

Panama City Sustainable Innovation Zone (ACTA): Key Accomplishments and Lessons

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of ACTA date as far back as 2014, when Dr. Marc Weiss visited Panama City to give a speech for the Panama Green Business Council, he discussed with me the possibility of developing a Sustainable Innovation Zone in Panama, according to the framework that Global Urban Development (GUD) was including in the Leapfrog Economic Strategy for the State of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil¹. It was an ambitious plan that had, at its core, the idea of creating special areas within cities where young entrepreneurs, students, and the general public could get involved in the creation of Sustainable Innovation-oriented policies, programs, and projects that would promote more economically resilient cities.

In late 2015 Dr. Weiss and I started having serious conversations about the idea of creating a Sustainable Innovation Zone in Panama City, modeled on GUD's newly organized Porto Alegre Sustainable Innovation Zone (ZISPOA)², a key implementation step of the Leapfrog Economic Strategy. First, my colleagues and I decided to reach out to local organizations where GUD's Sustainable Innovation and Inclusive Prosperity strategic policy and action framework could fit well. We got together with Ciudad del Saber (City of Knowledge), which is a large campus made up of universities, schools, and other institutions, to share ideas about this possibility. We decided that even though it sounded great on paper, the fact that it was in a remote suburban area far from the city center made it too much of an isolated bubble for what we had in mind.

By the beginning of 2016 I had been accepted to attend the Master of Environmental Building Design program at the University of Pennsylvania, so with plans of leaving soon, I still decided to start sowing the seeds for the Sustainable Innovation Zone. I got together with colleagues and friends from all walks of life who I knew would be interested in organizing a SIZ. Before leaving for Philadelphia, I already had a small group of 10-15 people who were interested in helping make it happen. They included mechanical engineers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, architects, and other young professionals.

STUDY BREAK

During my time in Philadelphia, I had the opportunity to participate in many conversations with Christopher Zelov and his group, who were creating an Eco-District in the Spring Garden

neighborhood near UPenn. Additionally, I participated in numerous conferences and lectures on sustainable city-making and kept threads of emails alive with Dr. Weiss.

BACK HOME

Coming back home from studying, in 2018 I gathered my colleagues, and we got together to brainstorm under Dr. Weiss's guidance. It started with identifying possible areas of the city where the Sustainable Innovation Zone would make the most impact, especially given our limited financial resources. I sat down with my architect colleagues and selected 10 communities that showed some potential, including historic areas, up-and-coming neighborhoods, and everything in between. They were all rated for their assets, their connectivity, and their institutions. We gathered with our colleagues and talked back and forth until we all agreed upon our pilot area.

After reviewing many options, we decided on La Exposición, which was a historic part of the city that was the venue for the Panama World Expo roughly 100 years ago to celebrate the inauguration of the Panama Canal. La Exposición was the location for the municipal government's headquarters building, City Hall, a key institution for urban policymaking that had recently taken responsibility for the district's public space. La Exposición also included multiple metro stations for sustainable mobility, plus wider streets and sidewalks for walkability and bicycling. On top of this, La Exposición had several major universities, and a substantial amount of both housing and commerce. This made it an ideal place to experiment with Sustainable Innovation policies. Even though it already had an excellent urban planning and design framework and many community assets, La Exposición also had great potential for improvement, and so we chose it as the pilot area for our Sustainable Innovation Zone.

FOUNDATION

By the end of 2018 we had gathered a larger group, created our brand, structured our goals, and launched a social media presence. Our core group consisted of the following, all of whom were close friends and successful young professionals:

Gary Martin and Luisa Nuccio: a couple of entrepreneurs who had recently launched a platform that promoted citizen action and accountability from our political leaders. They had met while studying law and had a common interest in advancing democratic reforms.

Andrés Leiro: a Worcester Polytechnic Institute graduate in Mechanical Engineering who was immediately excited about the concept of Sustainable Innovation Zones. He already had a strong background in social activism and sustainable business.

José Benítez: a law student who had been working in the British Embassy for some years, where he was directly involved in projects related to banning single-use plastics. He had particular interest in applying new technologies to support citizen activism.

Mariana de Obaldía: also a WPI graduate who had been previously involved in the nationwide project for the Sanitation of the Panama Bay. She then moved to work for Procter & Gamble, where she was very keen on implementing sustainable practices in their supply chain.

José Barría: an architect working with the Panama Green Building Council since 2013, who was especially interested in promoting energy efficient buildings and advancing sustainable urbanism.

