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Crafting Consensus in City Logistics: The Power of Storytelling in Stakeholder-Driven Freight Policy Design

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of storytelling in participatory planning for urban freight transport. Stakeholder engagement is universally recognized as fundamental to urban logistics governance, yet its practical implementation remains uncertain. The research explores how digital storytelling, integrated within the Living Lab environment through a purpose-built software, enhances dialogue, consensus-building, and policy acceptance. In particular, the study analyzes its application within the Sustainable Urban Logistics Plan of the Metropolitan City of Rome, using it as a case study to clarify the effectiveness of this tool. The results demonstrate that storytelling increases stakeholder satisfaction and engagement, supporting a more transparent and inclusive participatory planning process. Participants in the experiment were real urban freight stakeholders, such as shippers, receivers, and transport providers, engaged in the co-creation of actual metropolitan logistics policies. These findings advocate for broader adoption of storytelling in urban freight transport governance to improve stakeholder sense making and policy effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

Storytelling is defined as the universal art of sharing stories through narration, using spoken language, gestures, images and expressions to create a direct and emotional connection between the storyteller and the listener (Pellowski, 1977). Therefore, it is not merely a form of entertainment but also an educational and cultural tool that preserves collective memory, strengthens social bonds, and fosters personal growth while clarifying social linkages and functioning.

Considering these attributes, storytelling has also been recognized as a valuable tool for participatory planning (Sandercock, 2003). It is particularly effective in addressing complex areas within urban planning, where stakeholders' interests may conflict, and power dynamics can significantly influence outcomes.

Urban Freight Transport (UFT) planning stands out as a sector presenting some of the most critical and complex challenges for cities. On one hand, it generates negative externalities but, on the other, it is also indispensable for ensuring growth, competitiveness, accessibility, and inclusivity within urban centres. Achieving a distribution system that meets market demand while simultaneously ensuring environmental and social sustainability is, therefore, a fundamental objective (Taniguchi and Thompson, 2014). In this context, participatory planning and stakeholder involvement play a crucial role in balancing the needs of the private sector, focused on greater efficiency and low-cost operations, with public needs, centred at ensuring urban liveability, high safety standards, and environmental sustainability. However, although there is broad consensus on the importance of this process, uncertainty remains the best practical implementation path to follow.

This paper addresses a specific gap in the academic literature. While several studies highlight the role of storytelling in participatory planning across various sectors, its application within UFT remains mostly unexplored. In this study, real urban freight stakeholders—shippers, receivers, and transport providers—actively participated in the co-creation of actual logistics policies through the Logistics Living Lab (LLL) established in the Metropolitan City of Rome. LLL are collaborative environments where public and private stakeholders co-create, test, and implement innovative policy and service solutions for city logistics. The LLL interacts with participants through a structured three-phase process that includes: listening and systematic mapping of active stakeholders in the metropolitan freight ecosystem; co-design and evaluation of policy measures through preliminary workshops; real-time communication and feedback via the L-3D

Visualise platform, which visualizes the outcomes of the discrete choice experiment (DCE) directly during the participatory sessions.

2. What is storytelling?

Bayer & Hettinger (2019) define storytelling as “the water of human communication,” highlighting its role as a natural, simple, and intuitive method for both understanding and sharing information on cognitive and emotional levels. Narratives that combine data and emotions are significantly more engaging than dry information as humans are inherently predisposed to this form of communication (Pickering & Garrod, 2004).

Traditional storytelling represents one of the oldest and most universal forms of human communication. Before writing and modern technologies existed, this practice played a central role in transmitting knowledge, traditions, moral values, and shaped the identity of communities.

Digital storytelling combines the traditional art of narration with new technologies. It involves creating and sharing stories using multimedia elements such as text, images, audio, video, and animation. This form of storytelling offers a more immersive and engaging experience by utilizing digital tools to enrich the narrative with visual and auditory elements.

3. Storytelling and participatory planning in urban freight transport

Participatory planning is a collaborative methodology that actively engages various stakeholders, including citizens, planners, public institutions, and private companies, in the decision-making process (Forester, 1999). It is particularly effective in addressing complex issues such as environmental quality, urban design, and economic development, where stakeholders’ interests may conflict, and power dynamics can shape outcomes. Public participation focuses on building consensus while maximizing time and cost efficiency. In fact, Figure 1 illustrates how, while unilateral decisions may initially seem faster, they often result in higher costs and delays due to resistance. Conversely, public participation, though more time-consuming upfront, fosters goodwill and facilitates smoother long-term implementation (Creighton, 2005).

