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How Just Are Urban Sustainability Transition Plans? Benchmarking Spatial Justice

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The ongoing debates surrounding sustainability transitions in cities and regions highlight the urgent need to make these transitions fairer, more democratic, and inclusive. Currently, there is increasing recognition that sustainability transitions must be more just to avoid the risk of failure and the deepening of discontent with climate action, particularly in disadvantaged urban areas and among marginalised communities. Similarly, in the field of urban planning, there is a rapidly expanding body of literature on spatial justice, emphasising the need for more equitable planning in terms of the spatial distribution of benefits and burdens, fairness in procedures, and recognition of the diverse needs and interests of different social groups. However, planning practice has yet to keep pace with this trend, and there is a significant knowledge gap regarding how to measure and evaluate spatial justice in the planning process. This paper seeks to address this gap by proposing a spatial justice assessment tool for planning documents. We outline the conceptual model that underpins the tool and demonstrate its application across four European cities.

The assessment is conducted in two phases. The first phase involves using the Values, Strategies, Objectives, and Actions (VSOA) approach to distil essential part of their agenda from the documents prepared by the cities. This approach provides a framework for analysing key components and understanding how values are articulated and translated into actionable measures. It helps to identify the overall vision, the strategies designed to achieve it, the specific objectives set, and the tangible actions proposed. In the second phase, we employ spatial justice as a lens for a qualitative evaluation of how cities address the dimensions of distributive, procedural, and recognition justice within city-wide planning documents. This includes ensuring the fair distribution of burdens and benefits, focusing on processes that do not exacerbate inequalities, and being attentive to needs and aspirations of marginalised and vulnerable groups and identities affected by these transitions.

The paper applies the evaluation tool in four diverse urban contexts: Belfast, Rotterdam, Granollers, and Budapest. These cities vary in size, are located in different parts of Europe, and represent different planning cultures. The plans assessed also cover a range of climate action documents, from overarching sustainability transition plans to more specific energy transition or climate resilience plans. We present and critically evaluate the scores produced by the evaluation of the four planning documents, discussing these findings in relation to the existing literature and considering their implications for planning and policy practice in the context of delivering more just urban sustainability transitions. By deploying the tool in these varied settings, we demonstrate its versatility and broad applicability as a spatial justice assessment framework for urban planning practice. Additionally, we illustrate its potential as a critical discourse analytical tool, revealing the extent to which sustainability transition discourses in urban planning adhere to the principles of spatial justice.