



# Reflections on citizen-technical dialogue as part of cycling-inclusive planning in Santiago, Chile



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## ABSTRACT

Cycling-inclusive urban planning is attracting worldwide attention as cycling has demonstrated its potential for contributing to resolving not only mobility but also diverse issues of social concern (health and physical activity, urban congestion and pollution), amidst the challenges of global warming and the need to define more equitable ways of organizing urban systems, to mitigate the impacts of segregation, discrimination and other factors contributing to exclusion and vulnerability.

In recent years these converging interests, which involve academics, politicians and planners, private sector actors and citizens as individuals and as organized groups (civil society), have stimulated a growing body of experience and substantial evidence on what measures may contribute the most to progress. Today, we know a great deal about the elements that make a city more sustainable. We know less, however, about the processes whereby cities, regions and countries move forward effectively. Applying specific measures often involves contextual factors that are less understood, particularly those arising from local cultures that reflect professional skills and user behaviour, and the institutional arrangements that define their interactions.

In this paper, we examine the experience and results from a project conducted by a university team that partnered with an advanced citizen group in Santiago, Chile, as part of a key phase in a multi-year process of change. Interest arose in response to local advocacy and was significantly mobilized through a three-year collaborative planning process led by the regional government and citizens' groups, with technical assistance from Dutch experts. The experience discussed here reveals that it was the ongoing iterations between different kinds of technical and non-technical actors and the resulting blend of urban expertise that drove the process forward, leading to systemic changes in both planning and city spheres.

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## 1. Introduction: critical steps toward achieving sustainable cities

*The very old saying 'you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink' must have been coined by people at the sharp end of sustainable transport. Globally we are drowning in excellent material. [We know plenty about] how to produce huge gains for quality of life, health, community, air quality, poverty and accessibility, reduce death and injury on the roads and create lively, viable communities. All these topics have been covered in detail in our last 20 years. The reality is we are just not doing it.*

John Whitelegg, editorial, World Transport Policy & Practice (2014).

Our rapidly urbanizing world faces substantial challenges from diverse sources, many related to environmental, social and economic limits first argued in the 1970s (Meadows, Meadows, & Randers, 1992). In most cities, transportation is a major polluter of air and water, as well as generating 20–25% of greenhouse gases, social and health inequities, and other costs, which worsen with economic growth. Meanwhile, potential energy failures, fires and the wildly fluctuating costs of fossil fuels, along with risks inherent in pandemics expected to accompany global warming and other major changes in the biosphere, threaten mass transport systems.

In recent decades, citizens and experts in regional and transport planning have identified crucial ingredients for more sustainable transport systems but, as Whitelegg's heartfelt comment quoted above indicates, achieving the necessary shifts has brought more frustration than celebration to date. Undermining progress are institutional silos in the governance sphere and research/practice

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silos in the technical and academic fields (Low & Gleeson, 2003). The “what” is often confused with the “how” in the sense that many believe that identifying ways of reducing emissions (public transport, electric cars) and/or encouraging modal shifts favouring more active transport (cycling and walking) should convince politicians and the public of their virtues, and thereby induce change.

Far from being linear, however, change is a complex process that requires navigating and reworking behavioural and institutional environments that are both shaped by and tend to reproduce existing conditions and lessons from a past that may be very different from the future. This has been explored in some depth by Kingdon (2003) in the policy sphere, Friedmann (2011), Innes and Booher (2010) and de Roo and Silva, 2010 in the planning sphere and, in the case of transportation, by Banister (2005), Low and Gleeson (2003) and Ortúzar and Willumsen (2011) with their call for a continuous planning framework, among others.

In practice, the lack of a clear approach to the “how” has brought on-going conflicts over major projects involving the car-centred focus embedded in highways and concessions, the bus-centred requirements for more space of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) systems, or the demands of cyclists and other interested parties for more cycle-friendly cities. Sometimes, these conflicts open the way to change. Often, however, they increase costs, slow or stymie progress toward greater sustainability, and even undermine citizens’ confidence in their governments, institutions, and democracy itself. This reality reflects a failure to address underlying causes, foster crucial debates, and thereby build the “foundational consensus” necessary to support diverse measures that together constitute significant improvements to the way people and communities live together.

