



# Smart Urban Intermediaries

Connecting people.  
Changing communities.

REPORT FROM BIRMINGHAM'S

FOURTH LOCAL LAB

Monday 20th May 2019

Women's Enterprise Hub, Ladypool Road, Birmingham

Produced by Sally Ward, based on recordings, notes and participant reflections from the workshop

In



## Attendance

Naseem Akhtar, Karen Cheney, Hannah Greenwood, Adill Hadi, Tony Kennedy, Noha Nasser, Abdullah Rehman, Adrees Sharif, Mahmooda Qureshi

## Apologies

Nick Booth, David Cusack, Moses Dakunivosa, Catherine Durose, Helga Edstrom, Chantall Faure, Sandra Hall, Tim Hughes, Marianne Salmon, Fred Rattley, Austin Rodriguez

**Facilitated by** Alison Gilchrist and Sally Ward

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the fourth and final local lab was for participants to share learning, compare experiences and report back from the Transitional Lab in Lisbon. It provided an opportunity to make sense of data from the fieldwork across all four cities; present and discuss initial findings relating to Birmingham's co-enquiry issues; and make preparations for the transnational living labs in Krakow and Copenhagen. The workshop included a session to identify implications for policy and practice based on the project's learning so far. The report of the discussions from this workshop will be used in contributing towards the eventual conclusions and recommendations of the project.

### CHECKING-IN

The local lab began with a round of introductions. The participants spent a few minutes sharing their thoughts about what experiences had excited or challenged since they had last met in December. The feedback from this checking-in session was enthusiastic and animated. The participants shared that they enjoyed coming together to find out what others were doing in their communities. Some of the experiences shared during the session included:

- Establishing links with the Sikh community. This involved lots of organising and there were some setbacks. The importance of looking for ways to work smarter was emphasised in order to overcome these difficulties.
- Organising a youth festival around Small Heath that brought together a number of agencies to make this happen.
- Working with young people to help change attitudes to violence and knife crime. Using music, positive song writing lyrics, social media and sign-writing projects. The importance of developing leaders to take responsibility for advocating for young people on their behalf through programmes and ventures.
- Developing a programme around our shared planet with a green theme to build a positive, unexpected representation of being Muslim and making connections with different organisations. The importance of doing things that are perceived as different to what is normally done such as visiting the Mosque every day.
- Working with the Prince's Trust and police to help keep knives off the streets through the creation of a community hub that enables people to come together. The importance of not just creating a talking shop but about working out what can be done practically.
- Working on a Neighbourhood Networks programme for the over 50s to keep older people active and healthy. Starting discussions with the community about working together openly and positively to create more honest relationships with the local council. Birmingham Community Matters run by community organisations have been awarded funding where peer to peer support is perceived as 'better' than coming from professional experts.
- Working on changing things from the bottom up by getting people more active to overcome isolation. This involved working on things differently; for example, instead of lads parading in cars, organising a community cycle ride for Ramadan and appealing to women to participate to challenge how they are perceived in a positive way.

The discussion emphasised the positive work everyone was doing in their communities and the need for **coming together** through events that encourage cooperation and create community cohesion. For example:

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multi agency working, multi faith responses, facilitation and acting as a hub, to leverage funding and address big issues relating to crime, well-being and sustainability.

People emphasised the need to **overcome barriers and setbacks**, for example, persuading community leaders to show an interest in initiatives and encourage their support and involvement.

The discussion considered how making a difference involved **doing things differently and taking action** - not just by talking but by addressing real and local matters of concern to “get things done”, “being pro-actively open” and “welcoming”, doing the unexpected and modelling a way of being. For example: connecting care for the environment as a social responsibility undergirded by religious teaching.

### WORLD CAFÉ REFLECTIONS – on the current thinking from the academic team



The second session of the local lab began with a presentation of the academic team’s initial thinking based on data from across all four cities. Six diagrams were presented:

- motivations and values,
- making a difference,
- social smart,
- alchemy of assets,
- approaches and tensions, and finishing with the
- challenges faced by SUIs in different contexts.

