



# Citizens building a new Europe

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**GEF**

GREEN EUROPEAN FOUNDATION

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While the European Union struggles with a declining confidence from its citizens, we do see many sparks of hope arise at grassroots level. More and more citizens set up initiatives to make society more resilient, offering alternatives for a better, more sustainable living in times of increasing uncertainty.

According to its citizens, immigration, terrorism, the economic situation and the state of member states' public finances are the most important issues facing the EU. Less important, but still in the top 10, are unemployment and climate change. According to the latest Eurobarometer, a staggering 54% thinks that their voice doesn't count in the EU. News about terror threats, refugee crises, budget cuts and corruption don't paint a rosy picture of the reality we currently live in. Populists thrive on fear, human rights and freedoms are questioned and cynicism among citizens seems to be winning ground.

At the same time however, an ever-increasing number of citizens strike sparks in this seemingly dark tunnel, by developing social-ecological initiatives. To rebuild communities from the bottom up, to revitalize a more sustainable economy and to strengthen ties of solidarity and care, while governments struggle to manifest our common identity. Everywhere in Europe, hopeful democratic citizen initiatives emerge in fast pace. And knowingly or unknowingly, they are already making a difference, whether it be small or big, by building social and sustainable alternatives within the current neoliberal model of fear. Like swimmers against the tide, citizen movements get organised to take domains like production, finance, energy and care back in their own hands. So, join us for a walk through Europe and explore some of these exciting initiatives, because this is how citizens react to the policy of fear and austerity in our disrupted societies.





## The next big thing will be a lot of small things

*Never before have the possibilities for action been so abundant.  
Never before has the potential to interconnect all these actions been so great  
Therefore the time for putting the blame to those in power lays behind us  
and the time for kickstarting small but massive action lays in front.*

*In a networked society the transition to a more sustainable living environment  
will not only be realized by a handful of large-scale projects that are or-  
chestrated by a few  
it will mostly be shaped by a billion of tiny interrelated actions that are initiated  
by all of us.*

*In a networked society we, as citizens, have power.  
we can influence decision making by posting, forwarding, grouping, choosing  
and approving.  
we can reshape our living environment by initiating, exchanging, sharing, impro-  
ving  
and building upon what was developed by those who came before us.*

*It's now simply up to us to be aware of this new opportunities in order to exploit  
them to the fullest.*

Thomas Lommée /Intrastructures

## Tailor-made

In the domain of production, we can witness countless initiatives by citizens who reject the disposable economy and search, independently from the state, for ways towards a more sustainable one. Since 2011, [Reciclare Creativa](#) in Romania is a beautiful example where creative recycling empowered communities to move towards a greener future. In a most innovative way, communities, schools and cultural spaces are given green, non-formal education to revive from trash; and creative professionals like architects and stage designers are encouraged to work with regular citizens to rebuild civil spaces and to grow by learning from each other.



Another example, for when you somehow can't revive from trash and need new furniture: why not order from a young independent designer wherever in the world, and have your order made at a workplace near you? Open Desk, based in London, is a global open-source platform where you can download designs from all over the world for local making, hence avoiding a non-transparent global supply chain, instead opting for a more direct and personal approach. This system cuts out time-consuming and expensive shipping, showrooms and storage. Furthermore, by buying furniture directly from independent designers and local on-demand makers, you create more local jobs. Everybody wins.

### People's energy

Europe lives by the grace of massive imports of non-renewable energy like gas from Russia and oil from the Middle East. Billions of euros from our national economies are drained by these energy-supplying mastodons. At the same time, European governments fail to tackle subsequent pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

[REScoop](#) believes that citizens should have control of their energy production, transportation, distribution and supply. Hence, it supports citizens and renewable energy cooperatives in their fight for energy democracy. One of those energy coops is [Sifnos Island Cooperative](#). The Greek island Sifnos depends on imported diesel for its electricity, heating and cooling, for a total annual cost of no less than 5,6 million euros. As a reaction, alert citizens formed a cooperative supported by the government, to look at the possibilities for the exploitation of renewable energy sources and natural resources. Today Sifnos has an advanced energy autonomy plan. A conducted study shows that the planned wind parks, solar panels and pumped-storage plant on the island will not only make them energy autonomous. The ambitious plan that was set up in collaboration with the local government, will also be profitable from the first year of operation and will continue to be profitable throughout, as the energy demand is secured. There will be no more need to import costly fossil fuels.