The group collectively decided on the name for the Panama City Sustainable Innovation Zone: ACTA, which came from **AC**tion **TA**nk, following Dr. Weiss's ideas that it is through **action** and small victories that leads to building momentum for larger scale, long-term change. Once we had settled on a name and a core group, we started processing the creation of an NGO with a local high-profile law firm. They helped us create the official entity and establish its legal parameters, as well as the requirements to start receiving donations and other forms of funding.

With a clearer vision, a legal structure, and now a strong group of professionals, everything was ready to go. Additionally, we used Pentagrama Design Studio's space after office hours weekly, and it became our official ACTA hub. Pentagrama was coincidentally located in El Cangrejo, which was one of the neighborhoods we had also seriously considered for our Sustainable Innovation Zone. There, we enthusiastically gathered and held our first meetings.

STRUCTURING

Since Sustainable Innovation is a multi-faceted venture, we decided to divide our efforts and assign leadership. ACTA began developing projects organized into four key pillars: Energy (led by Andrés Leiro), Urban Infrastructure (led by José Barría), Resource Security (led by Mariana de Obaldía), and Governance (led by José Benítez).

Each leader then reached out to their network of contacts and built smaller project-oriented working groups to start discussing ideas. These were organized as Idea Labs, which were 3-5 hour meetings with groups of at least 6 guests. The result of these Idea Labs was an action roadmap for each pillar. It was structured in a way that could be handled with volunteers and supervised by our leaders. With these, we created the outline and presented them as our ACTA Action Plan during our official launch as an NGO in April 2019.

Our launch event included high profile guest speakers for the Governance and Energy pillars, and then Andrés Leiro and José Barría presented to the room, filled with more than 100 participants, our action plans for ACTA. Our presentation featured a short video by Dr. Weiss talking about Sustainable Innovation Zones, and how much he supported the one we were

creating in Panama City, which made our participants extremely excited and eager to be part of something with such momentum and international support³.

There was an absolute consensus that an initiative such as Sustainable Innovation Zones made perfect sense in a city like Panama. We even talked with many colleagues who had been thinking about similar ideas, though they had not heard about Sustainable Innovation Zones or had seen anything else organized and structured in the special way that GUD was doing in Porto Alegre with ZISPOA.

With all this great enthusiasm, we left the event with a full sign-up sheet of people who wanted to participate, donate time, contacts, and their ideas to ACTA.

ACTION

In order to start executing, we took the event's momentum and began implementing our action plan roadmaps. It was very helpful to have organized ourselves into smaller groups, because since we were well-aligned in the core group, there was basically no internal bureaucracy, and each pillar was able to move ahead acting almost autonomously from the other pillars.

On one hand, ACTA served as a source of education and inspiration for many citizens, and on the other hand, as a broker of dialogue between businesses, institutions, and the general public.

The first project put forward by ACTA was "Diputado tu Empleado" under the Governance Pillar, which was an online platform built to help keep our lawmakers accountable for their actions. It was funded by the International Center for Journalists and was proudly supported by local leaders in the field of Institutional Transparency (one of them was a guest speaker at our opening event). This platform had major relevance for its duration, and it enabled us to get involved with the lawmaking community very early on.

By the end of 2019, we fleshed out our ACTA version of ZISPOA's Sustainable Parklet in Porto Alegre⁴. This is a good example of Tactical Urbanism, a pilot project of crowd-funded and community co-designed parklets located in strategic places. The idea was to prove it was possible to have citizen-based interventions in public space, and with that, establish a legal framework for parklets within the municipality. We held meetings with the Chief of Urban Development and exchanged ideas on how this could be done, but we were met with too much bureaucracy, dealing with a rigid division of authority by many different public agencies (with little to no communication between them).

Due to the high demand (and impact) in such a short time, we eventually added a fifth pillar, Communication. This group was put in charge of engaging with our community through social media, as well as creating a constant stream of new publications. They enabled us to maintain a presence within our community while each strategic pillar leader could focus on moving forward with their group's projects.

Right when all of that was beginning to take shape, the global Covid-19 pandemic slammed the brakes and everything ground to a halt.

LOCKDOWN

Due to the uncertainty of ever going back outside under the same terms, the group quickly dispersed, and even the idea of sustainable development was generally dropped from the list of priorities for most local institutions and businesses.

