



**ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG**  
BRUSSELS OFFICE

# **CITIES OF DIGNITY**

**URBAN  
TRANSFORMATIONS  
AROUND THE WORLD**

**GLOBAL WORKING GROUP BEYOND DEVELOPMENT**  
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# INTRODUCTION



# BUILDING RADICAL URBAN TERRITORIES

By Giorgos Velegrakis, Mabrouka M'Barek and Raphael Hoetmer

The Editors are indebted to Claus-Dieter König who has generously given his time to help the team organise the editorial work in the early process; to Ashish Kothari for his insightful guiding questions in chapter 9; to Miriam Lang for her continuous guidance, to Axel Ruppert and Alexandra Spaeth for their invaluable feedback on the introduction; and to Vinod Koshti for his assistance during the last minute checking process.

This book is the third publication of the Global Working Group Beyond Development. This is a group that seeks to analyse and critique the global political economy and its social, political and environmental impact, taking as its premise the diagnostic that the world is facing a civilizational crisis – a crisis caused by the notions of unlimited growth guiding our societies and the resulting dispossession at the margins, principally affecting the Global South. In this context, the Working Group constitutes a space for learning, ‘unlearning’ and interaction involving more than 30 activist organisers and activist researchers (and the many combinations of these identities) from various parts of the world regarding the possible introduction of radical emancipatory transformations in opposition to the capitalist/colonial/racist/patriarchal status quo responsible for the ongoing social and ecological destruction of our planet.

The Working Group’s publications hope to help those whose conversations shudder to a halt when they come to the ubiquitous defeating question “but then what is the alternative?” We do not believe that radical transformations have to be assigned to a single specific framework implemented in its purest form, but we do share the belief that the multitude of transformative emancipatory practices can provide answers to today’s civilizational crisis. In fact, the Working Group’s very *raison d’être* is to highlight existing and piloted practices and give rise to strategic thinking to multiply, expand, connect and consolidate these. We do not claim to be seeking one particular alternative way forward but rather to put forward a series of case studies demonstrating that there are indeed many local transformative initiatives happening right now. We try to describe these practices without romanticising them, presenting them along with their challenges and contradictions and their individual context. In this sense, we conceive of radical practices and the social and environmental movements producing them as being “phenomena in constant motion” (Walker 1994: 671).

We also hope that the Working Group’s publications are of use to people, organisations and movements already involved in organising transformative practices, enabling them to derive inspiration and insights from other processes already taking place, as well as giving them a chance to forge connections and perhaps even establish opportunities for transnational solidarity allowing them to consolidate their own movement and its processes. Bringing together the efforts of grassroots, bottom-up initiatives and organisations voicing the concerns of local people with those of researchers studying their interrelatedness with wider global political and ecological processes is a key factor in building a movement – or a network of interrelated movements – for socio-ecological transformation.



What we try to convey to the readers of this work is that our civilisation's fate does not hinge on waiting for political and technical experts to come up with a package of reforms covering a panoply of policy areas, along the lines of the Green New Deal, and providing a miracle cure for the problems facing us. While such packages, which should address all patterns of domination, may be necessary and deserve our effort and support, we ought to acknowledge and recognise that there are many radical emancipatory practices already being tried out or that have always been anchored in indigenous practices on a local or community level and sometimes worldwide. It is only by acknowledging/understanding/connecting and expanding these transformations that a bottom-up reform package, covering a range of policies, or a global eco-socialist movement can take root. With this book we would like to reinvigorate these local processes not because they will necessarily be successful but because their proliferation and the purpose behind them create a world of possibilities capable of enabling dignity and creating the necessary conditions for life to flourish by forming a buttress against the ongoing immiseration of living beings and ecological destruction.

Similarly, we believe that transformative emancipatory experiences need to be discussed collectively among people fighting various struggles and coming from different perspectives to work out the broad thrust of a response to the pressing crisis of civilization we are currently experiencing. This fully reflects the Working Group's approach, which is based on collectively debating, exchanging and discussing case studies presented at annual meetings, where participants can interact directly. The choice of venue for these meetings is related to the chosen topic, and we usually take the opportunity provided by these meetings to meet those involved in transformations going beyond development to gain new insights and have more in-depth conversations. Our publications like this one, which are produced following our annual meetings, offer a platform to the many voices in the field who are establishing strategies and practices. Moreover, we are committed to exploring, discussing and developing an idea of what new fields of theory/research and new forms of action can be created through this 'common space' providing a forum for dialogue, co-creation and transformation.

The last chapter is collectively written by the Working Group participants and covers various ongoing debates and discussions. As such, this chapter does not reflect a consensus between the Working Group's participants, as finding a compromise is not the idea behind our activities. Compromises and the obsessive search for a conclusion or a universal solution are extreme ways of silencing voices. Instead, the Global Working Group values the search for and identification of debates and questions, which is why it encompasses a wide range of perspectives.

## WHY URBAN TERRITORIES?

In its first publication, *Alternatives in a World of Crisis*, the Working Group sought to describe transformations that have – despite their many challenges – represented meaningful changes while addressing one or more forms of domination: colonisation, imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, casteism and the predatory relationship with nature. Discussions and debates surrounding the six case studies presented in Quito in 2017 (Nigeria, Ecuador, Venezuela, India, Spain and Greece) provided insights that the Group summarised in the last chapter which was then published in an extended stand-alone publication entitled *Stopping the Machines of Social and Ecological Destruction*.

Realising that many of the Working Group's conversations tended to revolve around rural areas, participants started thinking about transformations in urban spaces. How might they be different and how do they relate to rural spaces? Urban radical transformations, although mentioned in the Quito discussions, seemed more complex and challenging. Discussing rural experiences may have been regarded as more straightforward because rural territories are geographically further removed from centres of capitalist power. In particular, participants considered that the transformation of the countryside might produce a number of strong political concepts and narratives, such as *Buen Vivir*, food sovereignty and agroecology, which might be less developed in the cities where hegemonic Western/capitalist/developmentalist thought has predominated. Therefore, the notion of 'the commons' that inspired local transformative struggles in Barcelona (Castro, 2019) and elsewhere seemed a suitable starting point for a discussion about a potential radical urban transformation.

This is the reason why we chose to make urban transformation the focus of our third annual meeting. We chose Barcelona for the start of our discussions about radical urban transformation to enable a dialogue with activists, intellectuals and politicians and learn from the experiences of resistance and the creation of radical transformations in one of the most progressive cities in the world, currently governed locally by *Barcelona en Comú*, a municipalist political movement with roots in popular housing struggles.

Our meeting in Barcelona drew on (often participatory) research on radical emancipatory practices, specifically focusing on:

- > what urban 'commons' look like today (Chapter 1);
- > the experience of radical urban transformation for sustainability and depatriarchalisation in Brazil's popular municipalities in the face of dispossession policies and State violence (Chapter 3);
- > the defensive action of the indigenous San Roque market in Quito, Ecuador (Chapter 4) and the struggle in New Delhi, India (not included in this book) against the threat of oligopolistic modernisation;
- > the establishment of local solidarity and cooperatives by the black community in Detroit, Birmingham and Jackson in the United States (Chapter 5);
- > the resistance of slum dwellers in Makoko, Nigeria (Chapter 6) and Bhuj, India (Chapter 9) reclaiming and holding their ground;
- > the 'Sarafu credit', a community currency and inclusive credit in Kenya (Chapter 7);
- > the 15th Garden movement pushing for food sovereignty in war-torn Syria (Chapter 8); and
- > current transnational initiatives supporting localised urban transformations (Chapter 2).



Our initial central collective research questions were:

- > What conditions and strategies enable radical transformation in urban contexts?
- > What kind of economic and political processes can sustain urban radical transformations?
- > What urban realities does the countryside need to re-dignify rural life and rural-urban relations and vice versa?
- > What theoretical and political frameworks are useful for establishing urban radical transformations?

In the various case studies that make up this book, the most important factors are the status of social relationships and the balance of social, class and political forces that define the relationship of the society in question with its urban environments. This is because we conceptualise the various urban contexts as a social relation not a given solid 'thing' or a commodity, despite global capital's attempts to bring about the opposite effect (as for example demonstrated by the enclosure of the commons in the urban sphere). That is the reason why we talk about territories as opposed to environments. The notion of territory relates to the significance of the space, taking into account the relations between people and the environment, geography, as well as culture, and history. We used a multidimensional analytical framework to guide our collective debates surrounding these issues.

## BUILDING ON THE GLOBAL WORKING GROUP'S COLLECTIVE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Our meeting also sought to continue the Working Group's previous discussions, which showed how radical multidimensional transformation is vital to ensuring the dignity and well-being of all living beings. The following five key processes of social change are required to deepening justice, dignity, democracy and the sustainability of life:

- > decolonisation;
- > anti-capitalism;
- > anti-racism;
- > the dismantling of patriarchy;
- > the transformation of predatory relations with nature.

The Working Group shares the belief that radical change – understood as the transformation of our society, economy and politics from the bottom up – is vital if we want to call a halt to the current social-ecological destruction being wrought by our crisis-hit civilisation.

At the same time, there are very tough preconditions for such change. Power and resources are more concentrated than ever before in the hands of global elites and corporate groups, and collective views of development, consumerism and individualism are deeply rooted in the constructed subjectivities of the majority of the world's population. Militarism, the spread of corporate technology, mass surveillance and the mass media are enabling factors for these negative conditions, while a concerted global counter-offensive of reactionary and conservative forces is pushing back or battling emancipatory change in many parts of the world.

Our earlier discussions showed that despite differences in our stances regarding these various strategies, we agreed that the current historical situation involved different temporalities of transformation which are best tackled by distinct, potentially complementary political strategies. In the short term, there is a need to stop the accelerated ecological, political and social processes of destruction and dispossession by means of defensive struggles which also protect the achievements of social movements in previous cycles of struggle. There needs to be an active defence of spaces of autonomy, self-organisation and extension of the commons, as these form the building blocks for deeper and sustainable change.

Any long-term multidimensional transformation will require other offensive political struggles, capable of creating new forms of existence and consciousness, new institutions, new modes of production and new distribution and consumption practices. The required political framework needs to go far beyond the realities of the nation state, the notion of human rights and current production, consumption and distribution processes and practices, thereby responding fully to the civilizational and ecological crisis we are facing. Such a radically different society is already taking root and has even been adopted previously in many local processes of prefigurative politics. Political perspectives of plurinationality, polycentricity, Buen Vivir or bio-democracy and their specific expression on the ground allow for the possibility of overcoming the limitations of both modern liberal and Marxist Eurocentric political thoughts. In our meetings we have seen that this requires deep and significant dialogues between cultures, political traditions and social movements.

The appropriate strategies will differ depending on the individual local and historical context, but the challenge of nurturing relationships between them and of building ecosystems of change made up of various actors, strategies and scales is a crucial one. The kinds of alliances we need are those that connect resistance and the establishment of emancipatory transformations, being based on shared principles that inspire localised practices.

Existing struggles are not limited to the local or national level but are also fought on a global scale. Examples of these are the environmental movement that makes each climate conference (CoP) a focus for their struggle, the opponents to trade and investment protection agreements who concentrate their efforts on World Trade Organisation events, and the supporters of a binding treaty on business and human rights. This is a creature of necessity, as often no change to the global framework puts a brake on the potential success of local and national struggles.

Finally, in our previous meetings we became acutely aware of the fact that our dialogues and discussions were not taking place in a homogeneous space or community, something which is in fact never the case. Any choice of words or of items in lists or categories always reflects some particular geopolitics of knowledge that we need to take into account in our interactions (Lang 2018). In this light, our group seeks to foster a dialogue of knowledges interconnecting various perspectives and individuals.

## URBAN COMMONS AND GLOBAL SOLIDARITY FOR URBAN TRANSFORMATION

This work includes some of the case studies presented at the Working Group's meeting in Barcelona as well as its collective discussion on the possibilities and challenges for radical urban transformation, while paying tribute throughout to the tremendous transformative potential of cities.

In the first chapter, Mauro Castro and Marc Martí-Costa set out the theoretical basis for the notion of urban 'commons' by combining two approaches: the liberal approach and the autonomist Marxist approach. The liberal approach interprets the commons as another form of management and government to place alongside the State and the market without trying to create a path of emancipation from capitalism. This is the case of the neo-institutionalist tradition proposed by Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990). In contrast, the Marxist understanding seeks to criticise capitalism as a process of dispossession in favour of capital accumulation (Harvey, 2003) and interprets the commons as a social practice which, being autonomous and offering an alternative to the State-market/public-private dichotomy, can produce emancipation from capitalism and institute a new social order based on the principles of self-government, mutual help, sustainability and non-appropriability of resources. Much of the literature on the commons tends to focus on natural resources and related matters and has been rather limited in terms of considering social constructs such as cities. However, these are an integral part of the commons – one that has been subject to significant processes of 'enclosure' and privatisation. Both new urban enclosures and urban commons have gradually started to receive scholarly attention in recent years, pushing the boundaries of both urban theory and urban action in important ways.

In the second chapter, Mary Ann Manahan and Maria Khristine Alvarez present a survey of existing transnational initiatives and how they can support urban transformations such as the Transformative Cities Atlas of Utopias, the Plataforma de Acuerdos Públicos Comunitarios de Las Americas and 'Fearless Cities'. The chapter also elaborates on the various concepts that have been used by local movements and more particularly 'the right to the city' and its opportunities and challenges. The paper highlights the increasingly organised transnational schemes and trans-solidarity corridors/forums being deployed to support municipalist movements and act as a buttress against the global racist capitalist system.

The third chapter reports on the efforts made by popular movements to dismantle patriarchy and transform urban territories threatened by State violence and expropria-

tion in Brazil. Penned by Isabella Gonçalves Miranda (a longstanding organiser who recently won a council seat in the municipal elections in Belo Horizonte), this chapter retraces the development of social movements in Brazil until 2004, when there was a change in strategy and objectives. Since then, new resistance movements have emerged which are no longer restricted to demanding rights for the city (such as the right to housing, water and health) and instead are transforming the notion of power by creating communities committed to collectively exercising their rights associated with their everyday lives (care work, food, health, etc.) by in particular establishing urban commons and consolidating an identity. As such, there is no strict separation between living spaces and public arenas where various struggles play out. This urban resistance is one of the specific expressions of these struggles, being a creative force redefining and designing new urban environments focused on the well-being and dignity of all. The Brazilian urban resistance has been further galvanised by the coup d'état of 2006 and the recent election of President Jair Bolsonaro.

In the fourth chapter, Ana Rodriguez and Patric Hollenstein describe the struggle organised by the San Roque market against the municipality of Quito in Ecuador. This chapter makes a key contribution to describing the social role played by popular markets which are not limited to the marketing and distribution of commodified food. The San Roque popular market is an important point of entry for those transitioning from rural areas to Quito and serves as a focal point for the struggle against oligopolistic modernisation.

The fifth chapter is an original contribution by Mabrouka M'Barek from Tunisia, and Elandria Williams from the United States, both participants in the Global Working Group, who travelled together to meet cooperative incubators/enablers, organisers and political activists in the black communities of Birmingham (Alabama), Jackson (Mississippi) and Detroit (Michigan). Following their learning journey, the authors offer insights into questions of race, land struggles and what it means to belong to a community. This chapter highlights the marginalisation of black communities living in an imperial, colonial system in the United States where white supremacy still guides policies of racist expropriation and depletion of financial and material resources. Urban and rural communitarian practices such as cooperatives have not arisen from the current racist capitalist system but are instead deeply rooted in African heritage and the fight for liberation from slavery. This account demonstrates how the introduction of radical urban practices cannot be dissociated from rural territories but are interlinked because of their joint connection to a shared struggle – not a space – and therefore in the case of the black community in the United States any attempt to separate urban and rural spaces makes little sense.

In the sixth chapter, Marion Cauvet, drawing on inputs from Ruth Mawangi's participation in the Working Group's Barcelona meeting, describes the trial in Kenya of a community-controlled currency known as the 'Eco-Pesa' and a credit tool called the 'Sarafu credit'. The growing number of women taking part in these processes shows how – despite their limits – community-controlled and owned currency and credit tools can reduce the marginalisation of women. This trial did not adopt the bottom-up approach advocated by the Working Group. However, the group is keen to benefit from an initiative that shows how the use of a simple printed credit voucher system could transform the lives of communities significantly. This is particularly relevant today when so many urban movements are being overwhelmed by the complexity of cryptocurrencies and the hype surrounding these. One of the biggest challenges facing such movements is a lack of financial resources. As such, the community currency offers a very promising way forward, while the Sarafu credit case study demonstrates that sometimes there is no need for the use of sophisticated technology, avoiding more daunting hurdles for those involved.

Another case study from Africa, relayed in the seventh chapter, is the organised resistance of slum dwellers in Makoko in the Nigerian capital of Lagos. Isaac 'Asume' Osuoka and Abiodun Aremu describe how Makoko, a fishing community predating the establishment of Lagos by the British colonists, became a magnet for migration, attracting indigenous people dispossessed by the colonists or fleeing slavery. Post-colonial urban design has polarised infrastructure investment in Lagos, separating out the capitalist and working classes and totally neglecting the expansion of surrounding slums. The level of contempt for the urban poor and the violent attack on their way of life is a result of colonial capitalism, which has justified this with the subjective ideas of 'beauty', 'cleanliness' and 'safety', when in fact the alienation of Makoko is the result of colonial-capitalistic activity. Aremu and Osuoka demonstrate how the collective memory of previous evictions has inspired the community of Makoko to organise themselves and generate new subjectivities to defend their territory and their identity. At the very heart of the slum dwellers' resistance is the idea of reclaiming the definition of citizenry.

In the eighth chapter, Ansar Jasim provides an account of the 15th Garden movement pushing for food sovereignty in Syria. Her article explicitly repudiates the need for geopolitical positioning or for a description of the various debates surrounding that country which, in her opinion, not only ignore the existing grassroots movement but also ignore Syrian voices. Nevertheless, this case study still provides a much-needed account of localised processes despite the lack of geopolitical analysis of the situ-



ation in Syria. As such, Jasim tells us about various community-led practices that have proliferated in besieged cities in that country despite the ongoing war between the Assad regime and the many imperialist interventions of regional and international actors. The 15th Garden, which has grown up in the context of a nationwide uprising and the subsequent war in Syria, is a democratic network of self-organised and grass-roots rooftop gardens and agricultural actors in urban and rural areas. The 15th Garden experiment, although currently facing a serious threat to its existence due to the unrelenting food siege and military assaults on civil and civilian infrastructure, has created a social network demanding food sovereignty and advocating long-lost practices of sharing knowledge about seed production and storage.

The last case study, presented by Aseem Mishra and Sandeep Virmani in the ninth chapter, relates the steps the slum dwellers of Bhuj took to assert their rights and to come up with their own city planning. When employees of development NGOs realised that the work they were doing in rural areas could be applied to their own urban territories, they drew on their experience-based knowledge to benefit their own community. The case of Bhuj also provides a vital illustration of how a grassroots community decision-making system can affect a deep-rooted bureaucratic and political city-wide decision-making process. The relative success encountered in Bhuj is the result of a major programme to support women and eliminate the obstacles they face. Just as in Makoko, slum dwellers in Bhuj have taken control of city planning, ensuring that their voice is heard, and restoring the slum's place as an integral part of the city rather than a marginalised urban space for disposable labour.

## COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS

This last chapter is the result of the collective work carried out by the Global Working Group Beyond Development, as most of the group's participants had analysed and engaged in in-depth discussions on the themes and topics addressed here. Therefore, it is envisaged as a work in progress aiming to conceptualise the historical times our world's urban spaces are currently experiencing and to explore the possibilities for multidimensional radical transformations. Our thoughts are based on the deliberations of the group's third meeting in Barcelona in April 2018. They have their roots very much in the local experiences set out above but also look for transnational and transcultural interconnections and seek out lessons learnt.

## THE GLOBAL WORKING GROUP BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

The Global Working Group Beyond Development was launched in 2016. The idea to form a global collective came from activists and organisers from Asia – specifically from India’s Vikalp Sangam (Hindi for ‘alternative confluence’) – and drew inspiration from the productive Permanent Latin America Working Group<sup>1</sup>. The first meeting of the Global Working Group was held in Brussels in January 2016, with a focus on resource extraction and its socio-ecological impacts in different parts of the world. This was followed by a second meeting in Quito in Ecuador in 2017, concentrating on discussing processes addressing many types of domination. The third meeting, resulting in this book, was held in Barcelona in 2018 and discussed the challenges and opportunities for defending, expanding, articulating and establishing urban radical transformations in the contemporary world. The Working Group is an independent and self-organised collective operating with the support of its participants and the Brussels office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

The premise of the Latin America Permanent Working Group was to occupy the space of knowledge production, with a view in particular to decolonising knowledge, thereby addressing what Anibal Quijano describes as the colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2000). Quijano explains how Eurocentric knowledge production exercises control over the subjectivity of knowledge. Therefore, what we commonly understand as ‘poverty’, ‘wealth’, ‘development’, ‘culture’, ‘community’, ‘labour’, ‘medicine’, ‘health-care’ and so on are shaped by modern Western teachings and Eurocentric knowledge and therefore tinted with capitalist and imperial connotations and interests. Like the Latin America Permanent Working Group, the Global Working Group is trying to actively participate in knowledge production, but the difference is that it provides a forum for countries from both Global South and North to exchange their views. As such, we are trying to highlight processes that are marginalised by the hegemonic Eurocentric system and labelled ‘underdeveloped’, backward or illegal. We hope to provide readers with examples of perspectives that could help push the boundaries of what is considered knowledge. In other words, we believe that a plural dialogue contributes to building an ecology of knowledges without pre-established hierarchies (de Sousa Santos 2017). As a result, the Working Group brings together very distinct threads of critical thinking from domains as far apart as ecology; ecofeminism; Marxism; decolonial and anti-imperialist thinking; social movements; academics; and grassroots and indigenous knowledge. Case studies presented in this book reflect

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1 For more information, see [www.rosalux.org.ec/en/alternatives-to-development-group](http://www.rosalux.org.ec/en/alternatives-to-development-group).

the views of their respective authors and not necessarily those of the Working Group as a whole or of other participants. Those involved in the Working Group vary from one year to the next as there is no membership as such, but rather participants in the group's individual events and activities.

## **WHY BEYOND DEVELOPMENT?**

Just as capital is accumulated as a result of dispossession, development in the West comes at the cost of the corresponding underdevelopment of the Global South (Rodney 1972). Western nations and in particular colonial and imperial powers have set up international development banks, International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and designed development projects supposedly to help 'developing' countries to catch up with the 'developed' world. From the perspective of these imperial powers, the continued extraction of resources requires underdevelopment to be addressed and fully controlled.

These development projects have certainly created more dependencies on the global market and foreign currency, contributing to the accumulation of global capital. The export boom of the 2000s, continuing until the start of the financial crisis in 2008, led to an increase in the adverse socio-environmental effects of capital accumulation, having a major impact on many parts of the world. This was brought about by such developments as the expansion of mining activities worldwide, driven by high demand; a protracted period of high commodity prices; an environment conducive to the financialisation of nature; new processes for commons enclosure in both urban and rural environments; speculation surrounding land prices; and in general, the expansion of economic processes exerting a high social and environmental cost. In this sense, the much-touted economic benefits (for employment, revenue and investment) of these transitions are proving insufficient to compensate for their adverse effects. At the same time, the global elites have chosen austerity as their main response to the post-2008 crisis of late neoliberalism. Despite much analysis suggesting that austerity measures exacerbate rather than remedy socio-economic problems in a crisis, policies prioritising budgetary discipline at the expense of people's wages, rights and social benefits continue to be implemented to this day. As such, we agree with the definition put forward by Harvey (2011: 85–86) of austerity as a form of class politics for re-engineering society and privately appropriating the commons.

In other words, capital crises and strategies for recovery are the other side of the coin of processes for contemporary capital accumulation: on the pretext of a constant and urgent necessity for development, international and domestic capital is trying to revive its global domination while fostering many forms of alienation with each other, between societies and their urban and rural environments, between humankind and nature, and so on.

The crucial political problem arising from all this is the need to identify, tackle and overcome the many forms of development that in contemporary capitalism refers to accumulation, dispossession and alienation. Dare we hope for new relations toward nature, with each other, with the work we do and the way we live beyond the development rationale?

To offer a positive response to the above question, we need a diverse strategy as well as notions, ideas, practices, processes and try-outs that are smarter than capital. Our point of departure is that a multidimensional crisis – namely this crisis of civilisation – calls for multidimensional responses going beyond the development requirement and/or its rationale. As we often reiterate in the Global Working Group, in the world of today's social transformation, we need to examine the complex relations between class, race, coloniality, gender and the environment, as these are the historical entanglements and interdependencies that determine the civilizational basis of the system we face. While the future of capitalism is already clear as a result of its own crises and indebtedness, there are – and should be – no bounds on our political, economic and socio-environmental imaginations. Moreover, going “beyond development” requires paying attention to activists' practices and always trying to develop symbiotic relationships involving mutual learning and reinforcement.

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# URBAN COMMONS: FROM COLLECTIVE GOVERNANCE TO THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

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This article was originally published in Spanish by Eure, the Latin-American Magazine of Regional Urban Studies vol. 42, no. 125 (Chile, 2016). The pertinence of theoretical debates on urban commons and various approximations of commons, from objects and resources used in management (common goods) to political topics (social movements), provides the context for us to introduce the work of the Global Working Group Beyond Development, and the case studies presented in this book aim to contribute towards a growing body of critical, situated knowledge. – Original translation from Spanish to English: Richard Allen. Revision: Linguanet sprl, Brussels

## COMMONS AND THE CITY

Having initially applied to natural and then digital resources, interest in commons is increasingly crossing over to the urban sphere. The literature, although recent, is nevertheless quite broad, being characterised by the multiple interpretations of the term 'commons'<sup>1</sup>, and its application to urban territory and municipal administration. Consequently, we believe there is a need to reflect on and evaluate the possibilities and limits of the theoretical framework of commons as an explicitly urban project, taking up two of the main paths or 'entry points' (Hess 2008) covered in the specialist literature, and considering their many interconnections.

The first entry point is the neo-institutionalist perspective, which focuses on analysing the institutional paradigms and governance rules adopted by communities to manage so-called common-pool resources (CPRs)<sup>2</sup>, and whose main exponent is the American political scientist Elinor Ostrom. The second entry point adopts a Marxist outlook that relates commons to their complex interrelations with socioeconomic practices of enclosure and focuses on the many ways in which the process is both implemented and resisted in the urban environment.

The first section of this article addresses the literature focused on forms of CPR governance and the major differences between the natural resources analysed by Ostrom and the physical, social and cultural resources found in the urban sphere. The second section concentrates on those authors who have linked struggles for commons as a response to enclosures and the logics of appropriation by dispossession in the neoliberal city, which is very close to the literature on urban social movements and the struggles for the right to the city. The final section ends with some conclusions about the potential gains of a dialogue between the proponents of both approaches.

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1 It soon becomes apparent how unclear terms like 'commons' and other associated concepts, such as common wealth, common resources, common property, common good, etc. are and that they are not entirely synonymous. In fact, how 'commons' should best be translated into Spanish is still being debated, e.g. as *común*, *procomún* (a noun combining *provecho*, which is often translated as interest or good in English, and *común*, in the sense of a public utility), and *bienes comunes*, meaning common goods. In addition, the clarification of terms is complicated by the involvement in this domain of many different disciplines (philosophy, economics, political economy, sociology, political science, ecology, etc.). In this connection, the compilation by Hess makes interesting reading. For more information, see: <http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/handle/10535/304>.

2 Ostrom understands a 'common-pool resource' to be a "natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use." (Ostrom 1990: 30).

## SELF-MANAGEMENT OF 'URBAN COMMON RESOURCES'

The work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) on the administration of natural resources (or CPRs) greatly inspired and guided a rethink about how common-pool urban resources can be collectively managed. From a viewpoint based on individual and collective rationality, Ostrom analysed the appraisals, problems and possibilities of collective action – neither State-controlled, nor private measures – geared to ensuring that natural resources are managed efficiently. Her starting point was a critique of the 'tragedy of the commons' metaphor popularised by Garret Hardin (1968), which was itself closely linked to Olson's (1965) work on the logic of collective action. Hardin asserted that a common resource open to everyone<sup>3</sup> would end up degrading because each individual would tend to maximise their own benefit to the detriment of maintaining the resource collectively, even when the benefits of a collective strategy were greater. Following this argument, the only solution to this 'tragedy' would entail establishing either a regulatory system based on private property and the market, in which each individual was responsible for their property, or a system of State control, based either on planning or a hierarchy. By contrast, Ostrom first highlighted the normally invisible costs involved in keeping property private (fences, surveillance, less capacity to monetise investments, etc.) as well the expense required to control, maintain and constantly improve it if run by an external entity such as the State. Next, Ostrom cited a series of real-life cases to illustrate the feasibility of taking collective action to manage common resources, provided that various conditions facilitating the collective governance of that resource applied.

## RESOURCES, COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT

When focusing on the urban sphere, important differences become apparent between the examples of self-administered CPRs investigated by Ostrom and urban common-pool resources managed by municipalities. Hess, discussing the literature on the 'new commons' (shared resources that had recently evolved or been recognised as common), claimed that the term had lost its connection to academic concepts linked with traditional common resources (CPRs) and come to be defined more openly and expansively – therefore making it analytically more diffuse (Colding / Barthel 2013) – without being limited to a specific type of economic good (meeting the criteria of rivalry and non-exclusivity) or type of property regime (Hess 2008: 34).

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3 Hardin confused unregulated open-access resources with collectively managed resources, whereas the problem for Ostrom is not the common resource per se, but its governance.

## RESOURCES

The first question arising is which existing urban resources can be considered common goods. The literature distinguishes the following types of common resource, among others: material (land, housing, infrastructure, equipment, public spaces, green spaces) and immaterial (information, knowledge, cultural creations, cooperation, security, etc.); natural (water, air, land wealth) and artificial (social, cultural or collective knowledge); universal (with guaranteed access for all) or locally produced (with a community of reference); and abundant versus scarce resources.

In an attempt to be more specific, Efrat Eizenberg (2012) invoked 'actually existing commons' to encapsulate shared resources in urban environments that are governed by common property regimes, i.e. institutional arrangements that involve neither State administration, nor private property, but which are based on self-management by a local community. Examples she cites include the New York Community gardens, workers' cooperatives, and experiences of collective property ownership destined for, and managed by, poor urban populations. Other authors refer to these same examples as 'neighbourhood communes' (Hess 2008) to highlight the nearby communities' ability to protect, preserve and manage local resources. Thus, frequent case studies cover community gardens and allotments (Foster 2006; Foster 2011; Fernandez / Burch 2003; Sheldon 2010), street markets (Parker / Johansson, 2011), parks and other recreational facilities (Matisoff / Noonan 2012), public spaces in general (Getachew 2008; Low / Smith 2006; Cooper 2006), occupied houses (Hodkinson / Chatterton 2006), housing cooperatives (Saegert / Benitez 2005), and even gated communities (Lee / Webster 2006; Le Goix / Webster 2006; Colding 2011), among others.

Other authors also include more intangible aspects of shared resources, addressing security, for example, by exploring how a community organises itself to prevent crime in a certain pre-determined area of the city (Bennett / Holloway / Farrington 2006; Wagenaar / Soeparman 2004). On a larger scale, attempts have been made to conceptualise the basic infrastructure that makes city life possible as a form of urban commons (Frischmann 2005; Frischmann 2006; Bravo / de Moor 2008). Examples range from water distribution systems (Bakker 2007; Wutich 2009) to port infrastructure (Selsky / Memon 1997), roads (Blomkvist / Larsson 2013), electricity (Byrne et al. 2009; Lambing 2012) waste collection and processing (Post / Baud 2003; Cavé 2013), natural ecosystems in the city (Svendsen / Campbell 2008) and even land regulation systems (Porter 2011; Salingaros 2010). Due to these resources' importance in facilitating urban life and the complexities of their manage-

ment, it is usually public institutions that are called on to provide, care for and maintain these resources, either directly (Sofoulis / Williams 2008) or using hybrid forms of co-management or co-production alongside civil society (McShane 2010). This introduces the issue of scale; whereby some resources can be subject to forms of local management by clearly delineated communities (usually on a smaller scale), while other commons (public spaces or collective infrastructure, for example) relate to much broader communities and require more open and non-proprietary management, with inclusive access and expansive participation being taken into account.

In short, what is and is not an urban common resource is an open, contextual and above all a political question. Indeed, as we will see below, a common resource is a common resource when a community claims that it qualifies as one.

## COMMUNITY

As Ostrom pointed out, more than being merely resources (software, water or public spaces) with specific characteristics (rivalry in consumption and non-exclusive access), commons must have an active community that manages them by fulfilling shared norms. Commons should not be identified on the basis of their intrinsic characteristics, as a particular type of asset, thing or resource, but rather defined in relation to a social subject in the localised context of a community. This raises the complicated question of how to define what 'community' means in an urban context.

Many, though not all of the communities Ostrom identified as successful in taking care of a resource and ensuring its sustainability, are relatively small and characterised by strong ties and stable shared norms. The description of this type of community resonates more with rural and traditional societies than with those in urbanised societies, which tend to be characterised by multiple, temporary, interest-based, associations between unknown parties.

Neighbourhoods have often been conceptualised as intermediate entities between rural and urban spaces, the domestic and metropolitan or private and institutional levels. Functionally, neighbourhoods are also the minimum units of social reproduction in a city, spaces in which basic needs like self-sufficiency, socialisation, education and everyday healthcare can be met through recourse to various spaces of sociability, resources and facilities. In this latter connection, neighbourhoods have also been analysed as spaces of political organisation, resisting processes of gentrification (Smith 2002), making demands on urban services and facilities (Castells 1977) or simply serving as spaces for participation in government and local politics. In this neighbourhood context, communities are no longer viewed

as closed, homogeneous groups, but redefined as plural collectives with a range of proximity-based shared interests and needs<sup>4</sup>. These factors, such as residential proximity and a dependence on certain shared resources, make the neighbourhood an urban space that is particularly conducive to developing collective management systems for common urban resources.

However, various authors have also pointed out the wide-ranging characteristics a community of this type can have in the urban sphere: for instance, they may be exclusive or integrative; regressive or progressive (Kohn 2004; McCarthy 2005); refer to a small group of users, an entire neighbourhood, the whole population of a city, or groups operating in digital spaces (Foster 2011; Blomley 2008); and they may be sedentary or temporary. Stavrides (2011 and 2012) defined occupations of land and empty, disused buildings in Brazil and of 'town squares' (plazas) that triggered a global cycle starting in 2010–11 as 'communities in movement', meaning social organisations that, far from notions of homogeneous community, essentialist rural communities or social bonds within a traditional extended family, instead rest on the very action of managing and democratically governing common resources.

In any case, regardless of whether 'communities' are based on geographical adjacency or some other linking factor, two things are clear: a) although they arose from "similar forms of collective ownership that have very different social and political effects" (as with the elitist, exclusive nature of gated condominiums, for example) (Kohn 2004: 10); and b) we must see them as far more open, unstable entities that are less dependent on a particular resource than the successful cases analysed by Ostrom. Where urban CPRs are concerned, the subsistence of the actors in question does not normally depend solely on exploiting a resource, and this has important consequences for their motivation to maintain it and/or control its use by others<sup>5</sup>. This does not mean that users do not derive any kind of (economic, social or political) benefit, but rather that such benefits are often much more indirect, suggesting the importance of motivations other than subsistence, such as fundamentally civic or political factors. This implies that calculating costs and benefits based on the homo economicus underlying Ostrom's theory can be problematic. Indeed, Olson himself (1965) recognised that his theory based on economic rationality did not work well enough to study philanthropic, communal and religious organisations.

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4 Always bearing in mind that residential proximity does not necessarily imply or result in a 'neighbourhood' (in the sense of mutual support or community). (Ledrut 1968)

5 In the words of Ostrom: "because the individuals involved gain a major part of their economic return from the CPRs, they are strongly motivated to try to solve common problems to enhance their own productivity over time."



## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Finally, we should highlight the relationship between urban common resources and government, here local government in particular.

In her work, Ostrom already recognised the important role of governments in legitimising and lowering the costs of collective action. Meanwhile, Sheila Foster (2011) highlighted various reasons why the role of government plays an even more predominant role in an urban setting. Firstly, it is very difficult to find spaces where the local government has no ownership of resources or at least some regulatory control over them. Secondly, collectively managed communities often do not operate under ideal conditions, so the facilitative and legitimising roles played by the State become even more important for ensuring that resource in question functions optimally.

Foster (2011) invokes the ‘tragedy of the commons’ simile in cities when local government becomes disengaged from its regulatory functions and the commons start to degrade due to their overexploitation or misuse by users: a phenomenon she refers to as ‘regulatory slippage’: “In simple terms, regulatory slippage refers to a marked decline in the enforcement of these standards and/or the increasing tolerance of noncompliance with these standards by users of a given public space. (...) the concept of regulatory slippage simply bears witness to a decline in the management or control of a common resource over which public authorities have formal governing authority” (2011: 67). Yet she does not examine the causes of this decline beyond pointing out insufficient funding or excessive demands on the part of the user population, without a doubt a naïve view of local government, its capacity for agency, constraints and guiding interests.

The role afforded to local government in the collective management cases analysed by Foster (urban gardens, care of public parks, coalitions for local development, and citizen security patrols) is above all one of providing support, e.g. to lower the costs involved in collective actions or disincentivise ‘free riders’, and so forth. Accordingly, experiences associated with urban commons are classified in terms of the level of ‘support’ received from a local government, determined primarily by variables endogenous to the community (with local government support deemed less necessary in the presence of a strongly cohesive community).

To an extent, these elements invoke one of the principles guaranteeing the sustainable governance of common resources, according to Ostrom's classic list<sup>6</sup>. However, as highlighted by De Angelis (2003), among others, the work of history shows us that the recognition of the self-determination of the community by high-level authorities (like the State) is often gained through struggle.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE COMMONS

In the second part of this article, we will switch to examine contributions that go beyond evaluating whether results of collectively managing common resources can be deemed 'tragic' and study CPR management in its (antagonistic) relationship with capital, viewing it as a source of conflict and resistance within contemporary capitalism.

The approach or hypothesis shared by authors with neo-Marxist or heterodox Marxist views maintains that the strategy of accumulation in neoliberalism and the rentier form that gains the advantage under the hegemony of financial capital both closely resemble the process of enclosing<sup>7</sup> communal fields described by Marx in the framework of what he termed 'primitive accumulation' (see De Angelis 2003; Federici 2004; Hardt 2010; Hardt / Negri 2011; Harvey 2003; Heynen / Robbins 2005; Marazzi 2009 and Vercellone 2009, among others).

In 1990, the same year that Ostrom published *Governing the Commons*, the editorial collective Midnight Notes Collective coined the term 'new enclosures' to refer to the spectacular and unprecedented privatisation process that had been taking place across the planet from the mid-1970s onwards as a result of the global neoliberal turn (Midnight Notes Collective 1990). Nature, the social benefits that define the welfare state, culture and knowledge, and even urban structure itself and the resources established within it, have all become new spheres of business for capital and evidence an

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6 Elinor Ostrom's work investigates how communities either succeed or fail at managing common pool resources and defines eight design principles for stable, local CPR management: 1. Define clear group boundaries. 2. Match rules governing the use of common goods to local needs and conditions. 3. Ensure that those affected by the rules can participate in modifying the rules. 4. Make sure the rule-making rights of community members are respected by outside authorities. 5. Develop a system, carried out by community members, for monitoring members' behaviour. 6. Use graduated sanctions for rule violators. 7. Provide accessible, low-cost means for dispute resolution. 8. Build responsibility for governing the common resource in nested tiers from the lowest level up to the entire interconnected system.

7 The recently 'unearthed' archaism associated with capitalism's founding chapter is that of 'enclosure', a term referring to the legal protocols that paved the way to peasants' expulsion from communal fields and the subsequent transformation of that land into privately owned plots, as happened with much of England's communal lands in the 18th and 19th century. Marx described this as one of the different 'bloody' methods constituting the 'original sin' that allowed the accumulation of capital and labour necessary for the transition to capitalism, a process known as primitive or original accumulation.

era of 'new enclosures' by a capitalist regime that increasingly relies on the parasitic absorption of social wealth, rather than on the growth of productivity.

In the same vein, David Harvey (2003) adapts and rejuvenates Marx's notion of 'primitive accumulation' under the term 'accumulation by dispossession', which he uses to describe the new closure of communal fields as a means of overcoming problems of over-accumulation. Referring to this renaissance of primitive accumulation, Hardt and Negri (2011) insist that it cannot be read simply as a process of appropriating physical resources, but must be treated as a process of encroachment on 'the productivity of living labour'. For his part, Žižek (2009) defines four fundamental antagonisms that constitute the principal and current threat to commons: ecological catastrophe, the operation of private property regimes (such as patents and intellectual property), techno-scientific developments (especially biogenetics) and the emergence of new forms of apartheid (walls, fences and borders).

## THE 'NEW ENCLOSURES' OF THE NEOLIBERAL CITY

Despite growing recognition of the usefulness of Marxist theories of primitive accumulation in understanding the current neoliberal phase of capitalist development, several authors have pointed out its high level of abstraction and lack of empirical concreteness, its lack of research into the particular dynamics of the dispossession and enclosure taking place in an urban context (Hodkinson 2012) and the relative absence of research on contemporary practices of 'urban communalisation' (Bresnihan / Byrne 2014).

A recent new wave of academic publications rooted in critical urban theory develops a renewed perspective linking the contributions of Marxist theorists on primitive accumulation with work on neoliberalism in cities and emerging studies drawn from critical geography and urban sociology (see Blomley 2008; Hodkinson 2012; Jeffrey / McFarlane / Vasudevan 2012; Vasudevan / McFarlane / Jeffrey 2008). These authors use the concept of 'enclosure' to refer to the process of the 'neoliberalisation' of cities, thus covering not only what is commonly understood by the term 'privatisation' (the transfer of public assets to the private sphere), but also a wide variety of acts, ranging from the privatisation/financialisation of urban space and the commercialisation of urban life to pollution, exclusion, displacement or the actual erection of fences and walls. Stuart Hodkinson (2012) describes urban 'enclosures' not only as "a metaphor for contemporary urban policy (...)" but [as] the "modus operandi of neoliberal urbanism" aimed at "finding new urban outlets for capital accumulation, controlling the use and exchange value of urban space or shutting down any access to any urban space or sociability – commons – that offers a means of reproduction and challenging capitalist social relations" (p. 515).

We can divide the different outlooks into three large blocks:

- > those that focus on processes of fragmentation, privatisation and securitisation of urban spaces;
- > those that broadly address gentrification dynamics as processes of the enclosure of entire neighbourhoods on the part of capital, and
- > those that address 'negative externalities' of models of accumulation based on the intensive use of territorial assets (pollution, the depletion of resources and homogenisation), and which view the city as the foundation for other commons based upon it.

We can start off by noting how the literature has utilised the 'enclosure' concept to refer to the expansion and intensification of fences, walls, borders and fortifications that privatise and commercialise previously open and accessible public spaces to the benefit of certain urban elites, and in the process 'displace' and 'exclude' the city's urban poor. Alex Jeffrey, Colin McFarlane and Alex Vasudevan (2012) describe this proliferation of security architecture as the most rudimentary and geographically evident form of enclosure. They cite as examples the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and closed neighbourhoods or 'gated communities', where the classes most favoured by the globalisation process are isolated from the rest of the city in protected enclaves. All these processes in some way hark back to the enclosures and the expulsion of peasants from communal land in the early days of capitalism: the fencing, commodification and privatisation of land, the expulsion of the popular classes (in this case, from historic centres) so that land could be put to more lucrative uses, and the transformation of common rights – such as the right to public space – into private rights.

Another example cited in the 'urban enclosure' literature which maintains strong parallels with the dynamics that gave rise to the historic formation of the working class is that of gentrification (Atkinson 2000, Smith 2002); a concept that synthesises a series of processes aimed at reconquering central spaces by raising the price of housing and neighbourhood services, with the effect of directly or indirectly displacing the former population and eroding the social networks of the popular classes (Blomley 2008). In this sense, the enclosure process not only refers to corporate attempts to control, privatise and marketise public space, but also extends to those resources generated by urban life itself, namely culture, heritage, symbolic capital, lifestyles, and so on.

Harvey (2012) gives a good example of the inversion of ‘Hardin’s tragedy’<sup>8</sup> when he describes gentrification as a paradigmatic example of how an excessive deference to private property and individual interest leads to the degradation and mismanagement of a common resource: “the better the common qualities a social group creates, the more likely it is to be raided and appropriated by private profit-maximizing interests. (...) By the time the market has done its destructive work, not only have the original residents been dispossessed of that common which they had created (often being forced out by rising rents and property taxes), but the common itself becomes so debased as to be unrecognizable” (p. 78).

As recognised by Gago and Mezzadra (2015), among others, referring to the literature on ‘neo-extractivist’ development policy in Latin American countries, extraction not only occurs in natural reserves or rural indigenous areas, but is also taking place in cities by socially dispossessing urban commons through processes such as gentrification. Not only is the community dispossessed of the common it produced (in this case a particular urban ecosystem, environment, diversity, etc.) due to higher land and housing prices, but that particular urban ecosystem is depleted by banalising, homogenising market effects.

Similarly, some authors also use the term ‘enclosure’ to refer to demolition and reconstruction projects affecting degraded urban areas, such as favelas or shanty towns. In these contexts, it is deemed a more analytically robust term than ‘gentrification’, since it (both conceptually and politically) links the struggles against displacement occurring in both the Global North and the Global South (Ghertner 2014).

Finally, alongside the (literal or metaphorical) process of fencing off – i.e. the displacement and absorption of collective wealth for the benefit of certain productive and speculative sectors – the process of enclosure has also been used as a framework to address the degradation of common resources and the contamination of shared environments: what economists call the market’s negative externalities.

Taking the case of Spain during the years of the last real-estate boom (1993–2007) as an illustrative example, studies conducted by the Metropolitan Observatory (Observatorio Metropolitano 2007, 2011 and 2013) describe in detail how a model based on real-estate property, patrimonial cycles and the massive construction of infrastructure is necessarily developed based on the materiality of the territory through the steady depletion and intensive use of common natural assets. According to the authors, this

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8 Responding to Hardin, Monbiot (1994) suggests that the ‘tragedy of the commons’ became the tragedy of its disappearance.

'colonisation of territory' entails resources that belong to the whole community, such as the coast, air, urban land, water, and so on, undergoing processes of overexploitation and contamination that endanger their sustainability. According to them, many common resources are being privatised and commodified because corporations see them as cheap or free fuel for the voracious market machine. At the same time, they represent a cheap and convenient dumping ground, somewhere to offload all the unpleasant externalities that companies do not wish to internalise in their cost structures (Observatorio Metropolitano 2013: 28).

In short, while the term 'enclosure', from a neoclassical viewpoint, is undoubtedly synonymous with increasing productivity or profitability in the face of the supposed instability inherent in collective property regimes (Hardin 1968; Lee / Webster 2006), from these (alternative) perspectives it represents the underlying logic behind the unwanted social changes and dynamics driven by the expansive logic of free-market capitalism applied in contemporary metropolises (see Blomley 2008; Hodgkinson 2012; Jeffrey et al. 2012; Vasudevan et al. 2008).

It is precisely in interstices in the privatisation of urban commons that the crucial contemporary processes of urban politico-economic transformation, neoliberalisation and financialisation must be situated. This has become even more flagrantly apparent in light of the extraordinary ongoing processes of dispossession that are taking place as a result of the financial crisis combined with austerity and fiscal rectitude measures (Midnight Notes Collective 2009). And although the evocative force of the term 'enclosure' has provided a powerful metaphor about the expansion of entrepreneurial power in the city, this same somewhat lax and diffuse conceptualisation<sup>9</sup> has at the same time triggered debate about its analytical and explanatory validity (De Angelis 2003; Harvey 2003).

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9 As De Angelis (2003) reminds us, the current literature does not offer much in terms of systematically classifying the different mechanisms through which enclosures operate, and even less with respect to urban enclosures specifically. In turn, referring to gated communities, David Harvey reminds us that the dynamics of common enclosure cannot be read in a simplistic, linear fashion: context must be taken into account because what is considered a common in one instance may become private property in another, and vice-versa (Harvey, 2013).

## RECLAIMING THE RIGHT TO THE CITY BY REAFFIRMING THE COMMONS

Thus far, we have considered cities as privileged places of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2003) under neoliberalism. However, they also are and have always been, highly contested spaces of friction and resistance, backdrops for various daily struggles and political contestations which, through the prism of the commons, have been identified as 'the (constitutive) outside' of enclosures (De Angelis 2004).

Since the Midnight Notes Collective (1990) and authors such as Naomi Klein in her influential *Reclaiming the commons* (2001) described the global cycle of struggles that began in the early 1900s (the so-called anti- or alter-globalisation movement) as a battle to 'recover the commons' and 'reclaim control of what was being privatised', critical urban studies have debated the growing importance attributed to the commons by political movements (see Caffentzis 2010; De Angelis 2003; de Peuter / Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Fattori 2013; Hardt / Negri 2011; McCarthy 2005; or Stavrides 2011 for a review).

David Harvey argues that accumulation by dispossession has given rise to a great variety of struggles that show a series of new characteristics, not taking place in the factory but in the city, and not being led by the working class, but rather by a broad spectrum of social movements and civil society. The author takes up an idea previously put forward by Henri Lefebvre when addressing the urban roots of the May 1968 movement in Paris: capital has left the confines of the factory and the territory has become 'the social factory'.

This shift has afforded an increasingly central role to urban struggles as a source of resistance to capitalism, displacing the traditional proletarian struggles of the past. Hardt and Negri (2011) take a similar line when they point out that "the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory used to be to the working class" (p. 250). Accordingly, but somewhat simplifying, while 'workers' struggle to wrest improvements in working conditions, mobilisations against dispossession are geared towards reclaiming and recovering the commons as a precondition for life in the great social factory that is the city.

In his latest book, *Rebel Cities* (2012), Harvey analyses the importance of the urban dimension in the cycle of struggles that began in 2010–2011 in Tahrir, in Syntagma Square, in Gezi Park, in the encampments of the 15M (or Indignados) Movement, and points out how the urban commons – in particular, city streets, squares and parks – become principal theatres of resistance and places for issuing demands.

At the same time, he highlights how the act of occupying and re-appropriating public spaces, and the collective actions generated in the crucible of urban life can be interpreted as acts of ‘communalisation’, transforming the locations in question (Syntagma Square in Athens, Tahrir Square in Cairo, Gezi Park in Istanbul, Zuccotti Park in New York) into urban commons, reformulating their management through collective bases, and challenging how urban public spaces are controlled and administered: “by putting human bodies in that place [squares, parks and streets], to convert public space into a political commons – a place for open discussion and debate about what that power is doing and how best to oppose its reach. (...) Syntagma Square in Athens, Tahrir in Cairo, and the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona were public spaces that became an urban commons as people assembled there to express their political views and make demands” (pp. 161 and 73).

Inspired by Harvey’s notion of the reappropriation of the urban condition as a common, and by an ethnographic study of the 15M Movement in Spain, Estalella and Corsín (2014) describe how squares – temporary urban camps that recreate ‘cities in miniature’ (p. 151) –, taken hostage by the privatisation of their use and subject to various forms of authoritarianism and prohibition, emerged as urban commons, organising assemblies in public space, being distributed and rhizomatic within their network, and forming new ways of ‘doing or being in common’.

Salingaros (2010) has described the social form arising when creating commons as ‘peer-to-peer (or P2P) urbanism’, where the ideas and practices of free software movements are being applied to different communities in the city, which generate alternative ways of accessing, producing and valuing urban space using the logics of open source and social cooperation to define urban space according to how people use it (Salingaros 2010).

Stavrides (2011) defines these ‘communities in movement’ or ‘communities-in-the-making’ as “[communities] created in a society in movement through the catalytic activities of urban social movements”. These social organisations are far removed from the idea of a homogeneous or essentialist rural community or the social bonds of the extended family, since, according to the author, they are based on making



commons, i.e. they emerge from mobilisation and collective actions and are constituted in the very act of managing and democratically governing common resources: “The community develops through commoning, through acts and forms of organisation oriented towards the production of the common” (p. 5).

Here it is important to stress that it is precisely this social practice of communalisation that converts goods, services and public spaces, from town squares to public education, into common resources. This is in line with what Peter Linebaugh (2010) states when he converts the name (the commons) into a verb (‘commoning’) to highlight how commons, beyond being mere objects or physical resources, cannot exist without the act of communalisation, namely without the action of a determined community that decides to defend and administer a resource collectively. In this sense, commons not only presuppose a community, but are themselves produced in the course of a struggle.

There is a good example of this in the work of geographer Nicholas Blomley (2007 and 2008). In one of his articles (*Enclosure, Common Right and the Property of the Poor* (2008)), the author highlights the consistent plea of a community for the collective property of their neighbourhood (“Woodwards Belongs To Us”) as a way of confronting an ‘aggressive’ process of regeneration and imposing limits on the exclusive right of property developers and their ability to displace poor populations. The challenge to the capacity of the State and capital to sustain its duopoly in the tasks of service provision and urban planning suffices for the author to interpret the mobilisation as an urban common. In turn, the mobilisation has been particularly active against the appropriation of cities by private interests based on the interpellation and defence of the urban as a common, and on affirming those principles of access, participation and sustainability found at the heart of the struggle for commons.

Here commons, far from being considered isolated experiences of small communities that manage resources, instead emerge (and are presented as) a philosophical-political idea articulated through the language of rights: the right to collective property (of the city) as opposed to the city as an aggregation of private property rights<sup>10</sup>. This view of the rights that underlie the practice of making and reclaiming commons allows us to connect with the literature that deals with the struggles for ‘le droit à la ville’ (right to the city), a concept coined by Lefebvre to address the French protests of May 1968 (Lefebvre 1968). In this sense, it highlights the introduction of key elements absent

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10 Where property is an absolute attribute of the owner (whether individual or institutional), it confers on them the capacity to decide on an object, or in this case (exclusive rights regarding) the use and exploitation of the city.

from much neo-institutionalist research, including for example the centrality of ethical issues and the central role of political contestation: “The commons is not so much found, as produced” (Blomley 2008: 320).

On the other hand, there are authors like Hardt and Negri (2011), from what is referred to as the field of Italian autonomist Marxism or ‘post-workerism’. For them, the question of ‘the commons’ or ‘the production of commons’ is a central element in ‘cognitive capitalism’, due to how it assumes a double antagonistic condition, as a plane of both autonomy and capitalist capture (Hardt / Negri 2011; Pasquinelli 2008; Roggero 2010; Vercellone 2009). From this perspective the territory itself, the metropolis and not the factory, is considered the basis of social innovation and ‘biopolitical production’; the source and space of commons, “of people living together, sharing resources, communicating, exchanging goods and ideas” (Hardt / Negri 2011: 133). This socially produced wealth is then subsumed by capital, principally through different financial mechanisms and by controlling and appropriating urban rents that benefit certain dominant sectors within the city’s economy (tourism, real estate, finance).

The visions of these authors expand the definitions of commons present in neo-institutionalist studies (which always refer to ‘small communities of users’) to encompass all those resources or goods, spaces and forms of sociability in the city that are of a collective character (or ‘that belong to everyone’), both in terms of property (‘inherited wealth’) and of production (‘the products and results of individual and collective work’), and everything that constitutes the basis for promoting the productive life of the metropolis and satisfies its basic needs. For these authors, beyond specific demands to manage certain concrete common resources collectively, a ‘democracy of the commons’ is based on the generation of institutions that permit the democratic management of production and/or collective wealth. Accordingly, struggles for ‘the commons’ point in the direction of a ‘general’ critique of public-private dichotomies, i.e. neoliberalism and privatisations, and also of the role of the public sector and its lack of democracy and transparency.

Summing up, we have seen how the concept of ‘the commons’ is becoming increasingly fluid, expanding beyond its original meaning of relating to a physical resource, and now serving as an analytical instrument for urban conflicts and political contestations in response to the extension of neoliberal urbanism. This social form of ‘commons’, whether expressed in ideological terms or as a pragmatic response to material needs (Bresnihan / Byrne 2015) and/or referring to processes of self-management, such as movements geared towards defending and re-appropriating rights (Observatorio Metropolitano 2013), which arose in the course of actually making commons, criti-

cises neoliberal urbanism by challenging both the hegemonic logic of private property and the function and role of public institutions. As Chatterton reminds us, the urban common and the practices and social relationships that support it, have become the purest expression of the kind of politics necessary for greater justice in the city; “simultaneously a defensive act and a productive act against enclosures and oppressions ”(Chatterton 2010: 627).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although terms like 'enclosures' or 'commons' are normally associated with bygone eras, these strange and archaic notions have seen a resurgence of interest in recent years amongst social movements and academics from various disciplines.

This paper explored two approaches in the literature on commons and their offshoots in urban studies (see Table 1). In the first, we adopted the outlook on collective management of common goods in the city, strongly influenced by the work of Elinor Ostrom on the conditions required to enable the effective collective management of particular natural resources. In this sense, we highlighted urban specificity when applying perspective to the city by referring to:

- > the particular nature and diversity of urban resources, which are themselves socially constructed;
- > the type of communities that arise in an urban environment, which are much more open and fluid, and their (less dependent) relationship to the resource and finally,
- > the role of local government in regulating these resources.

These assessments are not in any way intended to invalidate the possibility of communities self-administering urban resources in a sustainable manner by increasing their positive externalities in the sense of creating local social capital and revitalising cities as a whole.

Epistemologically, much of the theoretical work on the governance of CPRs takes into account that the world is populated by rational individuals who maximise utility and, from that starting point, wonders under what conditions a common property regime can function and be socially efficient (see for example Ostrom 1990 and 2005; Ostrom et al. 1994). Challenging this perspective based on methodological individualism, neo-Marxist currents recover the historical matrix of the commons by contextualising their analysis within the framework of capitalist power relations. In this sense, 'commons' are not only a rich variety of more or less successful models of resource management, but 'the common' becomes a central concept through which to understand the bases for generating social wealth and modes of accumulation in contemporary capitalism, making it fundamental to addressing modern-day processes of 'enclosure' in cities.

## NEO-INSTITUTIONALIST AND NEO-MARXIST PERSPECTIVES REGARDING URBAN COMMONS

	Perspectives	
	Neo-institutionalist	Neo-Marxist
What is understood by the term 'commons'?	<p>Institutional arrangements for the management of so-called 'common-pool resources' (CPRs).</p> <p>Highly coveted assets from which it is difficult to exclude.</p>	<p>More emphasis on the common (understood as the processes of the production and distribution of wealth) than on common goods. A more generic term.</p> <p>Emphasis is placed on the centrality of commons in the resistance to capitalism (the dialectic of commons/enclosures).</p> <p>The importance of 'commoning' (using common goods for political purposes).</p>
What is meant by the city?	A space where the sharing of resources gives rise to challenges regarding their management, maintenance and access.	<p>A space for the biopolitical production of social wealth (the metropolis as a factory).</p> <p>An antagonistic space in relation to enclosures.</p>
The role of the State	Deregulator/facilitator.	At the service of capital: neoliberal State/biopower.
Governance	<p>Organisational practices within a community.</p> <p>Identification of design principles. Normative trend towards democratic governance.</p>	Not only internal organisation, but also concerning conflicts with actors outside the community: to institute, reclaim and protect.
Examples	Urban gardens, community gardens, neighbourhood watch programmes, street markets, parks and recreational facilities, housing cooperatives, and so on.	Resistance against the 'urban privatisation', neighbourhood struggles against gentrification; the global Occupy movement, self-management practices (housing, culture, care, health, education), etc.
Key authors	Ostrom (1990), Foster (2006 and 2011), Hess (2008), Eizenberg (2012).	De Angelis (2004), Midnight Notes Collective (1990), Federici (2004), Harvey (2012), Hardt and Negri (2011), Hodgkinson (2012).
Critiques	<p>Lack of a macro perspective: restriction to the local/neighbourhood scale.</p> <p>Lack of a systemic perspective: does not deal with relations with other social institutions and fails to dovetail with broader historical processes (for example, neoliberalism).</p> <p>Takes little account of issues related to power, inequality or territorial justice. Needs to problematize who has access and who does not.</p>	<p>Abstract and non-operational definitions: lack of empirical studies.</p> <p>The role of the State is simply that of a deregulator or to serve class interests.</p>

Source: made by authors

An interesting feature of this approach to analysing urban commons is understanding the structural context of tensions regarding the control of urban resources. Thus, in addition to more institutionalist perspectives, in which urban commons are viewed as a resource, a community and a set of rules that regulate their collective management, these alternative viewpoints go beyond the resource itself and introduce themes of conflict, politicisation and even the reclamation of rights.

This more complex reading of the urban commons concept enables us to introduce other factors to try to explain, among other things, the negative effects engendered by some commons beyond their borders, or the sustainability of certain practices in the urban domain. For example, by merely considering what makes up a gated community, without adopting this more complex approach, we cannot explain the link between the growth of these types of real-estate products and the extinction of other common resources historically linked to cities, such as the public sphere; nor can we evaluate their negative social effects, such as the promotion of division and social segregation, or the manner in which they favour the commodification of resources like security (Kohn 2004). On the other hand, as we have pointed out, the lower the direct dependency of users of urban commons on the resources they manage, the lower their incentive to durably maintain collective action, hence the need for other incentives, both individual and collective, to sustain their collective management.

In this connection, we would like to point out two further aspects that we believe should be taken on board when studying the sustainability of urban commons. Firstly, the politicisation of the players involved in defending a common good considered to be under threat from the logic underlying acts of privatisation is an important motivational element for sustaining communal practices (though it can also be demotivating when the prospects of success are slim). Secondly, institutionalist perspectives afford greater complexity to the study of local government, not only as an instrument facilitating the interests of the local, State or international bourgeoisie per se, but also as a possible facilitator of cooperative practices.

Although from the neo-Marxist standpoint, the critique of the form of the modern State is a fundamental prerequisite for any radical democratic political project, authors like Harvey have tried to enrich the analysis of the relationship between commons and the State by pointing out a probable need beyond a certain scale some kind of state structure, and suggesting that the State can play an important role in redistributing wealth. Although self-management practices may favour more democratic modes of participation at the local level, the role of the State cannot be ignored. In this sense, there is a need to explore potential community-State alliances to develop in each particular context or sphere, thereby expanding what is deemed public beyond something strictly associated with the State.

The dialogue between both trajectories reconstructs urban commons as a political space that unites both the processes of enclosure and practical forms of resistance (such as different examples of collective management) that take place around them. We cannot reduce urban commons either to experiences of collective management in the city or to urban movements concerned with the defence of what is public. The study of urban commons under the complex perspective developed in this article necessitates a new political and research agenda for the study of those social and communitarian practices that go beyond the State and rebel against the commodification and privatisation of urban life, in order to assert collective rights to the city.

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# **AN ATLAS OF PRAXES AND POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES: RADICAL COLLECTIVE ACTION AND URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS**

By Mary Ann Manahan and Maria Khristine Alvarez

Cities are now front and centre of many community-led radical urban transition and transformation initiatives. They are breeding grounds for multidimensional societal problems spanning environmental degradation, massive greenhouse gas emissions, dispossession and exclusion. As nests of development and crises, they function as arenas of contestation over neoliberal policies that commodify and privatise space and life which in turn reproduce marginality and injustice. Yet at the same time, cities invite a radical openness to transformation (see Yiftachel 2015).

This chapter offers a survey of existing transnational initiatives promoting urban transformation. Drawing mostly from the Transformative Cities Atlas of Utopias (henceforth TC Atlas) and Fearless Cities, we present cases of community action across the world and consider different praxes that emerge from local movements. In what follows, we highlight that these growing transnational initiatives and trans-solidarity platforms are deeply rooted in local and national movements, and share a fundamental desire to envisage and create people-centred places. Hence, we regard the 'urban commons' and transformative cities as praxes of radical urban transformation. But rather than underlining the prospects of replicability and upscaling, we choose instead to unravel parallels between and draw lessons from these praxes. We anchor our analysis of radical urban transformations and alternatives in a critique of capitalism, patriarchy and growth-centred economy.

## NEOLIBERAL NARRATIVES

At the 2016 World Cities Summit in Singapore, the World Bank claimed that the "single most crucial component in rejuvenating decaying urban areas around the world is private sector participation" (World Bank 2016). For the Bank, private sector participation pertains to the mobilisation of big money and the involvement of for-profit entities such as national and transnational companies (TNCs), investors, regional and corporate banks and other financial institutions. Ede Ijjasz-Vasquez, Senior Director for the World Bank's Social, Urban, Rural and Resilience Global Practice, stressed that "participation [of] the private sector is a critical factor in determining whether a regeneration program is successful" in creating areas "where citizens can live, work, and thrive" (ibid.). Large urban renewal projects, also known as "revitali[s]ation, renaissance, regeneration, renewal, redevelopment, rejuvenation, restructuring, reurbani[s]ation, and residentiali[s]ation" (Slater 2008: 219; see also Tickell / Peck 2003), aim to physically upgrade sections of a city and bring in a more affluent demographic (Koch et al. 2017) by reconfiguring blighted areas and neighbourhoods in decline as well as the built environment as a whole (Slater 2008). Yet across the Global North and South,



such improvements have entailed dispossession on a massive scale (see Lees et al. 2017). Low-income communities are evicted and forcibly relocated; owners of small businesses and hawkers displaced; and communal spaces privatised to make way for more profitable land uses. Revitalisation projects mobilised to institute neoliberal systems in under-provisioned urban areas (Koch et al. 2017) bear a resemblance to structural adjustment programmes that restructure and reorganise cities as investment hubs and engines of economic growth. Such initiatives are accompanied by changes in laws and policies that weaken local institutions, corporatise municipal bodies and facilitate the outsourcing of public services to third-party contractors, thereby rendering these entities similar to private-sector organisations which are often devoid of public ethos.

