The magic ingredient

The role of civil society in accelerating sustainability transitions

In this Transition Read, we look at different roles civil society can play in accelerating sustainability transitions in European cities, focusing on the transformative potential of civil society and possible tensions. This is a special edition Transition Read, bringing together reflections coming from a number of EU-funded research projects related to sustainability transitions, most notably ARTS (Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability) and GLAMURS (Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Up-scaling Regional Sustainability).
Will the real civil society please stand up?

“Civil society” has become one of these terms that can mean anything, from well-established non-governmental organisations that employ hundreds of people worldwide to a bunch of neighbours meeting every week to play chess. The term “third sector”, sometimes used interchangeably with civil society, makes it even more (un)clear: it is a container for all those initiatives, institutions and groups that do not fit into either public or private sector.

Academic literature offers multiple definitions of the term, ranging from lists of organisation types (including i.a. grassroots and community-based organisations, advocacy groups or professional associations) to negative definitions (everything but the state). Civil society is also conceptualised as a space of interaction and struggle between those competing for hegemony, involving both the state and the civil society organisations. Interestingly, the battle (or perhaps play?) of state and civil society is placed not only between but also within sectors or individual organisations.

As Räthzel et al (2015, p.168) write there is a need “to investigate civil society as a ‘force-field’ in which multiple inter- and intra-relationships interact. While state and civil society organizations may oppose each other and occupy dual positions in the space of civil society, they are also present within each other.”

The force-field metaphor seems particularly well suited to conceptualise the role of civil society in sustainability transitions, encouraging reflection on how changing roles of one organisation or sector respond to or influence other parts of the system.

Three reasons we need civil society

Based on a number of case studies collected across Europe, we have identified three roles that civil society plays in local sustainability transitions that will be described here in greater detail and illustrated with examples. First, local initiatives can pioneer and model new practices that can then be picked up by other actors (e.g. policy makers), eventually leading to incremental or radical changes in our practices and ways of organizing things. Civil society can therefore be an integral part of and driver of such transformations; it establishes new connections and through them it triggers wider change. Then, civil society can also fill the void left by a changing welfare state, thereby safeguarding and servicing social needs. Last, it can act as a hidden innovator – initiatives may in fact contribute to sustainability but remain invisible to the wider society.
Even such a short overview demonstrates that civil society is part and parcel of sustainability transition, contributing to the effectiveness and inclusivity of this process, and at the same time safeguarding and strengthening democracy. Cities across Europe need the knowledge, creativity and commitment embodied by civil society to move forward. However, it is only fair to say that things are not always that rosy. Civil society represents a broad spectrum of interests, values and ways of acting, not all universally admirable. In addition, certain broader mechanisms may impact civil society actors, causing tensions or conflicts, as addressed in the final part of this document.

The reflections and examples have been collected as part of five European research projects (ARTS, GLAMURS, InContext, GUST and TRANSIT) – there is much more information available on the respective project websites. The roles described are by no means mutually exclusive or covering the entire spectrum of civil society engagement. However, we believe they provide useful lens for understanding how cities and regions can mobilise local resources in order to move towards a more sustainable future.

Civil society as a driver for sustainability transition

This role is the one we most commonly associate with civil society, especially in the context of sustainability transitions. It is about proposing and implementing alternative solutions, raising ambitions and acting as a symbol of what is possible, influencing both individuals and institutions. The question of who influences who is very pertinent here: are civil society groups really challenging existing norms and practices or rather playing it safe, paying only lip service to systemic transformation?

Nimble and strongly rooted in the local community, civil society groups can act as a driver for sustainability transition by developing and testing new ideas. Combining on-the-ground knowledge with flexibility offers a perfect setting to experiment, showcase alternative solutions and gather evidence on what works. Driven by values and not as bureaucratic as the public sector, civil society initiatives can advocate for more progressive and radical ideas.