Storytelling emerges as a powerful communication tool that fosters empathy and a sense of community among stakeholders, helping them understand individual benefits while recognizing collective compromises and necessary decisions. Furthermore, it cultivates a sense of belonging and responsibility in decision-making, enhances empathy and community building, strengthens co-creation, acceptance, and policy implementation.

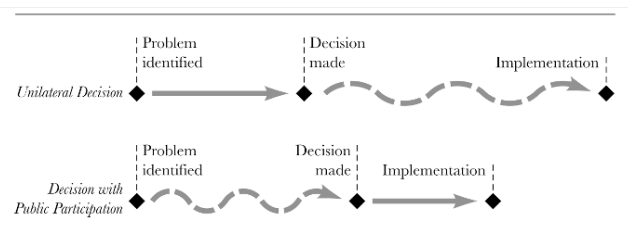


Figure 1- comparison of length of time: unilateral decision vs public participation (Creighton, 2005).

4. Participatory planning in Urban Freight Transport

Participatory planning proves particularly valuable in contexts where decisions carry significant and varied impacts on different groups or when issues are structurally complex and controversial. It aims to collect diverse perspectives, strengthen the legitimacy and acceptance of decisions, and foster consensus among stakeholders. This approach is especially valuable in urban development projects, where public involvement is necessary for the effective implementation and the assurance of long-term policy sustainability.

The transition to a collaborative urban governance framework is crucial for effectively addressing the significant challenges UFT poses to urban centres (Ehrler et al., 2021; Marcucci et al., 2017). Promoting cooperation between public administrations and private stakeholders is essential for coordinating logistics activities, particularly in local-level planning (Le Pira et al., 2017). Engaging businesses and local communities is pivotal for co-creating effective policy plans, testing, and implementing innovative solutions in UFT. This underscores the importance of collaboration between public authorities and diverse stakeholders (Gatta et al., 2019).

Living Labs (LLs) serve as collaborative environments where public and private stakeholders co-create, test, and implement innovative pilot projects. Additionally, LLs have the potential to improve governance by systematically involving key private stakeholders and public administrations, enabling both top-down and bottom-up governance approaches (Quak et al., 2023). In UFT planning, LLs prove particularly valuable in fostering shared awareness and facilitating the production of collective knowledge among stakeholders (Marcucci et al., 2019).

Within a LL, stakeholders are not selected randomly but identified based on their active role in the local logistics ecosystem, ensuring that their perspectives, needs, and constraints are authentically represented. In the case study presented in this paper, participants included shippers, receivers, and transport providers operating in the Metropolitan City of Rome, who were engaged throughout the process to identify, prioritize, and validate real policy measures considered for official adoption.

Stakeholders were identified through a systematic mapping conducted by Roma Tre University and Roma Servizi per la Mobilità, categorising actors into shippers (wholesalers, manufacturers, distributors), receivers (retailers and public or private organisations managing goods reception), and transport providers (couriers, logistics operators, carriers). Each actor was profiled according to company size, logistics role, geographical operational area and type of goods handled. A targeted communication campaign, supported by Roma Servizi per la Mobilità and FIT Consulting, ensured that all mapped stakeholders had the opportunity to participate, enabling a balanced representation from major international logistics operators to small local businesses, each contributing equally to the decision-making process.

Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were required to declare their macro-category within the software interface, selecting their primary activity among the classifications defined in the earlier phases: receiving, shipping, or transporting goods. Among the participants, 8 belonged to the receivers' category, meaning clients who receive orders, such as retailers and other recipients of shipped goods; 8 fell under the shippers' category, that is, those responsible for sending goods and entrusting them to carriers; and 15 were transport providers, namely operators responsible for collecting, moving, and delivering goods, including logistics companies and express couriers. In addition, participants indicated their specific business sector by choosing among 12 available options, including Construction, Maintenance/Installation, Appliances/Relocations, E-commerce, HoReCa, Pharmaceutical, Healthcare, High-Value Goods, Hazardous Goods, Waste, and Miscellaneous Goods. This categorisation enables the identification of potential compromise solutions both by predominant activity and across the entire supply chain.