From Lagos to Singapore, the corporate private sector continues to shape everyday urban life through their dominance in retail and food distribution, banking and finance, land and housing, as well as basic services provision. Their hegemony is attested by recent figures showing that 69 of the 100 largest economies are transnational corporations, and the ten biggest corporations in the world generate a cumulative revenue of more than the combined income of 180 countries (Global Justice Now 2016). Using income-based metrics for measuring the size of an economy has elicited criticism and ignited debate, particularly within the Global Working Group Beyond Development (GWGBD). Nonetheless, it is a powerful method for demonstrating the scope of corporate power.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE CITIES: CHALLENGING THE POWER OF CAPITAL**

As new inequalities emerge and existing ones are amplified by projects of neoliberal urbanism, a groundswell of resistance originating from the margins of society has edged its way into the foreground. Opposition to water privatisation, citizen-led campaigns for energy democracy, anti-eviction and cooperative housing movements and electoral victories of progressive political parties have gained ground in response to capital's consolidation of power. Since 2000, at least 835 cases of (re)municipalisation of public services, involving more than 1,600 municipalities in 45 countries, have been recorded around the world (Kishimoto / Petitjean 2017). The motivations behind these projects often include aspirational and politically-strategic goals such as regaining control over local resources and the local economy, decentring the power of TNCs, ending private-sector violations of labour and human rights, providing more affordable and democratic public services and implementing ambitious climate strate-

gies (ibid.). In other parts of the world, these agendas have been complemented by the recent rise of radical municipalism articulated in citizen-led platforms, such as Barcelona en Comú in Catalonia (Spain), Demosisto in Hong Kong and Reclaim the City in Cape Town (South Africa). These alternatives demonstrate that another world is possible and is in fact already being envisaged and enacted.

The Transformative Cities Atlas of Utopias came into being as part of efforts to contribute to the global debate on radical urban transformations (see box below). Initiated by six regional and international organisations,<sup>1</sup> it aims to “build an atlas of real utopias, make these experiences viral and share the learning that comes from implementing these experiments” (Buxton / Trumbo Villa 2018). Their objectives spring from recognising the potential of cities to “break with the dichotomy of despair” and offer possibilities for practicing transformative ways of living, thereby providing the rudiments of radical transformation (Buxton / Trumbo Villa 2017). Conceived as a translocal learning and sharing platform of transformative practices at the city/municipal level, the Atlas aims to amplify real-world practices that demonstrate how cities are working on radical solutions to the multiple crises brought about by entrenched and uneven power structures.



FearlessCities. International Municipalist Summit, Barcelona

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1 Led by the Transnational Institute, the TC Atlas is a collaboration between Habitat International Coalition, European Network for Community-led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability, Red Intercontinental de Promoción de la Economía Social Solidaria, Global Platform for the Right to the City and Friends of the Earth International.

## GLOBAL AWARDS AS POLITICAL TOOLS

The Transformative Cities (TC) award adopts a methodology that combines public policy literature with the ontological and political vision of Ernesto Laclau. It uses 'demands' rather than identities (e.g., workers, women) as starting points or units of analysis. Dr Erick Gonzalo Palomares Rodriguez, the main architect of this methodology, credits the political significance of using demands to "its ability to represent the indignation and frustration of different sectors of societies", as well as to its power "as a political strategy [for] creat[ing] a social majority". Inspired by this view, the TC award focuses on the novel political strategies used by communities, social movements and city/municipal bodies in instigating policy reform in housing, water and energy. As a hermeneutic tool, it also underlines the translation of these experiences to other contexts, rather than replication which global awards celebrating best practices are known for.

Source: Skype interview with Dr Erick Gonzalo Palomares, 14 June 2019

The TC Atlas may be used to explore the constellation of global transformative practices, many of which remain under the radar. The strategic focus on basic rights to housing, energy and water stems from years of advocacy and campaigning by the Transnational Institute and its partners. It serves as a specific lever and an entry point for understanding how transformative processes led by communities, social movements and progressive parties are implemented at the city/municipal level. In 2018, using participatory online tools, the initiative made its first open call for contributions of community-led transformative practices in the energy, water and housing sectors. In total, 32 cases from 19 countries were collected, spanning small villages and global cities (see Table). Of this sample, nine were chosen as finalists by a team of evaluators representing activists, scholars and changemakers in the corresponding fields. Three People's Choice award winners were determined by a public vote, namely the women of Solapur (India) who built thousands of homes, the community-owned and -built water treatment plant in Cochabamba (Bolivia), and the new municipalist platform for energy transition in Cádiz (Spain) called the Plan of Action Against Energy Poverty. Following the success of the initial round, a second call was announced in early 2019, garnering 34 submissions of transformative practices from around the world.

## SUMMARY OF TRANSFORMATIVE CITIES ATLAS OF UTOPIAS CASES

SECTOR/ PUBLIC SERVICE	IMPETUS	KEY ACTORS	POLITICAL STRATEGIES	LOGICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE <sup>2</sup>	CHANGES BROUGHT ABOUT
Housing	Struggles for the right to the city, particularly housing rights, i.e., access to dignified and affordable housing, and resistance to mass evictions and commercialisation of urban space	Urban poor and informal settler communities; housing cooperatives; trade unions; women workers	Sustained campaigning demanding housing rights and opposing gentrification and commercialisation of urban space; policy reform; media work; popular mobilisation; vertical and horizontal alliance work	Social movements; social movement unionism; radical municipalism	Policy reform; public investments in dignified and affordable housing; participatory mechanisms in planning and implementing housing projects
Energy	Struggles for energy democracy/sovereignty; resistance to energy poverty, fracking and fossil fuels; campaigns for renewable energy transition and climate justice; opposition to private electricity companies; demands for grassroots solutions to energy problems; calls for remunicipalisation	Cooperatives; multi-constituent platforms; progressive political parties	Platform-/discourse-building and awareness-raising initiatives regarding energy democracy; cooperative-building efforts; lobbying and campaigning for energy policy reform	Prefigurative politics; social movements; radical municipalism	Energy policy reform; defeat of fossil-fuel and coal-fired power plant giants; new democratic municipal energy companies; community-led and economically-regenerative alternatives
Water	Community responses to 'glocal' (global/local) problems, i.e., pollution, privatisation of water services, climate change; demands for right to water, democratic control of public water and remunicipalisation	Local governments (city councils/mayors); grassroots-led movements; civil society coalitions with local roots but global networks	Self-organising; multiple performative strategies; city-level reclamation of control over water	Prefigurative politics; everyday politics; social movements; radical municipalism	Temporary to permanent halt to water privatisation and outsourcing; introduction of prepaid water meters; de-privatisation and remunicipalisation of water services; creation of new public water companies; community-led alternatives; broad community-labour alliances

Source: Authors' rendering.

2 This is based on the Global Working Group Beyond Development's typology.

Whilst the initiative does not offer a definition of transformation or transformative practices, many of the cases featured in this chapter trace their roots to popular struggles and demonstrate diverse ways of reimagining cities, reclaiming living spaces and resisting corporate control of shelter, energy and water. The TC Atlas highlights the ability of local people to chart new pathways for their communities and reclaim their individual and collective autonomy, with the principles of cooperation and solidarity as bases. A number of cases are incomplete insofar as they are ongoing processes of transition and transformation: from issue-based campaigns to abolish prepaid water metering, to 'systems thinking' for building solidarity economies. The common thread weaving these cases together is the emphasis on claiming vital rights, namely water, food, energy, housing and mobility. Though fundamental to human survival and a dignified life, these rights have been reduced to 'sectors' subject to neoliberal policies. Nonetheless, their commodification has shaped them to become the very tools for organising transgressive social mobilisations and popular uprisings. One such example is the pushback against coal power in Mauritius. In 2013, social organisations publicly released documents regarding the license that was secretly awarded by the government to CT Power, a Malaysian TNC, to operate a new coal-fired power plant. The movement's bold move, alongside its advocacy for the establishment of a National Audit Commission tasked to review the country's energy policy and lead the transition to renewable energy, resulted in the shelving of the power plant project and spurred the launch of another campaign for cooperative-led alternatives to fossil fuels.

In taking stock of these radical changes, we note that one process of transformation may not necessarily lead to the transformation of other aspects of urban life. Victories and gains need to be protected from corporate and State backlash. Successes in reclaiming public services may co-exist with regressive social and public policies such as opening up urban land to commercial interests, as in Jakarta and Mumbai. This is usually the case for issue-based social movements' campaigns to end privatisation, provide basic services and democratise governance. However, these objectives often evolve into comprehensive agendas, particularly when relevant groups become involved in local/national or regional/international networks and campaigns, or when the situation requires building unity platforms (e.g., challenging the dominance of cross-border TNCs and capital).

We also note that the TC Atlas cases go beyond the 'small is beautiful' view of alternatives. Instead, they emphasise the geographic and thematic context, alongside the importance of transnational solidarity. Many of the cases presented here

have strong regional and international links, inspired by transformative practices and lessons from cities that share similar challenges. For example, the water school in Mexico, led by a volunteer-based organisation comprising professionals, organisers and educators, was based on a Freire-inspired initiative on water education in Colombia. Similarly, Eau de Paris, which remunicipalised its privatised water system in 2010, adopted environmental management practices promoting agroecological farming practices that improve water quality and help smallholders. The same model was also implemented in the last two decades in the Catskill Mountains, New York City's main water source.

## CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

The local cases cited in this chapter illustrate contentious politics, a concept described by political scientists Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly as “interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programmes, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties” (2007: 4). It refers to collective political struggles of claimants (or the groups they represent), which depend in part on non-institutional forms of interaction with the State or with opponents such as corporations. Contentious politics covers policymaking and elections, social movement campaigns, democratisation processes and experiments, as well as riots and revolutions (Tilly / Tarrow 2007). The concept offers a practical way of understanding the diversity of transformative practices in the TC initiative, as it deals with three aspects of social life, namely contention, collective action and politics. In essence, contentious politics concerns political questions about who does what, why, where, at whose expense and how.

Each site of contention has its own peculiarities. For instance, there are marked differences between the water pollution and sanitation crises faced by the water cooperative in San Pedro Magisterio in Cochabamba, and the electricity-market deregulation confronted by residents of Schöna in Germany. Whilst the conditions that spawned local organising and collectivisation vary, parallels and similarities exist in the mechanisms and processes that operate across different sites because they relate to basic rights.

Parallels include established repertoires and political strategies used by social movements, communities and citizen-based political parties such as demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, statements and media campaigns, public meetings and assemblies and other performative actions. The success of these repertoires often

depends on the strategic identification of political opportunities and key targets, as well as the kind and quality of organisations, networks, traditions and solidarities that sustain them.

The transformative cases discussed in the TC Atlas mostly involve well-focused and politically-engaged approaches which aim to reclaim space and civic participation, build horizontal and vertical alliances and forge translocal solidarity. Some strategies also prioritise collaboration with progressive political parties and State towards the achievement of shared goals. The experience of Valladolid Toma la Palabra, a Spanish municipalist movement that runs the environment department of the city council, illuminates this point. Inspired by electoral pledges of the new three-party coalition government to remunicipalise public water management, the movement campaigned to organise open debates and roundtables. These conversations eventually resulted in the establishment of the Public Water Management Platform composed of neighbourhood associations, ecologists and socially-engaged residents. The city subsequently announced its commitment to invest €178 million over the next 15 years for upgrading infrastructure and keeping water prices affordable.<sup>3</sup>

The TC Atlas cases also tackle common problems that mobilise collective actions in diverse contexts. The “think global, act local” slogan of alter-globalist movements articulate four of these common issues. It proceeds from widespread discontent firstly, with neoliberal policies and laws in growth-centred economies; secondly, with corporate and financial control of water, energy and housing; thirdly, with the involvement of international financial institutions (IFIs) and development finance in the design and implementation of privatisation policies and programmes; and lastly, with the reproduction of social inequalities.

These frustrations coalesce in the World Bank and regional development banks’ active production of water crises, which resulted in the handover of State-owned water utilities to the private sector from the late 1990s up to the 2000s, as in the experience of Jakarta and Paris in the years preceding remunicipalisation. Fortunately, the intersection of these sites of discontent has often prompted powerful mobilisations such as the gathering in 2016 of 20,000 people on the streets of Belgrade in protest of a large-scale waterfront project (Pantovic 2016).

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3 For more information, see: [www.waternewseurope.com/spain-remunicipalisation-of-drinking-water-valladolid](http://www.waternewseurope.com/spain-remunicipalisation-of-drinking-water-valladolid).

Another thread that runs through these cases is the collective motivation and action to pursue alternatives. Collective action refers to the organisation of coordinated efforts or activities involving shared interests, slogans and programmes (Tilly / Tarrow 2007). The success of these outcomes relies largely on the active, dynamic and meaningful participation of communities and citizens throughout the transformation process. People's assemblies are a common feature of these cases – whether it is the community-led production of hydroelectric energy in El Cua, Nicaragua, or the equitable model of local energy provision established by Community Power, a movement of marginalised people in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Democratic decision making, direct participation in community affairs, self-organisation, resource pooling and reliance on local knowledge demonstrate that transformation-related decisions, motivations, interests and behaviours are shaped and experienced in the intimacies of everyday life.

Practices of plural and radical democracy articulate people's resistance to neoliberal notions of democracy which in turn triggers socio-political change. This involves exposing, challenging and altering oppressive power structures and relations, as in the case of Sistema de Agua Potable de Tecámac (SAPTEMAC), a volunteer-based organisation of professionals that runs water schools in Mexico. The group identifies laws and policies supporting water privatisation as a source of oppression, and through the water schools, equip citizens with political tools for defending rights. Such initiatives illustrate that exploitative relations stem from the neoliberal State and capital's control of the city; at the same time, they illuminate why municipalist movements emerged in the last six years (2014-2020) (see section on fearless towns and cities).

Reclaiming power as a community figures prominently in the TC Atlas cases. For instance, the Las Peñas neighbourhood in the outskirts of Cochabamba practiced *ayllus*, which is the traditional form of indigenous local governance in the Andes. It encompasses collective mechanisms of land control and management, as well as *ayni*, a concept embracing mutualism and reciprocity in communal work and as a way of life. This self-organised community used both practices in asserting housing rights, autonomy and self-determination.



## FROM DECONSTRUCTION TO RECONSTRUCTION

Radical urban transformations are part of the growing global resistance against privatisation and commodification of urban life. Underpinned by principles of social justice and solidarity, many of the popular struggles have not only produced counter-narratives, but also proposed alternatives to the neoliberal order. In this section, we identify three key alternative praxes emanating from the TC Atlas: de-privatisation, rise of the urban commons and social movement unionism.

### DE-PRIVATISATION

The first praxis pertains to campaigns for de-privatisation. Two approaches are particularly noteworthy. The first involves launching a counter-narrative and counter-offensive against Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)<sup>4</sup> by promoting the practice of Public-Public, Public-Community and Community-Community partnerships (collectively known as PuPs) in the water sector. The failure of PPPs, alongside the deterioration of outsourced public services, has inspired a renewed appreciation for the role of the public and the State, particularly in the context of these novel forms of partnerships. PuPs are concrete, practical and innovative tools that link up various actors<sup>5</sup> to share experiences, expertise and local knowledge, with a view to improving democratic public services and building public support for non-profit, mutually cooperative and solidarity partnerships. Unlike PPPs, PuPs are rooted in serving the common good and do not seek to profit from cooperative development projects. One example is Sintracuavalle, the trade union in the Jamundí and Cauca Valley in Colombia that led a campaign defending local water supply. In 2009, unions helped set up four community water systems in Latin America based on the principles of the Plataforma de Acuerdos Públicos Comunitarios de Las Américas (the Platform for Public-Community Partnerships of the Americas), an America-wide platform establishing community-led water alternatives and promoting horizontalism and solidarity.

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4 PPPs are long-term contracts underwritten by government guarantees that have been used as mechanisms for introducing corporate private sector participation into energy, housing, water, transport and infrastructure, which are traditionally run or provided by the State. Supporters of PPPs, which include the State, IFIs and donor governments, argue that the private sector brings in monies, expertise, technologies and skills the public sector lacks. One of the main advocates of this view is the Public-Private Infrastructure Advisory Facility (PPIAF), which was created in 1999 as a multi-donor technical assistance facility, financed by 11 multilateral and bilateral donors and housed inside the World Bank Group. The PPIAF is designed to promote and strengthen policies, regulations and institutions that allow private sector investment in infrastructure in emerging markets and developing countries. For more information, see: <https://ppiaf.org>.

5 PuPs actors include Northern and Southern countries, trade unions, activists and public resource managers.

The trade unions, activists and social movements participating in this platform, whose work originated in the Cochabamba water wars in 2000, have fiercely defended water as commons and successfully blocked the rollout of PPPs in the region.

The emphasis on community partnerships emerged from the Global South, where 'public' is misconstrued for the State (i.e., municipal or central authorities) and where there is general distrust of government. As social participation has expanded, it has also taken on new forms. For example, the municipalist movements in Cádiz, community organisations in Minneapolis and Jackson and urban poor neighbourhood associations in Dar es Salaam and Mumbai have systematically organised around crafting community-based solutions to water, energy and housing problems. They have also built new forms of partnerships wherein women play a vital role as leaders and changemakers. Such initiatives demonstrate the power of organisation and participation in forging an ethic of active labour towards the improvement and democratisation of public service provision.

The second approach to de-privatisation involves the remunicipalisation of public services, which disputes the necessity, superiority and inevitability of privatisation and corporate control. Kishimoto and Petitjean (2017) refer to remunicipalisation as "the process of bringing previously private or privatised services under local public control and management" (ibid.: 159). The growing list of cities and municipalities taking back control of their public services indicates the appeal and promise of remunicipalisation as one of the most significant policy shifts in public service governance in the past decade (McDonald / Swyngedouw 2019). This global paradigm shift echoes widespread citizen dissatisfaction amidst the failure of the private sector to provide adequate basic services. The ills of privatisation and austerity measures pushed by IFIs and adopted by central and supra-regional governments are palpable in cities and towns. They materialise in various forms, ranging from unnecessary public costs (e.g., bailing out a bankrupt private water company operating in the western part of Metro Manila) to deteriorating public services, both of which exacerbate existing inequalities. In contrast, remunicipalisation creates a "credible, realistic, and attractive option" (Hoedeman et. al. 2012: 106) for delivering more equitable public services. Furthermore, it stresses a shift in public operation and management, specifically from the corrupt and unreliable provision of basic services to a new generation of public companies rooted in principles of social justice.

Remunicipalisation is particularly vibrant in Europe, notably in the water and energy sectors. The return of Paris's water services to the city's control in January 2010 threatened the dominance of French multinationals Suez and Veolia in the water

market. Regarded as a pioneer in public water management, Paris previously operated an unbundled water system, with distribution, infrastructure and water safety assigned to different companies. Eventually, it established a single and fully-integrated public operator (from source to tap) called Eau de Paris (Transformative Cities 2018). This new entity succeeded in restructuring water provision, instituting important reforms, reclaiming public interest and providing clean and affordable water to three million consumers. By reinvigorating the public sector, the city was able to generate significant annual structural savings of €30 million. More importantly, it was able to reduce the price of water by 8% and continue the free supply of water to public fountains. This shift likewise allowed the local government to establish cooperation with organisations supporting refugees and the homeless, as well as employ strategies supporting agroecological farming practices of farmers whose lands are home to the city's water sources.

Whilst Paris's remunicipalisation of water services was primarily initiated by the city itself, Berlin's was championed by a small group of activists that uncovered a PPP deal between Veolia, RWE and the city government. From 2006 to 2011, a citizens' campaign urged local officials to hold a referendum on disclosing the secret contract. The campaign gathered massive support from big NGOs, residents, trade unions, political parties and the media, and eventually forced local authorities to buy back their shares and remunicipalise the city's water supply. Similar initiatives are happening elsewhere. From 2012 to 2017, a series of court victories in favour of citizens and labour groups compelled the city of Jakarta to terminate the 1997 privatisation contract due to the poor performance of PT PAM Lyonnaise Jaya (Suez's subsidiary) and PT Thames Pam Jaya. This accomplishment was the result of decades of intense campaigning and sustained transnational mobilisation to remunicipalise Jakarta's private water system.

In the energy sector, the struggles for sovereignty and democracy consist of three common aspects. The first is the fight against fossil-fuel reliance and the push for renewable energy transition. The second involves the collective goal of energy self-sufficiency, improved and democratised energy services, as well as citizen participation in ownership, management, operation and policymaking. The third concerns the effort to roll back corporate power by enabling cooperative-run systems and instituting policy reform allowing citizen re-appropriation and control. In Mauritius, the People's Cooperative Renewable Energy Coalition, devised a plan which ensures shifting to solar energy whilst simultaneously addressing the question of food sovereignty. The coalition traces its roots to Power Shift Campaign

which mobilised for energy policy reform. Supported by young people, trade unions, social movements and a progressive political party, it entered into a partnership agreement with the island's sugar farmers to acquire uncultivated lands for use in generating renewable energy whilst providing assistance in food production. In post-Chernobyl Schönaun, a citizens' initiative campaigned for clean electricity and successfully acquired the power grid despite opposition from the private operator. Today, the cooperative supplies clean and sustainable electricity to their small town and to 170,000 households across Germany. The remunicipalisation of energy production was made possible by significant changes in State policies (e.g., government incentives such as feed-in tariffs that allowed the renewable energy sector to grow in the 1990s) and more recently, by the ambitious *Energiewende* (energy revolution) policy which is Germany's low-carbon, nuclear-free transition plan.<sup>6</sup> In neighbouring Spain, a number of citizen-led campaigns aim to democratise, decentralise and devolve energy production. The Catalonia-based Xarxa per la Sobirania Energètica mobilises against fracking and corporate hydropower dams, and campaigns for regional energy policy reform whilst collaborating transnationally. In the Spanish city of Girona, Som Energia, a cooperative which began as a student assignment in 2011, has grown to 44,600 members nationwide and now supplies 100% renewable energy to thousands of households.

These cases of remunicipalisation show the possibilities of reclaiming power and experimenting with democratic ownership and collective management. Under this model, citizens exercise a central role.

## RISE OF THE URBAN COMMONS

The second praxis we draw from the TC Atlas involves the rise of the urban commons. This pertains to creating, expanding and caring for the commons, which are resources, spaces, public goods and wealth that belong to the public and must therefore be actively protected, managed and shared for the good and benefit of all (Guttal / Manahan 2011). The TC cases show diverse forms of shared access and governance of the urban commons, as well as bottom-up reclamation of the commons.

The experience of Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi, United States (see Chapter 5) illustrates this praxis. The organisation is a network of cooperatives and worker-owned, democratically self-managed enterprises that aims to build a solidarity

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6 The book *Reclaiming Public Services* (Kishimoto/Petitjean 2017) documented 234 cases of remunicipalised energy systems in Germany. The country accounts for 90% of remunicipalisation cases in this sector.

economy in the city (Transformative Cities 2018). It employs 'systems thinking', which combines a radical vision and plan with long-term processes of socio-economic transition and political change. Launched on International Labour Day in 2014, Cooperation Jackson's long-term vision is to create four interconnected and interdependent institutions, comprising a federation of local worker cooperatives, cooperative incubator, cooperative education and training centre and cooperative bank or financial institution (Cooperation Jackson N.d.). Inspired by the Jackson-Kush Plan<sup>7</sup> initiated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, these efforts centre on organising unemployed and underemployed working-class people from black and Latino communities, and building worker-organised/-owned cooperatives. Among their key activities is the creation of the Sustainable Communities Initiative which seeks to (co-)shape place, space, culture, institutions and businesses in ways that sustain the community socio-culturally, ecologically and economically. This involves helping stabilise rent; providing affordable, green housing; as well as creating living-wage jobs. Through this work, Cooperation Jackson hopes to establish a Community Land Trust, Housing Cooperatives and Eco-Village model, made possible by voluntarism, community production and collaboration with the municipal government (ibid.).

The commons are also generated and kept alive by continuous acts of commoning or bottom-up social governance, which bypass markets and States and radically reconceptualise relations with these institutions. Latin America offers rich examples of community-led self-organising and of defending and reclaiming the commons. Prompted by a severe water pollution crisis, the community of San Pedro Magisterio in Cochabamba formed a cooperative responsible for treating domestic wastewater and managing the neighbourhood's entire water cycle (Transformative Cities 2019). Residents convened assemblies where collective decisions were made about the technical design of the water treatment plant, the improvements to the sewerage system, as well as the introduction of a new tariff structure that would sustain the new system (ibid.). The community's determination to manage water and sanitation quashed municipal authorities' opposition. Since then, the cooperative has created alliances with other neighbourhoods and public officials to fight against political intimidation (ibid.).

Autonomous organising in defence of the commons is likewise strong among dispossessed urban communities. In Dar es Salaam, displaced residents self-organised

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7 The Jackson-Kush Plan was designed to address the economic and social impacts caused by the disaster. For more information. For more information, see: <https://cooperationjackson.org> for more information.

against government-led demolitions in favour of Tanzania's port expansion. They created the Chamazi Community Based Housing Scheme to provide a relocation site within the city, improve access to water and sanitation, as well as finance community needs. Residents also launched a collective initiative to secure around 12 hectares of land purchased through community-pooled resources amounting to US\$ 24,000, and mobilised broad-based civil-society and government support for the provision of affordable and dignified housing.

In Washington D.C., tenants have been organising limited-equity cooperatives (LECs) since the late 1970s (Huron 2018) in response to widespread evictions. The LEC model provides affordable and secure housing to tenants through the collective purchase of the residential complex from private landlords (ibid.). This practice has scaled up beyond D.C. through knowledge sharing by groups such as the Aspen Cooperative, which hosts delegations of tenant organisations seeking to learn from their experience (ibid.: 15). This control over housing is described by Huron (2018) as a reclamation of urban commons. Anti-eviction movements are mobilised based on "the right to stay put" (Hartman 1984; see also Weinstein 2014), which resists the displacement and "re-placement" (Rademacher 2009) of communities.

Although the practice of urban commoning may involve acquiescing to capitalist processes and seeking assistance from city authorities (Huron 2018: 86), it also adopts a more defensive and confrontational approach that opposes, rejects and bypasses landlords and the State. Squatter movements and tenant takeovers of idle or abandoned housing are typical examples of "seizing and maintaining the commons" (Huron 2018: 60). Such tactics have spread among cities across the world following the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis which has escalated the financialisation of land, housing and real estate (see Aalbers 2019), as well as the emergence of "austerity urbanism" (Peck 2012).

One of these tactics is the establishment of homeless encampments in cities. In the United States, temporary camps have proliferated in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. As of 2017, five tent cities existed in Seattle, a city covering 217 square kilometres (Sparks 2017). Whilst camps emerge as a "spatial tactic of resistance" (ibid.: 90), subsequent legalisation and regulation potentially undermine their radical politics, as encampments are normalised and become an "official state strategy of poverty management" (Herring 2014: 299). Yet despite the political limitations brought about by institutionalisation, homeless camps retain radical possibilities. For example, Tent City 3 in Seattle has been able to foster collectivism marked by a shared commit-

ment to contributing to the daily operations of the camp such as taking on security, tent maintenance, donation management and kitchen duties (Sparks 2017: 94). In this semi-autonomous and self-governed space, residents exercise political agency and citizenship (Sparks 2017: 100).

Another transgressive practice of urban commoning is the takeover of idle, disused and abandoned public, residential, commercial and industrial properties. Squats and occupations emerged in Western European cities and municipalities as early as the 1950s (see Mudu 2004). Whilst known to be used as residences, collectives also reconfigured these spaces into hubs of social and political activity, as in Milan, Rome, Turin, Bologna as well as the Italian municipality of Sesto San Giovanni where social centres function simultaneously as sites of community organising, venues for social and cultural events, bastions of autonomous activism (ibid.; see also Andretta et al. 2002) and hotbeds of transcontinental solidarity movement building (Mudu, 2004). Between 1985 and 2003, 262 social centres were active across Italy (ibid.: 929). In the late 2000s, urban austerity and the global financial crisis ignited an expansion in squats and occupations across the world. In the United States, coordinated actions were launched in December 2011 as part of the decentralised Occupy Our Homes Movement (Christie 2011). Years later, in the Philippines, members of Kadamay, a homeless and urban poor group, took over some 5,300 deteriorating socialised housing units and relocation villages in the province of Bulacan, north of the capital region of Metro Manila (Dizon 2019). This radical reclamation of space can be read as a tipping point for what Oldfield and Greyling (2015) term “waiting for the state”, which pertains to the housing precariat’s “practices of quiet encroachment” (ibid.: 1100). In protesting the sluggish response of governments to the active production of housing crises (Ferrerri / Vasudevan 2019), occupations and takeovers transform neglected spaces and, in the process, create new social and spatial relations through self-management and self-production (ibid.).

Beyond practices of reclamation, the rise of the urban commons likewise manifests in cooperativism. In Budapest (Hungary), the Cargonomia collective was set up in 2015 as a sustainable urban centre offering a local and organic food distribution point, featuring a cargo-bike messenger service, family-scale organic vegetable farm, organic bakery, wine distribution and bicycle-building cooperative responsible for delivering more than 3,000 food boxes annually (Transformative Cities 2018). These efforts directly reduce greenhouse gas emissions from food production and distribution, whilst providing multiple benefits to the community such as offering logistics support and community space (ibid.). The local network underpins an

approach grounded on 'systems thinking' and solidarity economy building, similar to that of Cooperation Jackson. At the same time, it underlines the importance of social centres as the backbone of community life, as incubators for commons-based initiatives and as the birthplace of urban social movements. Another example is the work of a community organisation in Amsterdam, Netherlands called Stichting Building. The group transformed a derelict church into a social centre, with the aim of fostering community life and local activism. This helped build bridges between community members by gathering excluded groups and wealthy individuals, young and elderly people, as well as minority groups in a space that encourages the exchange of ideas. The community the organisation nurtures serves as a collective force in fighting against gentrification, particularly the threat of church demolition and construction of new commercial buildings.

Cooperative movements likewise attempt to reclaim information and technology in a world where big corporations control data, and panopticon-like State surveillance has become an everyday reality. Juegos del Común (Commons Games), a Barcelona-based digital association, stresses the importance of open data to transparency and democracy. It experiments with using game dynamics to challenge corporate-controlled technology whilst promoting open data and encouraging citizen participation. The group has developed four game prototypes as well as an online service providing public access to city council datasets about the consequences of tourism for housing.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM

The third praxis derived from the TC Atlas is worker-led/owned transformative practices. Social movement unionism,<sup>8</sup> which is rooted in the political struggles in developing countries, has grown over the last three decades despite criticism of trade unions' parochial concerns. This approach is distinct from traditional unionism<sup>9</sup> on at least three fronts. Firstly, it adopts broad aims concerning social justice, human rights and democracy; secondly, it advocates active labour-community alliances; lastly, it reframes trade unions as social movements that mobilise their members not only against workplace injustice and other forms of social oppression (Alliance of Progressive Labor 2001).

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8 An iconic example of social movement unionism (SMU) is the alliance between South Africa's Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s. It is also practised by trade unions in Brazil and the Philippines in their campaigns and industrial relations. More recently, global unions such as Public Services International have reinvigorated SMU through their campaigns for de-privatisation, remunicipalisation, PuPs and energy democracy.

9 Traditional unionism mainly focuses on work and workplace issues.



Trade unions under Public Services International (PSI), one of the largest international federations of public sector unions with millions of members around the world, assert the importance of unions in ensuring quality service and defending rights alongside other groups, citizens and actors. The challenge lies in building real participatory mechanisms which bring together various stakeholders. A concrete case of labour's transformative role in public service provision is the experience of a workers' association in Dhaka, Bangladesh in fighting against the outsourcing of parts of the water supply distribution system. Through collective persistence, it succeeded in introducing revenue collection managed by labour cooperatives, and in creating a broad-based community-labour alliance in the 1990s. The Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) encountered major challenges in meeting community demands due to poor levels of revenue collection and substantial water losses. The utility company proposed building a surface-water treatment plant to be financed by the World Bank on condition that DWASA privatise sections of its water supply distribution and revenue collection. The unions strongly opposed this plan and developed grounded solutions with the communities they serve. They proposed that one zone be managed by the worker cooperative in partnership with the community, and the other by a private operator for a one-year period (Hoque 2003; Hall 2010). When this was implemented, revenue collection improved and water losses decreased in the cooperative zone (Hall 2010). Payment of living wages likewise eliminated bribe seeking (ibid.). As a result, the water union successfully blocked the World Bank plan; and in doing so, it demonstrated the viability of worker-operated cooperatives and strengthened their relations with the communities they serve (Transformative Cities 2018).

Dynamic traditions of strong unionism are likewise present in the housing sector. For nearly two decades, textile mill workers in Mumbai, India have consistently campaigned for their rights to land and housing. In particular, they demanded that a portion of the land belonging to textile mill companies be earmarked for shelter needs. This strong campaign, alongside social movement unionism, produced legislation committing 100,000 to 150,000 housing units for workers. According to the TC Atlas case brief (2018), around 8,000 apartments have been constructed, with 18,000 units under way. In Solapur, 396 kilometres from Mumbai, women cigarette (beedi) workers were at the forefront of the struggle for dignified housing. In 1992, around 65,000 women workers launched an extensive campaign headed by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions to secure affordable housing for their members as well as to textile and informal sector workers employed by the government. The women likewise played a central role in the design, planning and implementation of three housing

schemes. The Comrade Godutai Parulekar Housing Scheme, regarded as the largest cooperative housing project for workers in Asia, involved the construction of some 10,000 housing units from 2001 to 2006. This was followed by the Comrade Meenakshitai Sane Housing Scheme in 2015, which aims to build 1,600 houses for women beedi workers. The largest project, sanctioned a year later, involves the construction of 30,000 affordable homes, including key infrastructure such as roads, water and electric facilities, hospital, tertiary school, market and places of worship (Transformative Cities 2018). In both the textile mill and beedi worker examples, people supported broader demands for dignified housing and emphasised shelter as a working-class issue. They used cooperatives as a training ground for running parts of the economy such as public services. New forms of partnership like labour-community alliances (see the case of Colombia above) required the rethinking of roles, relationships and attitudes based on principles of equity, mutual respect and genuine solidarity.

## **FEARLESS TOWNS AND CITIES AS MULTIPLE NODES OF CHANGE**

Transformative Cities underscores the praxis of Fearless Cities through its focus on radical municipalism (i.e., self-government by towns, municipalities, cities and city regions) as a means of creating and expanding solidarity, inclusion and the commons. The logic of social change it espouses is transformative political power, wherein the transformation or appropriation of certain parts of the State happens through greater collective activity from below. Fearless Cities is a newly formed international platform built on translocal solidarity, particularly a translocal alliance for the growing municipalist movements around the world. To date, there are more than 80 cities and municipalities with active platforms and people's political parties advancing a radical municipalist agenda in defence of human rights, democracy and the common good (see Figure 1). As the movement is defined not only by its goals but also by how it enacts its politics (Baird 2017), it shows a commitment to doing things differently (i.e., from traditional left politics). The first gathering hosted in Barcelona from 9-11 June 2017, sought to build an "ecosystem of organizations working within and beyond electoral politics at local level" (ibid.).

This practice differs in three ways from the wave of municipalist strategies in the 1990s and early 2000s which focused on decentralisation and disregarded devolution of powers and people's direct participation in shaping urban life. Firstly, a radical municipal strategy acknowledges the municipal scale, where people's lives are organised and governed by institutions, as a site of contestation, resistance and trans-

formation (Plan C / Russell 2017). Secondly, radical municipalist movements are often deeply rooted in popular struggles for just shelter, public water, energy democracy, dignified labour and urban justice. A number of movements have occupied streets and halls of power to reclaim urban space and life from the claws of capital. Remunicipalisation struggles echo the demands to dismantle corporate power and other structures of oppression (see Chapter 5). Thirdly, this new radical municipalist agenda undergirds the more encompassing and transformative objective of building social justice. It counters the politics of the far right, emphasises the politics of everyday life and changes the way politics is practiced. Its aim is to “build global networks of solidarity and hope from the bottom up” (Fearless Cities N.d.).

This model of people-centred governance espouses both an understanding and a way of doing politics that go beyond electoral strategies and large-scale actions and initiatives such as mass uprisings. Radical municipalism stresses the importance of day-to-day community organisation, which deals with the “quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts” (Kerkvliet 2009: 232; see also Hobson / Seabrooke 2007) of collaboration, negotiation, and dialogue to determine “who gets what, when [and] how” (Lasswell, 1936). It therefore concerns the control, production, allocation, and use of public resources (Kerkvliet 2009: 227). The remunicipalisation of public services serves as a good example, as it is a response to people’s demand for genuine democracy and meaningful participation in governance and political life beyond the ballot box. Moreover, radical municipalism seeks to foster creative and cultural spaces that embrace diversity and address isolation and othering (Wright / Jenkinson 2019). A number of European cities have rolled out identification schemes for undocumented immigrants (Baird 2017) in an effort to make an otherwise invisible population visible. Multiple initiatives have also been initiated in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers in their struggle for political change (Wright / Jenkinson 2019). In this way, radical municipalism reconfigures social relations based on principles of social justice.

In what follows, we enumerate examples of radical municipalist platforms across the globe:

- > Barcelona en Comú is an electoral multi-constituent/citizen-led movement with roots in the housing rights movement. It won the city elections in 2015 and subsequently instituted progressive policies promoting direct citizen involvement in policymaking and participatory budgeting systems towards the redistribution of wealth and power. Inspired by Barcelona, other Spanish cities created their own municipalist movements including Valladolid Toma la Palabra, which runs the environment department of the new city council. It held open debates leading to the remunicipalisation of its water system, which drew opposition from the private sector. This resulted in the democratisation of the Board membership, renewed public investment and the suspension of water rate increases. In the Andalucía region of Spain, citizen-movement candidates from the Por Cádiz Sí Se Puede (For Cádiz, Yes We Can) and Ganar Cádiz en Común (Winning Cádiz in Common) coalitions were elected to the municipal government with a platform advocating renewable energy, promoting democratic energy transition, addressing energy poverty/inequality and supporting the creation of energy-related employment. These efforts subsequently rebuilt and reshaped the city's social and productive life, as well as introduced a general strategy for roundtables (*mesas*) as open space platforms for debates on the city's energy issues.
- > The Richmond Progressive Alliance (RPA) transformed the region from being the "armpit of the [San Francisco] Bay area" (Hashe 2018) to an environmentally- and labour-progressive city. It raised the local minimum wage, led grassroots mobilisation around social and environmental issues and supported community policing which led to a decrease in overall crime rates. From 2006 to 2014, Green mayor and RPA co-founder Gayle McLaughlin introduced a number of progressive policies. Notably, under her leadership, the city sued Chevron and won US\$ 90 million in environmental damages.
- > Kurdish women in the self-governing region of Rojava in Northern Syria are building "feminist, assembly-based models of stateless democracy" (Baird 2017), amidst an economic embargo, limited access to food and water, an inhospitable climate of conflict and a refusal to recognise the Kurds. Women have been organising not only to dismantle entrenched power structures, but also to implement alternatives to the oppressive system. One such example is the creation of women's communes in Jinwar (free women's space/women's land) which provide a free and safe space for victims of violence and patriarchy, as well as those who have lost their husbands and

relatives in the war.<sup>10</sup> The communes include schools, medical centres, museums and houses; and community life is built and shaped based on ideals of freedom, equality and non-violence. In 2012, the Kurds declared self-determination and introduced “Democratic Confederalism” which promotes “a non-state system of grassroots democracy, decentralisation, gender equality, and environmental sustainability” (Ocalan 2011).

- > Pro-democracy and youth-led opposition parties in Hong Kong such as Demosisto and Youngspiration organise and challenge Chinese government-elected city councillors, amidst State repression and persecution.
- > Electoral victories of progressive candidates in Latin America signal hope and change despite the rise of right-wing politics and the crises of socialist governments in the region. A candidate fielded by *Cidade que Queremos*, a citizens’ platform in Belo Horizonte in Brazil, won more than the number of votes combined for other candidates in the city council elections. Similarly, in Chile, a former student activist running on a people-led platform was elected mayor of Valparaíso.

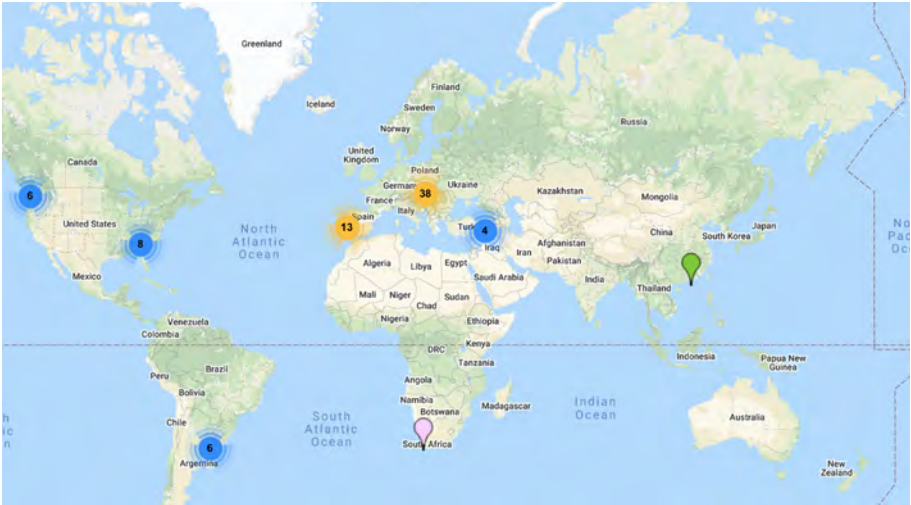
These cases illustrate practices that generate progressive municipal and urban movements and therefore create people-centred and anti-capitalist alternatives. At the same time, they show how the internationalist dimension of Fearless Cities is crucial to developing a common identity, deepening global collaboration and confronting common issues collectively (Plan C/Russell 2017).

Yet despite these gains, the future of fearless towns and cities is under threat. Taking the experience of Spain as an example, the May 2019 municipal election results highlight some hard lessons on the municipalist movement’s sustainability and future collective work. Whilst the defeat of Spain’s Fearless Cities in Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, A Coruña, Santiago de Compostela and other key cities may be attributed in part to rekindled nationalism, sociologist Carlos Delclós (2019) points to the incommensurability between the movement’s campaign and its discursive focus. Speaking specifically about Barcelona en Comú’s recent electoral defeat, he notes that though it had previously won on a platform challenging global capitalism, patriarchy and climate change, its rhetoric has nonetheless foregrounded accomplishments of governance centred on municipal programmes (ibid.).

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10 See this powerful article written by the women of Jinwar: <https://internationalistcommune.com/jinwar> (07.06.2019).

Thus, whilst the future of radical municipalism rests in part on its ability to counter right-wing politics and political manoeuvring, its success lies in how it is conceptualised and enacted as a political strategy. As a starting point, it is productive to consider the place of rural dwellers in a movement focused on the municipal; to think critically about the fundamental difference between municipal institutions and the nation-state; to evaluate the prospects of developing tactics that bypass legal and financial obstacles imposed by governments, and generating strategies that encompass or surpass the State; to deliberate the political significance of seizing institutions; and to probe the possibilities of surviving after seriously transgressing the State (Plan C/Russell 2017). Answers to some of these questions are tackled in chapters of this book. But overall, they are in the making: they emerge in the very practice of radical municipalism.



Map of fearless cities, a global municipalist movement  
Source: Barcelona en Comú

## WHAT DO THESE PRAXES MEAN?

The transformative practices featured in the Transformative Cities Atlas of Utopia and Fearless Cities initiatives underline locally-embedded and globally-networked practices of radical urban alternatives. Most of these practices cover multi-constituent approaches including alliance work with the traditional left and established political parties. They stress transparency, radical democracy, citizen participation and the progressive realisation of human rights to housing, water and energy. In this section, we enumerate lessons drawn from these praxes of radical urban transformation:

- > **Scope and scale:** The TC Atlas and Fearless Cities underscore the city/municipality as the locus of radical urban transformation. Most of the initiatives pose a direct challenge to capitalism, exclusion, and other forms of structural oppression. The alternatives they build either upset the balance of power or demolish the structures that undergird them. For these efforts to succeed and flourish, sustained repertoires and socio-political capital must be built. Whilst some of these initiatives are substantial in scale and may even be replicated, this anthology nonetheless troubles the prospects of upscaling and replicability as the lone measure of evaluating promise and success. It may be just as beneficial to draw lessons and inspiration from victories and determine which aspects can be adopted or reworked in diverse contexts.
- > **People's agency:** The cases presented here testify to the capacity of the poor and the marginalised to re/write their own her/histories, reject existing conditions and reconfigure structures and possibilities (Long 2001). Many of these community- and worker-led alternatives demonstrate citizens' ability to transform power and social relations, and effectively generate a commons-based, participatory and democratic politics.
- > **Crucial differences between public and private:** The nature and objectives of public and private actors are vastly different. Though the public sector is not necessarily inherently 'good', the alternatives featured in the Atlas of Utopias indicate a renewed appreciation of its potentials and promise. This is supported by the proliferation of global initiatives to reclaim, redefine and reshape the notions of 'public' and 'publicness'.
- > **New public ethos and commitment to public service:** Engendering a new public ethos entails involvement in public service provision. Engaged citizenry and everyday forms of radical democracy are crucial to radical and transformative initiatives.
- >

- > **Decentring urban expertise:** The cases suggest a critical questioning of expertise and a necessary shift in such expertise. This is particularly salient in the issue of housing wherein the homeless, precarious and dispossessed inhabit the fringes of housing politics despite being at the centre of the crisis. It is imperative to decentre the production and implementation of solutions from planners, developers and economists, to citizens and shelter justice movements (Madden / Marcuse 2016: 4). Such a shift reflects an understanding of the housing crisis as a political and economic problem rather than a technical and technocratic one (ibid.).
- > **From citizen participation to self-governance:** Recognising the expertise of end users of public services draws attention to the inadequacy of liberal notions and practices of citizen participation, as well as of 'inclusive' new urban governance regimes which nonetheless do not fundamentally reconfigure power relations (Alvarez 2019). A critical examination of such initiatives recognises the need for a corresponding shift to self-governance and citizen control of programmes claiming to benefit the public (ibid.).
- > **Challenges:** These lessons we enumerate here likewise present challenges. These include legal barriers and obstacles to remunicipalisation such as the inclusion of Investor-State Dispute Settlements in trade and investment agreements and contracts, as well as the pushback by right-wing and pro-capitalist forces advocating for novel forms of PPPs. Whilst the sustained success of anti-privatisation movements is the result of a number of factors, the importance of strong citizen campaigns urging central governments to reject neoliberal policies and the influence of IFIs is indisputable.

The rise of the commons is firmly situated in the context of claiming “the right to the city” (Lefebvre 1996), which is both a slogan and a political ideal that far exceeds the right to live in the city, insofar as it fundamentally extends to “the right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey 2008: 23). As a collective right, it is centred on the power of collective action to simultaneously transform urban space, urban life and urban relations. The cases outlined in our discussion of the Transformative Cities Atlas of Utopia and Fearless Cities demonstrate how radical and people-initiated actions reconfigure lived experience and inhabited spaces. In striving for a life of dignity, communities transform the political subjectivities of the marginalised, thereby re-politicising urban citizenship and reconstituting the city. As interventions and moments of rupture that shape and are shaped by urban politics, radical praxes reveal the transformative possibilities of towns and cities enmeshed in systems of inequality.



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**AMERICAS**

The background of the cover is a solid orange color. Overlaid on this is a faded image of a protest sign. The sign has the text 'MUDANÇA PRESENTE, HOJE E SEMPRE!' in large, bold, yellow capital letters. Above the sign, there is a yellow flower with long, thin petals. In the bottom right corner of the sign, there is a small yellow logo consisting of a stylized sun or flower shape. The title 'THE URBAN RESISTANCE FRONT: EXPERIENCES OF RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATION WITH A VIEW TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE AND DEPATRIARCHALISED CITIES' is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the cover. Below the title, the author's name 'By Isabella Miranda Gonçalves' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the cover, there is a paragraph of text in white, sans-serif font, providing information about the translation of the book.

# **THE URBAN RESISTANCE FRONT: EXPERIENCES OF RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATION WITH A VIEW TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE AND DEPATRIARCHALISED CITIES**

By Isabella Miranda Gonçalves

This chapter is largely a relatively free translation of the Portuguese version into English by Florência Lorenzo and Mayra García and benefitted from language editing suggestions from Richard Allen.

## URBAN RESISTANCE: HISTORY AND CHALLENGES

The urban problem in Brazil has become an ever more central issue in recent years. In June 2013, there were huge urban demonstrations across the country which thrust many urban social struggles front and centre. There was also the nationwide growth of major urban land occupations, alongside the occupation and conversion of empty buildings in central areas into cultural, feminist and living spaces.

The paper that follows presents various forms of popular resistance within the urban context, responding to the structural crisis in capitalism and its rollout in urban spaces, intertwined with a hegemonic country-wide and global neoliberal framework.

This chapter sets out the experience of the Urban Resistance Forum, which has been working on sharing and establishing everyday practices in terms of territorial popular power in Brazil. The case of the 'Izidora occupations' is used as evidence of depatriarchalising practices in the production of space, as well as of sustainable agroecological practices, sowing the seeds for a new way of constructing and thinking about urbanisation, guided not by generating surplus value, or profit, but by fostering 'good living'<sup>1</sup>.

As in other Latin American countries, urbanisation in Brazil constantly moved forward throughout the 20th century. In less than 50 years, from the 1940s to the 1980s, Brazil's urban population overtook its rural numbers and, according to data from the last census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE 2010), now represents some 84% of the total population.

Urbanisation in Brazil has taken a path that is typical of both the gradual formation of a nation state and of a dependency model of economic growth; that is, it is oriented towards the fulfilment of the international market's needs above and beyond the interests of the Brazilian people. This process is entrenched in the overexploitation of labour and has harnessed the country's historical power imbalances that grew out of its roots in slavery.

Land concentration, late industrialisation coupled with increasing appeal for commodity export sector, the overexploitation of labour and high rates of unemployment and underemployment in cities have all left their mark on an urbanisation process characterised by extreme inequality of access to urban goods and a lack of enforcement of multiple social rights – rights that have historically been denied to poorer and marginal sections of society. In this sense, Brazilian urbanisation has itself forged processes of socio-spatial segregation, as pointed out by Ermínia Maricato:

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1 The concept of 'good living' is a rough translation of the Portuguese notion *bem viver*, or *buen vivir*.

*"For more than four decades of late industrialization - 1940 to 1980 - Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew by more than 7% a year. At the same time, the country experienced high urbanization rates, concentrated especially in the metropolises, thus ensuring an abundant supply of cheap labor. Low-wage industrialization was matched by low-wage urbanization: self-construction of houses, illegal land occupation and horizontal growth of neighborhoods with no urbanization, whose occupation was made possible by the precarious conditions of road transport, which was indispensable for the workforce to commute." (Maricato 2011: 13)*

In concrete terms, this translates to over 32 million people in Brazil having no clean, treated water available to them, with only 57.6% of the population having access to sanitation in its urban areas. According to the João Pinheiro Foundation, the housing deficit affects over 6,940,691 families, while urban planner and lawyer Edésio Fernandes states that there are "(...) more than 50 million Brazilians who have been walking from home to work, for they are unable to afford paying for public transport; a growing percentage of people have been sleeping on the streets despite having a home, to avoid either transport costs or long journeys to work with the risk of being fired hanging over them if they arrive late." (Fernandes 2006: 124) (our translation).

It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that much of the population has no social stability and has a limited ability to actually exercise basic rights in urban spaces, such as urban mobility, the right to housing, the right to an adequate environment, the right to a regular supply of water, electricity and basic sanitation, as well as social rights such as education and quality healthcare.

In a broad sense, this crisis is unfolding as a result of the close nexus between economic and political power, both of which seek to produce and reproduce cities based on the standards of the financial real estate market, as opposed to the actual needs, interests and rights of those living there.

During the military dictatorship, large numbers of rural workers, having been forced off the land by the mechanisation of production and land concentration, arrived in cities across the country, leading to a substantial increase in labour supply and driving the exploitation of workers to unbearable levels. The model of concentration and centralisation that underpinned this urbanisation process was based on an authoritarian federative structure that did not envisage any significant level of municipal autonomy and undermined the needs of the local population, instead setting them up for a late industrialisation process marked by precarity and inequality.



Through the process of redemocratisation following the enactment of the 1988 Federal Constitution, a liberalising and decentralising paradigm gathered strength in Brazil that emphasised local management. However, the economic crisis of the 1990s and the consolidation of a neoliberal agenda across Latin America – which marked the establishment of a new dependency pattern at that time – together culminated in an even greater setback, particularly with regard to transport, housing and sanitation policies. In accordance with the guidelines of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and, especially in Latin America, the Interamerican Bank of Development (IBD), a large number of the companies responsible for the administration of social urban rights were privatised.

Following the financial crisis and the subsequent withdrawal of investment, the growth of unemployment and the neoliberal shift in economic policy, many of the promises of a free and just society that were set to provide a life of dignity for Brazilians – including in terms of urban policies and municipal management (as stated in the Federal Constitution of 1988) – remained unimplemented.

Although such models continued to receive little funding, that period witnessed the growth of urban struggles and the consolidation of popular movements, as well as the corresponding development of experience in the participative management of cities. Social and popular urban movements, neighbourhood associations and other political organisations enhanced the country's *Urban Reform Agenda* in the period preceding the rise of the Workers' Party (PT) into the federal government in 2003, as well as in its initial years in power. A number of key institutional achievements came to pass in this period, including the enactment of the *Statute of the Cities* Law 10.257/2001 based on the concept of the right to the city – this democratised city planning and offered the municipality a variety of legal tools to prevent real estate speculation and to balance collective well-being with private property – and the subsequent establishment of the Ministry of Cities in 2003.

From 2003 onwards, the PT reaped the benefits of governing a country enjoying economic growth – the average GDP growth rate stood at 4% a year during the two consecutive terms of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, popularly known as President Lula (IBGE 2010). In this light, the PT can be regarded as having favoured particular sectors of private capital associated with mega infrastructure projects, and which disproportionately impacted both cities and the markets.

The construction industry – alongside the various sections of the bourgeoisie and capital whose reproduction depends on this sector – managed to achieve a degree of

hegemony in the implementation of countercyclical policies by the Brazilian government. An example of this is the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (MCMV – My House, My Life) programme, responding to the global economic crisis of 2008 that was triggered by a burst of predatory real estate practices. On this subject, Ermínia Maricato writes:

*“The construction industry was a priority sector for economic growth policies thanks to investment in infrastructure and housing. Another sector that received a boost was the automotive industry, having a major impact on the cities. We shall examine these three pillars of capital – real estate capital, heavy construction capital and the automotive industry – which resulted in a positive countercyclical reaction to the global crisis of 2008, but led to a tragic plight for cities after almost 30 years of low levels of investment. (...)The revival in public investment started gradually, hindered by the neoliberal obstacles that stood in the way of social expenditure. However, in 2007 the federal government launched the Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (Growth Acceleration Programme, or PAC), followed by the Minha Casa, Minha Vida (MCMV) programme in 2009. The former saw heavy construction activity beginning to take off, while the latter resulted in a boom in the housing industry.” (Maricato 2011: 37) (our translation)*

New infrastructure projects were road-centric to serve the needs of the automotive industry in Brazil, which was mostly dominated by foreign companies. Therefore, the construction industry’s development of infrastructure across the country was not aimed at overcoming the urban crisis but rather to provide a response to Brazil’s need for infrastructure expansion, which was itself subjugated to the interests of (global) capital. The investments made in the energy sector are another example of this.

In the years of economic growth and high rates of public investment (during the terms of President Lula and his successor, President Dilma Rousseff), large amounts of public resources were pumped by the country’s treasury into the energy sector through investments by the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) and public works projects forming part of the PAC. For example, PAC 2 invested 640.2 million Brazilian reais in the energy sector, with a view to building 54 new hydroelectric power plants in Brazil and neighbouring Latin American countries. Meanwhile, 18 billion reais were put into extending the electricity grid to rural areas as part of the *Luz para Todos* (Light for All) programme. As a result, 97.8% of Brazilian households today have access to electricity. However, the majority of the energy of the country’s production is consumed by big industry. In 2008, for instance, the industrial sector was responsible for 46% of electricity consumption, while households used only 24% (Zibechi 2014).

In the wake of this alliance with certain strands of domestic and global capital and the subsequent need to maintain the country's dependency status at international level, a powerful set of tools was developed through the urban programmes mentioned above. Moreover, relations were forged with the popular sectors based on class conciliation and on increasing access to the long-term consumption of goods such as cars and home ownership.

Therefore, as Brazil was a 'developing country' that presented itself to the world with mega infrastructure projects and mega events (which changed the urban environment) and an expanding consumer market, cities increasingly became a genuine wholesale business. Under the banner of 'progress' and 'development' the urban Left facilitated a process of forced removals, overpriced contracts and an exponential increase in real estate speculation and ensuing living costs, all of which exacerbated urban segregation.

## RISE OF NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A wealth of social movements that struggled and fought for urban reform during the 1980s and 1990s were institutionalised through government forums and councils to conduct housing policies. However, in the process they ended up largely abandoning the broader 'right to the city' agenda.

Looking at social participation, political scientist Leonardo Avritzer argues in his work *Impasses da Democracia no Brasil* (2016) that although Brazil has promoted a solid system of social participation since its redemocratisation, forming more than 20,000 councils, in the infrastructure sector associated with major public works and development plans – involving the circulation of huge sums – there was no popular participation at all. Allegations of corruption and a feeling of institutional crisis arose surrounding infrastructure projects. According to Avritzer, in this environment a sector emerged that would criticise and attack the social movements engaged in urban reform (Avritzer 2016).

From 2004 to 2005, new forms of territorial resistance, trade union federations and urban social movements emerged in opposition to the PT. This set in train a number of major milestones including the establishment of the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL) in 2004; the Mensalão scandal in 2005, which highlighted a 'votes for cash' scheme inside Parliament and shed light on the limits of coalition presidentialism; the emergence of the Labour and Popular Federation-Conlutas (CSP-Conlutas) in 2010, and the working class federation Intersindical in 2014. The Free Fare Move-

ment<sup>2</sup> (MPL), a social movement which stands for the right to come and go to and from cities, was founded in 2005 and performed a major role in the 2013 June Journeys protests. Other organisations vital to the urban agenda also emerged, or grew stronger, throughout the 2000s, such as the Landless Workers' Movement (Bahia) (2003), the Popular Brigades (2005) and the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST).

## THE URBAN RESISTANCE FRONT

The Urban Resistance Front emerged against this backdrop of urban crisis. *Urban Resistance* (RU – *Resistência Urbana* in Portuguese) is a Latin American strand of popular movements that struggle for urban reform and workers' rights in cities, joining together to take action in many states in Brazil and across Latin America. RU saw the light of day in 2008, following the convergence between various movements who favoured direct and radical action and were critical of the dominant urban development model in Brazil and the institutionalisation of social movements that was happening under the PT, which was the party in power at that time. RU was an alternative arena to the National Forum for Urban Reform, which had become the main point of convergence for movements since the 1980s and focused on legislation for controlling real estate speculation and urban justice and therefore on residential policies involving an alliance among state capital or between the state and capital. This initiative has recently gone international, drawing on the synergy of the many urban movements and initiatives in Latin America.

The Front organised itself through political formation moments, meetings and journeys. Its main vectors were the Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST – *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto*), the Popular Brigades (*Brigadas Populares*) and the Homeless Movement of Bahia (MSTB – *Movimento Sem Teto da Bahia*) in Brazil. It also worked with the UKAMAU from Bolivia, the Darío Santillán Popular Front in Argentina, and the People's Congress in Colombia (Congreso de los pueblos).

Besides joint actions of resistance and fighting back, RU has recently started to articulate experiences of territorial popular power. Acting alongside the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, movements that are part of the RU have started to create alternatives to hegemonic urban development and living models in a bid to offer more autonomy and power to the people.

RU pushes for an agenda of structural urban reform not only anchored in institutional mechanisms but above all in direct action: occupations, roadblocks and marches. Since

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2 The *Movimento Passe Livre*, also often translated as the "Free Pass Movement".

2010, RU-related movements have organised major demonstrations and protests regarding mega events in the country, specifically around issues arising from staging the World Cup and the Olympic Games that would have consequences including further privatisation, the use of special legislation mechanisms and increased militarisation in Brazil's cities.

These mobilisations were strengthened following a change in the political climate in the country after the parliamentary coup against President Rousseff, which was carried out in order to implement an agenda of fiscal adjustment and privatisation. President Rousseff (of the PT) had narrowly won the 2014 presidential election, garnering slightly more votes than the second-placed candidate. The next day, her opponents started organising a *coup d'état*, driven by right-wing parties, owners of big business, sections of the financial markets, conservative legal forces, the military and the mainstream media.

By 2015, the country had become increasingly difficult to govern, with polarised demonstrations and a parliamentary strategy aimed at obstructing voting. In 2016, members of parliament accused President Rousseff of corruption regarding her reporting of statutory accounts: a move that would eventually culminate in her impeachment. This was in effect a parliamentary coup, given that following the president's removal, representatives later approved all her federal accounts and nobody was able to prove she had committed any crime.

Vice-President Michel Temer, who had been involved in the impeachment move, began to implement a new government programme which had not been endorsed by the public. In little more than a year he sold off a substantial proportion of Brazil's oil reserves, privatised public companies, implemented fiscal adjustment measures, halted the investments that had been made in the country over the previous 20 years and approved a law removing workers' rights that had offered citizens a level of protection since the 1930s. His government was unsurprisingly the most unpopular in the country's history.

The *coup d'état* continues to this day. The military is playing an increasing role in Brazilian politics and there is direct military intervention in Rio de Janeiro. The coup has entered an even more extreme phase, condemning the ex-President Lula to 12 years in jail in response to fears he was likely to win the 2018 elections. He was arrested in a legal conspiracy where no proof of corruption was required and which was driven by pressure from business and the military. There is now no such thing as the democratic rule of law in the country.

The 2018 general elections were a highly polarised affair, opposing the PT – whose presidential candidate, in light of Lula being barred from standing, was Fernando Haddad – and Jair Bolsonaro (PSL), a retired military officer who gained notoriety with his moralising, racist, LGBT-phobic and misogynist rhetoric, preaching a phony nationalism fed by a profound contempt for those on the left of the political spectrum. Bolsonaro's victory was followed by the appointment of a cabinet from a religious, military-backed and ultra-neoliberal coalition that is withdrawing social, territorial and labour rights. Among other setbacks, the Ministry of Cities was closed down. This resulted in the legacy of the Workers' Party, such as the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* programme and the urbanisation of slums, being virtually wiped out.

The popular urban movements and the Urban Resistance Front are among those who are building up a makeshift coalition of organisations known as the "Fearless People's Front" (FPSM – *Frente Povo Sem Medo*). The FPSM has been fundamental in organising against the *coup d'état* across the country, arranging huge demonstrations and joint initiatives across all of Brazil's regions, as well as organising various international solidarity activities. MTST is a protagonist in this regard, even running a candidate, Guilherme Boulos, for the presidency of the country.

To summarise, the recent coup has checked and subsequently made largely redundant the strategy, based on legalistic principles and the negotiation of rights, that had been adopted by social movements since the 1980s. The growth of day-to-day working strategies focused on building territorial popular power, where people work or live, has increasingly become a political strategy of lasting popular resistance based on restoring democratic and sovereign conditions in the country from the bottom up. Three movements take centre stage here, with further details being set out below. The key concepts developed by these movements are the concept of 'Well-being Territories', developed by the MSTB; the concept of 'Fearless Territories', developed by the MTST; and the concept of 'Communes', developed by the Popular Brigades.

## POPULAR BRIGADES

The Popular Brigades started as a political organisation in Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, over 10 years ago. It takes action mainly on issues relating to urban spaces, organising themes revolving around urban living, women, youth and movements against incarceration. By expanding its role and merging with other organisations, this organisation is now present in 12 Brazilian states.

Their actions pushing for urban reform were stronger in Minas Gerais, where a series of horizontal urban and rural-urban occupations were organised to challenge the government's official policy of *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (My Home, My Life). This demonstrates a new way of building territorialities and gaining rights. The Popular Brigades were one of the major organisers of the World Cup's people's committees, highlighting social problems created by the organisation of that event from 2010 onwards.

Some symbolic landmarks in the history of the organisation were the rural-urban occupation in Dandara (2009), where around 2,000 families live, and the rural-urban occupations in Izidora (2013), which is home to 8,000 families. There are also thematic occupations such as the cultural occupation in Luiz Estrela (2013) and the occupation to organise informal jobs such as Vicentão (2018).