This session provided participants with a set of ‘heuristics’ for interpretations of the projects findings and ways of exploring this theory in relation to their practice. A World Café method was used, with large scale drawings of the six diagrams, so that participants could reflect and comment on each category using post-it notes.

### Motivations and values – altruism, personal interest and political cause

The data from the interviews and shadowing indicated that SUIs are motivated by a range of different values and that these are often combined or that people move between them when talking about their aims.

Some **altruistic motivations** came through such as providing a ‘selfless service’ and to ‘serve others who are less fortunate’. However feedback seemed more about being **socially-orientated** and socially-minded to make changes for the benefit of all, rather than a willingness to bring advantages to others even if it results disadvantage oneself. Examples given by the participants included:

- Wanting things to be better for all, not just self
- Spreading love, peace, understanding and fun
- Seeing the best in all people because we care
- Creating unity amongst people
- Promoting equality and social justice (making a positive change by tackling injustice)
- Tackling and changing social issues such as crime, antisocial behaviours and inequality
- Keeping organisations going by meeting funding requirements so they can continue to deliver projects

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- Retaining skilled and experienced people to help deliver projects by encouraging participation
- Making things better through positive change in your area and community for future generations (legacy)
- Regenerating areas by getting communities to be part of the 'system' such as housing, planning and urban design

**Personal interest** included being motivated to transform young people's lives, building friendships, promoting the values of a particular community such as the UK Islamic Mission. For example: breaking media stereotypes by showing people that Muslims and women are different from media perceptions. It took the form of a sense of success, satisfaction and fulfillment in building trust and community cohesion through giving time and being connected to others, listening, engaging and motivating others to take action on the issues that matter to them.

Participants are motivated by a **political cause** such as organising or being part of collective actions outside of government. This represents a political identity associated with self-governance at a grass-roots level. Sometimes their motivations are about being 'neighbourly' and making a positive difference at a local level to 'improve the status quo' or challenge existing structures of division and isolation by breaking down barriers, a form of politics which they contrast to 'corrupt politicians' and 'big P politics'. Altruism and politics should be the same whereas party politics currently 'gets in the way'. SUIs felt it was important to have a voice against divisive narratives such as Islamophobia.

### **Making a difference – people, places and communities**

The team suggested that there are three main ways in which SUIs across the four cities are making a difference. By enhancing people's skills, confidence and aspirations; by improving the look and quality of life in specific areas; and developing community-level aspects of society, such as collective capacity, neighbourliness and cohesion.

The **effective deployment of assets** to access the community and provide a safe place for people coming together is regarded as critical for **place-making**. This can include sending a positive message to the community by taking pride in the environment through cleaner streets, flowers and baskets in contrast to broken windows syndrome.



Participants agreed that **people-making** is important for addressing inequalities, opportunities, health and education. Building credibility by delivering small projects well through teams of trusted volunteers is key to making a difference. Training and ethics are also important and might be incorporated into the way that larger projects can be tackled. People need to be able to deal with conflict better by working with challenges for a positive outcome. **Inspiring others** by focusing on common values to make a positive change in society can help create a positive outcome.

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From a democratic perspective, lack of information is considered a challenge where more data and information is needed so that people can be held to account.

**Community-making:** projects should be specific and scalable, relevant and value-added to make a difference in the community. Decision-making needs to align with what is “always wanted” and should also reflect the “quiet voices”. The influence of quiet voices on civic decision making is also needed to make a difference.

Participants highlight that change (making a difference) is difficult due to institutional and member inertia and responsiveness. Participants suggested that creating an awareness of problems and the impact they have on the wider community is important to bring people together and in making a difference.

### Being ‘social smart’

This discussion was about what it means to be ‘socially smart’. And the team had come up with three components: contacts in networks, relevant expertise and local knowledge and how you are seen by others (reputation and reliability).

