

Participatory Budgeting in Urban Regeneration: Defining the Gap Between Formal and Informal Citizen Activism

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Abstract – Urban regeneration has been an ongoing process in many cities for decades. It has experienced various changes in terms of the main driving force, with public engagement becoming more and more important. One of the ways for communities to get involved in urban transformation is through participation in urban planning. Local communities are considered as partners in urban design processes, and in many countries their role in planning and design is defined by industry regulations. Still, one question is important – is public participation a formal tool or does it have an influence on planning and how it impacts decision making. Along with community involvement in planning processes, participatory budgeting has been developed as a public participatory approach in recent years. This gives a chance for inhabitants to participate in the budgetary decision-making process. The aim of this study is to analyse whether participatory budgeting, which is mainly municipal-led urban activism, answers the real needs of inhabitants in terms of urban regeneration. The interests of formal urban activism are defined and compared to the interests of informal urban activism actions, correlation and gaps are defined.

Keywords – Participatory budgeting, the right to the city, urban regeneration.

INTRODUCTION

Urban regeneration has become an important urban policy issue in the 1980s [1]. It is an alternative to new urbanization and allows to transform and upgrade existing places [2]. Now, participation of residents in urban regeneration has become an irreplaceable component of that process [3]. Participatory processes are intended to force understanding of needs and wishes of local inhabitants by empowering local community and drawing local knowledge in the design and planning. It encourages learning processes and ensures political support. Local governmental organisations are supporting involvement of citizens in participatory planning, co-creation, co-design and other related activities [4], [5]. On the other hand, informal bottom-up actions are also taking place in cities. Often as temporary construction and use of space, which is driven by different forces [6]. The basic idea of those informal actions is that citizen rights to use and access the city space “*must be delinked from land ownership or the imperatives of urban capital, and instead linked to urban occupancy and participation*” [7]. The existence of both approaches in many countries shows that the official participatory tools do not accomplish some citizen demands in terms of public open space quality, accessibility, quality of urban life, etc. Also, in Riga, despite the growing number of participatory budgeting tools, informal urban activism in the field of urban regeneration and quality of urban public space still exists and even increases in number of actions. For that reason, the aim of this study is to analyse formal urban regeneration projects realized using the participatory budgeting

tool and informal urban activism, define topics of interest in both cases as well as geographical distribution and define the gap between interests accomplished with governmental support and the interests of informal urban activists.

Research question: What type of urban regeneration issues addresses the governmental instrument (participatory budgeting tool)? Are the addressed urban planning and design challenges the same within formal and informal tools? What are the gaps covered by informal actions and can they be addressed by formal participatory budgeting tools?

I. METHODOLOGY

First, the collection of participatory budgeting project data from Riga government official webpage was collected. When using social media, we collected the data on informal urban activism in Riga. Those actions were then sorted in different groups depending on the level of impact on urban environment to select activities and projects which had an aim to change cityscape. As the next step both formal and informal activities were grouped according to the topic and were mapped in order to define both the gaps between interests and geographical distribution and possible fragmentation (injustice).

A. Urban Regeneration

In recent decades, urban regeneration has become one of the most important processes in European urban development policy. This approach seeks to transform and revitalize existing urban areas, thus directly contributing to the mainstreaming of sustainable development into the urban policy [8], [9]. Intensifying existing urban areas and curbing urban sprawl are just some of the challenges of urban regeneration. Urban regeneration policies are based on factors related to serious short- or long-term economic problems, deindustrialization, demographic change, underinvestment, infrastructure aging, structural or cyclical employment issues, social tensions and other changes in urban areas [10]. As these processes have a significant social impact, a participatory approach is essential to address them [11], [12].

The Riga Sustainable development strategy until 2030 includes the objective, which states that priority should be given to urban regeneration rather than intensification of existing housing estates. Public open space should be preserved and new development on the expenses of public space can be allowed only in case of successful solutions to promote accessibility, qualitative public environment and interconnected infrastructure [13]. It is also stated that sustainability and liveliness of urban envi-

ronment can be achieved only with active public participation in space co-planning and co-creation.