The Popular Brigades believe in having communes in urban spaces – territorial units where people can organise socially and politically. Communes are a political and physical device used in cities to get the community involved in activities that enhance their organisational profile and political status.

Nowadays, there are many communes around the country which have led initiatives related to many activities such as popular education, community organisation, popular solidarity economy, popular preparation courses, culture, law, listening to daily demands, agroecology, collecting and recycling items and informal jobs, among others. These activities respond to immediate demands and create the context to establish a collective identity and affection, and solidarity structures that are expressed in political engagement.

## THE HOMELESS WORKERS' MOVEMENT

The Homeless Workers' Movement (MTST) is the largest social movement pressing for urban reform in Brazil. The movement is 20 years old and organises workers from the place where they live, namely suburban neighbourhoods. It has a presence in nine Brazilian states and struggles collectively for homes and against urban segregation, linking this to Brazilian workers' struggle.

In São Paulo, where the MTST has been taking the strongest action, the movement organised more than 25,000 people in 2014, during the World Cup, asking for urban reform and questioning the 'company-city' model promoted for this kind of event. In 2015, it was involved in recreating the Brazilian Resistance to address the blows directed at the people, such as reduced working rights and social security, fiscal adjustment and privatisation. This was ahead of the creation of a national front of movements and inter-thematic organisations in the national struggle, namely the Fearless People Front.

In its occupations, the MTST organises experiences of communitarian living and territorial popular power, such as community kitchens in its camps, community libraries, self-management, organisation of housing, and popular restaurants. Nowadays it believes in building Fearless Territories, self-organised localities that respond to people's immediate needs with collective organisation and by demanding that rights be public and shared by everybody.



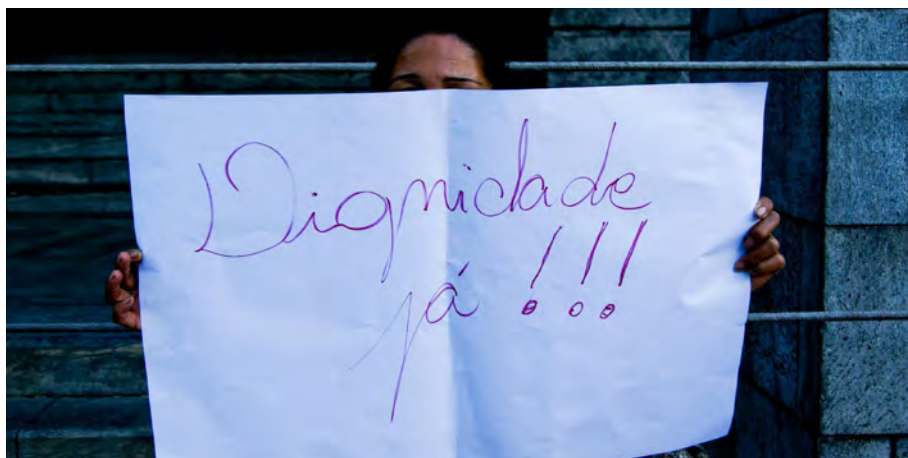
The MTST's Fearless People occupation in São José dos Campos, São Paulo.



## THE HOMELESS MOVEMENT OF BAHIA

The Homeless Movement of Bahia (MSTB), which was launched in 2003, organises many occupations around the state of Bahia. It brings together the demands for improved living standards and urban reform with those of women, young people and, in particular, anti-racism campaigners. The movement was inspired by the dream of home ownership. However, it subsequently turned its attention to the broader objective of implementing a political project, namely the Well-being Communities (*Comunidades de Buen Vivir*), with their ambition of creating communities where children, young people, adults and older people can live in dignity and be fully-fledged citizens.

Well-being Communities provide systems organising education, preventive health-care, job and income creation, and culture. They have their origins in black resistance and indigenous and popular traditional movements who fought for freedom for the oppressed (black and indigenous people, women, the poor, etc), Securing rights that are enshrined in Brazilian law.



The MSTB's Quilombo Paraíso occupation in Salvador in Bahia.

## THE GOALS OF RU: HOUSING, WORK AND AUTONOMY

*Resistência Urbana* is inspired by the experiences of autonomy and self-determination in Latin America of such organisations as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the communes in Venezuela, the Base Christian Communities in Brazil, and the Well-being Communities. These initiatives have persisted because they arose out of the struggles of people's organisations, including many street protests in recent years.

The movements created political momentum that went beyond demands regarding their main goal, housing, to take in organising collective autonomy and work. They decided to reject dependency on the state and capital, organising their own finances. As a result, their sphere of activity extended into sustainable self-organisation, the local expression of sustainable values, and community feminism.

Currently, RU is organised as a Latin American front that seeks to establish joint initiatives across the continent, while exchanging experiences of self-determination and local resistance.

Constituent organisations have emphasised a Latin America-wide perspective, and have:

- > built up experience of promoting the self-management of public services;
- > consolidated communal spaces;
- > proposed urban development alternatives; and
- > provided radical opposition to capitalism's new urban strategies, which are based on financialisation and militarisation.

## EXPERIENCES OF RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATION

Brazil is a country with a history of homeless and landless people. Centuries of expropriation, exploitation and predatory and exclusive action resulted in more than 7 million homeless families. Neither urban nor rural land reform has ever been implemented. Recently, conditions have become even worse because of the political coup and mass unemployment. What is currently known as radical urban transformation is the product of movements resisting evictions and the lack of urban rights.

Yet this resistance is not enough to secure a positive radical agenda for transformation. What is needed are bold methods, able to get beyond what Popular Brigades figurehead Pedro Otoni has called “the passive way”.

The conservative offensive, arising initially from the coup, has limited the strategy adopted by the Left and people’s organisations since the democratisation process in Brazil in the 1980s. The forces that were socially and politically active in recent decades are now incapable of directing the people’s struggle, as they no longer have the same level of political support and lack the capacity to innovate, instead adopting the same passive methods, based on uncritical legalism, naïve electioneering and backroom dealing. In other words, their traditional approach involves negotiating with the conservative sectors and then hopefully winning elections and forming a government based on the established order. For them, the social struggle is at most an optional extra.

In contrast, the ‘active way’ aims to create a transformed power, focusing on people’s day-to-day lives. It transforms people into new political players who can defeat the strategy put in place by the political coup in 2016 by drawing on the diversity of their lifestyles and their organisation as a tool for change. The idea is to transform the problems of everyday life into social conflicts that establish the basis for a new revolutionary movement – in other words, we should be building practical solutions based on people’s immediate needs, laying down a new set of demands to challenge those in power. The starting point here is provided by where people live, which is the weakest link in the control structure, even when it is immune to private and state control. This breaks with the traditional leftist notion of the workplace being the fulcrum of struggle, given the view that these spaces are controlled by fear, preventing people from reconstituting themselves as players in a struggle, and that their living environments are becoming more oppressive every day.

However, the places where they live are still spaces in which they can form common aspirations and reveal the possibility of organising people's struggles. After all, "space is political," as French economist Henri Lefèvre said. Inclusion in or exclusion from the space determines the means of sociability within a social body. Taking action within this space means doing so where the conflict occurs on a daily basis. A deliberate collective initiative organised locally in this space may represent the subject of a further social dispute with the dominant group, and one which may be raised again in subsequent disputes.

Viewed from this perspective, RU created communes as spatial units of social and political organisation for the people. Communes are a physical and political mechanism to engage the community in more evolved means of organisation and doing politics. Whereas previous forms of organisation were based on individualism and the breaking up of communal needs, communes help to establish a new social challenge correlating with a narrative that offers an alternative to the dominant picture that is painted.

Communes are autonomous structures that receive no public or private funding. To finance their activities, political partnerships encourage projects lasting from one to two years and relying on the voluntary collaboration of the residents. Fundraising activities include parties, campaigns and cooperative work. The cooperatives' products are marketed mainly within the community, for money or through exchanges of merchandise or donations. The producers are also regularly involved in holding people's markets around the city. The aim is to establish a permanent marketplace in the city centre to sell cooperatives' agroecological produce and/or handicrafts. However, the municipality's policies usually restrict and criminalise these initiatives in urban centres.

In 2017, for instance, there was a huge military operation to forcibly remove street sellers in the centre of Belo Horizonte. In response, the People's Brigades held a commune occupation there in Vicentão. The idea was to create a space for informal workers, the self-employed and street sellers to live, work and organise. It was also used as a place to sell the products of other occupied areas.

The commune is made up of all those involved and sharing in the extension of the commons, based on the principles of communal living. Joining a commune is a choice that is made freely and is open to all, regardless of religion, race, sexual orientation or social background.

### Communes are forms of self-governance involving the following aspects:

- > Self-production. People have the scope to build up a solidarity economy and cooperatives. Key initiatives include urban agroecology, recycling, and women's sewing and crafts cooperatives.
- > Self-government. In the communes all decisions are made in assemblies. Generally, these discuss all aspects of communal life: waste management, electricity provision, and access to healthcare and education.
- > People's education. In the communes, people set up nurseries, activist schools, courses preparing individuals for university, and adult education.
- > Culture and youth. The communes host workshops on drama, poetry, hip hop and dance.

The activities promoted in the communes respond to immediate needs and create the climate for establishing a collective identity and also solidarity structures that are expressed in political engagement.

The way people organise in communes, the decision-making process and the participation in popular struggles make radical democracy a part of daily life. Instead of getting embroiled in a constant state of conflict in which women and young people are killed, the communes aim to find different strategies for dealing with disputes. A collective approach to problems helps to transform political communities. The communes also get involved in political life at national level, for example opposing the coup.

Our resistance uses communication as a weapon. Each initiative and each demonstration involves the use of every means of communication, old and new, such as social media, with a view to countering the bias of the mainstream media. A weekly newspaper is produced for all those involved in the occupations, sharing information about the struggle, encouraging resistance, and debating social issues. These newspapers are also supplied and read in community assemblies.

For each mass event, RU ensures that there is visual coverage (photos and videos), as well as live broadcasts and written records. Web flyers, leaflets and memes are created for rapid communication. This external communication process was essential in establishing a support network for resistance initiatives like *Resiste Izidora* (explained below), helping to increase the ability of three occupations in the Belo Horizonte area to persuade the public of their case. Artists, communications activists and social activists were deployed as various communication strategies were tried out to see which worked best.

Communities and their supporters have also produced documentary films that cover the struggle for power. Some of these have won prizes, for example *Na Missão, com Kadu* (On the Mission, with Kadu), by activist directors Aiano Mineiro and Pedro Maia de Brito. The film focuses on resistance against violent oppression in Izidora, based on the views of one of the coordinators of the Izidora occupation, called Kadu (an alias for Ricardo de Freitas), who was murdered in the struggle.

The communications process raised awareness about social networks for young local activists. One of these initiatives resulted in the establishment of the Occupy Media collective, which emerged after many workshops organised by social movements, including the NGO Internet without Borders, and by the ZOCA (Occupied Zone for Arts and Culture) commune. The Occupy Media collective, consisting of three young people from the Izidora occupation, is responsible for communications within the community.

Another key tool for resistance in the communes is the creation of cooperative working methods. In cities, it is more difficult than in the countryside to build up a local, cooperative, class-based organisation. In the countryside, people work on the soil in the area where they live and operate. In the cities, most families are used to derive their income from outside the home, without necessarily being unionised. This shows the importance of looking at the idea of locality with new eyes by seeing it as a new basis for organising the working class and identifying the appropriate tools for doing so.

The communes and cooperatives in Izidora provide the seeds for community sovereignty. People who work there are vulnerable to processes of unemployment and underemployment, as a result of the failure to create formal jobs. Most of the occupiers either are in highly exploited work or have informal jobs in the cities, and spend hours commuting on inefficient public transport. However, the communes try to establish cooperative jobs that allow people to spend more time in their own area and participate in communal life – something which poses a huge challenge.

In the Vincentão occupation, organised by the People's Brigades, there is a programme of full employment. The initial reason for the occupation was support for informal workers, providing a space for organising, working, living and the collective reproduction of life. The idea of full employment is that all activities in the community be taken into account, including cooking, childcare, cleaning and security. These functions can be undertaken by local people who should be paid for their work.

Families with members who are formally employed, or who derive their income from informal employment, could pay a small tax based on an amount equivalent to 30% of their already low minimum wage. With this tax, they could afford daily meals, education for their children, young people and adults, security and other costs. The experience of socialising these reproductive costs could also result in jobs for everyone. This perspective shows how the community can overcome the problem of lack of remuneration for reproductive work, which has traditionally been undertaken by women.

This paper will now analyse the experience of communes through a case study of the largest occupied site in Brazil, in the city of Belo Horizonte, namely the occupation in the Izidora area, where 30,000 people live. In three areas of Izidora, namely Rosa Leão, Esperança and Vitória, residents resisted various eviction orders enforced by the state and its contractors. The communities have to face unjust policing and urban violence. They see the state attempting to co-opt residents through various strategies, including using patronage systems and bad planning, but also by imitating the strategies people use in struggles and resistance fights. This paper shows the development of strategies for people power, including local sustainability in the form of agroecology, and the self-organisation of women to combat patriarchy.

## **IZIDORA: A RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATION**

The land law passed in Brazil in 1850 made access to land impossible for poor and Afro-descendant communities. This led to long-lasting resistance, as the dispossessed claimed the right to land, which served as a place of residence and of food cultivation. In practice, this meant the establishment of defensive social movements, using direct confrontation to resist evictions and to secure the permanent right to land.

In June 2013, when huge demonstrations were held in over 100 cities in Brazil, thousands of people occupied land that had been abandoned for a long time. The land had deliberately been left fallow by real estate speculators in anticipation of increasing 'land hunger' and in a bid to guarantee future profits. Nowadays, 30,000 people live in what were called the "occupied areas of Izidora", namely the settlements of Rosa Leão, Esperança and Vitória.



Fashion show at the Fashion Reference Centre in Belo Horizonte  
by women from the Rosa Leão occupation in Izidora.

The wider region was previously known as Isidoro, and was renamed Izidora after the occupations, in honour of a black woman who fought for freedom from slavery. Isidoro was the last major green belt in the city of Belo Horizonte. Here, market prices for land had escalated ahead of big investment projects such as Christ the King Cathedral and the new administrative headquarters for the state of Minas Gerais, both designed by legendary city architect and planner Oscar Niemeyer. Isidoro was meant to be a new urban development outside the city's original boundaries.

Large landowners are claiming various parts of the forest around Izidora, which for many years was a protected area. Another part is under the control of the Mangueiras Quilombo (an independent community of Afro-Brazilians whose forebears escaped from slavery). The large landowners' claims were based on acquisition through fraud and exploitation. As property values in the area increase, there is more speculation aiming to turn the land into a site for luxury apartments, serving the interests of capital.

For planning permission to be awarded for such projects, city bylaws needed to be flexible. One device under the bylaws is called the *Operação Urbana* (OU – Urban Operation) and allows for the economic exploitation of a specific area where there is a financial return for the private sector. Irregularities resulting from the implementation of the OU in Izidora abound, and there is the complete absence of any political participation by affected communities. Once the occupation by 8,000 families of three neighbourhoods (Rosa Leão, Esperança and Vitória) was under way, this put an end to the plans to build luxury apartments. Instead, one of the developers, a



company called Direcional, changed strategy and called on the federal government and the municipality to get involved in building a large low-cost housing project falling under the government's *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* scheme. Under this arrangement, Direcional would receive approximately 750 million reais (US\$ 200 million) from public coffers. It would also make huge profits from the evictions of thousands of families who had occupied urban farmland for the previous 40 years.

This is a clear example of the strong relationship between economic and political power. Capital seeks to reproduce cities according to its own dictates, conflicting with the real needs of the population, especially those of black people and women from the slums, who have the least power.

From the start, resistance in Izidora took the form of an organised strategy, involving social movements and 'people's lawyers', who educated leaders and organised assemblies with them. In these assemblies, people had the power to make decisions and mobilise.

Resistance tactics are agreed by a central panel comprising the coordinators of the three occupations, social movements, people's lawyers and technical support staff. The panel's decisions are put before the assemblies to be debated. Various tactics have been used to resist the eviction order and to mount a struggle for basic services, including mass mobilisation, negotiations, pressure on the authorities, shaping of public opinion through the media, creation of an external support network (called *Resiste Izidora*) and a range of political and cultural activities in the context of the occupations.

The communes are not represented on the panel as they have different goals. The idea behind the communes is to involve residents in the non-hierarchical development of communal life by building up prolonged resistance, fostering activities revolving around popular education, establishing cooperatives, consolidating access to culture, boosting urban agroecology, and so on. While such activities contribute to mobilisation, this was not their only objective.

The authorities do not tolerate the existence of the occupations and the communes, considering them illegal and attacking them and criminalising them. In 2013, the government of the state of Minas Gerais violently repressed a demonstration by Izidora residents. It mobilised cavalry against the people, and the face of one of the demonstrators was slashed by a sword, meaning that he required 30 stitches. In the same year, the state intended to use 5,000 troops to force an eviction, but the public mobilisation from the support network, daily demonstrations by residents and a court

ruling led to the eviction being called off on the basis that the state and the municipality had no plans to protect the lives of children and teenagers living there.

The state rescheduled the same eviction for 2015, forcing residents to demonstrate once again, despite 100 people being seriously injured and 50 being arrested. The injured included a new-born baby who choked as a result of a tear-gas canister being thrown into its pram. After this operation, the Supreme Court of Justice overturned the state's authorisation to make evictions, on the grounds that it had not created the conditions to do so without putting people's lives in danger.

The evictions have been suspended for the time being, and negotiations are continuing with the state and the municipality. However, there is no political will on the part of the authorities to recognise the occupation, which is why people had to resort to demonstrations and resistance to claim their rights in the first place.

An urban occupation is not simply a collection of homes, and is therefore unlike the hegemonic and mass-produced housing of the government's *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* programme. Instead, an occupation is a piece of self-constructed city, based on the needs and potential of those who occupy it and collectively transform it into a space full of meaning as a result of the economic conditions surrounding their reproduction. In this context, the building of houses, infrastructure and collective equipment helps facilitate the processes of community organisation, which are extremely important for the residents, especially the women.

In the Rosa Leão occupation, collective spaces such as streets and gardens, churches and the community center are used to hold women's meetings, political awareness-raising activities, assemblies, bazaars, supporters' get-togethers and collective celebrations of Christmas, Children's Day, birthdays and so on. Maintaining collective spaces, setting areas aside for future projects and even discussing the purpose of having a common space always conflict with private interests, with residents' individualism and with low-intensity property speculation.

The struggle for the maintenance of collective spaces in the Rosa Leão occupation is a struggle fought by women, either because they form the majority in the political coordination of the space or because they are the ones who use the space the most (as we shall see below). However, where they have needs and desires regarding a given space, women have to face the possibility that the narrative will be hijacked by the liberal urban agenda. This aims at organising the cities in the interest of real estate and financial markets. Furthermore, in most cases women's experience of community conflicts overlaps with gender issues.

URBAN DESENVOLPMENT COMPLETE AGAINST HUMAN RIGHTS  
10 MEGAPROJECTS BI(MI) AWARDS X 8,000 FAMILIES



## A COMMUNE FOR DISMANTLING PATRIARCHY IN OUR SPACES

The capitalist and patriarchal structures of production in the cities generated processes of urbanisation that were clearly segregated along gender lines, having specific impacts on the lives of women. At the same time, in the spaces under occupation, women have been developing strategies to resist sexist structures. Such strategies have repercussions for the course of their lives, their struggle for space and the establishment of care networks.

The majority of residents involved in the Izidora occupations are women. Women are also more active than their male counterparts in demonstrations, public hearings and community work, as well as in the practical management of the space, along with the social movements. Their abundant presence in the political struggle surrounding the occupation raises some questions that require further discussion. These include: What makes women's opinions respected in a mixed-gender collectivity? What tactics do they use within their family to negotiate their participation in assemblies and meetings? How does the inventive power of these women relate to the actual day-to-day networks among them on the ground?

This discussion about Izidora women emphasises the challenge of how to address the wealth and diversity of their life experiences. Moreover, when it comes to poor women, the vast majority of whom are black, it is important to realise that gender oppression is also accompanied by oppression based on race and class, illustrating why we need to work with models which are multidimensional.

Fashion show at the Fashion Reference Centre in Belo Horizonte by women from the Rosa Leão occupation in Izidora. Credit: Resiste Izidora. The concept of intersectionality, articulated by feminist researcher Kimberlé Crenshaw, seeks to understand the specific place of black women, who are at the intersection of various systems of oppression:

*"The idea of intersectionality seeks to capture both the structural and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more forms of discrimination or systems of subordination. It specifically addresses the manner in which racism, patriarchy, economic disadvantages and other discriminatory systems contribute to create layers of inequality that structures the relative positions of women and men, races and other groups. Moreover, it addresses the way that specific acts and policies create burdens that flow along these intersecting axes contributing actively to create a dynamic of disempowerment" (Crenshaw 2000)*

Being at the intersection of oppression means that black and poor women have a special experience of how the city works. They see how the city organises itself and how it contributes to their marginalisation. In fact, they may even have a fuller, more multifaceted perspective of the city than others because they circulate between the formal city on the one hand, to take care of activities related to their economic survival or to access services and exercise their rights, and the informal city on the other, where they live.

*“Being on the sidelines is part of the whole, but outside the mainstream. As black Americans living in a small town in Kentucky, the train tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across these rails there were paved streets, shops we could not enter, restaurants in which we could not eat, and people we could not look directly in the face. Here we could work as maids, as doormen, as prostitutes, as long as they were in a service capacity. We could enter this world, but we could not live there. We always had to return to the other side, to the trails, tents and abandoned houses on the edge of town.”* (Hooks 1984: 10)

At the same time, an intersectional approach invites us to explore the social relations, networks and identities associated with the resistance in these locations and develop an understanding of the city and the production of space from this perspective.

Women face obstacles to their political participation, and initially seem less able to make decisions about projects that have an impact on the urban space. Historically, urban planning allowed itself to be dictated by the needs of capitalist production and of autonomous men who did not have any particular family ties. The city disregarded the needs of those professional women who also had to look after the sick and older people, take children to school and feed the family. In this sense the city was not neutral and had a strong gender bias (Muxí 2009).

Even in emerging spaces of resistance, such as occupations, women face multiple challenges in constructing and making sense of such spaces based on their needs, desires and perspectives.

Women are the head of the household in over a third of Brazilian families, yet they earn an average of 30.5% of white men's wages and are subjected to more unemployment, informal and precarious work than men. They bear the brunt of the housing deficit, segregation and poor city planning (IPEA 2011). Living in poverty in slums far away from employment options cuts women off from access to jobs and basic public services such as daycare centres, schools and primary healthcare centres. This explains why many women support occupations, build communities and resist the offensives of the real estate market associated with the state.

How do these women think and project their needs and desires onto an emergent urban space that is under dispute? This was a question raised at workshops attended by women involved in the Rosa Leão occupation, Where their priorities were discussed in the context of the community's political struggle, following intensive deliberation and exchanges of life stories.

Besides the struggle against eviction, the women pointed out the following priorities: the maintenance of collective spaces for community organisation and work; the formation of care networks and women's groups where problems such as depression, loneliness and violence could be shared and resolved; the promotion of youth activities and support with regard to concerns about the death and imprisonment of friends and family; and how to access public services like nurseries, schools and primary healthcare. Women emphasised the need to provide preventive and prenatal care themselves in the absence of gynaecologists in their areas.

The city refuses to recognise the occupied areas and the need to service them, regarding them as temporary and illegal, pending the eviction of the residents. The only public service it provides is a militarised form of policing by the specialised battalions of the military police. No census of the residents is undertaken, and so there is no assessment of the need for other public services. The illegality of the occupations is used as an excuse to deprive the residents of access to any services.

When the state fails to provide basic care, we know that the burden falls even more on women, especially on those who cannot afford to pay for others to perform the relevant work.

In the case of the Rosa Leão occupation, primary healthcare has been denied to participants, even when the health centre was in the same building as the social assistance reference centre (CRAS). Women revolted by this situation rose up on 8 March 2016, demonstrating and occupying the CRAS to highlight their rightful claims to healthcare for residents. As a result, the health centre started to deal with emergency cases, despite pressures on its budget and its team being overloaded. However, the municipality continued to maintain its position of refusing to recognise the residents' right to healthcare. Only in 2017, during the transitional government, were these rights formally recognised, but there are still unresolved problems with implementation.

Public health in Brazil is a free universal right. Usually basic healthcare services are provided by family health teams. Primary healthcare units attend to common cases,

and then provide backup home visits where necessary. These units are also supposed to offer residents treatment for serious infectious diseases.

When occupations are not recognised by the city, their residents are excluded from the healthcare system. Since in the case of Izidora, there is no basic healthcare unit nearby, residents have to utilise emergency services or use their relatives' addresses to access care at a health centre. The family health teams do not enter areas under occupation and there are no home visits to such areas, and even ambulances do not enter them. This has even meant that people have died because of the lack of care.

As a result, when it comes to health problems, people involved in the occupations look after each other, with the women in particular taking turns to provide assistance to older people and children. However, this care is inadequate and insufficient, as demonstrated by the many problems arising from self-medication and failures in assisting the sick and disabled. While the community does make some use of complementary medicine, this is practised by individuals who have built up trust in these methods and passed their experience down the generations. However, it is incorrect to attribute the spread of traditional or alternative medicine to the absence of public healthcare. Often the use of complementary medicine has more of a cultural basis in traditional knowledge and the practice of agroecology.

Access to electricity, water and sanitation are also of a very precarious and informal nature. Some residents connect up to these services illegally. However, such connections are dangerous and can cause electrical fires or electric shocks or result in water and soil contamination.

Some of these services can be met through agroecological applications. For example, some homes in the occupation use an agroecological system for sanitation. Known as TVAP, it consists of a group of banana trees that are able to filter sewage water. Many homes use solar heating, which has been popularised as a result of communal training programmes. Such systems are relatively affordable and help us think about alternatives to using fossil fuels.

Although women organise themselves in the insurgent spaces of the occupations to challenge and put pressure on the state, alternative collective solutions to daily problems have been constructed without the state's assistance.

The organisation of care networks has emerged as central to the resistance, due to both the maturity of the women's organisations and the mass strategy emerging from the occupation which prioritises solutions to everyday problems. Women are involved

in communal activities and spaces, such as self-managed women's cooperatives, communal nurseries and community centres.

As part of the Rosa Leão occupation, the community centre for people power is currently being built in honour of Maria da Conceição, better known as Zoca, a figure in the local struggle who was active in the 1980s. ZOCA is also the acronym for "Occupied Zone of Culture and Art". The Zoca Centre has been built on the site of the former community shack, reflecting the desire to consolidate the links with the history of resistance in Izidora and affirming the cultural life of the occupations.



Working together to build the Occupied Zone of Culture and Art (ZOCA)

The political participation of women fundamentally depends on how issues of family and community care, family reproduction and the reproduction of life can be addressed. Without communal power, it is inconceivable for these problems to be resolved individually. Poor women in a patriarchal society cannot afford to pay or outsource care services. Instead they need to build communal alternatives that draw on everyday networks to achieve their emancipation.

It has always been difficult to map and visualise the activities of the network of women because their activities were seen as a phenomenon of daily life, belonging to the private sphere. However, we were able to learn more about these networks by attending everyday workshops and a very enlightening assembly which were held in the Rosa Leão occupation in August 2016.



Some prominent women occupation leaders have had to cope with attacks of a personal and sexist nature, often in the form of gossip. Such attacks pose a challenge to collective ideals relating to organising work and to women's attempts to balance leadership roles and material survival. For example, one accusation was that the main coordinator had acquired cars and a driving licence, a maid and a very big hairstyle.

In the assembly, women involved in the care network stepped up to the microphone to determinedly stand up for the coordinator. One explained that the coordinator had paid for her driving lessons using credit-card instalments. Another explained that she was helping the coordinator with housekeeping tasks on a reciprocal basis, since she knew that the coordinator had to attend a lot of meetings alongside her caregiving activities. A further witness explained that she had been involved in taking care of the coordinator's hair and felt it was important for the coordinator to feel confident and self-assured about her appearance when representing the community. So many voices were raised in her defence that it became clear that all the gossip was misplaced, and that the questions surrounding leadership, care-related matters and participation were all political.

The women holding coordination roles also take part in the care network. This network is feminist in that it supports the women of Izidora with regard to self-organisation, political participation and surviving in the face of patriarchal structures that continue to have an impact on their daily lives.

The local struggle of women for a dignified life is necessarily a struggle to achieve an emancipated space. They face various forms of oppression: neoliberal urban planning, political exclusion, inequality in the workplace, gender violence, racism and patriarchy in the community. Both their self-organisation and the care networks provide a vital daily defence against this oppression.

The prominent participation of these women in the organisation and leadership of spaces such as the Rosa Leão occupation provides the seed for a popular, structured and feminist urban reform project. It is popular in that it is thought through and built up by the people and then discussed collectively and supported by 'people's architects'. This participation entails no artificial separation of the project and the construction site, unlike what normally happens under neoliberal and modernist urban planning (Ferro 2015). It is structural in that it points to the struggle for the right to housing and the right to be part of the city, which is understood not only as entailing access to urban land, public facilities and urban infrastructure, but also as involving direct

participation in the production and material reproduction of cities. And it is feminist insofar as it consolidates the political participation of women from the urban suburbs and makes them subjects who are no longer excluded from determining their collective future.

It paves the way for the struggle to extend collective spaces and helps them boost their self-organisation. This struggle has seen the establishment and defence of spaces for daycare centres, community centres, schools, training venues and other community facilities.

The depatriarchalisation of the area is interwoven into the networks of women creating emancipated zones and establishing relationships of protection and mutual reinforcement. It also arises when taking the lead in the debate with the state and the community about local priorities.

## **A COMMUNE FOR AGROECONOMY AND SUSTAINABLE SPACES**

The Izidora occupations represent the expansion of the metropolitan urban area of one of the largest state capitals in Brazil, the city of Belo Horizonte. They are located in the last area of green-belt land around the city, in a forest of about 950 hectares (2,350 acres) full of springs and preserved indigenous vegetation.

In this ecosystem, animal breeding and plant cultivation take place against the backdrop of the problems faced by the urban periphery. This apparently rural space is not subjected to state planning and infrastructure. This brings out some contradictions within the occupations that have to be dealt with by the movements.

*“The process of environmental education, the monitoring of rural practices and the preservation of forests and water resources are essential in order to protect the balance of the environment in these areas, thereby helping people who often have a deep connection with the land and agriculture, and this monitoring is mainly used to create a beneficial common area based on the knowledge already possessed by the occupiers.”*  
(Fonseca/Tofanelli/Luz 2015: 10) (our translation)



Agroecology in Izidora

In this way, agroecology is used to develop communal activities, thereby resolving day-to-day problems. They combined the right to housing with the right to a healthy diet and environment. Initially the mapping of the fields was carried out by the residents of the Vitória occupation. The residents experimented with planting a huge variety of food-bearing species as well as with animals.

After the mapping, the occupiers held popular education meetings, knowledge- and seed-sharing events and the practical development of various permaculture and agro-ecological methods. They established a producers' forum for each of the occupations and used these to step up exchanges and to build unity among the occupiers.

In the experimental phase, permaculture and agroecology provided solutions offering an alternative form of city living. It helped resolve problems such as unemployment and low incomes, as farmers were able to plant, distribute and sell their agricultural produce in city street markets. Some residents, to compensate for the absence of sanitation, began to use Evapo-transpiration Tank (TVAP) methods instead of resorting to the use of septic tanks. This involved the construction of green cesspools that are part of a depletion filtration system. To ensure an electricity supply for water heating, the occupiers have turned to solar heating plates. These innovations are just a few examples of how agroecology has offered solutions for the absence or inadequacy of urban services, resulting in a healthier and more harmonious co-existence between occupiers and the environment.

This experience, arising from the greatest land conflict in Brazil, brings together struggles for housing and urban agriculture. It adds a new dimension to the housing conflict, namely the productive perspective. This seeks new uses for the occupied land and extends the struggle from one over housing to a struggle for land and the transformation of the city.

The recovery of urban land, with its use also derived from agriculture, helps reveal how the process can be both productive and inclusive, giving identity and purpose to individuals who previously fell below the radar. It offers a sustainable high-quality alternative way of life in the large urban centres.

Agroecology values the knowledge of occupiers of urban land, who in turn become more active and involved in the political life of the community. In addition, the agro-ecological communes constitute a new collective identity within the occupations, establishing new social relations and a consolidation of the link between residents and the land. This link makes it possible to give the soil an additional new use, and (re) utilises communal knowledge (Fonseca / Tofanelli / Luz 2015).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The urban resistance front in Brazil is marked by a wide range of experiences. Here we have reported, admittedly very partially, on the experience of the communes in a key area of resistance, namely that of the Izidora occupations.

The Izidora residents are proud to live in the occupation, despite the surroundings and the creation of the communes, by noting their direct day-to-day involvement and the voluntary nature of their actions.

Also significant is their response to the state's efforts to negate the occupations by substituting its own popular housing programme called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida*. Through their struggles, the people of Izidora have shown that housing and day-to-day living involve more than just a set of walls and a roof. It entails having space to plant produce, work, celebrate, have exchanges and live within a community.

Several other experiences indicate the unity of the occupiers in establishing community kitchens, assemblies in occupations, people's schools and the *multirões*, which are voluntary teams which help with reciprocal self-construction. Another dimension of the experience is the sacrosanct promotion of the concept of well-being (*buen estar*) and the celebration of the cultural diversity of Latin American people in cities.

What do these experiences have in common? There are three notable dimensions in the process of political involvement of the subjects engaged in radical transformation and the

establishment of people power. In the first place, there is the dimension of day-to-day life and subjectivities, involving the creation of structures to ensure the collectivisation of the material reproduction of life in urban spaces, which are aimed at combating patriarchy, extractivism and individualism. The second dimension is that of political education and day-to-day popular education, based on capitalising on local knowledge, and the construction of a transformative praxis, based on consolidating collective autonomies and direct action. The third dimension is the construction of broader projects, in both the city and the countryside, emerging from the concrete contradictions in people's lives and the collective transformation solutions offered by the occupations.

This three-dimensional political practice interfaces with the real and concrete needs of day-to-day life and points to a radical transformation of power. Such practices arise in particular from a context of resistance to the oppressive state. They challenge public policies through their reappropriation and transformation. They build a new type of power which is not restricted to institutions but which draws on people's collective everyday lives, and in this sense is both against and beyond the state.

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# IV

## SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVES TO OLIGOPOLISTIC MODERNISATION: FOOD PROVISIONING, SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND INTERCULTURALITY IN QUITO'S URBAN MARKETS

By Ana Rodríguez and Patric Hollenstein

All forms of trade in this market are based on agreements between colleagues and workers. This is why it's also called the 'popular market', because it is collective, not held for the benefit of a single person or a company.

Martha, leader of Mercado San Roque, 2014.



A street adjacent to San Roque Market where informal vendors sell fresh fruits and vegetables.

San Roque Market (SRM) in Quito represents a source of income for just over 5,000 family-based trader businesses and informal workers. Merchants trade a wide variety of fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, seafood, medicinal herbs, furniture, clothing and traditional crafts there. Indigenous women and members of their families shell large piles of grain and peas, whereas male porters manually load and unload goods. The market meets a full third of the city's internal food requirements, and its wholesale and retail traders constitute the city's second most important fresh food market. Despite this long-standing strategic position in Quito's food supply system, SRM is facing several threats, namely systematic neglect by the local government, the rapid expansion of corporate food retailers and associated transformation changes in consumers' behaviour, and urbanistic modernisation policies that leave no room for popular economies located in Quito's historical centre. However, aware of this shifting environment and the external challenges they face, several grassroots associations of SRM traders set up a second-tier organisation, called the Front for the Defence and Modernisation of San Roque Market (FDMSRM), to protect their businesses and the market as a whole. In this paper we analyse the situation in which FDMSRM emerged to resist external, hegemonic pressures. Drawing on a 'modernisation' narrative, FDMSRM's agenda reflects the traders' ideas for improving their family businesses. We also show that claims on the urban territory are inseparable from the notion of the 'right to work', often invoked by traders' representatives. For FDMSRM, the right to work is a demand for economic inclusion and a defence of popular forms of economic organisation based on small-scale family businesses and extended family networks.



The first section of our paper describes the historical development of popular food trading in markets owned by local governments and shows how decentralised food networks are increasingly being confronted by and related to the growth of corporate supermarket chains. The second section briefly describes daily trading at SRM. The third section describes the relationship between urban transformation processes, urban planning and SRM, emphasising the role that the FDMSRM plays in raising the traders' profile and organising their resistance to capitalist urban restructuring and modernisation policies proposed by the local government. The fourth and final section draws some conclusions about SRM's potential role in the discourse on public markets. It also examines the dispute on the future development of the respective urban territory, which centres around the right to urban territory and the right to work.

## **UNDERSTANDING ECUADOR'S FOOD SYSTEM AND POPULAR MARKET ECONOMY**

Ecuador's food market is at a historic crossroads. On the one hand, hundreds of periodic and daily markets distributed all over the country represent the backbone of Ecuador's domestic food system, connecting approximately 800,000 peasants, 227,000 merchants and a population of 16.4 million consumers (INEC 2001, 2010). Almost all of the fruit, vegetables, grain and cereals consumed by Ecuadorian households and lunch restaurants serving homemade-style meals are traded in these markets. On the other hand, large supermarket chains have been rapidly expanding across the country since the 1990s, a decade characterised by pro-market reforms and, towards the end of that period, a financial crisis. Although the supermarkets' own food supply chains are themselves linked to the market, there are growing indications of a deep transformation of the food system that will pit small-to-medium-sized family-based trading units and their relatively decentralised networks against large capitalist corporations. This section describes the historical development of the structure and functioning of the market system vis-à-vis the expansion of large supermarket chains.

Food trading in Ecuador relies on links between rural intermediaries who gather harvests from primary producers, wholesale merchants and retailers who sell the produce in urban markets. First, rural markets concentrate foodstuffs in increasingly larger commercial centres until they reach regional wholesale markets spread across Ecuador. From there, they are then redistributed throughout the country, but especially to large urban centres, such as Guayaquil, Quito and Cuenca. Urban markets, which

receive food first hand from regional wholesale markets, function as intra-urban food distribution centres. Despite this position in the overall system, however, they do not specialise solely in wholesale trading, but serve a wide range of customers, including more specialised retail markets, lunch restaurants, general food stores, greengrocers, itinerant traders, supermarket chains, the urban food industry and urban households. The SRM is just one such market. Importantly, most markets and, concomitantly, their stalls, are public property regulated and controlled by the municipal government.<sup>1</sup> In short, popular markets represent crucial linkages in the country's food system, most notably as a connection between rural and urban trading structures.

Yet the social, economic and historical interpretation of these markets is not easy, due to their varied meanings and differentiated opportunities offered to social groups and the regional particularities of trading structures.<sup>2</sup>

One key social group in Ecuador's food system comprises often indigenous small- or medium-scale producers, who are increasingly dependent on a female workforce. They have long endured exploitation by another social group, white *mestizo* (mixed ancestry) townspeople, who engage in unequal exchanges with indigenous producers (Burgos 1971, Villavicencio 1973). Historically, traders have used ethnicity and class to exploit indigenous, rural peasants, lowering prices as much as possible.<sup>3</sup>

While there is little doubt about the mechanisms of exploitation within popular food-trading chains, two further points have to be made. Firstly, unequal exchange relations have not developed in a public policy vacuum. Weak agrarian reforms and the anti-rural and/or pro-urban/industrial bias created by Ecuador's import substitution industrialisation (ISI) system underlie such exchange structures. Microeconomic exploitation at popular markets is a product of an exploitative macroeconomic structure shaped by the country's economic policies. Secondly, major regional differences impact how popular markets function in general. Let us consider one example, in the territory of the Central Sierra, with its epicentre in the province of Tungurahua. Here, due to a more equitable landholding structure and family networks that transcend the elsewhere typically fraught relations between rural-based production and urban-

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1 The notion of a uniform national market is an illusion born out of excessive focus on abstract neoclassical or politico-economic models.

2 The notion of a uniform national market is an illusion born out of an excessive focus on abstract neoclassical or politico-economic models.

3 There is extensive literature on similar commercial exploitation, e.g. 'distress sales' (Olsen, 1996) and 'forced commerce' (Bhaduri 1973), on the Indian subcontinent (see also Crow, 2011; Harriss-White 1996, 2008) and Africa (Clark, 1994; Hart, 1982).

based trade, there is a less polarised commercial structure between production and exchange (Hollenstein 2011, Carrión 2011).<sup>4</sup> In this instance, far from depressing rural communities, popular markets have served as economic drivers energising provincial rural areas (Larrea 2011, Ospina et al. 2011, Ospina / Hollenstein 2015, Hollenstein / Ospina 2014).

Since neither the industrial growth anticipated by the architects of the ISI system nor the predicted abundant demand for urban labour ever materialised, during the latter half of the 20th century, and particularly after strong influxes of migrants in the 1970s, markets became economic anchors for rural populations migrating to Ecuador's urban centres from more economically stagnant parts of the countryside. Consequently, the final quarter of the 20th century gave rise to a growing economic population and widespread practices that are still evolving today. Since then, 'popular' markets have been nurtured by hundreds of thousands of small trading units drawing almost exclusively on family labour. These units operate on an intrafamilial division of labour centred around women and their daughters, complemented by their husbands' and sons' work as loaders or drivers.

According to official statistics, in 2010 there were 227,000 people or households nationwide working as independent traders (INEC 2010).<sup>5</sup> According to the Municipality of Quito, today there are 20,000 merchants working at its periodic markets and fair. In addition, countless itinerant traders sell their wares away from markets or on the city's streets. In all, 66% of the vendors at these markets are women, but only 5% receive any remuneration for their work (INEC 2010). In addition, 99.9% of commercial units are of the smallest size, i.e. have between 1 and 9 employees (INEC, 2012). However, statistics on remuneration patterns indicate that these units are best defined as pure family ventures or one-person enterprises, since hardly anyone who works in popular trading enterprises receives a salary.

By contrast, Ecuador's modern corporate food and retailing industries, which emerged in the 1970s, grew stronger throughout the 1980s by focusing on the burgeoning middle and upper classes in the country's metropolitan centres. During this time, supermarket chains expanded into 'modern' urban neighbourhoods with greater purchasing power. However, as elsewhere in Latin America, it was only in the 1990s

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4 See Harriss-White (2008) and the aforementioned literature on the Indian subcontinent for a wider discussion of the relationship between the spheres of production and circulation, as well as of the role played by land ownership patterns.

5 This is only slightly fewer than the number of workplaces created by the shrimp industry, the most important other economic sector of employment.

that supermarkets really took hold and increased both in number and in market share. Today, the sector is dominated by four supermarket chains: *Mega Santa María* with 7% of the market, *Associated Industrial Stores* (TIA) with 14%, *Corporación El Rosado* with 28%, and *Corporación Favorita* with a 48% share. In 1990, these four supermarket chains owned 54 stores, though this figure rose to 85 by 1998, 160 by 2004, 356 by 2016 and 481 in 2017. There are now 59 supermarkets in Quito. Their number passed that of the city's 54 public markets for the first time in 2005. Their combined sales have risen from approximately \$300 million (in 2000) to almost \$4.5 billion in 2015 (Hollenstein, forthcoming).

Now that some markets have several supermarkets nearby, the pressure imposed by big capital in the city is not just being felt economically and spatially. Supermarket chains are no longer only targeting middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods, but are rapidly penetrating lower-income areas, while restaurant and grocery store industries are resorting to new wholesale formats. While no supermarket has yet opened in the vicinity of SRM, its traditional clientele is being exposed to an increasingly aggressive price war being waged by supermarket chains.<sup>6</sup>

Despite supermarket chains' rapidly increasing market clout, the overall situation in the Ecuadorian household food sector shows that popular food markets like SRM still command a substantial (albeit falling) market share. In 2012, markets accounted for 30% of household spending on food in Ecuador, with local neighbourhood shops accounting for a further 48%, and other establishments 14%. Back then, supermarkets accounted for just 11% of direct household spending on food. But there is a huge discrepancy between these figures and other statistical sources regarding supermarket chains' market share. Contrasting with the household expenditure cited above, supermarkets' overall food market share lied already at 40% at the beginning of the 21st century (United States Department of Agriculture 2003).

Experience in other countries shows that when supermarkets command a high share of the overall food market, other commercial actors, e.g. local shops, and specialist greengrocers suffer (Reardon / Berdegue 2002). In Ecuador, the impact is not yet as clear cut, which does not mean the early effects of supermarket expansion on the country's traditional food market actors cannot be traced. One noteworthy factor is the supermarkets' aggressive strategy of 'besieging' traditional markets by locating their outlets close by. At the retail market level, the *Mega Santa María* chain is a case

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6 Supermarket chains offer fresh fruit and vegetables at 25% off on Tuesday, the day on which wholesale and retail markets and their clientele (traditional greengrocers) procure fresh produce.

in point. At the wholesale level, *Corporación Favorita* has created a new commercial, wholesale supermarket format, dubbed *Titán*, targeting and catering for some of the popular markets' most important clients, such as greengrocers, restaurants and local shops. The first *Titán* supermarket opened its doors in 2017 next to Quito's wholesale market. In recent decades, supermarket chains have substantially expanded and concentrated their market power.

However, it would be wrong to infer a linear logic of capitalist penetration into Ecuador's domestic food market. For one thing, popular traders and their networks are not passive economic actors. On the contrary, they strive to adapt their economic strategies to a changing organisational environment. For example, many wholesale traders at SRM buy directly from producers in order to maintain or gain a price advantage over traders relying on longer supply chains and supermarket chains, which have built shorter supply lines of their own. For another thing, the government plays an anything but marginal role in restructuring domestic food markets. One interesting example of its involvement, at national level, is Ecuador's Superintendency for the Control of Market Power (SCPM), a government organisation set up by Rafael Correa's 'Pink Tide' government (Chiasson-Lebel 2016) to identify and break up market monopolies. After an investigation into the supermarket sector, the SCPM set guidelines aimed at regulating the relationship between supermarket chains and their suppliers, prohibiting several types of market power abuse and obliging supermarket chains to include more suppliers from popular and solidarity economy sectors. While there is no specific regulation at the municipal level to protect popular markets against expansion by corporate retail capitals, the local government and its policies are frequent targets of large-scale protests organised by traders' associations. In short, market politics will play their part in shaping Ecuador's future food sector, as – crucially – will SRM's resistance against corporate and urbanistic modernisation.

## TRADING AT SAN ROQUE MARKET

SRM represents a cornerstone of Quito's food supply system, which comprises some 54 retail markets and food fairs. As one of two markets including substantial wholesale trading, SRM also supplies a wide range of customers, such as restaurants, local food stores, greengrocers, corporate retailers, street traders and households. Compared to the second largest strategic site for food sales, the Wholesale Market of Quito (WMQ), SRM stands out as a popular site with a very long-standing presence in the city centre, whereas the WMQ was built in 1981 as part of a combined effort by local government, other State entities, as well as private shareholders to modernise food trading in the city.

A significant proportion of the products sold at SRM stem from regional wholesale markets in Ambato or Santo Domingo, both mid-sized cities located a few hours away from Quito, or from smaller distribution markets closer to the city. As recent and yet unpublished studies show, MSR integrates not only specialized traders, but also a considerable number of farmers who sell their produce to their wholesale partners at MSR, but also directly to greengrocers and urban consumers. Freshly harvested tubers, vegetables, fruit and legumes, including many traditional Andean alimentary goods like *mashua*, *ocas*, maize, *mellocos*, fava beans and *chochos*, are available from Ecuador's highlands all year round. Other produce, such as bananas, papayas, pineapples, watermelons, *guanábanas* (i.e. soursop or graviola), passion fruit, oranges, white sapotes (Mexican apples), mamey sapotes and many others, arrive from the lowlands. An equally varied selection of meats and seafood is also available at SRM. Dry foods, such as nuts, grains, rice, oil, pasta and noodles, along with other Ecuadorian and imported produce are traded in another section of the market. Outside the main building, artisanal dressmakers and shoemakers sew, repair, modify and sell used clothing and footwear. New clothes, along with hand-crafted furniture, industrially manufactured pots and pans, and other home supplies account for another major proportion of SRM's product range.

The marketing of fresh food is controlled by approximately 3,000 family-run trading businesses, which may be of substantial size, but – tellingly – seldom hire employees other than family members, who do not receive any salary. While they keep records of their assets and liabilities, they do not have a sufficiently detailed accounting system to allow them to set prices based on a certain level of profit or calculate gross and net profits. Instead, the prices charged usually depend on complex observations of 'movements' in the market, i.e. noting the number of potential buyers present and their reaction to the first price announced, prompting them either to buy or walk away

in search of a better offer. If the latter tendency prevails, traders adjust their prices, to lure customers back.

In order to operate successfully, these family-run businesses need to establish a certain level of control and stability in a constantly fluctuating trading environment. They do this by adopting various individual and collective strategies. Firstly, upstream (supplier) and downstream (customers) links in the supply chain aim to stabilise the quantity of goods to be bought and sold. One risk every trader runs is overestimating demand, so efforts are made to minimise that risk by nurturing stable business relations. Secondly, having local trading circuits within the same market helps to reduce the uncertainty of buying and selling. For example, wholesalers sell to retailers trading at the same market, and informal street vendors sell their wares nearby. Other forms of endogenous trading circuits take the form of reciprocal 'market trading' exchanges, one example linking traders to SRM's 'food court' section, where typical Ecuadorian dishes are prepared. So traders sell ingredients to popular restaurants, which sell breakfasts and lunches back to the traders, who often work night or early morning shifts 10 to 12 hours long. A third strategy designed to control and regulate the market environment entails interlinking the spatial and social organisation of SRM. Finally, grassroots traders' associations play a crucial role in the social – as opposed to private and public governance – regulation of the marketplace, as will be shown in greater detail in the next section.

## **URBAN PLANNING AND SOCIAL ORGANISATION AT SRM**

The previous section suggests that market trading is embedded in regulatory social arrangements or institutions, such as kin-based selling and traders' associations. In other words, daily trading at SRM does not take place in a social vacuum, but is sustained by an intricate social structure. Whereas some social relations are fundamental for actual daily trading in the narrow sense (i.e. buying and selling), other social relations help to foster trading in a wider sense, subject to a set of basic preconditions not manifest in each and every transaction (socially regulated in their own right, as explained above), but fundamental to the existence of the social group of traders. One such basic precondition is control over the territory where SRM operates, spreading well beyond the market building itself. While trading is confined more or less to the market building itself plus many adjacent streets, the bulking, storage and grading of produce takes place in the wider neighbourhood, which is where the traders live and use other services on a daily basis.

Taking a broader perspective, it is therefore important to frame the market's social and territorial organisation within the context and objectives of the municipality's urban planning policy. Since managing urban spaces is a core competence of local government, the administration also claims the same territory, albeit for different reasons, such as to conserve the historical centre of Quito or ensure that the city is functionally arranged, with large trading centres located on the outskirts of the city in order to avoid traffic and health or sanitation problems. The *de facto* and *de jure* authority of these policies over the land in question has prompted popular mobilisation, struggles and negotiations between the local government and traders' organisations over access to that urban space. This section recounts the recent process of social organisation against the backdrop of the development of urban planning policies that threaten the presence of popular and indigenous traders in the centre of the city.

In the 1970s, many inhabitants of the historical centre were indigenous people, who migrated there during the exodus following failed rural development policies. For millions of peasant families, markets represented an important entry point to urban life. In SRM's case, the migration process, i.e. arriving, settling, working, living and reproducing at least some of the indigenous community institutions that had previously governed the migrants' daily life in the countryside, were all concentrated in the historical centre of Quito. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, the first San Roque Market – at the intersection of Chimborazo and Rocafuerte Street, the adjacent 24 de Mayo Avenue and the nearby Cumandá Bus Terminal, all of which were interconnected in the heart of the historical city centre – played a crucial role in accommodating temporary and permanent migrants from Ecuador's central highlands, serving as a place where they could ease into urban living.

We, the indigenous people, arrived in the 1970s, looking for work. There was already oil in the country, they said. We wanted to work, so many of us came to the city where we knew other members of our community, without knowing what it was going to be like. I went to Guayaquil and then came back to Quito. It was hard, but there were people who helped us, because the government offered no help at all. And there was indeed work. I worked as a porter. Before they set up the market here, we were already in the Hospedería Campesina, living in San Roque and loading produce at street fairs (Interview with a trader named José Antonio Guapi in 2013).





Indigenous traders on 24 de Mayo Avenue

Newspapers regularly picked up on the constant crowding in the historical centre. And while public opinion was not unaware of the economic slump endured for decades by Ecuador's rural population, large-scale migration by the rural population was nevertheless depicted as an 'invasion' of organised urban life. Due to its location, 24 de Mayo Avenue was converted from a petty bourgeois area into an open-street fair dominated by walking vendors. This move was the first sign of the municipality's intent to reorganise popular trade in the historical centre. But other restructuring projects had to be completed before this first milestone in a conflict-ridden process could be reached. Sixto Durán-Ballén, an architect who served as Quito's mayor between 1970 and 1978, did a lot to trigger the 'modernisation' of the city by planning and executing several public works that would come to define the San Roque neighbourhood and market, such as three tunnels and a multi-lane highway connecting the northern and southern parts of the city.

Once these works were finished, Álvaro Pérez, the city's next mayor (1978–1982) began constructing a new market building on the periphery of the 24 de Mayo / Cumandá complex, on the outskirts of the historical centre. The opening of New San Roque Market (NSRM), located at the intersection of the old 24 de Mayo Avenue and the new highway, ignited a tussle between the municipality and traders and their organisations over the organisation and use of the space in question. The first milestone in that tussle was when traders organised themselves and left their improvised stalls on 24 de Mayo Avenue and in the adjacent streets in order to occupy the new market building after NSRM's inauguration in 1981.

As part of a wider strategy to replace the traditional indigenous SRM with a 'modern' market, the municipality of Quito not only built and inaugurated NSRM, but that same year also opened the Wholesale Market of Quito (WMQ) to serve as its primary supplier. At the time, the WMQ was the first commercial centre specialising in wholesale trade, and it was strategically located on the southern edge of the city. The municipality then tried to establish the WMQ as the only centre for wholesale trading by reducing SRM's role within the marketing system, but with little success. One of the strategies adopted by the local authorities involved transferring traders from SRM to the WMQ in a bid to free the historical centre of economic activity and oust a population that was deemed merely to cause urban planning issues and hinder the exploitation of the city's cultural heritage. A subsequent mayor, Paco Moncayo (who served from 2000 to 2009) played an active role in this, because trading in the historical city centre was reorganised by his government, which created popular shopping centres to relocate informal merchants spread throughout a number of historic streets. While not directly affecting SRM, this policy did curb its dynamism by breaking its commercial ties with street merchants and vendors.

Over the past 20 years, the local government's management of the city centre has focused on restoring, preserving and conserving its heritage, its streets and squares, churches and colonial convents, its archaeological sites, museums and public spaces. In stark contrast to its recognition and the new role of the historical centre as a tourist attraction, the media have widely represented SRM as one of the ugliest and most dangerous and unhygienic parts of the city, a ruined fringe attraction tainting the historical centre (see also Kingman 2012). Neglect of the market's infrastructure, the proximity of a large prison and local governments' tolerance of prostitution and drug dealing in the area all add to this overall negative image. Following such lengthy neglect, public opinion also turned against SRM, which in June 2011 was declared the 'anti-miracle' of Quito by a local newspaper (*Últimas Noticias* 2011).

More recent urban transformations and the urban development plan for Quito's historical centre have ramped up the threats hanging over SRM:

- > the market's probable relocation to the city's northern periphery, and
- > the transformation of the city's largest prison, located just in front of the market, into a luxury hotel.

These multiple attacks on SRM heightened its leaders' awareness of the need to keep the market in its traditional neighbourhood, of the role it plays in the city's metabolism, and of extensive gentrification pressures on the historical centre. This awareness has duly translated into organised resistance.

Those who threaten to oust us from this space have opened our eyes to the need to be organised and have the information and capability to react in time. We, the leaders of associations and the Defence Front, must then take to the streets to enlist the support of thousands of people and enter into a political struggle, devise a strategy for defending our market, highlight its values, what it means to the city, the fact that it serves as a great home for so many workers, provides good, beautiful, cheap produce. We still lack representation in a number of areas, such as porters, but little by little we are making headway and incorporating others besides traders, e.g. transporters and merchants from both inside and outside SRM (Interview with a trader at the SRM, 2014).

When threatened by external processes, traders' associations emerge as major political players. The Front for the Defence and Modernisation of San Roque Market (FDMSRM) was founded in 2003. As a second-tier organisation, it unites approximately 13 trader organisations, all opposed to the market's relocation, behind an option for SRM's further and future development (Rodríguez 2017). Although the FDMSRM represents the majority of traders, it is not the only organisation to have taken a stance in the dispute on SRM's future. Another dozen traders' associations, mostly representing wholesalers, agree with the idea of relocating the market to a more marginal location that would offer larger traders greater opportunities to scale up their businesses. This clash of interests and other issues related to tightly-knit trader and/or personal networks have been important sources of conflict and fuelled mistrust, proving decisive in several elections of the market's presidential team.<sup>7</sup>

The FDMSRM is continuing to stand firm over the market continuing to occupy its current space. It identifies potentially threatening urban processes and then devises and implements strategies designed to counter them, supported by the knowledge network Red de Saberes (Rodríguez 2017). Over the past five years, several meetings, forums and conferences have taken place in the market, playing host to authoritative representatives and leaders of indigenous peasant organisations (like the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, CONAIE) and representatives of local government and national authorities (such as the national Undersecretary

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7 The market's presidential team is directly elected every two years by the traders themselves. Although a disproportionate number of male traders are usually elected, women too are frequently elected as market presidents, as are the presidents of traders' associations.

Office, responsible for urban development), various experts, academics, and heads of NGOs from all over the world working on rural-urban relations and urban planning. Their presence and furtherance of their own interests all heighten the profile of the market and the struggle over it. In 2016, the FDMSRM and its allies also staged an anti-Habitat-III event attended by an indigenous mayor, a representative of the Unitary Confederation of Retail Merchants and Autonomous Workers of Ecuador (CUCOM-ITAE) and the Marxist scholar David Harvey.

## **CITIES FOR THE MAJORITY: DISPUTING THE RIGHTS TO TERRITORY AND WORK**

At present, SRM finds itself at a crossroads. Several groups of traders, workers, the local government and other actors – both internal and external – are struggling to define the future organisation and functioning of the market and its multidimensional role within Quito's urban context. SRM continues to face pressure from capitalist urban transformation in various forms, such as the museification and touristification of the historical city centre and general commercial gentrification. In addition, the local government has not implemented any specific policies regarding its market system for several decades, other than very limited infrastructural and decorative improvements. Consequently, traders' associations have filled the gap in establishing regulations and implementing public policies, organised the market internally and made sure that the slowly decaying infrastructure did not fall into total disrepair. As one trader representative explained in an interview: "without the associations there would no longer be any markets in Quito".

At the same time, not all traders' representatives have acted in accordance with democratic values. Uses and abuses of power designed to benefit individual traders and their networks have been part of the daily struggle for survival at SRM. Informal workers hired by wholesale and retail traders have not yet set up their own organisations and are therefore not heard and represented in multilateral negotiations. SRM's status quo is symptomatic of the 54 markets and fairs across Quito. The deterioration of the infrastructure at these sites of exchange and the corresponding lack of hygiene and sanitation when handling food, have combined with problems of mobilisation, growing competition from supermarket chains, the absence of effective regulation and control, the lack of public policies, undemocratic practices by traders' associations, and the resulting corruption of public officials have all fuelled the impression that markets are an inefficient and anachronistic form of food distribution.

Several lines of thought have led to this conclusion. On the one hand, unsurprisingly, policies and people influenced by neoliberal thinking have eclipsed concepts such as public service and social needs and preferred the language of profitability and efficiency. Neoliberal perspectives are rooted in abstract market models and therefore ignore the role physical marketplaces such as the SRM play as sites of food distribution and urban social life. In the few cases where markets have been taken into consideration in public policies, the main objective of those policies has been to make them more efficient, attractive and/or profitable in order to guarantee their existence in an increasingly competitive environment. The corresponding solutions have thus often been limited to creating 'niche markets' that do not compete directly with large supermarket chains, e.g. expanding the gastronomic offer available to tourists and the local urban population.

The various different neoliberal public policies vis-à-vis markets are characterised by their 'economisation', i.e.

- > their abandonment as providers of a public service to an urban population;
- > their conversion into sites generating profits for the city through taxes;
- > privatisation of market management and the ownership of market stalls.

On the other hand, rural sociologists, often of a critical and/or Marxist orientation, criticise the fact that exchange relations in rural and urban markets have historically been one of the main causes of the exploitation of small and medium-sized agricultural producers and peasants. From this viewpoint, intermediaries are (proto-)capitalist agents who abuse their power over disorganised peasants by imposing an unequal trading regime between rural producers and urban consumers. In short, from both the orthodox and heterodox perspectives, the common conclusion reached is that markets are negative economic spaces and organizations (being deemed either inefficient or exploitative) that yield no benefits at all and appear outmoded by technological advances and changes in patterns of consumer behaviour.

Here we suggest an alternative reading of public markets, one that seeks to transform and rescue them as centres of urban organisation that are socially, culturally and economically inclusive (see also Hollenstein / Red de Saberes 2019). The various processes underway at SRM reflect this potential, but also the inherent difficulties, given the current state of these sites of exchange. Our alternative reading revolves around the question of how a public markets can help to convert a 21st century city into an anti-hegemonic site that curbs or even opposes the advance of capitalist

monopolisation and thus prevents the exclusion of most of the social groups living and working in the urban environment.

The answer covers three organisational characteristics of public markets: autonomous workers, public regulations and supplies of fresh food. First, public markets in Quito have been operated by thousands of small and medium-sized businesses, caught between the need to operate profitably to survive in a variable economic context (prices fluctuating in line with supply and demand) and the informal and often familiar logic underlying their internal organisation.

While the former element in this dilemma pushes merchants towards an orthodox economic analysis of their operations, the latter emphasises the basic needs of households, such as the creation of jobs for family members. The use of a family workforce and the practice of having multiple commercial entities within a single family instead of replacing this arrangement with wage labour causes a head-on collision between a pure capitalistic viewpoint and household economy approach. Unlike supermarket chains, popular traders at public markets do not unreservedly favour more profitable and capitalist ways of organizing their business through the elimination of human labour, but are a constant source of autonomous work, often exercised by women with few alternative economic opportunities.

Second, autonomous work takes place in a non-private economic space. The administration, ownership and control of commercial space at public markets is taken care of by the local government. While some widespread practices in markets' operation seek to undermine public regulation (the concentration of several market posts in the hands of a single family or network of merchants being one widely quoted example), the fact that market stalls are not private property places important limitations on privatisation and on such concentrations of commercial space among such a limited number of people.

Thirdly and lastly, public markets in Quito are focused on supplying fresh food for daily consumption that is in line with a traditional Ecuadorian diet. From a public health perspective, access to fresh produce both in economic and geographical terms (i.e. low prices and proximity respectively) is a fundamental feature of the urban food system, counteracting the availability of (highly) processed foods at several other commercial sites. Furthermore, given the characteristics of agricultural production in Ecuador (see section 1), the availability of a market that collects the qualitatively and quantitatively heterogeneous produce of a large number of small and medium-sized farmers and growers, guarantees the latter's access to the domestic food market, albeit under often disadvantageous terms of exchange (see Guarín 2013).

Notwithstanding the contradictions and limitations regarding the economic inclusiveness and democratic organization, public markets bear the potential of fostering the 'right to work' and the right to the urban territory in current processes of urban enclosure represented by the expansion of supermarket chains and shopping malls. In that sense, we suggest that public markets resemble urban commons in as much as small-scale traders, consumers, workers negotiate and regulate the use of a common resource: the marketplace.

Consequently, it is fundamental to draw a practical and conceptual distinction between a city with markets and a market city (see also Polanyi 2001). While the former is based on public markets, which are embedded in relationships between different social groups and regulated by the local government, the latter abandons this leverage and subordinates the control of the use of the urban territory, its economic organization and food provisioning to capitalist tendencies of oligopolistic accumulation.

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# FROM SELF-DETERMINATION TO COMMUNITY- DETERMINATION: BLACK-LED COMMONS IN THE UNITED STATES

By Mabrouka M'Barek and Elandria Williams  
(Notes on a journey of learning and solidarity)

This chapter, which was made possible by funding from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Brussels office, is dedicated to the memory of Mama Lila Cabbil (1944–2019), whom we met during our trip to Detroit in March 2018. Mama Lila was a water warrior and founder of the People's Water Board Coalition. We are both eternally thankful for the wisdom she briefly shared with us and the good laughs we had as we spent an entire day following each other to social justice events without this being planned! May Mama Lila rest in power and love.

## JOURNEY INTO NEW AFRIKAN COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

“What does it mean for you to share knowledge? Land? Food? Care? Production tools?” The organisers we interviewed in Jackson (Mississippi), Detroit (Michigan), and Birmingham (Alabama) would all answer this critical question by concluding that, **in the end, it is all about self-determination**. For black communities in the United States, the commons have been central to their struggle against slavery and so have become an integral part of the Black Liberation Movement – known to the public as “Radical Reconstruction,” the “Civil Rights Movement,” or the “Black Power Movement”. However, commoning is not just a means of survival – it is rooted in the African heritage and culture preserved and nurtured by ancestral knowledge passed on by enslaved people from Africa.