**Who you know.** The participants agreed that it is good to know a mix of people, such as peers, people and grassroots, as well as influential people / strong ‘pillars of society’ in order to be socially smart. Social media can be used to reach people (especially young people) on the streets and it was considered important to make connections with local organisations and companies according to intention and need. One SUI said “I always call people I know as a last resort when other people don’t do what they said they would. One participant commented that being **socially smart is not necessarily about who you know - it’s what you do that matters.**



**What you know.** Most participants agree that what you know is part of being socially smart. What you know is about **being locally-based where you get a ‘feel’ of the area.** Knowing how to link people from diverse cultural groups and build a team to get something done was also a key competence of SUIs. Years of experience building local knowledge of a range of people, key players, influencers that can be trusted. Care and compassion are also factors. The participants suggested that local issues and how to mobilise around these in a positive way are what can bind neighbourhoods together. This is about being **intentionally smart**, understanding communities as an eco-

system of trust, actions and capabilities, and having the specific skills to challenge oppositional voice, echo, calm - not he who shouts the loudest.

**How you are known.** Participants highlighted that **lack of stability is a barrier for young people** who don’t get a look in due to lack of financial stability. This doesn’t allow them to put the same levels of time into voluntary community work. Participants agreed how you are known, such as being organised, being a good co-ordinator, being efficient, an influencer and a good listener are important factors to being socially smart. One participant described themselves as being known for having a big heart, being humorous and kind. Another described someone who influences people, manages conflict situations very well, and is calm and level

headed. Another said they are known for being a great communicator, committed, sincere, humble, great work ethic and a disciplined motivator.

### **Alchemy of assets – fixing, assembling and connecting**

The team had discovered that SUIs operate by bringing together ideas, resources and interests to solve problems or achieve change in other ways. This seemed to involve investing in relationships over the long-term, strategically assembling medium term coalitions and bundles of resources to tackle issues, or short-term fixing of immediate problems that face communities.

Participants suggested SUIs feel comfortable doing all these things because they are adaptable:

**Connecting** is about a long-term strategy of building relationships of trust, and using relationships to find a solution by knowing who to speak to and how to get things done. It also involves understanding people, judging context and good listening skills.

**Assembling** is about bringing partners and resources together for specific projects or delivering events that bring people together. It involves co-ordinating, collaboration, being 'non-hierarchical' and making people feel equal and that their contribution is valued.

**Fixing** involves problem solving, finding a common goal and being about to adapt to grassroots level and institutional level, for example connecting wider organisations such as voluntary groups, police and partner agencies to tackle youth violence. One participant suggests that the label 'fixer' supports the deficit model that there is a lack of something in communities which is negative.

Participants emphasised **transformative change** instead of fixing. Transformative change is political and gradual therefore requires long-term commitment and energy. Participants suggest that democracy doesn't work because 'rules of parties' does not allow 'anyone' to be elected only the 'chosen one'. Transformative change is about making a positive difference, not just creating change for change sake.

Participants suggested learning and reflection should be included within Alchemy of assets.

### **Different approaches and tensions between collaboration and opposition; and sustaining and innovating**

The academic team had identified two axes which seemed to capture differences and tensions within SUIs practices. On the one hand, some preferred a more collaborative approach while others tended to be more confrontational. On the other hand, there are conflicting pressures on practitioners to be innovative while also striving to sustain good projects that are effective.



**Collaboration** is about **finding ways to work with partners**, such as ‘bridging cultures’ events, working and supporting likeminded work, avoiding duplication and staying abreast of local issues and trends (keeping updated). Demeanours, such as being stable, wise, calm, kind and being a good listener are all important for collaboration.

**Opposition** tends to be from far right political viewpoints said one participant. Participants suggested the education process can reduce the need for opposition tactics. However always being used for your connections, (e.g. “can you put me in touch with...”)

can create a constant tension with being visible and known. People must be confident enough to take opposition in their stride and turn it into collaboration – “all boils down to self-esteem said one participant”.