B. Citizen Activism

Already since the mid-1970s, many countries around the world have been moving towards democracy. However, in the states, which were part of the Soviet Union, citizen groups became active only during the post-communist period [14]. Unlike in the end of the 20th century, when in the Baltic states citizen participation in making more democratic governance was still a phenomenon, nowadays civil society and social urban movements are emerging. Variety of urban activism initiatives such as grassroots community or neighbourhood associations, interest groups, politically or culturally oriented pressure groups, housing associations, groups against globalisation and neo-liberalisation of urban policies, organisations for sustainable development and social justice are emerging all around the world [15]. As a result, also, the interest in urban activism has been growing among different disciplines: urban planning, sociology, human geography, political science, history, women's studies, ecology and recently, also social anthropology.

Urban activists have a great impact on decision-making through variety of participatory practices and tools, and so it becomes an important part of urban governance processes. In many sources citizen activism is defined as any individual action with social consequences, which often includes collective activity, participation in faith groups or neighbourhood associations, producer organisations and trade unions, etc. [16]. These activities play an important role in ensuring that the city and variety of institutions respect inhabitants' rights and meet their needs. In turn, urban social movements are often created by a group of inhabitants engaged in a collective action with an aim to reach a common goal. To reach these goals they use variety of tools and strategies such as public meetings, demonstrations, campaigns, guerrilla actions, etc.

Urban activism initiatives (often under umbrella of the "Right to the city" movement) pop-up in many countries in Europe, North America and Latin America, as an answer and protest against large commercialisation projects, urban development at the expense of open public green space and new developments which lead to gentrification [16], [17]. The concept of the Right to the city arises from Henri Lefebvre in 1968 in his book *Le Droit à la ville* ("The right to the city"). The Right to the city is a holistic approach to upgrade the urban environment and quality of urban life. According to Lefebvre, the right to the city can be approached only if it is delinked from land ownership or city authorities and linked to urban occupancy and participation [7]. That approach has been used by geographers to criticize urban neoliberalization [17], [18]. It is stated that the right to the city is rather common than individual, and it is not only one's freedom to use and access urban resources, but also the right to change oneself by changing the city. Harvey argues that despite the fact the freedom to make and remake our cities is highly estimated, it still remains one of the most neglected human rights [18].

C. Participatory Budgeting

The role of partnership and citizen empowerment in urban politics has increased in the course of last decades [3]. Citizen involvement has fostered dialogue between different stakeholders as well as the development of community-led instrument for urban management.

Participatory budgeting (PB) has become one of the tools for engaging the wider population in urban development issues. The Right to the City is the basic setting of urban communities. It is also based on the Leipzig Charter on sustainable European cities (Europa, 2007), which states that functional and well-designed urban spaces, infrastructure and services are a task that must be jointly addressed by the state, regional and local authorities, citizens and businesses [19].

Participatory budgeting is considered one of the most successful participatory tools in recent decades. Generally, the nature of the PB can be defined as a mechanism through which citizens decide or contribute to decisions made at local level about the use of all or the part of the public resources available [20]. This is a tool which fosters education and engagement of people in the government operations. As a method of demonstrating real civic participation it is implemented by municipalities in many countries, which means that the understanding of the PB and the tools used vary depending on location. Also, Europe comprises different models of PB, but each model allows citizens to participate in the adoption of the municipal budget either directly or through different PB representatives (NGOs, community groups, etc.). Direct participation, also known as participatory democracy or consultative democracy, which involves an association of unelected citizens, is very important.

II. PARTICIPATORY APPROACH IN NEIGHBOURHOOD REGENERATION OF RIGA

In case of neighbourhood regeneration participatory actions are of special importance, as they can strengthen sense of community, sense of belonging to the neighbourhood and can foster greater interest in community life, quality of public spaces and regeneration processes. Participatory planning and co-creation can increase the efficiency of regeneration proposals and help to create spaces, which will be used by local inhabitants. As sustainable development is the main goal of many cities, then ensuring public participation in urban regeneration is crucial while searching for effective long-term solutions [21].

In the last decades a number of different support tools have been created to ensure more active involvement of neighbourhood communities in the planning and design processes in Riga. The main emphasis is on various competitions organized by municipality. These competitions are mainly addressing neighbourhood associations and related NGOs offering financial support while enhancing sense of community and creating more liveable environment. Financial support is offered for organizing neighborhood forums, festivals, sport events, community integration activities, cultural activities, as well as regeneration of the public open space.

