Conversing cities: the way forward

Mimi Tresman, Edna Páscher and Francesco Molinari

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the importance of conversing within cities, organizations and beyond, in order to adapt to the rapidly changing environment and promote co-operation, participation and with special reference to European cities.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper brings examples and case studies of how the concepts of conversing cities has been and is being integrated into existing cities focusing on the future – youth, employment, education and quality of live as essential factors for the future prosperity of cities.
Findings – With the rapid changes in society, economy and technology, not only business organizations need to adapt to the new reality but also cities. Conversing is an important part of adaptation – communicating, making contact, networking, sharing ideas, creating new knowledge.
Originality/value – This article shows how interactions which have been formulated for organizations (businesses) can be relevant and essential to cities as living and changing units and shows how conversing cities have benefited and prospered.
Keywords Knowledge management, Innovation, Citizen participation, Democracy, Cities, Europe
Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction
With the rapid changes in society, the move towards knowledge economies and the migration of traditional industries out from Europe, rapid urbanization and the raise in the urban standard of living, European cities need to re-invent themselves (Carrillo, 2006) or they may die. The Lisbon Agenda addresses these issues and others in the following strategic goal of becoming “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (Lisbon European Council, March 2000). In order to deal with the shift towards an intangible knowledge economy it is necessary to create knowledge societies (New Club of Paris, 2006), empowering citizens into knowledge citizens (Goldberg et al., 2006).

Preparing for the future
The migration of rural populations into cities, which started in the onset of industrial revolution, is still happening. Today 50 per cent of the world’s population lives in cities, and it is expected that by 2025, 75 per cent of the population will be urban (Carrillo, 2006). For EU27, the share of people that lives in urban areas is more than four in ten (SERA, 2006), only two out of ten live in predominantly rural areas. In addition, the deterioration of the sense of community in many cities (crime, unemployment, ethnic divide) has been emphasized by a number of incidents of social unrest in Europe over the past years. This has an effect on the social fabric which the city consists of and in order to create a city which is to survive and prosper there is a need to create more social cohesion, both for preserving and raising standards of living (by reducing crime, better education, welfare and jobs) and for creating,
renewing and sharing the diversity of knowledge (through research, participation, dialogue and inclusion).

**Knowledge cities must be conversing cities:**

Conversations are seen by some scholars as a “unifying principle” for the generation of innovation in corporate, as well as urban, environments (Stewart, 2001; Dvir and Pasher, 2004). This has much to do with empowering people in the process of city governance and at the same time, with a restored or strengthened legitimacy of governments (Pellizzoni, 2004).

In the context of knowledge cities, conversations can involve the inhabitants of a same city and/or different cities (Ergazakis et al., 2004), on one hand, or the practice of “social dialogue” between public administrators and citizens (Wiig, 2002), on the other. However, the latter must be more than a periodic consultation with selected groups or communities of people (including their elected representatives); for three reasons:

1. Attention centers on individual knowledge that should be made available for public purposes, in the interest of the whole community.
2. Citizen engagement in policy making has a significant impact on the quantity and quality of deliberations, especially when these are affecting a sub-sample of the whole population (e.g. in the case of the location of hazardous waste treatment plants).
3. People’s participation in the democratic process (especially at local level) has always been seen as a way to increase the level of acceptance, and confidence, in the direction that the whole community is taking towards the future.

While very few doubt of the positive relation between knowledge sharing and conversations, a more sensitive issue is the inherent dilemma (or contradiction) between participation and representation: hearings, fora, small talks and other forms of public involvement, differently from voting, do not ensure a fair representation of the interests of the whole population. Quite usually, the floor will be limited to “the best informed”, “the affluent”, or “the most educated” part of society, which can lead to severely distorted results.

Another sensitive issue can be identified as “noise in conversations”, or “the paradox of scale” (Fishkin, 1995): too many voices rarely lead to a clear conclusion, or rather fall victims of someone else’s “summing up”. It is then part of a city government's responsibility to ensure that the results – not just the topics, or the frames – of people’s conversations be really reflecting a free, open and comprehensive social debate, able to build intellectual skills or to leverage upon existing ones.