Today, from cooperatives and community-run schools to democratising production and energy or collectively imagining a future, the commons continue to be a way out of the subjugation of globalised racist capitalism and an opportunity for emancipation through community-determination, i.e. building communities having the material conditions and making decisions that affect their lives by ensuring dignity for all and eliminating all patterns of domination. Yet for observers outside the United States, this formidable resistance of the Black community starts and ends with the Civil Rights Movement. The creative forms of commons and alternative building we are witnessing today are rarely mentioned to protect capitalism and the American Empire. While cooperatives are spreading in every community, in the black community, we can see the commons as a tool for transformation opposing all forms of domination, be this racism, capitalism, imperialism, colonisation, patriarchy or a predatory attitude to nature. The conception of nature as a source of knowledge in Detroit, the democratisation of democracy with people’s assemblies in Jackson, the recentring of cooperatives around social reproduction such as care work in Birmingham, Alabama and the general unfailing solidarity with Palestine witnessed across these cities as part of their struggle to combat colonialism and imperialism are just some examples of multi-dimensional transformations.

Jackson in Mississippi has enjoyed more coverage in this regard than the other cities mentioned here thanks to the relentless work of its activists in communicating their narrative and disseminating it in the media and in the context of transnational conferences and initiatives such as Fearless Cities (see Chapter 2 of this publication). We have decided to tell the story of Jackson along with those of Birmingham in Alabama and Detroit in Michigan during our “learning journey”. We are two participants in

the Global Working Group Beyond Development: Elandria Williams, an organiser and trainer from Tennessee and Florida in the United States, and Mabrouka M'Barek, a former member of the Tunisian parliament and drafter of the country's constitution. Therefore, this chapter will alternate descriptive and analytical passages with embedded dialogues between us recorded during our trip to the various cities. As for how this collaboration came about and why we chose these three cities, our first dialogue, recorded while driving between Atlanta and Birmingham, should prove instructive.

*Elandria: I met you, Mabrouka, in Ecuador, and at the time, I thought how amazing to know someone who has experienced a phase of construction after a revolution! That's what my people need: to hear an account directly from someone who has been at the heart of what we know is a radical transformation. What had worked and failed in Tunisia and the Middle East region in general, are insights we don't get to hear too often. I always wanted you to come and meet my people, so when the opportunity came, and you reached out to me, I was excited!*

*Mabrouka: When the Global Working Group decided to dedicate its third annual meeting to urban transformations, I was living in the United States and was reading the book Jackson Rising, where you, Elandria, had co-written a chapter. I thought the serendipity was a sign!*

*I also saw in collaborating with you not only a form of transnational solidarity in action but an opportunity to show my people the United States from a different perspective: a decolonial one that would shed light on the country as an imperial power where millions are marginalised, killed and locked up.*

*Unfortunately, in my part of the world, the propaganda of modernisation and technological progress has eclipsed the brutality of the Empire. That demonstrates the power of subjectivities created with the American Dream sold overseas. I can't stand hearing politicians and the elite in panic demanding that we find them "success stories," and most of the time they will find a Tunisian working in the Silicon Valley creating more unmaterial apps and say: "see: that person is smart, hardworking and successful: we – the government – are not the problem".*

*While serving on the Tunisian Constituent Assembly, I heard over and over again American ambassadors and EU, IMF and World Bank representatives trying to teach us lessons in democracy and economics by prescribing nothing more than elections and austerity. "Political stability" was their holy grail, to "let business flourish," they said. Attracting business would create jobs. We were told that we Tunisians had a "Jasmine Revolution" and that we were yearning for democracy but the way this was described by commentators, it was clear they were talking about freedom to do business and moder-*

nity through development based on how much capital is accrued. According to this narrative, the Jasmine Revolution was about a yearning for Western values: globalised capitalism and unlimited growth. Most of us reject this interpretation of our revolution, as we are not yearning for jobs but a dignified life! This is why revolutions everywhere in the world are hailed to be about “democracy” while in the West, revolution at home is shut down, like the Yellow Vests movement that is brutalised on a daily basis by Macron’s police regime in France, and Wall Street occupiers being removed by the Obama administration in the United States. Alain Badiou, a French Marxist, sarcastically said: “our rulers and our dominant media have suggested a simple interpretation of the riots in the Arab world: what is expressed in them is what might be called a desire for the West [...] by contrast, riots are brutally repressed and execrated when they occur at home. If a ‘good riot’ demands inclusion in the West, why on earth rise up where this inclusion is well-established, in our robust civilized democracy?” That is exactly what I am interested in: putting the spotlight on how the West suppresses emancipatory movements at home to help us – in the Global South – to deconstruct and stop imperial interventionism. That is what I am hoping to learn from this journey here in the United States and from our two different perspectives.

Elandria: We are two different people, indeed. I knew that the combination of our diverse backgrounds— civil rights organising and post-colonial struggles – on our learning journey would provoke some interesting debates and insights on questions of land, race, revolution, and so on.

Mabrouka: I look forward to learning with you, Elandria! So, I pretty much let you organise the whole trip! Which means I have no idea where we are going and who we are meeting. Can you tell me more about why you chose these three cities and who we are going to meet?

Elandria: I don’t think it is useful to concentrate on one city because we will never get a complete picture. The reason why I have chosen to focus our journey on Detroit in the North and on Birmingham and Jackson in the South is that in these three cities, the emancipation movements are at different stages and face specific struggles, but most importantly, they are interconnected. This connection stems from the Civil Rights Movement and the critical role of the Church, which has been a centre for black power. Furthermore, the relationship can be traced from the Great Migration that occurred after the Second World War as black Southerners escaping segregation migrated north to work in the industrial sector. In other words, these urban communities are not stand-alone. They connect with the surrounding rural areas, they connect with each other, and they connect with a broader transnational movement fighting all forms of domination. People think the situation is terrible with Trump in power, but it has always been dire. My people get shot every day. To understand what my people are going through in our current system, we first need to look at history.

In the current political climate in the United States, rural and urban cooperatives and other types of commons are having to pursue their struggle within an ever more virulent racist state. President Trump himself embodies every kind of domination, making all of them apparent to the public at large: white supremacy, misogyny, capitalism, colonialism, extractivism, and a total disregard for preserving nature. While the repression of minorities and violence against them is now worse than before, the situation has always been abysmal. In this context, the movements in Jackson, Birmingham, and Detroit emerge not merely as economic alternatives but as deep-rooted struggles for dignity, which resonate with other experiences in the world, explaining why these three urban transformative experiences enjoy such a robust transnational solidarity network.

In this chapter, we will provide a brief overview of the history of black movements leading to today's urban commons. First, we will describe what the black community is doing to survive and shape its dignified future in Detroit, Jackson, and Birmingham. Second, we will analyse these efforts considering debates surrounding land, commons, race, patriarchy, capitalism, state violence and relations with nature. Third, we reflect on the principal hurdles facing the commons movement in the United States today and also address local and global relations.



Banner at the Kuwasi Balagoon Center for Economic Democracy and Sustainable Development which hosts Cooperation Jackson

## HOLDING ONTO THE AFRICAN IDENTITY AND WAY OF LIFE FROM PRE-SLAVERY TIMES TO THE PRESENT DAY

*“Crystallizing our identity as New Afrikans helps us understand our reality as a colonized Nation and what We need to do to be free rather than being confused looking for the system to free us.” – New Afrikan People’s Organization*

The practices, culture, and knowledge surrounding commons among black communities in the United States are firmly rooted in the ones these communities came from before they were brought over to the American continent after being enslaved. The commons have been centuries in the making predating the transatlantic slave trade in the 17th century, and are deeply influenced by the many heritages of Africa. What does this mean in practice today? It means that black people have been practising commons without calling them “commons,” especially when it comes to land, food, education, care, and childbirth/child-rearing. The commons are anchored in African culture and were preserved throughout slavery and beyond. This explains why throughout this journey, all the black/New Afrikan activists, organisers, educators, mothers, artists, and so on, we met emphasised decolonising their identity by finding and reclaiming their self-worth in their Africanness. Building alternatives to racist colonial capitalism starts with being radical, in other words, going back to your roots, and therefore reclaiming this African heritage, indigenous knowledge and the African identity – sometimes referred to as New Afrikan – as opposed to assimilating to the myth of individual success defined and validated by white people, capitalism and patriarchy. Let us take a glimpse at this painful history and how enduring ‘commoning’ has been a central part of the struggle of enslaved and freed black people in North America.

## THE LITTLE-KNOWN HISTORY OF HOW BLACK WOMEN PAVED THE WAY FOR THE COMMONS SINCE SLAVERY

White European plantation owners knew that the African way of commoning life was an obstacle to their control and use of the black body as free labour. Slave owners wanted to demolish African culture and identity by denying black women motherhood by separating children from their parents at will, for example, through selling family members at auctions and by raping/controlling the bodies and wombs of enslaved and free black women. However, they have failed. Enslaved people in North America were given very little to survive. They had to rely on each other to “make a way out of no way.” From assisting each other in the fields and the main house to the granny midwives – who were also ancestral healers – helping deliver babies in cabins and



fields, people took care of one another and made sure that as many as possible could survive these hard times. An essential facet of commoning life was child-rearing, which was based on the understanding that taking care of each other was a task for the village as a whole. Everyone looked after children as if they were their own. This traditional community-based upbringing continues to this day, with most children being raised by extended family members unless the state interferes and forces the children to go into 'foster care'. In the 19th and 20th centuries, black women created black/"Negro" or "Coloured" foster-care agencies and schools to help raise these children regardless of what happened to their parents and families.

There were also other ways in which people used cooperation to survive and resist. Most famously, the secret **Underground Railroad** system involved extremely perilous trips that relied on fine-tuned cooperation, mostly aided by native Americans (Finkbine 2019) and white abolitionists, to organise and secure the escape of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people to Canada and South Florida, where **Harriet Tubman** helped about 300 slaves gain freedom in the 1850s and 1860s. But some, rather than risking their lives escaping, would choose to organise collectively and claim some land. Free black people would pool their resources to purchase farms before and after the American Civil War. Free and enslaved people created mutual-aid systems related to social reproduction activities, such as care (for children, elders, and widows)–, or burials, often organised by women. These invisible cooperative networks, as well as faith-based gatherings, were used as channels for resistance (Gordon Nembhard 2014). Examples of mutual aid include the **Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association** led by **Callie House** to obtain reparations, and the Independent Order of Saint Luke, a women's association in Maryland working on sickness and death assistance. As for communes, the **Wilberforce Colony**, established in Ontario (Canada), was among the first successful self-sustaining black communes and also included indigenous and mixed blacks. In the United States, the Northampton Association of Education and Industry was set up by freed African/Black Americans as a utopian community in Massachusetts, where the abolitionist and women's rights activist **Sojourner Truth** lived (Gordon Nembhard 2014). **W. E. B. Du Bois** would later write that "the spirit of revolt which tried to co-operate by means of insurrection led to widespread organization for the rescue of fugitive slaves among Negroes themselves, and developed [...] into various co-operative efforts toward economic emancipation and land-buying. Gradually, these efforts led to co-operative business, building and loan associations and trade unions" (Du Bois 1907: 26).



## THE RECONSTRUCTION ERA (1863–1877)

The American Civil War broke out in 1861 pitting southern states, known as –“the Confederation,” against the Union, which they wanted to secede from. Slavery was a key issue in this conflict. At the time, the president of the Union, Abraham Lincoln, understood that to prevent secession and preserve the Union, he needed to starve the South of its economic power, which rested on the free and disposable labour provided by slavery. Despite not having the constitutional authority to do so, Lincoln signed a Declaration of Emancipation in 1863 which, while it did not free slaves, did set abolitionism in train, heralding a new age, referred to as “the Reconstruction era”. Lincoln promised support to any freed blacks and runaway slaves willing to leave the South to colonise new territories nearby and in South America to expand the Union and exterminate the native population.

With the end of the Civil War in April 1865 and the assassination of Lincoln, Congress ratified the 13th Amendment to abolish slavery in December 1865, but it was ignored by Southern states which passed the Black Code, a series of laws limiting civil rights. Congress responded to this southern denial by introducing the Civil Rights Act in 1866 and later the 14th Amendment, which protected black civil rights and gave them the right to own land, and the 15th Amendment in 1870, giving male freedmen the political right to vote. The South reacted by engaging in ruses to suppress votes such as the introduction of a poll tax and the grandfather clause prohibiting anyone from voting if they were not registered before the Civil War. Even though legally speaking, slavery was outlawed, it continued in the form of economic servitude through a system of sharecropping. Ex-slaves would continue working for their former masters, who would give them a share of the crop instead of a salary, meaning that “the new African American communities [were] trapped inside the boundaries of the plantation complex” (Woods 1998).

Over the years, the Ku Klux Klan galvanised white supremacists through horrific lynchings, rapes and murders. Southern states revived the Black Code by introducing the Jim Crow Laws, which institutionalised racial apartheid and white supremacy. By maintaining this visceral racism against black people, Southern states showed that they had never accepted their defeat by the Union. Racism against blacks remains a prominent feature across the United States to this day, but it is in the South, in Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Virginia, where it has reached the most palpable proportions.

The Reconstruction era represented a critical milestone in the history of black people in the United States, especially in the South, being the first – and maybe the only – time when the United States government, black people themselves and white supporters pushed for black self-determination. This was also the period when the first black men were elected to public office. While **Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)** were established long before the Civil War, there was a resurgence in support for these along with a proliferation of their numbers during the Reconstruction era. HBCUs were founded to provide higher education to formerly enslaved people. Among these were Cheyney University (originally known as the “African Institute for Colored Youth”) (1837), the University of the District of Columbia (1851), Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (1868) and Tuskegee Normal School/Institute (1881). Wilberforce College, established in 1856, is the oldest private HBCU and was the first to be owned and run by African Americans. Colleges like Berea College in Kentucky were established to educate both poor Appalachian whites and people who had been enslaved and their relatives, making it the only integrated college in the South. To this day, these institutions’ curriculum includes the history of black people across the diaspora and ways to support the black race. The HBCUs increased the collective and the economic strength of black people across the country. As a result, Reconstruction enabled the emergence of a black economic class and the further expansion of black cooperatives.

This gradual economic power built up over time helped create the political power required to hold and sustain the commons. In the 19th century, the black cooperative movement was joined by unions such as the **Cooperative Workers of America**, the **Knights of Labor** and the **Colored Farmers’ National Alliance and Co-operative Union (CFNACU)**, which supported rural farmers in the South (Gordon Nembhard 2014). As black women acquired skills in mutual-aid cooperatives, they took on leadership roles, like **Leonora Barry**, who was the chair of the Knights of Labor in 1886 (ibid.). The CFNACU eventually became a political platform promoting black economic opportunity. Its network grew at regional and national levels, often in coordination with the church network. By 1891, the CFNACU counted a million members (ibid.) but due to various acts of sabotage and brutal repression by the white political and economic elite, all its branches were dissolved five years later. Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014: 59) notes that “both the frustrations and the small victories associated with these efforts would be remembered, and the vision of a cooperative society would continue to surround the Black civil rights and liberation movements”. Women also played a significant role in the building of cooperative farms, most famously in the case of the fearless **Fannie Lou Hamer**.

#### FANNIE LOU HAMER (1917–1977)

Fannie Lou Hamer grew up on a cotton plantation in Mississippi, helping her family with their work as sharecroppers. She learned to read and write at a school that was set up for sharecroppers' children. At the time, eugenics was running high, and Fannie Lou was sterilised against her will and without her knowledge while being treated in hospital for a tumour. This episode and the many injustices and white supremacy violence she and her family faced led Fannie Lou to become politically active and to stand for election with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, of which she was a co-founder.

At the time, it was generally believed that political power had to be matched by economic power, and therefore black people needed to control their food production and distribution. This period saw the creation of several cooperatives, all of them focusing on food sovereignty. Fannie Lou founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative, which also acted as a training centre and an incubator for agricultural cooperatives. Her Freedom Farms and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives helped anchor an influential culture of commons in Mississippi which has profoundly influenced today's Cooperation Jackson and other cooperatives across the country.

In 1964, Martin Luther King and Fannie Lou Hamer testified before Congress. After King gave her the floor, US President Lyndon B. Johnson panicked and improvised an announcement about a nine-month anniversary of the death of his predecessor, President John F. Kennedy, to interrupt the live stream of her powerful speech.



Fannie Lou Hamer, American civil rights leader, at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1964

After the First World War, the United States was plunged into its worst economic crisis up to that time, known as the Great Depression. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, an unprecedented programme which created jobs – mainly temporary jobs in the construction sector – paid by the federal government. However, the programme excluded the black population or provided them with the lowest-ranking unskilled jobs, which meant that “black workers generally found themselves left out of the most powerful unions” (Bynum 2010: 113). The New Deal contributed to housing inequality, white flight and consequently a worsening of segregation. As a concession to the white capitalist class in the South, President Roosevelt blocked any attempt to pass an anti-lynching law (Katznelson 2006). The pervasive legacy of the Jim Crow Laws infected Roosevelt’s New Deal.

In the face of the discrimination of the New Deal, union labour organiser **A. Philip Randolph** started rallying a movement to oppose Roosevelt, laying the foundations for black power. In 1952, Randolph wrote that it was essential to develop “an all-Negro movement fighting for all our civil rights for first-class citizenship but with absolute dependence upon Negroes to furnish the money, the brains, and [the] direction” (quoted in Bynum 2010: 127). Two years later, black writer **Richard Wright** coined the term “**Black Power**” in his book *Black Power: a record of reactions in a land of pathos*. This work was influenced by his encounter, during a trip, with the inner circle of Kwame Nkrumah, who was preparing for the liberation of the Gold Coast (now Ghana) from French colonisation. The idea behind organising self-reliance in the black community would subsequently be advocated by the **Nation of Islam**, an organisation of black Muslims founded in Detroit in 1930, whose members included **Malcolm X** and boxer **Muhammed Ali**.

The gradual expansion of the cooperative economy and movement meant that the 20th century would be marked by the creation of organisations to promote high-quality, sustainable cooperatives or economies through education, training and shared pooling of resources. The second primary focus of this era is the construction of sustained political black power for the liberation, emancipation and self-determination of black people in the United States.

## HOLDING THE COMMONS: THE NECESSITY OF CREATING A BLACK POLITICAL POWER

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was a black sociologist, and probably one of the most influential thinkers who shaped our contemporary understanding of social science. In 1909, Du Bois helped found the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**, which is still playing a critical role today. He was also involved in setting up the **Negro Cooperative Guild**, the first organisation to promote learning for consumer cooperatives and provide them with support by teaching them technical skills. The Guild led to the creation of several study circles across the country. In Gary (Indiana), the **Consumers' Cooperative Trading Company**, pursuing similar goals, supported the creation of the most successful cooperative grocery store at the time. The **Southern Tenant Farmers Union** rallied farmers who owned their land and sharecroppers alike to organise for better treatment and to educate them about their rights and then bring them together to purchase land, start grocery stores and so on. The focus here was on land and food production and distribution. The **Federation of Southern Cooperatives** was founded in 1967 and merged with the Emergency Land Fund in 1985, becoming the **Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF)**. This organisation was, along with the **Highlander Research and Education Center** in Tennessee, one of the most important incubators of cooperatives in the South. Jessica Gordon Nembhard (2014) noted that in the first 25 years of its existence, the FSC/LAF helped create more than 200 cooperatives and credit unions.

*Elandria: Our first stop is going to be the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, or FSC. As you can see, we are driving off an unmarked rural road. It is hard to find the FSC, and there is a historical reason for that. You see, the FSC was the economic arm of the Black Liberation Movement, and as such it was important to establish their base in several locations, some of them, like this one, being hidden from public sight. The FSC created and supported many cooperatives such as farms, insurance providers and credit unions.*

*[Woods surround the property, which consists of several buildings and garden plots. One building is a huge conference hall where training sessions take place. In the centre of the room there is a flip board with what looks like a list of bullet points from a previous training session which read: "business plans, marketing agreements, coop movement and policies, back to basics in cooperative development, audit-ready files, centralized accounts, etc."]*

*Mabrouka: I must admit, I am a bit perplexed when I see this marketing and business jargon. I mean: if cooperatives are alternatives to capitalism, why are we still emulating neoliberal tools when it comes to managing commons and coops? Don't we have a better way than worrying about marketing and business plans? It sounds market-oriented.*

Elandria: *I don't think that folks here wake up in the morning thinking: capitalism must be replaced. Every day it's the same worry: putting food on the table and making sure no one gets shot or put in jail or if that happens, then the entire family will pitch in, be it bailing out a cousin or taking care of children until things get sorted out. I mean, at the end of the day, finding alternatives to capitalism/neoliberalism is what the Left wants, not the day-to-day folks on the ground. Now, when you have a cooperative setup, well guess what? You still have to have fiscal accountability, a bank account and tax papers, you still need procedures and policies to make sure new people on board know what needs to be done, and so on. There is no escape from that; we must stay real. Now, that doesn't mean we can't be creative and put together new management tools. Look, for example, at the people's assemblies that came out of Jackson which we will visit later.*

Urban commons started developing in urban areas, especially in Harlem (New York), which saw consumers, grocery, garden and housing cooperatives flourish. In Tennessee, since its creation in 1932, the Highlander Folk School – still operating today as the **Highlander Research and Education Center** – played an essential role in educating and supporting cooperatives and organisers in the South, such as **Martin Luther King Jr** and **Rosa Parks**. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement took off and while it is known for its struggle for equal rights and opportunities (jobs), it also sought to create and consolidate a black political and economic power – expressed by Fannie Lou Hamer, A. Philip Randolph and Richard Wright – as a way to ensure the self-determination of black people, that is, as Hamer defined it, “the process by which a person controls their own life” (Lumumba 2017).

Mabrouka: *In my part of the world, we use the word “dignity” to express what we yearn for. Dignity kind of encompasses ideas of equality, justice. But here in the United States, I have heard this term “self-determination” cropping up in our conversations. Can you tell me how you understand what self-determination is about?*

Elandria: *I know people repeat this term “self-determination,” but there is no “self” in this struggle! It is about “community-determination”. I don't know why people persist in calling it self-determination. But anyway, the meaning is the same, and that is black people taking back control of their own lives and having the power to collectively determine how to transform their community and economy for a dignified life for all.*

In all three cities we visited, organisers involved in transformative experiments, cooperatives and water remunicipalisation struggles were all influenced by leaders of the Black Liberation Movement. A well-known influence is **Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign**, which is being relaunched today by the **Rev. William Barber**. In Mississippi, the fiercely combative Fannie Lou Hamer is probably the most inspirational figure. Another important influence was **Nation of Islam** member **Malcolm X**, who was more radical in his approach as he denounced capitalism as a system that is not meant to provide people with self-determination and dignity. From these differences emanated various movements with different objectives but all striving for black liberation. Those closer to Malcolm X's ideas pursued building a Black Power movement, notably in Detroit, whose first step was to create an all-black party called the **Freedom Now Party**, whose main figures included the **Rev. Albert Cleage**, the **Rev. Milton Henry** and **Richard Henry** – who organised the **Republic of New Afrika** to build an independent nation comprising Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina – **Ed Vaughn**, and **James and Grace Lee Boggs**.

#### GRACE LEE BOGGS (1915–2015) AND JIMMY BOGGS (1919–1993)

James ('Jimmy') Boggs came from Alabama and worked at a Chrysler automotive factory. He was the author of several essays and books such as *The American Revolution*, a work reflecting on the growth of the working class since the Second World War and the problem with automation and the resulting rise in unemployment. His contributions looked at black labour, which is treated as highly disposable in the United States. More generally, Boggs was interested in what humans would do if they were replaced (Boggs 1963).

Grace Lee Boggs was born in New York into a Chinese migrant family. She studied philosophy but quit academia in favour of working as a movement organiser. Jimmy and Grace Lee were both black power activists and philosophers and thinkers preoccupied with the idea of rebellion and revolution.

They were profoundly influenced by the Trinidadian pan-Africanist writer and historian C. L. R. James. For them to achieve revolution, people had to evolve and therefore change with the situation. To implement their vision, they created the Detroit Summer School – inspired by Mississippi Freedom Summer – to train young people to think creatively in ways to rebuild their city. Grace Lee Boggs went on to inspire a generation of activists, organisers, community leaders and public intellectuals through her deep questioning and five books. She wrote the last of these aged 95, entitled *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*, where she implores us to always ask the question "Where are we in the Clock of the World?".



James and Grace Lee Boggs

In Detroit, **the Rev. Cleage**, who was a fervent believer in black independence, founded **the Shrine of the Black Madonna Church** in 1967. The Shrine addressed the lack of liberating spiritual iconography depicting black people, which has been a source of conflict (Razak 2016). Its liberating power made it a bastion for black liberation through the organisation by its political organisation, **the Black Slate**, at elections.

Inspired by **Malcolm X** and the pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist **Frantz Fanon**, in 1966 **Dr. Huey P. Newton** along with **Bobby Seale** founded the **Black Panther Party for Self Defense** in Oakland (California). The late **Chowke Lumumba**, the Mayor of Jackson and a member of the **New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO)**, recalls that "around the country, a lot of Black people's movements had moved from the phase of just merely turning the other cheek in the face of attacks and egregious repression to actually declaring the right of self-defence, under the inspiration of Malcolm X" (Sunkara 2017: 213). As the Black Power Movement took radical and revolutionary stands, so the repression intensified.

In July 1967, a police raid of a nightclub where 45 black people died ignited a rebellion – not "a riot" (Boggs 2012) – aimed at halting police violence. After the rebellion, Detroit witnessed a massive flight of the white population towards the suburbs. Detroit became a centre of black power, but as **Shea Howell** – a white activist and long-time friend of the Boggs – explained, **the call for black power was a call for everyone, not just the black community.**



In the Black Belt region<sup>1</sup>, as entire counties had a majority black constituency, the **Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party** and the freedom fighters from **Coalition of Racial Equality (CORE)**, the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**, the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** and other civil rights groups tried to rally people around the necessity of seizing public office through building local black power. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was led by Fannie Lou Hamer, supported by grassroots organizer **Ella Baker** and others who backed both cooperative economic movements and political ones. For black people in the United States, economic and political power are two sides of the same coin. These political formations led to black people taking elected and appointed positions in ways that had not happened since Reconstruction. Today, organisers from the **Republic of New Afrika** and the **Malcolm X Grassroots Movement** alongside the NAACP and other traditional black organisations and churches are playing a central role in actively building black political power in the South.

## FROM OVERCOMING WHITE SUPREMACY TO CREATING A BLACK-CENTRED JUST ECONOMY

### SURVIVING IN THE UNITED STATES EMPIRE'S "CASTE" SYSTEM

While white supremacy did not stop after the Civil Rights Movement, what has replaced the Jim Crow Laws and most of the “lynchings” is a more sophisticated embedded state and corporate system of systematic exclusion and racism, in every aspect of society including the mass incarceration system and a police state which has resulted in the highest prison population ever, private prisons and the killing of black people by the police. This has resulted in more black people being in a state of *de facto* slavery in 2019, than during the formal years of slavery.

This racist system of exclusion is visible through what is called “food apartheid”. In Birmingham (Alabama), for example, you can walk through entire neighbourhoods without finding anywhere to buy or grow food. In the Dynamite Hill neighbourhood, named after the series of bombings, perpetrated by white terrorists targeting black houses in the 1970s, there is only a “Dollar Store” selling with a limited selection of processed and canned food and beverages. There is no store for buying fresh, healthy food.

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1 The Black Belt is a region in the South of the United States which includes Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

[Driving through West Birmingham, Elandria takes us to the Smithfield neighbourhood. One particular peculiarity of the layout of this neighbourhood is that as we drive North, all the streets are broken up by interstate highways 20 and 59, which cut through the neighbourhood from West to East.]

Elandria: *Now you see this street we are driving on [Center Street]. Just pay attention, as I want to show you something.*

*[The street looked like the others, except that it involved an overpass, which forms the only connection between the Smithfield and East Thomas neighbourhoods, which are surrounded by interstate roads and railways. We took the first street on the right, and passed Angela Davis's childhood home at the corner. We then drove into Dynamite Hill, one of the areas in the United States that have been most attacked by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) but also a powerful incubator of revolutionaries from that historical struggle.]*

Mabrouka: *Let me guess: this neighbourhood was cut through by an interstate highway to isolate the community? I have seen this in France where immigrants and the poor working class are literally surrounded by motorways, and public transport would stop early to prevent people from getting out of suburbs surrounding Paris like Sarcelles and Saint Denis, and HautePierre in Strasbourg. I grew up in France, in an immigrant working class neighbourhood serving the nearby General Motors factory. Our projects were outside the town just across the motorway; and recently another motorway was built to isolate this area even further. We did not own a car, and so we had to walk half an hour each way to shop for groceries, but nothing compared to what I am seeing here in this area where you can only shop at Dollar Stores and small liquor stores (i.e. an off licence).*

Elandria: *In a similar vein, interstate highways are used as tools for exclusion, but here in the United States they are particularly destructive. In this neighbourhood, black businesses were once thriving. But white supremacists who had control over the local state budget built an interstate to geographically split communities and destroy black businesses. There is a huge food apartheid here. It is not a food desert, because deserts are natural phenomena, whereas here white supremacy is actively preventing food availability and distribution to black communities.*

In Detroit, the Interstate Highway System built after the Second World War not only cut through Paradise Valley, the black business district, but this mega-infrastructure contributed to white and capital flight towards the suburbs (Kurashige 2017). This trend subsequently accelerated throughout the country. In Detroit, the situation deteriorated particularly badly after the 1968 rebellion, turning the city into the most racially segregated metropolitan city in the United States.

Another form of exclusion is the lack of financing, which is a reason why in the South, and in the rest of the country, most cooperatives are run by whites (William / Walker 2018). It is harder for black communities to access credit and loans because of redlining, government regulations, lack of access to banks in communities and lack of collateral; if people do have such access, they are likely to fall prey to predatory loans. During the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, the National Fair Housing Alliance reported that “African-American and Latino homeowners were disproportionately steered to worse loans,” leading to “the largest loss of wealth for these communities in modern history. From 2009 through 2012, African-Americans are projected to lose \$194 billion in housing equity” (National Fair Housing Alliance 2012: 6).

In the United States, “at year-end 2017, the imprisonment rate for sentenced black males (2,336 per 100,000 black male U.S. residents) was almost six times that of sentenced white males (397 per 100,000 white male U.S. residents)” (Bronson / Carson 2019: 1). Along with this mass incarceration and police brutality, today the black population – as well as the indigenous and LatinX populations – are facing an unprecedented level of lack of services, racism and discriminations, and are under constant attack from the State. Living under the rule of a “racial caste system,” as **Michelle Alexander** puts it (Alexander / West 2012), leads to the emergence of cooperatives as one of the solutions for the black community to gain self-determination.

In this context and following a long tradition of collective community building and cooperative mechanisms since slavery, urban commons came into being in Jackson, Detroit and Birmingham, further reviving Afrikan culture. In Jackson, the process started with a vision articulated in a strategy – the **Jackson-Kush Plan** – crafted by the **New Afrikan People’s Organization (NAPO)** and the **Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM)** under the leadership of **Mayor Chokwe Lumumba Senior**. Whereas in Birmingham and Detroit, black mayors past and present have made considerable efforts to overcome racism but there has been no significant lasting drive establishing a new economic dynamic based on the commons.

However, in each city, cooperatives are part of a general movement that includes productive and social reproductive activities.

## THE JACKSON-KUSH PLAN: A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR A DECOLONIAL ECONOMY IN JACKSON (MISSISSIPPI)

Mississippi is the most impoverished state in the United States, with 20.8% of the population below the poverty line, defined as an income of less than \$24,340 a year for a family of four<sup>2</sup>. The black population accounts for up to 37.7% of the total for this mostly rural state, which is not enough to change the course of politics at state level. The state's government remains under the control of the Republican Tea Party movement, a conservative right-wing grouping, which is the principal reason why white supremacy has endured. Racism has remained particularly vehement in the South, reaching such proportions indeed that it has created unsaid rules about people's geographic movement based on race. Jackson's black community knows that the east bank of the Pearl River is hostile territory, especially after dark. For **Kali Akuno**, an MXGM member and a co-founder of Cooperation Jackson, it is precisely this kind of clarity that has led to the radical **Jackson-Kush plan** (Center For Political Education 2018).

Jackson is the only city in Mississippi, with a black community making up 79% of the total population, which was 174,000 in the 2016 census, but local organisers believe this was an underestimate. Jackson is situated at the intersection between two principal highways crossing the state from North to South and from West to East, connecting the city with other states. However, with the decline of industry and the predominance of white supremacy controlling the local economy, the city did not offer much opportunity for the black community to create the kind of economy they needed. Despite being home to the headquarters of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives – affiliated to the Federation of Southern Cooperatives – the only cooperative operating in Jackson besides credit unions was the **Rainbow Grocery store food cooperative**, which hosts a cooperative computer repair shop as well.

Furthermore, in 2004 the Gulf region of the state of Mississippi was hardest hit by **Hurricane Katrina**. Following the hurricane, a disaster relief coalition led by the MXGM decided to sustain its effort with a long-term plan and ultimately form the **Jackson People's Assembly**. This new platform elected human rights attorney and NAPO member **Chokwe Lumumba** as mayor in July 2013 (Akuno / Ajamu 2017). Under this new leadership, members of the MXGM and the NAPO were able to develop their long-term strategy by drafting the Jackson-Kush Plan, a radical long-term plan for a new urban communitarian and solidarity economy. This plan is in the black radical nationalist tradition advocated by **Malcolm X** and **C. L. R. James**, for

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2 U.S. Census Bureau 2016

whom only an independent, radical transformation of society could enable self-determination. The integration of the black community into the capitalist economy, even if this was reformed, would perpetuate the subjugation of black people.

The Jackson-Kush Plan's objective was to "advance the development of the New Afrikan Independence Movement and hasten the socialist transformation of the territories currently claimed by the United States settler-colonial state" (Akuno / Ajamu 2017: 22). **Cooperation Jackson** was created to serve as the main vehicle that would implement the Jackson-Kush Plan beyond the aegis of the mayor's office, thereby sustaining the vision behind it and avoiding a top-down approach. Cooperation Jackson's strategy boils down to four main objectives (ibid.):

- > Shift control over the means of production to the black working class
- > Shift production towards a more harmonious relationship with nature
- > Democratically engage the local population in the transformation of their local, state and regional economy
- > Pursue a broad vision of attaining self-determination, with a view to radically decolonising and transforming the United States

The programme intended to sustain the movement that elected Lumumba by creating radical democratic practices owned by the community. Ultimately, the goal was to create a solidarity economy in Jackson. This process is quite unusual as normally cooperatives are created individually and then eventually join together to form a network. The Jackson-Kush Plan aimed to institute a framework first, making Cooperation Jackson an incubator for cooperatives.

Currently, Cooperation Jackson is based at the former office building of the late Mayor Lumumba, who died after one year and eight months in office. In the same building – renamed the "**Kuwasi Balagoon Center for Economic Democracy and Development**" – work was carried out on launching and running a catering cooperative that buys fresh organic produce from the **Freedom Farm cooperative**, a local urban farming initiative also established by Cooperation Jackson. Another feature characterising the catering operation as part of the embedded economy is the way it barter food in exchange for services with local homeless people, giving rise to new social relationships with community members deemed "poor" under a capitalist system. Freedom Farm sells its remaining produce to a local grocery store. Cooperation Jackson has just opened a brand-new **Center for Community Production**, which at the time of our visit was still in the planning stage.

This community makerspace is inspired and assisted by the work of the Incite Focus fabrication laboratory in Detroit. Along with these projects, Jackson's network encompasses several cooperatives ranging from landscaping, recycling and zero waste to day care. With the newly formed **Fannie Lou Hamer Community Land Trust**, Cooperation Jackson hopes to acquire land and to create affordable housing and eco-villages.

## BIRMINGHAM (ALABAMA): THE COMMONS AND THE LOCAL POLITICAL POWER

Birmingham is the only large city in the South that did not exist prior to the Civil War. Built after this conflict, it attracted black people from rural areas and European immigrants alike to work in coal mines. People were "slaves by another name," due to Jim Crow policies long after the Jim Crow Laws ended, and had to work in servitude. Most of the people were former sharecroppers who worked on land owned by white former plantation owners. This practice was widespread in the United States until the 1970s and is still found in other parts of the world, especially in India and Pakistan. Birmingham has been a city where white supremacists have been engaging in extreme violence against the black community. The city went from being called the "Magic City" as a result of its steel industry to being known as "Bombingham" because of the gruesome attacks by the **white terrorist group the Ku Klux Klan** and other **white supremacists** who would bomb black communities' neighbourhoods. One of these bombings left a particularly traumatic scar on these as it killed four schoolgirls at the **16th Street Baptist Church** in 1963.

Ten years later, the father of one of the victims, **Chris McNair**, was elected to the United States House of Representatives, thereby becoming one of the first black legislators in the United States. Following the killing of **Bonita Carter**, a young unarmed girl, by police officers in 1978, the general sentiment against racism further galvanised the black vote, leading to the election of Birmingham's first black mayor, **Richard Arrington Jr.** Since then, the city has had many other black mayors, although unfortunately some of these public officials did not live up to the black community's expectations.

The struggle in Birmingham differs slightly from Detroit or Jackson because black politicians have had control over the city since 1978. However, this brings with it another layer of difficulties. Recently, in 2017, **Randall Woodfin**, a young black candidate running on a Democratic Party progressive platform, became the new mayor. Woodfin has shown signs of deepening democracy by getting citizens and organisers involved in liaison committees, but the community participating in the commons and cooperatives are finding it very difficult to give him their full support<sup>3</sup>.

This is because although Birmingham has been a stronghold of black political power for the past four decades, the city's economic power still originates from what gave Birmingham its "Magic City" status, namely steel and aluminum and industries whose capital was and is still accumulated by white families who continue to be powerful to this day.

Despite a lack of political support, Birmingham is home to several cooperatives ranging from productive to social reproductive activities, such as the **Cooperative New School for Urban Studies and Environmental Justice**, the midwifery service at the **Birmingham Birth Workers Cooperative**, several community gardens, an organic grocery store, cooperative housing, the **Automotive Free Clinic**, a community repair shop that provides free and low-cost auto repair and the **Smithfield Dynamite Hill Land Trust**.

## REGENERATION OF BLACK DETROITERS: CARING, PLANTING AND BUILDING ON INDUSTRIAL/CAPITALIST RUINS

The city of Detroit may be the best metaphor for what the regeneration of nature would look like if applied to an industrial metropolis. Formerly known as "the Paris of the United States" because of its renowned automotive industry, Detroit was an Eldorado for the middle class. The decline of its car sector since the 1950s, principally due to automation, has translated into gradual job losses, increasing polarisation and intermittent uprisings.

The industrial decline of Detroit has left haunted landscapes of vacant factories and land. Now this image of desolation has in fact created an opportunity for black communities to organise around these vacant lots and claim them as commons. These industrial ruins have been fertile ground for the development of the commons.

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3 Interview with Jilisa Renee, Zac Henson, Nina Morgan and Reggie Bolton conducted in Birmingham on 9 February 2018

Unlike Jackson, the movements for black-owned and black-led cooperatives in Detroit were not covered by a single published strategic long-term blueprint. Rather, the rise of black commons was largely guided by a network of connected local black power politics – as mentioned earlier – such as the Shrine of the Black Madonna Church, the Boggs Center, the Nation of Islam and the MXGM movement, or the NAPO.

Due to its size (670,000 inhabitants in 2016) and the influence of its grassroots black power political movement, Detroit includes probably the most diversified urban cooperatives, ranging from productive to social reproductive activities, of anywhere in the country.

To name just a few examples: Detroit includes a fabrication laboratory (fab lab) which serves as an educational training centre (**Incite Focus**); the **Cass Corridor Commons** building, which was home to the First Unitarian-Universalist Church, is now shared with multiple organisations working for the benefit of the community, becoming a hub for social and environmental work in Detroit; the **D-Town farm**, the largest urban farming project in the city; the **City Commons Cooperative**, which is a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) partnership that shares a space for storing produce on site; and the **Ryter Community Industries**, providing solar street lighting; multiple upcycling efforts, which have probably been Detroit's main strength as the city benefits from its industrial productive capacity that is a legacy of the automotive industry. In terms of education and care, there are several cooperative day-care centres as well as a network of Independent **Freedom Schools** to provide an Afrocentric approach to education.

Meanwhile, the **Detroit People's Food Co-op**, a project conducted by the **Detroit Black Community Food Security Network**, is expected to establish the largest consumer-owned supermarket cooperative in the city.



## LAND, PEOPLE POWER AND CULTURE: HOW BLACK-LED COOPERATIVES AND COMMONS ARE BUILDING DIGNIFIED COMMUNITIES

Mabrouka: *What would you say are the most important transformations – in terms of projects, institutions or new values – that have happened thanks to the cooperative movement in general?*

Elandria: *Exchange has always been understood as a bartering process while also creating institutions like grocery store cooperatives or doula/midwifery cooperatives that people pay for, sometimes on a sliding scale. Regeneration and redistribution of wealth and knowledge are important concepts in all three cities and are behind the success of many of the projects. Black people in all three cities have at times run the “official city” and have also been under its thumb and so all of them have used the city in one way or another in order to get land, contracts or spaces, or utilised the cities’ services. However, democracy is strengthened by people’s ability to participate and help govern the projects or even in some cases the government. All three cities created People’s Assembly processes to help set the agenda for the official government and find out what community members needed.*

Mabrouka: *Do you see any recent innovations in movement and cooperative building?*

Elandria: *I think the black community in the 1930s was way more innovative than any of the projects seen today because back then they had to create so much community infrastructure where there was hardly anything, which is key to understanding innovation and realising that everything comes and goes in cycles. All the people involved, be they from Jackson, Birmingham or Detroit, are only one generation away from having been farmers and people living under [the] Jim Crow (Laws), and so life cycles and community-determined solutions are essential.*

*But I think innovation has come in the form of People’s Assemblies, food security networks that are member-based, the fab labs, Birmingham’s New Cooperative School, which is a political education and cooperative training school that is based on radical politics, Allied Media Projects in Detroit, which brings artists and organisers together to create change and is also a creative makerspace and gathering spot. The plan in Jackson and Cooperation Jackson itself is an innovative form of cooperative creation in the United States because generally cooperatives start one at a time and then network together, although the Federation of Southern Cooperatives during the Civil Rights Movement, which still continues today, took a similar track but across the entire South.*

Transformations are happening on a deeper, long-term trajectory. That is why we have seen in the three cities that each common also serves as a space for political engagement and a way to build and strengthen communities. This dual vocation stems from the fact that commons developed by black communities are a consequence of the struggle for self-determination and against racism. Therefore, all community commons are also a platform for building solidarity in struggles which are all rooted in two principles: power and land, but innovating beyond material conditions as they engage several generations and shape knowledge and culture.

## **PEOPLE POWER: PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT ASSEMBLIES**

The idea of Jackson People's Movement Assembly (PMA) started life in 1992 with the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM). For Akil Bakari of the MXGM, these assemblies are gatherings of residents that "galvanise people power." Bakari explains that even though these assemblies emerged in the 1990s, they are not much different from assemblies over the centuries where people met to make decisions. These assemblies are very similar to the process witnessed by the Zapatista Liberation movement in Chiapas in Mexico with their rotating councils or in Nabón in Ecuador (Lang / M'Barek 2018), where assemblies are used not only for listening to and giving a voice to the people but to offer an opportunity to collectively devise strategies. Assemblies also make it possible to build and strengthen community-wide relationships in urban areas where it is often more difficult to create a sense of community.

Most importantly, these assemblies are inspired by Afrikan spirituality or cosmovision. The Jackson-Kush Plan reminds us that "the roots of our Assembly model are drawn from the spiritual or prayer circles that were organized often clandestinely by enslaved Afrikans to express their humanity, build and sustain community, fortify their spirits, and organize resistance" (Akuno 2012: 5). These practices existed among native American indigenous tribes and have certainly been a source of further influence and inspiration. Incorporating the principles of the MXGM and the NAPO, the Plan recalls how the black community was once organised into assemblies between 1831 and 1864: the "Negro People's Conventions" at the start of the Reconstruction era, which were intended to "develop autonomous programs of action to realize freedom as Afrikans themselves desired it and to determine their relationship to the defeated governments of the Confederacy, and the triumphant government of the Federal Republic" (Akuno / Ajamu 2017: 153).

Prior to the PMA, neighbourhood associations existed in Jackson, but they mainly served the interests of homeowners, as they were seeking a way to improve their neighbourhood (Themba Nixon 2017). It is only with today's PMA that low-income communities can finally engage in a democratic platform. The Jackson PMA model was officialised under Chokwe Lumumba Senior's leadership, and currently includes the mayoralty, which is now held by his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, and which is the executive branch responsible for implementing some of the Assembly's recommendations. The People's Assemblies also serve the purpose of both bringing people together to determine what changes they want for their community which can be implemented by the community itself, and running other local elected officials who follow the platform laid down by the city districts and neighbourhoods.

Cooperation Jackson and the MXGM have launched a more specialised assembly: the **Participatory Budget People's Assembly**, which is organised independently of the local authorities. Meetings of this assembly are still taking place today, under the leadership of Rukia Lumumba, and MXGM member Akil Bakari. Workshops and assembly meetings are used to explain how budget distribution works and to gather communities' ideas on how to distribute the budget and set up a campaign if necessary.

The interesting thing about Jackson People's Assemblies is that there is no instituting legal framework governing how they operate. At first glance, it would appear that the implementation of collective decisions emanating from these democratic platforms depends on the good will of the mayor in office and therefore it is all too easy to write off these assemblies as vulnerable platforms. However, the intention behind them is not just to create occasional opportunities to make communal decisions but to serve as one of many means of creating and entrenching a long-lasting culture of exercising people's collective power. Given that they come from the people, the source of democratic legitimacy, they do not need the State to provide them with statutory legitimacy.

The strength of these assemblies, regardless of their outcomes, lies in their long-running existence and their ability to organise black communities and support them in realising their power and most importantly in flexing the democratic and decision-making muscle so many people do not manage to actually use. That is to say: they are all about democratising democracy by *occupying and redefining* democracy from the bottom up rather than *claiming* [representative/neoliberal] democracy which we know will ultimately remain representative, corporate-led and socially and ecologically

destructive. Clarity in this regard is important as this power can be co-opted in top-down platforms such as Community Benefits Agreements, which we will address later in this chapter.

It is this aspect of creating/redefining democracy from the bottom up which opens up a world of possibilities and countless creative strategies for community-determination to the many organised movements that want to mobilise and engage communities in a genuine long-lasting transformation.

## **FREE THE LAND! FOR FOOD AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Across the world, and especially in the United States, our general system for producing and distributing food is deeply racist, exploitative and predatory: traits that are indeed intrinsic to the capitalist system because maximising profits involves monopolising land and exploiting people (labour) and nature.

- > Maximising profits requires land. This involves first removing indigenous populations from their territories through a process of colonisation, and then using extreme violence to push out vulnerable communities. Land grabs are also achieved through various dispossession schemes, such as eminent domain<sup>4</sup> and gentrification.
- > Maximising profits requires free labour, historically through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, or more generally the cheapest labour possible. In the European Union, the number of migrants in total employment in the agricultural sector grew from 4.3% to 6.5% between 2011 and 2017 with the most significant rises in proportions being in Denmark (increase from 10 to 20%), Spain (from 20 to 25%) and Italy (from 15 to 20%) (Natale/Kalantaryan/Scipioni/Alessandrini/Pasa 2019). In the United States, the government has put in place the H2A visa, which is the primary institutional mechanism for exploiting cheap labour. Under this temporary visa, farms have to provide housing and food, but that situation of total dependence puts migrants in a very vulnerable position. It is not very different from sharecropping.
- > Maximising profits requires yielding massive quantities via a mono-crop culture, horrific conditions in overcrowded slaughterhouses, carcinogenic pesticides and fertilisers, and intensive of hormone injections into animals.

The exploitation of our environment (land, water and air), animals and people is alarming. The United States Department of Agriculture regulations for the food sector are equally disturbing with their “modernisation” programmes to speed up the animal

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4 This is also known variously across the world as “compulsory purchase”/“compulsory acquisition,” “expropriation” and “land purchase.”

slaughtering process (David 2018), and rules requiring poultry to be dipped in a chlorinated bath before being processed (Eglene 2018). However, no amount of chlorine can clean up the sinful United States agribusiness industry. The system needs to be replaced. However, first, those who are marginalised need access to land.

Land is central to the struggle for liberation. This is clearly echoed by the motto "Free the Land!" of the NAPO and embraced by the MXGM and Malcolm X's vision. With their common African heritage, the black communities in the United States have a natural connection to the Global South (Ajl 2018), with whom they share their everyday struggles for liberation from colonisation and imperialism. It is therefore not surprising that a major influence is exerted by decolonial and anti-imperialist thinkers such as Fanon or Cabral for whom the agrarian question is central (ibid). In other words: in order to gain self-determination, i.e. collectively controlling the material conditions to exist in dignity, communities will need to gain control of land as expressed in the following statement from the NAPO: "Land constitutes the material basis upon which We can exercise our collective will" (New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO) 1989).

Here the issue is not private property, but the need to have a space that cannot be relinquished where commons are collectively produced and preserved but with the possibility of having within this space parts that are private property. The NAPO's founding statement sheds light on the complexity of gaining control of land in an occupied territory: "We recognize the claims of Native Americans to this land, and we will struggle side-by-side to help them regain their land. At the same time, since our captivity in the western hemisphere, progressive Native Americans have recognized that We have nothing in common to north amerikkka and the majority of us have no realistic way to get back to Afrika." (ibid.)

## HOW LAND TRUSTS OVERCOME THE BARRIERS TO ACCESS TO LAND

To grasp how difficult it is to access land, we need to look at the much neglected topic of black land ownership loss over the past 100 years. In his book *Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights*, American historian Pete Daniel uncovered the extent of land lost by the black community, which held 16 million acres (6.5 million hectares) in 1910, while there were 925,000 black farms in 1920. Between the 1940s and the end of the 1960s, 600,000 black farmers were ejected from their land (Daniel 2013). In 1999, 96% of agricultural land was owned by whites, only 2% by blacks and less than 0.7% by native Americans. This monopoly of white people over land is the result of the way in which the United States developed, namely through initially the process of colonisation/genocide/slavery and later lynching and gruesome murders in the name of white supremacy that forced the black population to migrate to the north. The land-grab process has continued as a result of police violence, discrimination and, more recently, predatory loans and gentrification. The United States is a colonial-settler country that is maintaining its imperial power both inside and outside its borders. The list of attacks against black communities goes on. Last but not least, this violent dispossession is accelerated by the nature of capitalism, which favours the accumulation of capital in the hands of the capitalist class.

Table 1

**All private agricultural land owners, acres owned, and value of land and buildings, by race and ethnicity, 1999**  
*Minorities own only a small part of the U.S. agricultural land base*

Group	Land owners		Acres		Average acres <sup>1</sup>	Value (\$1,000)	Percent <sup>1</sup>
	Number	Percent <sup>1</sup>	(1,000)	Percent <sup>1</sup>			
United States	3,412,080	--	932,495	--	273	1,283,853,124	--
White	3,218,751	96.2	856,051	98.1	266	1,156,977,076	96.8
Black	68,056	2.0	7,754	0.9	114	14,366,319	1.2
American Indian	23,266	0.7	3,398	0.4	146	5,271,769	0.4
Asian	8,158	0.2	964	0.1	118	6,860,824	0.6
Other	27,290	0.8	4,640	0.5	170	11,753,114	1.0
Hispanic <sup>2</sup>	47,223	1.4	12,888	1.4	273	18,209,871	1.4

<sup>1</sup>Racial percentages are calculated based on the racial totals for all owners and all owner acres (3,345,521 and 872,807,000). The U.S. total is greater than the sum of the races because it includes corporate and other non-individual owners that do not have racial characteristics, plus some individuals who did not answer or did not receive a racial identifier. This also applies to average acres per owner.

<sup>2</sup>Hispanic percentages are calculated based on the U.S. totals for all owners and all owner acres (3,412,080 and 932,495,000).

Source: Table 68, 1999 *Agricultural Economics and Land Ownership Survey*.

1 acre = approximately 0.405 hectares

Source: United States Department of Agriculture

The table above provides a crystal-clear picture of the situation in the United States, where the white population controls most of the land in a capitalist system that perpetuates white ownership through inheritance. As Elandria has said many times, “most of us have zero generational wealth, so there is not much to pass on to anybody. So even in my case, when my grandpa passed away, he left a house, but we had to invest double the value into fixing it after the hurricane hit.”

As predatory pension funds have been actively engaging in land theft without the knowledge of pension holders, black-ownership of land is dangerously decreasing. The financialisation of the economy, a pillar of the capitalist system, displays hidden and vicious features as it engages the passive participation of a large population. For example, in the United States, journalists (Newkirk II 2019) and ActionAid activists (Quinn-Thibodeau 2019) have uncovered how the fund retirement TIAA is using retirement funds to marginalise, displace and dispossess the black community. Recently TIAA has grabbed 80,000 acres in predominantly black counties in Mississippi (ibid). State workers, non-for-profit workers, educators, and university faculty and staff should unite against the way TIAA and state funds use their retirement funds without their consent to steal agricultural lands from the black community.

Access to land seems impossible for black people, but in cities, searching and negotiating for every plot of available land has become the task of black-led community trusts like the **Dynamite Hill-Smithfield Community Land Trust** in Birmingham (Alabama). The Trust’s director, **Susan Diane Mitchell**, explained to us how she and her team have been on the hunt for every last parcel of land that could be used to benefit the community. For example, the Trust has claimed vacant lots situated by interstate roads or bridges and has been in negotiations with local churches that have an unused lawn to turn them into urban agricultural cooperatives. Its urban gardens include a composting zone for the use of the entire community, thereby contributing to the zero-waste movement. This service enables links to be forged with the community and for the youngest members of this community to understand where their vegetables come from. The head gardener we met at the community garden managed by the Trust told us that his greatest pride was organising a visit to the garden by the school or taking back to his son a carrot freshly removed from the soil so that new generations can learn to re-establish a connection with nature.

For **Majadi Baruti**, an active member of the Dynamite Hill land trust, community education is central, especially when it comes to educating people about the wealth of farming skills and technology handed down the generations. Our ancestors brought with them seeds from their motherland and their knowledge, which was then

passed on, and yet black youth is facing a negative narrative depicting black people as somehow being incapable of farming to justify farmland grabs by the white population. Baruti echoes a similar struggle reported by **Leah Penniman**, an activist, farmer and author of a recent book, *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*. According to Penniman, Africans were enslaved because of their mastery of farming. Black farmers created many technologies. **Soul Fire Farm** in upstate New York has created its own trust, which can receive donations of land through people-to-people reparation, representing the first of its kind.

For **Malik Yakini** of the **Detroit Black Community Food Security Network** and the **Detroit Food Policy Network**, **D-Farm** is not just a project for growing healthy local food; it also helps grow collective consciousness and reframe the kind of agriculture that works for the community. Yakini considers urban farming an act of self-determination as opposed to globalised industrialised agriculture, which exploits black labour for the accumulation of land and capital for wealthy white men. Yakini insists on repeating the three terms “wealthy,” “white” and “men,” as he believes this is what capitalism has produced: a racist and patriarchal society where the majority is neglected in favour of the accumulation of capital, as suggested by Walter Rodney and Samir Amin.

## CREATING NEW MODES OF PRODUCTION

Marx's influence has persisted in the form of one particular imperative, namely the need for the workers to take back control of the means of production. What black radical emancipatory practices are teaching us is that communities can reinvent new means of production, ones that are more connected to their needs and more connected to nature. One of the unique innovations of its kind comes from the **Incite Focus digital fabrication laboratory** (commonly referred to as the “Fab Lab”) in Detroit, where all the business processes were inspired by observing the regenerative features of nature. The makers' lab includes high-tech 3D printers, a sophisticated machine to make prototypes out of cardboard, various machinery for creating electronic circuits, and a myriad of tools. Director **Blair Evans** – whose early activities as an organiser started with his uncle founding the **Shrine of the Black Madonna Church** – explained how they used permaculture as a model and a framework for organising their activities, thereby revolutionising how they operated. Evans explains that traditionally the business community prioritises profit, and therefore the starting point for all entrepreneurial endeavours is one individual's idea. This capitalist culture encourages us to use marketing strategies, cheap labour, and so on to extract maximum profit. There is no consideration for the social or ecological consequences, let alone whether there is any real need for the product/service. This



neoliberal culture is constantly driven home by the education system and also by global media propaganda surrounding patriarchal business entrepreneurs like Elon Musk, who is considered to be a genius of his time, when in fact, his initial wealth was inherited from his father who stole an emerald mine from the people of Zambia. Wealth accumulated from colonial theft and slavery is hidden by the myth of the American Dream.

The counterculture advocated by Incite Focus proposes a new relationship between the community and nature and radically distancing ourselves from the growth paradigm. It suggests that the natural world must stop being perceived as an infinite source of raw materials to be exploited. Instead, nature must become a source of knowledge and guidance that includes an intelligent consciousness that is available for us at all times, providing us with inspiration. Evans attributes the success of this community production centre to the fact that the starting point has always been the community and its needs.

*Elandria: Can you tell us what the production centre is exactly, and I would be interested if you could share with us what you believe are the invisible assets, be they network- or knowledge-related, for example, that helped support the fab lab?*

*Blair Evans<sup>5</sup>: The most critical part of that is experiential [...] You've got to make the shift incrementally, as the people involved are willing to put more time and energy into it when they feel the power that goes with it. It spirals up. From a business perspective, you have the classic development process: you have an idea, then you draw a business model, you assess the market, and make a business plan... [Instead] you actually: (1) select a community that you're actually going to be serving; (2) seriously engage the community to seriously understand what the needs are; (3) identify [...] a specific problem and you develop a specific solution; (4) test that idea in the community. There is a tremendous opportunity not just in terms of having productive work to do but [...] to pivot the whole mindset of people of being involved in the creation of their life in addition to just consuming stuff. That gives them the opportunity to actually be an agent in [their] future, which is new.*

The Fab Lab's most experienced staff help people validate their ideas, but not from a market perspective but from the standpoint of the community, thereby reinforcing the latter's engagement in decision-making with a view to adopting the appropriate solutions proposed by the lab. The natural system forms the basis for this organic and scientific approach. The process of creating solutions becomes a commons and therefore is based substantially on organising skills instead of selling capacity.

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5 Interview with Blair Evans conducted in Detroit, 9 March 2018

Evans considers that the financial cost of the automation that has deprived people of their jobs is low enough to make sure that Detroiters will not have to wait for another wave of industrialisation to happen – which is unlikely to materialise anyway. Instead, he believes they have the ability, just like nature, to adapt to their environment and create work for themselves, especially in light of the technological knowledge shared on open-source platforms. New industries, if they are brought back to the city, will only perpetuate an “unhealthy, imbalanced system from which they were ejected in the first place” (Piper 2013). Evans explained how the community production lab sees nature echoing the struggles of the black community, saying that “in permaculture, you’re not a slave to the process. You’re a participant in the process.”

In a similar vein, the Jackson-Kush Plan highlights the devastating effect of timber extraction in Mississippi, which has left the state dependent on global capitalism and external capital. To avoid reproducing such extraction/dumping, Cooperation Jackson, along with other black-owned cooperatives in Mississippi, has developed a strategy geared towards creating regenerative projects to minimise extraction. In Jackson, cooperatives are interrelated, and this interrelatedness is the mainspring for a local economy. For example, **Freedom Farms** provides produce to community members at low cost and used to supply the former Nubia’s Place Café and Catering Co-op, which was previously located in the Lumumba centre’s kitchen. Freedom Farms sells vegetables and herbs to a ‘cash and carry’ in Jackson, a retail market that sells pesticide-free and fresh produce.

## **BUILDING COMMUNITIES WITH KNOWLEDGE, CULTURE AND ART**

An increasing number of black communities have responded to food apartheid and the generally racist food system by growing their own produce. Many black farmers we met consider themselves not only farmers but also food justice activists, as their work encompasses the actual technical skills required to prepare and care for soil and to grow and harvest food. They use the land to create a space for learning, sharing and building communities, bonding with nature and educating communities with African knowledge, heritage and culture.

## KNOWLEDGE IS A COMMONS

The way knowledge is produced and disseminated is very much inspired by an indigenous understanding that it is not enough to simply be a good member of the community – being a good ancestor is just as important. Therefore, building communities requires actions that both encompass the present moment and foster intergenerational solidarity. This aspect was very much on show in Detroit. For example, the **Boggs' summer school** serving young Detroiters started with free gardening programmes in collaboration with the Garden Angels, a group of elders with southern roots who were teaching younger generations how to grow food. Similar educational programmes exist in Birmingham, where young aspiring gardeners can benefit from the guidance of mentors. The **Cooperative New School for Urban Studies and Environmental Justice** in Birmingham is an online school offering courses on history, theory, and practice of social movements and community organizing.

Knowledge, when cooperatives disseminate it, is not treated as a commodity but as a commons to be expanded and nurtured and made free, accessible and shareable. On the other hand, this does not prevent cooperatives from resorting to paid training to reinforce their internal capacities. Community production labs such as Detroit's Incite Focus, for their part, defy intellectual property by "hacking" or tweaking products such as tools and machines for which most designs can be found on open-source platforms. The website [farmhack.com](http://farmhack.com) is an example of an open-source design used by Incite Focus.

Detroit is a city where there are many vacant homes and plots of land. People just occupied plots and started gardening, thereby creating a new culture around commons and the opportunities it can offer to a community. Detroiters maintain a belief that they are the makers of their own history, a philosophy that stems from decades of struggle and Detroit's industrial history. Most importantly, as music producer **Bryce Detroit** explains: "this culture is due to the southern rural roots where black communities had to create their own economy from scratch."

Cooperative networks are more preoccupied with building a local economy for the communities to thrive than making a profit. This particular business model reinforces the culture of commons. In Detroit, the **Cass Corridor Commons** hosts the offices of several organisations, which then have a common shared space, which helps create new synergies and strengthen the culture of commoning. For **Daryl Eley Jordan**, a senior organiser with the **East Michigan Environmental Action Council**: "Cass Commons [...] [is] the people's place and almost everyone can meet here. People using the building is how it can be sustainable."

Even though it is not institutionalised per se, Detroit's regular Commons Social Gathering is innovative as it creates a space where a culture of commons can thrive. However, the gathering does not depend on the goodwill of institutions.

Perhaps the most critical aspect is that the political organisations and their connections are also relevant to each of the commons projects, providing support to each other and interconnections. For example, due to the Great Migration, black people in Detroit have southern roots, and some of them, such as the late Lumumba, do return there.

## BEYOND MATERIALISM, SPACE AND TIME: AFRO-FUTURISM AND THE COMMONING OF THE IMAGINARY

We discovered throughout our learning journey that collective traumas do shape relationships with the land. From a post-colonial struggle perspective, whereas in Africa or for native Americans, for example, private property was used as a tool of dispossession and forced labour, for the black community in the United States, being involved in a cooperative does not prevent people from accessing property. Similarly, one can delimit what people own within a cooperative. For black people taken from their homes without their consent, private property is a way of – at least to some extent – putting down roots in a new continent.

For 'Emergent Strategist' and writer **Adrienne Maree Brown**, the particular trauma of slavery and being uprooted calls for the need to "be grounded," and this opens up a range of possibilities. As such, we view the emergence of Afro-futurism as a way to collectively build a shared vision and hope around the black body and the black imaginary.

In Detroit, Incite Focus hosted a discussion about the movie **Black Panther**, reflecting on how the city could become **Wakanda**, the fictional sovereign nation. One of the organisers in attendance was involved in a project with youth, art and poetry reflecting on Afro-futurism. Faced with racism fed by pejorative narratives, Afro-futurism allows the black community to avoid the negative ideas and imagery associated with this and to create its own narrative and identity in the future. While **Majadi Baruti** and **Leah Penniman** are striving to honour the depth of knowledge of black farmers and shift the narrative, Afro-futurist artists and activists are doing similar work but extending their imagination to what the black community and what the black body will look like in the future.

# WHITE SUPREMACY AND CAPITALISM VS COMMUNITY-DETERMINATION

## THE PROBLEM WITH SEIZING PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

**Scott Douglas**, the Executive Director of the **Greater Birmingham Ministries** (a multi-faith coalition that strives to strengthen the community and provide financial support for people in need), points out how Jackson built up its economic power first, whereas Birmingham started with institutional politics.

The perception and the hope that seizing public institutions will solve issues for the black communities create a lot of tension because substantial power is held by capital owners belonging to plantation owners' families.

Part of the deception surrounding the Jackson and Birmingham mayors' leadership stems from the imaginary of power limited to who seized power through a representative democracy, as opposed to how to create a different relationship between the State, the communities and the economic elites. Detroit went through a similar process with the election of **Coleman Young**. The biggest challenge to these black political communities remains not only **white supremacy and systemic racism but also global capitalism, which gave rise to more racism**.