**Sustaining** is all about having to prove your worth to compete and remain sustainable. This creates pressure to keep sustaining your work to remain successful. It’s very hard to sustain your work and it’s getting harder said one participant. This contrasts with the pressure to be ‘innovative’, as so often required by funders.

## Challenges

The academic team recognise that SUIs face a number of challenges in their work.

**Curse of success** is about the way that demands on the individual or organisation grow when things have become effective. Services are taken away because there is a perception that there is less need for them. Other challenges associated with success are pressures to meet targets, the expectation that [youth] services can make things happen on demanding agendas and over-dependency on those trusted to deliver.



**Austerity and poverty** is about the need to break down barriers. For example Sunni and Shia mosques working together collaboratively to normalise relationships and change stereotypes and misinformation. One participant commented that sometimes you have to lose the battle to win the war where a long-term view and compromise is needed. There is a lack of co-ordination with cross-sectional organisations on shared themes such as knife crime.

Participants also discussed the issue of a ‘pretense democracy’ and questioned what a city council is for if not for tackling these issues. Successful organisations get funding and are therefore criticised because others are left out. Participants also suggested smaller organisations require training on how to put bids together because they miss out to larger more professional players.

## Some stand out remarks from the group discussions on findings

'You have to constantly prove your worth'

'How to make connections and relationships'

'Working with diverse people'

'People with diverse backgrounds - we mobilise them and bring them together naturally'

'Negotiators and problem solvers'

'Good listening skills'

'We need to avoid being cast as patronising, being parachuted in to help'

## FEEDBACK FROM LISBON

The purpose of this session was for those attending the Lisbon transnational lab to share their experience and identify any learning that could be useful to the Birmingham context. Alison commented that she saw narratives about 'place' as an important part of people's commitment and that Portugal still has a revolutionary spirit so the idea of working collectively appeared to live on.

Tony and Adrees made some valuable observations:

**Community spirit is rooted in local experience** and local neighbourhood. Empathy to local circumstances is key, rather than being a resident. Tony suggests that you don't need to live there, you need to be empathetic and socially minded with a disposition to social and local. Attitude rather than geography is emphasised.

Adrees took away the **importance of being approachable** and addressed the issue of people being invisible.

**Visibility is important** where invisible people do not have a voice, and people do not hear their voice. Some local government actions were seen as 'spiteful', thoughtless and uncaring. There is a **need to care about and attend to local situations** and experiences. Local government interventions are viewed as "ticking boxes" to satisfy policy recommendations rather than meaningful whereby the quality of their interventions is viewed as woeful. There is a need to recognise and appreciate community heritage and where people come from.

An example was given about renovating a washing area which is a significant as community area. The washing area is not just a place where people gathered to clean clothes but something much more profound in community terms. It is a **space of coming together**.

So it is significant to have spaces where communities come together to do things. Religiosity can act also as generator of community orientation. There are misconceptions that religiosity is purely about the afterlife but it's also about the here and now, based on living a set of moral and virtuous practices. Thus mosques and religious centres can play a key role in facilitating these practices within the community to help overcome challenges related to inequality, antisocial behaviour and crime by coming together.



## CO-ENQUIRY

The purpose of this short session was to draw out some of the findings that related to the three issues selected by the Birmingham Local Lab for some co-enquiry, namely: tackling inequalities, relationships (connecting trust and maintain networks) and linking with the big picture and the system (neighbourhood to city links).

Participants emphasised **being a mediator and being co-operative** by breaking down stereotypical set ups of organisations for example the Prince's Trust is traditionally viewed as white middle-class people. **Reaching out and bringing people together** by bringing them into other spaces and forums is important.

The idea of an honest relationship that is not just about asking communities to help when there is a crisis. **Relationships are built continuously, even when there is no immediate need**. This averts the feeling that someone is being 'used'. Creative thinking is viewed as important for spotting opportunities to build relationships, community cohesion and to solve immediate problems. An example of a community having transport issues was discussed whereby the Prince's Trust unused Minibuses were put to non-regular use.