Sustainability transition initiatives led by civil society have been known to push new market forms, such as sharing economy, or experiment with new economic structures, from co-management to alternative currencies. Focused on social value creation, civil society groups search for alternative business models that can later by adopted by other actors in the public or private sector. Civil society can also influence the market indirectly, e.g. by increasing consumer awareness.

The driver role extends to changing individual and collective practices, encouraging more sustainable ways of living and consuming. By connecting environmental degradation and impact at global scale to local practices, civil society organisations succeed in promoting low-carbon lifestyles. These personal transitions are enabled by newly established institutions, such as consumer cooperatives, but also linked to a sense of belonging, a feeling of being part of a community of practice.
Many examples of this trailblazing role revolve around food, encompassing new ways of organising production, new market structures and new consumption practices. Food-focused initiatives can bring positive economic, environmental and social outcomes, as well as influence urban planning approaches and practices. The question of food, so intimately connected to our identity and everyday experience, offers a good entry point for understanding the links between local and global scales and often serves as inspiration for more sustainable lifestyle choices. However, it is not necessarily the food itself that we are seeking. An important driver for starting and joining grassroots sustainability initiatives is the desire to experience more meaningful connections to others.

**Coraggio Food Cooperative (Rome, Italy)**

The COoperativa Romana AGRicoltura GIOvani (Coraggio) brings together women and men with a passion for sustainable agriculture, healthy food production, environment and landscape preservation. Among its members are farmers and chefs, agronomists and anthropologists, architects and educators. The aim was to develop an agricultural urban model that is healthy, organic and multi-functional. The cooperative wanted the degraded concrete buildings to make space for a new way of living, combining environmental concerns with the respect for the dignity of labour, as well as for the social value and meaning of agriculture. Coraggio organised a public debate with the Municipality of Rome to promote the idea of public multi-functional farms, run by young farmers that could produce food, as well as deliver a number of services including education, environmental restoration, recreation and agricultural experimentation. Following the debate, the cooperative obtained necessary concessions to use public land for this purpose and since 2015 the project is in progress. (Source: GLAMURS)

![Coraggio Food Cooperative](image)

**Uit Je Eigen Stad (Rotterdam, the Netherlands)**

Uit Je Eigen Stad (*from your own city*) started with a motivation to connect local consumers with locally produced food, cutting out the middlemen in the food market. This civil society-led initiative consists of a farm with adjacent restaurant and market, all built on vacant space in the former city harbour of Rotterdam. It also holds workshops on growing your own food in the city and has become a learning hub not only for citizens but also smaller scale food-related local initiatives. The first five years meant not only growth but also diversification, with the initiative now closely collaborating with multiple local food entrepreneurs. It has also become a showcase
of sustainable food production methods, such as hydroponics and aquaponics that reuse waste nutrients, aquaculture ponds or restaurant operating on circular principles. Uit Je Eigen Stad contributed not only to rethinking the use of vacant space in the harbour area but also more broadly, to reimagining urban life in a once industrial city. (Source: GUST)

In less affluent neighbourhoods, with higher proportion of low-skilled, low-educated inhabitants, the role of civil society is often to counter social and economic segregation. Many initiatives focus on reskilling individuals to integrate them in the society and in the job market, while at the same time offering valuable social or environmental services.

**Equus Zebra (A Coruña, Spain)**

The initiative promotes the re-use of clothing, reduction of textile waste and sustainable consumption, at the same time creating employment opportunities for members of marginalised immigrant groups, mostly African. Equus Zebra has contributed to changing popular attitude towards second-hand clothing in a city that is also home to one of the biggest textile companies in the world, a main promoter of the concept of “fast fashion”. They run several stores in the more densely populated neighbourhoods in the city, offering a renewed sense of hope for the people involved. While promoting sustainable clothing, the initiative addresses also social dimension of sustainability by creating a new space of possibilities for the fuller development of human potential. (Source: GLAMURS)

Civil society organisations often find themselves in the space between individual citizens and local and state institutions, acting as a connector, mediator or buffer of first response in case of market or state failure. This raises questions concerning the distance they establish with the “centres of power” and how it impacts their ability to be truly transformative. Many groups are forced to make a choice between fit and conform strategy, accepting the system they operate in as a given, and the stretch and transform one, actively engaging with dominant structures to push them closer towards the initiative’s core values.