D. Formal Participatory Budgeting Tools in Riga

Since 2016, the city of Riga is launching a funding program called “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community” (Riga City Council Department of Education, Culture and Sport, 2018 [22]). In terms of this program the city organises 3–4 contests each year to fund projects by neighbourhood community associations and other related NGO's or institutions. There are no strict guidelines for project types or topics, as the main aim is support of more liveable and inhabitant friendly neighbourhood development and community building. Absence of specific guidelines makes it interesting to follow up the trends of funded projects, making it possible to find out what types of projects the city is ready to accept.

As soon as the contest call has been published, the neighbourhood association is submitting the project, and then the Riga City Council Committee is evaluating the submissions. Finally, approved project authors are receiving financial support to realize their ideas (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The process of community project budgeting [Figure: A. Koroļova].

So, for example in 2016 and 2017, two urban design projects appeared in the Brasa neighbourhood: a graffiti wall and a new neighbourhood's information table with map of attractions were approved and supported financially (Fig. 2). Both projects were initiated by the non-profit organisation called Association “Culture Workshop” (*Nodibinājums “Kultūras darbnīca”*). Art work was created with the support of graffiti artist A. Baranov in cooperation with staff members of a kindergarten, children and their parents [23]. The design of graffiti wall helped to refresh an old concrete wall in the courtyard of kindergarten, promoted involvement of children into environment creation process and influenced creation of a positive identity of the area. Another project – map of neighbourhood attractions also acts as a new meeting point.



Fig. 2. Graffiti wall in the Brasa neighbourhood [Photo: Riga City Council Department of Education, Culture and Sport, 2018].

Other supported projects, which included long-term urban regeneration, were information stands in various neighbourhoods, art installations, creation of flower beds and recreation areas, and the lightening object in the city centre [22].

In 2019, the Riga City Council launched a new participatory budgeting pilot program called “For Riga neighbourhood development project realisation” [24], [25]. The main aim is to foster neighbourhood regeneration and creation of identity, while supporting local inhabitant participation in the development of the area. The submitted projects should meet the following criteria:

- the project territory should be publicly available, which means it should be in the property of the city or under municipal jurisdiction;
- the project should be linked to infrastructure development in the neighbourhood and should have long-term and social value [25].

Here the participatory process differs from the one described before (Fig. 3). After the project call is open, any neighbourhood association or other NGO can submit their proposal. Then, the projects that meet the criteria are open for public voting, each resident having only one vote. The second evaluation stage includes the committee evaluation. The contest committee consists of municipality representative – Executive Director of Riga *Ziemeļu* (northern) executive board, representatives from the association “Riga Neighbourhood Association”, as well as representatives from the Riga City Council Finance Department, City Development Department, *Pardaugava* Executive Board, *Austrumu* Executive Board, *Ziemeļu* Executive Board. The Committee is considering the results of public voting, but it also evaluates other issues and realisation opportunities, and then decides on support. Financial support is given to the responsible executive board (depending on location of the neighbourhood) and projects are accomplished / led by the executive board [25]. According to the public seminar data, executive board representatives are expecting active participation of the project authors during the fulfilment phase.

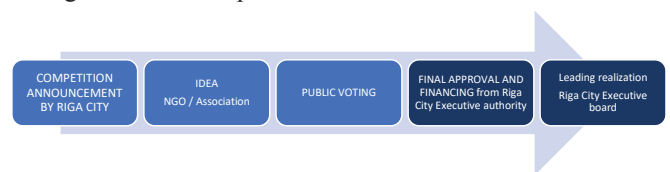


Fig. 3. The process of participatory budgeting pilot project [Figure: A. Koroļova].

The first pilot participatory budgeting project was launched in April 2019, with public voting in August and September and announcement of results in the end of September. As a result, 6 projects were accepted. These are regeneration and new recreation facilities in a public square, creation of new multifunctional sport field, sport complex for all ages, recreation areas and regeneration of the neighbourhood centre, creation of community centre and improvement of public transport stops. The projects mainly request the development of professional architectural projects and approval of the Construction Board, as well as

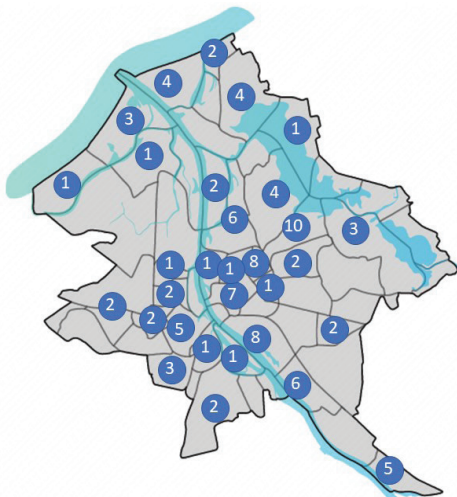


Fig. 4. Number and geographical distribution of all approved projects in terms of participatory budgeting programs “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community” and “For Riga neighbourhood development project realisation” in 2016 till 2019 [Figure: A. Koroļova].