Systematic incarceration of the black population has created an incredible capacity for quick organisation. We had witnessed this first hand as soon as we landed in Detroit when meetings were postponed to attend an emergency strategic meeting for a campaign to free **Siwatu-Salama Ra** jailed for standing her ground in self-defense. This environmental justice organiser was six months pregnant at that time and was jailed under challenging conditions with 23 hours a day of solitary confinement – without any consideration whatsoever. She was given prenatal care while shackled in bed, and after birth, she was denied the right to breastfeed her new-born.

According to **Daryl Eley Jordan**, his colleague Siwatu is being punished because of where she comes from, her parents being from a movement-related organisation. We discussed the United States' Second Amendment, which allows people to bear arms, and the Stand Your Ground Law, which allows people to bear arms in self-defence. As Elandria has rightly pointed out, being black means that it is impossible to use the same constitutional privileges created specifically for whites. Bearing arms while black has consequences.

The emergency strategic meeting has been led by artist and organiser Invincible III Weaver and alumni of the **Boggs' Detroit Summer School**, and now **Emergence Media** and **Complex Movements**. At the meeting, familiar faces from other cooperatives and rights movements have been working in synergy, pooling their strength to be more effective. Water warrior **Mama Lila** and artist **Bryce Detroit**, have been among those participating in such meetings, where they have provided reinforcement to each other. The ability to rally such a big crowd in no time is the key strength of community networks built around a similar struggle and where everyone knows each other, be it as a result of a shared campaign, a church or common southern roots.

By way of an update to the above, Siwatu-Salama Ra is now free. The three charges were reversed unanimously in the Court of Appeals, and she, along with organisers involved in her campaign, has been organising for mothers' rights and against abuses and laws like shackling of incarcerated mothers, and for the abolition of prisons entirely. **Siwatu's case is one of many revealing how racist the justice system is in the United States.**

There are currently increasing tensions in Jackson and Birmingham as a result of having more progressive mayors who were elected by community members, unable to stop incarcerations and killings of black people while the cities have been declared economically broke, and the options open to them to increase revenue to pay for services are limited. As a consequence, the same community organisers and leaders who put them into power are now frustrated at how they are behaving and operating.



Poster at the Free Siwata event.

## PATRIARCHY AND THE BURDEN OF THE MALE-LED CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT NARRATIVE

For **Scott Douglas**, of the Greater Birmingham Ministries, patriarchy is mainly due to the predominant narrative that charismatic men led the Civil Rights Movement. This narrative gave little scope to women to overcome this patriarchy. More famously, **Rosa Parks** who was often described as a simple tired seamstress or a weary seamstress who refused to give up her seat to a white man, and her action was reduced to a “brave and lonely act,” while in reality, Parks was the secretary of the **NAACP** local branch in Birmingham (Theoharis 2015). Her track-record has been forgotten as has that of other brave women like the 15-year-old **Claudette Colvin** who had refused to give up her seat before Parks did. In her memoirs, journalist and activist **Ida B. Wells** revealed that **W. E. B. Du Bois** excluded her name from the list of founders of the NAACP.

The **Civil Rights Museum in Birmingham** does feature framed portraits of famous civil rights activists, but all of these are men. Women are mainly described as persuasive organisers inside homes. At the training centre of the **Federation of Southern Cooperatives** near the Mississippi/Alabama border, a mural which at first glance seems to represent the liberation of black people through the control of land, on closer inspection reveals a gendered division of labour. Women are portrayed harvesting the land and cooking, whereas men are strategising sitting around a table or depicted as having the physical strength to break the chains of slavery. It is therefore unsurprising that the main grievance of an employee of the Federation, the only person in the organisation interviewed for this case study, was the weight of patriarchy in the organisation. The employee we interviewed feels that the excessive number of audits required by the State is a way to push the Federation into turning into a business and maintaining a vertical hierarchy.

Even for a successful project like the D-Town farm in Detroit, you have to dig deep to find out that it was black women – namely the late **Charity Mahouna Hicks**, **Mama Lila Cabbil** and **Mama Hanifa Hightower** from the **Shrine of the Black Madonna Church** – who laid the ground for this initiative.

Representing a new generation of cooperative incubators, member of the MXGM and Cooperation Jackson founder Kali Akuno often juxtaposes the intersectionality of the settler-colonial nature of the United States with white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. **Sacajawea (“Saki”) Hall**, a member of Cooperation Jackson, asserts that “capitalism and patriarchy separate social reproduction from economic production. [...] Capitalism would not survive without social production.” This is illustrated by the fact that members of Cooperation Jackson are working to make care work a central part of the solidarity economy they are trying to institute (Hall / Chimurenga 2017).

## THE CONTROL OF ENERGY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND WATER BY THE WHITE CAPITALIST CLASS

One of the most challenging obstacles for communities to thrive is the commodification of the natural world. Most resources, such as minerals, gas and oil, are owned by the white capitalist elite through mine operating rights (for coal, steel, copper, etc.). For example, renewing Jackson's sewer infrastructure – which is in catastrophically unhealthy condition – does not only require money but access to these commodities.

In Detroit, the most dramatic trend of these mega-corporations owning nature has been the attempt to privatise water. Detroit sits on 20% of the world's freshwater reserves, and companies such as Veolia and Nestlé are trying to privatise these, while California is sending in speculators. The privatisation process started with the land being classified as part of a "national park." This was then fenced off, eventually becoming separated off from the outside world and then quickly privatised. This struggle to resist the privatisation of water has led to the community to organise a Water Board which is fully integrated into the network of the city's commons. We met the poet and activist Tawana "Honeycomb" Petty at the Allied Media centre in Detroit to discuss how the community is fighting to keep water and its distribution a commons.

*Elandria: Tawana, can you tell us about what commons mean to you, and what the situation looks like here in Detroit.*

*Tawana: When I think about commons, I first think about water. The regional water authority has created a barrier, an island that was a public park - now privatised in the guise of a private park, using fences. That is a direct affront to the commons. People from California are coming to speculate on our water. We know what it means to give our water away – it is for the world, not just Detroit. A study made by Monica Lewis [a member of the People's Water Board Coalition] highlighted that in five years, a third of the world won't be able to afford water. What helps us connect with people across the globe is our water. The same corporations that destroyed water in Palestine, Saint Louis, Flint and so on are Veolia and Nestle. These corporations extract the water for free and sell it [in plastic bottles] to make a profit. If Nestle gets hold of our water, it is the end.*

*[I also think] how libraries should be a common but children are afraid of them. They only get one hour of computer use. This is not enough. We are facing many barriers just to live, the air, the corporations polluting the air... We have the most polluted zip code in the country.*

*Detroit is 50 years [ahead of others and] so we can tell other places what does not work, we can tell people that it is not because you elect a black city government that people don't internalise patriarchy and capitalism or white supremacy. When corporations are done with the people, we know what is left. I hope the narrative that folks*



*take from Detroit is from the people that are surviving and have been here. They will not gentrify Detroit. Detroiters have been fighting for too long [to allow that to happen]. If you are 40 or 50 years old [and have been living] in the city, you know what happens when corporations, the media, politicians and industries cooperate to destroy you. And if you [have gone through this], your defences are up. For almost half a century, Detroit has been dealing with global orchestrated propaganda feeding a narrative of failure, abandonment and bankruptcy. In movies when you hear “take them to Detroit,” it is supposed to be a punishment.*

*Elandria: It’s the same for Mississippi.*

*Tawana: The most crucial part is the narrative for the people who are resisting and also those who have internalised [things]. It is difficult to sustain any kind of revolutionary movement if people believe what is told about themselves and their city. If we try to go back to the commons, one thing I try to do is teach poetry as visionary resistance [to] be able to see how people are respirationed and reinvigorated through art.*

*Mabrouka: Like the movie Black Panther, it has re-energised people.*

*Tawana: Yes! The movie was so important [and] so is making art more of a commons, teaching literacy and art workshops, from the young to elders. You are not going to engage... If you believe the propaganda you’re fed, then you won’t engage in something revolutionary, you will be part of a counterrevolution. We have to fight internalised capitalism, everything that is not for humanity. Ways to do that are inspired through art. Direct work can only be sustained with a narrative. For example, many believe that if you cannot afford water, you don’t deserve it and if you cannot afford internet, you don’t deserve it. That desegregation of the commons [is detrimental] to our psychological welfare. The shame that comes with not being able to afford [something]. And yet back in the [olden] days a bottle of water was unheard of, but now we’ve bought into the narrative that we have to buy water. We must work towards changing this narrative and make people understand that water is a commons and therefore it cannot be privatised and sold but needs to be collectively managed.*

Our conversation with Tawana made us think about ways in which communities can influence public decisions governing the commons. We were generally convinced about activism, resistance and people’s assemblies, but when it came to Community Benefit Agreements, which were mentioned to us a couple of times, we started having doubts and decided to dig a bit deeper.

## COMMUNITY BENEFITS AGREEMENTS: A CO-OPTED DEMOCRACY?

Among the many violent ways in which the black community has been pushed to the margins of society, gentrification has been one of the hardest to resist. Under the pretext of “development,” gentrification leads to the expulsion of lower-income groups and particularly the African American and LatinX community. Often plans for mega infrastructure get passed on from one administration to another, sometimes for decades, which makes them resilient.

This is the case in Birmingham, whose stadium project has been in the pipeline for years. Unfortunately, the current mayor, being tied to the narrative of creating jobs and boosting development, has agreed with the developers out of desperation and a lack of “real power.” Once the developers get involved, it is complicated to stop such massive infrastructure going ahead. Benefitting from the mayor’s initiative to create citizen-led committees, members of the community were nominated to participate in a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA). CBAs are contracts signed between developers, local government, and the community, agreeing on community needs in exchange for their support for the project. In Detroit or Birmingham, supporters interviewed for this case study have all explained the rationale behind CBAs, namely as for the most part, developers are being paid public money, the public has a say in how the project is designed.

CBAs are not the only channel. In Detroit, food justice organisers have been speaking directly to black developers through church connections, thereby forging relations with the for-profit sector to try to maximise the leverage for their demands. CBAs seem to be a type of last-resort action and are framed to help provide the community with a sense of self-determination that is not circumscribed by the rule of law or by the illusion of representative democracy. However, even CBAs are negotiated by a handful of community members who might not themselves be regarded as representatives. Once a community decides to agree on a CBA, whatever the project it is about, that project is a done deal.

Admittedly, we have not been able to gather more information on CBAs, and current studies are only available for a specific location in San Francisco and Chicago. It would be interesting to conduct more studies on whether CBAs are, as we think, just another way capitalism has adapted to co-opt communities.

## CONNECTIONS WITH LOCAL AND GLOBAL POLITICS: RELATIONS WITH THE LEFT AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSIONS

The political forces steering these urban and rural commons are rooted in the MXGM and the NAPO and have little connection with American political “progressives,” but internationally, these movements have extended solidarity and knowledge sharing networks. The importance of international solidarity is mentioned in the text of the founding statement of the New Afrikan People’s Organization: “We advocate a non-exploitative, social economic system. One that benefits the masses of all people in an independent New Afrika.

Our determination to end all exploitation of subjugated nations, inside and outside the boundaries of the US, is a fundamental principle that motivates us to have fraternal relationships to those forces struggling against imperialist domination” (New African People’s Organization (NAPO 1989). Detroit, Birmingham and Jackson have built a solidarity network with Puerto Rico, and other countries in the Global South as well. However, tensions with the Arab and Southeast Asian populations have undermined relationships, although all three of the cities support migrant and immigration justice, and will stand up against racist rhetoric targeting migrants. Often, it is the local black churches and black elected official caucuses nationally, statewide and in local communities who are pushing for leftist radical immigration and workers’ rights policies.

According to artists and organisers **William Copeland, B. Anthony and Bryce Detroit**, the dominant white capitalist class created tension between minorities. Bryce explained that through an urban renewal project, automotive manufacturer Ford rolled out a strategy to bring in Europeans who were perceived as more desirable than white Americans and as a way to dilute black numbers. So in the early 20th century, the Arab population in Ann Arbor was offered white and immigrant privileges to counter black communities.

For most black people, their only encounter with Arabs is in a grocery store, a petrol station or a liquor store (i.e. an off licence), as the people running these stores, and so blacks see them in this role. Generally, black youth do not see Arabs and interact with them other than these stores, which is unfortunate. This situation is changing with the election of United States House of Representatives Congresswoman **Rashida Tlaib**, a Palestinian activist, who was and is supported by all the “left”-leaning community members in the county that Detroit belongs to. She, her campaign and her office

are bringing the community together in ways that would have been unimaginable previously. Several organisations of people with Arab descent petitioned the administration of President Barack Obama to stop classifying North Africans and Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula as “white” but a particular Arab elite in Michigan was fiercely opposed to this and hung onto its white privileges.

Despite these internal tensions, one common cause that has united organisers and cooperative workers in all three cities has been their indefatigable solidarity with Palestine. Most people we interviewed have already travelled to Palestine to build a solidarity network. The similarities of the struggles of both black people in the United States and the Palestinian people is not only striking, but it enables, as Angela Davis puts it, to establish an appropriate analytical framework to help us “think of these issues together and to organize around these issues together” (Davis 2016: 19). In some way, what Davis is proposing is to use a multidimensional framework similar to the one used by the Global Working Group and extend the transnational solidarity aspect.

In Jackson, the French occupation movement ZAD Notre-Dame-des-Landes (Zone to Defend), has visited and supported Cooperation Jackson in continuing to build transnational relations and share experiences. Many people we have met have visited Mondragon in Spain. The Jackson-Kush Plan states that Mondragon is a model that Jackson intends to replicate:

*“Our conception of Solidarity Economy is inspired by the Mondragon Federation of Cooperative Enterprises based in the Basque region of Spain. Our conception attempts to draw from the best practices and experiences of the Mondragon system and combine them with the best practices and experiences of the Solidarity Economy and other alternative economic initiatives already in motion in the United States.” (Akuno 2012: 9)*

## IN THE END IT IS ALL ABOUT COMMUNITY-DETERMINATION

When looking specifically at urban transformations, the different stories and experiences coming out of the United States shows such deep connections between urban and rural spaces that it makes little sense to try to analyse these spaces separately, as in other chapters of this book. It is not so much the nature of the space that matters but the capacity to take power and transform any space, because the struggle for the liberation of the black community started with slavery when most of the territory was rural. Black people in the United States are descended from enslaved Africans, uprooted, taken from their continent and resettled on foreign land colonised by white Europeans.

This means that the question of land – not urban vs rural spaces – is a central one here. While white Europeans have treated the land as their dominion, exterminating the indigenous population and robbing them of their land through property ownership, the black community has strived to free this land again. In a way, they are challenging the ownership of land and see this issue as a way to free themselves through self-determination and through building communities, or – as Elandria puts it – “community-determination.”

During this learning journey, we collected more than 20 hours of recordings, had many encounters and built a strong bond between us as we came out of the experience with a mutual understanding of our respective peoples. Our sincere hope is for this kind of journey to be repeated and for stories to be told. Also, perhaps it will take more solidarity, more poetry, more art and more storytelling to mobilise people and rid them of the denial that our global system is a result of racist settler-colonial formations of Western states. We must recognize that welfare is a concession made by the white elite to compensate for the immense colonial drain on their resources (Bhambra 2019 and Patnaik 2018). There needs to be a recognition from the dispossessed, the colonised, the marginalised, the Global South, indigenous people, black people, the working class, LatinX populations and women, that catching up is not only impossible (Rodney 2014), but it is not viable. There must be reparations for the imperial and colonial crimes that were perpetrated. The colonial drain perpetuated by colonial-settlers and sustained by political, economic and military violence outside and inside the empire must stop for communities around the world to regain their dignity.

Finally, we must continue building our communities, sharing our struggles, providing love (Guevara 2003 and Lee Boggs 2013) and extending transnational solidarity. The only way to transform society is, as Grace Lee Boggs puts it, to “grow our soul,” and this is done, as we have learned from the black community in the United States, through community building and community-determination.

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**AFRICA**

The background of the entire page is an aerial photograph of a densely packed urban area, likely a slum in Lagos, Nigeria. The image shows a complex network of small, closely situated buildings and structures. A prominent yellow 'VI' is positioned at the top center of the page, partially overlapping the top of the aerial image.

VI

# **WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH MAKOKO? SOLIDARITY, STRUGGLES AND VISIONS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE SLUMS OF LAGOS (NIGERIA)**

By Isaac 'Asume' Osooka and Abiodun Aremu

Makoko is the most populous slum settlement in Lagos, the largest city in Africa. As the biggest floating slum in the world, about a quarter of Makoko's buildings, including homes and workplaces, are built on stilts in the waters of the Lagos Lagoon. Makoko is referred to by some as "the Venice of Africa", and such romanticisation has helped attract considerable global media attention and a rising number of Western camera-wielding tourists. However, the estimated 200,000 people living in Makoko face a constant struggle to make ends meet there or find work in other parts of the metropolis, or 'mega-city', that is modern-day Lagos.



Women at work at makoko Lagos

Makoko was a fishing community that existed before the city of Lagos saw the light of day and the latter was made the political and commercial capital of Nigeria during British colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> Many of the indigenous coastal communities were sacked as the colonialists took over their land to build the new city. Makoko was one of about 50 that survived, persisting side by side with the colonial settlements. However, their exclusion from colonial city plans served to informalise them. From the 1960s, following Nigerian independence from the colonial power, these waterside communities became a last refuge for some of the people who had moved to Lagos in search of opportunities, only to face impoverishment instead. Such communities expanded into the Lagos lagoons as the city's population grew due to migration from rural areas. The resilience of those who arrived from other parts of Nigeria and from other West

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1 The political capital of Nigeria was moved from Lagos to Abuja in 1999, after work started on building the new capital in the 1980s.

African countries, many of them still making their living from fishing, can be seen in the way they reclaimed land from the sea, namely by digging with their hands for sand from under the water. Reflecting the original residents' fishing background, Makoko's residents used canoes to get around, and those who subsequently joined them also adopted this means of transport and lifestyle. Over the years, this community has remained neglected by governments in terms of the provision of social services and infrastructure.

Makoko witnessed dramatic expansion in the early 1990s, a period when Nigeria was under military rule. In 1990, the military administrator of Lagos State demolished Maroko, another mega-slum having over 300,000 inhabitants. Tens of thousands of those displaced with no compensation or other place to live moved to Makoko. Meanwhile, the land where Maroko had stood was handed to the rich as part of the Victoria Island Extension, which is now taken up with the homes and offices of some of the wealthiest individuals and companies in Nigeria today. The children of the Maroko residents who arrived in Makoko are now facing new threats of land grabs. For the government, the slums are an unseemly eyesore that needs to be removed to make way for new, private sector-led urban developments. Indeed, some parts of Makoko, in particular those very close to the waterfront of the Lagos Lagoon, have witnessed a series of demolitions since 2012.

This chapter examines popular responses to the threats of forced eviction by Lagos State's authorities, and how the residents of Makoko are fighting to be acknowledged as a legitimate community. We used interviews to give voice to members of the community involved in the struggles to protect their rights to housing and a livelihood, and the organisations supporting them. First, we outline the success of community members in stalling demolition plans and cementing the recognition of Makoko as a legitimate urban community in the popular consciousness. Second, we examine possibilities for and constraints on turning popular resistance in Makoko, and similar communities in Nigeria, into more radical and transformative spaces for social and material production as alternatives to capitalist urbanity. We show that in the face of marginalisation by the State, the people continue to reclaim Makoko and similar settlements as living spaces with lifestyles and forms of leisure determined by the people themselves. However, participatory community governance could be constrained by the exclusionist claims of indigeneship by a few, which is supported by the Lagos State Government as a 'divide and rule' measure.

The case of Makoko reprises the example of the Maroko evictions in the 1990s, with both of these instances offering an insight into the post-1980s neoliberalisation of

development in Nigeria. Beyond the precarity of housing for the urban poor, we see in the plans of the military and civilian authorities running Lagos State from the 1990s to the 2010s a vision of corporate-driven urban development, including the privatisation of public water systems, as promoted by local capital and global bodies, including the World Bank. As such, our examples provide an opportunity to look at the (re)configuration of social forces within the communities and civil society from the 1990s to the 2010s.

Resistance to the Maroko evictions in 1990 benefited from a stronger, broader-based solidarity network linked to the movement opposing the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and supporting democracy, at a time when there were no professionally organised, specialised NGOs with a focus on housing rights.<sup>2</sup> In Makoko, the 2012 resistance was more or less limited to actual evictions and to the community itself. A few professional NGOs have worked to support this community. Together, they have succeeded in halting evictions, in part by proposing alternative housing and potential livelihoods that put people first. In the midst of all this, a slew of community, NGO and corporate initiatives have emerged offering education, health-care and other social services. How has Makoko fared against the background of contentions with the government, private investors and international development organisations? Do the Makoko/Iwaya Waterfront Regeneration Plan and the Makoko Sustainable Regeneration Plan represent the vision of the community or that of NGOs and their financial backers? How can communities at the margins of State and private capital infrastructure develop self-supporting democratic systems and solidarity-based economies?

Beyond housing rights, the case of Makoko reflects the contradictions of post-colonial urbanity where official city plans push communities into precarious living situations and ultimately to the margins of citizenship, which should not be equated with belonging, which more or less means being an indigene.

While most residents of Makoko are citizens of Nigeria, a few are also claiming ownership of the community with the backing of the Lagos State Government. The indigene/resident dichotomy fades away when there is the imminent threat of demolition but takes centre stage again at other times to undermine the sustainability of solidarity.

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2 Donor-funded NGOs with paid management and staff focusing on specific issues did not exist until the emergence of human rights NGOs in the late 1980s. Nigeria's first human rights-focused NGO, the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), was founded in 1987. NGOs specifically targeting housing rights emerged in the 1990s.

# RURAL LIVING IN A MEGA-CITY: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT FOR THE STRUGGLE

## ORIGINS OF LAGOS AS A COLONIAL CITY

African coastal towns in the area that eventually became Lagos were vital for European traders. For several centuries indeed they hardly went beyond the Atlantic coast, from where they traded with African intermediaries who brought in slaves and commodities from the hinterland. The first Europeans to venture further were Christian missionaries. Following their lead, British traders operating at the British government's behest made their way inland, having arrived with gunboats. In 1861, the British completed the annexation of the Lagos area as a 'Crown Colony' (Ikime 1977; Flint 1960). From then on and in response to the demands of European capitalism at that time, British colonial rule expanded inland over the region they called Nigeria. Colonialism was an enterprise – and one involving a lot of competition in those days. British trading interests in the Gulf of Guinea were meant to head off competition from the French and the Germans and sought to roll back the frontiers of the territory under their sway. The fierce rivalry between competing business interests culminated in the Berlin Conference (1884–85), where Africa was partitioned into spheres of domination of the various European powers.

George Goldie was the most prominent British trader involved in the efforts in the Niger River region. First, Goldie negotiated for the major British trading companies in the area to merge into a single United African Company (UAC) in 1879. By 1882, he had been instrumental in establishing a new company, the National African Company, which bought out the UAC. Goldie's company acted as the colonial government in the Lower Niger area. Goldie himself was one of Britain's leading representatives at the Berlin Conference, where he successfully laid his country's claim to control of the area that is now called Nigeria (Ikime 1977; Flint 1960). Following the Berlin Conference, his company was renamed the Royal Niger Company (RNC) in 1886 and had the British Crown's authority to act as the colonial government. The RNC turned its staff into imperial bureaucrats and controlled an army that embarked on expeditions to capture more territory and expand British colonial rule eastwards and northwards (Ikime 1977).

Gradually, the British colonial power in the form of the RNC started to divide Nigeria into various colonies and provinces, including Lagos Colony and Calabar Colony (the first capital of Nigeria). Of these, Lagos Colony emerged as the most important, and



eventually it was made the administrative and commercial capital of Nigeria, given its strategic geographic advantages and links to the Atlantic routes and the massive investment there in capitalist commodity exchanges, infrastructure and administration that resulted in paid employment opportunities. However, indigenous communities had no say in shaping colonial Lagos, a city built by white Europeans for their own interests more than anything else. Similarly, the needs of colonial commerce and administration determined the infrastructure that was put in place there.

European colonial rule, in the form of a 'British Protectorate', took in the various Yoruba groups, extending as far as to what is now Southwest Nigeria, with Lagos remaining the epicentre of colonial rule. As colonial power grew, so did the city of Lagos, with workers deployed in British companies and the emerging civil service. The colonial administration planned the city and mapped out the European quarters, away from the working-class neighbourhoods. In this case, the working class numbered those working for the official 'establishment'. There was no clear plan for the members of the indigenous communities who were pushed to the edges of the city. Among the marginalised and excluded were dozens of surviving indigenous fishing villages on land that was not of immediate interest to the colonists. Over time, these villages, like Makoko, swelled into slums as migration from rural areas increased.

Makoko, on the coast of the Lagos mainland, became an 'informal' settlement which was by now home to so many people that the authorities could not keep track of its population, or perhaps did not care to do so. In ignoring the settlements of the urban poor, the Nigerian ruling elite failed to acknowledge these communities' contribution to society as cheap labour supporting capitalist production and domestic labour for the newly monied government officials who had looted the public coffers. In the absence of reliable census figures for Makoko, population estimates vary from 40,000 to 300,000 (Ogunlesi 2016). Makoko today is a conurbation of six villages: Oko Agbon, Adogbo, Migbewhe, Yanshiwhe, Sogunro and Apollo. Some of the early inhabitants are said to have had their roots in Badagry, a town about 60 km west of Lagos which was a prominent pre-colonial slave port. Others came from western communities who are now part of the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey), a colony established by France, but who have historical ties with communities in the region that became British Nigeria. In modern-day Makoko several languages are spoken, including Yoruba, Egun, English and French.



## THE PLACE OF MAKOKO IN LAGOS: FROM COLONIALISM TO THE STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMME (SAP)

The literature as well as media reports about Makoko emphasise the contradictions between human existence and the right to decent housing for most of the communities in Lagos. Unlike the former European quarters of Ikoyi and Victoria Island and the official working-class neighbourhoods of Apapa, Surulere and Ikeja, Makoko is unplanned, overcrowded and lacking access to basic sanitation. Beyond the less populated and planned settlements for the wealthy and middle-class elites and the growing new neighbourhoods, which are paved and serviced with drainage, roads, water and electricity lines, most of the Lagos communities are categorised as slums. Slums and semi-slums abound in Lagos: Ajegunle, Amukoko, Badiya, Obalende, Lagos Island, Mushin, Somolu, Ojo, Alaba, Okokomaiko, Ajangbadi, Ikotun, Igando, Isolo, Oshodi, Alimoso, Agege, Ojodu and Ketu. These settlements are home to the majority, low-income groups who to varying extents are suffering from the same drawbacks of urbanisation and deficiencies in infrastructure as Makoko.

In the 1980s, the elites were not interested in Makoko. As with Badiya-Ijora and other slums in the metropolis, they preferred to avert their gaze when faced with the unseemly sight of the homes of the most disadvantaged section of society. For many poor people, though, Makoko was simply an affordable place to live. Most of the parts of this 'no-man's land' that are not covered by water were reclaimed by the residents themselves, using sand dredged by hand from the lagoon. As the population grew and there was no longer enough land available to cope with the influx of displaced fishermen and artisans from elsewhere, people started to build homes standing on stilts above the lagoon. However, doing this is not necessarily an act of desperation. Such buildings for fishermen and their families to live in are not unusual in coastal fishing communities in the mangroves right across the Gulf of Guinea. In particular, in parts of the Niger Delta, such communities have used wood and bamboo and thatched roofing to build their homes. People from the Niger Delta, including Ilaje and Ijaw fishermen, have made their way to Lagos to ply their trade and have brought their architecture with them.

However, when these rural-style homes were introduced into the city, taking their place alongside the magnificent Third Mainland Bridge and high-rise buildings, they were seen as a blight on the Lagos urban landscape. Indeed, until 1990 when the Third Mainland Bridge, sections of which stand over the Lagos Lagoon, was opened up to motorists, Makoko was little known about by non-residents.

Makoko's fishermen work on the lagoon with their families. Their catches are sold to traders, often women, living in their community. Fish is sold fresh or smoked in Lagos's open-air markets. Many of the boats used for fishing and local transport are built by members of the community. The boats are also used by sand dredgers who harvest sand from the lagoon using their hands and buckets.



Fish is mostly smoked indoors by women from the community.

Other residents work in different professions and trades in the city. Among them are low-level civil servants and workers in factories and the services sector, such as banks, where they are drivers and cleaners. Others are market traders and artisans – carpenters, mechanics and several other vocations normal in a large city. Together they have established lifestyles and built amenities without government involvement. While its economy is tied to that of the city as a whole by trade and employment, Makoko enjoys self-government through a combination of a sense of mutual solidarity and the prominent role of government-supported local leaders, called *Baales*, who are chosen from families claiming indigeneship. Members of the community run businesses such as bars and hairdressers' and barbers' shops. Rather than being provided as social amenities, businesses are in charge of water boreholes, given the lack of public water systems available to the community. Therefore, private borehole owners sell water to residents, who collect water using jerry cans, like the majority of the population of Lagos and other Nigerian cities do for their drinking water following the post-SAP collapse of most public water services.

In the 1980s, the SAP did serious damage to people's living standards. This period saw the unprecedented privatisation and commercialisation of public assets, resulting in a rise in the cost of these and of public services, massive job losses, a gradual collapse of the manufacturing sector, low levels of national productivity due to a dependence on foreign products, an economic recession that led to pay cuts, unpaid salaries and pensions, workforce casualisation and job insecurity, among other consequences. The SAP also brought about a huge influx into Lagos of jobseekers and those looking to earn their livelihood there from across the country and abroad, which gradually led to the saturation of the undeclared-labour market by the newly arrived members of the city's workforce. The desperate search by the jobless and artisans for opportunities led many to slums such as Makoko as this became a vibrant underground economy.

Since the 1980s, teachers and other public-sector workers have experienced a decline in their income as a result of inflation. There have been protracted school shutdowns as teachers and other workers have demanded higher wages. At other times, teachers in state schools have looked for other ways of supplementing their household income, meaning that less of their attention has been focused on their pupils. More fundamental to the deterioration of the state-school system, though, is the lack of funding or the looting of budgeted funds.

In Lagos and other parts of Nigeria there are many state schools where children are educated in dilapidated classrooms. Children from the community attend state and private primary and secondary schools within a four-kilometre radius of Makoko in Ebute Metta, Iwaya and Yaba. However, the community has many small privately owned and operated fee-paying schools. Despite the fact that these are not properly regulated and lack basic learning facilities, they have continued to attract the patronage of poor families following the crisis of confidence that engulfed the state education system in the 1990s.

## HISTORY OF FORCED EVICTIONS

Studies have traced the history of forced evictions in Lagos as far back as the pre-independence era, as the colonial authorities expanded their settlements in an area peppered with lagoons and islands. The authorities argued these evictions were about protecting the public interest. For instance, the Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) claimed the bubonic plague was a reason for the evictions ahead of the 1920s demolitions (Agboola / Jinadu 1997). Urban expansion of Lagos has often involved infilling, especially in the high-brow Ikoyi and Victoria Island. New developments providing homes for top government officials and other elites have resulted in the original communities being pushed to the margins, closer to the swamps. However, the authorities have been known to consider such settlements for the poor an eyesore, even demolishing them, as the colonial administration did to avoid the British queen seeing them on a visit to Nigeria (Agboola / Jinadu 1997).

Following independence, Nigerian governments continued and even stepped up the demolitions and evictions. As not all the waterfront settlements are marked on official city maps, these are easy prey when building development infrastructure such as motorways. Often, areas marked for demolition are categorised as illegal settlements by the government. In Lagos, these areas include Adeniji Adele, Iponri and Alaba Market. Evictions have also been visited on markets such as Tejuoso, leading to the displacement of small-scale shopkeepers and stallholders who were forced to give way to corporate capital in much the same way as San Roque's indigenous market in Ecuador, as described in Chapter 4. Populations affected have ranged from hundreds to tens of thousands. Maroko had experienced demolitions before the evictions in 1990, with demolitions in 1982 so that a motorway could be built and over 60,000 residents being displaced a year later when there were demolitions by the government due to floods caused by a lagoon overflow. Then in 1990, the entire Maroko settlement was bulldozed, and all the residents were forced out of their homes.

In 1990, the military junta at the time defended the demolition of Maroko, the worst mass evictions in Lagos up to then, on the pretext that they were to protect the people living there from flooding. However, the flooding that affected Maroko also hit areas with high concentrations of wealth, such as Ikoyi and Victoria Island, which did not suffer such a fate, illustrating the class delimitation rationale behind these evictions. In Lagos, from Isale Eko to Western Avenue, evictions have been linked to infrastructure development, modernisation or setting aside land for the elite. Indeed, they have been a consistent feature of roadbuilding, accompanying the construction of Idiro Road, Agege Motor Road, Ikorodu Road, Oba Akran and Awolowo Road, for

example. In the case of Makoko, the Lagos State Government referred to the proximity of some of the buildings to high-voltage electricity pylons to justify the mass evictions in 2012.

The evictions in Lagos during military rule in the 1990s and by the post-military governments following the 1999 transition were never cushioned by resettlement plans. Furthermore, only rarely was there even compensation paid, as there was little if any consideration for the social impact of urbanisation. The emphasis was more on aesthetics than the interests of the poor and the communities who had traditionally lived there. The civilian governments that have emerged following the flawed general elections from 1999 onwards have produced new rulers who however operate in ways mirroring their military predecessors. Their approach has been driven by the pressing desire of the power elite to acquire potential prime waterfront properties as part of urban renewal schemes. Therefore, once a space is identified as a slum, the authorities respond not with rehabilitation but complete demolition, which ultimately leads the displaced to make other existing slums more congested and create new ones.

Evictions are in violation of fundamental human rights. Often members of the armed forces are drafted in to destroy the properties of the poor. There have even been reports of extra-judicial killings of the victims of demolitions (Eze 2017; Morka 2008). The use of the military highlights the nature of this war being waged by the power elite against the poor.

The experience of land and property dispossession in Lagos reflects the widening inequalities and gaps between the wealthy and low-income workers and the precariat who have mostly been driven to the fringes, as their neighbourhoods have become the subject of property-value speculation.

## THE MAROKO EVICTIONS IN 1990

A study of the evictions of over 300,000 people from Maroko in 1990 presents a picture of what would conceivably happen if Makoko were demolished without providing any alternative housing for the residents. The Maroko evictions were the biggest-ever single act of dispossession in the history of Lagos State. Samuel A. Adeyemi of the Maroko Evictees Committee reports the following:

*Makoko was created in 1948 when the colonial government acquired Victoria Island as a GRA [Government-Reserved Area] and displaced those originally living on the land. [The government] used the then Lagos Executive Development Board (LEDB) to resettle the displaced people in Maroko, on land that was later successfully claimed by the Oniru Family through litigation. Many of the residents of Makoko had bought land from the Oniru Family. In 1972, Lagos State acquired the land for public purposes which were never disclosed.*

The Lagos State Government relinquished its acquisition in 1977 (Akhigbe 2015). By 1990, Maroko had about 10,000 extra homes and a population of 300,000 from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria and other West African countries, most of whom were renting property. However, the military government called them all squatters, and on 7 July 1990 the military administrator of Lagos State, Brigadier Raji Rasaki, issued them with one week's notice that their homes were going to be destroyed. Before the evictions, residents of Maroko had consistently paid tenement rates, taxes and development levies to the state government despite the latter's failure in its duty to provide basic social amenities. The demolition notice came after a week of heavy rain in late June 1990 which caused flooding in many parts of Lagos, including the upmarket Victoria Island and Ikoyi neighbourhoods. In December 1991, so barely a year and half after the demolition of Maroko from 14 to 28 July 1990, Rasaki, despite a public outcry, allocated the land where the demolitions had taken place in Maroko to a handful of wealthy Nigerians.

In 1990, responses to the Maroko evictions both and before after they happened reflected the popular mood and the strength of social forces opposing the military regime at the time. The introduction of SAP policies by the military rulers from the mid-1980s onwards reinvigorated civic resistance led by the Nigerian left, bringing together the student movement, radical academics, human-rights lawyers and those connected to organised labour. When the challenge of the Maroko evictions arose in 1990, the response and the solidarity with the victims reflected the forces of resistance to military dictatorship and the clamour for people's right to live in decent housing. A number of civic organisations, platforms created in soli-

darity with victims of the Maroko evictions, were involved, including the Maroko Action Committee (MAC). The groups insisted that the State has a responsibility to take care of the poor, including shelter and other aspects of socio-economic planning. The MAC comprised the Maroko Development Community and a coalition of leftist groups such as the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, the Nigeria Tenants Association (NTA), the National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), the Gani Fawehinmi Solidarity Association (GFSA), the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) and Women in Nigeria (WIN). These groups organised rallies and press briefings and continued to work in solidarity with the victims to ensure that the Maroko story persisted in the public consciousness years after the evictions. The groups demanded compensation for those who had been evicted.

The dogged struggle by the MAC and the evictees continued until a brief period of civilian rule at the sub-national level in 1992, when Governor Michael Otedola revoked the Certificates of Occupancy that had been issued to those who had been given Maroko land. He also demanded that the displaced people be allowed to resettle on the land. However, only very few could actually do this. Agboola and Jinadu (1997) write:

*Only landlords with evidence of property ownership prior to 1972 were considered. Thus, of the estimated 41,776 landlords displaced from Maroko, only 2,933 were considered for relocation. Of these, 1,766 were relocated on the Ilasan government housing estates, 917 on the Ikota estate and 250 on Epe. At the time when these housing units were allocated, most were not ready for human habitation. For example, on the Ikota government housing estate, only four blocks out of the 2,000 one-bedroom flats were habitable. Likewise in Ilasan, only one block (six flats) out of the estimated 2,000 flats was completed. There were neither water nor electricity supplies nor facilities on the housing estates and the whole environment was waterlogged. Accounts from the residents confirmed that the two estates lacked toilets, hospitals, markets, schools, and postal and other services at the time they moved in.*



A YEAR OF MAROKO DEMOLITION  
SUPPORT THEIR CAUSE. BE PART OF THE PROCESS  
TO BUILD A HUMANE SOCIETY

14th July, 1991.

Precisely a year ago, like a dream, but indeed a reality the Lagos State Government in tacit connivance with few, rich Nigerians moved into Maroko, a settlement of over 300,000 law abiding citizens, demolished their homes and dehumanized these our tax-paying citizens in a barbaric and devastating action that left public and private properties in billions of Naira ruins. This happened right here in Nigeria on July 14th, 1990, before our wide open eyes, and inspite of public outcry and outrage. It has happened before and is still happening but none has been of unimagineable proportion as the heinous dislodgement of these 300,000 peace-loving Marokoans! Yes, it happened before, in the inglorious history of our country, when in 1980, the ignoble Shehu Shagari Government massacred hundreds of peasants at Bakalori, in Sokoto State in a forceful seizure and possession of the peasants' land, their only fertile means to livelihood. It was the same plunderous episode, four months after the infamous demolition of Maroko, when the good, rural citizens of Emechem settlement in Rivers State were killed and maimed on this same issue of land.

On this historic first anniversary of the criminal outrages against the displaced Maroko residents, we the Nigerian Tenants Association want it re-affirmed that the wounds inflicted by the unpopular demolition exercise are yet to be healed, the agonies they suffered daily are as acute and relevant as our socio-economic reality.

Since the deeds were already done, what are the options open to our country to the problems of these displaced residents. Maroko problem is our problem, every Nigerian, every African, every lover of a peaceful world and humanity. What did they do? Are they not human beings? Yes they are. Their offence as pronounced by the official record of the government was that Maroko was in flood and they needed to save the residents from danger. Agreed! But we ask which part of Lagos was and is not in flood. If demolition is the measure, then all parts of

.../2.



- 3 -

- Compensation for the families of the affected citizens taken into consideration the physical, psychological, economic and socio-cultural losses suffered by the victims.

Issued by the Publication Bureau,  
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2, Jamilatun Buraimoh Close,  
Surulere.

ALWAYS RESIST MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN.

- MAROKO LAND IS OUR LAND, THE POOR PEOPLE LAND, LET JOIN HANDS TOGETHER TO DEPRIVE THE SUPER-MILLIONAIRES FROM SHARING OUR SWEAT.
- KNOW AND FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS TO LAND, TENANCY, DECENT HOUSING AND SECURITY TO LIFE; JOIN THE TENANTS ASSOCIATION TODAY, AND SAVE YOURSELVES, TENANTS, FROM THE TENEMENT RATES.

\*\*\*\*\*

MAROKO IS OUR LIFE, HOME, EDUCATION, JOB, AND OUR CULTURE, WE MUST BE RETURNED TO OUR HOME.

The Nigerian Tenants Association's statement of solidarity with the victims of the Maroko evictions in 1991.



## MAROKO ACTION COMMITTEE

24, Jebba street (West), Ebute Metta. Tel.....

12 February 1992

### PRESS STATEMENT

AN APPEAL TO GOVERNOR MICHEAL OTEDOLA AND THE HONOURABLE MEMBERS, LAGOS STATE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY TO REDRESS RAJI RASAKI'S INGLORIOUS CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

The Maroko Action Committee comprising representatives of the Nigeria Tenants Association (NTA), the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), Women in Nigeria (WIN), the National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADL), the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), and the Maroko Evacuees Community, wish to congratulate the Lagos State Governor, Sir Micheal Otedola, and the Honourable Members of the Lagos State House of Assembly for their concern for the Displaced Maroko people by revoking the Certificate of Occupancy of Maroko land.

1 The Maroko land in question was unjustly and maliciously allocated to certain few Nigerians by the ignoble Rasaki's Administration in December 1991, inspite of public outcry.

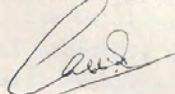
2 On this historic revocation which has further confirmed the legitimate right of the over 300,000 dislodged Maroko citizens to the Maroko land, we urge the Otedola's Administration and the Honourable Members of Lagos State House of Assembly to set up an appropriate machinery to return the affected victims to their land immediately.

3 Since the afflictions created by the heinous demolition of the homes of these hapless Nigerians in July 1990, are still having serious political, cultural, psychological and socio-economic repercussions, we therefore, strongly implore the Lagos State Government to set up a Humane inclined Resettlement Committee to work out acceptable modalities for the rehabilitation of these over 300,000 law abiding Maroko people.

.../2

4 We feel it a responsibility to once again bring it to your attention that there are no schools and health facilities in the present abodes of the three per-cent (3%) of the displaced Maroko people that are ill-adequately resettled by the Rasaki's Administration at Ilasan and Ikota Estates suffice it to add that the Rasaki Administration compounded the woes of the Maroko children by demolishing their last two (2) surviving schools in December 1991.

We appeal to you to do something in the immediate.



A. A. ABIODUN  
For Maroko Action Committee

Lagos State shared Maroko land with the rich despite denials by Raji Rasaki, the military administrator.

## MAKOKO AND THE THREATS POSED BY URBAN RENEWAL

Maroko evictees were still calling for compensation from the government when Makoko came to public attention as in 1991, with the opening of the Third Mainland Bridge, Nigeria's longest and grandest bridge, Makoko became apparent to motorists for the first time. This prompted negative reactions: as well as considering it out of place next to the University of Lagos, they deemed it a blot on the coastline.



The Third Mainland Bridge revealed Makoko's existence to Lagos motorists.

In the same period, the Central Business District (CBD) made up of Lagos Island, Ikoyi, Victoria Island and Lekki Peninsula was witnessing expansion through sand filling along the coastline, in response to demands by big business. It was only a matter of time before corporate interests and the politically connected well-to-do would set their sights on Makoko.

And so it turned out, on 13 July 2012 some Maroko residents received a letter, dated the previous day and signed by Akin Tijani on behalf of the Commissioner for Waterfront Infrastructure and Development, indicating that the state government was keen on upgrading the waterfront. The letter also said that the government's action was based on the need to protect life and property, promote legitimate economic activities at the waterfront, restore security, improve navigation and make the Lagos coastline more attractive. These motivations, the government stressed, underlined the mega-city status of Lagos State and as such required all illegal developments at the waterfront and on the water bodies to be cleared.



Consequently, the letter went on, "notice is hereby given to you to vacate and remove all illegal developments along Makoko/Iwaya waterfront within 72 hours of the receipt of this notice!"

On 16 July 2012, officials of the Lagos State Ministry of Waterfront Infrastructure and Development stormed the neighbourhood, with police shooting in the air and thugs arriving armed with machetes and chainsaws only four days after the 72-hour eviction notice. According to the Social and Economic Action Rights Centre (SERAC), a legal advocacy group, the assault on Makoko continued for five days, during which time chainsaws, machetes and other items were used to demolish buildings before residents had had time to remove their belongings. Many buildings were set ablaze by the Marine Police and thugs who attacked and injured many residents and threw some into the lagoon. The demolitions resulted in one person being killed and about 30,000 being made homeless, according to SERAC.

One resident recounts events as follows:

*The demolition of the structures at Makoko waterfront of Makoko started on Monday, 16 July 2012. The community has very ugly memories of the methods used by the authorities to achieve their ends that week because their equipment was well below the standard you would expect in the 21st century.*

*On Friday, 20 July, it took one of the operators of the only two chainsaws used for the demolitions about 15 minutes to be able to start it. The rest of the state government's operatives used a few cutlasses to take down one of the wooden structures at the waterfront.*

*At about 10.30 a.m. on Saturday, 21 July, some members of the Nigerian Police Force suddenly stormed Makoko waterfront and started shooting at residents. People were scared and scattered. A man identified as Pastor Timothy Azinkpono who was not resisting the Marine Police in any way was shot in the stomach and died from his injuries. After a lot of anger from people at the scene, the Marine Police arrested three Egun men and took them along with Pastor Timothy's body in their boat to Oworonshoki Police Station. They later went to the Lagos State Teaching Hospital with the body, where the pastor was confirmed dead.*

## TELLING THE STORY OF THE 2012 FORCED EVICTIONS IN MAKOKO IN IMAGES

Aderemi Adegbite is a visual artist and the Artistic Director of the Vernacular Art Laboratory Foundation (VAL) in Sogunro Community's Onisemo Village in Iwaya (part of Lagos State). Adegbite holds the view that art is a form of resistance.



The remains of a waterfront house demolished on the orders of the Lagos State Commissioner for the Waterfront, the Hon. Segun Oniru, during Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola's administration.



Young boys playing football during the demolition of the Iwaya/Makoko waterfront community



Members of the Iwaya/Makoko waterfront community at the Lagos State Secretariat in Alausa, Ikeja.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR HOUSING RIGHTS IN MAKOKO

The struggle for housing rights in Makoko in the context of Lagos urbanisation is rooted in the story of the Maroko demolitions in 1990. Following the evictions from Maroko, tens of thousands of people who had lost their homes moved to Makoko to erect new dwellings in the absence of either alternative housing or compensations from the government. Makoko residents teamed up with other precarious settlements in the Lagos Marginalised Communities Forum (LAMCOFOR). Samuel A. Adeyemi, a victim of the Maroko evictions, led the organisation and was a rallying point for the communities until his death in 2013.

With the Maroko evictions still etched in the public memory after 20 years, there was an outcry in support of the Makoko residents. While in Makoko the pattern of demolitions, including the short notice, was similar to Maroko, the immediate consequences were different. A combination of mass protests and litigation in the days and weeks following the July 2012 demolitions succeeded in halting the government's plans. There is no doubt that the knowledge of resistance built up from the Maroko evictions has endured and helped Makoko residents be more proactive and take more wide-ranging action. A lot changed in Nigeria between the Maroko demolitions in 1990 and those in Makoko in 2012. The most significant shift was the full restoration of civilian rule in the country following the 1999 general election. The transition to democracy was heralded by a pro-democracy movement that included organisations working in solidarity with

the Maroko victims. However, by 2012 the pro-democracy movement was mostly in decline or had collapsed. Instead, professional NGOs had come to dominate the civil society landscape. Some of these became very active on the Makoko issue, establishing their interest in this regard with the projects targeting that area. NGOs that have played a prominent role in these efforts include the Social and Economic Action Rights Centre (SERAC), the Rural and Urban Development Initiative (RUDI), the Justice and Empowerment Initiative (JEI), the Centre for Children's Health Education, Orientation and Protection (CEE-HOPE) and Spaces for Change. These NGOs have worked with the residents of Makoko to resist further government demolition plans and to put forward alternative solutions for urban renewal in Makoko.

## THE MAKOKO/IWAYA WATERFRONT REGENERATION PLAN

Makoko residents, supported by NGOs, submitted its own Waterfront Regeneration Plan to the Lagos State Government, providing an alternative to forced evictions. The plan was first and foremost an attempt to respond to all the reasons provided by the government as justification for the Makoko demolitions in 2012. The community devised its plan in close collaboration with SERAC, which created the Urban Spaces Innovation (UCI). This SERAC initiative, run by technocrats, was commissioned to produce an urban renewal plan for Makoko. Backed by international development organisations, the UCI created a working group that provided a framework for the broader participation of community members and experts in housing, urban development, finance and economic empowerment.

The terms of reference of the working group included:

- > to come up with an infrastructure roadmap, housing and neighbourhood regeneration plans showing the scale, nature and means of future infrastructure development in the communities and the harmony of the proposed housing structure with the renovated neighbourhood;
- > to develop a Makoko Tourism Plan that would serve as a tourism development and management guide and a Makoko Economic Development Strategy (MEDS);
- > to incorporate all the development plans into a Makoko/Iwaya Waterfront Regeneration Plan (MIWRP) with a view to offering a comprehensive proposal covering housing upgrading, infrastructure delivery, tourism prospects and overall community renewal projections;
- > to propose a realistic land and littoral title framework giving Makoko residents greater security of tenure, ahead of its potential adoption by the Lagos State Lands Bureau (Ambe-Uva 2017).



Once the working group had completed its activities, the community submitted the plan to the Lagos State Government in February 2014. The centrepiece was the proposed creation of 'neighbourhood hotspots', i.e. public spaces and facilities with renewable energy production, floating markets, recycling stations, floating schools, a walk-in clinic and toilets connected up to biogas. The plan also set out ways of increasing community members' incomes with a mini biogas reactor and mini solar plants. The proposals also suggested widening some of the canals to improve accessibility (Fabulous Urban / Heinrich Böll Foundation 2014). The plan received global recognition and was shortlisted for the Fuller Challenge in New York. Within the community, the first pilot Makoko Neighbourhood Hotspot, developed by Fabulous Urban in collaboration with SERAC and the Heinrich Böll Foundation Nigeria, was opened in 2015. As part of SERAC's ongoing work, the Makoko Neighbourhood Hotspot Multipurpose Cooperative Society was established.



Architect Kunle Adeyemi's blueprint for a regenerated Makoko.

The most popular project to be developed in the Makoko Regeneration Plan was the Floating School, which was designed by a Nigerian architect, Kunle Adeyemi. A graduate of Princeton University in the United States, Adeyemi managed to attract considerable support for his project, including from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Federal Ministry of Environment Adaptation Programme, the Yaba Local Council Development Area (YLCDA), Tafeta and Partners and the Makoko Waterfront Community, to go ahead with its implementation. The floating school, completed in August 2015, is considered a modern architectural masterpiece, winning many global awards such as the Aga Khan Award for Architecture 2016.

However, this project was hailed not for its sustainable transformative capability but for creating a media-worthy buzz to back up the neoliberal myth of individual initiative as opposed to the potential of collective action.

Before the project started, Makoko had just one, inadequate primary school. This stood on reclaimed land and was repeatedly threatened by flooding. But despite the buzz created by the floating school, the social situation in Makoko demanded more. Tens of thousands of children from Makoko attend the neighbouring schools in nearby Iwaya, Yaba and Ebute Metta, while the floating school when in use could accommodate 60 pupils at a time.

Eventually, the experiment failed. The building collapsed in 2016 during a rainstorm. Before that, parents had withdrawn their children from the school given the uncertainty surrounding its structural stability.

## INTERNAL DEMOCRACY AND REPRESENTATION IN MAKOKO

While the apparent wretchedness of Makoko is widely represented to the public by the mainstream media, scant attention is paid to the resilience of this community. Pre-colonial cultural identities and community organisations continue to frame the pressure from the State. *Baales* preside over various parts of the waterfront. They work with the various community development associations (CDAs) recognised by the government. While the CDA officers are supposed to be elected by the community, in practice Lagos State Government officials and politicians close to the government wield a lot of influence over the selection process. This is compounded by the *Baales* also seeking government recognition and approval.

As ‘traditional rulers’, most of the *Baales* claim to be indigenes. However, as mentioned above, most of Makoko’s residents have roots elsewhere. This means that although all the residents call Makoko home, there could be some dispute about their belonging, with some – those with ancestral ties to the land – claiming to ‘belong’ more than others. The Egun and others with ancestral roots in Makoko seek to defend their ownership of the community and their greater belonging. This is because that claim is all they have in a society where Nigerian citizenship has not been translated into communal belonging. People, irrespective of their living arrangements and work in the city, continue to feel a sense of belonging to their ancestral communities, where, by established common practice, their mortal bodies will be buried when they die. In a city like Lagos, it is normal to return to your ancestral home in another part of Nigeria to stand for political office in a general election. As a

result, the tensions between those whose families have lived in an area for generations and 'outsiders' could undermine urban communities where most residents do not have ancestral roots. The ruling elite often exploits this situation. For instance, only those whose ancestors come from Makoko or Lagos State can become *Baa*les. Active participants in CDAs are also very often 'original' community members. As such, while Makoko is a community offering a safe haven to many, belonging and urbanity are compromised by the unclear citizenship situations prevalent in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Internal democratic deficiencies, based on the pressures on *Baa*les and the CDAs from the government, were reflected in the process of preparing the Makoko/Iwaya Waterfront Regeneration Plan. As illustrated by the design of the Floating School, this did not draw on the knowledge of the community despite the greater buildings of their buildings built on stilts above the water. Also noteworthy is a new tendency to rely on external agencies including NGOs who are now expected to serve as a provider. Although SERAC and the community created a working group and organised meetings to encourage broader participation, in fact this favoured individuals with a firm foothold in the CDAs and parties with particular interests and motives, including external consultants and contractors. An observer points out:

*Non-governmental organizations such as SERAC and USI dominated the participation arenas, hence the democratization process was not driven by local citizens but by elites that understood how to mobilize the knowledge, resources and time of the private sector. Many scholars argue that such participatory forums are [a] mere source of legitimization of decisions already made by conveners. The organizers of such forum[s] play influential roles in setting the agenda and aggregating the interests. Since they are the ones who choose experts, they can cherry-pick their preferred recommendations, and decide what is discussed as well as the timing and institutional design... In the Makoko Regeneration Plan, the overbearing influence of the baale or the traditional structures negatively affected democratic participation since these actors and institutions possessed disproportionate resources vis-à-vis local citizens... Another weakness of the Makoko waterfront renewal was that the decisions did not have any direct effect on the final policy outcomes, since the Lagos State Government must approve all the decisions relating to urban renewal, especially finance. Similarly, the reliance on development agencies and the government for funding, meant that the meetings were often reduced to a mere talk[ing] shop with no implementation powers (Ambe-Uva 2017)*

Despite the limitations on the scope of community members' participation in NGOs and government schemes, the residents have a largely positive view of NGOs who supported them in times of need. However, the perception remains that these are trying to benefit from this themselves. Structured interviews were carried out with select members of the Makoko community, who agreed to express their views on condition of anonymity. One respondent explained:

*There is the need for NGOs to provide support for communities like the Iwaya/Makoko waterfront community as the government doesn't seem interested in the well-being of the people living there. The problem comes through when some of these NGOs begin to exploit the situation in this community for their own ends. In the case of the Floating School for example, the project was all about promoting architectural prowess rather than resolving a community problem. A lot of the key players were not properly informed about the project, and the idea of putting an individual in charge of it was a way of evading the very social responsibility the project was supposed to improve. If Makoko Floating School had been a project born out of the need to provide a lasting solution for the Iwaya/Makoko waterfront community, it might still be standing today. NGOs can really make a difference in a community if they are upfront in their activities and are scrupulous in working alongside the members of the relevant community.*

Most members of a community are caught up in the struggle for day-to-day survival. However, unity across a community can be easily achieved when common threats arise. There are various groups within a community, in particular young people, who organise sports and recreation and sometimes become part of movements organising street protests. As residents of the community, such groups have a material interest in protecting their homes from demolition and have played a vital role in establishing solidarity across the community and organising action whenever there is a threat of the community coming under attack from or facing eviction by the authorities.

Women actively participate in the economic and social life of the community and for decades now have formed cooperatives across various groups of trades and have run thrift clubs that allow them (and men) to save money and obtain credit facilities through a system of mutual contributions. These varied groups could potentially be organised democratically to defend the housing rights of the community, but this would require political education and mobilisation with regard to short- and medium-term objectives.

## WHO 'BELONGS' TO MAKOKO?

The Makoko and Maroko communities reflect the contradictions of colonial development and urbanity and expose the limitations of post-colonial citizenship. People belong to communities, and a political community in the form of the Nigerian State presents citizenship as a validation of belonging. When its cities deny the belonging of particular communities or fail to protect the rights of its members, then that citizenship is compromised. Colonial rule imposed on African people a state that was created to facilitate European commercial and imperial objectives. Colonial development models, including the building of economic and social infrastructure, served to extract human and material resources from the rural hinterland to service the urban centres. However, within the urban capitals, communities like Makoko exemplify a formerly rural African community in the heart of an urban metropolis, living on to expose what and who is excluded from the plans and promises of the colonial and post-colonial state.

In Nigeria and elsewhere, it is becoming commonplace for urban development to encompass the proliferation of new cement and glass buildings and other glitzy infrastructure. The unsightly residences of the poor are meant to give way to these buildings, involving forced evictions. It is as if certain citizens – namely those lacking financial resources – should be banished from the city landscape. However, in Makoko we see an example of resilience and resistance from a community seeking to advance an alternative vision of urban renewal – one that recognises the rights and the lives of its people.

Like Maroko in the past, Makoko presents a dynamic picture of the Nigerian masses and shows how they continue to subsist and thrive despite the exclusionist practices of the economic and political elite. In that sense, Makoko is a community offering refuge to those who have come to call it home. When there is the threat of eviction, all the residents march together with a view to protecting their right to housing. However, when there is the possibility of benefits – or compensation – from the government or NGOs, there is increased competition for ownership. Non-indigenes tend to focus more on their day-to-day jobs than on local politics. When dealing with communities like Makoko, NGOs have to navigate this delicate terrain, avoiding inadvertently taking the easy path of entrenching the participation of the local elite in schemes such as the Makoko/Iwaya Waterfront Regeneration Plan.

What should be done to achieve the potential for radical social transformation (in the context of alternatives to capitalist/state hegemony) in an urban environment like Makoko? Within Makoko various groups have been set up to facilitate artisanal work, commerce and recreation. A shared threat of forced evictions has increased community solidarity. People have marched together under the banner of housing rights. Without the involvement of the State in the provision of social amenities, there are possibilities for building common services under participatory and democratic management, as has been articulated in part by the Makoko/Iwaya Waterfront Regeneration Plan. What seems to be missing are conscious political actions and continuous popular education and programmes tied to the immediate material needs of both indigenous and non-indigenous members of the community.

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# VII

## COMMUNITY CURRENCIES FOR THE LOCAL ECONOMY: A CASE STUDY ON KENYA'S SARAFU-CREDIT VOUCHER SYSTEMS

By Marion Cauvet and Ruth Mwangi



Although Kenya is the largest East African economy, this does not make the country immune to the global trends regarding inequality and the poverty resulting from it (Muchai / Kimuyu 2017). Indeed, almost 50% of the Kenyan population are living in extreme poverty (UNDP 2017). Kenya is also experiencing an upsurge in migration from rural to urban areas, as young people see few opportunities for advancement in the villages. The increasing inequality in this country can be seen in the increasing dispossession levels experienced by the working class. The capture of wealth by capitalists has led to spatial marginalisation, with almost 61% of urban Kenyan households living in informal settlements, where the provision of housing and basic services such as water, sanitation, employment, education, transport and healthcare cannot keep up with increasing demand. Besides, in 2017, Oxfam pointed out that slum dwellers are subject to volatile markets and increased food costs, which have pushed already vulnerable people into extreme marginalisation by the economic elite. This leaves the working class with difficulties accessing food, healthcare, housing or education. This marginalisation and the lack of basic services, coupled with the increased pace of urbanisation, have led to more land grabs.



Women selling dried fish, vegetables, fruits and different types of grains during market day in Ugunja

The rise in informal settlements (INSEs) should be seen as a manifestation of the civilisational crisis our (neo)liberal capitalist society is currently facing. INSEs bring together people who have temporarily or permanently left their native peripheral area due to climate change, environmental degradation or conflict leading to a food crisis or because of insecurity issues on their land, and / or because they are looking for

alternative (economic) ways of living in the cities, which are considered “centres of hope” or “economic hubs”, while peripheral areas are perceived as (economically) marginalised. INSEs are full of ‘displaced’ people – husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, or young people, often alone but all seeking money. Some of them, especially the young people, even believe that, similar to Western views, urban life is the modern way of living, far away from traditional farming livelihoods. For them cities are the future, cities are hope, cities are beacons of modernity, but in truth this is just what Western capitalist mouthpieces are telling us. Against this backdrop, INSEs are expanding all over the world, with their causes and the vulnerabilities they reveal demonstrating the multi-faceted crisis – economic, financial, social, cultural, environmental and political – our ‘modern’ society is globally and relationally experimenting

As many have argued, this civilizational crisis is rooted in patriarchal, colonial, extractivist and imperial capitalism and the associated centralisation of power and capital, and therefore must be addressed through structural socio-political and economic changes. In recent decades, many ‘progressive’ and ‘radical’ social movements have emerged. These have called for emancipatory place-based politics aimed at transforming the current economic and financial structures and modes of production into vehicles for social justice and sustainability. In other words, they have aspired to bring about a transformation that goes beyond the imperatives of growth and development demanded by the hegemonic and corporate financial regime. These structural changes will necessarily involve in particular the politicisation, empowerment and identification of alternatives, especially grassroots initiatives that challenge today’s exploitative economies and relations between society and nature and that effectively create place-based capacities based on the relevant needs on the ground at local, regional, national and international levels.

Among these grassroots initiatives, community currencies challenge the global monetary and financial order by (re)socialising and (re)democratising money as well as the mechanisms of wealth creation, given that money is strongly correlated with wealth in our collective view of our modern society. Rooted in movements promoting the social/solidarity economy and/or ecological economics, community currencies underpin the “three-layered collective ‘blind spot’ with regard to our hegemonic and monopolistic monetary system controlled by a ‘shadow banking system’” (Lietaer et al. 2012). Like many grassroots innovations, community currencies are very diverse in their objectives, design and implementation, but what they all share is an aspiration to tackle the massive concentration and centralisation of power and capital by addressing context-based issues – e.g. environmental and social externalities – which are structurally rooted in our current international monetary and credit structures and dynamics.

Among the myriad of community currency alternatives, the Kenyan non-governmental organisation (NGO) Grassroots Economics is experimenting with unique monetary strategies to empower vulnerable members of society, especially in urban areas. The aim is to achieve a systematic, sustainable transformation of local (and informal) economies, providing local organisations or community-based businesses with an inclusive financial tool that will tackle inequality of access to funding and globalised monetary extractivism.

After introducing some theoretical background remarks on money and community currency, this paper examines the Kenyan experiences of community currencies and their potential to foster sustainable and inclusive development at the territorial scale. It then addresses the challenges encountered by Grassroots Economics, before discussing the great potential offered by monetary innovations and the technology of blockchains to structurally engage the transformation of the corporate neoliberal financial system and address the related civilizational crisis. This concluding discussion will be based mainly on insights from political ecology and ecological economics.

## **BACKGROUND REMARKS ABOUT MONEY AND COMMUNITY CURRENCY**

### **THE MODERN MONETARY SYSTEM IS STRUCTURALLY NURTURING POVERTY, INEQUALITIES AND UNSUSTAINABILITY**

Although economics has major impacts on government policies and on society, mainstream economists have ignored the structural role played by the current monetary paradigm in nurturing poverty, wealth inequalities and unsustainability in the world. Policies suffer from a collective ‘blind spot’ with regard to our monetary system, especially the mechanisms associated with money creation and issuance and their impacts on society and the environment (Lietaer et al. 2012). As argued by Dissaux and Ruddick (2017), this collective blind spot is also deeply rooted in the currently prevailing ‘financing for development’ paradigm, undermining the relevant policy interventions in developing countries. Understanding the nature of money and how the transfer of income and wealth is defined by the design of the monetary system is a crucial preliminary step to any policy interventions aimed at sustainable development.

To start with, it has been estimated that 97% of all money in circulation is bank-issued credit and only 3% is physical currency, i.e. cash (McLeay et al. 2014). Rather than being a good in itself, money is a promise of reimbursement created through lending. As pointed out by Bendell et al. (2015), money is a “system with symbols

based on agreements” rather than “a commodity with value in itself”. It means that most of what people use to pay goods and services is not cash but “promises of cash recorded in bank accounts”, i.e. credits. Indeed, money is mainly issued through bank lending, and banks do not need deposits to issue credits but promises of reimbursement from the agents to whom they lend money.