**Knowledge cities – conversing innovative living environments:**

A knowledge city refers to a city as a dynamic and complex living system, much like a living organism, a network of integrated systems, processes and structures which exists within an environment which experiences and must adapt to internal and external changes. A culture of conversing promotes what is required in order to adapt successfully to change and the unknown (Stewart, 2001).

As Albert Einstein said, you can’t solve problems with the same way of thinking which created them. Along this line, knowledge cities are a part of a “new paradigm which develops new strategies which go far beyond the repetition of ‘old recipes’ to ‘make the future’, or variations of the same mistake” (New Club of Paris, 2006).

Expansion of the concept of wealth to intangible concepts such as intellectual capital, which includes human abilities, relationships and innovation, creates a new way of viewing the world in financial terms. Thus, future economic growth is interconnected with many different systems in society, the environment and the global economy. The ability to create a connected and conversing network of key players (industry, academia, schools, health, government) reflects on the city's ability as a system to adapt to internal and external changes and utilize the value of a heterogenic society, not only in the way of tolerance but in the creation of value and knowledge from this diversity.
The benefits of a tolerant and conversing culture, created through continuous interaction between regions, are acceptance and respect, trust, co-operation between and within groups, creativity, inclusion, participation and ethical behaviour. So is the spontaneous appearance of other important and emerging issues such as ecological awareness and responsibility (Ximena et al., 2004).

**The importance of conversing for organizational learning:**

In a culture where dialogue, communication and conversing are common, people feel confident to express their thoughts and ideas in regard to questions that matter. A culture of trust enables the creation of ‘new knowledge which is created from questions that arise in conversation’ (Stewart, 2001). As Alan Webber said: “In the new economy, conversations are the most important form of work. Conversations are the way knowledge workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues, and in the process create new knowledge” (Stewart, 2001).

Through creating a culture of dialogue, trust, inclusiveness, confidence and hope are promoted. People feel and become part of the decision-making process and community building, generating new ideas, participation, knowledge, issues to be dealt with, and ways of dealing with them.

In cities, like in organizations, there is a process of organizational learning. This is rooted in individual learning and a synergy of knowledge and insights and create a common value greater than the sum of its parts through knowledge sharing.

Feedback is a way of maintaining good relationships between management/municipality and employees/citizens and encourages individuals to express their views and ideas. As it has been found by Goldberg et al. (2006): “A learning city, just like a learning organization, needs to be a place where both individual and group learning occurs through conversation and feedback.”

**Case study: the city of Holon, City of Children**

The city of Holon, in central Israel, was experiencing problems such as young people leaving the city and becoming an unattractive place to the young and the old alike, in the early 1990s. As a result of the ongoing situation, the new mayor at the time initiated a new client-supplier relationship between the city and its inhabitants. And through a survey on the municipal demographics, economic, cultural and social profile a new strategy was developed to transform the city through the vision of Holon as the City of Children. This emphasized the focus on the future, nurturing of knowledge and drawing young people and families to the city.

Inviting people to converse had an effect on their attitude and their willingness to participate and contribute. As a result, new cultural institutions were created to educate, enrich and focus on children, such as: the Israeli Children's Museum, a unique museum that offers an interactive experience through the use of advanced technology. “Meet the Eye”, a centre for experiencing art through advanced technology, aimed at enriching the children's world through the language of art. The Centre for Digital Art, a technological institute which teaches children about science and technology through interactive experience (Levin-Sagi et al., 2006).
The physical surroundings of the city were an important aspect in Holon’s strategy and renewal, promoting the creation and preservation of parks and green spaces, public art gardens, integrating public knowledge in a natural setting. In addition, the city developed economically, aiming to provide future opportunities and contribute to a rising standard of living and attractiveness.

In order to do just that, the city improved its own services to the public. This could be measured through its performance as a knowledge city in the way of intellectual capital management.