Effective communication of results is often overlooked in participatory planning, even within collaborative environments. While many recognize the importance of participatory planning in improving policies, few studies delve into how to effectively share outcomes with the public. Policymakers must prioritize establishing bidirectional communication channels with stakeholders and carefully craft communication strategies and tools to ensure transparency, understanding, and engagement. Within the LL, a comprehensive communication strategy was implemented to ensure that participants could understand, assess and validate the outcomes of each phase. During the intermediate workshops, the results emerging from the discrete choice experiment and from stakeholder discussions were presented using structured visual materials, including tables, charts and summary presentations. These tools enabled all stakeholders, including those without a scientific or technical background, to clearly understand the issues being discussed and to participate actively and consciously in the decision-making process, ensuring that every participant could contribute meaningfully to the participatory process. The final results were communicated during a dedicated concluding session. A structured narrative supported by audiovisual content facilitated participants' understanding of both the quantitative outcomes of the analysis and their implications for urban freight policy. The real-time visualisation of satisfaction levels associated with the proposed solutions showed a clear increase in average satisfaction following the storytelling-based presentation, confirming its positive contribution to shared understanding and collective acceptance.

5. The role of storytelling in participatory planning

Storytelling is a valuable tool for managing stakeholders within a participatory planning framework, facilitating dialogue in two fundamental ways. First, it promotes mutual awareness of participants' identities within policy co-creation processes, fostering empathy and understanding, which are key elements for recognizing and valuing diverse perspectives (Black, 2008). Second, it supports dialogic interactions by helping stakeholders manage tensions between themselves and others. Storytelling encourages perspective shifts, enabling participants to acknowledge the validity of differing viewpoints, even in cases of disagreement.

Sandercock (2003) highlights storytelling as a valuable tool for urban planning, while Passon (2019) recognizes its effectiveness in fostering behavioural change. Storytelling enables individuals to interpret the past and prepare for the future, offering a forward-looking perspective that is crucial for planning (Van Hulst, 2012). Employing storytelling as a tool often requires a commitment to more inclusive and community-focused planning approaches, moving away from the unilateral decision-making models that frequently dominate public planning processes. Stories can capture, create and foster a community's fundamental identity, influencing or enhancing its capacity for transformation (Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003). Furthermore, public narratives can convert shared values into concrete actions (Ganz, 2011).

6. The role of storytelling in participatory planning for urban freight transport

Storytelling enhances UFT characteristics participatory planning by helping stakeholders engage with different scenarios and policy options. It clarifies trade-offs and clarifies the potential impacts of each decision. By embedding

logistics challenges and solutions within a narrative framework, storytelling fosters active interaction with the content and encourages stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to the planning process.

This approach innovates how policymakers convey policy implications and impacts to participants. Rather than relying on traditional methods filled with dry, quantitative data—such as tables, graphs, coefficients, or confidence intervals—storytelling adopts an engaging and accessible language. It simplifies complex technical issues, ensuring stakeholders fully understand them. By making policies more relatable, it drives deeper involvement and collaboration among all participants in the decision-making process.

7. Case study

In 2019, the City of Rome approved the Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan (SUMP), a strategic framework outlining short, medium, and long-term objectives for the urban mobility system. The Sustainable Urban Logistics Plan (SULP), integrated within the SUMP, included several measures addressing managerial, behavioural, regulatory, and infrastructural UFT features. The establishment of the LL of the City of Rome constitutes a cornerstone of this initiative, designed as a collaborative platform to systematically engage both public and private stakeholders in city logistics (Maltese *et al.*, 2023). Officially launched on February 24, 2020, the LL actively involves key logistics stakeholders—shippers, receivers, and transport providers—actively participating in discussions and experiments concerning the sector's challenges and priorities. Participants were selected based on their active roles in the metropolitan logistics ecosystem, ensuring that their interest in the process were real and significant. In 2022, the development of the SULP for the Metropolitan City of Rome began, with the definition of policy measures needed to enhance metropolitan logistics efficiency thus also reducing CO₂ emissions. The LL played a central role in drafting the SULP and prioritizing the measures included in the document, facilitating a structured and efficient decision-making process. These real policy options were not abstract hypotheses but concrete interventions under consideration for official adoption, ensuring that stakeholder engagement concerned tangible and meaningful outcomes.