### Caring is sharing

Another highly topical issue these days is the ageing of our population, the corresponding higher costs for our society and the lack of resilience of our

welfare state to cope with this trend. Care becomes too expensive, and privatisation of the care sector is, contrary to what governments would like us to believe, not always in the best interests of its patients. Instead, it rather results in a battle for profit.

In 2012, as a reaction to cold-hearted saving measures in the healthcare sector in the Netherlands, citizens of the village of Austerlitz, a small town near Utrecht, gathered in a care cooperative called [Austerlitz Zorgt](#) (Austerlitz Cares). Their aim was to let the elderly live independently in their home village for as long as they want with the help of other citizen volunteers. Today the village of Austerlitz is able to offer its elderly excellent care- and wellbeing-facilities against lower costs than usual thanks to efficient support and good coordination of volunteers in the village. In exchange for the cost savings in favour of the municipality, the municipality covers the cost for two Austerlitz Zorgt employees. Hundreds of citizens support and contribute to this system, hence making it a success.

© Sifnos Island Cooperative





## Enter Partner State

Compared to Austerlitz Zorgt, the region of Emilia-Romagna in Northern Italy is 40 years ahead of its time. The region, with its capital Bologna, shows the enormous potential of partnerships between State and civil society for the general well-being of the economy and the population. In the 1980s, social cooperatives found the perfect breeding ground in the continuous dysfunction of state programmes and government cuts. Activities by cooperatives like [COPAPS](#) (for people with a mental disorder), and relentless political pressure lie at the core of today's system of social services in the Emilia-Romagna region, in which social cooperatives form a central aspect. In the city of Bologna alone, 87% of the social services of the city are delivered through municipal contracts with social cooperations. Emilia-Romagna is now known for its highest living standards and lowest unemployment rates in all of the European Union. It is a state of the art example of how a government can employ cooperative principles as part of a public-civil partnership for economic and social development.

In other words, besides the dominant discourse that oscillates between state and market, the example of Emilia-Romagna shows that [a third way to organise society](#) does exist. It foresees a more autonomous role for citizens as an entity, challenging governments to leave their top-down politics behind and evolve towards a more horizontal form of governing, in what we call a Partner State. The Emilian Model is a unique example of successful cooperation in what is still a capitalist setting.

A similar trend is seen in Barcelona. Cooperatives and citizen initiatives account for an increasing part of the economy to the well-being of the citizenry as well as the local economy.

[Fab Lab Barcelona](#) for instance, is a network of fabrication laboratories designed for communities as prototyping platforms for local entrepreneurship. It aims to provide access to the tools, the knowledge and the financial means to educate, innovate and invent using technology and digital fabrication to allow anyone to make (almost) anything, and thereby creating opportunities to improve lives and livelihoods. Its primary beneficiaries are community organisations, educational institutions and non-profit concerns. Fab Lab Barcelona is part of the [FAB City](#) project that was launched in 2011. It comprises an international think tank of civic leaders, fab lab champions, makers, urban planners and innovators working on changing paradigm of the current industrial economy where the city operates on a linear model of importing products and producing waste, to a new urban model for locally productive and globally connected



self-sufficient cities. It is an ambitious way to increase resilience for the city and its citizens, and to develop a more ecological system where cooperation between cities, citizens and knowledge centres form the basis of the scientific knowledge. It is a great economic opportunity because it creates new types of jobs and professions related to the knowledge economy and the development and implementation of innovative approaches and technological solutions.

While still in Barcelona, another inspiring initiative is [Guifi.net](http://Guifi.net). Guifi offers a free, open source alternative to conventional internet providers, through the interconnection between its users. In 2008, citizens in rural areas where telecom operators would not invest in internet coverage, set up their own web of interconnections. Today Guifi is considered as the world's largest community telecom network.

### **Towards a sustainable economy**

From Romania to the Netherlands or Spain, all over Europe we observe – despite the pessimistic mood which seems to overshadow Europe – the steep and encouraging rise of citizen initiatives. Citizens do have power and the will to make a change towards a better living for all. Governments possess the means to make these developments a success and we can see that especially local and regional governments seem to take on this role. So why not, as citizens, jointly become part of this movement and make it stronger? Why not, as local governments, welcome, facilitate and support these sparks of democratic citizenship? This is a unique chance for the 20th century pressured Welfare State to evolve into a more progressive Partner State for the 21st century.



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