**Putting youths in the centre**

The Israeli Ministry of Education has recently launched a long-term project for the inclusion of youths (aged 12-18) in the planning and creation of their Future and the future of their cities. This is done on a municipal or regional level by adopting a systems thinking approach which leads to the creation of a space in which young people can converse and work together with key players from different fields such as the mayor, schools, after school activities, youth groups, social services, industry, academia, culture and sports. Creating an environment in which different organizations and people work together at a round table and share knowledge, expectations, fears, and together evaluate and implement ways of addressing these issues.

In the authors’ work with the Israeli Ministry of Education, the idea of creating Future Centers as hubs for these roundtables was introduced. A long exploration of Future Centers which started in a collaboration with Leif Edvinsson in the Skandia Future Center on creating the Intellectual Capital report of Israel in 1998, has evolved into a European-funded project on Future Centers (OpenFutures in FP6) in which the authors are partners and in which the potential of shared spaces for conversations on questions that matter for the future of organizations and cities is explored.

By addressing young people’s interests, it is possible to make a city more attractive to them. This includes investment in future jobs to make it attractive to today’s youth in the future. Having a high level of education will give young people a good starting point with many future opportunities, raising the standard of education, employment and living overall, and making the city a more attractive and sustainable place to live in:

Society must consist of three generations … The older generation holds experience and knowledge that the young have not yet acquired. While the younger generation hold knowledge that is more technologically oriented, up to date, and innovative (Levin-Sagi et al., 2006. p. 114).

This is why cities must be attractive to all groups in society and promote exchange of knowledge, new ideas, methods and lessons leaned. This in itself encourages social cohesion, conversations, general atmosphere and standard of living:

Creating a positive future begins with human conversation. The simplest and most powerful investment a member of a community or an organization may make in renewal is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered (Stewart, 2001).

**The future of cities in Europe**

In order to address the EU’s goals as stated in the Lisbon Agenda, it is necessary to create a new way of living in a community and participating in society. With technological advances and the internet, the unknown of climate change and the rapid changes to European economies, cities need to become favourable environments for exchanging and creating knowledge. By promoting knowledge-based industries and networks, cities can maintain high standards of living through low unemployment levels and better jobs, research, education and investment in infrastructure and services. The investment knowledge cities make in education, raise the standard and skills for further education and skilled labour, working towards sustaining the future of the city. In addition, the investment in culture, arts and sports contributes to a high standard of living, natural environment and attractiveness of a city and a region.
The processes which drive knowledge cities produce a democratic system which enables and encourages citizen participation and dialogue in order to create an urban community and a sustainable society in the twenty-first century. Thus, contributing to the creation of a "competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy . . . capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by "supporting the transformation of our society and economy into a knowledge society and a knowledge economy" (New Club of Paris, 2006).

Inspiring a “conversing democracy” model

Let the enemies of the Persians be ruled by democracies; but let us choose out from the citizens a certain number of the worthiest, and put the government into their hands. For thus both we ourselves shall be among the governors, and power being entrusted to the best men, it is likely that the best counsels will prevail in the state (Herodotus, The Histories III.81).

Democracy was born in Athens almost 2,500 years ago, and still then something was wrong with it. Herodotus, the Greek writer known as the Father of History, describes a debate on the three known government types (monarchy, oligarchy and democracy), stating that in democracy, deliberations are made by the entire citizenry, while the magistrates are held accountable and selected by lot.

None of these conditions is reflected in current democracies. In particular, "the entire citizenry" is just too large to assemble and discuss, let alone decide, on any specific issue. Public officials are not randomly selected but delegated through a majority vote. Universal deliberation is substituted by the universal (and untouchable) right to cast a ballot in the polls. However, the elected members of modern parliaments and councils – including the professional bureaucrats – are hardly made accountable to the citizenry, and what is probably worse, a bulk of evidence on political business cycles is there to show that "being accountable" simply does not increase the incumbents’ chances to get re-elected. (Neither does it lower them, of course, but the two events seem largely uncorrelated.)