Still, from home, we kept in touch with other organizations and partners, and were approached by a lawmaker's office to participate remotely in the creation of an Urban Observatory Law Project. This was the legal vehicle to utilize government decentralization funds to work on citizen-led initiatives on public land. We gave our feedback and helped write the key document. This gave us additional exposure and we were thus contacted by a local citizen group from El Cangrejo (where our ACTA hub was located) to help create a neighborhood map with all of its urban assets. As this coincided with a brief lift of the lockdown, we decided to organize a Jane's Walk to highlight the urban inventory in collaboration with our neighbors.

When businesses started opening their doors, we also participated in the creation of a law banning single-use plastic bags in supermarkets. However, most of our action since the pandemic focused on communicating possible solutions and promoting discussion within our network.

By the beginning of 2021, the momentum was almost entirely held by the Communications Pillar. At the same time, we realized that other small organizations had sprung up by the end of the lockdown, and they were all focused on promoting projects that were aligned with our pillars, but on a micro scale. They focused on smaller, more achievable projects within a very short-to-mid-term timeframe, which enabled them to grow and become recognized quickly.

PIVOTING?

With those examples, we immediately realized that we should reassess the role of ACTA, and decided to take a step back and become more of a mediator and communicator, rather than an active participant in small community projects. This role fit ACTA nicely and we attracted many leaders to help connect lots of people and ideas.

However, by the end of 2021, only two of our seven founding members remained physically in Panama (the pillar leaders of Communications and Urbanism, respectively). We received the final blow when our Communications leader fell very ill and had to resign. After three years, many meetings, projects, calls (*and Zoom meetings*), outlines, ideas, think tanks, and many,

many, many cups of coffee, we were back to square one. That was when we decided to go on a temporary hiatus.

LESSONS

Creating ACTA was an inspiring experiment. It proved that citizens have the willingness to engage, speak up, and participate in the improvement of their cities. It proved that if no platform exists for this kind of expression and engagement, the status quo persists.

It also proved that Sustainable Innovation Zones have educational institutions at their core for a reason. They provide resources, spaces, people, and bring a level of trust from the public that otherwise is hard to obtain individually. Universities in particular remain instrumental in the creation of Sustainable Innovation Zones because the communities created within and around them will outlast their individual parts. If those communities can survive rotation and turnover and maintain a steady flow of active participants, and they stand behind the core tenets of Sustainable Innovation and Inclusive Prosperity (in this case, GUD's ideas presented in the Leapfrog Economic Strategy), then such organizations can continue growing and thriving.

With that in mind, the organization requires people – many hands working together. As our core members grew professionally, most came to the crossroads of staying in the NGO lane or pursuing more financially remunerative endeavors. This is another reason that constant renewal of the group is key for its survival, in case no funds are available to hire permanent staff.

We learned that spreading too thin can be a difficult challenge. For us, it was the result of trying to constantly pivot when faced with the numerous obstacles put in our way when dealing with local institutions. We felt that being dynamic would help us maintain momentum, but in the end we felt we were just going around in circles instead of making progress.

Seeing other smaller groups focus on small projects made us realize that little things can be nurtured into greatness, if given the time. This is proof that, as GUD's Leapfrog Economic Strategy states, small and quick wins help you create a good reputation and build momentum.

Politically, ACTA stands behind no particular party or politician, though we definitely kept close contact with local ministries and other public institutions. This helped us maintain some level of connection and support even through the political turmoil of recent years. It also helped us reach powerful groups (especially lawmaking groups) where we could represent our members and act on their behalf.

CONCLUSION

Sustainability is not rocket science, but it is a very multifaceted issue. It connects so many areas of the economy, that changemakers might be tempted to want to tackle everything together. The

correct approach would be to recognize where leverage can be found in an individual cog of the machine. Once that is achieved, such examples can help empower people towards change in their respective fields.

In the end, our take is that Sustainable Innovation Zones are the very platform in which we as citizens showcase these small successes to each other. With enough exposure, things will certainly change for the better.

MOVING FORWARD

ACTA exists as a vehicle to channel the ideas at the core of the Leapfrog Economic Strategy and GUD's overall approach to improving our world. As the community of Sustainable Innovation Zones keeps growing globally, hopefully an entire new generation of entrepreneurs and activists will find our lessons to be useful and then carry our torch forward.

¹ https://www.globalurban.org/2015_RS_LEAPFROG_ECONOMIC_STRATEGY.pdf

² <https://www.globalurban.net/porto-alegre-brazil>

³ <https://www.globalurban.net/panama-city-panama>

⁴ https://www.globalurban.net/files/ugd/be81d1_f0bc1ef7282644cfb07f03a1e2f70088.pdf