Storytelling was seamlessly integrated into this process through a tailor-developed procedure and the dedicated software L-3D, that was created thanks to a locally financed project titled “L-3D - a new dimension of participation”. This approach promotes, develops, and systematizes an innovative decision support system designed to facilitate stakeholder involvement and evaluate policy ex-ante acceptability. The procedure developed and used in coordination with the software begins by identifying shared measures and culminates in their prioritization. Specifically, the “Visualise” software module leverages new technologies and innovative communication tools to enhance stakeholder engagement in UFT decision-making processes. The software stores and processes responses in real-time, enabling the immediate representation of results, which are then presented to the public using optimized graphics, embodying a digital storytelling approach.

8. Methodology

L-3D Visualise generates storytelling results by: (1) illustrating the status quo and the characteristics of the problem; (2) presenting the preferred combination of estimated policies for each stakeholder category, elicited using the DCE technique. DCE estimates stakeholder preferences by presenting them with alternative policy combinations and recording their choices, which reflect the relative utility of each attribute (Kuhfeld, 2001). Importantly, no external weighting was applied to stakeholders' preferences: the relative importance of each policy measure emerged endogenously from the DCE results, ensuring an unbiased reflection of stakeholder priorities; (3) showing the best compromise solution by clarifying which policy combination achieves the highest total utility across all stakeholders; (4) comparing steps 1 and 2 by visualizing the satisfaction levels of each stakeholder category regarding the compromise policy package; (5) building collective awareness of the compromise by enabling all stakeholders to compare their category's preferred solution with the overall solution. Each of these steps can also be identified as a storyline component, with each one logically following the previous to ensure a coherent and effective narrative (Vogler, 2007).

9. Practical application of storytelling in urban freight transport participatory planning

The sequence of the storytelling steps is detailed below in its application within the LL of the Metropolitan City of Rome when it was applied on 6th July 2022.

Step 1 illustrates the status quo scenario, where all types of stakeholders involved in UFT express a very high level of dissatisfaction, emphasizing the urgent need for changes to address ongoing challenges. Currently, UFT is fragmented and characterized by inconsistent regulations across municipalities, a situation exacerbated by e-commerce growth. The increasing demand for direct-to-consumer deliveries, combined with the lack of comprehensive access control systems, adequate loading/unloading zones, and an optimized strategy for positioning logistics infrastructures, hinders efficient and sustainable freight distribution.

Step 2 introduces the actors—senders, receivers, and transport providers—along with their preferred combination of policies, estimated in real time by L-3D software, which displays the preferred policy combinations for each stakeholder category. The best policy mix for stakeholder-types are reported below:

LTZ Access: **Senders** (Support facilitation of green vehicles); **Transport providers** (Support facilitation of green vehicles); **Receivers** (Prefer restrictions on polluting vehicles)

Governance / Infrastructure: **Senders** (Prioritize electric charging infrastructure); **Transport providers** (Advocate for integrating logistics into urban planning); **Receivers** (Advocate for integrating logistics into urban planning)

Operational Facilities: **Senders** (Request priority lanes for green vehicles); **Transport providers** (Request priority lanes for green vehicles); **Receivers** (Favor loading/unloading areas dedicated to green vehicles)

Logistics Facilities: **Senders** (Emphasize the need for available loading/unloading bays); **Transport providers** (Favor the development of an integrated micro-hub network); **Receivers** (Favor the development of an integrated micro-hub network)

Monetary Incentives: **Senders** (Support financial incentives for delivery consolidation); **Transport providers** (Support financial incentives for the adoption of green vehicles); **Receivers** (Support financial incentives for off-hours delivery)