Local community initiatives are always affected by big policy decisions from a **big picture** perspective. SUIs are a great idea and they have to **navigate the impacts and effects of policy**. There is a need for more imaginative ways of funding. Accessing private money is rare.

SUIs can play a role as a **trusted connector** to private and commercial sources who want to help but don't know how. However whilst tapping into the business sector's sense of social responsibility is a good idea, is it often difficult to generate support and resources for local projects because bigger companies tend to focus on supporting broader initiatives relating to big issues rather than local community impacts that would actually have more impact.

Being **socially smart** is not about who you know but the **good stuff you do**.

## PREPARING FOR THE TRANSNATIONAL LABS: KRAKOW - COPENHAGEN

The participants discussed issues and themes for Krakow in June and Copenhagen in September. The participants expressed a desire for more SUIs to be able to attend the final workshop because it would be interesting to get updates and different perspectives. There is an expectation that you are going as ambassadors. However, it is about taking ideas to share, sharing practice and raising concerns about the research process.

The participants suggested a need for better networking which is essential for sustaining the SUI initiative and they would like to keep the momentum going. This research is trying to independently demonstrate the value of SUIs to local government officials and it important to consider the mechanics of sustaining this. 'The principles are clear - it matters and it works' one speaker said.

### WHAT NEXT?

This session was to explain the final stage of the research project: flagging up final interviews with SUIs and co-operation partners and preparing a policy briefing that will be launched with an event in the autumn. Participants identified a number of potential messages for policy and practice guidance.

#### Policy recommendations

The suggestions from the participants were as follows:

- Explain and emphasise the value of networks, a bottom-up approach and investment in infrastructure and partnerships
- Deliver the Localism agenda - working together in neighbourhoods
- Promote and explain the concept of Smart Urban Intermediary
- Nurture conditions for Smart Urban Intermediaries to emerge and evolve
- Identify actual Smart Urban Intermediaries and support them
- Make the practice of Smart Urban Intermediaries visible to raise awareness of this role and the work that they do
- Recognition of the skillsets and traits of 'connectors' and find out what support they need to be effective and keep going
- Bring young people in, encouraging and enabling them to grow as Smart Urban Intermediaries
- Birmingham awards for young and active citizens
- Organise transnationally to share intelligence and strategies
- Improve co-ordination e.g. around common themes such as gentrification and far right threats.
- Measure levels of 'connectedness' as an indicator of social capital
- Smart Urban Intermediaries are very diverse in their motivations, background vision and aims
- Prefer not to have a toolkit, but to develop other forms of experiential learning based on peer-to-peer learning not training
- Enable public authority officers to work well with Smart Urban Intermediaries in the community to create a genuine partnership and mutual respect
- Understand and release the energy of Smart Urban Intermediaries based in local authority, notably officers and councillors
- Mobilise community initiatives and collaborative self-help
- Reach out beyond 'the converted' and 'usual suspects' to extend and sustain SUI-type practices
- Join things up above the neighbourhood community - scaling up and across different areas at municipal and regional levels
- Emphasise cultural change that is needed within institutions and communities, possibly also in the private sector
- Invest in the work of Smart Urban Intermediaries and value their contribution
- Democracy is a verb, not a noun - focus on what it does rather than what it is
- Help Smart Urban Intermediaries know other Smart Urban Intermediaries through a city-wide workshop or through the web

The SUIs emphasised that their work is about **local interventions in the here and now** and this seemed understated in policy making. They questioned "how do you get institutional professionals to work with SUIs to best effect?" The participants felt there is a risk that SUIs could become institutionalised and that might kill the emergence and local action character of what they do. Participants feared that over-formalising smart

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urban intermediation might jeopardise an intuitive and unique practice that needs to be versatile and contextually agile. “You can’t just call someone a SUI...you can’t replicate it” one participant said. Codifying the practices of smart urban intermediation is a bureaucratic solution and the participants suggested that is the last thing policy should do as one participant said “We don’t need to map it, we need to support it”.

