

# Recent Developments in Urban Commons Transitions

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The purpose of this essay is to summarize what we can learn from the 40 case studies of urban commons experiences that we have collated for this project<sup>1</sup>.

We will start with some methodological reminders, and then analyze the case studies in two groups. The first group concerns nine experiences in the “Global South”. These are 9 chosen out of the 20 from this ‘geographical’ region that are in areas marked by strong deprivation. Thus cities from Australia, New Zealand but also Seoul, we be treated in the category ‘Global North’, as they do not exhibit the same intensity of deprivation as the cases selected for this first category.

Based on the extensive series of questions we have asked the activists and organizers active in these projects, we have organized our findings in the following grid:

- Geographical Dimension: where is the project taking place
- Catchment area (block/neighborhood/district/city level): extent of the area covered, incl. administratively
- Urban collective governance: how are the projects managed, what stakeholders or participants have a stake in the governance
- The enabling State: to what degree is the project support by city, regional or state entities
- Poolism: what is the shared resource being created or protected by the project
- Process: what are the participative methodologies used in the project.

In order to understand the empirical and analytical basis of our conclusions, it is useful to start with Appendix X1 and X2, which respectively have narrative summaries of the projects, and the results from the above grid comparison. The full text of the case studies are available [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup>This contribution is the result of a work that the LabGov team conducted in collaboration with Michel Bauwens with the support of Vasilis Niaros within the context of the Co-Cities research project ([www.commoning.city](http://www.commoning.city)). The contribution analyses data from the first 30 case studies collected for the Co-Cities database. A reworked excerpt of this contribution appears in a publication of the P2P Foundation by Michel Bauwens and Vasilis Niaros with the title: Changing Societies through Urban Commons Transition, <http://commonstransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bau-wens-Niaros-Urban-Commons-Transitions.pdf>.

## Part One: Urban Commons Projects in the Global South

Here are some important conclusions about commonalities and divergences that can be found in the nine narratives that we analyze here.

### Conclusion 1: The Problematic Role of the State and Local Administrations

One of the first conclusions from the 9 case studies is that cooperation with governmental institutions, especially at the national level, but not exclusively, and thus any practical instantiation of polygovernance that include official entities, is problematic for nearly all projects, with few exceptions.

In the case of the Bergvievier project that is trying to stimulate local economic streams using a complementary credit-commons based currency, there is a clear distrust and rejection of the more central authorities, seen as corrupt and neoliberal in their orientation, though this project is exceptional in that it found active and benevolent support from city officials. Project leader and author of the case study Will Ruddick also stresses that however difficult at the institutional level, there are always ‘interstitial’ individuals, who can make a difference and create some level of cooperation even within indifferent and hostile governmental entities. The Ker Thiosane project leaders in Dakar specifically mention the indifference of the authorities, even as the success of the project to revitalize a poor neighborhood, is obvious. At issue here is the inability of governmental personnel to ‘see’ and understand the logic of commoning, especially when it is ‘extra-institutional’ i.e. happening outside the sphere of both government, business, as well as ‘classic’ NGO’s. The Platohedro contributors of the cultural project in Medellin, Colombia say that see the city and regional governments as opportunistic towards urban commoning, and therefore cannot be counted on.

Other projects themselves reject governmental interference or even support. For example, the Hacklab project in Cochabamba tries to maintain smooth and non-partisan relations with the local government, but keeps them at distance in the context of maintaining the autonomy of the project. The Mlnha Sampa campaign organization in Sao Paulo, Brazil, similarly actively rejects government funding because their citizen-led campaigns are most often based on demands directed at the government. The Woelab project in Lome, Togo, actively rejects the mentality of seeking help from

donors, which is seen as a form of post-colonialism that disempowers personal and collective autonomy. The organizer states that “There is no support neither from government nor from the city and the project is entirely marginal”.

On the other side of the polarity is the Karura Forest project near Nairobi, Kenya, which stresses the necessary role of the government as framer of the local cooperation, i.e. the the Forest Act of 2005 frames multi-stakeholder governance; the City-based Forest Conservation Program, the county’s environmental portfolio and the Kenyan Forest Service all have a stake. Even more positive are the experiences of the Manzigira Institute, which works on the welfare of urban farmers, and claims a good response from the local governments in listening and taking into account its policy recommendations.

### **Conclusion 2: The projects are ‘integrative’ in their approach**

Most if not all of the projects are ‘integrative.’ We mean by this that they are not ‘one issue’ projects that focus on one or few dimensions, but that they have holistic visions of both the problem and the methods needed to overcome them.