Step 3 presents the best overall compromise solution, considering all stakeholder types. The compromise includes facilitation of green vehicles in LTZ access. This measure entails, on the one hand, the recognition of specific operational facilitation for accredited operators and, on the other, the progressive introduction of access restrictions for more polluting vehicles. This configuration supports the operational needs of shippers and transport providers while simultaneously contributing to the environmental objectives of the metropolitan area. The package also incorporates the integration of logistics into urban planning, a governance-oriented measure aimed at embedding freight distribution requirements within planning instruments and spatial policies. The objective is to define an efficient, metropolitan-scale freight transport model “from the origin,” ensuring that urban planning tools effectively integrate freight transport considerations and recognise its essential role for sustainable development. This approach responds to the demand, particularly from transport providers and receivers, for stronger coordination between logistics functions and urban development. A further component of the compromise is the introduction of priority lanes for green vehicles, an operational measure designed to improve delivery reliability and reduce travel times for environmentally compliant freight fleets. The measure foresees the use of reserved lanes by accredited freight vehicles, which meet defined environmental and efficiency standards, with the aim of increasing commercial speed, reducing congestion and minimising interference with private traffic. This, in turn, enhances both efficiency and overall performance of the urban distribution system. The compromise additionally includes the development of an integrated micro-hub network, a logistics infrastructure measure intended to reorganise last-mile distribution by creating small, strategically located consolidation nodes. These mini-hubs, or “proximity logistics spaces,” constitute essential infrastructure where operators can work in synergy to decarbonise and rationalise freight distribution across the municipalities of the Metropolitan City. This solution addresses the need, emphasised in particular by transport providers, for greater operational efficiency, while also meeting receivers’ interest in improved punctuality and reliability of deliveries. Finally, the compromise solution identifies off-hour deliveries as the preferred monetary incentive, promoting deliveries outside peak hours through financial or regulatory support. This measure is conceived as complementary to the broader objective of shifting deliveries away from daytime congestion periods and reflects the strong preference expressed by receivers. It also contributes to reducing traffic and the environmental impacts of freight movements during peak hours.

Step 4 compares stakeholder-type preferred solutions to the collective compromise. Unlike previous representations, the comparison made explicit how the compromise package partially incorporated elements from each stakeholder group's priorities but did not fully satisfy any single actor. This phase was enhanced to emphasize stakeholder trade-offs and emotional reactions.

Step 5 provides all the necessary elements to build collective awareness of the compromise, redirecting their attention from perceived losses to potential gains. While stakeholders unanimously perceive the status quo as highly negative, their evaluations of the compromise solution are different.

To mitigate the negative perceptions arising from comparing individual preferences with group compromise—which may be due to feelings of not being heard or insufficiently considered—Step 5 emphasizes how various proposed solutions, preferred by each stakeholder-type, have been incorporated into the compromise scenario.

Additionally, Step 5 uses emoji-based visualizations to illustrate stakeholder satisfaction levels, showing that all stakeholders are, on average, satisfied when comparing the compromise solution to the status quo (Figure 2). Emojis, linked to the satisfaction levels of each stakeholder type regarding the best compromise solution, communicate results in an effective, user-friendly, and emotionally engaging format.

Churches et al. (2014) suggest that emojis expressing joy can enhance the recipient's mood. Similarly, Haltmayer and Gierl (2021) argue that the brain processes emojis in a manner similar to human facial expressions. Moreover, emoji-based digital communication fosters a sense of warmth and reduces social distance, positively impacting the perception of the message source. Emojis often play a role in storytelling, allowing recipients to interpret narratives through their sequences.

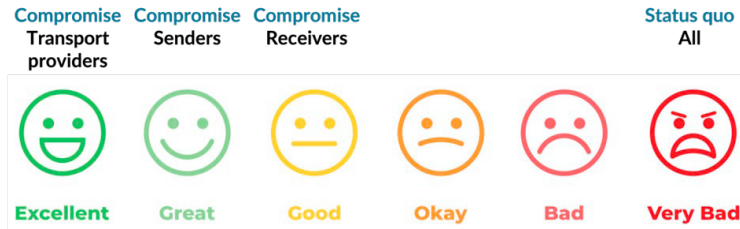


Figure 2. Emojis for representing satisfaction levels for stakeholder-types.

At the end of the participatory phases, a final LL session was organised to present the prioritised measures through a narrative format supported by audiovisual content and emojis illustrating stakeholder satisfaction levels. Real-time visualisation of satisfaction results showed a clear increase in average satisfaction after the storytelling session, confirming its positive impact on collective acceptance.