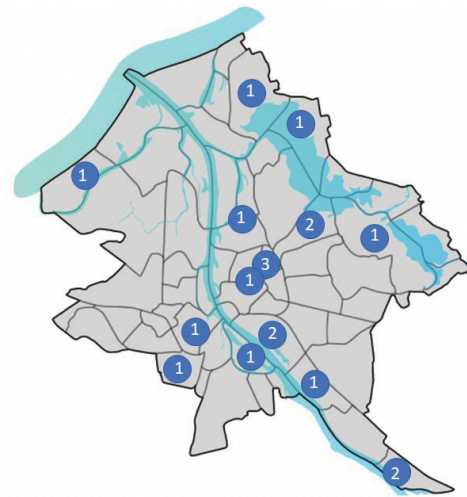


Fig. 5. Number and geographical distribution of approved urban regeneration / urban design projects in terms of participatory budgeting programs “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community” and “For Riga neighbourhood development project realisation” in 2016 till 2019 [Figure: A. Koroļova].

technical data and approval from various institutions, so the expected accomplishment year is 2020.

In general, during 4 years from 2016 till 2019 in both programs 101 projects have been approved (Fig. 4). However only 19 are related to urban regeneration issues (Fig. 5).

E. Informal Urban Activism

The same year, 2016, in Riga was created an association called *City for People* whose initiatives tend to force the creation of more liveable and citizen friendly urban environment in Riga and other Latvian cities [26]. Starting with actions focused on safer and more comfortable conditions for walking, cycling and use of public transport, now they focus also on protection of greenery and accessibility issues of different areas. The initiatives published and supported in social media by the *City for People* were chosen as examples of informal temporary urbanism urban activism, because the chosen activities are guerrilla, temporary solutions created by volunteers and often by unknown authors.

In general *City for People* supported activities include guerrilla cycling lane, guerrilla road circle, guerrilla pedestrian roads (while reconstruction works), actions to protect trees, guerrilla gardening in the centre of the city, guerrilla maintenance of road holes, etc. Due to the short-term and informal character of guerrilla initiatives, it was impossible to count the precise number of actions for years 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. However, the types of actions illustrate the direction of citizen-led initiatives and the problems they are trying to solve. In addition to on-site guerrilla actions, the association itself works actively on the development of visualisations with proposals to change the urban environment, collection of good examples, writing articles and

organising voting for best or worst solutions, etc. Currently, trying to have long-term impact on urban environment the association also started participation in calls to get support from the City.



Fig. 6. Process of informal urban activism [Figure: A. Koroļova].

III. TYPES OF ACTIVITIES BY FORMAL URBAN ACTIVISM

In order to identify the field of activities for both formal and informal urban activism, it has been decided to collect and analyse the results of financed project.

Analysis of online data showed that among 19 funded projects in 2016 (of 2 contests), only 2 projects had a long-term effect on the urban environment. In 2017, the total number of supported projects was 29, and again only 2 of them with long lasting effect on the surroundings. In 2018, 21 project with 4 having a long lasting effect on urban environment, and in 2019, 26 projects with 3 on urban interaction [27].

All other projects included various one-day events, like neighbourhood festivals, markets, sports competitions or workshops. Eleven projects included also springtime neighbourhood cleaning activities [27] (Riga City Council Department of Education, Culture and Sport, 2018). The second program – “For Riga neighbourhood development project realisation” had all 6 funded projects focusing to a certain extent on urban regeneration (Table I).