For example Cowen/Ziniades (Bergrivier) stress: “one cannot assume bottom-up approaches will work without prior capacity building!” and this is done through a ‘integrative’ approach which aligns inner approaches (self-change), relational capacities (group work), and outer dimensions (creating a confident engagement with friendly and unfriendly outer institutions). The Cochabamba Hacklab stresses that community integration and collective intelligence is balanced and integrated with individual ‘passionate’ contributions. Both Ker Thioassane in Dakar and Woelab in Lome, have a strong orientation towards integrating ‘modernity’, through the mastery of networked technology, with a re-adaptation of African traditions of cooperation.

Platohedro in Medellin uses what they call ‘Post-Pedagogy] techniques, i.e. mostly un-learning conventional knowledge, learning by doing, and ‘do it with others’ process, based on active listening, and integrating self-work and rootedness in the body.

### **Conclusion 3: The Civil Society orientation is combined with efforts towards more ethical and local economies**

The connection between a focus on civil society’s empowerment, but combined with the attempt to create generative livelihoods, is a recurrent theme in several projects.

The Bergrivier and Bangla-Pesa projects (South Africa and Kenya respectively), clearly combine a focus

towards respectively young people and informal traders, but look to local economic value streams as a key part of the solution for their projects. The tool here is the complementary currency and positive cooperation between SME network members is crucial to the success of the Bangla-Pesa project.

The Woelab in Lome creates an incubator for social enterprises, which are collectively owned and governed by the contributing members of the Lab, using practices inspired by African village governance traditions. The Manzigira Institute in Kena explicitly focuses on the economic welfare of urban farmers and creating the framework conditions for this to happen.

It should be stressed that commons-project are civic-oriented, but they do not consider themselves as traditional NGO’s, though they seek support and sometimes funding from the more traditional NGO’s. Ker Thioassane says that it engages in intensive dialogue with local population and institutions, but it also connects with global cultural networks and NGO’s, such as Afropixels, and has been successful in generating funding from sources abroad. Platohedro in Medellin is particularly strong in its emphasis of cooperation with local museums and cultural institutions. Minha Sampa empowers citizen-led campaigns with their collective toolkit for self-organisation, but gets funding from national foundations.

### **Conclusion 4: The commons is present as narrative and practice, but not hegemonic in the discourse**

All the projects and case studies have pooled resources, and practice various aspects of commoning, but use different types of languages to express it.

The Cowen Zinaides Bergrivier projects explicitly uses commons language, but combines it with a focus on creating a local exchange system; The Woelab and Ker Thioassane have a very strong ‘neo-traditional’ outlook, with their focus on reviving traditional African forms of cooperation and governance in a new context, but even Platohedro is anchored in the ‘buen vivir/buen conocer’ narrative discourse that is used by both communities but also by the progressive governmental coalitions in the Andean and surrounding region. While Buen Vivir is strongly anchored in the cultural traditions of the Andean native people, ‘buen conocer’ is a more recent and commons-specific import of the FLOK project in Ecuador, which was a specific effort to create knowledge commons. Minha Sampa is an outlier, more rooted in the civil and human rights tradition.

### **Conclusion 5: Important roles for networked technology**

The projects of Will Ruddick in Kenya and South Africa are centered around the use of complementary currency systems, but still analog. The Cochabamba, Ker Thioassane, and Woelab experiences have a strong

emphasis on digitally networked culture, most strongly linked to a specific technology itself only in Cochabamba (i.e. wireless networks). The two others mentioned here are closer to the philosophies of fabbing and the maker movement. Platohedro is more rooted in artistic and cultural practice, i.e. the p2p-driven 'Do It With Others' philosophy. Minha Sampa is focused around a online toolkit that facilitates political campaigning.

The two exceptions seem to be the Karura Forest and Manzingira experiments, that do not exhibit such a clear link to digital culture.