**Civil society as a self-organising actor**

This role refers both to civil society self-organising to respond to unmet needs, as well as self-organising as a strategy to build new movements and coalitions. While often invaluable, this role carries also considerable risks, especially if self-organisation comes as a response to the absence or retreat of other actors.

Where either the state or the market neglects certain social needs, civil society can offer an alternative, self-organised response. This self-help approach, contributing to a new social order of active citizens, is grounded in the ideas of democracy and solidarity and often seen as a counterbalance to dominant neoliberal policies.
Civil society initiatives are also self-organising as social movements, when various groups come together to advocate common interests, issues or values. Their ability to forge connections goes beyond sectoral divides, with civil society initiatives often playing key role in restoring the ability of local communities to connect with different urban stakeholders and finding synergies between different stakeholder claims.

**Repair Cafés (Schiedam, Delft and The Hague, the Netherlands)**

Repair Cafés are freely accessible meeting places where people gather to fix broken objects, share technical knowledge and experience, as well as interact with others in a friendly, informal atmosphere. One of the main aims of Repair Cafés is to reduce the amount of waste our society produces by extending the lifetime of objects, while also teaching people that broken items can be repaired and that often they can do it themselves. In addition, the Repair Cafés have proven to fulfil an important social function, by offering a pleasant environment for people to meet and build up or strengthen social contacts. The initiatives provide space for acquiring new skills and offer low-cost repair services to people that cannot afford to go to regular repair venues. The first Repair Café was started in 2009 in Amsterdam by the journalist Martine Postma and the idea is spreading fast: in March 2016 there were already over 1000 Repair Cafés in 24 different countries! Interestingly, the initiator is still involved in the movement, working to further share the concept worldwide as part of the Dutch Repair Café Foundation. (Source: GLAMURS)

![Image of a Repair Café](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Compost Masters (Genk, Belgium)**

Compost Masters are volunteers who support the municipality in promoting the composting of household waste and waste free gardening. Each volunteer receives a free training organised by Vlaco vzw (Flemish composting organisation) and Limburg.net (local inter-municipal waste company). After the training, the volunteers can link up with the compost team of the municipality. The training is organized by the Compost Masters and it concerns the whole cycle of recycling from collecting to using the compost material for gardening. In addition to delivering the training, Vlaco and Limburg.net organise annual meetings for Compost Masters where they can exchange experience and knowledge and act as a contact point. All meetings, advancing trainings and sharing of experience so as to inspire the continuation of the composting practice are self-organised and self-funded. Since 1998 100 volunteers have been trained and 10 are actively involved as part of the compost team of the city. For Vlaco and Limburg.net, the compost masters are part of their efforts to improve composting through a bottom-up approach.

However, it is worth noting that the first compost project in Genk dates back to 20 years ago and was started by a retired resident in the district of Winterslag. The municipality gave him a permission to use a previous dumping site of the local mine.
for his composting and gardening initiative. He was one of the first volunteers to follow the Vlaco and Limburg.net training course. Now, next to the project in Winterslag, Genk can boast two additional demonstration projects: the Zwartberg composting school (established by a local resident inspired by the Winterslag project) and the Heempark demonstration site. The Heempark is an Environment and Nature educational centre, collaboration between the municipality and local volunteers. The initiative coordinates and supports the activities of the Genk compost team, in cooperation with the sustainability manager of the city. The Winterslag and Zwartberg demonstration gardens are well embedded in their respective districts, working with local schools and community organisations. From the very first project two decades ago, local activity around composting and waste free gardening evolved into a well-functioning ecosystem involving local civil society organisations, local and regional administration, educational institutions and residents of Genk. (Source: ARTS)

Self-organisation, notwithstanding all the positive impacts it brings, can also be seen as filling the void left by a retreating welfare state or providing justification for further public sector cuts. What used to be a public service now needs to be organised within the community, with the most vulnerable groups at risk of being left out. The need to step in where the state is no longer present can also put enormous pressure on limited resources that most civil society organisations have at their disposal. Forced to operate in emergency mode, plugging hole after hole without an end in sight, civil society is pushed to a point where its innovative potential, flexibility and elasticity disappear. However, by challenging the status quo, self-organisation can also set in motion a process to transform a wider policy.