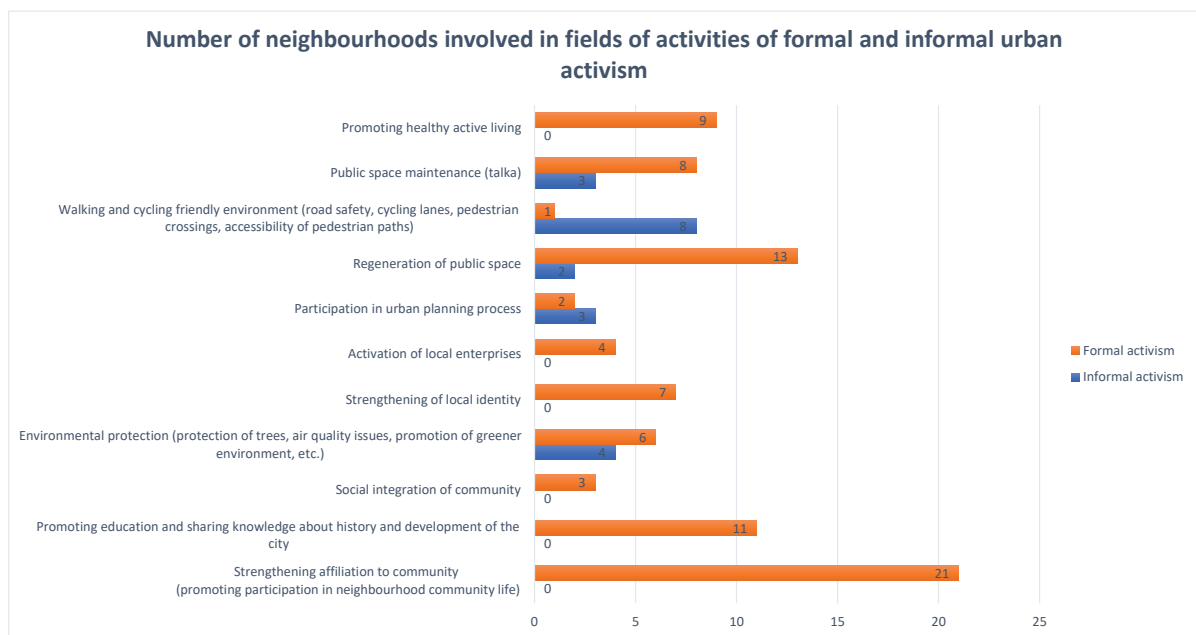


Fig. 7. Fields of activities in formal and informal urban activism and number of neighbourhoods addressing these topics [Figure: Authors of the Article].

TABLE I

PROJECTS SUPPORTED WITHIN “NEIGHBOURHOOD'S INITIATIVE TO PROMOTE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND STRENGTHEN THE SENSE OF COMMUNITY” AND PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING PILOT PROGRAM [AUTHORS OF THE ARTICLE]

	2016	2017	2018	2019	Participatory budgeting, pilot project in 2019
Event/festival / celebration/ sports activities / workshops	17	25	15	19	–
Cleaning (<i>Liela Talka</i>)	–	4 (2 as a separate activity)	3	4	–
Urban interaction	2	2	4	3	6
Other	–	–	–	4	–
Total number of activities	19	29	21	26	6

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of formal and informal urban activism allowed to group the activities according to their main focus. Figure 6 shows the interrelation of the funded projects in different neighbourhoods of Riga and informal activities in various places (Fig. 7).

Comparative analysis of formal and informal urban activism showed that informal activities are mainly addressing road safety and accessibility and environmental protection issues. Focusing on safety and accessibility urban activists are trying to gain rights to walking and cycling friendly environment, safer road

crossings, interconnected cycling lanes, safe solutions during road construction works, protection of pedestrian paths from car and scooter parking, etc. These issues have been directly addressed only in one funded participatory budgeting project – *Trīsciems*. Moreover, the guidelines for program “For Riga neighbourhood development project realisation” applicants state that the creative quarter and residential area courtyard road and path infrastructure reconstruction is not applicable. However, deeper research on the unfinanced projects showed that some applications included creation of new safer paths and bicycle parking but did not succeed to collect as many public votes as the other projects [25]. The other participatory budgeting program called “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community” set the condition for the project to support inhabitant participation in urban planning or co-creation of urban space. The guidelines state that the supported actions can include neighbourhood environment clean-up and improvement. But as can be seen from supported projects they usually do not include creation of cycling lanes or new road barriers but focus on outdoor cleaning activities [27].