Looking also at the growing costs of electoral campaigns and the increasing level of "professionalism" (c.f. Weber, 1919) of modern politics and politicians, one might be tempted to conclude that Herodotus’ conditions for oligarchy, rather than democracy, are satisfied in our times. However, his prophecy seems far from realized, as the needs for a managerial injection and repeated accountability prescriptions are “top of the list” of remedies to our ailing political class.

The ICT (information and communication technology) revolution of the past 20 years and the internet explosion in the past ten have given new momentum and offered a wider perspective not just to (e-)voting, but also to (e-)participation in collective dialogue and decision making. Yet as was emphasized by Pateman (1970) almost forty years ago, modern theories of democracy attach little value to citizens engagement and universal deliberation. A paradigm shift is probably needed to make room for normative concepts like Dahl’s (1998) conditions for democratic decision making, i.e.

- Effective participation.
- Equality in voting.
- Gaining enlightened understanding.
- Exercising final control over the agenda.
- Inclusion of adults.
Each of the above conditions raises sensitive and unsolved issues; for instance, it is known from Arnstein’s (1969) seminal work that the development of participation in a selected context can reach different levels of granularity, including “loose coupling” and rhetoric “manipulation”. At the other extreme, Dahl himself admits that in the real world, it is very unlikely that every citizen can have equal opportunities to influence the policy agenda. The recent popularity of electronic voting is partly related with the possibility of enhancing people’s control over policy makers. Yet in the State of California, as reported by Zakaria (2003), when people were asked to vote electronically on more than 200 pieces of legislation in one single year, this instead of opening up a new perspective to participatory democracy, simply turned into the creation of “a jumble of laws, often contradictory, without any of the debate, deliberation, and compromise that characterize legislation”.

Herodotus’ worries about the risks of magistrates selection by lot are echoed in this description. Using Zakaria’s words, “politics did not work well when kings ruled by fiat and it does not work well when the people do the same”. However, this would not necessarily imply that “the elected”, not to speak of “the appointed”, public officials could take better decisions on their own in the interest of the whole population.

As Fishkin (1995) clearly stated: “The (real) problem of democratic reform is . . . how to bring people into the process under conditions where they can be engaged to think seriously and fully about public issues”. This is exactly what a conversing city should be aiming at. Requirements for this do not only include the establishment of mechanisms for expressing a “separate judgement” of the electors with respect to the elected, but also the settlement of conditions for a timely, informed and responsible judgement, that are definitely harder to achieve.

Internet and the ICT are not a viable solution to that. Apart from any consideration on the digital divide running across homes, boroughs and regions, the internet’s capacity to ensure many-to-many deliberative discussions is questioned by some, who argue that these are best conducted in face-to-face settings involving relatively few people (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001). Thus, a solution is lacking for connecting, consulting and engaging citizens without a personal access to the Internet. Public kiosks, cyber-cafés and community centres lack of the necessary diffusion, while TV and other digital platforms need to be integrated with a socio-technical solution to favour conversations and deliberations within groups of people.

This may also recall Plato’s belief that 5,040 is the ideal number of citizens to take part in a working democracy; that figure, however, would be high enough to require the provision of supporting facilities to enable Dahl’s “enlightened understanding” of decision matters and the establishment of fair rules to collect and aggregate the opinions of everyone.

Case study: the regional law on (e-)participation in Tuscany

Tuscany is, indeed, one of the Italian regions which are most active in e-Government projects. Apart from the State-funded initiatives in the ICT area, a good share of which belongs to the Tuscan Public Administration, it is worth to mention here the following:

- 1995-now: building up and maintenance of a region-wide telematic infrastructure, called RTRT (first example in Italy), linking all the main public entities of Tuscany and with a significant representation of the private sector (both profit and non-profit).
- 2001-now: conception and implementation of the “e-Toscana” initiative (the Action Plan of Tuscany Regional Administration), including a “long list” of 50 specific projects for ICT solutions development in the business area, the deployment of e-Government services and the promotion of e-Inclusion in the Regional Information Society, with an overall investment of more than €100 million.
- Ongoing activities for dissemination of free and open source software and the testing of broad band and other innovative infrastructure solutions in remote and rural areas.
Another example of public intervention in the field is the €5.7-million investment plan funded by the Regional Administration over the past three years, in order to spread some 300 “PAAS” within 192 Tuscan Municipalities, in cooperation with non profit entities, NGOs and voluntary associations.