This is particularly important to bear in mind in the case of developing countries, where most people do not have access to banking services and mainly use cash to make exchanges in an informal economy. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, only 28.9% of the population have a bank account. Therefore, in recent decades, microfinance has been widely promoted to improve the access to loans and provide capital to vulnerable people in developing countries. However, it has been pointed out that marginalised and very poor people are not eligible for loans and so this assistance does not help them (Morduch / Haley 2002; Weiss / Montgomery 2005). Other studies have shown that this financial innovation does not really empower the poor as the small loans that have been introduced have been subject to high interest rates, intended to generate profits rather than promote development financing (Bateman 2010; Bateman / Chang 2012).

Due to interest charges on newly created money, every actor is forced to produce more money than was initially issued, i.e. created, over a delimited period, to be able to pay off both the borrowed amount and the interest associated with it. This process brings about a competitive economy in which actors must try to generate profits from limited resources, often doing so at the expense of collaborative action, human well-being and environmental sustainability. The process of creating money through interest-bearing loans also results in an unequal distribution of wealth and income among economic actors. In a nutshell, wealth and income are channelled from the net payers of bank interest to the net recipients of this interest.

At local level, the neoliberal design of the global monetary and financial systems is responsible for a chronic lack of money and investment. As explained by Dissaux and Ruddick (2017), the conventional free-flowing capital-led financing paradigm] considers money supply as limited and rival resources that must be efficiently allocated through financial intermediation. In other words, the quantity of money available locally depends directly on the flow of financing, and therefore on the attractiveness of the relevant area in terms of the criteria applied by financial markets and banking institutions. These dynamics are interlinked at the macro, meso and micro-economic levels, resulting in a poverty trap in unattractive sub-monetised areas.

In recent decades, local communities have also been facing an increasing lack of money due to the financialisation of the capitalist economy that has introduced the logic of financial markets into our society. In particular, this involves the legitimisation of financial markets as the only reliable “foundation for a stable social order and economic progress”, thereby changing the “rules of the game” (Storm 2018). It is argued that neoliberalist capitalism (or the financial corporate system) has its roots in financialisation, which itself is responsible for “transferring the income from the real economy to the financial sector and contributing to the growth of inequality income” (Szunke 2014). This tendency has led to a growing gap between the financial economy and the real economy, as highlighted by Lietaer et al. (2012): “Only 2% of these foreign exchange transactions relate to the “real” economy reflecting movements of real goods and services in the world, and 98% are purely speculative”. Within this financial regime, money supply is therefore unequally and unsustainably concentrated in financial markets, leaving real people competing for interest-bearing debt money, which is seen by neoliberal economists as a scarce and limited good. In marginalised areas, this means that the supply of money is generally insufficient to trade available goods and services while the mechanisms for savings and reinvesting business profits are problematic in a competitive economy.

Besides, local communities are often dependent on extractive markets rather than local productive resources, resulting in outflows of money from the relevant area to external and exogenous markets. This means that the locally generated income is mainly used to buy imported goods, channelling the local money supply to global, liberalised and export-led commodity markets. This is particularly true in developing countries where this causes the population to experience chronic poverty and a failure to meet their basic needs. This tendency has prompted the need for local networks to make their own investment in the local community to achieve sustainable and endogenous (economic) development. In this context, bottom-up financial innovations such as community currencies are worth considering with a view to overcoming these structural challenges involved in development financing.

## COMMUNITY CURRENCIES ARE GRASSROOTS FINANCIAL INNOVATIONS WHICH RESPOND TO THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF THE GLOBAL MONETARY SYSTEM

There is a wide range of complementary currency schemes. These include community currencies (CCs), a grassroots innovation providing a complementary means of exchange that has been developed at the initiative of actors who have formed a network to this end (Fare et al. 2015). In common with other grassroots innovations, these are bottom-up solutions and social innovations from the civil society arenas and aiming to respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved (Seyfang 2006). Lietaer et al. (2012) stressed that the primary aim of complementary currencies is to link unmet needs with unused resources. Mainly implemented to respond to local embedded needs, they are an expression of innovative views about money and wealth, aiming to establish a new framework for economic exchanges while creating new circuits of value within a specific community (Fare et al. 2015, Place / Bindewald 2015). They fundamentally aim to respond to a number of social, economic and environmental needs that are not fully addressed by the configuration of the market economy (Seyfang 2006). Scholars and practitioners argue that these grassroots financial innovations have great potential to be used as instruments to foster sustainable development (Michel / Hudon 2015), the social and solidarity economy (Ruddick / Mariani 2013), territorial development (Fare et al. 2015) and development aid (Bendell et al. 2015),

Since the 1980s, more than 3,000 projects of CCs have been rolled out across 23 countries and six continents (Seyfang 2006). They have been developed by various actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), non-profit organisations (NPOs), local authorities and informal groups (Michel / Hudon 2015). This rapid proliferation has also led to a significant process of differentiation, or fragmentation, resulting in a wide range of CC schemes varying in their design, scale and objectives. Several scholars have attempted to categorise and establish a typology of these systems (Lietaer et al. 2012; Seyfang 2006; Ruddick / Mariani 2013). The mechanism for issuing community currencies is often considered a critical aspect when designing them, resulting in a distinction being made between convertible currencies and mutual credits.

Convertible currencies are “designed to be exchanged for and backed by national currencies” (Ruddick / Mariani 2013). They are then issued through a monetary exchange with the national currency rather than by means of monetary creation. The pool of national currency savings makes it possible to redeem the convertible currency for national money. The main effect of these systems is to support the crea-

tion of new circuits of value by breaking the neutrality of money while ensuring that such currencies are circulated among a specific network of actors. Most convertible currencies focus on a delimited geographical area, restricting the outflows of money and fostering local trade by emplacing the economy - in other words, the economy is now place-based thanks to the community currency.

By contrast, mutual credits are multilateral reciprocal trade systems based on promises of repayment within a specific network of individuals and/or businesses. A mutual currency is not issued before the economic exchanges but is created by means of mutual exchange in the form of credit which one actor grants to another. This form of mutual agreement between these actors allows them to “defer payment for goods and services through a mutual credit clearing system”, doing so without the need for the national currency which is in scarce supply (Ruddick / Mariani 2013). A mutual credit provides credit facilities to the users and so increases the available means of exchange in a network. By creating ex nihilo an additional financial capability for users, a mutual credit system acts as a buffer against the scarcity and volatility of national currency.

It is argued that mutual credits provide more satisfactory answers to the issues of poverty and inequalities, as they increase the amount of money in circulation among the participants compared with convertible currencies. Mutual credits are capable of structurally tackling the lack of cash and credit and the inability to trade informal debts among communities by giving them the liquidity they need for trade and employment. Mutual credits are an available means of exchange which is used for trading available goods and services, even in tough economic times when there is a shortage of national currency. As argued by Bendell et al. (2015), mutual credits are an innovative tool for development aid, providing loans to low-income communities for free. Moreover, due to their embeddedness in a particular area, local mutual credits are inclusive financial tools which channel profits into the target community.

In this sense, they act as a safeguard of the local monetary resource, limiting monetary outflows to the external markets by focusing local purchasing power on local productive resources. It is often argued that local community currencies foster local (economic) multipliers due to their increased velocity as a currency for spending rather than saving and their geographic features injecting local demand into the local economy. They could also address social inclusion by redistributing resources more equally through zero-interest loans and bolster the social fabric by providing a mechanism for communities to finance social services, such as education, environmental and health services. As such, they help develop a social and solidarity Economy at the community level (Ruddick / Mariani 2013).

Aside from their design, community currency projects stimulate thinking and discussions about how money works and affect the local economy and livelihoods, thereby raising people's awareness of money, economy and wealth. Community currencies are tools for capacity building and community empowerment by embodying a rethink in the governance of money for the economic 'commons'.

In this context, the analysis of the Kenyan community currencies provides an insight into the true potential of monetary innovations to address poverty, inequality and environmental issues in developing countries. It is argued that the unique experience of the Kenyan NGO Grassroots Economics offers key lessons to future decision-makers, practitioners and scholars aiming to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially in an urban context.

## **GRASSROOTS ECONOMICS AND EXPERIENCES OF KENYAN COMMUNITY CURRENCIES: A CASE-STUDY**

### **GRASSROOTS ECONOMICS AIMS AT ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT FOR VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

Grassroots Economics (GE), formally known as Koru Kenya, is a non-governmental organisation launched in 2012. It envisions prospering economies built by thriving communities and so aims to empower marginalised communities to take charge of their own livelihoods and economic future. Therefore, GE's primary goal is to improve the lives of the most vulnerable in society by introducing a grassroots financial innovation, the community currency or Sarafu-Credit voucher system. This reconceptualisation of money gives GE an appealing leverage point, as it enables communities to create their own local credit system based on social enterprise. When launching a community currency, GE uses participatory education, in-depth research and community profiling to understand the relevant needs and to design programmes with meaningful impacts.

### **FROM THE ECO-PESA TO THE SARAFU-CREDIT: THE EVOLUTION OF THE KENYAN COMMUNITY CURRENCY SCHEME THROUGH A LEARNING-TRIAL PROCESS**

The founder of Grassroots Economics worked on his first community currency project in 2010 with the introduction of a convertible currency called the 'Eco-Pesa' in an informal urban settlement in the Kenyan city of Mombasa. This project aimed to foster both the cost-effectiveness of environmental programmes and the local



economic situation. Backed by a donor fund in national currency, the Eco-Pesa was initially issued to a network of local businesses, using a system of monetary exchange with the Kenyan shilling (1Ksh = 1 Eco-Pesa). Then, the vouchers were issued to community members for environmental services such as waste collection or tree planting. The participants could use the vouchers for trading goods and services among themselves or redeem them for national currency. Ruddick (2011) showed that the project resulted in positive economic, social and environmental outcomes. In particular, the Eco-Pesa caused a 22% average increase in the incomes of participating businesses, while three youth-led community tree nurseries were created and 20 tonnes of waste were collected. Other benefits of the Eco-Pesa programme were that it was cost-effective: with a donation of USD 4,000, the community currency reached over 75 businesses and 20,000 residents, generating USD 4,176 USD worth of trading while removing waste for what would have costed 50,000 Kenyan shillings (about USD 700). Besides its multiplier effect, it also offered an enhanced system for increasing accountability and keeping track of development funding.

However, although the convertibility of the Eco-Pesa into Kenyan shillings fostered trust in the system, it also limited its financial independence and its capacity to promote local trade. At first, Ruddick (2011) noticed that some participants were intentionally hoarding Eco-Pesa vouchers to redeem them for shillings. By doing so, they curbed the primary function of the CC scheme as a spending currency as opposed to a means of saving. Besides, the project's dependence on an external donor's backing made the community unable to sustain this financial innovation once the donor funds were redeemed. Finally, it is argued that convertible currencies have a limited capability to transform the local economy. Due to their design and issuance mechanisms, convertible currencies do not increase the amount of money in circulation. They are intrinsically limited by the amount of national currency already in circulation in the relevant communities. Although these local currencies have a higher velocity than legal tender, they do not fundamentally tackle the existing lack of investment or money in the relevant population.

Based on this experience, the founder, Will Ruddick, decided to launch a CC scheme with a different design when initiating another project, the Bangla-Pesa scheme, in the informal settlement of Bangladesh in Mombasa in 2012. This was a mutual currency backed by the community itself rather than funds in national currency. The CC vouchers were created by means of zero-interest loans and distributed to any local businesses co-guaranteed by four others and therefore by the community itself. The fact that it was issued at no interest made it an accessible complementary means

of exchange, allowing local businesses to trade with each other despite the lack of Kenyan shillings. Ruddick (2011) reported that after one week, 22% of the daily trade between users was carried out in Bangla-Pesa and its circulation rate was at least twice or three times that of the official currency. Furthermore, the use of the vouchers for trading between local businesses enabled users to save their Kenyan shillings for reinvestments in their businesses or for paying for education and health services (Ruddick / Mariani 2013). In short, the vouchers launched by GE created a buffering countercyclical system of trade by complementing the unavailability of national currency and matching unused resources with unmet demand (Dissaux / Ruddick 2017). As a result, the CC is used as a spending currency, while the national currency is used for savings and investments (Sillen 2017).

## RESISTANCE FROM THE GOVERNMENT

In 2013, the Kenyan government grew sceptical of the Sarafu-Credit programme, accusing it of being a plot to undermine the national currency. After numerous petitions from supporters from all over the world with an understanding of what Grassroots Economics (GE) was doing here, the NGO won a ground-breaking court case<sup>1</sup> in 2013 in which it proved the legality of these programmes, and has since extended Sarafu-Credit to over 1,200 users across Kenya. Despite the government's initial scepticism, GE has picked up more and more allies with each passing year.

In 2015, GE replicated the model in four other urban informal settlements in Nairobi and in Mombasa. Each community had to register as a community-based organisation (CBO) where elected board members had to be accountable to local users.

Although positive outcomes in terms of food security and community identity have been empirically demonstrated by Ruddick (2011), the networks faced challenges due to lack of trust and commitment from users. Dissaux and Ruddick (2017) argued that a mutual credit system is only effective if there is 'multilateral trust' throughout the community. This means that each user should be able to accept and spend the vouchers, ensuring a roughly balanced web of debts across the community and therefore circulation of the currency. Besides the importance of reciprocity, the ability of local businesses, especially retailers, to produce their stocks locally was another limitation on the Bangla-Pesa scheme, prompting GE to switch to the Sarafu-Credit scheme backed by cooperative local assets, with a view to fostering the institutionalisation of the community currency and overcoming the social dilemma associated with this common.

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1 For more information, see: [www.grassrootseconomics.org/media](http://www.grassrootseconomics.org/media).

## THE SARAFU-CREDIT VOUCHER SYSTEM

The Sarafu-Credit voucher system involves mutual credits being backed by cooperative assets. The vouchers issued via zero-interest loans are backed by the assets of a local cooperative business such as a wholesale shop. Grassroots Economics is targeting an injection of between USD 5,000 and USD 15,000 in assets and consultancy services, with the investment coming from donations. The Sarafu-Credit vouchers come from annual air drops of distributions and are backed by those assets through one year credit. This means users can trade goods and services with each other and also with cooperative business which always accept the vouchers as a means of payment. This mechanism increases the community's confidence in using the vouchers, fostering its acceptance and therefore local circulation. In other words, the cooperative shops developed by GE are credit-clearing centres where users can clear their excess vouchers. The cooperative businesses have also been established to allow local businesses to produce their stocks locally rather than importing goods.

Within this credit-clearance system, the Sarafu-Credit system integrates three different mechanisms to ensure the injection of the CC into the community. First, each user receives 400 Sarafu-Credits with no interest in becoming a member of the network. Second, cooperative businesses can use the vouchers as a means of payment for its operating costs. Last but not least, members and non-members can receive the vouchers in exchange for community work, such as waste collection or tree planting.

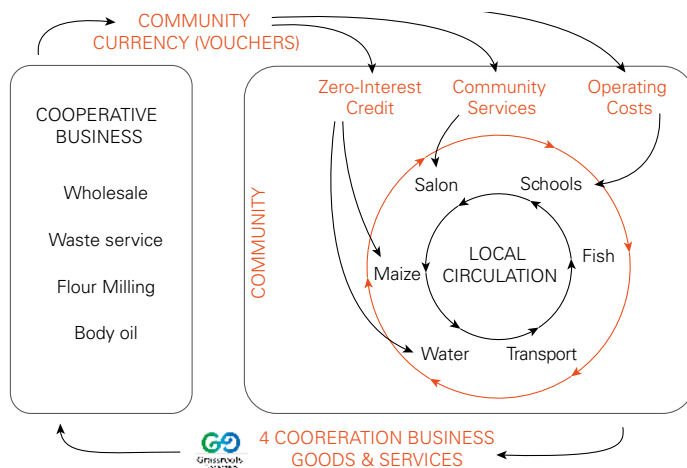


Figure 1: Illustration of the Sarafu-Credit vouchers system  
Source: Grassroots Economics

## ILLUSTRATION OF THE SARAFU-CREDIT VOUCHER SYSTEM IN TWO CONTEXTS: THE CASES OF THE MIYANI-PESA AND THE GATINA-PESA

The Miyani-Pesa and the Gatina-Pesa are two Sarafu-Credit vouchers systems launched by GE. There are interesting case-studies to analyse and compare because of the differences in their socio-economic and environmental contexts. While most of the Kenyan community currencies have been launched in informal urban settlements, GE is currently extending its programmes to rural areas such as Miyani and Takaungu. This shows that the model is adaptable to different contexts, although the specific form that programme rollout and governance take depends on the local context. In other words, the community currencies are specific adaptive and place-based specific mechanisms for implementing the principle of sustainable and endogenous development. The following case studies testify to this.

### THE MIYANI-PESA FOR A VULNERABLE RURAL COMMUNITY IN KWALE COUNTY

The Miyani area of Kwale County is made up of six villages where the main livelihoods are subsistence farming and urban (casual) jobs in Mazaras or Mombasa. In most cases, men are employed in the city while women take care of the farm and the house. Low levels of agricultural productivity and the ensuing food insecurity have meant that local people (especially women) have also started up small businesses alongside their farming to generate alternative sources of income and food.

In 2011, after a severe drought crisis, the World Food Programme launched a Cash for Assets programme, which resulted in the creation of an agricultural and community-based cooperative (the Miyani Food Distribution Point, i.e. FDP) with the technical assistance of the Kenyan Red Cross. Over 200 vulnerable people, mainly women, are members of the cooperative and collectively work three days a week on farming and agroforestry projects. Together they generate food and alternative incomes to support their cooperative and livelihoods. Each member was paid 2,000 Kenyan shillings by the World Food Programme (WFP) for nine months and worked as volunteers for three months.

Although this programme helped with establishing a local organisational structure as well as fostering the access to alternative sources of income, it was not financially sustainable due to its reliance on external funding. Indeed, this limitation proved the downfall of the programme, which ended in 2018.

In this context, GE launched a community currency programme in the area, aimed at supporting the FDP in developing a sustainable and endogenous source of financing, besides fostering the local economy. The programme was viewed as a solution to follow up on the Cash for Assets programme following the latter's decline in 2018. After investing in a collective productive asset in the form of a posho mill, GE has supported the FDP with launching the community currency, called the 'Miyani-Pesa'. The FDP uses this currency to pay some of its operating costs through local sourcing, resulting in increased savings (in Kenyan shillings) and a boost for the local economy. The CC also offers an incentive for community work at the cooperative. It has proven its worth even more now that the WFP programme has ended. On the user side, people have access to free loans in the CC, helping them tackle their lack of purchasing power, especially for food and maize milling.

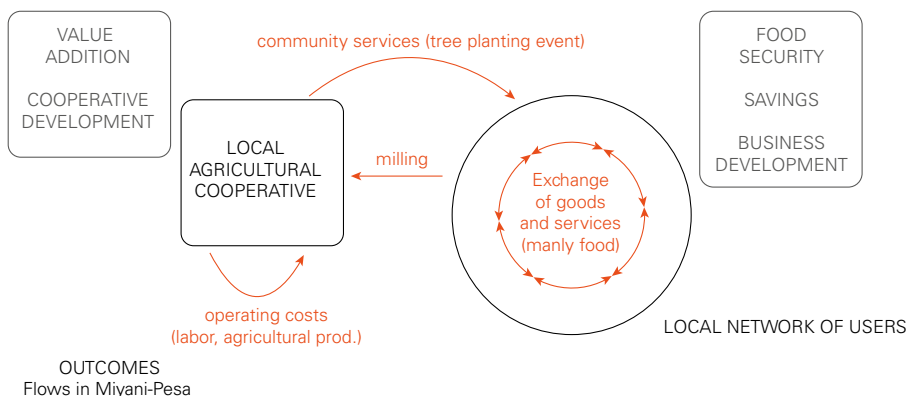


Figure 2: How the Miyani-Pesa works  
Source: Marion Cauvet)

## THE GATINA-PESA FOR A VULNERABLE URBAN COMMUNITY IN THE INFORMAL SETTLEMENT OF KAWANGWARE (NAIROBI)

Most people come from rural areas with a view to finding work and a better life in the city. However, most inhabitants live on less than USD 1 a day, and unemployment is high. The households in the area mainly earn their livelihoods doing small-scale and informal work involving small shops and kiosks, hawking second-hand cars and selling street food and groceries, while some of them, such as security guards and cleaners, are employed in the surrounding wealthy areas.

The Gatina-Pesa was launched in 2015 by Grassroots Economics, after interest was expressed by a group of school head teachers and other teachers, supported by a German NGO specialising in permaculture. The network numbers some 300 users who are all registered as members of a community-based organisation (CBO), backed by GE. The CBO, as a local body, is expected to manage the network on its own, taking care of local ownership and leadership of the CC. Moreover, the CBO aims to facilitate members' access to loans on a merry-go-around. Every member should save 200 Kenyan shillings a month and as a counterpart can receive loans in Kenyan shillings from the community pot.

The Gatina-Pesa is a commodity-based currency backed up by a wholesaler, aiming to supply an alternative source of stock to local retailers. This cooperative business provides stock to around 20 local shops (users and non-users of the CC) on a weekly basis as well as to various individuals. The cooperative shop is set up to regulate trade and to boost levels of trust in the CC and in GE and to make the CC programme more financially self-sufficient. The users of the Gatina-Pesa, who have received a zero-interest credit of 400 CCs when becoming members, at any time can use their (excess) CCs at the shop as well as trading with the local network of businesses. Therefore, the cooperative shop puts in place credit-clearing mechanisms for the network. As the vouchers expire, there is a curb on accumulating community currency. GE will promote recirculation through all stages of the growth of the CC. Indeed, the desire to keep the currency in circulation means that accumulation is discouraged. Future digital vouchers will also have demurrage or negative interest rates built in.

Schools and their teachers are key stakeholders in the Gatina-Pesa network. In a context where families painfully do not have the Kenyan shillings to send their children to school and make lunch payments, the Gatina-Pesa fosters access to education while supporting the relevant teachers' livelihoods. Indeed, users can partially pay for lunch, tuition and school fees with the community currency in 20 local schools. In turn, schools are able to pay some of their operating costs in Gatina-Pesa, including advances for wages and food.

To conclude, the Miyani-Pesa and the Gatina-Pesa provide insights into GE's ability to adapt to various local contexts and communities. This type of back-up cooperative assets responds to local needs and resources. This ability to adapt the programmes to the local conditions is behind both the evolution of its design as well as its potential to foster sustainable and inclusive development at local level.

## STORIES AND OUTCOMES

Scholars have argued about the positive outcomes of the Sarafu-Credit voucher system in terms of poverty reduction, livelihood improvement and sustainability (Ruddick 2011; Ruddick / Mariani 2013; Richards / Ruddick 2013; Bendell et al. 2015). Various active users have indicated that these impacts are actually experienced in daily life, and therefore the stories of three women, Zainabu, Dama and Priscilla, are presented here by way of illustration.

First, we come to the story of Zainabu, which shows how the Sarafu-Credit can increase the sense of community and food security. Zainabu, a member of the Sarafu-Credit network in Miyani, recalls the day when women came together to dig special pits to store water where they would eventually plant maize and legumes:

*“That was a special time because I got paid in Sarafu-Credit at the community shop. This means when I’ve finished digging, I can go to the community posho mill to mill my maize and have lunch ready for my children when they come home from school. It also means I can go to other members of the community to buy vegetables or fruit to add to the meals!” (Testimony gathered by Caroline Dama on Mother’s Day 2018)*

Second, there is the experience of Dama Ngala, who sets out how the Sarafu-Credit can foster food security and increase savings for reinvestment in reproduction assets, such as education:

*“My daughter used not to go to school because I didn’t have enough money. I decided to let the boys go while the girl stayed at home. But ever since I joined the BN [Bangla-Pesa network], I’ve been able to use the CC on things I need every day like food and water and save enough money to send my daughter to school.”*

Finally, the story of Priscilla indicates how the Sarafu-Credit can boost business profits by fostering branding in the community:

*“Ever since I joined the network, I’ve started having many more people coming to fetch my water. Because I accept the SC [Sarafu-Credit], I get more customers.”*

These claims illustrate short-term perceived outcomes outlined by users. The theory of change introduced by Dissaux and Ruddick (2017) explains how these outcomes can be multiplied in the medium to long term.



Teacher Mercy at Sifa Primary School in Gatina (Nairobi) received tuition payments in the form of Sarafu-Credit

## THE SARAFU-CREDIT VOUCHER SYSTEM AND THE THEORY OF CHANGE

Dissaux and Ruddick (2017) referred to the theory of change to argue for the potential of the Sarafu-Credit voucher system to achieve sustainable development and empower the local communities. This theory relates to the interrelated positive effects on local production, consumption and the market resulting from the introduction of a local bi-monetary system. It also emphasises a transitional process in the territorial economic system, combining this with a long-term perspective, which is vital when dealing with sustainability issues.

First, access to interest-free credit increases the means of exchange available within the community. This is a result of two interrelated mechanisms: (1) the introduction of this complementary currency increases the amount of money as a means of exchange in circulation in the community; (2) by using the Sarafu vouchers for their daily purchases, users save an equivalent amount in Kenyan shillings which can be used for reinvestment. As such, the CC gives users greater purchasing power. Furthermore, its association with a specific area ensures that this extra money circulates territorially and is used to purchase local goods and services. This guarantees that local businesses are the beneficiaries of this increased purchasing power. As payments are made in both Sarafu vouchers and Kenyan shillings, local businesses' make more profits in both currencies. They can then expand their activities by increasing their stocks and/or employing new labour both locally and further afield. Furthermore, by



receiving some of their wages in Sarafu vouchers, local workers can buy more goods and services from local businesses and so on. By injecting liquidity in the form of zero-interest credit, the local production and service industry is not burdened by debt and is able to expand. Furthermore, the higher velocity of the Sarafu vouchers, which also facilitates local trade, thereby foster economic growth at the territorial scale.

Moreover, the cooperative businesses or Sarafu centres are registered as community-based organisations (CBOs). Each member of the network is also a member of the local CBO and should save Kenyan shillings and Sarafu-Credit vouchers in a community pot every month. The CBO can then use this pot to issue loans to the community as well as to invest in cooperative assets or community services. The more cooperative assets exist, the greater the number of vouchers that can be issued to the community, boosting local trade and supporting the growth of local assets. Indeed, the Sarafu-Credit is backed by these cooperative assets, and the number of vouchers in circulation is proportional to the value of cooperative goods and/or services. Furthermore, the ability to pay for community services, which are often not valued by the conventional market, fosters the transition to a social and solidarity economy, or circular economy, or ecological economics, responding to the specific territorial context. This means that the Sarafu centres are able to link underutilised territorial resources such as waste and labour to unmet needs such as waste management, the labour force in permaculture gardens, and employment.



Traders at Kangemi in Nairobi exchanging Sarafu-Credit for vegetables on an open-air market day

Finally, the introduction of a complementary means of exchange that is more widely available into a specific community and territory fosters and stabilises the local economy. The resulting bi-monetary system includes both a currency for spending and a currency for savings and reinvestment and boosts the local system’s resilience to external shocks. Channels for investment are more accessible to the local population, while value-addition activities are locally embedded or integrated. Last but not least, the local governance and downward accountability of the project empower the community by enabling its members to collectively decide which services are needed and feasible in their area. This means that a lack of money and investment are no longer obstacles to local and sustainable development.

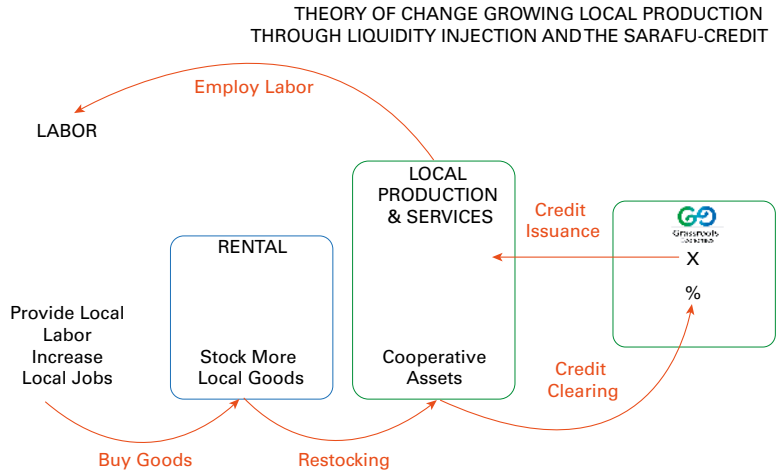


Figure 3: The theory of change and the Sarafu-credit  
Source: Dissaux/Ruddick 2017

## CHALLENGES FACED BY GRASSROOTS ECONOMICS IN IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY CURRENCIES IN VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Although Grassroots Economics views this as a promising financial innovation, the NGO has been facing some challenges in scaling up and developing these programmes, as is usual for grassroots innovations. The institutionalisation of the Sarafu system requires some level of commitment from the community, which therefore experiences a social dilemma when trading in Sarafu vouchers, as argued by Dissaux and Ruddick (2017). A lack of leadership and collective governance and of commitment and education are currently limiting the programmes' ability to transform the local economy. Besides, GE is still at an early development stage and needs to develop its capacity and capital to improve its programmes and the impacts associated with them.

First, challenges relating to collective organisation and institution building have been particularly evident for the Kenyan Community currency networks in informal settlements (Dissaux / Ruddick 2017; Dezyn 2017). Although GE aims to achieve community-based governance of the Sarafu system, it faces a lack of commitment, motivation, understanding and time from these vulnerable communities for whom collective management is an unfamiliar notion. Ruddick (2011) linked this lack of ownership and leadership of the programmes to a "donor mentality", arguing that the poor in Kenya have been used to development projects in which they did not have any responsibility. However, Dezyn (2017) pointed out the existence of a "complex dialogical relationship between the active members and GE", resulting in ownership and organisational issues. Furthermore, he pointed out that GE is limited by a lack of downward accountability as the programmes that have been launched have not really implemented any direct channels of participation or decision-making vis-à-vis GE. Although GE envisages community-based management and autonomy regarding its programmes, the reality of these communities reveals a need for co-management integrating accountability mechanisms and capacity-building activities. It is argued that to ensure involvement from these communities and development of a sense of ownership in the long term will require attention from and collaboration with GE. In this context, it is argued that GE's labour force and management capability will be vital to overcoming this challenge. GE should be financially able to employ more field officers working on the ground to foster leadership, networking, marketing, training and capacity building in the communities.

Second, GE aims to develop cooperative assets in the communities with a view to making the theory of change a reality. Being tied to these cooperative assets, the number of Sarafu vouchers in circulation depends on the quantity of cooperative assets available as a backup. This means if the financial capital for the initial investment is lacking, GE's liability could put a brake on the development of the Sarafu system.

## **SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS**

As pointed out earlier in this article, it is argued that neoliberal capitalism is rooted in a corporate financial regime where there is centralised power and capital and that this is leading to a multi-faceted, civilizational crisis. An analysis of international monetary and credit structures reveals that the current wealth-creation rationale is underpinning social justice and environmental sustainability. As bank-debt money bears interest, economic actors have to compete to extract profits from limited resources while paying back their loans, nurturing the associated growth imperative. This competitive and extractive economy results in an unequal distribution of wealth, income and investments. Banks, as the stakeholders responsible for issuing credit, control the process of monetary creation e.g. wealth creation. They are contributing to the systematic dismantling of the State's economic sovereignty, while civil society has not even been included in this power equation. Moreover, all banks tend to provide funding to or withhold it from the same sectors or countries at the same time, thereby exacerbating economical and financial boom and bust cycles. The amount of money available to a sector, a region or a state depends on its attractiveness based on criteria set by the financial markets and banking institutions. The availability of money is not linked to local needs but is an exogenous tool, taking its lead from external factors such as the national debt, interest rates, trade deficits and IMF policies. Investment valuations do not take into account either future costs (due to the discounting of all future costs or income) or social and environmental externalities, thereby neglecting social and natural capital as well as long-term thinking. Ecological economists also acknowledge the limits of the neoclassical approach which views 'manufactured', 'human' and 'natural' capital as substitutable, aiming to preserve an economy's capital stock while addressing sustainability. It is argued that a monopolistic globalised monetary system enables this phenomenon of substitution although it entails 'weak' sustainability for ecological economists. Finally, poverty, social injustice and environmental unsustainability should be recognised as an institutional and structural problem particularly tied up with the international monetary and credit system itself.

The movement of community currencies aims to re-politicise and re-socialise the very basis of wealth creation, challenging the hegemony of the economic and financial structure of a monopoly, namely a single, interest-bearing central currency. It has been argued that community currencies, especially mutual credit, have considerable potential to give access to funding to populations that are often regarded as non-bankable (Gomez 2009) while mobilising the capacities of communities. As such, they become tools for challenging the hegemonic power when it comes to money creation e.g. wealth creation while offering a counter-cyclical and endogenous source of credit that fosters economic resilience among local economies in the face of the intrinsic volatility of the exogenous central currency system. The Kenyan experience is a valuable case study that shows how mutual credit can tackle the lack of access to credit among vulnerable members of society. It also demonstrates the importance of having both a spending currency and a saving currency, thereby tackling the cultural view of money as a repository of value. This view challenges the imperative of capital accumulation by encouraging people to exchange their goods and services locally using their spending currency. In this sense, networking entrepreneurs and businesses in a community effort involving the implementation of mutual credit fosters the mobilisation of local capacities within a network in which people collectively recognise the exchange value of such credit. As mutual credit is “built on relations of trust and proximity”, it can help “re-embed the economy [...] in the social relations of the community”. In this sense, it is contributing to a “relational turn” in our economies, transforming economic relations into social relations.

However, this transformation is challenging, especially for marginalised urban communities living in INSEs where trust is a very scarce commodity. The Kenyan experience demonstrates this effectively, thereby justifying its shift from the Bangla-Pesa to the Sarafu-Credit model. Rather than framing a community currency as a common, Barinaga (2017) defines the mutual credit system as the resource system and the goods and services exchanged and generated as the resource units. She points out that the tragedy of commons in mutual credit currencies lies in the lack of incentive for users to “generate an amount of services and products valued equal to the amount consumed”, resulting in a “free-rider problem [...] at the individual level [rather than at] the level of the currency system” (Barinaga 2017: 9). She concludes that “the difference in users’ capacity to appropriate relative to their ability to provide [...] is based on the different access to the traditional resources of a market-based economy: land, labour, capital” (ibid.: 10). This analysis reinforces the importance of the effective creation of capacities at the individual and collective levels within communities to effectively transform the conventional economic structures. This indeed is the core idea behind the Sarafu-Credit model put forward by Grassroots

Economics. While the Kenyan NGO aims to build up collective assets and community funds, they are still challenged by a lack of transparency, accountability and scalability. Therefore, it is argued that blockchain technology holds out the prospect of facilitating the work of community currencies' implementers and managers as well as rethinking the concepts and traditions of solidarity and internationalist relations, taking these beyond the North-South nexus.

First, it is believed that the creation of local capacities can be fostered through the implementation of an effective community fund that is collectively managed based on the local context. This community fund should not only allow local investment in (collective) assets to build up the local productive capacity but also set store by environmental and social services that are not valued by the classical market-based economy to establish socio-ecological productive and reproductive capacity. Re-evaluating social and environmental services would put the means in place to build up and mobilise local capacities based on local socio-ecological resources and needs rather than relying solely on external inputs and demands, i.e. on extractive markets that currently deplete social and natural capital without paying the price for this. This process would also enable the community to establish alternative livelihoods while transforming the formal market and wage labour into new socially just and ecologically sustainable forms of socio-ecological (re)production.

This community fund should be seen as a way of deepening democracy and self-determination at community level, re-politicising the concept of economic sovereignty and backing up the shadow banking system. The community cryptocurrency model highlights these opportunities offered by blockchain technology. Their model includes a "community fund from which community members may take out loans if the community votes to approve them" (Vandervort et al. 2015: 78). This model echoes the Sarafu-Credit model but overcomes some of its accountability challenges thanks to blockchain technology. Indeed, this decentralised and redistributive technology brings transparency and traceability into the system since the cryptographic methods protect the integrity of transactions and of the currency itself by allowing "complex scripting behaviors such as [multi-signature] transactions and smart contracts" (ibid.: 79). A significant advantage of this cryptocurrency model and associated smart contracts is the possibility of "automatically adjust[ing] compensation for different types of transactions and [...] verify[ing] the accuracy and nature of payments [...] [without] having to go to a local 'bank' and exchange notes or access a website and enter verification details" (ibid.: 82). This feature increases the transparency and accountability regarding the management structure for the community currency while increasing

trust in the system and the money itself. Moreover, blockchain technology enables the required features to be established for the constitution of the community fund and its use. For instance, it is possible to incorporate 'demurrage fees' or transaction fees that will automatically top up the community fund. The transaction fees can be adjusted to specific transactions, such as transactions relating to unsustainable consumption practices. It is also possible to draw on the reputation factor, incentivising individuals to give donations to the community fund given the transparency of all the transactions. Finally, a feature that can be integrated into the community cryptocurrency is a voting system that enables the community members to securely vote for the projects they want to fund. It is worth pointing out here that these features must be carefully built into the cryptocurrency protocol. This technology allows communities to really take charge of their own development based on their context-based needs and resources, although it cannot be deployed if the community itself is unable to analyse its socio-ecological features and to fully integrate new relations between society and nature. We should mention here that cryptocurrencies can help manage the economic and resource flows within the communities if they are able to understand and use the data the system provides. This reinforces the need for participatory assessment and projects involving local people and researchers from the bottom up and based on the local context.

Furthermore, it is argued that blockchain technology is a chance to rethink the concepts and traditions of solidarity and internationalist relations by providing an *infra-structure for building embedded translocation*, e.g. material and knowledge flows, *in and between* socio-ecological systems. This proposition is inspired by political ecologists' frameworks for structural and comprehensive socio-ecological transformations. Political ecologists acknowledge a theoretical shift, rooted in post-structuralist approaches and associated debates about the relations between humanity and nature, that addresses the politics of scale and the associated place-based political strategies while recognising the importance of understanding place-based 'socio-natures' and co-producing knowledge and change (Moragues-Faus / Marsden 2018). The importance of embedding and anchoring communities of practice in and through geographic location is of great importance when it comes to structural and comprehensive changes in modern society.

The core idea behind this proposition is based on the analysis of the geography of the community currency movement: in the North, most community currency experiences address issues from the consumption side while in the South, there are more mutual-credit schemes, dealing with the informal economies where everybody is both a

consumer and a producer. However, both movements face the challenge of a lack of local capacity, e.g. investment or funding issues, while still having to cope with being marginalised alternatives and the inability to scale up. In this context, connecting these alternatives between places through translocated assemblages should reinforce the community currency movement as it pushes for structural transformation, challenging the current corporate financial regime centralises more than 98% of the world's monetary resources, subjecting them to speculation. Blockchain technology allows us to imagine a future characterized by a decentralized global money system based on productive capacity as a fundamental unit of exchange. This decentralised global monetary system should be rooted in a global network of connected community cryptocurrencies in which communities are able to trade their currencies with each other, with automated exchange rates being generated by the communities' collective production. The Bancor protocol provides the opportunity of doing this by embedding the Bancor script in smart contracts between community currencies, allowing them to establish 'reserve tokens' which can then be used as a medium of exchange between the communities involved.

While this protocol enables bottom-up growth where the fundamental units are based on the value of the smallest element fostering the development of local production and service sectors in lieu of imports, it does not challenge the concept of production as viewed by classical economists. It is argued here that it is important to consider the concept of co-production and incorporate it into this model. This concept, introduced by the eco-economy model, recognises the importance of co-producing ecological and natural processes through place-based socio-technical and knowledge mechanisms (Kitchen / Marsden 2009; Marsden / Farioli 2015). The combination of the natural, physical and social practices are necessary conditions for building new forms of socio-ecological (re)production and therefore for re-embedding economic processes into natural, physical and social ones.

Finally, the Bancor protocol allows us to envisage a potential decentralised monetary system that structurally challenges the corporate financial regime system as a result of blockchain technology. It holds out the prospect of connecting communities through a decentralised monetary and technical infrastructure and so could foster the actual creation of local capacities and translocated assemblages. However, the features of such technology must carefully integrate the concept of co-production to bring about a comprehensive transformation of the current relations between our society and nature.



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**ASIA**

# VIII

## SELF ORGANISATION AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN WAR-TORN SYRIA: THE 15<sup>TH</sup> GARDEN NETWORK

By Ansar Jasim

"We are condemned to hope"  
Sa'adallah Wannous, Syrian dramatist.

Long analysed through a political science and/or geopolitical lens, Syria has often been labelled a failed state, failed uprising, failed revolution and failed country. This failure-heavy discourse has produced an unsatisfactorily narrow view geared towards distinguishing the 'good guys' from the 'bad guys' (Hinnebusch, 2018). As a result, emancipatory actors on the ground in Syria have been rendered invisible. But we ought to consider a more important question, namely did the 2011 uprising trigger any social and ecological transformations? War, as well known, is destructive; but the conditions of war and sieges and ensuing shortages force communities to work in drastically different ways, refocusing their efforts – beyond immediate survival – on regaining some kind of dignity, which necessarily entails taking over communities' food production. One such transformation taking place in the midst of war is the 15th Garden, a food sovereignty network in Syria. This network was initially created by people in urban areas, most notably Yarmouk and Madaya, who were being starved by politically motivated sieges, and by non-besieged rural communities in Syria, e.g. in Eastern Ghouta. For the first time in years, these people could produce food in their own way, in a manner connected to a political understanding of the changes happening in the country, with freedom, dignity and social justice.

The network developed in the context of the ongoing uprising of 2011 and the subsequent war waged against the civilian population. Groups organised within the 15th Garden network have produced food in Syria's besieged cities, turning urban areas like Yarmouk in the southern outskirts of Damascus, into agricultural fields. Since 2018, several communities that initiated the 15th Garden have been forcibly displaced to join the rural communities in Idlib and the countryside around Aleppo, living in flooded slums as the violent crackdown on them continues.

Since the situation in Syria is often described as the world's biggest humanitarian crisis, it is important to understand that actually that crisis is political. Hunger in Syria is not a by-product of the war, but rather a defining feature of it, one of the main strategies used by political actors to force the insurgent population into submission. Food has been used as a weapon against local rural and urban communities from the very first months of the uprising, but it has also been used by humanitarian actors, first and foremost the United Nations, to undermine people's right to self-determination. This is what makes the 15th Garden so interesting: it challenges both the warring factions and conventional development programmes, because people have not merely been fighting for food security serviced by international humanitarian aid agencies. Syrians have fought not only for the right of access to food, but also for food sovereignty, i.e. community-led and controlled food production and distribution as well as control over the tools required

for production. This entails access to land, water and – most importantly – seeds. Although the tale of the 15th Garden is a story of hope and self-determination, I will endeavour to depict the experience without romanticising it. Instead, I will highlight the many challenges faced and examine how agriculture has been affected by authoritarian rule and how control over peasants and the rural populations is being used within the sectarian framework on which the incumbent regime relies.



View from Aleppo citadel in 1995

The 15th Garden is just one of thousands of stories of a society emancipating itself from years of suppression and undergoing a radical transformation. I will start with an introduction to Syria's social and historical context, describing the pre-uprising situation and recounting how the Ba'ath Party turned its back on the peasantry, leading both Hafiz Assad and now his son Bashar to liberalise the economy and subject the agricultural sector to global market forces. This introduction will also briefly explain why there was no opposition to Assad's authoritarian, neoliberal policies. I will then move on to discuss the subsequent uprising and the ensuing shift in urban-rural relations. Next, I will place in context how food sieges are used as horrific weapons to force civil populations into submission and explain how the 15th Garden network was created to respond to them. That section will focus on the network, its programme and challenges and how it strives to foster local, regional and international solidarity. Then I will discuss what lessons can be learnt from the 15th Garden for other struggles for solidarity, focusing above all on how the network has extended beyond the need for organic, permaculture projects and refocused



the debate on the priority of food sovereignty for regaining dignity. In my view, it is the clarity attained by the network due to the shortage of food and sharing of knowledge, especially on the plight of Iraqis and the nature of solidarity, that has strengthened the 15th Garden movement.

## **SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT BEFORE THE UPRISING**

### **THE COLONIAL AND IMPERIAL LEGACY AND FORMATION OF THE SYRIAN STATE**

*"Syria means many things to many people"* (Chatty, 2018: 4): Greater Syria, Bilad Al-Sham, The Levantine.

As part of the Ottoman Empire, for centuries Syria had been regarded as a safe sanctuary. As mass displacement became a reality through the 19th and 20th centuries, Syria took in many populations from other parts of Europe and Western Asia, seeking refuge from wars, conquests and religious coercion (Chatty, 2018: 4): "Damascus, and Syria as a whole, was marked by a local conviviality, a cosmopolitanism which tolerated and sometimes celebrated those of other ethnicities and regions" (Chatty, 2018:4), in stark contrast to today's grim reality: a country more than 50% of whose population has been internally or externally displaced.

The end of the First World War brought four centuries of Ottoman rule to an end, in October 1918. However, this new phase was shaped by European imperialism as opposed to the proclaimed "new age of independence" (Rogan, 2009: 174). France, already possessing territory in North Africa, added Syria and Lebanon, while Great Britain gained control of Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq. The borders we know today in Western Asia were drawn by European imperialism, thereby destroying the aspirations of Arab nationalists. Despite facing resistance and uprisings since the early 1920s, France sought to secure its interests in Lebanon and Syria before giving any concessions. French imperialists applied the tactic of 'divide and rule' in Syria, splitting the country into states defined by alleged sectarian identities and effacing Syria's 'memory of conviviality'. Right after VE Day in May 1945 and the defeat of Nazi Germany, French imperial forces violently cracked down on countrywide protests in Syria and bombed Damascus (Rogan 2009: 245). Syria's parliament building was completely destroyed, and by July 1945 more than 400 Syrians had been killed. Syria became a battlefield in an imperial war between France and Great Britain. This colonial violence is often ignored by European historians, who prefer emphasising the 'heroic role' played by France and *La Resistance*



in liberating Europe from Nazi fascism. The withdrawal by French military forces in April 1946 led to the birth of Syria as a supposedly independent, modern state.

The post-independence period was characterised by diverse political and cultural activism and several military coups. The Ba'ath Party (Arab Renaissance) formed following a merger with Akram Al-Hourani's Arab Socialist Party – Syria Region. The Ba'ath Party, backed by pan-Arab-nationalist middle-class intellectuals, viewed Arab unity as the only way of gaining social justice and full independence from external rule (Rogan, 2009: 305–306). Ba'athism is an exclusive nationalist movement, as explicitly mentioned in the party's founding constitution, that firstly declares illegal all social and political groups not sharing its Arab nationalist ideals (Tejel 2009: 57), and secondly defines Kurds as a 'foreign' group. The Syrian intellectual and political dissident Yassin Al-Haj Saleh also refers to it as 'absolute Arabism' and views the constitution of the Ba'ath Party as the basis for Syrian fascism (Saleh, 2017: 8). However, some Ba'ath ideologues have recognised the Kurds as a 'cultural' – but not ethnic – group within the Arab nation (Tejel 2009: 57–58).

As an Arab nationalist organisation, the Ba'ath Party initially enjoyed wide support from the peasantry and rolled out numerous land redistribution policies as part of its agrarian reform. But its nationalism was hollow. Failed policies and deep divisions within the party caused it to shift away from its original Socialist vocation. The Ba'ath-Party gained power through a military putsch in 1963. Expropriating and redistributing land became a strategy for mobilising the rural masses, retaining its core support from peasants and the working class, and thus consolidating its grip on power. The Ba'ath Party also put an end to the leading role played by prominent urban families in political and economic life.

Meanwhile, the strong anti-Kurdish policies of the pre-Ba'ath government were continued. In 1961, the pan-Arab government conducted a population census in the governorate of Al-Hasakah in which all non-Arab inhabitants had to prove they had been residents of Syria prior to 1945. The government claimed it wanted to identify so-called 'alien infiltrators' who had no right to Syrian citizenship (Chatty, 2018: 135). This policy subsequently created various kinds of stateless Kurds, some of them had no rights to education, healthcare, or Syrian identity cards, which made travelling within the country difficult. The war of 1967, when Israel defeated Arab nationalists by capturing Quneitra, dealt the party a final blow.

The father of the current president of Syria, Hafiz Al-Assad, came to power in 1970 after an internal coup and transformed Syria into an “authoritarian national security state”(Hinnebusch 2001: 7) that legitimised itself based on the crisis following Syria’s defeat by Israel in the 1967 war. Previously the party had already been divided over how to deal with the outcome of the war. But the new wing of the party rising around Hafiz Al-Assad, who by then was the country’s defence minister, aimed at strengthening his wing in the army in order to interfere in party affairs (Hinnebusch 2001: 55–56). Rejecting his approach, the Ba’ath Party called an emergency congress in which it planned to dismiss Assad and his chief of staff, Mustafa Tlas. It never expected Assad himself to instigate a coup with the military’s support. Since the country was in economic crisis and short of foreign currency, Assad proposed economic liberalisation (Hinnebusch 2001: 56). Over the following years, Hafiz Al-Assad’s Syria managed to access foreign currency by exploiting Cold War rivalries and enjoyed protection from the Soviet Union. Syria, considered the ‘front-line state’ against Israel, received oil rents from regional donors, turning its economy into a “partial or indirect rentier state” (Hinnebusch 2001: 7).

The Ba’ath Party claimed to be leading the country towards Socialism and striving for central planning and the development of Syria’s industrial and commercial sectors. But the political economist Volker Perthes (1992) underlined an important contradiction: the Ba’ath Party claimed to have discharged the Syrian bourgeoisie, considered the ‘enemy of the revolution’, but in the 1990s it was pointed out that “an active private sector controls more than 90% of agriculture, about half of all registered foreign trade and most internal trade, and produces about three quarters of the surplus in Syria’s converting industries” (Perthes, 1992: 31). At first, the Ba’ath Party worked on import-led industrialisation and a welfare state with large subsidies in the public sector, and it derived its political loyalty from key social forces, such as peasants and workers (Dahi / Munif 2012).

As the country faced economic problems in the late 1970s, the first steps towards economic liberalisation were taken. Leaning towards liberalisation paved the way for the emergence of new social forces and alliances, which developed “junior partners to the state in the economic field” (Ismail 2009: 16). Thus by co-opting merchant middlemen and developing a national bourgeoisie, the regime consolidated its authority. The most powerful actor was the so-called ‘state bourgeoisie’, described by the Syrian political economist Bassam Haddad (2012) as the “organic backbone for the regime.” As a social stratum, the state bourgeoisie is dependent on the state to such an extent that it cannot survive without its protection (Haddad

2012: 251). Through economic neoliberalisation, the state bourgeoisie managed to establish itself in the private sector (Haddad 2012: 252), and disentangling the interests and fortunes of the state bourgeoisie and the Syrian upper class would be nearly impossible (Haddad 2012: 255), while the “new oligarchy is composed of high-ranking officials and their offspring” (Ismail, 2009: 18). “Families and clans tied to the regime [...] become major economic actors” (Ismail, 2009: 19), a constitutive element of the Syrian regime until today.

## AGRICULTURE POLICY IN ASSAD’S SYRIA: THE GREEN REVOLUTION DISASTER

Hafiz Al-Assad, convinced that the ‘backward’ peasant system in Syria was in need of modernisation, naively believed in the promises of the so-called Green Revolution of the 1980s. As a consequence, “previously self-sustaining peasant classes were rendered subservient classes to the regime and its policies,” subjugating the traditional agrarian society and turning it into a “market-oriented, state-coordinated commodity-producing society” (Sheikh / Manna, 2017).

Agriculture was intensified to serve the market, irrigation systems were expanded, with widespread use of pumps, and land reclamation programmes “converted deserts and arid lands previously used for herding and pasture into irrigated fields” (Sowers / Waterbury / Woertz, 2013). The Syrian government heavily subsidised peasants to encourage them to intensify their agriculture by growing modified, high-yielding (often hybrid) seeds instead of heirloom varieties.

The Green Revolution had disastrous consequences. Farmers became dependent on external government aid; the over-extraction of groundwater led to soil salinisation; rivers like the Balikh in northeastern Syria dried up; the country suffered biodiversity loss; crop yields started falling as the soil was depleted; and as a result unemployment among farmers started to rise:

*“Before the revolution, Abu Adnan planted his fields with grain and vegetables. Under the rule of Bashar al-Assad, the government paid farmers 100 lira for a kilo of wheat, and then sold the same amount of wheat on the open market for 400 lira: a 400% profit for the government. So when the bureaucrat came by to collect the harvest for the government’s set price, Abu Adnan would pay a small bribe, keep his grain, and sell it for a slightly higher price on the black market. Even life as a sharecropper during feudal times was better than life under the Assad regime,” said Jumana Manna (2017) about a young Syrian farmer featured in her documentary Wild Relatives.*

Assad's disastrous neoliberal policies persevered partly because he actively crushed any opposition and co-opted other political actors, an approach that has benefited the regime since the Hamah massacre.

## THE CRUSHING OF ALL OPPOSITION BY ASSAD'S TOTALITARIANISM

Politically, the 1980s are also characterised by another major development: the total extinction of any opposition. While the National Progressive Front (*al-Jabha al-Wataniyyah at-Taqaddumiyah*) was established in 1972 and intended to allow certain co-opted parties<sup>1</sup> to work in the parliamentary political system under Ba'ath leadership, it also made any opposition outside this body illegal. When Hafiz Al-Assad rose to power, he first cleansed the party of all internal – mostly radical Leftist – opposition, and created a system that revolved around him individually (Jaki, 2014: 30). The Ba'ath Party exists as a kind of parallel structure to the state bureaucracy, which is why even the smallest bureaucratic decisions cannot be taken without the party's consent, even at village level. Elizabeth Picard describes the Ba'athists not as a party but rather as a system of domination and corruption (Picard 1996: 218) and highlights the development of a neo-patrimonialist, clientelist network as a ruling strategy. Perthes underlines the fact that under this system, groups that would otherwise oppose the regime are tied to it, because they benefit from it. Moreover, "they also serve to create fragmentation within these groups, thus making a unified opposition difficult" (Jörum: 32, referring to Perthes 1995: 181).

By the end of the 1970s, social contradictions culminated in Syria, triggering an uprising which is often only known outside Syria as a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood, leading to the Hamah massacre, which claimed an unknown number of victims. However, the historical reality is far more complex, since the social basis for the revolt extended far beyond the Muslim Brothers' sphere of influence. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood has distanced itself from the current that actively advocated violence against the state and its institutions (e.g. attacks on a military school in Aleppo), the so called 'fighting vanguard' (*Al-Tali'a al-Muqatila*). It also viewed this violence as resistance following an active attack on them by the state. However, more importantly many secular and Leftist groups had called for democratic reforms and participated in protests (trade unions, Leftist parties, professional associations, intellectuals and artists) until they were dissolved by decree in April 1980 (Haugbolle and

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1 The Front includes the Communist parties under the Faisal and Baqdash current, the Arab Socialist Party, the Arab Socialist Union, the Social Democratic Unionists, and since 2003 also the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party (SSNP).

Hastrup, 2009), giving the regime a monopoly on Syrian politics. The revolt can also be described as the culmination of an urban-rural conflict or “[...] primarily a reaction by small manufacturers and tradespeople in Hamah to the regime’s program of large-scale industrial development” (Lawson 1982).

At the same time, non co-opted Communist forces, such as the Communist Action Party, were actively mobilising against the Syrian regime. Initially they merely sought to reform the system, but after the brutal state crackdown their demands changed. The significance of Hamah is two-fold: firstly, it sounded the death knell of any form of organised political opposition in Syria; and secondly it created a memory of violence often referred to by Syrians only as ‘the events of Hamah’. Even people from Hamah itself often remained pretty calm about their violent experience. In this sense, the Hamah massacre was decisive:

*“Understanding violence as a form of governmental power underlines practices and strategies that have as their objective and outcome not only to harm the body, the mind and the effect but, also, to reconstruct, shape, discipline and normalise the subject of government” (Ismail 2018: 9).*

I refer below to the continuing centrality of violence in the rule of the Assad regime in connection with its suppression of the popular revolution in 2011. But there is another important point about the massacre: it set a precedent for what we must understand as the “anticipation of violent acts” (Ismail 2018: 131). In other words, the very notion of the Hamah massacre, when the regime’s army killed between 15,000 and 40,000 people within days, made Syrians mindful of the fact that any questioning of the Assad regime’s total authority would be met with violence aimed at annihilation.

In the wake of the massacre, all organised political opposition was extinguished. Although Syria experienced a number of attempts at popular uprisings and intellectual dissidence during the early 2000s, examples including the Damascus Declaration, the Statement of the 99, the Uprisings of Qamishlo and As-Suwayda and the protest by farmers in ar-Raqqa in 2002, there is no organised opposition to pick up on these popular revolts. But while the regime has successfully crushed political dissent, it has not managed to deal with the severe realities of climate change.

## UNPRECEDENTED DROUGHT

Policymakers in Syria were unable to change track when the unprecedented severe drought in the country in 2006 forced thousands of peasants to leave their farmland and seek new livelihoods in the surrounding cities, such as Aleppo and Damascus, or find work as labourers in Homs or Tartus. According to NASA, “the recent 15 year drought in the Levant (1998–2012) is the driest in the record [...] we conclude that there is an 89% likelihood that this drought is drier than any comparable period of the last 900 years” (Cook et al., 2016).

This inability to cope with the drought was aggravated by the structure of the country’s economy: Syria’s workforce was largely employed in the agricultural sector, which used 87% of the country’s water resources. Centrally managed irrigation systems were established by 160 dams built between 1963 and 2001. Water-intensive strategic crops, such as wheat and cotton, were meant to make Syria self-sufficient, the country being constantly faced with sanctions imposed by the West (Haidar / de Châtel, 2009). Political scientist Jessica Barnes argues that water-intensive agriculture was a way of sustaining the constituency of early Ba’ath Party supporters and maintaining support from the influential Peasants’ Union (Barnes, 2009) and that this explains the regime’s unwillingness to change this policy. Furthermore, addressing the international public, the regime argued that the water shortage was due to “population growth, growing water demand, the unequal distribution of water sources in the country, and climate change” (de Châtel / Holst-Warhaft / Steenhuis, 2014).

Despite expending effort on crushing its opponents, the Assad regime had to face this unprecedented drought which, coupled with the financial crisis in 2008 and the beginning of the Arab uprising in 2010, created a situation that was becoming politically unsustainable.

The Syrian uprising in 2011 was an opportunity to transform the country’s institutions and agriculture and to end Assad’s authoritarian rule and market-oriented, water-intensive agriculture. Yet, when faced with war and food sieges, Syrians had to reinvent their own food production without the control and the involvement of institutional state structures. In addition to the horrific context of war, the people’s efforts had to also challenge the intervention of international humanitarian and development agencies, which would effectively safeguard Assad’s neoliberal model (as described in more detail below).

## THE SYRIAN UPRISING OF 2011

### CONTESTING THAT 'POVERTY' WAS THE ROOT CAUSE OF THE UPRISING

Before the uprising in 2011, the rate of unemployment among people aged under 25 was between 20 and 25%, rising to around 55% in some areas. It should be borne in mind that at the time 65% of the total population was just under 30 years old (Daher, 2014). If anything, the neoliberal policies implemented in Syria and their impact on the population strengthened the authoritarian rule of Assad's crony capitalist regime. The uprising did not stem exclusively from material deprivation: Syrians took to the streets to protest their marginalisation and voice a yearning for dignity.

When the president's envoy tried to quell the protest by announcing salary increases in the public sector, the demonstrators retorted they were not hungry. From early on, the protests directly targeted figureheads of the crony capitalist state, like the president's cousin Rami Makhlouf, among others. As the Swiss-Syrian Marxist Joseph Daher puts it: "the roots of the revolutionary process are the absence of democracy and increasing social injustice as a result of neoliberal policies, especially as implemented to a high degree with the arrival to power of Bashar Al Assad in 2010" (Daher, 2014).

The drought of 2006–2010 not only cost many rural people their livelihoods, but many children dropped out of school, prompting a spike in children's employment (The New Humanitarian, 2009). One wheat farmer from Qamishlo in eastern Syria, who was forced to move to Damascus, gave this insight into the extent of poverty people were facing:

*"There is nothing left for us there. Farming stopped and I sold plastic for a while, but it was not enough. We had to borrow so much money from people just to survive" (quoted in IRIN News, 2009).*

At this time, many informal housing were built around the bigger Syrian cities, e.g. in Rif-Dimashq Governorate. Especially hard hit was the Daraa Governorate in southern Syria, the place where the popular uprising would erupt.

## DURING THE UPRISING: AN INTERLUDE TO THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

The Syrian uprising of 2011 was decisive for envisioning a new kind of political community and “at the same time informing a re-imagining of the nation” (Ismail, 2011: 538). The uprising started in the form of rather spontaneous protests in the southern, agriculturally important province of Daraa. The first larger demonstrations in Syria took place in Damascus on 15 March 2011. However, when asked what sparked the revolution, people retell the story of Daraa, the largest town in Syria’s bread-basket in the South, where Syrian children had been imprisoned and tortured. The violent torture of children and the dismissive contempt of the local government was so abhorrent that it generated the momentum for the first demonstrations in Daraa’s urban-rural areas. However, the first protestors actually came from the informal areas in Rif-Dimashq.

The protests mounted there spread all over the country, many being held spontaneously in solidarity with Daraa. On 25 March, another big demonstration in the centre of Damascus saw hundreds of protestors chanting “Daraa is Syria” out of solidarity. For just a moment, the urban-rural divide seemed totally non-existent. Sara, a Leftist activist from the very beginning, explained to me that: “for the first two years, previously important questions like which city you came from and whether you lived in the countryside, among others, became totally meaningless in the light of efforts to develop a democratic Syrian identity.”

Three months into the protests, the mobilisation of support had created a following of around 4 million out of the country’s total population of 21.5 million (Ismail, 2011: 539): “Thus, the challenge to the regime moved from local acts of confrontation with representatives of the regime to a nationwide uprising against the regime as a whole” (Ismail, 2011: 539). The tremendous creativity harnessed by the movement in 2011 to gain attention and garner support resulted from how the security services dealt with dissidents. The fountains of blood in Damascus, rubber balls with “FREEDOM” written on them, and the concealment in dustbins of cassette players and speakers to blare out songs about freedom in Syria are just a few examples. This incredible creativity was a response to the Syrian regime’s continuous violence against any kind of opposition in the country.



Although a peaceful civil movement has since developed, which remains active today, it was confronted with the challenge of seeing parts of the opposition deciding to fight or being offered arms to fight against the Syrian government (in mid-2012), plunging Syria into an “international civil war” (Saleh 2017: 26).

With international actors intervening in the conflict – aiding the regime or the opposition – Syria has become known as a field for proxy war and a fertile ground for the al-Nusra Front and Daesh, but nobody remembers the names of people who have disappeared (Razan Zaitouneh, Samira Khalil), been killed under torture (Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, Yahya Shurbaji, Islam Dabbas, Laila Shwikany) (Cutcher, 2018), assassinated (Mish'al Temo, Raed Faris, Hamoud Junaid) and the million displaced persons and exiles. Outside of Syria, people know the names of the perpetrators, but not one name of the heroes of a nine-year old uprising. That is what this section is about, telling a forgotten story of creativity, solidarity and resistance amidst the ongoing, now globalised, civil war that has seen interventions by Russia, the USA, the EU, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and others.

Providing an in-depth geopolitical analysis of the proxy wars fought in Syria and the direct confrontations between international powers are beyond the scope of this study, it would also effectively further justify the logic of having to declare a political position before being allowed to talk about the Syrian experience. I reject this positioning which silences Syrian voices. Indeed, it is little short of absurd to seek to write about a radical grassroots experience, but first have to contextualise it in terms of international politics and using international political terminology. For the work done every day by grassroots organisations in Syria is proving such analyses wrong.

## **POST-UPRISING URBAN-RURAL RELATIONS: THE CITY BESIEGING THE COUNTRYSIDE**

Urban politics is deeply influenced by Syria's colonial legacy. After the Ba'ath Party took power in 1963, it perpetuated the country's colonial urban design. Syria's policy on modernisation had previously displaced urban residents on more than one occasion and partly compensated them with housing on cities' outskirts. Thus, the inhabitants of Jaramana were displaced when a highway was built through their

camp<sup>2</sup>, and in the mid-2000s people living (often in modest wooden houses) in the very poor parts of Kafr Susa in downtown Damascus, were ousted to make way for the Sham City Centre shopping mall<sup>3</sup>. As the Syrian state stepped up its liberalisation of the country's economy, two zones emerged: 'zones of pleasure'<sup>4</sup> (Wedeen 2013) for a 'new class with the means to consume' and 'zones of social abandonment' (Biehl 2005).

A broad understanding of how the housing market has been affected by Syria's changing political economy is given by Robert Goulden (2012), who underlines that the neoliberal shift by the Ba'ath Party (and especially the extent of privatisation) has negatively impacted the housing situation of most Syrian citizens. Goulden concludes by suggesting that only the positive legacy of the welfare state has prevented a wider development of slums in the country.