10. Results

The developed procedure adopts a hybrid format combining digital storytelling and traditional storytelling, enabling the presentation of policy measures and their anticipated impacts in a formal, engaging, and easily understandable narrative structure. A facilitator guides the storytelling process, ensuring that all stakeholders can easily follow the narrative. The facilitator's role is crucial in interpreting visualizations and integrating them into the overall narrative, helping stakeholders understand the compromise process and the decision-making procedure adopted.

The participatory planning technique developed, centred on storytelling, highlights that compromise is both necessary and shared among all stakeholder groups. This compromise represents a trade-off between the policy combinations individually preferred by various stakeholders. When each participant clearly perceives that others also have to give up something, an empathetic atmosphere immediately develops within the community. This scenario provides valid evidence for the described case study, which, however, requires confirmation through an iterative and recursive research process.

In our case, storytelling created a positive perception of the best compromise policy combination, which was considered acceptable after some discussions among participants. Both verbal and, most notably, non-verbal communication unequivocally demonstrated to the research team managing the workshop the profound impact storytelling had on participants' perceptions, encouraging them to "step into each other's shoes." This clearly transformed the overall atmosphere of the stakeholder meeting.

To objectively assess the impact of storytelling, a follow-up evaluation was conducted with the same participants on May 9, 2024. The evaluation was based on structured feedback and satisfaction ratings, allowing a quantitative comparison before and after the storytelling experience. Participants rated their level of satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 6, where 1 represented the lowest level of satisfaction and 6 the highest. The results showed a significant increase in participant satisfaction after exposure to the storytelling experience. Specifically, the question, "How satisfied are you with the policy combination you helped determine?" initially received an average score of 4.2 out of 6. After the storytelling experience, satisfaction levels rose to 4.7 out of 6, indicating that storytelling positively influenced participant engagement and their perception of the decision-making process. At this point, a comparison between the two means can be conducted using the paired samples T-test formula (Kim, 2015) provided below:

$$t = \frac{\bar{d}}{\frac{s_d}{\sqrt{n}}} \quad (1)$$

The obtained values are as follows: mean difference ($\bar{d}$)= 0.5; standard deviation of the differences (s_d)= 0.3; number of participants (n)= 22. Below we report the formula with the values applied to the case study:

(2)

$$t = \frac{0.5}{\frac{0.3}{\sqrt{22}}} = \frac{0.5}{\frac{0.3}{4.690}} = \frac{0.5}{0.064} \approx 7.81$$

With $n - 1 = 21$ degrees of freedom and a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed test), the critical value of the T-test is approximately 2.08. Since the calculated value ($t = 7.81$) is greater than the critical value ($t = 2.08$). The null hypothesis (H_0), stating that there is no difference in satisfaction before and after the storytelling intervention ($H_0: \mu_{\text{before}} = \mu_{\text{after}}$), is rejected. The increase in the average satisfaction score from 4.2 to 4.7 is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). This result suggests that storytelling had a significantly positive effect on participants' engagement and perception. No significant policy changes or external interventions occurred between July 2022 and May 2024, which supports the conclusion that the observed difference can reasonably be attributed to the storytelling process itself.

This experiment provided a clear, objective, and measurable assessment of the positive impact of storytelling on the participatory planning process. The results revealed that participants felt more included and satisfied with the outcomes when storytelling was incorporated into the process.

11. Conclusions

Storytelling stands out as an effective communication strategy that fosters a sense of community and empathy among stakeholders. It allows them to understand individual benefits, acknowledge collective compromises and trade-offs, and facilitates the co-creation, acceptance, and implementation of intervention policies.

The case study demonstrated that even when stakeholder groups such as shippers, receivers, and transport providers initially have divergent priorities, storytelling techniques can facilitate the construction of an acceptable compromise solution. Storytelling not only clarifies trade-offs cognitively but also fosters emotional acceptance through empathetic engagement.

Based on these results, policymakers, public administrations, urban planners, and participatory facilitators should consider integrating structured digital storytelling techniques into stakeholder engagement processes, particularly when dealing with complex, multi-actor decision-making environments such as urban logistics planning.

Future applications of this methodology could extend beyond logistics, supporting participatory processes in other domains such as urban regeneration, environmental planning, and transport system design, wherever consensus building and co-creation are essential.

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