Current planning theory, meanwhile, underlines the importance of collaborative processes that bring in key actors representative of diverse players, particularly different scales of government and citizens, to find “better ways of living together” (Healey, 2006). Collaboration among diverse, interdependent actors, through fruitful dialogue or deliberation has proven crucial to successful innovation in complex rural and urban settings (Innes & Booher, 2010). In the case of transport, the goal of participation is to have up-to-the-minute insight into how people think and feel about transport, cities and sustainability, as well as generating co-responsible attitudes, “buy-in”, and foundational consensus sufficient to support the debates and costs of change (Bickerstaff, Tolley, & Walker, 2002; Giering, 2011; Innes & Booher, 2000). A major challenge along the way, particularly in recently democratizing countries such as those of Latin America, has been finding ways to breach the gap between citizens’ practical knowledge and the specialists who spend years training away emotions and perceptions to achieve knowledge that is considered pristine and “objective”. In previous articles we have explored the role of conflict in producing citizen learning (Sagaris, 2010) and diverse ecologies of citizen and government actors (Sagaris, 2014) to progress toward more sustainable transport and planning practice in real cities. Cycling, which is enjoying a comeback after 30 years of relegation to the back burner as a transport mode, offers particularly rich lessons (Sagaris, 2015).

This paper focuses on a specific moment (2010–2011) within a collaborative planning process, which brought together citizens’ experiential and engineers’ technical knowledge to drive forward a cycling-inclusive planning process, in Santiago, Chile. The process achieved significant results in a relatively short period of time, summarized below, inviting a reflection on what elements made this possible. Moreover, it is worth examining whether there are any lessons that could be useful to planners, citizens and engineers grappling with similar challenges in different places.

The next section summarizes methods, followed by a narrative characterizing the Santiago process. Section 4 presents and reflects on the results of a project that can be considered part of this process, in which citizens worked with a university-based technical team on a government-tendered contract. Section 5 examines some final conclusions and possibilities for future experimentation through community-based research.

## 2. Qualitative methods and a narrative-based presentation of data

This is primarily a reflection on the apparent serendipity of a complex rather than linear planning process that has brought significant change to the metropolitan region of Santiago de Chile. Both authors pioneered consideration of cycling as crucial to sustainability in Chile, one from his perspective as a transport academic and the other from her perspective, first as leader of grassroots citizen organizations (1993–2010) and, more recently, as a post-doctoral researcher in planning (2013–present).

For this paper we examine the sequence of events that allowed cycling to shift from an identity as an obsolete ride for poor, marginalized men to a trendy, healthy and inclusive way of getting about town for men and a growing percentage of women. This shift was achieved in a remarkably short period of time, the six years between 2007 and 2012.

We use a narrative structure to capture the complexity of this process (Uprichard & Byrne, 2006) and follow Byrne’s perspective on coming at causality backwards (Byrne, 2011), that is, seeking to identify the key elements that drove the system, through reflection and examination of events with the benefit of hindsight. The intention here is not to find a universal law applicable in every context, but rather to identify *possible interactions that made significant change possible* and measurable in the relatively short period of six years.

In particular, we are interested in how diverse actors managed to build a clumsy but reasonably effective interface between citizens’ experiential knowledge and the technical knowledge of university trained experts, particularly civil engineers. This was far from a clean, happy process, and it involved many implicit and some explicit clashes. Partly, these dynamics reflected what Dutch cycle planning expert Godefrooij (2008) identified as the difference between project-based and process-based planning (Table 1), with engineers tending to treat planning as the cumulative effect of specific projects.

This gap between project-centred and process-centred approaches reflects a fundamental difference in world views, discussed by Phelan (1999) in an insightful article. There he examines the contrasts and similarities between systems theory and thinking about chaos and complexity. Although there is “a high degree of commensurability between the two theories” closer examination reveals shared terms, but the two “differ markedly in their research agenda and methodologies” (Phelan, 1999, p. 237).

The prime differences between these two world views, sometimes called “hard” versus “soft” system methodologies (Checkland, 2000), include their purpose, “positionality<sup>1</sup>” and resulting methods. Systems theory, as applied in engineering, follows Phelan’s observations, in that it tends to focus on *prediction*

<sup>1</sup> *Positionality* is defined in sociology as important aspects of our identity such as gender, race, class and age that are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities. Anthropology, meanwhile, has developed specific methods for encompassing diverse positionalities of researchers with regard to their subject matter, including “participant-observers” and, more recently, “observing participants”.

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