Carnisse Community Centre (Rotterdam, the Netherlands)
In 2011 the community centre serving one of the deprived neighbourhoods in Rotterdam was closed, following a number of municipal and organisational choices such as the decision of the local municipality to not include resources for the centre in a newly issued tender for welfare services. The local action group investigated the possibilities for re-opening the centre, including intensive lobbying with different organisations, launching a petition, getting the facts with regard to ownership structure, financial obligations and neighbourhood needs on the table. Beginning 2012, the action group formed a foundation and unofficially re-opened the centre taking on all daily tasks on a voluntary basis. This was done notwithstanding ongoing negotiations with the municipality regarding rent and exploitation. This act of self-organisation was part of the broader movement in the city, with other initiatives trying to achieve this in their respective districts. It was only in 2015 that the municipality reconsidered its policy to close the community centres across the city and provided necessary resources to maintain one community centre per neighbourhood. (Source: InContext and GUST)

Civil society as a hidden innovator
This role is the one we probably notice the least and no wonder, since many civil society groups and the innovations they represent remain hidden from the mainstream. This cloak of invisibility can be either a conscious decision by certain initiatives or result from public engagement policies that cities have in place, e.g. when only organisations with certain legal status are recognized.

Groups that choose to fly under the radar often argue that exposure comes at the expense of time and effort that can be better invested in pursuing their
mission. This challenges the perhaps naïve notion that civil society wants to be discovered. The reluctance of civil society actors to become visible can be explained by previous negative experience, for instance of being instrumentalised by others, or by a desire to step away from the wider society and pursue one’s own aspirations and ideas.

**Ecovillages in Romania**

According to Global Ecovillage Network, an ecovillage is “an intentional or traditional community using local participatory processes to holistically integrate ecological, economic, social, and cultural dimensions of sustainability in order to regenerate social and natural environments”. The Romanian ecovillages Stanciova Ecovillage, Aurora Community and Armonia Brassovia strive to create alternatives to existing consumerist, fast-paced lifestyles. These types of communities are notable among other sustainability-related initiatives because they require their members to undergo a more radical, across-the-board transition to new lifestyle choices, consumption habits and time-use patterns. They are usually built on the principles of permaculture, downsizing and sharing, offering a safe space for experimenting. This does not necessarily mean invisibility, as they are very open to contacts with other interested groups and partners, but rather efforts to protect the boundaries of those experimental spaces. (Source: GLAMURS)

Other initiatives, e.g. in the field of food or energy, that emerge in opposition to dominant practices may offer potentially transformative solutions but their impact on wider institutional shifts remains limited.

**Zocamiño (A Coruña, Spain)**

The main objective of Zocamiño, a responsible consumption cooperative, is to facilitate access to organic products. The initiative promotes short food distribution circuits and the consumption of healthy, locally sourced food products, while also striving to assure a sustainable livelihood for local organic producers. They actively promote a change in consumption habits towards local, seasonal and organic products, as well as encourage local participation in a structure of working groups set up to address different sustainability-related themes around food. With more than 300 members, they have become a hub for innovative and participatory activities centered on food. The members of Zocamiño can experience a change towards more sustainable lifestyles, which then spills over into other aspects of their lives. The cooperative also promotes a locally embedded common identity and a set of common goals, including new values of trust that should govern the relationship between a producer and a consumer. (Source: Glamurs)
As much as our culture likes the stories of leaders, social innovation is a product of networks, groups and formal and informal organisations rather than of “hero entrepreneurs”. Cities can benefit from expanding the group of stakeholders they engage with, aiming for greater diversity and reaching unusual suspects. However, this needs to done with respect for the needs and capacities of other partners. The balance between overexposure, leading potentially to loss of legitimacy or pressure on already scarce resources, and staying in the shadows, risking irrelevance and ineffectiveness, is not an easy one to find.