In Syria, 38.8% of poor people live in urban areas, a huge proportion of them in 'informal' (i.e. illegal and lacking basic health and education services) settlements. In fact, 40% of the inhabitants of Damascus and Aleppo are said to live in such settlements (Ahmad 2012: 7). The official numbers for Damascus estimate that it has 700,000 inhabitants, whereas unofficial estimates place the figure at 2.5 million (al-Warraaq 2012). Accordingly, it is fair to say that: "More than ever, informal access to urban land and housing is no longer the exception, but has become the rule" (Fernandes 2008: 7). Half of all the housing in Damascus was considered informal, and it is no coincidence that these areas of 'informal housing' have formed the front lines in the uprising, as a consequence having their living spaces punitively targeted,

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2 The re-location of part of the Mukhayyam Jaramana [Muhaiyyam Ġaramānā] to make way for a highway was one measure in the 'civilized development programmes (mašrū'āt tanmiyya hadariyya) implemented between 1985 and 1986. It entailed the resettlement of around 700 families, one group in the marginal southern district of al-Hussainiyya, and the other in a newly built government housing project (mašrū' hukūmī ġadīd) in al-Hussainiyya (UNRWA n.d.; Palestinian Aid Committee, 2011).

3 How resettling the urban poor for modernisation projects is a direct result of the liberalisation policies of the former years can be seen in Kafr Susa (Kafr Sūsa), a central district of Damascus. After building the Sham City Centre, Syria's first 'Western style mall' where the products sold are beyond the means of the average Syrian (Terc 2011: 161) and which can therefore be deemed a 'zone of pleasure' for the upper class, an access road had to be built in 2006-2007. Since the settlement on the site was 'informal', the inhabitants were removed, most of them evicted forcibly (ihlā') to al-Hussainiyya (Qāsiyūn, 2007), which is 20 km to the south of Damascus. Anyone entitled (mustahiqq) to compensation would supposedly be compensated, but decisions about who would be deemed to have this status seemed to have sometimes been decided rather arbitrarily (Qāsiyūn, 2006). This incident highlights two interesting points: firstly, the forced displacement of Syrians from Kafr Susa to the outskirts of the city; and secondly the fact that such events constitute additional steps in 'clearing' poor people out of the city centre, especially in the area around the prestigious neoliberal Sham City Centre project.

4 For further literature on the subject, see descriptions of the increasing commodification of Old Damascus (Salamandra, 2004); and for the spatial impact on the city's 'original' inhabitants, see Sudermann's explanation of the gentrification taking place where 'zone of pleasure' emerge and average people can no longer afford to live (Sudermann, 2012).

either through war or through lawfare, as happened most recently in the Damascene neighbourhood of Tadamon<sup>5</sup>. Over a third of the Syrian population (and some estimates go as high as 44%) has lived in the countryside (Al-Sabouni, 2016: 120). The countryside (*rif*) and city (*madina*) trigger different connotations and subjectivities amongst Syrians from different parts of Syria.

It is rural Syria and the informal urban quarters on the outskirts of bigger cities that are leading the popular uprising. What we see throughout the uprising is, on the one hand, the deployment of fierce violence against rural and agricultural sites and, on the other hand, most of Syria's non-urban areas falling under the control of armed revolutionary forces, outside the control of the government. In 2012, the Syrian regime started systematically using starvation as a weapon by militarily besieging several rural and semi-urban areas surrounding the city of Damascus.

So let us consider Damascus and its countryside. Damascus's gardens form its countryside. In the 14th century, Arab geographer Ibn al-Wardi described the Ghouta, east of Damascus as: "... full of water, flowering trees, and passing birds, with exquisite flowers, wrapped branches and paradise-like greenery. For eighteen miles, it is nothing but gardens and castles, surrounded by high mountains in every direction, and from these mountains flows water, which forms into several rivers inside the Ghouta. It is the fairest place on earth, and the best of them" (Lund, 2016: 5). However, urbanisation and technological changes that occurred after independence from France in 1946, "transformed the Damascene hinterland into a region of suburbs and satellite towns" (Lund, 2016: 5). The Ghouta has accommodated waves of refugees from the Golan Heights and Palestine and also provided living space to many poor Syrians in need of employment (Lund, 2016: 5). Some smaller towns of the Ghouta, like Jobar, have been integrated into Damascus, and the once agricultural land is now criss-crossed by roads and dotted with factories, army compounds and housing projects. This expansion took place without the slightest degree of planning and with consideration of its impact on the environment and people's health.

The popular uprising has seen incidents take place in various urban and rural spaces, including Rif Daraa and Rif Hama. Focussing on Damascus, three types of urban space can be distinguished (see Ismail 2013): 1) traditional quarters: Midan, Rukn ad-Din; 2) informal quarters: Barzeh, Qaboun, Harasta, Douma, Qadam etc.; and 3) Rif Damascus: Darayya, Moadamiyya.

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5 For more information, see: [http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/34863/Families\\_Prevented\\_From\\_Returning\\_Their\\_Homes\\_Damascus](http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/34863/Families_Prevented_From_Returning_Their_Homes_Damascus) (13.09.2019).

A full 50% of Syria's residential areas are informal (Habitat International Coalition 2015: 257). The main problem with this is that people do not have legal secured tenure to their original homes and plots. Consequently, should the regime wish to carry out any modernisation projects in these areas, the tenants would have had no legal grounds to protest and would simply have been evicted from their homes.

The brief overview above shows that not all urban spaces have been involved in the protests. Ismail asks how to explain that fact and takes a closer look at Damascus's urban configuration. Through state co-opting, incorporation and exclusion, the Ba'ath Party succeeded in reconfiguring social forces, its developmentalist approach to the countryside prompting a huge migration into Syria's cities. It is quite important to understand the connection between the regime and the disadvantaged sectors of the population. The regime managed to draw social lines dividing state agents tasked with controlling violence from other social groups with which the former share socio-economic positions (Ismail 2013: 881). This 'populist co-optation' (Ismail 2013: 881) has spatial implications that are reflected in the distribution of protests across the urban landscape of Damascus.

Unfortunately, existing literature on Syria often just reiterates portrayals of the conflict in terms of a simple, binary urban-rural division (e.g. Kilcullen and Rosenblatt 2014). Yet both the *rif* (countryside) and *madina* (city) have certain social connotations. The *rif* is associated with village farmers and urban slum dwellers, while Syria's cities are described as gateways to economic and political power (Kilcullen and Rosenblatt 2014: 34) or this is implied in statements about how the Damascene merchant "will extract profit from his father" (Batatu 1981: 336), or how "the urban poor have risen" (Kilcullen and Rosenblatt 2014: 34). Such implicitly binary descriptions reproduce stereotypes that are not helpful for analysing the nature of the oppositional protest movement, but rather de-legitimise it. Any simple, binary urban-rural distinction would ignore the fact that both the backers of the current regime, and indeed the regime itself, once comprised people of rural origins (Batatu 1981: 338).

In the words of Hanna Batatu: "For long the peasants lived at the mercy of the cities. From their standpoint, the cities obtained benefits and brought only injury. [...] [Men] from the cities owned their villages or, if they did not own them, controlled the markets in which they had to sell their produce." (Batatu 1981: 336). However, peasants were at no point simply subjected to these power relations, but rather undertook several uprisings to seek liberation from cities' influence.

Between 1806 until 1935 alone, Hanna Batatu lists nine such (albeit rather localised) uprisings, though these never translated into a broader peasant movement. Postulating a binary urban-rural divide also disguises the facts that there have been inter-city struggles and that in recent years many people from the centres of old cities to their outskirts (Sudermann, 2014) or mixed areas, like Yarmouk. Palestinians mainly of rural origin have been living in Yarmouk since 1953. Several generations often occupy the same three- or four-floor building, and since they work in Damascus, the community can hardly qualify as rural. Over time, Yarmouk has come to be mostly inhabited by poor people from all over Syria.

The inhabitants of Mezze 86, primarily comprise members of the military from the coast, low-ranking soldiers from the 86th Division incorporated into the regime “through the organs of coercion.” Qaboun’s population mainly includes migrants from northern Syria who work on the fringes of the local economy, but enjoy a certain degree of autonomy as they are not reliant on the regime for employment (Ismail 2013: 882). Furthermore, the urban-rural binary model does not explain why places with similar social configurations, having seen the influx of rural migrants and been built as informal communities on agricultural land, adopted a different political stance during the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. Neither place can be readily integrated into the urban fabric of Damascus. Mezze 86’s inhabitants have tended to be loyal to the Syrian regime – the district of Mezze has not seen any popular protests, whereas Qaboun has participated in the uprising. So we should acknowledge that Damascus, like other Syrian cities, is divided along social, economic, cultural and religious lines (Ismail 2013: 882). And according to Salwa Ismail, the main parameters used for analysing a quarter should be its relations with the regime and its demographic composition. Other quarters, like Kafr Susa and Barzeh or Moadamiyeh, have witnessed large-scale expropriations (Ismail 2018: 76) and eviction in an attempt to build middle-class housing and military facilities (Ismail 2013: 883), and they participated in the uprising, though Kafr Susa has never been fully controlled by opposition forces.

## SIEGES, SELF-ORGANISATION AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Sieges have been the strategy *par excellence* applied by the Syrian regime to implement its policy of 'Assad or we burn the country'. Damascus has been besieged on all fronts: in Eastern and Western Ghouta and southern Damascus. These sieges mean no water, no electricity, no food, no movement. Their aim is to render impossible any hint of a potential alternative life.

Towards the end of 2016, the Siege Watch project reported that "of the more than 900,000 people still living under siege:

- > 88% of the besieged Syrians in approximately 32 communities are besieged entirely by the Syrian government and its allies in Damascus, Rural Damascus, and Homs governorates.
- > 10% of the besieged Syrians in three communities are besieged by a mixture of the Syrian government and armed groups. In Deir Ezzor the siege is primarily enforced by ISIS, while the Syrian government imposes further access restrictions from the inside. In the southern Damascus suburbs, the primary siege is imposed by the Syrian government, but ISIS and other armed groups impose further access restrictions to Yarmouk and Hajar al-Aswad inside the siege.
- > 2% of the besieged Syrians in two communities are besieged entirely by armed opposition groups in Idlib governorate."

The situation worsened in 2017 with the now US-led coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) emulating the Assad regime's siege weapon, which prompted the almost total depopulation of the northeastern town of ar-Raqqah.

Ghouta and Southern Damascus enjoyed a period of autonomy to a certain degree. In Eastern Ghouta, protests started as soon as 10 days into the uprising, in March 2011. The government cracked down violently on the protesters. By summer 2011, entire neighbourhoods of Eastern Damascus and Damascus's gardens, Eastern Ghouta, had been seized by the opposition, the last troops loyal to the Syrian regime withdrew in 2012 (Lund, 2016: 8). By early 2013, the regime started besieging Eastern Ghouta, trying to retake areas that would undermine the inflow of goods and arms.

Yarmouk, to the south of Damascus, was forced to take in internally displaced persons (IDPs). Since at least July 2012, the city has been bombarded with mortar shells. On 16 December 2012, a mosque and two schools sheltering IDPs and other civil facilities were bombed causing a mass exodus. With the siege on Yarmouk, 194 people would die between July 2013 and February 2014 from malnutrition and a blockade on access to medical supplies (Amnesty International, 2015).

Sieges develop gradually. First, checkpoints are set up around the area to be besieged, initially only to check IDs and control movements in and out of it. This prevents anyone who is wanted by the regime or is eligible for military service from leaving the area. This arrangement totally restricts a first group of people. Nobody is allowed to take goods out of the area or bring things in. Next, the quantities of goods brought into the area are restricted: only certain goods and certain amounts are permitted to enter. Humiliation is routinely used as a tool to prevent people from moving at all. By reducing and policing the quantity of food brought into the area, the regime makes sure that people use up their stored supplies, the so called *moone*. Agricultural fields are destroyed, sometimes shortly before harvest; bakeries and bread lines where people were queuing for supplies are bombed (HRW, 2012). Seven months later, the checkpoints simply never reopen. A family member may happen to have left that morning, but will not be allowed back in. This marks the start of the great starvation, or *maja'a*. People will say: "Probably the checkpoint will open again tomorrow." Residents of Yarmouk staged popular mass demonstrations from within the siege to try and approach the checkpoints, but were shot at. Yarmouk was in a larger area under siege, with checkpoints closed on all sides. A military campaign in summer 2013 cut off the besieged farmers from their farmland, preventing them from continuing to provide for their communities. This tactic was repeated in the areas of Madaya (Ciezdlo, 2016) and Eastern Ghouta (Martínez / Eng, 2018).

Meanwhile other areas around Damascus were besieged, and nothing could be done to ease the stranglehold (Lund 2016: 8). Some 400,000 people remained inside Eastern Ghouta, reliant on self-organisation in a huge territory with an urban structure, but also with the fields of the Eastern Ghouta in which they were trapped. And the Ghouta was not the only example: there was the Ain Al-Fiji area, home to the water sources supplying Damascus; the Qalamon area, famous for its apple and pear trees; southern Damascus, which had provided the capital with fresh milk every day, and so on. So one paradox in Syria is that "the city is besieging the countryside," a sentiment often repeated to me.

## RADICAL TRANSFORMATION: NEW FORMS OF ORGANISATION UNDER WAR AND SIEGE

Several weeks after being besieged, the starved communities realised that (lack of) food was being used as a weapon against them. In the city of Moadamiya, one council representative writing under the pseudonym of Qusai Zakariya documented day by day in an English-language blog how the siege was developing<sup>6</sup>. The author did this to make sure that what people were enduring would not go unnoticed by people outside Syria and to appeal for solidarity.

At the same time, these communities were confronted with another reality: all state-run social infrastructure, such as local government, schools, hospitals, etc. was now beyond the control of the Syrian regime. In some parts of the country, the Syrian regime continued paying the salaries of state employees if, in return, they refused to work towards developing any alternative infrastructure. There was no central idea among the regime's opponents about how to develop forms of local self-administration. Instead, all areas outside state control followed different approaches regarding their self-organisation and self-administration. However, besides the organic development of those structures, there were also Syrian thinkers, such as the anarchist Omar Aziz, who came up with the idea of local self-governance through local councils with a view to revolutionary commitment to decentralising the Syrian state (Yassin-Kassab, Al-Shami, 2016: 68). In his view, a new society had to be built from the bottom up. For this reason, he felt that the main tool of early revolutionary activity in Syria, demonstrations, was insufficient. Even when the Syrian government still controlled all of Syria, Aziz already thought that local councils could effectively change people's value systems. These councils were thought of as locally organised grassroots forums designed to achieve three main goals in a bid to boost solidarity amongst their communities: people should manage their lives independently of the state, collaborate collectively and initiate social revolution at the local, regional and national levels (Yassin-Kassab, Al-Shami, 2016: 68). He compared the Syrian revolution to the Paris Commune workers' revolt, saying: "We are no less [...]. They resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half" (Yassin-Kassab, Al-Shami, 2016: 69). Omar Aziz was detained in November 2012 and later died under torture in a Syrian prison.

In some areas, a wide variety of different approaches was taken, e.g. in the area of Al-Jazeera, where the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, or PYD) would later become the main hegemonic force and establish a self-administration that, year by year, took over more self-organisation from society. Other areas

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6 For more information, see: <https://stopthesiege.wordpress.com> (13.09.2019).



set up local councils, some of them democratically elected (as in the case of many of the councils in Eastern Ghouta or Aleppo), others instead adopting a plutocratic or even aristocratic approach, whereby the families with the greatest historical influence would form a committee that would then elect a council (as in the countryside around Aleppo). Some councils ended up gaining great influence over the armed groups controlling the area (e.g. in Daraya), others were violently taken over after their election by a small group of armed radicals (as happened in the city of Idlib in 2016). In Yarmouk, more than 12 local social and humanitarian organisations utterly dismissed the idea of local councils, and instead formed a council out of the members of all the local, self-organising bodies. So since 2012, the areas of Syria outside the regime's control have undergone a wide range of experiences.

Experiences of new developments, e.g. women's participation was a problem in many areas at the beginning of 2012 and in 2013, but one area was dominated by its strong women's movement: the city of Zabadani. Many areas struggled to appoint female political representatives to their local councils, but in the city of Jassim in Daraa in 2015, many offices were run by women, and in 2017 many women's councils and committees were established. In Idlib, female activists started training to make sure more females than males would qualify for the next elections.

In Atareb, people campaigned against the undemocratic formation of their local council. Several cities in Eastern Ghouta were controlled by armed extremist forces justifying their rule on religious grounds. By the beginning of 2018, most of these factions had lost all their legitimacy amongst the local population and had also committed extensive human rights violations. Through self-organised structures, people were constantly developing and re-developing visions of a new society. In Erbin, when local religious extremists opened schools, activists also opened schools in which they offered a secular education. In Yalda, when a group of activists offered to teach young girls how to swim, the local authority, or *mashayekh*, headed by notable local figures, ran a smear campaign against them. So beyond the war between the regime and its opponents, all of Syrian society is undergoing a revolution. Polarisation, be it on the grounds of gender, religion versus secular views or other factors, are by their very nature destructive. However in the context of the war in Syria, these clashes have inspired creative projects and localised organisations.

One impressive story is set in the besieged Damascene district of Qaboun and concerns a local group called *al-Hayat* (meaning life in Arabic). It is a typical example of a group that grew out of a local coordination committee, of spontaneous and initially unorganised structures that sprung up in 2011, often founded by people who had only

recently become acquainted at demonstrations. Al-Hayat filled the gap when government forces left and the state infrastructure broke down. Various social classes were represented in the group, which even included people from outside the area, who lived in government-controlled areas, but smuggled themselves back in to support the burgeoning self-organising structures. Al-Hayat managed to set up a mutually supportive social structure, including a school and a hospital, supported by a bakery and a sewing workshop.

## GENESIS OF THE 15TH GARDEN

It was in this very context that the 15th Garden developed. In winter 2013, when the besieged communities realised that they had to start independent food production, they faced a huge problem, which applied to all such areas: the centralised agricultural system in place before the uprising had placed seeds, fertilisers and pesticides under the Syrian regime's control. In the more urban areas under siege, like Al-Yarmouk, Qaboun, Al-Tell or later on the city of Aleppo, people were confronted with the very basic problem of not having spaces safe from shelling that were big enough to be cultivated. Moreover, most seeds in circulation through official channels or accessible on the free market were hybrids or cross-pollinated, making them not that useful for communities seeking to become independent, making it crucial for them to grow their own seeds.

Activists with no agricultural knowledge from urban besieged areas sought to connect with farmers and gardeners in their community and beyond, in a bid to learn from them in order to find a way of providing for their community. On 15 March 2014, people from 15 different regions of Syria gathered in the border region between Turkey and Syria to decide how to form a food sovereignty network, underscoring the fact that the issue of food is intrinsically linked to the question of dignity, and as such to political uprising. So from its very inception, the 15th Garden aimed to find a way to secure a dignified life in contexts, like refugee camps or besieged cities in Syria, where people were totally reliant on external food aid. At the meeting in Turkey, people from self-organised structures from areas bordering Turkey, like Qamishlo, Maarat an-Numan and Afrin, joined in too. Other than worrying about the wellbeing of people under siege, they were concerned about their communities' growing reliance on external food supplies, so-called food baskets, which made them feel reduced to the status of mere aid recipients. So what brought all these people together was a common interest in the questions of food and seed sovereignty raised by the revolution, rendered necessary by the war and giving peasants new possibilities to consider.

Nonetheless, these different communities in Syria had different obstacles to overcome. Besieged urban communities were in dire need of food production, but lacked the necessary equipment, seeds and often, in the case of several activists, the requisite know-how. This held especially true for communities under siege in the mountainous Al-Qalamon region, who desperately needed to grow a crop during the first winter of their blockade in 2013. Rural besieged communities faced the problem of accessing seeds, while other rural communities found themselves confronted with a huge humanitarian catastrophe, either being displaced persons themselves or having to provide for large numbers of IDPs. Subjected to heavy bombing campaigns, they were unable to care for their crops. People working with their own Syrian community in the neighbouring countries or in refugee camps within Syria itself were upset when they realised just how reliant their communities had become on external aid. This was a situation they wanted to change. It was then that communities affiliated to the 15th Garden network launched the notion that they had started an uprising for dignity.

### LOCAL, REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

All these reasons brought people together in 2014 to found the 15th Garden network, turning for support to international farmers – with the support of La Via Campesina – who felt solidarity with them either after visiting their towns during the early uprising or through other solidarity-based structures developed during the Syrian uprising. Accordingly, right from the outset, the 15th Garden adopted a strong intra-Syrian and international solidarity approach. The network's main slogan was that food should not be used as a weapon: neither politically, through military sieges and attempts to force communities into submission, nor on the level of creating dependencies on schemes imposed by international aid organisations.

The members of the network not only criticised the food security approaches taken by humanitarian aid agencies, but countered them with their own understanding of food sovereignty, prompting their criticism of the deep psychological impact that reliance on external food aid has on individuals and communities. Receiving international aid turned political subjects into recipients, treated as 'target groups' or 'beneficiaries'. The first projects were launched in late 2014 in camps for IDPs in Afrin, but also by Syrian activists in Lebanon and in areas like Idlib. One main objective of their work was to keep up the belief in the possibility of self-sustainability and sovereignty in the light of a situation where people were actually totally reliant on external help. The feeling of '*ajiz*, a sense of being unable to act on your own, would prevent people from going back to their villages and re-build their communities, so growing their own food was essential.

For all communities, though, obtaining seeds was a huge undertaking. Even in Lebanon, where some supporters of the network lived, it was a massive challenge to get hold of organic seeds, as people were always offered 'improved seeds' instead. There was no sense – and absolutely no logic – in taking huge risks to smuggle hybrid and cross-pollinated seeds into besieged areas whenever they were needed, when organic seeds only needed to be smuggled once and could then be grown and reproduced locally.

Thus, the solidarity network was crucial for providing support in the form of (not necessary heirloom) seeds right from the very beginning. Farmers networks all over Europe would express their solidarity by providing seeds or even urging their own communities to grow solidarity gardens (as in the case of one school in Athens). International solidarity sometimes combined education on food sovereignty, the Syrian uprising and the situation in besieged and bombarded areas with events like seed collection. One example comes from *Graines et Cinéma*, a collective touring France by bus and sharing the story of the 15th Garden network.

Until early 2016, the network could still organise meetings on the Turkish-Syrian border. One farmer from Saraqeb would linger in a refugee camp for five days to try crossing the border to attend the meeting, but was ultimately unable to make it. Another person from Kobani was only able to attend the same meeting on the very last day. The border agreement between the EU and Turkey not only prevented people from fleeing a war-torn country, it also did tremendous harm to the network, preventing them from bringing together people from so many different areas.

Alongside international solidarity, there was also strong regional support, with seeds sent from Palestine and Iraq, mostly to benefit refugee camps, which initially had no space locally to grow and reproduce their own seeds.

## SEED SMUGGLING AND SAVING FOR DIGNITY

The gardens of Eastern Ghouta still had a huge diversity of indigenous seeds, and people feared that due to the war and their inability to cultivate them, they might be lost. Old strains of wheat had no longer been cultivated in many areas, and some farmers did not even have access to them anymore. Since some Syrian seeds had also been sent abroad, some activists made efforts to bring them back home. During the winter of 2017, farmers planted Babagha, one old variety of wheat, and other similarly old varieties in Idlib. Months later, they were proudly sending pictures of the bread and sweet pastries they had baked with it. Once certain varieties had been obtained, 15th Garden would try to grow and reproduce them for one or two seasons in some safe neighbouring countries and then send them to Syria.

In besieged areas, it might have been easier to smuggle in weapons than seeds. In 2015, one 15th Garden activist recalls a car from a UN-convoy coming to their area in Madaya to check on the humanitarian situation. 15th Garden activist Nawara urged them to put seeds on their wish list, saying: *"Seeds are much more important than your food baskets."*

Seeds were intended to break the siege. Later, in May 2016, seriously starving parts of Daraya received UN aid, but instead of bringing much-needed food, only mosquito nets, medical supplies and baby milk were allowed in (al Araby 2016)<sup>7</sup> because the Syrian government had to permit deliveries of UN aid. As a result, international aid was not distributed in line with people's needs, but became a tool in the hands of a Syrian government, raising questions about the UN's impartiality in the Syrian context (*The Guardian* 2016)<sup>8</sup>. Before the siege, a kilo of courgette seeds used to cost around \$24 USD, but during the siege that price skyrocketed to \$240 USD, despite bribery and smuggling (Ciezadlo, 2016)<sup>9</sup>, which were still possible, but were expensive and dangerous.



Families turned rooftops into gardens, here in besieged Yalda in southern Damascus.

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7 For more information, see: [www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/6/1/mosquito-nets-but-no-food-for-starving-syrian-town](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/6/1/mosquito-nets-but-no-food-for-starving-syrian-town) (13.09.2019).

8 For more information, see: [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/how-assad-regime-controls-un-aid-intended-for-syrias-children](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/29/how-assad-regime-controls-un-aid-intended-for-syrias-children) (13.09.2019).

9 For more information, see: [www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/07/18/sowing-hope-and-weeding-out-siege-profiteers](http://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/07/18/sowing-hope-and-weeding-out-siege-profiteers) (13.09.2019).

In Damascus, one private charity registered with the regime, which suffered from its own community being under siege, hid seeds in the few food baskets they were allowed to bring into their area in 2014. This was hugely risky, because every basket was opened at the checkpoint controlled by a group loyal to the regime before being allowed into the area. Later, together with the children of the community, they planted those seeds, making sure that the community shared responsibility for the project. One lady, named Nawara, would obtain permission to leave her area and later return. When she was allowed back in, she brought in a few small bags of mixed spices. Not seeing any problem with that, the checkpoint allowed her to pass, unaware that she might have mixed seeds in with the spices. In other areas, there were seed exchange banks, where the sole rule was that only people who contributed seeds could take some away in return. In Yarmouk, locals had to buy seeds at horrendous prices from a nearby farmer intent on capitalising on the siege situation. However, at the network meetings people dreamt about and envisaged having community seed banks that everyone could access.

Every group had its own reality and dynamic, and every Syrian community experienced different challenges and responded in its own way. The city of Zabadani had no available large plots of land for agriculture, so people grew food on small plots, sometimes even on pipes close to buildings, within the range of snipers who could have shot them. In Yarmouk, a similar shortage of farmland prompted the removal of the asphalt on the street that had previously hosted the vegetable market, to create space for a vegetable garden. Another space used for agriculture was a former sports stadium, which had been used as a rubbish dump during the siege, but was subsequently cleared and turned into the biggest vegetable garden in the area. However, there was always one part of the stadium that could not be cultivated, because it was just within range of snipers. The other parts of the field were safe, since they lay in the shadow of a huge building. In the city of Aleppo, soil was taken up onto the rooftops of buildings and placed in polystyrene boxes to grow crops in the sun. Transferring soil from more urban areas and lifting it using an improvised lift onto the roofs of huge buildings required a major communal effort by a group of people who had developed trusting relations with each other by working together over the years.

Whereas in Aleppo activists had to convince people to start farming, in areas like Yarmouk closely coordinated local organisations made sure they were able to provide for everyone by dividing the camp into different parts and going from house to house to make sure they would not miss any elderly or sick people who could not leave their homes any more. Then, they assessed how much each organisation would be able to provide and how many people were left in each part of their district.

## SHARING SEEDS AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Exchanging knowledge within the network was also important. In urban areas, for people with no experience in farming, the network designed and produced simple printed planting manuals that it distributed together with seeds. Sharing this basic knowledge became crucial when the siege on Aleppo began. An activist and agriculture engineer named Motaz recalls:

*"We couldn't keep up with demand. Suddenly everyone needed seeds, but nobody knew how to plant them. So at one point we just printed manuals and handed them out to people along with some seeds."*

In addition, free radio stations were used to broadcast information on urban farming and the need to establish food sovereignty structures. Today, with the development of more stable structures in more stable surroundings, knowledge sharing is helping the farmers in the network to promote a form of agroecology as a means of freedom and essential part of the popular revolution in Syria. In Idlib, for example, farmers are organising self-education sessions on organic farming at the village level, with other farmers. For many farmers, this is the only solution anyway, since fertilisers and pesticides are either too expensive or are not allowed into Syria for fear they might be used as solvents for making chemical weapons.

After a long journey, these seeds made it into Madaya in March 2015, just as the siege was tightening. Despite constant military attacks and subsequent displacements of the population, the 15th Garden network managed to make some progress. In Yarmouk, at least, local organisations succeeded in meeting around 20% of people's needs. Some communities, like Kobani, could return after displacement and work the land, but most, such as Khan Sheikhou, al-Tell, Zabadani, Madaya, Daraya, Moadamiya, Aleppo, and southern Damascus were starved into submission and forced to move to Idlib and the northern Aleppo countryside.

In the farming region of Idlib, the huge number of IDPs pushed the network's farmers to develop their own strategy: to plant more vegetables and support more farmers in the surrounding area to cope with the huge influx of thousands of refugees. The gruesome violence of sieges on the population forced people to develop completely, democratic, self-sufficient bottom-up modes of food production in a context characterised by severe shortages and politically motivated starvation tactics, in which the only way to survive was for communities to discuss new modes of production and consumption with each other.

## RESISTING THE NEOLIBERAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Although international development agencies provided humanitarian aid, they too supported government-like structures, their assistance following a neoliberal approach to development, based on the use of high-yield hybrid seeds and chemical enhancement, perpetuating the Assad regime's agricultural strategy. German Development Cooperation (GIZ), which implements cooperation projects for the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), provides support for the General Organisation for Seed Multiplication (GOSM), which bears the same name as its Syrian government counterpart. As Abdul Qader, one of the senior agricultural engineers in northern Syria, explained: "[GOSM] was initially set up to fill a vacuum left by the withdrawal of the regime."

GOSM is part of the Syrian opposition's interim government's Ministry of Agriculture. In 2017, it had seven offices in parts of the country outside the government's control. Their main objective, according to Abdul Qader, was to provide "agricultural equipment from familiar sources" coordinated by local councils. His colleague Rami explains further: "There is great uncertainty about the origin of agricultural products, which is why we procure some things, especially pesticides, from reliable sources like Syngenta and BASF," he says, in an undisguised advertising puff for these multinationals. Indeed, on its homepage, GOSM states: "In continuation of our strategic plan to offer all tools and materials for agricultural production at reduced, subsidised prices within the liberated parts of Syria, GOSM wishes to inform farmers that a number of vegetable varieties, fertilisers, and pesticides produced by Syngenta, DuPont, Bayer, Sumi Agro, and BASF are now available" (GOSM, 2017). The focus here is on high-performance seeds produced by big multinationals that need added chemicals and minerals to grow, even though development and farming organisations have repeatedly protested that such projects also involve smallholders with traditional expertise and that this expertise must be preserved.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Syrian farmers striving to organise themselves to practise organic agriculture under ideal food sovereignty conditions also find themselves violently clashing with state-like institutions supported by international developmental agencies with a single-minded approach to industrial agriculture. Syrian farmers see GIZ as having an active counter-revolutionary role to play and using a shock strategy to ensure that the neoliberal agricultural model remains. However, peasants in Syria are constantly working on sharing knowledge about the importance of agricultural independence, i.e. how to resist the GIZ and the global capitalist mode of food production.

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10 These protests have been vociferous, especially in the context of criticisms of the German Food Partnership (GFP). For more information, see: [www.keine-gentechnik.de/nachricht/31478](http://www.keine-gentechnik.de/nachricht/31478) (16.09.2019).



Farmers in the Idlib region wanted to set up peasant councils alongside the existing agricultural offices of their local governance structures, so-called local councils. The main purpose of these peasant councils is to give people a place to discuss how to bear the burden of food production for their communities. Similar councils had already been established in southern Syria, mainly in Quneitra, by a group of activists providing community centres and even financial community support for local farmers. This bottom-up democracy helped to bridge the gap between food producers and non-food producers. In Yarmouk, the effect was similar, with activists having to work with farmers from adjacent areas to learn how to grow crops to provide for their community and also to recognise that they were dependent on them, thus turning around rural areas' traditional reliance on the city, while also overcoming a divide between urban and rural living.

## LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The Syrian context exemplifies how the question of food sovereignty can arise from an uprising for freedom, dignity and social justice with the withdrawal of the state. Progressively, the notion of food sovereignty eclipses the neoliberal notion of food security. Producing food becomes the most central and crucial aspect for rural and urban communities under siege. It is under these violent conditions of sieges that seeds, along with land and water, become the most valuable material condition for a community's survival and dignity. Food sovereignty is also a mean to resist, oppose and propose an alternative to the hegemonic civilisational rationale of food production especially reinforced at the national level by the Assad's dictatorship.

Through the 15th Garden network, the Syrians involved in food production expanded their understanding of and solidarity with farmers, gardeners and seed-savers. This solidarity extended to neighbouring regions and influenced farmers in Lebanon to build their own 15th Garden inspired network for food sovereignty based on a bottom-up project on organic agriculture.

In an informal refugee camp for Syrians in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, a mother named Nesreen, rearranged her tent to make it look like an Arabic house with an arch and inner courtyard where they would plant seeds: corn, edible plants, flowers for pollinators, etc. Her 8-year-old son Amer was responsible for the flowers in the garden. They soon developed plans on how to start planting potatoes in the little space they had, but unfortunately, the whole camp burnt down after a fire started in one of the tents. Since people were only allowed to have temporary shelters made exclusively of wood and plastic, the blaze soon engulfed the entire camp of 30 tents. Nesreen's family lost everything except photos of their garden and tent, which they

showed to everyone as a reminder that in their precarious circumstances they had had some dignity and a sense of agency and freedom.

This was the launching pad for a 15th Garden-inspired network for Syrian families in refugee camps: people tired of the conditions there, the arbitrary nature of the help they received and of simply being recipients of international food aid. A network of Syrian activists provided the soil and seeds not available in the camp. Everything was planted directly into the ground. Not everything worked out, but the camp did turn green and made people feel that they had overcome their enforced temporary status.

*"When I left the tent in the morning and saw the tomatoes, it just made me feel happy,"*  
recalls Umm Abdu.

The 15th Garden approach refocused the public debate on dignity, as opposed to growth, development and security. The camp inmates did not manage to produce enough food to make them totally independent of food aid, but they had successfully totally transformed their camps. Sometimes, even relatives from other camps would come to visit and would want the same for their camps. Later, an official NGO learnt from this approach and helped people to plant and grow their own food in other camps. However, under Lebanese regulations, people were only allowed to plant in a temporary manner, in movable boxes, not in the ground itself.

The 15th Garden network and many other networks and groups it inspired are core by-products of the Syrian revolution. While a centralised state set up a non-sustainable form of intensive agriculture vulnerable to global and climate crises, people organised themselves to build an alternative farming practice that may have been less intensive, but left them far less vulnerable and was also far more sustainable, even though the networks in question were hampered by ongoing war and closed borders.

Food production is an area of struggle with the potential to impact all realms of life. People in the 15th Garden network connected the importance of food sovereignty to dignity, which is not exactly an obvious link, considering that their country is constantly framed and analysed in terms of a global and civil war. Another key point being made here is that even exiled communities stripped of their agency and solely regarded as 'problems' or 'victims' of what is commonly referred to as the refugee crisis can regain their dignity and agency through food production.

## ELEMENTS OF AND FOR FOSTERING INTERNATIONALISM IN DYNAMIC TRANSFORMATION

The Syrian network for food sovereignty was also deeply inspired by similar struggles in the region, particularly the plight of Iraqis. Study sessions were organised during the network's meetings and also in agricultural schools, to understand the lessons learnt from the Iraq war and occupation.

As one 15th Garden activist put it: "We need to understand that your liberation frees us all. It shouldn't matter solely to Syrians. We know, for example, that many of the weapons used against you [Iraqis] in your present struggle for freedom and future are weapons that are both potentially and in reality used against us all" (Z, 2014). Solidarity with farmers and people growing their own food is transnational, as this excerpt of a solidarity letter written by a German in Brandenburg, underlines:

*"I'm a simple farmer from the worldwide movement of farmers and peasants, La Via Campesina, which in translation means the path of the farmer. The struggle for food sovereignty begins at our doorstep: When I work the fields on my farm I'm actively engaged in the local movement against the grabbing of agricultural land in my region and the use of poisons and pesticides. This work is inseparable from my direct solidarity with Syrians, and is just as necessary. Policies of land grabbing, theft, destruction and displacement happen in a 'globalised' setting, and we must resist them."*

La Via Campesina has played an important role in raising class consciousness around the world, enabling transnational expressions of solidarity and refocusing the debate on questions of land, seeds and water, as opposed to mere – but necessary – 'band aid programmes' of organic farming or permaculture. The question of food sovereignty goes deeper, entailing a yearning for transformation to regain dignity. Such transnational solidarity shines some light on how the Global North is perpetuating misery, land grabbing and extraction in the Global South. For example, European citizens are starting to think about how industrial chemicals manufactured by companies in the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Austria and Germany and originally used in agriculture have come to be used as chemical weapons (Deutsch / Oweis, 2013).

The big *We are fed up* demonstration, held every year in Germany, shows that anyone fighting for food sovereignty in Germany cannot look away when food is used as a weapon of war, e.g. to force people to surrender in Syria. Consequently, the 15th Garden network has participated in the demonstration since 2014 to show solidarity with German farmers' struggle for survival in the light of an agrarian crisis in the country, due to factors like the dairy market situation and the country's recent huge summer crop failure.

Food production and an understanding of food sovereignty cannot be viewed in isolation, as evidenced by the example of interference by the German development agency GIZ. The experience of a democratisation of a previously largely industrialised form of agriculture within a dictatorial system yields lessons to be learned by any movements seeing agriculture as a gateway for transformation. The 15th Garden network has come together with farmers within La Via Campesina and participated in the International Day of Peasant Struggle on multiple occasions. Over the last couple of years, it has been activists with no knowledge of or connection with agriculture whatsoever who introduced this day to their communities to show gratitude to farmers and for the efforts they made for the community.

The network also enjoys support from other European food sovereignty networks, such as Longo Mai. Bearing in mind that the progressive Syrian movement born of the Syrian uprising of 2011 was largely left alone by the international Left, the 15th Garden network proves that direct practical solidarity is the best way of making progress in an international struggle. Each actor belonging to the solidarity network is also involved in its own struggle. Through the 15th Garden, they created a political commons, with “shared visions, shared problems, shared perceptions and shared efforts and also shared social and political struggles of resistance” (Bar-Tal, 2014). Within the 15th Garden network, participants generate knowledge for and learn from each other, so nobody is excluded for lacking the knowledge on how to access each others’ discourse.

The political Left first failed to articulate the harmful effects of agricultural policies deployed by authoritarian regimes like the one in Syria, which has sought to impose tight control on agriculture, then failed to voice its solidarity with the movements that emerged from the Syrian revolution, countering these very politics. If Leftist forces do not engage in such localised struggles, they will leave the field free to Liberal or Conservative forces, bringing with them hierarchies and support for clearly counter-revolutionary structures.

In 2014, one Syrian activist from a community garden put it like this: *“It might even be a step further than anything you will find either in the opposition- or regime-controlled areas. The moment your hands touch the ground and the community joins as a collective feeding itself from there in solidarity, this ground is liberated and belongs – just and only – to the community”* (Bar-Tal, 2014).

This is what we must recognise in Syria, and it is such insights that call on us to extend our solidarity. The need to show solidarity with the people fighting for dignity and justice in Syria became even more relevant in a world which, in the words of the

Syrian dissident and intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh, is becoming increasingly 'Syrianised'. In other words, today we are living in a world of impunity for war criminals and imperialist forces: "Not only was the Assadist state unpunished for its crime, in fact it was given a license to continue killing Syrians with its other weaponry. It was granted a full mandate to continue punishing the Syrians who had revolted against it, with an international guarantee for its impunity" (Saleh, 2016). More impunity comes from the US-led coalition which has yet to respond to their responsibility in the civilian carnage in ar-Raqqah (Amnesty International, 2017).

It all began with indifference to the cause of the Syrian uprising, but since 2011 we have found ourselves living in an increasingly Fascist world. By using the term 'Syrianisation', Saleh urges us also to think about what such impunity means for all other social movements seeking to resist exploitive capitalist structures and dictatorship, while at the same time rejecting any imperialist intervention. It is not about picking a fight and then closing an eye to one crime, while declaiming another. In the quest for dignity and truth there can be no impunity: all that matters is the reproduction of life.

By standing together in solidarity and shoulder to shoulder with the people of Syria, we can fight the Syrianisation of our world.

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# **AN EMERGING DEMOCRACY FROM THE BOTTOM UP: THE CASE OF BHUJ, INDIA**

By Aseem Mishra and Sandeep Virmani

Against the backdrop of the rapid process of urbanisation going on around the globe, India has the world's second largest population of urban dwellers, with 377.16 million people living in 7,933 cities (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India 2011). By 2030, this could grow to a staggering 590 million (MGI 2010). These cities are also home to the largest number of poor people<sup>1</sup>. Major question marks hang over India's ability to provide basic utilities, including services, security, housing and infrastructure (especially to the poor). Almost 38 million homes will need to be provided to the poor by 2030 (MGI 2010); 96% of these are from Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) and Lower Income Groups (LIG) (MHUPA 2016), meaning that many poor have no other choice but to squat on available public land that is lying vacant. There is a water supply for only 2.9 hours a day (Vaidhya n.d.); with many resorting to buying water. Not only this, but the efficiency of this supply is extremely low, with water losses ranging from 40% to 60%. Between almost 30% and 50% of urban households are not connected to a sewer system and only 20% of urban sewage is treated (Vaidhya n.d.), leading to severe pollution of India's rivers and groundwater table. Towns and cities generate around 62 million tonnes (MT) of municipal solid waste per annum. Only 43 MT of the waste is collected with 12 MT being treated and 31 MT dumped in landfill sites (Lahiry 2018), creating problems for public health and the environment.

Recent reports indicate that there are 1,083 Urban Family Welfare Centres (UFWCs)<sup>2</sup> and 871 Health Posts (HPs)<sup>3</sup> catering for the needs of 377 million people living in the country's urban areas (Gupta/Guin 2015). This boils down to one UFWC/HP per 192,992 members of the urban population, compared with the norm of one centre for every 50,000 persons, indicating a severe accessibility issue (ibid.). Primary schools providing education to poor children face multiple issues such as low teacher ratios, poor infrastructure and low-quality education. While the poor continue to converge on cities to find work, almost all their livelihoods suffer from a lack of infrastructure

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1 The income limit for households qualifying as a beneficiary under the BPL (Below Poverty Line) benchmark has been pegged at about INR 27,000 per annum. Internationally, an income of less than USD 1.90 per day per head of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) is defined as extreme poverty. Based on this definition, about 21.2% of Indians are extremely poor.

2 Introduced in the early 1950s, these offer family welfare services in urban areas and are meant to provide supplies of contraceptives. There are three types of UFWC, with different staffing patterns, depending on the population covered by the relevant centre.

3 These were introduced in 1983 with a view to provide service delivery outreach, primary healthcare, family welfare and maternal and child health (MCH) services in urban areas. There are four types of HP, but with a lower population base than UFWCs.

facilities or legitimacy, as illustrated by the emergence of hawking zones<sup>4</sup> and labour colonies<sup>5</sup>. Their wage rights are flouted with impunity and only marginally enforced. Various studies show that the poor end up paying more than other sections of society for basic services like water, sanitation and security, having to rely on private companies for their provision.



Panoramic View of Bhuj City from Bhujio Hil

Safety for women in urban areas has deteriorated dramatically in recent years. National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) data indicate an 83% increase in crimes against women from 2007 to 2016 (Newslick 2017), and women feel a sense of insecurity in crowded places because of the fear of being inappropriately touched, ‘paved’, stalked or stared at (Mahadevia/Lathia/Banerjee 2016).

Over the past few decades, our cities have witnessed an increase in the frequency and intensity of floods, heatwaves, droughts and so on as a result of climate change. In fact, India is one of the most vulnerable and risk-prone countries in the world due

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4 Hawking (or vending) refers to the act of selling goods for living. Under Article 19(1) (g) of the Constitution of India, every citizen has a right to carry on any lawful trade or business. As hawking zones are considered a major public nuisance and a source of traffic problems, it is becoming increasingly important for local authorities to pinpoint dedicated hawking zones in cities. Under the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act of 2014, local authorities are entitled to designate and earmark street vending zones in their cities/towns.

5 The promotion of the secondary and tertiary sectors has resulted in a huge population influx into urban centres. Over 92% of India’s working population work in the informal economy, making their livelihoods from activities such as street vending and construction. As very few of them receive any housing or basic infrastructure services, the majority of them end up living in precarious conditions in vulnerable locations.

to its high population growth and density, poverty and inadequate infrastructure. The urban residents most vulnerable to climate change are poor slum and squatter-settlement dwellers and those facing the multiple insecurities cities have spawned owing to poor governance, the lack of serious investment in the 'commons' and a strong nexus between the political class, real estate developers and public agencies (Revi 2008).

Cities are administered by Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). There are three categories of these: municipal corporations, municipalities and notified area committees, or city councils. This categorisation is based on population that varies from one state to another depending on the respective state's municipal legislation. The jurisdiction of an ULB area is divided into territorial constituencies known as wards. Each ward has one or more elected members known as councillor(s) or corporator(s). The president or mayor of the municipal area is either directly elected by the citizens or chosen from among the elected councillors of the ULBs.

With an electorate whose size outstrips that of any other country on earth, India is the world's largest democracy. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments Acts (CAAs) passed by Parliament in 1992 introduced local self-governance to rural and urban India in a bid to bring about greater decentralisation and increase the involvement of the community in planning and implementing schemes, thereby enhancing accountability. ULBs were entrusted with 18 key functions including urban planning, planning for social and economic development and poverty alleviation. While a lot has been achieved in India's rural areas, its towns and cities are lagging a long way behind.

The single most important reason for the poor condition of Indian cities is the failure of municipal governance (Ravindran 2018). The municipal bureaucracy possesses more powers than elected representatives of the ULBs. Although the remit of the Municipal Commissioner/Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is to serve the mayor/president and the councillors, most executive powers remain with the Municipal Commissioner, making this individual unaccountable to the city and relegating the mayor/president to a largely ceremonial role. Having limited financial resources, ULBs depend heavily on grants from the state and central governments. Often ULBs are unable to generate adequate revenue income (predominantly raised by levying various types of taxes) to pay their staff. Urban planning takes place substantially at state level with municipalities playing only a limited or negligible role. Their dependency on tied grants from the state government deprives them and citizens with powers to plan their future. Therefore, very few cities have formed ward committees; with even fewer of them having devolved powers to these committees. Elected councillors have virtually no control over funds. Furthermore, there is little financial transparency, although urban

communities pay higher taxes than their rural counterparts. Land systems are poorly managed, with mismanagement of public land in particular being rife. Cities struggle to work out any planning arrangements for this. Most cities follow outdated zoning systems, with a few states adopting Town Planning Scheme (TPS)<sup>6</sup> mechanism or Transit-Oriented Development (TOD)<sup>7</sup>.

This paper explores the efforts being made in Bhuj, a medium-sized city in India where five Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) along with issue-based collectives and citizens are trying to secure decentralisation, equity and an environment conducive for development. What is unique here is the CSOs' ability to collaborate on multifarious issues and problems affecting the public, particularly the poor and marginalised. Having expertise in various social and technical domains, these organisations have drawn on each other's strengths and experiences to develop a common agenda for Bhuj. This cooperation has been honed by a series of previous collaborative rehabilitation programmes following disasters in the region, the most recent being the earthquake in 2001 that almost destroyed the city.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first of these focuses on the city's background, reasons motivating CSOs to work together and transformative actions undertaken to achieve slum redevelopment and decentralised governance and groundwater management. The second part focuses on interventions relating to waste management and to support marginalised sections of society such as women in slums, migrant labour workers and cattle rearers.

## **AN EMERGING DEMOCRACY FROM THE BOTTOM UP**

### **THE CITY OF BHUJ**

Bhuj is a historic city, the capital of a kingdom of the Jadeja Rajputs until 1948, and now the administrative centre of an arid district, Kutch, in the state of Gujarat bordering Pakistan. A population of about 200,000 is living under the jurisdiction of the Bhuj Area Development Authority (BHADA) region, which is spread over an area

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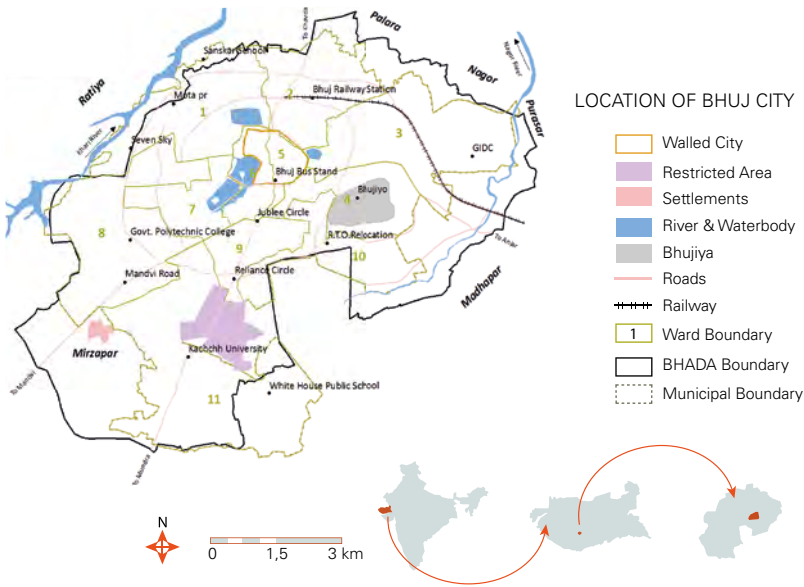
6 The TPS is a land pooling and readjustment mechanism that allows the city to appropriate land from private landowners for public purposes, such as roads, open spaces, low-income housing, underlying utility infrastructure and other health, education and community services (Mahadevia/Pai/Mahendra 2018).

7 TOD integrates land use and transport planning and aims to develop planned sustainable urban growth centres, featuring manageable and liveable municipalities with a high density of mixed land use. Citizens can access open green and public spaces and at the same time transit facilities are efficiently utilised (MoHUA 2017).



of 56 square kilometres and includes the municipal limits of Bhuj and three adjoining villages. For administrative purposes, Bhuj Municipality is divided into 11 wards. Major investments were undertaken in the city by the state and national governments as well as national and international agencies after the 2001 earthquake that destroyed large parts of the old city and killed over 4,000 people.

It was only after the establishment of BHADA in 2001 that the city came under formal planning norms. BHADA prepared the Bhuj Development Plan 2025 for planned development of the city, which has become cosmopolitan with large-scale industrial investment in the Kutch region accompanied by an influx of migrant labour. About 31% of its population live in 77 slum settlements, largely found in the northern part of the city. In fact, 90% of these settlements are in four northern wards where the majority of the minority and *dalit*<sup>8</sup> communities live.



Location of the city of Bhuj and the administrative boundaries of Bhuj Municipality and BHADA  
Source: Arid Communities and Technologies 2017

8 Dalits feature at the bottom of the Indian social hierarchy (also referred as the ‘caste system’).

Following the 2001 earthquake, the rehabilitation and reconstruction work drew the attention of several CSOs based in Bhuj but working in rural areas. Some of their staff realised that they as citizens had little control over decision-making in the city. Gradually, members of these CSOs started to demand improvements to deficient services and accountability for this. They quickly realised that a society's vital ability at both neighbourhood and city levels to be able to conduct democratic dialogue as a building block for development was rapidly being eroded. The resulting centralised control left the neighbourhoods with no role in decision-making apart from organising festival celebrations. Even the collection of the waste in front of their homes required action to be taken by officials working for the municipality. This encouraged a culture of cronyism or 'access to power' being cultivated when it came to accessing and exercising fundamental rights. The second reason for the fragmentation of social capital was a lack of control over land pricing. A handful of developers controlled prices (in spite of prevailing *jantri*<sup>9</sup> rates), dividing the city along class lines, with neighbours not even engaging with one another. This was at odds with the traditional system where communities lived along caste lines (both rich and poor) and had a lot of power to deal with their own affairs. The traditional system had its own drawbacks which was not replaced by constitutional democratic systems but by market forces.

Even at municipal level, elected councillors had little or negligible control over the allocation of finances, as this was based on funds distributed by the national and state governments for predetermined activities. Therefore, there continues to be no city planning, resulting in no vision for the city or dialogue in the municipal assembly. This contrasts with slum-dwelling communities whose interdependence meant that they had more trust in each other to collectively make arrangements for basic services and economic development. This interdependence has fostered social capital, creating a far richer and more humane society, albeit one suffering from financial deprivation and often low self-esteem.

The CSOs were keen to re-establish development discourse in the city with the potential of building social capital – where human relations mattered, compassionate values were not compromised for material progress and communities had resources to develop and manage their own basic services and citizens could shape the constitutional priorities of justice, liberty, equity and fraternity.

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9 The minimum market price of a plot of land/building in a particular area, as stipulated by the government. Jantri rates are used by the government to decide on the amount of stamp duty to be collected in any sales deed for such a plot of land/building.



## THE HOMES IN THE CITY (HIC) PROGRAMME

Five CSOs that had shown their effectiveness in governance, women's empowerment, water management, housing and infrastructure and environmental action in rural areas came together to rebuild societies by fostering strong democratic values of decentralisation, environmentalism and to learn from caring for the vulnerable and deprived in the city. While Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) and SETU Abhiyan specialised in mobilising communities, Sahjeevan, Hunnarshala Foundation and Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT) brought with them technical competencies.

The initial years were spent gaining an understanding of the city's dynamics, organising people based on their access to basic services, schemes and benefits and developing small-scale pilot initiatives relating to water, housing and savings, for example, to demonstrate a different reality. The programme set itself the following objectives:

- > to push the government for democratic decentralisation of governance structures, thereby allowing citizens to build communities and to have better control over development – in other words, to take charge of their services, assets, facilities and future;
- > to ensure environmentally and ecologically friendly interventions;
- > to work towards establishing equity and therefore putting the appropriate conditions in place to facilitate disadvantaged and marginalised groups (including migrants, women, the socially stigmatised and even flora and fauna) in determining emancipatory actions for themselves.

In 2008, a formal programme called Homes in the City (HIC) was initiated in partnership with the German Non-governmental Organisation (NGO) MISEREOR, which provided financial support for the programme to achieve its objectives. Over the years, this programme has touched the lives of many marginalised and poor communities, including rag-pickers, migrants, women, children, adolescent girls, cattle owners, vendors, sex workers and labourers, to name but a few.

The programme has supported people's collectives, including Jalsrot Sneh Samwardhan Samiti (JSSS), with local water conservation. JSSS trains local youngsters to be 'barefoot' hydro-geologists and engineers to help ward committees and societies plan their water resources. These young people aid neighbourhoods in working out the subterranean geology and finding a way to replenish the aquifer with rainwater to meet domestic water needs.

Another group benefiting from the HIC programme is Sakhi Sangini, a registered association of over 3,000 women living in slums that focuses on establishing and

consolidating self-help groups (SHGs) in the city's slum settlements. The SHGs secured gender parity in all HIC programme activities. They also act as pressure groups demanding access to the government's public distribution system (subsidised food shops), *aanganwadis*<sup>10</sup> and primary schools for the poor. Another organisation, *Bhuj Saher Pashu Ucherak Maldhari Sangathan* (Bhuj City Cattle Rearers' Association), is a registered association of 125 cattle rearers living in the slums. Their objective is to supply the city with milk and dairy products, ensuring that their legitimacy is recognised and safeguarding services that are essential for their livelihood.

Meanwhile, the Labour Union and Street Vendors' Federation is striving to improve its representation and make its voice heard with a view to enhancing its bargaining power so that its members can exercise their rights and access government services.

Himayati Juth focuses on environmental education and awareness-related activities. Over the years, it has organised campaigns pressing for a ban on the use of plastic and promoting the separation of waste and keeping public spaces clean. They are also helping neighbourhoods preserve and plant indigenous or significant species of flora.

In conjunction with the municipality, the HIC programme is working towards decentralisation by supporting two types of legal entity:

- > ward committees, which have been formed in five of the eleven wards in the city, with a view to devolving the municipality's powers and ensuring ward-level planning and implementation;
- > Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), which have been established in two slums to manage their neighbourhoods and provide a social purpose. As the lowest rung of local governance, RWAs need to maintain a formal relationship with the ward committees and the municipality.

Wards are divided into areas. Each area covers between 300 and 400 households and elects an area committee consisting of six or seven members. Two of these committee members (one man and one woman) are selected to represent the area in the ward committee. In this way, a ward committee made up of between 10 and 15 members is formed and chaired by the elected councillor of the respective ward. Ward committee meetings are held at least once a month.

The HIC programme provides fellowships for change-makers to develop an idea and demonstrate its effectiveness through a pilot project in the city. It then supports

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10 An *aanganwadi* centre essentially provides basic healthcare services, including contraceptive advice, and offers nutrition-related and educational and pre-school activities.

organisations as they push for such initiatives to be scaled up in consultation with the authorities. Grants received from MISEREOR and other donors including the American Jewish World Service and the Curry Stone Foundation provide financial support for the fellowships. The programme, including the approval of fellowships, is run by a steering committee consisting of two eminent members of the community, two CSO leaders and two members of community-based organisations (CBOs).

## WATER CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT

After the 2001 earthquake, a campaign was organised by CSOs to collect money for repairing the breached embankments of Hamirsar Lake. The city was on its knees, with almost all its citizens either having fled or living in tents in makeshift camps. In spite of scepticism that people would be unwilling to donate in such circumstances, an impressive sum of INR 1.7 million (around USD 23,500) was collected, with even the poor contributing. The breach was repaired just in time ahead of the monsoons, and when the rain gods came that night, the historic lake swelled, overflowing the weir. The next morning, the city residents gathered around the lake, overwhelmed and emotional, and celebrated the first piece of successful post-earthquake reconstruction.

For 500 years, this lake in the very hub of the city had always held a special place in the hearts of Bhuj's population, providing water security in abundance in an arid landscape. While the emotional connection remained, the focus for those in charge of the city gradually shifted from local water management to advocating use of water from the Narmada River a thousand kilometres away. Bhuj's own deep groundwater bore wells outside the city became depleted over the years, erasing with it the memory of how in the past Hamirsar Lake and its catchment areas had sustained Bhuj.

Popular legend has it that once there was a king who was upset and embarrassed that his people were migrating to a neighbouring kingdom in search of water in times of drought. To address this, he asked his officials to find a solution. One of them reported that a shepherd called Hamir with over 2,000 sheep and goats had not made this journey. However, he would only reveal the secret of how he kept his animals fed and watered if the king came to visit him. The official sought the king's permission to arrest the grazier and bring him to the king. However, the king knew Hamir was right: the thirsty must go to the well. So he went to see Hamir, who showed him a spring that released its precious waters from the hills and flowed downstream into a small pond three kilometres away. Hearing this, the king moved his kingdom to the location of the pond and developed it into a grand lake, naming it

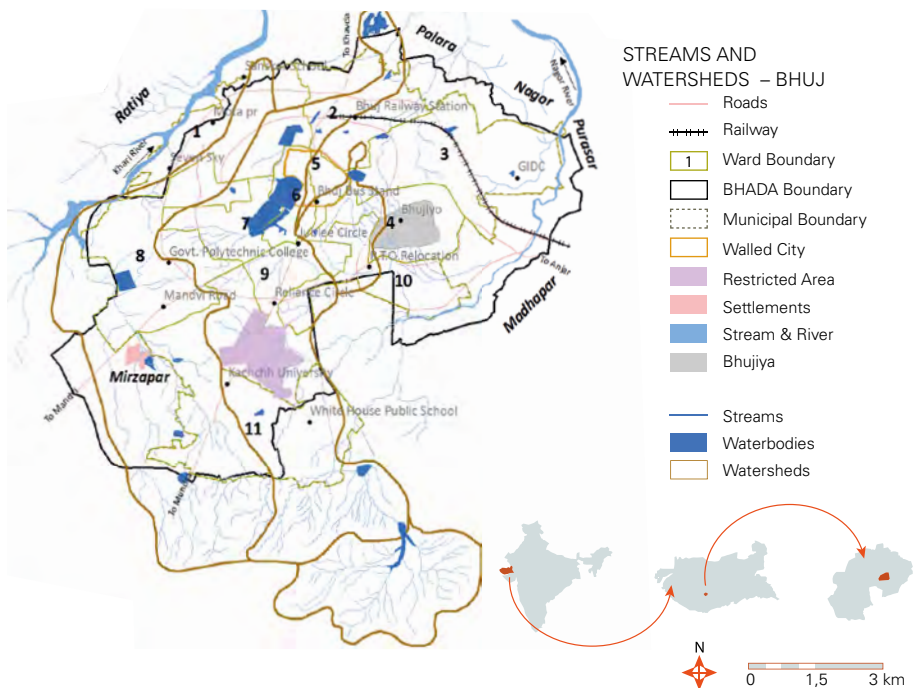
the “Hamirsar Lake”. He founded a temple at the source of the spring and dedicated it to the water goddess Tapkadevi.

A renowned geo-hydrologist and the Director of Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT), Dr Yogesh Jadeja, has helped many villages to revive their traditional water management systems by working with water experts in these villages. He has done this without the benefit of any surviving records in the city or royal archives indicating how the Hamirsar lake system had sustained the capital of the erstwhile kingdom. The year-long study by his team investigating the system revealed some fascinating insights into how the complex water system had been engineered based on the hydrogeology and hydrology of the region. Spread over an area of 40 km<sup>2</sup>, three rivulets of the Khari River, on whose banks the city stood, were connected with tunnels and diversions to enter the three interconnected manmade lakes of Hamirsar, Chatedi and Dhobi Talav. Buffer dams in the hills released water in the summer, when these three lakes dried out. While the lakes linked to the buffer dams covered shale formations that did not allow water to percolate away, these lakes around which the city was built had beneath them sandstone which served as the aquifer for the city. This confined sandstone aquifer, which spread over an area of around 100 km<sup>2</sup> and was about 18 to 90 metres deep, was punctuated with open wells in each neighbourhood to keep communities alive and provide sustenance.

Over the years, more than 43 ponds were created along the sandstone aquifer to supply water for the city, with diversion gates being constructed to avert the risk of flooding in case of very high levels of rainfall. Step wells and *saraïs* (inns where travellers can stop to refresh themselves and spend the night) and temples and *dargahs* (mosques) were established around the main water sources. However, with the promise of deep bore-well technology and the Narmada project<sup>11</sup>, the Hamirsar lake system fell into disrepair, the expanding city filled up many of its ponds to make way for real estate development and the water table receded into the hidden depths of the earth.

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11 The Narmada Valley Project (NVP) envisages 30 major, 136 medium and 3,000 minor dams on the Narmada River. NVP's major components are the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in Gujarat and the Narmada Sagar Project (NSP) in Madhya Pradesh. In Gujarat, the Sardar Sarovar Dam is a gravity dam on the Narmada River near Navagam. This project is idolised as 'the lifeline of Gujarat', benefiting both rural and urban areas in that state.



Watersheds of the city of Bhuj

Source: Arid Communities and Technologies 2015

Today, the city is suffering from a critical water shortage problem – the municipal water distribution system along with the water supply from the remaining bore wells and the Narmada barely cover 60% of the water demand of the city. Farmers in the city’s hinterland have filed lawsuits against the local authorities, keeping them from drilling any new bore wells. Almost 40% of the poor living in slums make individual arrangements by purchasing water from private tanker vendors at exorbitant prices. The rest of the city either uses saline water from its aquifer for domestic purposes and buys Reverse Osmosis (RO) plant water or has installed RO machinery for drinking-water purposes. Increased precipitation intensities and encroachments on the rivulets have meant that flooding has become common during monsoons.

After the 2001 earthquake, huge investments were made in haste to provide the city with a sewerage system. However, faulty design and poor implementation meant that this system often did not work, leading to the sewage overflowing in many parts of the city every monsoon. Furthermore, in the absence of a sewage treatment system (STP) in the city, the raw sewage is used by farmers for agricultural purposes to cater for the demand for food in the city.

ACT conducted a detailed water balance evaluation of the Hamirsar lake system, including a water budgeting exercise, which revealed that if reinstated, the system would be capable of providing seven times more water (74 million cubic metres (mcm)) than the city's annual requirements (10.25 mcm). Within six or seven years, it would be possible to revive the water table and reduce salinity to permissible limits for domestic and drinking-water purposes. This means that theoretically at least Bhuj could become self-sufficient in terms of its water needs in spite of its burgeoning population.

Over the years, ACT has monitored around 81 bore wells in the BHADA region. Revival of the aquifer could potentially ensure that 32% of the city's neighbourhoods, including the slums, had their own wells and household distribution system, thereby improving citizens' control over this precious resource. The remaining areas could have their water source within a couple of kilometres of their neighbourhoods. Therefore, the city authorities needed to focus attention on reviving and augmenting the Hamirsar system, in this way reducing pressure on 'external' water sources, i.e. the Narmada and deep bore wells. Sahjeevan and ACT conducted a detailed study of the costs involved in the two systems. It emerged that recurring expenditure on the Hamirsar system would not only be cheaper after the initial capital expenditure, but also no further subsidies would be required from the state government. The HIC programme proposed that the taxes on water from external sources could be priced at a higher rate than that drawn from wells in the neighbourhoods. This would incentivise the use of the city's own resources and at the same time provide water security vis-à-vis external sources.

ACT presented these findings across the city. An interested group of citizens was prompted to form JSSS to spread awareness, act as a watchdog for any encroachments on the Hamirsar system and advocate government investment.