Each PAAS has been built with a financial contribution of €15,000 and is now up and running at least 12 hours a week (50 per cent of time between 6 p.m.-10 p.m., at least once on Saturdays or Sundays), under the supervision of an NGO and/or Municipality. In this specific instance, public intervention was motivated by the awareness of a delay accumulated by Tuscany with respect to its “competing Regions” and of the opportunities that investments in the area of ICT could create both for citizens and businesses. However, with a twenty-first century hardware and software installed at each PAAS, and an old tradition of meeting and teaming up in their off-duty activities, a side effect of this operation was to start looking at the Tuscan population as a potential testbed for an ICT-supported participatory legislation process.

Not surprisingly, the starting point was a proposal for institutional change. The Regional Cabinet, led by President Claudio Martini, appointed Mr Agostino Fragai as delegated member to the reform of the political decision making and “cooperative governance system” in Tuscany, with a specific orientation to citizens’ involvement in the legislative process.

In January and May 2006, two specific events were organised, to collect and discuss the international evidence on (e-)Participation in Europe and worldwide. A specific website was created counting more than 100,000 hits in just a few months. More than 50 public meetings were held throughout the Tuscan territory, including “focus groups” and other forms of structured interactivity.

The idea has been to initiate the discussion around a draft regional law on citizens’ participation, using a “bottom-up approach”, in order to identify the core issues and the possible guidelines of this legislation effort, without starting from a predefined text, but rather recognizing the participation experiences already on course in Tuscany. In parallel, a coordinating group was created at the Department for Public Administration of the National Government, with the presence of several Regions, to enlarge the discussion about the topic at a multilateral level.

On 18 November 2006 in Marina di Carrara, the Region organized an Electronic Town Meeting, a participatory method allowing involvement of large audiences, where the participants could carry on a simultaneous discussion in small groups, individually expressing their opinions through an electronic polling system. Domain experts contributed to the process, stimulating reflection about the various issues at stake. The work sessions incorporated participatory planning techniques such as Open Space Technology and Focus Groups:

In a large pavilion of one of the most important exhibition areas of Tuscany, almost 500 people – equally representative by gender, and belonging to all social and professional groups, including immigrants, religious minorities and policy makers – coming from the ten provinces of the Region, were gathered and let interact for one full day throughout three different working sessions:

1. how to improve citizens’ participation on a specific public project (e.g. on the topics of participatory budget, urban planning, etc.);

2. how to manage the impact of major public works to the communities involved (similar to the experience of the French débats publics – see, e.g. www.debatpublic-iter.org); and

3. how to get more information on public policies and create a wider “culture of participation” within the Tuscan polity and society.

Fifty tables were set up, each seating ten people. Every table was equipped with a computer, connected to the others and to a central server by means of a wireless network,
and was presided over by a facilitator who conducted the discussions; each member of the panel also had a remote control for voting.

The discussion on each subject of the three sessions was briefly introduced by a domain expert, and supported by a “Discussion Guide” that was circulated before the meeting. The participants in each table were allowed some predefined time to interact and send their comments to a managing group of experts (the “Theme Team”), who were in charge of summarizing the feedback received and sending questions back to the tables for a final vote on each of them. Much of the day’s organization was ensured by some 100 volunteers, who carried out not only the most important logistic tasks (such as reception and visitors orientation), but also the delicate roles of table facilitators and/or members of the “Theme Team”, thus giving life to the supporting structure for the whole process.

The activities of the Electronic Town Meeting were disseminated through webcasting on a national TV channel (MTV) and to the PAAS network mentioned above, to ensure the widest possible impact.

The results of this experiment were later fed into the law-making agenda of the Cabinet, that is currently ongoing (see www.regione.toscana.it/partecipazione).