**And when things go wrong…**

There are a number of tensions inherently related to the role civil society plays in sustainability transitions, often resulting in civil society initiatives being instrumentalised to pursue goals other than those they explicitly support. This is especially apparent in neoliberal narratives justifying the retreat of the state where civil society initiatives are used, often against their will, to support the argument of self-servicing society that doesn’t require governmental support for basic services such as elderly care and education. By relying on civil society for service delivery, there is a risk of deepening social inequalities between and within communities, given their uneven capacities to self-sustain and self-organize. The calls for “Big Society” or community empowerment can mask ineffective public management and exacerbate structural injustices.

When civil society activities enter political sphere, e.g. protesting against the violation of common good or supporting most vulnerable groups, they are often stigmatized as troublemakers or complainants rather than seen as whistle blowers for institutional failures. The question of safe operating space for civil society organisations becomes especially apparent with the rise of populist governments across Europe, choosing obedience over critical dialogue.
In place of conclusions

This Transition Read focuses on the role civil society plays in accelerating sustainability transition, zooming in at the relationships with public and, to a lesser extent, private sector. However, there is one more partnership that we need to get right in order to better enable civil society initiatives to fulfil their transformative potential and it is the one with researchers. Based on our experience, we can propose three points that each researcher willing to engage with civil society initiatives in the context of sustainability transitions should consider.

Don’t do research “on” them, do research with them

There are many types of knowledge and academic is just one of them. Incorporating civil society actors in research design helps to generate knowledge that is relevant to local context and encourages knowledge co-production. Civil society initiatives are holding knowledge on systemic conditions and social needs that can be valuable in city making processes. Make sure not to treat civil society initiatives as information dispensers but take into account their needs and interests.

Avoid adding extra burden without offering anything in return

Too often the researchers’ demands put pressure on already limited resources that civil society groups have at their disposal, offering little in return. This is especially the case for initiatives that become so successful everyone wants to talk to them. Think how you can make it easier for them (e.g. by attending one of the public meetings or talking on the phone instead of sending questionnaires) and what can you offer in return.
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by the ARTS project

Accelerating Transitions

ARTS (Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability) is committed to understanding the role and impact of transition initiatives in cities and examining the conditions that can aid accelerating change towards a sustainable low-carbon society. For more information visit acceleratingtransitions.eu

by the GLAMURS project

GLAMURS (Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Up-scaling Regional Sustainability) works to develop a better understanding of the main obstacles and prospects for transitions to sustainable lifestyles and a green economy in Europe, as well as of the most effective means to support and speed them up. For more information visit www.glamurs.eu

by the GUST project

GUST (Governance of Urban Sustainability Transitions) works to develop a better understanding on how urban experimentation is established and sustained in cities looking at various forms of urban living labs in terms of their design, practices and scaling processes. For more information visit www.urbanlivinglabs.eu
Potential roles for civil society in sustainability transitions

1. Pioneering new practices, creating new connections – transforming systems
2. Providing essential social services, filling the void left by a retreating welfare state
3. Doing it’s thing – creating sustainable solutions though not engaging with wider society
4. Being used for other aims, commodifying members’ goals and motivations and leading to societal mistrust
5. Being used as an excuse for non-action by incumbent actors
6. Being left disempowered and exhausted by being asked to shoulder too heavy a burden with insufficient resources

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We are currently present in the following regions

Contact

Dr. Niki Frantzeskaki
Dutch Research Institute For Transitions
tel: +31-10-4088775
e-mail: arts@drift.eur.nl
www.acceleratingtransitions.eu
@ARTS_EU

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