The other issue addressed by informal activists is environmental protection. Informal urban activists are taking part in public protests against tree cutting or removal of flower beds, they plant trees in empty spots from where the tree has previously been removed, put signs on trees to protect from bicycle parking, etc. This issue appears also in formal activities, but with a different emphasis. So, for example the *Sarkandaugava* neighbourhood organisation organised a competition for the best maintained courtyard and most beautiful flower beds. Other neighbourhood associations were supported to create bird houses, etc.

It can be noticed that promotion of healthy active lifestyle is of big interest in formal activism. So, for example sports competitions and other related active recreation events compose a great part of projects in the “Events” section supported within the framework of “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community” and have been realised by 9 neighbourhoods. The situation regarding the pilot participatory budgeting project is similar, 2 projects out of 6 are addressing active lifestyle: *Multifunctional sports field in the Brasa neighbourhood* and *Sports complex for all ages in Kengarags and free sports lessons*. Also, installation of the waterfront recreation facilities in *Dārziņi* indirectly supports active lifestyle by promoting swimming. The fight of informal urban activists for cycling infrastructure may be considered as indirect addressing of active lifestyle issues, however in general these actions have a different aim.

Comparison of informal and formal activities in relation to specific neighbourhoods showed that certain neighbourhoods such as Center, *Teika* or *Čiekurkalns* face both types of urban activism. Still the areas of activities differ. For example, informal activism in *Čiekurkalns* addressed the issue of unsafe road and necessity of reorganisation of that area. While the formal projects have a wide focus on strengthening affiliation to community and local identity, promotion of education and knowledge about the neighbourhood, as well as urban regeneration. In *Čiekurkalns*, 8 formal projects focused on festivals, art installations, exhibitions, excursions, markets, Christmas events, and cleaning activities.

Informal activists are intently addressing issues of the city centre, such as a cycling lane on Brīvības Street, protection of flower beds on Kr. Barona Street, tree planting in the centre, actions to create safer walking environment during road construction works, etc. Analysis of formal activism showed that the city centre NGOs are focused on cultural events, educational activities, inhabitant forums, festivals, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of two participatory budgeting models showed that the Riga City Council has a leading role in one of them, determining the types of financed projects. The program guidelines for applicants are broad, which allows both the applicants and also the evaluation committee to have a wider choice while accepting or rejecting projects. The newly launched participatory budgeting tool allows citizens to have more impact on decision making as the model includes also public voting, which must be taken into consideration. In this case municipality is influencing the type of urban regeneration by defining in the guidelines which types of projects are not applicable.

While participatory urban regeneration can foster sense of community and strengthen neighbourhood identity, only 13 projects within program “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community” were addressing this issue. However, the second participatory budgeting program had all projects focused on urban regeneration, which can be explained by much bigger budget and shift from

community-realised (community implemented) project to municipality realised projects. Which means that all the project approval, construction and other related works are managed by the Municipality.

Comparison of interests of formal and informal urban activism showed some interrelations, but in general are addressing different issues, though both aiming at urban regeneration and development of more liveable urban environment. Thus, examination of projects related to environmental protection showed that formal activism is focused on creation (new flower beds, new greenery, etc.), while informal – on protection (actions to prevent removal of garden beds, protecting trees from cutting, etc.).

Analysis of geographical distribution of formal and informal activities showed certain differences. It is clear that some neighbourhood associations, like those in *Čiekurkalns*, *Sarkandaugava* or *Maskavas foršate* are more active and successful, and so the strengthening of community and identity as well as urban regeneration activities are more often and processes are faster and with wider public participation. Whereas other neighbourhoods have only one or no projects realised in the course of four years. Similar situation is with informal activism where focus on city centre and the neighbourhoods connected to the main street – Brīvības Street – is clearly dominating.

Trying to find correlation between the type of activities in one neighbourhood, it is clear that activists are living parallel lives. We can assume that in order to get financial support neighbourhood associations are forced to adapt to the project call guidelines, while informal urban activism can raise any urban regeneration issue they consider important.

Analysis of the types of projects and activities showed that currently small-scale urban interventions can not compete with sports and social inclusion oriented activities within the program “Neighbourhood's initiative to promote public participation and strengthen the sense of community”. And the budget of the program “For Riga neighbourhood development project realisation” requires thinking in large-scale. Still budgeting of small-scale fast solutions would allow slow but sensitive improvement of the quality of urban life. Moreover, allowing more projects to be financed might solve the question of current fragmented allocation of supported projects.

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