## **Part Two: Urban Commons Projects in the Global**

### **1. The existence of sophisticated urban commons policies through 'partner city' approaches**

One of the conclusions from comparing commons project in the Global North and those of the Global South, is that a number of cities in western/northern cities have taken sophisticated turns towards participatory, sharing and commons-oriented policies. Apart from the well known Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons, not covered amongst the case studies in this report, are the examples of Seoul, centered on the creation of a citizen-led sharing economy, those of Milan, oriented towards embedding startups in the communities through collaborative spaces, Athens, where the mayor and vice-mayor directly support the programs, and Barcelona, with a 'common-good' inspired political coalition, which has nominated officials in charge of a 'commons-based collaborative economy'. Edinburgh has a official 'cooperative policy' with already 17 community-led cooperatives created in this framework. Naples, not covered here, as a Commissioner for the Commons. These public policies are complex arrays of regulations and institutions with financial and other forms of support, with multi-year orientations, multi-stakeholder governance, and leading to a flowering of civic and cooperative initiatives. Also of import, and cited explicitly by Dirk Holemans of Oikos for the experiences in Ghent, Belgium, is a change from framework-based competition for funding (still very much practiced by Milan for example), to more long-term co-production of public services and policies, that are open-ended since they depend on the collaboration with, and input from, citizens.

### **2. In-depth and long-term integrative strategies of grassroots urban commoners**

Just as surprising perhaps, is the sophistication of integrated citizen-coalitions that operate in cities where there is little or no support from city officials. These projects are equally multi-year, multi-stakeholder, and integrative. The key example here is the city of Lille in Northern France, which has created a Assembly of the Commons (linked to 9 other similar initiatives in other French cities). They rely on 'open source third spaces'

such as collaborative run coworking and makerspaces, to work on collaborative cultures (Mutualab/Coroutine in Lille ; the Footscray makerspace in Melbourne, etc .), and they pay strong attention to constantly reworked social codes and social charters, which define their inner governance but also their relations with external third parties such as government and business, in order not to be coopted or captured by them. Lille is exemplary in that regard and its Assembly has developed sophisticated social charters to deal with these interactions. In Melbourne, the commoners have politicized even more through the creation of a Australian-wide Commons Transition Coalition. The Mutual Aid Network of Madison, Wisconsin is connected to 16 other cities and has developed sophisticated combinations of exchange and support mechanisms.

### **3. Combining social and ecological sustainability**

The Footscray makerspace works in particular with migrant and refugee populations in poor neighborhoods in western Melbourne, and links it to waste and upcycling. The waste management project in Malmo, Sweden, similarly is focused on integrating its migrant population. The M.A.N. of Madison, WI's first project is creating a food cooperative for a food desert area in the city's poorest neighborhood. Oikos in Ghent is a social-ecological 'think and to thank', that similarly looks for projects which simultaneously solve these two aspects of urban reality. The Emergent Structures project in Savannah, Georgia is especially focused on the re-use of construction and demolition waste. The insight on which these projects are based is that ecological issues disproportionately affect the poor but that solving them also creates economic and social opportunities in terms of creating local economies, jobs, skills and income.

### **4. The tension between horizontalist expectations and institutional governance**

Quite a few projects are struggling to adapt the 'right' governance model, somewhere in between horizontalist aspirations and 'vertical' needs for institutionalization, especially those that explicitly function without much public support. The most sophisticated attempts are probably by the Assembly of the Commons in Lille which has developed an array of social charters. Jose Ramos in his report on Melbourne initiatives mentions the difficulties in cooperative governance, and Anna Seravalli of Malmo reports explicitly that they had to abandon user-based governance because it self-reinforced cultural exclusion mechanisms (geeks attracting other geeks instead of a more diverse population). Most projects are moving to poly-centric governance models as already described by Elinor Ostrom. Whether bottom-up or top-down, all projects include fairly radical participatory processes as a matter of course, which points to a deep cultural shift which includes public officials.

## 5. The Commons as a tool for economic development

The Edingburgh city council wants to stimulate a vibrant 'cooperative economy'; Seoul and Milan are focused on the creation of a 'sharing' and/or collaborative economy. Barcelona-based Fab City has the ambitious aim of relocalized 50% of food and industrial production back in the city and its bioregions, within 50 years, centered around the creation of fabrication labs; the Evergreen Cooperative model of Cleveland, Ohio aims to use the purchasing power of 'anchor institutions' such as hospitals and universities, to create a thriving local economy based on local coops in the disadvantaged inner city itself and has been successful in already creating a number of them in food and laundry services. The project in Savannah is an ambitious attempt to create an economy around the recycling of construction and demolition waste. 596 Acres in NYC is moving from public spaces to the creation of locally run commercial zones through Real Estates Investment Cooperatives, and the Santaporo wireless commons aim to move towards helping local farmers accessing agricultural information that is vital for their economic function.

The common aspect of these examples is that the commons/sharing/collaboration is not just seen as a 'nice thing to do', but seen as vital to the creation of a new and vibrant local economy that works for all inhabitants.