SUIs aren’t interested in managerial metrics. They just want to get things done and to make a positive difference as one participant said “we don’t need to map it, we don’t need to prove it, it’s already there”. **A tension between what constitutes good practice emerged**. In particular, how good practice is evaluated. Policy makers tend to operate in an administrative world where good practice is measured and proven through metrics. SUIs operate in a more pragmatic world because they are embedded in the community. **They experience the improvements they make** and that’s how they know there is improvement, whereas policy makers are more removed or distant from local community contexts, therefore they need some way of measuring the impact of smart urban intermediation to know there is an improvement. Inadvertently instead of acknowledging SUIs for what they are, policy makers could use policy to make sense of how SUIs fit to policy and therefore their role and identity could be defined for them, “they will be asking where are they then?” One participant feared would take the emphasis off how SUIs can be helped and supported.



There was a view that facilitation and support of SUI practice is needed rather than training and teaching. SUIs need recognising for what they are. **A curious, entrepreneurial, even maverick force** that is different to the classic public service officer. It’s all about local action, local effect and idiosyncratic local contexts not big policy, big technology sweeps. Visibility is important where SUIs are doing stuff that needs to be “seen, celebrated and respected”. They question how the work of SUIs can be made more visible in encouraging people to think “I didn't know I could be one of those” through sharing local knowledge.

A major theme is all about **binding communities together through common understandings**, common activities and common concerns. Paradoxically current policy emphasises the need to recognise and celebrate diversity whereby it actually generates a sense of division. There is a need for a commonality agenda rather than a diversity agenda - not only ‘within communities’ but between communities and local government. Diversity simply emphasises difference. **SUIs are highly solution focused** and want effective strategies addressing problems around inequality, disconnection and bad behaviours. They do not want to battle with local government to get the solution fixed. They are agile, pragmatic, resourceful and practical. “She can, she can’t, I know someone who can” said one participant. They suggest SUIs differ from policy makers who tend to be oriented around principles and processes, as well as being obsessed with mapping and training. City officers simply need to help in a hands-on sense. They need to be known.

SUIs want hands on practical help from local authorities such as help with getting in front of the right people who can actually help them and to make decisions rather than offers of training and development. One participant asked if more training and development is needed. Another said **“Actually, I just want practical help**

**not public sector-isms**". Where training is offered, SUIs view local authority officers as 'remote observers' rather than 'direct participants' in coming together to address the practical problems they are facing.

### LEARNING AND DISSEMINATION

Alison explained to participants how the project findings would be disseminated through academic papers and a policy briefing that will be launched at a local event and possibly some practice guidance. Participants were interested to hear about the themes for academic papers and several expressed an interest in having a chance to read through and comment on these. Participants were also keen to come along to the launch of the policy briefing although they did not want to have another practice-focused 'toolkit'.

### CHECKING OUT and EVALUATIONS

Participants were asked to complete the evaluation forms. The participants were very pleased with the overall design of the lab. They enjoyed the reflections on the transnational labs, the opportunity to present their ideas, a chance to learn from others, the facilitators and the hospitality. One person thought the pace of the lab was a bit rushed and another thought that the room wasn't great. However the participants agreed that they had benefited from building networks, reconnecting with people, sharing best practice and listening to the experiences of others. In particular hearing about how other places operate.

The evaluations revealed that participants found it hugely beneficial to connect with others and feel part of a terrific network. They were reassured that other participants face similar challenges and a new understanding of the qualities and motivations of smart urban intermediaries.. The participants also said that they would make use of their connections, build connections with other SUIs and engage with councils more as a result of their experience on this project

The participants thought that the research processes have been very interesting and have given them the time to reflect in what they do, why they do it and how they can be more effective. They suggested that improvements to the project might include ensuring consistency of local lab attendees, an online community and action learning through visits. There was a real motivation to continue connecting and one participant raised a concern that the next steps are not supported by recognition and resources. More time to reflect and share best practices would have also been an improvement.