In March 2007, the Regional Council discussed the results and confirmed the validity of the work performed until then, by approving a list of recommendations; a first draft of the Law on (e-)Participation will appear by April and consultations will then take place with the stakeholders of the Tuscan “cooperative governance system”, including the table facilitators and the participants in the Electronic Town Meeting of November 2006.

The importance of conversing for legislation:

This ongoing experience of the Tuscany region is worthwhile in two respects:

1. on the one hand, it tackles with the issue of participatory legislation in a “self-mirroring” way, as it started with a participatory law drafting on the topics, procedures and methods that can ensure further integration of citizens “will” in the future decision-making process; and

2. on the other hand, it offers an intelligent and measured way to integrate the Tuscan people’s “informed judgment” into the existing constitutional setup, without imposing limitations to the law making competency of elected bodies (the Regional Council and the Cabinet), nor reducing the supplementary role of consultations with the economic and social stakeholders of the region.

The next logical step will be to develop a coherent evaluation framework (Macintosh and Whyte, 2006) to assess the impact, benefits and limitations of the participatory framework created.

Allowing citizens to “have their say” on the evaluation of public sector performance is also very much in line with the wave of government reforms aiming to increase the quality and accountability of results (Mussari and Steccolini, 2006). A person-centric, experience-based perspective can ensure a more sustainable innovation in the design and management of public services, by taking benefit of the ideas, suggestions and knowledge of the people involved with respect to their daily needs, in their every day lives, encompassing all their societal roles. Trying to build a participatory system of performance measurement is
coherent with the increasingly “networked” outlook of modern public administrations and
the delicate equilibrium to be searched between budget restrictions and continuous
improvement of policy outcomes.

Conclusions

The model of “conversing democracy” has still to be founded and better rooted in the
(classical or) modern theorising, yet it presents some immediate advantages over the
current state of things:

- it is related with a concept of “wise” (and “advised”) citizenship, that perfectly fits into
  that of learning city (and knowledge society);
- it can provide a sensible solution to the “dilemma” between representative and
deliberative democracy, allowing people to have their say without dismissing or
undermining the familiar gateway of free elections as access to the power and
governance; and
- it can offer a new perspective for measuring the accountability of governments and
allowing a participatory evaluation of law and policy making.

References

Vol. 35 No. 4, pp. 216-24.

Carrillo, F.J. (Ed.) (2006), Knowledge Cities, Approaches, Experiences and Perspectives,
Butterworth-Heinemann, Burlington, MA.

Coleman, S. and Getze, J. (2001), Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation,


Fishkin, J. (1995), The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy, Yale University Press, Yale,
CT.

processes: knowledge sharing in knowledge cities”, Journal of Knowledge Management, Vol. 10 No. 5,
pp. 92-8.


Z. and Ghoneim, A. (Eds), Proceedings of the eGovernment Workshop 2006: eGov06; Brunel University,

Public Money and Management, June, pp. 193-6.

decision_by_the_first_GA.pdf


No. 3, pp. 541-65.

SEERA (2006), Study on Employment in Rural Areas: A study Commissioned by the European
Commission, European Commission, Brussels.


About the authors

Mimi Tresman is a consultant and researcher at Edna Pasher PhD & Associates, working with organisations on sustainable development and social aspects, part of which is the creation of knowledge/conversing cities, future centers and dialogue creation. She is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: mimi@pasher.co.il

Edna Pasher (PhD) is CEO of Edna Pasher PhD & Associates, a management consultancy which was established in 1978. Edna Pasher has been at the forefront of social and organisational development which includes extensive work on: knowledge cities, knowledge management, sustainability and intellectual capital. Creating the future and preparing for it is a central focus in the work.

Francesco Molinari (MSc, BA) is a PhD Scholar on Public Sector Economy and Regulated Sectors Management at the University of Siena, Department of Business and Social Studies. As consultant for several public and private organizations, he has been involved for several years in the coordination of EU-funded, IST-related research and training projects. Currently he is also a strategic advisor to the Mayor of a middle-sized Italian city.

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints