

# Creating Socio-Ecological Societies through Urban Commons Transitions\*

Almost 75% of Europeans live nowadays in cities. At the same time, cities are becoming a crucial transnational governance level. They are organizing themselves in a whole tissue of networks -think of Fearless Cities or Fabcities - working together in domains like climate policy, renewable energy and urban economy. Especially in cities with a progressive government the most ambitious future strategy plans are introduced (e.g. the Helsinki city council decided to become carbon-neutral by 2035), going beyond what is thought possible at the national level.

These networks and strategy plans reflect a broader change in what is happening within cities. Blurring the traditional picture dominant at the national level, with seemingly only public authorities and market forces as important, at city level we see more and more citizens investing in a broad range of commons (citizens' collectives), focusing on co-operation and inspired by an ethics of care. Tired of only being a consumer or a passive citizen, people get active as maker, designer, urban farmer, solidarity volunteer, user of shared resources such as cars or bikes, civic or social entrepreneur, etc.



This goes along with the establishment of new organisations, infrastructures and open access

resources like digital platforms for the sharing economy, fablabs, energy co-ops, co-working spaces, urban food production plots, etc.

With all these citizens' initiatives, local governments have to rethink their way of doing politics. The challenge is to build specific structures and processes that foster synergies between the public and the commons domain. In this, they transform themselves into what is called a Partner State. In this new perspective, politicians don't see their political constituency as a territory to manage from above, but as a community of citizens with a lot of experience and creativity. Leaving top-down politics behind, they develop forms of co-creation and co-production. In Ghent in Belgium for instance, citizens developed, within the frame of a participatory climate policy, the concept of 'living streets'.



They decided by themselves to reclaim their streets - to operate without cars for one or two months. The city government took all the measures needed to make it happen in a legal and safe way. If local government had conducted this experiment unilaterally it would have provoked probably a lot of protest. Through these public-civil partnerships, an underestimated area of societal possibilities can be explored in a positive way.

\* This contribution is written in the framework of the Green European Foundation project - 'Creating Socio-Ecological Societies through Urban Commons Transitions.'

Taking these developments together, this could lead to a prototype of transformative cities, being the driving force towards socio-ecological societies. For this to become reality, innovations enabling cooperation between local authorities and citizens' initiatives have to be developed. So one think of a City Lab that helps people develop their innovative ideas and prepares Commons Agreements between the city and the new initiatives. Also, people participating in the commons should have a greater voice in the city. This can be realized by the establishment of two new institutions as Michel Bauwens proposes: the Assembly of the Commons, for all citizens active in commons' initiatives, and the Chamber of the Commons, for all social entrepreneurs creating livelihoods around these commons. These new institutions are necessary because people active in commons' initiatives work along a contributive logic. This means people are not looking to extract value (make private profit as central goal) but want to generate social value in the first place. Also, it is important to provide people who want to engage in the commons with the same support a mainstream profit-driven start-up gets. This entails the creation of an incubator for a commons-based economy and the establishment of new urban finance mechanisms ,e.g. a public city bank.



To really make the transition happen, commons have to become productive. So, we have to move a phase further,

from mutualizing the uses of houses and cars to really making them. This connects the real changes going on with the utopian vision of an evolution towards a post-capitalist mode of exchange and production, or at least a mixed economy. This requires new ways of organizing provisioning systems and the commonification of crucial infrastructures. Think about digital platforms used world-wide combined with localized shared economy initiatives such as co-working spaces and fablabs. This can be the seed form of a kind of production that combines globally shared productive knowledge with relocalized production capacities”.

To make it concrete, take the example of the Valori wooden chair designed by Denis Fuzil in San Paulo, and distributed by London based Open Desk. If you want to buy the chair, Open Desk will help you to find a local workshop that will produce it close to your home. Something extraordinary? Not really, the chair now has been produced more than 10000 times in more than half the countries in the world. This types of open design communities can be the alternative for the current dominant mode of innovation, based on patents and copyrights. And cities are the perfect breeding ground for this sustainable economy of the future.

Dirk Holemans, director of Oikos Think Tank, author of Freedom & Security (Green European Foundation)

At the 8th of June experts come together in Brussels at the international congress ‘Creating Eco-Societies through Urban Commons Transitions’\*. Joins us at this event and learn about new forms of partnerships between local authorities and commons initiatives. More information and registration via [www.oikos.be](http://www.oikos.be).

#### YOU CAN ALSO FIND US ON

-  @ GreenEuropeanFoundation  
@oikosdenktank
-  @ GEF\_Europe  
@OikosDenktank
-  @oikos.denktank



\* This is a GEF event realized with the support of Oikos