PLAY #2

CULTIVATE LOCAL INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

To compete in the smart innovation landscape, cities must cultivate supportive environments for individuals and local companies. Unlike business models backed by venture capital funding and research and development branches of mega-corporations, local innovation ecosystems are incentivized to understand and serve their community's needs. Public investment and procurement processes should support the development of technologies that prioritize collectively -defined public value and locally-sourced innovation.

DISCUSSION

It is no surprise that funder agendas steer smart city values. However, the project constraints stipulated by public sector and foundation investments tend to underestimate the lengthy engagement processes necessary for community-led innovation. Layman Lee says that "meaningful relationships with people and neighborhoods don't fit within 12—18 months of foundation timelines. Well-meaning [project teams] are trying to make community engagement a priority, but trust-building takes time and is rarely supported."

Large smart technology vendors might pay lip service to community engagement, but cities typically have no processes in place to mandate such engagement prior to procurement. It is typical, therefore, for RFPs to be awarded to companies with few or no requirements for public input. Moreover, as the definition of smart is still very much in flux, fast-moving industry sectors appear to be defining the terms for cities and citizens. In framing a local innovation ecosystem, we identify an alternative strategy of partnerships with universities, innovation hubs, labor, and community organizations both invested in local public value and better attuned to community needs. These relationships can help cities determine and prioritize public sector values, ethics,

and knowledge when negotiating with large corporations. As Catherine D'Ignazio says, "We need to discover creative mechanisms for the public sector to exert pressure on corporations who want to do business with cities, [and] to reallocate their funds into engagement, capacity-building, and addressing equity gaps." Cities need to create opportunities for publics to dissent, as well as for the public sector to fail honestly without activating the narrative of the political scandal.

Cultivating a local innovation ecosystem goes hand-in-hand with supporting an informed public voice on smart city technology use, and a key component of informed publics is basic data literacy. Public sector and civil society organizations need to invest in cross-sector data literacy for publics to critically assess the values and risks of smart infrastructure. Such capacity is often relegated to data scientists or technical staff,' but in an economy increasingly driven by data acquisition and deployment at the level of government and corporation, civic smart cities must prioritize data literacy or, more broadly, a data culture. This is not simply for the purpose of public input, but for idea generation and creative problem solving. The historic misuse of data that disproportionately impacted low-income Black and Latinx communities (such as stop-and-frisk police regimes) highlights the pressing need for greater data literacy - especially for those at heightened risk- to not only express their opinions, but to propose alternative solutions.

Informed publics need legitimate accountability measures for bodies with the authority to collect and act on data. Toward this end, the ability to audit government or private data sources is a key component of a data culture, as is the cultivation of citizen groups as technology innovators rather than simply consumers. By reinforcing channels for greater transparency and access under the umbrella of the smart city, cities can better facilitate public trust and local partnerships, creating healthier innovation ecosystems.

ACTION IDEAS

• Seek partnerships with local universities to source talent and knowledge

• Cultivate data literate publics to empower critical input and innovation

• Identify local innovation capacity by creating an asset map of skills and interests

• Support public experimentation with new technologies and cultivate local expertise