Over the years, JSSS has organised the following activities:

- > *Jal Yatra* (a water pilgrimage), involving students and citizens being taken on a half-day tour taking in the Tapkeshwari hill spring from where waters flow downstream to the Hamirsar Lake: this has become very popular with the schools in the city, and formal seminars and workshops have been organised with the relevant government departments;
- > a voluntary initiative to work on a public cause (*shramdan*) aiming to desilt and plant trees around the Hamirsar Lake and ponds in the city, with financial donations from the business community being encouraged: extensive resources, amounting to about INR 12.5 million, have been pumped into this project, meaning that some 17 water bodies and three step wells have been brought back into use over the years;
- > desilting of four ponds that have been illegally encroached on and preventing developers from moving in on two other ponds;
- > a systematic survey identifying all water bodies (including ponds and lakes): with the help of Hunnarshala Foundation, 43 water bodies were covered by the Bhuj Development Plan 2025, thereby bringing them under legal protection;
- > with the assistance of Hunnarshala Foundation, the development of a plan to revitalise one of the largest historical lakes, Desalsar, which was the source of drinking water for over 1,400 families living in the slums but which had over time become a sewage dump: a plan has been submitted by the municipality to the state government for funding;
- > a partnership between members of JSSS and the HIC programme to stop the municipality facilitating illegal recreational activities on the Hamirsar Lake by launching court proceedings;
- > following encroachments on the rivulets, city floods in 2011, resulting in the evacuation of 7,000 households from slums as well as affluent neighbourhoods: this was followed by a detailed flood mitigation plan prepared by ACT that was partially implemented.

Over the years, funding has been secured from both the public authorities and the business community to the tune of INR 72 million (approximately USD 1 million) to revitalise several parts of the Hamirsar system, including connecting the three rivulets to tunnels and diversion channels. The buffer lakes, Dhunaraja, Hamdrai and Mochirai Rakhal, have been renovated and made usable again.

ACT and Hunnarshala Foundation have developed and demonstrated three technologies which if implemented across the various neighbourhoods would not only provide decentralised control to the communities but also dramatically reduce costs and meet the city's water requirements. These were deployed in collaboration with several stakeholders in the city and are discussed below:

### GROUNDWATER RECHARGE BORE WELLS:

This is a technique for making a graded filter of sand, stones and rocks in a neighbourhood's park or on its common plot land, diverting rainwater. It helps reduce floods and improve the quality of groundwater in terms of total dissolved salts (TDS). This water could be pumped and supplied to the neighbourhood's homes.

In 2011, Jubilee Colony<sup>12</sup>, a neighbourhood prone to regular flooding, was the first to implement this technology. This not only stopped flooding there but also improved the water quality from the aquifer. The neighbourhood contributed around 20% of the total project cost (approximately INR 0.4 million).

After sharing this experience with the municipality, ACT was asked to develop guidelines for contracting such recharge bore wells under the national government's programme called Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT)<sup>13</sup>. The government has approved 13 recharge bore wells for the city, of which four have been built.

### RAIN ROOF WATER HARVESTING (RRWH):

This technique uses the roofs of buildings to collect rainwater in underground water tanks to serve the occupants' drinking-water needs. The excess water is taken off to small recharge pits to replenish the underground sandstone aquifer.

Almost none of the 36 government-run schools in Bhuj with their 10,000 or so pupils have a reliable piped drinking water supply and are largely dependent on municipal water tankers. Some 11 schools currently have access to drinking water from these RRWH systems, meaning that more than 2,000 children can now rely on quality drinking water. Of the total cost of constructing these systems, 25–30% was contributed by a range of stakeholders, such as the municipality, the school authorities, the pupils' families and even residents living near the schools. The brackish groundwater has become drinkable within a few years. Many pupils living in the slums fill their water bottles from their school's supply at the end of the day to take fresh water back home, given these settlements' lack of access to a regular water supply.

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12 The term 'colony' denotes an area surrounded by fences or walls enclosing a number of houses.

13 Launched in June 2015, the focus of this programme is on establishing infrastructure that is able to ensure adequate sewage networks and water supply for urban transformation.



An RRWH system having a capacity of 30,000 litres has been built in the Professors' Colony of Shri R. R. Lalan College. As a result, this college campus is now self-reliant in terms of its future water requirements. This success is inspiring other institutions to also use this water sovereignty model.



A groundwater recharge pit at Jubilee Colony (top)  
and an installed RRWH system in a government-run primary school at Shivnagar (bottom)

### DECENTRALISED WASTEWATER TREATMENT SYSTEM (DEWATS):

This is an efficient wastewater treatment solution that can be installed at household or neighbourhood level. Not only does it not take up much space but it does not require much energy, is reasonably priced and can be easily maintained by a local gardener.



Dewats at Bhanushali Nagar in Bhuj

While the centralised technologies for the Narmada water and sewerage system are subsidised, this is not the case for the decentralised technologies discussed above, which end up costing more for management and maintenance as a result. Therefore, if these technologies are to be scaled up, the municipality needs to incentivise them by paying the capital costs to the settlements along with providing tax waivers on water supply and sewerage services.

Several slum pockets facing acute water shortages have approached the HIC programme. As SETU Abhiyan has been setting up ward committees and their offices, one of the first requests was to resolve these neighbourhoods' water problems. ACT has trained a group of *Bhujal Jankars* ('barefoot' hydro-geologists), young people who have dropped out of school and who provide technical services to deal with these problems with the support of ACT. They also regularly monitor bore wells in the city and facilitate the implementation of projects. ACT working with the *Bhujal Jankars* has prepared comprehensive water plans for two ward committees, who are now putting pressure on the municipality to make resources available for these plans. Arghyam, a Bangalore-based philanthropic organisation, has generously contributed to the development of many of these systems. As of now, the recharge bore

wells have been incorporated into the AMRUT programme, and the government has provided technical approval for the rollout of DEWATS using public funds.

Dayaram Parmar is an enthusiastic young man living in the city's slums who has been receiving funding from HIC to resolve the water problems there. Each year, he identifies two or three settlements and finds solutions to their problems by hiring *Bhujal Jankars* as well as financial support for implementing these solutions. Over the years, the water problems facing more than 3,500 people living in six slum settlements have been resolved. All the proposed solutions involve the same system of identifying a local aquifer, recharging it and developing a stand post with a pump where the neighbourhood can come to replenish its water supply. He considers the best reward for his work the blessings he receives from the women in these settlements. Women play a key role in ensuring that access to the water supply is a top priority among the pressing issues and help establish a consensus in the neighbourhood surrounding the suggested solutions. They shoulder a lot of the responsibility when it comes to decision-making and managing the water systems.

The supply of water has always been one of the main issues featuring in political parties' demands and pledges at election time. It has exercised the state's politicians for over half a century and has resulted in the Narmada Valley Project (NVP) becoming the symbol of development and prosperity for the state. The current political masters in this region have also erected the world's tallest statue of Sardar Patel, one of Gujarat's founding political leaders, at the Sardar Sarovar Dam, which provides this state with water. For Kutch politicians, who have always complained about and suffered from a sense of marginalisation from mainstream Gujarat, the ability to assert and secure their rights to the waters of the Narmada also provided succour to their beleaguered identity. To be told after all these years that the solution for water security lay literally beneath their feet, in the aquifer of the city of Bhuj meant reorganising the very foundations of political discourse that had become established over the decades. After spending billions on the NVP, changing the narrative would be an embarrassment.

Similarly, for cities' political elites, to have their own sewage and drainage system is also an assertion of status amid competition for resources. The fact that sewage needs to be treated to prevent river pollution and contamination of agricultural produce is rarely considered. Therefore, how recycling sewage water could reduce demand is a secondary question to be dealt with after acquiring the water itself. However, the quantities involved are still insufficient even after the water of the Narmada waters became available to the city over the past decade. The general realisation that there

is no infinite seam of groundwater, is making farmers assert their rights to this scarce resource around cities, preventing the municipality from digging more bore wells on their land to supply water to the city of Bhuj.

With supply of centralised water being controlled by elites, the poor are the last to receive water. Councillors from the four poorest wards in the city have begun to realise that having control over the source of water is the only way they can quench their residents' thirst. As decentralisation also brings with it responsibility for management and maintenance, the rich, who can access water from the Narmada or afford RO systems, are less inclined to opt for decentralisation.

Moreover, planning projects is a centralised process with vendors being decided on at state level. These vendors are largely centralised companies whose business models are developed around a small set of knowledge applications that can be replicated across various cities. Given the geology of Bhuj, developing solutions does not fall within their field of competence. This means that CSOs in Bhuj, ACT and Hunnarshala Foundation, find it difficult to be knowledge providers for the city, even if their services have been recommended to the state government. The city has developed a stormwater drainage plan prepared by a national consulting firm which did not have adequate knowledge of the historical water systems and their contemporary relevance. Therefore, after the floods, ACT's plans to channelise stormwater and harvest and recharge the groundwater to mitigate floods and augment water capacities were not implemented.

These factors have curbed any scaling up of the discussed projects as well as the revival of the old water system.

## **PARTICIPATORY SLUM REHABILITATION**

Almost 31% of the city's population (about 14,000 families) live in slum settlements, inhabiting around 5.8% of its surface area. The communities that served Bhuj's erstwhile rulers lived in settlements outside the city fortifications. These communities provided goods and services such as agricultural produce, dairy products, firewood and labour for the city. In recent times, these settlements have been considered illegitimate and classified as slums. As the city grew, more service-based communities emerged and made land their own, with the most recent influx of labour following industrialisation in 2001.

Much of the city centre was destroyed in the 2001 earthquake, making many poor people living in rented properties homeless. CSOs, in particular Hunnarshala Foundation, negotiated the allocation of land and services by the state and charitable donations from other sources to rebuild their houses. The rehabilitation policy adopted building regulations from Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat, instead of designing them in the local context of Bhuj. These regulations did not allow cluster housing or courtyards, which were prevalent in the old city. The citizens were disappointed with the terraced housing design they were forced to apply. Hunnarshala Foundation made use of the 'group housing' category in the regulations to redesign the courtyard-based cluster housing for the Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) settlement. Some of the many new features incorporated into the layout plan for this settlement are set out below:

- > Separation of vehicles and pedestrians: This enabled social activities like sports, religious buildings, street vending, home-based production and buildings for education to take hold in the pedestrian green belt, with little need to cross roads. The relevant services were separated from the neighbourhood's roads by using the traditional concept of vichani (service lanes).
- > A sewage recycling plant was built around a traditional pond to recycle sewage from 120 homes.
- > Using stabilised rammed earth technology, 450 homes were built with recycled waste from two ceramic factories in the area.
- > A radical concept for enhancing Bhuj's food sovereignty by providing a primary production zone (including agriculture, animal husbandry and fisheries) in each sector, serving about 4,000–5,000 families. At present, food is produced illicitly or transported to the city from villages. However, this concept has yet to see the light of day.

The Sakhi Sangini federation of women living in slums was most concerned about the lack of basic housing, especially for the poor, single women and people with disabilities. Hunnarshala Foundation organised a fund of INR 4.5 million (approximately USD 62,800) for the Sakhi Sangini federation to develop housing with a low-cost design. They trained a group of women to identify families, monitor housing construction activities and provide subsidies through their SHGs. These houses were largely made of recycled material, including walls made of recycled blocks from the earthquake debris or mud and roofs made of recycled wood. In this way, around 120 homes were built. Each house was subject to a loan varying from INR 20,000 to INR 50,000.

In 2009, the national government launched Rajiv Awas Yojana (RAY), a progressive housing programme, involving a huge financial outlay. For the first time, the government thus recognised access to housing and basic services to the poor as a priority, along with livelihood infrastructure. This was developed by a group of individuals from civil society who were invited to the National Advisory Council (NAC) to draft and design this programme. In a shift from the 'one-size-fits-all' approach which largely promoted replication of the standard design of public housing across the country, RAY encouraged various development options (tailored to the local context and community needs), innovativeness and community participation in the design and planning of housing.

It enabled the formation of RWAs and provided maintenance funds to these associations. However, very few projects were actually implemented across the country, and even fewer made use of the innovative features of the programme. This is because cities are unwilling to allocate land to the poor for in-situ redevelopment, and contractors are usually unwilling to build for this section of society due to the unprofitability of such projects for them. I

In 2013, Hunnarshala Foundation, KMVS and Sakhi Sangini developed a housing project with three of their strongest women SHGs involving innovative design and implementation features for 314 houses for slum dwellers. The government's role was restricted to releasing payments to the beneficiaries (i.e. the owners of these houses) in instalments as they were constructed. Hunnarshala Foundation was given technical and coordination responsibilities for this project, while KMVS facilitated social mobilisation and ACT designed water recharge facilities.

Recently, the national government marked the project out for showcasing one of the 15 best practices for home planning and design for India's urban poor (MHUPA n.d.).





Housing before completion at Ramdev Nagar (top)  
and a beneficiary watering plants in her new house (bottom)

Women from the slums took the lead in the implementation of this project. The planning features chosen were typically as in any post-earthquake resettlement. Some of the key aspects are listed below:

- > Each individual family received 65 m<sup>2</sup> of land to build on, with the potential to build units incrementally (vertically), adding units as their families expanded. Extended families could share the courtyard, communal services and even make their *falia* (cluster) secure to create a sense of community.
- > Contributions amounting to 12% of the total project costs came from the beneficiaries. Each house was customised by Hunnarshala Foundation's 'barefoot' architects. Almost all the families built more than the minimum prescribed carpet area of between 21 and 27 m<sup>2</sup>.
- > Water management technologies included recharging the groundwater, establishing a community RO plant with a card-based water dispenser system and a wastewater treatment system recycling the treated water for flushing toilets and for developing the pedestrianised green belt. This amounted to baseline demand savings for water of around 30–40% and reduced sewage, while the water supply remained in the hands of the community. The Curry Stone Foundation generously supplemented the government subsidy, allowing this project to come to fruition.
- > Several key construction technologies were showcased in a few individual houses, dramatically reducing carbon footprints and costs. These included constructing roofs with stabilised mud blocks as cloister domes which could be flattened to add an extra floor later, and using sloping insulated roofs to cut down heating, as well as deploying building blocks made of construction waste.

During construction, the RWAs twice had to resort to demonstrations and hunger strikes to force the government to release their payments. However, as the houses and infrastructure finally neared completion, Hansaben Vaghela<sup>14</sup> commented with satisfaction, *"The process of building our homes has helped us rebuild our lives. We have come closer as a community, are investing in ensuring our children are going to school, and alcoholism is falling. We see a bright future for our children, without the stigmatisation of being disadvantaged."*

In 2014, the incumbent government, a right-wing political party, scrapped the RAY programme, replacing it with a private sector-driven programme, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) – Housing for All, in 2015. In 2016, Hunnarshala Foundation was contracted to design the Housing for All Plan of Action (HFAPoA) for Bhuj and seven other cities. The plan consisted of a detailed socioeconomic survey of all slum

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14 Ms Vaghela is a member of the federation Sakhi Sangini and a beneficiary of one of the slum rehabilitation projects (Ramdev Nagar).



residents, including a large section of city tenants. After discussions with around 15,000 stakeholders and the municipality, a plan to adopt the Ramdev Nagar model of individual owner-driven reconstruction was submitted to the state government. This model would release around 60 hectares of land currently occupied by slum settlements in the city, as opposed to the developer-based PMAY programme, under which excess vacant land left after in-situ redevelopment would be handed over to the developer for commercial purposes in exchange for its slum redevelopment services. Not only this model is financially unviable in small cities like Bhuj, but it also compromises the quality of life, construction and space available to the beneficiaries following redevelopment. The Ramdev Nagar model recommended financing bank loans taken out by the community with Sakhi Sangini as a guarantor (as piloted previously with RAY). Water, sewerage, electricity and road services financed under AMRUT and other schemes could be dovetailed with PMAY, which unfortunately is not assured under the current programme guidelines.

A Slum Federation for Housing Rights has been formed by Sakhi Sangini, Hunnarshala Foundation and Setu Abhiyan to argue for this plan to be adopted in the city. In India, there has been a longstanding dispute over whether slum dwellers have housing rights. For many years, slum clearance boards in the states were given the task of eliminating city slums and allocating poorly constructed buildings resembling 'pigeon-like holes' in peripheral city areas. These buildings would either end up being sold to others and the beneficiaries would return to the slum settlements, or become abandoned ghost townships. Owing to the large number of votes available from slum settlements, politicians usually agree to allocate basic services to the slum population. While the Site and Services (S & S) programme in the 1980s and 1990s ran for over a decade, beneficiaries of this programme were neither allocated the land on which they were living nor granted permission to build permanent homes.

The strong nexus between India's politicians and its developers continues to play a decisive role in development decisions. That is why in spite of a progressive programme like RAY, uptake levels for implementation remain low. The current PMAY programme is not enjoying traction primarily because low land prices in two-tier cities are not conducive to or profitable for developers investing their own money in slum redevelopment. Developers undertake slum redevelopment wherever it is feasible for them to recover their investments from the surplus land allocated to them for commercial sale. However, developers' poor capacities/experience in slum redevelopment often results in long delays in convincing slum dwellers to agree to redevelopment. This is exacerbated by cities' unwillingness to allocate land to the poor.

While RAY was a flexible programme that allowed slum dwellers to construct their own homes, its successor, PMAY, advocates and promotes private-sector construction. This restricted the scaling up of pilot projects developed under RAY in Bhuj. Since PMAY has been introduced, no developers have come forward to redevelop slums in Bhuj. Moreover, slum dwellers are unwilling to shift to the prescribed 30 m<sup>2</sup> housing units under PMAY, as on average slums occupy 80 m<sup>2</sup> plots of land (MHUPA 2015).

However, the rate at which people are migrating to cities and occupying slums is far higher than the ability of the State to provide housing and services. At the time of writing, there were upcoming national elections in which housing became an increasingly important issue, forcing politicians to reflect and choose between the developers and the slum dwellers. Large-scale people-driven housing is only possible when cities are given the flexibility to prepare and implement housing projects based on local needs and conditions.

## DECENTRALISED GOVERNANCE

The lack of public involvement in governance has made citizens think that public service delivery and development works are the exclusive responsibility of the municipality with no role for them. Poor service delivery by the municipality and the absence of needs-based planning and development has made citizens unwilling to pay municipal taxes. The task SETU Abhiyan set itself was to make the municipality accountable and share powers with the public, who in this way would realise that the decentralisation of governance would not only bring with it greater efficiencies and control but also see them being entrusted with responsibilities.

SETU Abhiyan began working with the poorest two wards in the city (Wards 2 and 3). These wards have a population of about 30,000, spread over 7,000 households, with 80 of them living in slum settlements with insufficient access to basic amenities and services. These wards receive very little funding from the municipality.

As development in these wards is largely informal, residents found it extremely intimidating and indeed futile to use the municipal office to assert and exercise their legitimate rights. SETU Abhiyan began setting up *Mahiti Mitras* (Information and Service Centres) to raise the population's awareness of their rights, including the right to make use of existing government schemes. They worked out a system with the municipality for identifying legitimate beneficiaries and taking care of the paperwork required to integrate them into the existing schemes. Eventually, *Mahiti Mitras* became legitimate vendors for the municipality. The local councillors utilised their services as an extension of those they offered to their wards. These service centres made it easier for people to

process their basic identity documents and access schemes including ration cards and widow's and pensions for senior citizens. Over the past six years, in these wards these service centres have ensured that around 1,534 citizens have received Suwarn Jayanti cards<sup>15</sup>, 817 have been issued with ration cards, 805 persons have received Aadhaar cards<sup>16</sup>, 643 have been issued with voter ID cards and 171 have received a widow's pension. Apart from these five services, a large number of people manage to access other schemes and have their documents/certificates issued by these centres.

Now a group of 15 volunteers has been formed in slum settlements to ensure that the services of *Mahiti Mitras* can be expanded efficiently. *Mahiti Mitras* also extend their services to remote areas if members of the public there cannot come to their centres. In addition, these centres act as public meeting spaces for citizens to discuss their rights and self-governance.

In accordance with the 74th CAA<sup>17</sup> mandating constitution of decentralised governance structures, SETU Abhiyan performed the following three steps:

- > It comprehensively documented the ward profile, including the status of basic services, the physical and social infrastructure and social security schemes. This was all rolled out in a specially agreed programme.
- > A group of 300-500 households constituted an 'area', nominating its representatives to form a ward committee, 50% of whom were women representatives. The ward councillors became ex-officio members. The committee adopted rules of procedure at a meeting attended by the mayor (president) and CEO of the municipality.
- > The municipality allotted land to the Ward 2 committee to build an office providing a physical identity for the ward.

To help citizens develop the art of consensus building for development plans, SETU Abhiyan offered a small 'untied fund' to the ward committees. This could be used if the due process of democratic dialogue was followed to determine the development work to be undertaken in the wards. Furthermore, there was a requirement for citizens to be involved financially in this work. This became a catalyst for

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15 This is a card issued by the municipality to families living below the poverty line (BPL). It has a unique number that entitles them to access various schemes aimed at BPL families.

16 Aadhaar is a 12-digit unique identity number that can be obtained by Indian residents based on their biometric and demographic data.

17 Passed by Parliament in 1992, the Act enshrines the official status of the ULBs, enabling them to function as institutions of self-government. It lays down the constitution of three types of ULBs; the composition of the ULBs; the constitution of ward committees; the allocation of seats to women, set castes and set tribes; the fixed term of ULBs; the powers, competences and responsibilities of ULBs; the appointment of state election and finance commissions; and the constitution of metropolitan and district planning committees.

the committee and the ward to discuss and prioritise needs. It also gave them a framework for discussing and working out their development priorities. Instead of implementing isolated activities, in 2015 the wards developed a comprehensive Annual Plan with financial outlays, which was submitted to the municipality at a specially convened meeting. In the two most recent financial years that were available at the time of writing (2015–16 and 2016–17), Bhuj Municipality has sanctioned works worth INR 9.08 million (approximately USD 127,000) in Wards 2 and 3, in line with proposals submitted by the ward committees. The quality of the implemented works, including the construction of water supply pipelines, roads, sewage networks, schools, toilets and so on have improved because of close monitoring by the ward committees. The establishment of these committees and ward plans has boosted councillors' confidence in the municipality's general meetings as they are now backed up by scientifically developed plans, supporting data and support from citizens who have been involved in decision-making in a rigorous democratic consensus-building process.

These committees also work on social issues like women's safety, children's education and quality of services provided by government ration shops, *aanganwadis* and primary schools in their ward, as well as organising religious and social festivals and work for communal peace and harmony. They also encourage citizens to pay municipal taxes regularly so that they can demand regular and quality services from the municipality.

The partner organisations under the HIC programme along with selected associates have helped the wards develop comprehensive plans for water-based projects along the local aquifers. They have devised a special plan to renovate and develop the Desalsar Lake, which is the main source of water for three wards, including Wards 2 and 3. The plan, which also includes spaces for vending activities and commercial markets that will provide a boost to the livelihoods of vendors and create recreational spaces for citizens, has been submitted to the state government for approval.

SETU Abhiyan conducts regular training programmes for elected councillors on decentralised governance and consolidates councillors' ability to deliver for their voters. Besides providing trained personnel to assist the committees to establish their offices, it has also prepared guidelines on how wards can set up their committees, offices, annual plans and citizen capacity building so that citizens can take control of their own development. Bhuj Municipality has adopted these guidelines and has supported the establishment of ward committee offices in another four wards. In total, these six wards would cover more than half of the city.

The expertise of the HIC programme's partner organisations and other selected associates has been made available to the ward committees. The focus of the programme is now on making the switch to serving the wards and their citizens – so the foundations on which citizen self-governance can be established.

The concept of decentralisation is based on the transfer of powers to local people, transparency and accountability in the system. India was ranked 81st in the Global Corruption Perception Index for 2017 released by Transparency International, which named the country among the 'worst offenders' in terms of graft and press freedom in the Asia Pacific Region (ToI 2018). Such corruptive practices also indicate the involvement of public servants and political leaders/parties. While decentralisation is a favoured and much-discussed option in public discourse, it faces strong resistance when put into practice. Even though to date half the city has established ward committees and prepared ward plans, the municipality has yet to pass a resolution legitimising these ward committees. Decentralisation is the only way to make sustainable, long-term positive changes to the current system.

## DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATION

The above initiatives have demonstrated their potential and have been adopted by the government to a fair degree. Some other initiatives that have successfully demonstrated their potential but still need to be systematically adopted by the municipality are set out below.

### WASTE MANAGEMENT:

One of the main reasons for the city's persistent cleanliness problems is that households were expected to discard their waste in neighbourhood containers, from where the municipal contractors would transport the collected waste to a designated landfill site. In 2009-10, the municipality awarded Sakhi Sangini a contract for door-to-door collection of solid waste from 10,000 properties and transferring this straight to landfill, thereby eliminating the need for neighbourhood containers. This type of initiative is now the focus of a major nationwide programme as part of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Swachh Bharat (Clean India) Mission. Sahjeevan has trained independent service providers and assigned them to individual neighbourhoods, where each household would pay them INR 1 per day. On large campuses such as Shri R. R. Lalan College and the Army Cantonment, sorted waste is collected, and then the dry waste is bought by recycling vendors, while the wet waste is composted on the campus itself. Such 'Zero Waste Centres' have been suggested to the municipality, along with a financial plan proposing the taxation level of INR 1 per household per day, thereby completely eliminating the need for subsidies from the state government to the municipality for landfills. However, the nexus between corrupt councillors and municipal waste contractors is preventing this plan from being upscaled.

Three innovative technical solutions for recycling waste have been demonstrated by three organisations, who are working with contractors without the involvement of the municipality:

- > Khampir, a craft organisation that is an associate member of the HIC programme, collects 20- to 40-micron plastic bags, aluminium foil packets and discarded factory plastic. The collected plastic is then passed to the weaving community to shred and weave them into high-quality products such as handbags and mats. This organisation has an annual turnover of INR 0.7 million (around USD 10,000).

- > Sahjeevan collects kitchen waste from the blue neighbourhood bins for over 300 households and supplies it to cattle rearers for feeding their cattle. Households are happy to do this because feeding cows is considered auspicious by Indian tradition.
- > Hunnarshala Foundation has developed the technology to recycle construction waste, accounting for about 25% of the city's total waste, into construction blocks. They are now developing value chains and training construction-block makers to include these in their product range.

## MILK PRODUCTION:

In the slums of Bhuj, there are 335 people working in milk production with 4,802 cows, 1,493 buffalos and 3,058 goats and sheep (Sahjeevan 2013). The cows alone produce 11,777 litres of milk each day and have a consumer base of over 9,000 families, so about 18% of the city's population (Sahjeevan 2013). Instead of trying to remove these primary producers from our cities, a combination of properly researched business plans and legitimate access to resources and infrastructure could create linkups between producers and consumers in cities, avoiding extensive value chains and substantial costs. Sahjeevan is working towards achieving this vision.

Standards for a clean production system have been established under the label "GoDesi" (Go Local) by an HIC programme associate. She has begun forging links between consumers and four milk producers to test out her business plan and has fitted containers to motorcycles of those involved in supplying milk to consumers, from which milk can be drawn, thereby negating the chances of contamination. A registered federation has brought together 125 animal rearers to organise the bulk provision of dry fodder (driving down their costs), to map grazing lands around the city that need to be protected from rampant encroachment and to organise credit facilities for members to purchase green fodder from designated farmers on the edge of the city.

A proposal for animal shelters (the *Gau Sewa Ane Gauchar Vikas Board*), dovetailed with the housing provided under PMAY, has been submitted to the government. The plan has been designed by Hunnarshala Foundation for 500 large cattle and 2,000 small ruminants. The main features of the proposal are providing clusters of 10-12 cattle rearers' housing adjoining an animal shelter equipped with water and fodder storage and dairy processing and marketing facilities. The cow dung would be converted into cooking gas and then fed back to the rearers' homes. A vision document identifies 11 locations in the city (covering all animals) which provide milk to 50% of the city's population.

## EMPOWERING MARGINALISED WOMEN:

Sakhi Sangini has a savings and credit base involving 2,770 members who have saved INR 91 million (around USD 1.3 million) and have total internal loans of INR 38.5 million (around USD 0.5 million). In addition to this, 126 members have also built their homes with loans worth INR 4.5 million (around USD 63,000).

KMVS has developed a helpline service called “Hello Sakhi” in collaboration with the police, along with a mediation centre linked to the District Court. With the assistance of 57 trained paralegal workers and three counselling centres, this service provides the appropriate information, training courses, guidance and legal support to harassment victims. A total of 374 cases have been logged by the counselling centres over the past four years. The Sakhi Sangini federation has also initiated safety mapping and focused group discussions with women in Wards 2 and 3 to identify high-risk areas in these wards. A plan has been submitted by the ward committees to the municipality with a view to starting a dialogue and seeking practical measures. Some 52 Sakhi Sangini leaders have been trained as ‘watchdogs’ for various government facilities and schemes. The result is improved service delivery and operations in 26 *aanganwadis*, 10 primary schools and eight budget shops. In conjunction with the government-run General Hospital, around 106 female sex workers (FSWs) are being supported with awareness-raising initiatives and other services to combat HIV/AIDS and reproductive tract infections. Efforts are also being made to help those who want to leave this profession by finding them alternative sources of income. Alongside the Institute of Rural Management (IRMA) in Anand, KMVS has completed a comprehensive study of the condition of women working on the informal market.

## MIGRANTS:

One of the most vulnerable groups in the city are the migrant labour workers who come from six different states, including as far away as Odisha and Bihar. Every morning, these labourers stand at designated *labour chowks*<sup>18</sup> in the city to be hand-picked by small-scale contractors for daily wage labour, mostly for construction work. There are about 4,100 labourers in Bhuj alone. Most of these workers migrate with their families and live in temporary structures made of tarpaulin sheets with no or scarcely any access to basic sanitation, water and so on. In the absence of anywhere safe to leave their valuables, they have to deposit their earnings with the contractors, making them vulnerable to exploitation and deceit. Meanwhile, their children languish on construction sites with little hope of improving their lot in life.

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18 A major intersection (or roundabout) where working people congregate in the early morning to be picked up for work.



By teaming up with Aajeevika Bureau, a national organisation working extensively on economic and socio-legal problems of migrant workers, SETU Abhiyan and Hunnarshala Foundation have helped bring these workers together. They have arranged with the government to start two *aanganwadis* for their children where they can be safe while their parents do their work. A large-scale proposal for a migrant hostel incorporating many innovative features such as communal kitchen facilities for cooking food, a 'one-stop shop' system for registration and the creation of a system for migrant labourers to use budget shops for subsidised grain for food purposes, the enrolment of their children in local schools, legal facilities to help them settle disputes with local contractors and banking facilities to send remittances to their home villages, among other measures, is in the final stages of being approved by the government.

#### VENDORS:

Most of the 1,700 or so vendors in the city are living in slum settlements. Hunnarshala Foundation and SETU Abhiyan have brought them together based on the provisions of the 2014 Street Vendors Act under which they must be granted legitimate rights and spaces for vending purposes as well as basic services. The federation has nominated six members to be on the official municipality committee which would make decisions relating to their well-being. Recently, with the assistance of SETU Abhiyan, the federation organised a major rally that finally forced the municipality to start issuing these vendors with identity cards, thereby recognising them as official vendors. Hunnarshala Foundation has developed designs for two locations to illustrate how vending spaces can be organised to ensure smooth traffic with equal business opportunities for vendors and access to water and sanitation facilities. The municipality is considering these two proposals.

#### PROTECTING URBAN BIODIVERSITY:

The Biodiversity Board has issued a circular asking urban bodies to recognise, protect and enhance the fauna and flora in our cities. Sahjeevan has been working on helping village *panchayats* develop committees, document the biodiversity in legal registers and develop conservation programmes for particular species and habitats. To demonstrate this methodology for Bhuj and move it forward, this exercise was undertaken in one of the city's wards. This documentation was released by the mayor as an example of best practice for the city as a whole. Several awareness programmes about the key biodiversity sites have been organised in the city for members of the public (adults and school children).

## CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS ALTERNATIVES

Centralisation brings with it a development ideology that promotes large-scale development projects which in turn result in inequity and require complex systems of accountability. Coupled with a right-wing polity, it diverts public opinion to false identities, distracting attention from the core work of empowering people, an unfinished tenet of the Indian Constitution. Decentralisation gives people responsibility and allows them to develop local solutions that invariably resonate with the ecology of the region in question. This takes discourse beyond the issue of providing basic infrastructure and services to the method by which it should be achieved, thereby focusing attention on relationships and building social trust and understanding.

The strategy adopted by the HIC programme, namely of creating collectives of poor and marginalised people and invoking their constitutional rights, is helping them access and make use of existing government schemes. In this way it has created an example of a fair degree of decentralisation, demonstrating a humane society. The ability of several CSOs to join hands, work together and involve like-minded people (including elites) from the city has helped establish the leadership needed in various areas of society.

On the other hand, the lack of accountability of those in power accompanied by the recent ascendancy of right-wing politicians is making it increasingly difficult to scale up these examples and make systemic changes to the current setup.

The initiatives illustrated in this chapter establish a public discourse and are making people realise that an alternative to the current development trends is possible, coinciding with the cultural values whose erosion they are witnessing. It would be interesting to see in the near future how the tipping point is reached to mainstream these approaches in a small city like Bhuj.

In terms of a radical transformation towards a more just and sustainable city, there are several lessons that can be learned from this case. We use here the conceptual framework developed as part of the national Vikalp Sangam<sup>19</sup> process in India and based on this, the analytical format developed by Kalpavriksh under the global ACKnowl-EJ<sup>20</sup> project (Kalpavriksh 2017). These frameworks show that transformations can take

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19 For more information, see: <http://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles>

20 For more information, see: [www.acknowledgej.org](http://www.acknowledgej.org).

place in one or more of five spheres – political, economic, social, cultural (including spiritual) and ecological – and in the set of ethical values and principles that society cherishes and attempts to adhere to. We have also referred to the transformation framework set out by the Working Group Beyond Development in Lang et al. (2018).

#### POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION:

An evident shift from a centralised to a decentralised decision-making process, i.e. towards more direct or radical democracy, appears to be taking place due to the processes initiated under the HIC programme. In the past, although there were elected councillors in each ward of the city, these only had a relatively marginal role in planning and development activities in their wards. Moreover, citizens were largely unaware of or unwilling to use the 74th CAA and therefore played no part in such activities; in fact, they had never even strongly objected to their lack of participation as this used not to be a widespread thing to do. A significant shift was observed after SETU Abhiyan started mobilising citizens and elected councillors, raised awareness about the 74th CAA, formed area and ward committees, pushed the municipality to establish ward offices, provide services, manage social security schemes and demand redress of grievances expressed by ward offices. Gradually, citizens, elected representatives and officials understood the importance of decentralisation and citizens' participation. However, much more has yet to be done to inculcate this in work culture and to strengthen institutions and processes of direct democracy on the ground. There is still a long way to go even building citizens' confidence in their ability to exercise self-governance in their neighbourhoods and become central to the city's planning and governance.

Direct democracy is not only about the overall decision-making processes but also about the governance of local ecosystems, resources and infrastructures. Owing to its geographic location in a semi-arid region of India, Bhuj is always facing the prospect of acute water shortages. In the era of the kings, distribution of water was managed in a decentralised manner through lakes, ponds and wells spread across the city. Both the city authorities and the people were always aware of the need to maintain these natural water resources, in the knowledge that these were the only sources available to them. But after India won independence from the British, as the municipality started drilling bore wells inside the city and beyond and there was access to water from canals linking up with the Sardar Sarovar Dam on the Narmada River (a long way to the south of Kutch), the city authorities and the population started to neglect local resources, which gradually led to water shortage problems. Not only is water from external sources expensive, but it is fairly difficult to ensure

its regular supply in sufficient quantities, given increasing daily requirements due to rapid industrialisation, a growing population and a consumerist lifestyle. ACT's work on conserving and revitalising water bodies and groundwater recharge and encouraging the use of local water resources for local requirements are significant alternative transformations towards decentralised resource management. Pilots demonstrated by ACT have been an eye opener for policymakers and city administrators. On account of these developments, the State has allocated significant resources for this purpose over the past few years.

In the context of urban India, although slum dwellers constitute 30% of the total urban population, they occupy only 5% of all urban land (The Hindu 2019). It is shameful that even after 70 years of independence, a large number of the urban poor live in miserable conditions without adequate housing, water, sanitation, education or health services or even social security.

One of the prime reasons for this is that slum dwellers are viewed as encroachers by the public authorities, who are therefore reluctant to provide them with basic services on a par with other citizens. The HIC programme has been a major breakthrough in redressing this injustice. The 314 houses built by beneficiaries in the three slums is a success story in which Hunnarshala Foundation along with other HIC partners have been able to demonstrate that if given a chance to redevelop their settlement, slum dwellers can produce higher-quality housing (by investing considerable financial resources) than the public authorities. In fact, this is a showcase of poor slum dwellers being empowered to such an extent that they decided on the design of their own homes, the layout of their area, the management of services and the implementation of all this. In other words, an alternative transformation has taken place from planner/bureaucrat-centric to people-centric planning, design and governance.

## ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION:

Greater control over land, water, housing and other resources, as mentioned above, and their governance as physical or knowledge commons is a significant move towards economic democracy. However, there are other dimensions of economic transformation in the HIC programme. In Indian society, traditionally women are not supposed to take financial responsibility, and even working outside the house is frowned upon in many communities. Therefore, they have little control over financial decisions or freedom to work as they choose. Given the status of economic empowerment of women as one of the focus areas of the HIC programme, SHGs were formed and nurtured initially by KMVS and subsequently supported by Sakhi Sangini. In this way, women became more financially independent in their households, subsequently encouraging them to engage in addressing issues relating to social and basic services in their areas.

The establishment of the Cattle Rearers' Association is another example of growing economic democracy. This integral component of Bhuj's local economy (although it has never been considered as such by the policy makers) boosted its capacity to serve the city by working on grazing land, water resources, fodder, vaccinations and market linkups for graziers' produce, gradually making their work profitable as opposed to their previous experience of living on the margins of society. Interestingly it is also one of the few examples of a primary-sector activity being integrated into urban living, as generally the process of urbanisation pushes out agriculture, grazing, fisheries and so on.

Waste picking has traditionally been another important informal activity managed by the poor, with profits largely going to middlemen or scrap shopkeepers. In view of this loophole, one of the public associates who had worked for years with waste pickers started a scrap shop with the support of HIC. The idea was to establish a scrap shop to collectivise the waste pickers, increase their income from the waste collected by them and enhance the capacity of the waste pickers' collective so that they could run scrap shops themselves in future.

Gradually, class relations may also be changing in some respects, given the HIC programme's ability to sensitise people and the authorities to the needs of the poor and marginalised through various programmes and events. Moreover, the middle class and elites are supporting these activities to help the poor and are getting involved in activities to make Bhuj a more inclusive city, accessible to all sections of society, based on the three main principles laid down by HIC.

## ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION:

The current system of development often ignores ecological concerns: an error that has an adverse effect on cities and city dwellers. Ecological sensitivity has been one of the principles of the HIC programme since its inception. The focus on sensitive water management, mentioned above, is one reflection of this. Additionally, Sahjeevan is working with citizens to raise their awareness of and to conserve biodiversity, reconnecting humans with the rest of nature. Awareness activities are regularly organised with schools and colleges, with the younger generation being exposed to local flora and fauna and encouraged to conserve them. These awareness drives are regularly organised with Himayati Juth. Over the years, thousands of local flora species have been planted across the city, and considerable volumes of *Prosopis juliflora* – an invasive alien species that is said to destroy local plant species – have been uprooted and replaced with local species. Natural resource mapping has been completed for the whole city and action plans for habitat improvement have been developed for key biodiversity sites as well as green-belt development. Citizens are encouraged to avoid using plastic bags, to sort waste, to recycle and to minimise waste generation. A number of activities are also organised regularly to save and conserve water. All these initiatives are gradually enabling habits to change, leading to more ecologically sensitive urban citizens.

## SOCIO-CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION:

The HIC programme has had an explicit focus on the socially and economically marginalised, especially slum dwellers, migrants, street vendors and female sex workers (FSWs). Here is a brief outline of the activities for each of these groups:

- > **Slum dwellers:** Apart from awareness of various social security schemes, thousands of families have been referred to various schemes like the retirement pension, the widow's pension, the pension for the physically challenged, the admission of poor children to schools under the Right to Education (RTE) and the ration card (enabling basic food and fuel to be bought at a subsidised cost). A group of women volunteers from slum settlements have been empowered to monitor public services that helped regularise these services in many slums. Decentralised services like water systems are managed by slum dwellers in a few settlements. HIC is working on the concept of enhancing their capacity to create and manage services rather than providing services as charity. Over the years, many leaders have emerged through this process, and they now work as change-makers.
- > **Street vendors:** HIC is working on organising street vendors so that they can enjoy their legitimate rights to sell goods in the city in a dignified manner. While the municipality has agreed to proposals to develop a few markets, vendors are aware of the constant need to keep up the pressure in demanding their statutory rights.
- > **Migrants:** Migrants are one of the most vulnerable sections of the city's population. As, coming from elsewhere, they are not permanent city residents, nobody pays attention to their needs. HIC partners strive to provide for their basic needs such as shelter, water, education, health and social security. After a long engagement process, the municipality has agreed to provide shelter to homeless migrants where they can live with basic services and where their children can receive education when they are at work.
- > **FSWs:** There are no legal safeguards in place from legislation for FSWs in India, as this work is considered illegal. As such, they hide their identity and become victims of many forms of exploitation. This also forces them to take various risks in terms of their health. KMVS has identified a large number of FSWs in the city and is working to protect them from health risks, educate their children and help them find alternative livelihoods.

Apart from these specific groups, one major focus of the programme has been on empowering women, and considerable shifts have taken place in gender relations, although given the ancient, deep roots of patriarchal, male-dominated systems in India, huge challenges remain. Women's potential and capacity to bring about large-scale change has traditionally been underestimated, meaning that their path to development has been blocked or neglected, leaving them with lower education levels and limited participation in political, social and economic discourse. However, HIC's work in the slums is gradually changing the mindset of community leaders and at some level they now recognise the freedom of women in their community to live and work as they wish. For instance, eight girls were recently trained to drive an auto-rickshaw and are now plying their trade with these vehicles on the roads of Bhuj, despite this still being regarded as an unusual job for women in India.

Another aspect of the socio-cultural transformation is the assertion and reaffirmation of 'folk' knowledge and expertise and the notion that the governance and management of urban systems is not something only formal 'experts' do. In many of the initiatives there are hybrid knowledges at work, combining traditional and modern, local and global, and formal and informal.

In conclusion, perhaps the strongest aspect of HIC's endeavours is its decentralisation component. Yet decentralisation is a negative term in that it denotes what it is not, namely 'not centralisation'. This is indicative of the situation we now live in, of centralised control by a few. Perhaps the affirmative word is *swaraj*, which, as Mahatma Gandhi said, "*is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint*". *Swaraj* gives every community the chance to dream and have the ability to change its way of life not only for the better but take it towards a responsible and compassionate future. Embedded in the notion of *swaraj* is the rigour of *swadhyaya*, or self-study. *Swadhyaya* consistently creates the ability to view yourself, your family and your community in the third person, leading to a charitable, compassionate and even-handed view of everybody, including the self. It helps cultivate *swa-anushasan*, or self-discipline. It exerts restraint on the unjustified, opulent consumption of all things material but also pleasure. It promotes *swanirbharta*, or self-reliance, and *swabhiman*, or self-respect, embodying frugality, awareness and compassion. The HIC programme is premised on this Gandhian principle. Every initiative seeking relinquishment of control by the government is closely linked with ensuring that the community understands the responsibility of self-rule.



The pedagogy and methodology of such transformation itself requires courage from the change-makers, as the programme is attempting to change the paradigms of engagement between individuals and with the rest of nature. This means that for instance, women realise they have all the money to service their own needs and do not need banks and philanthropy or governments to emancipate their condition; when a water source is under community control, this brings with it discipline, with care being taken to ensure that it is not wasted; when governments leave it to slum communities to design and build their own homes, they use this opportunity to develop the social capital in their relationships that is eroding fast in modern transactional societies. As there is a move towards *swaraj*, the need for complicated systems and technology also declines. The systems and technology for example for treating waste on a small scale are familiar and straightforward but demand innovations when an entire city's waste needs to be dealt with collectively. Therefore, HIC is devoting a lot of its energy to enabling organising of and by citizens, particularly the marginalised, into small and manageable communities, and pushing governments to share powers and resources with them.

The fact that the HIC programme involves changes in the many dimensions described above does not necessarily mean that it is a comprehensive or holistic transformation. The constant challenge remains dealing with centralised authority, from the Bhuj administration authorities through to the state and central governments. An example of this is provided by the waters of the Narmada River, which are supplied not only at great ecological and social cost (the struggle against the dam and canals which enable the water to be carried from several hundred kilometres away is one of India's most iconic environmental justice stories), but also undermine decentralised water self-reliance. Another is the reliance on the business community for funding. In other words, the programme does not fundamentally challenge the structure of the State, or of capitalism. Having said that, it does try to balance out some of the very unequal relations between citizens, especially marginalised sections of the population, and those who otherwise dominate economic, political and social life, and in so doing, strives towards far greater levels of justice than have existed up to now.

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# **COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS**



# TOWARDS COMMUNITY- DRIVEN RADICAL URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS

By the Global Working Group Beyond Development

This text was written and edited by Mabrouka M'Barek, Giorgos Velegrakis and Raphael Hoetmer, and is based on the Working Group's discussions in Barcelona and comments, suggestions, and edits by Claus-Dieter Koenig, Vinod Koshti, David Fig, Mary-Ann Manahan, Ansar Jasim, Miriam Lang, Ruth Mwangi, Nhu Trang Nguyen, Edgardo Lander and Larry Lohmann

The Global Working Group Beyond Development has focused on the idea of multi-dimensional social transformation, as illustrated and explained in our previous books *Alternatives in a World of Crisis* (2018)<sup>1</sup> and *Stopping the Machines of Socio-Ecological Destruction and Building Alternative Worlds* (2019)<sup>2</sup>. In these publications and in extensive dialogue we identified decolonisation, anti-capitalism, anti-racism and anti-casteism, the dismantling of patriarchy and the transformation of predatory relations with nature as key processes of social change and preconditions for strengthening justice and democracy, restoring dignity and enabling the sustainability of life.

In discussions and debates at our third annual meeting, we realised the extreme importance of unravelling all the social, political, economic and environmental forces that define different societies' multiple relationships with their urban contexts. Against this backdrop, we view the urban context, urban space and urbanity in general, not as a commodity (despite its extensive commodification in neoliberal capitalism), but as an element of a social relationship that is shaped, re-shaped and can potentially be radically transformed. With this in mind, our ongoing dialogue has been informed by participatory research on both analysing the tendencies that define urban environments and seeking radical, transformative, communitarian and solidarity-based practices.

Ideas, concepts, practices and claims, shape and define the core of this book *Cities of Dignity: Urban Transformations Around the World*, including:

- > urban commons;
- > sovereignty;
- > movements against gentrification processes;
- > reclaiming public spaces and public services;
- > feminist approaches and understandings of urban analysis;
- > building local communitarian and solidarity economies;
- > radical practices in everyday life;
- > creating new relations between cities and their local environments and/or rural spaces; and
- > transforming urban neighbourhoods and communities.

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1 For more information, see: <https://beyonddevelopment.net/alternatives-in-a-world-of-crisis-2nd-edition>.

2 For more information, see: <https://beyonddevelopment.net/stopping-the-machines>.



Global Working Group Participants meeting with the Top Manta Refugee Collective in Barcelona in 2018

Cities all over the world have experienced multiple forms of popular discontent as well as localised social movements. In some instances, these movements have taken the form of political communities focused not only on addressing current, specific needs, but also on transforming their urban environment. To this end, they try – in many cases successfully – to develop communities ways of building strong, lasting processes of participation, democratisation and decision-making, whereby internal power relations are collectively identified and tackled and ongoing experimentation and/or knowledge acquisition and production are based on old and new forms of democracy. Furthermore, they introduce more equitable social relations, transform discriminatory and/or racist inter-ethnic and intercultural relations, the base of knowledge and experience deemed necessary to advance social processes and dismantle patriarchal gender relations.

As explained in the introduction to this book, initially our core shared research questions were:

- > What conditions and strategies enable radical transformation in urban contexts? What kinds of economic and political processes can sustain radical transformations in urban territories?
- > Which urban realities does the countryside need to re-dignify rural life and rural-urban relations and vice-versa?
- > Which theoretical and political frameworks are useful for fostering radical urban transformations?

All these questions, as well as the attempts to answer them throughout the chapters of this book, relate to a historical moment of profound economic depression, changes, challenges and transformations. To analyse the current crisis in depth, we should focus not only on the macroeconomic causes of the crisis and its multiple effects in various geographical contexts, but also look at how grassroots movements disrupt, contest and subvert crisis 'from below'. In other words, we should look closely at how the spread of social conflict – through communication and interaction between classes, castes, races, cultures, genders, and via ecological and political struggles – interrupts the circulation of capital. Doing this may make us better equipped to understand actual examples of resistance to any form of context-specific capitalism and discuss their potential for instigating enduring resistance.

One step towards achieving this would entail proposing and practising radical, context-specific and place-based policies. To do this, we must seek systemic ways of fostering social, environmental and cognitive justice that meet the social needs of the many and compete here and now with mainstream discourse and politics. For instance, the notion of commons, which has inspired local transformative struggles in Barcelona and elsewhere, seems like a good starting point in the discussion about potential radical urban transformation, provided that it takes account of local social needs.

The Global Working Group Beyond Development endeavours to initiate debates and raise new questions connected to the aforementioned issues, since for us asking the right questions is as important as considering relative certainties. In keeping with our previous publications, we decided to produce a collective text that reflects our conversation, so our text does not include quotations of our Group's respective members and there is no extensive bibliography either.

We are keenly aware that the Working Group is heterogeneous, its members having different outlooks and ideas based on intellectual or political differences, but also different opinions about specific contextually driven needs. However, we find the dialogue centred around these differences enriching and feel that it fosters new knowledge and radical collective thinking. All this complexity enlivens our discussions and allows us (maybe even the 'global us') to really get to grips with the processes taking shape in the world we all share.





Global Working Group participants meeting with members of Barcelona en Comú at their headquarters in Barcelona in 2018.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT: TRENDS DEFINING OUR CITIES

Today's cities are the result of a plethora of historical processes. State building and consolidation in general, and colonisation and imperialism in particular, led to the centralisation of political and financial power in administrative centres with a view to ruling large populations and extensive territories. Moreover, the cementing and expansion of capitalism required concentrating populations so that they could be exploited as workers and constitute consumer markets.

The impoverishment and expropriation of territory through colonisation, imperialism, and racism, but also as a result first of nation building and then of large-scale economic operations or development projects, forced people to leave their traditional rural communities, creating large-scale migration to main cities either within the same country or to cities in richer countries within the same region or further afield. In recent decades, globalisation has even further concentrated services, economic and political power, in global cities that sustain the networks and flows of contemporary world society. 'Development' projects often create resettlement areas with few available means or material resources and poor access to healthcare or education. Consequently, many affected people choose to migrate to larger urban centres to work in burgeoning manufacturing and service industries there. Others choose to emigrate. During economic booms these migrants can be considered constructive

forces, keeping labour costs down, but in periods of economic recession they are considered threats to economic stability in their host countries. Many subsequently end up as urban squatters or living in slum areas. Already direct victims of imperialism, these marginalised people are also very likely to become multiple victims of globalisation, urbanisation and industrialisation.

In practice, this means cities have expanded through a process of expropriation, extraction and the eradication of communities, and by destroying or curbing nature, especially in the Global South. In addition, cities have necessarily established exploitative, unequal relationships with the countryside that provides them with resources, while at the same time often using such rural areas as sites to deposit solid waste, wastewater and perform other destructive acts.

Capitalist urbanisation very often not only reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes, but also exacerbates the already multiple burdens on both the social and (re)productive work of women. At the end of the Fordist era, when welfare associated with official employment was significantly curtailed, women were incorporated into the workforce, still on unequal payment and gaining less social recognition for their contribution, and with growing, but still very limited, access to decision-making and power in the corporate sector. Moreover, the segments of paid labour into which women were incorporated followed lines of racial and/or ethnic segregation.

As such, global urbanisation maintains mutual constituent relationships with prevailing patterns of domination in our societies, both shaping and being shaped by their modern-day development. Seen through this lens, urbanisation was fostered and moulded by violent processes involving the expansion of capital and deployment of colonial and imperial power. These factors reorganised territories and populations in line with the interests of global and national white male elites.

At the same time, contemporary cities are the result of a specific vision of success and progress implemented through the application of new technologies and urban planning, design and construction practices, all geared at enabling larger populations to live together. Cities became symbols of modernity, reflected in their cement, roads, cars, public works, water systems, energy grids, and health and education services, which were of course very unequally distributed. Thus, new patterns of mass consumption emerged, gradually constituting what we term an 'imperial mode of living'.

Effectively, capital, labour, power and services were concentrated in cities (and certain areas within them), largely urbanising potential for economic and social advancement.

This physical setup was reinforced by a public and political discourse of modernity and development that presented cities as spaces of opportunity and progress, which in turn underpinned their domination (and more broadly that of any metropolis) over rural spaces. Growing cities also created new challenges in terms of controlling ever more diverse and densely concentrated populations. Cities have been governed by many different regimes based on discipline and power and segregated along classist, casteist and racist lines. Urban poverty can be viewed as a condition actively brought about by processes of dispossession and exclusion. Various forms of repression and violence are used to control urban territories. At the same time, capitalism has naturalised poverty in racist, meritocratic ways and used the notion of poverty to legitimise processes of militarisation.

Cities have also been the topic of intense political disputes regarding their future, as urban populations have organised themselves to meet the challenges of everyday life, resist dispossession and defend their rights. At our 2017 meeting in Quito, we identified five different rationales for political transformation that are represented in contemporary struggles (albeit articulated and combined in different ways in distinct struggles) and also present in urban contexts (see Table 1 below). New forms of struggle have evolved out of the intercultural dialogue between the diverse range of city dwellers.

Thus, cities also have become places for self-organisation, intercultural dialogue and community building, based on solidarity, reciprocity and mutual support, aimed at reaching certain levels of resilience and security. On many occasions, these practices have been rooted in previous traditions of rural community life, but new forms of organisation have also emerged to confront the challenges of life in an urban environment. Urban struggles for rights to housing, health, adequate working conditions, education and public transport have shaped cities in a novel way.

A number of transformative policies, listed in the table below are 'prefigurative', i.e. are conducive to constituting territories, relations and practices for autonomous emancipation that are capable of inspiring broader social change. From squatters' movements to social and cultural community centres, all kinds of urban communities centred around urban gardens, peer production, caring or repairing, autonomism and prefigurative politics have shaped urban contexts around the world and are continuing to do so.

# RATIONALES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN CITIES

<div> <div>RATIONALE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE</div> </div>	<div> <div>STRATEGY</div> </div>	<div> <div>URBAN TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS</div> </div>
<div> <div>Leftist politics geared towards capturing state power</div> </div>	<div> <div>A traditional left-wing hypothesis of appropriating state power through elections (previously revolutions), enabling social change from these spaces of government.</div> </div>	<div> <div>Left-wing parties have governed cities around the world, implementing more-or-less transformative policies.</div> </div>
<div> <div>Alter-globalism</div> </div>	<div> <div>Networks and movements that seek to intervene in global political processes by mobilising people and campaigning.</div> </div>	<div> <div>Alter-globalist battles have mainly been fought in globalised cities, e.g. the Occupy movement and transnational initiatives like those described in Chapter 2.</div> </div>
<div> <div>Transformative political power: radical municipalism</div> </div>	<div> <div>Appropriating and transforming some parts of the state through bottom-up processes involving greater communal activity, whereby local governments in particular enable societies to become more democratic, equitable and sustainable.</div> </div>	<div> <div>Barcelona en Comú is just one example of this political approach, which seeks to govern cities in a new way to overcome some traditional flaws in left-wing politics, creating new modes of common governance.</div> </div>
<div> <div>Social movements</div> </div>	<div> <div>Social movements seek to bring about social, political and cultural change by organising and mobilising people.</div> </div>	<div> <div>Feminist, LGBTQ+, environmental justice activists, boycott, divestment and sanction campaigns, human rights and anti-racist movements, but also movements against gentrification and evictions, not only use cities as their main arena, but also dispute the future of urban social relations around the world, which helps cities become more diverse and democratic.</div> </div>

Contemporary cities face different, related challenges in these historical processes:

- > the violent restructuring of territories and populations due to speculation and the financialisation of housing, land and debt, which ousts populations from their neighbourhoods to enable the accumulation of capital and the realisation of large-scale development projects;
- > regimes' criminalisation of impoverishment and/or use of repression and militarisation to 'control' urban territories;
- > patriarchal oppression and the persistence of extreme inequality and racism among urban populations;
- > an expanding culture of 'hyper-individuality', constant acceleration and runaway consumerism that makes our daily relations competitive and violent; and finally,
- > cities' maintenance of highly predatory relationships with the countryside and nature, through practices like dumping and pollution as well as the urban metabolism in general.

In short, cities are built on a complex dialectic between individual aspirations for progress and alternative cultural models and collective needs. Cities have been shaped both by domination exercised by economic and political elites and by social struggles for their democratisation. In societies where democracy has deepened, cities also became more democratic, whereas in more authoritarian societies, cities tend to remain more violent. Urban citizens try to navigate these complex landscapes, balancing individual needs and communitarian solutions in many different ways.

## RECLAIMING OUR LIVING SPACES

Contemporary cities seem rather hostile environments for radical transformative actions, but they also constitute a fundamental and indispensable element in any strategy aimed at achieving socio-ecological change in the contemporary world. Our discussion and studies revealed two principal ways in which radical practices have appeared, which share political outlooks based on notions of dignity, territory, sovereignty and self-determination.

The precariousness and insecurity of living conditions in contemporary cities pose survival challenges that become foundations for the building of communitarian practices of solidarity and mutual support against exclusion, insecurity and impoverishment. For people lacking everything, community-mindedness is the only way to survive. This results in diverse practices like community strategies for neighbourhood security, collective initiatives to combat food insecurity or promote child care, collec-

tive improvisation around basic services, the building of local spaces for arts, culture, sports or education, and the organisation of local spaces for ecological agriculture, to name but a few. Our studies revealed very similar communitarian practices of solidarity in the context of the ongoing war in Syria (see Chapter 8), in Black communities within the United States (see Chapter 5), among slum dwellers in Nigeria (see Chapter 6), Brazil (see Chapter 3) or Kenya (see Chapter 7): cities full of mutual support and care, collective production and the building of solidarity economies that give impoverished and excluded people some dignity.

These concrete practices of resilience and communitarian living can prefigure broader changes in society. Particularly in contexts of crisis, like in 2001-02 in Argentina, in 2016 in Greece, and even in the context of the war in Syria, such self-organised practices have sustained the lives of very substantial portions of urban populations. They can even become institutionalised, in permanent markets, cost-sharing initiatives for the distribution and preparation of collectively grown produce, like the many community kitchens across the world, or take the form of solidarity economy initiatives, cultural and educational spaces, which also serve for joint decision-making.

The other main source for building radical emancipatory practices, economies and communities is the resistance of local populations against dispossession, eviction, exploitation and violence. Community organisation arises to defend and control collective spaces, and through them shared visions of the future, as the urban resistance movement in Brazil clearly shows. Resistance against eviction, in particular, generates debate on the kind of radical territories communities can create to move away from an imposed neoliberal, privatised city schema. One fact that clearly emerged from our discussions was that there is no way out of dispossession and exclusion without (not necessarily individualised) access to land and property. Occupations of land by communities and protection against eviction are all about defending communitarian properties that enable better individual and collective living conditions. As events in Brazil show, such forms of resistance do not necessarily entail clashing with the state, because local populations also want the authorities to provide services like schools and healthcare. But they do mean qualitatively different relations with the state, based on collectively organised community demands and imposing conditions on the authorities' presence inside occupied territories.

Both ways of bringing about radical transformation are based on:

- > strengthening relationships and expressions of solidarity that allows community building;
- > consolidating the links between communities and spaces, by building territorial identities;
- > bolstering autonomous practices designed to improve the specific living conditions of members of communities; and,
- > building a local culture and identity.

All these measures permit mobilised people to (re)gain control, i.e. sovereignty, over their lives and territories, oppose the dynamics of expropriation and alienation, and simultaneously express and implement shared visions of desirable futures for their territory (dignity and living well).

Without community, radical political power is impossible. Communities enable collective imagining, the building of shared futures, resistance against external perspectives or pre-determination. In many contexts, as shown in the case of the San Roque food market in Quito (see Chapter 4) or the Black communities in the United States (see Chapter 5), these communitarian practices are rooted in the rural pasts of new city dwellers. People who moved to urban spaces brought along some of their former communitarian and family ways, enabling the building of cooperatives in the United States, reinventing relationships of reciprocity in Quito's market, and creating means of mutual support and collective care to sustain their lives and communities in both of these urban environments. Some communities can help to transfer knowledge about resistance to other communities, as in the case of communities of slums in Lagos (see Chapter 6). Makoko's capacity for resistance was bolstered by the transfer of knowledge from slum dwellers evicted from Maroko in 1990 after their homes were demolished. The people relocated from Maroko knew all about the process of eviction and also why their resistance had failed, so their presence in Makoko was a constant reminder of what can happen when resistance fails. In a similar vein, the recent case of the uprising in Sudan and the strong refusal to place the military in charge of the transitional period can be seen as knowledge accumulated from previous, unfinished clashes with state authorities and the military, just like in Egypt, where the military hijacked a popular revolution.

At the same time, there are many different strains of communitarian rationale. Other groups, like the LGBTQ+ and women's movements, may not permanently occupy specific physical territories, but have appropriated and built reference points and networks and established appropriate spaces and support communities in cities around the world. Their demands and practices, and the networks of daily solidarities they weave, become shields against discrimination and violence, while at the same time giving them a visibility and presence in the urban public space. Environmental or critical arts movements take action by occupying spaces they do not control, to defend and transform them, stirring up public debate and raising awareness about the issues that matter to them. Internet and virtual-network-based dynamics of popular uprisings like the Indignados, #OccupyWallStreet, the 2011 uprisings for dignity in northern Africa and western Asia and many other modern-day struggles around the world show just how much more complicated the notion of networks and communities has become over the past decade, connecting digital communities with offline actions on the ground.

All these examples highlight a complex dialectic between concrete daily struggles in life, the defence of spaces for the common good, and the fight against historical patterns of domination and oppression. These various ways of building communities and communalising urban spaces generate direct tension with the property-oriented regimes that sustain our societies' status quo. In most contemporary societies, particularly in urban areas, there are three forms of hegemonic property: individual, state and privately owned. Black urban populations, the instigators of community-driven markets in India and Ecuador, and Brazilian and Nigerian activists have used radical practices to build ways of governing urban territories and reclaiming commons.

The emphasis on self-determination, ending patterns of domination, and subverting existing economic processes and property regimes takes our vision of radical urban transformation beyond discourses on the 'rights to cities', water or housing, to also include the rights to transition towns or solidarity economies. Although all these rights are fundamental – and we support the struggles seeking their recognition and believe that the energy transition and construction of solidarity economies are indispensable –, in our view none of these ambitions can be achieved without systemic transformation.



The complex issues that arose in our discussion of the control over space included violence and disputes over territories related to illicit activities, particularly drug trafficking. On the one hand, structural impoverishment and exclusion are the main causes of illegal activities, leaving few choices, especially for young men who face structural racism and discrimination and go on to join street organisations related to drug trafficking or other illegal activities. Most importantly, the pharmaceutical industry is responsible for putting on the market highly addictive opioids pain medication, which has increased the population of addicts among workers with hard physical labor jobs and has subsequently increased the demand for drugs. Also, under the pretext of a 'war on drugs', widespread violence has been unleashed on impoverished neighbourhoods, particularly targeting young men of colour. This war on drugs lays the foundations for criminalising poverty, by imposing a brutal security regime on marginalised neighbourhoods, resulting in surveillance, mass incarceration, killings by state security forces and widespread abuses of public power. The most dramatic cases, like those in the Philippines, Brazil and Mexico, reflect a more general world-wide trend. On the other hand, criminal street organisations are also one of the main challenges jeopardising the construction of radical emancipatory territories at grassroots level, as they spread their control over territories and populations in many parts of the world, imposing on them a regime of often extreme violence and capital accumulation, which also – indeed sometimes particularly – affects grassroots organisers and social leaders.

All this raises several complex questions. How should we view legal, illegal, paralegal and underground practices in a context in which the law structurally underpins or even fosters extreme social inequality, and which is rooted in institutionalised racism? How and to what extent can grassroots movements offer a valid alternative to criminal street organisations, and how can the former avoid ending up as targets of the latter's activities themselves? How can grassroots movements provide protection against the criminalisation of poverty and extremely violent security policies imposed on popular neighbourhoods? Also, in what ways do such communities building radical emancipatory practices effectively help to change the structural circumstances that push young people into criminal activities?

## BUILDING COMMUNITARIAN AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMIES

The building of territories of wellbeing and dignity for all necessitates the establishment of communitarian and solidarity economies rooted in reclaimed spaces. Retaining reclaimed spaces is also a constant struggle in cities. The consideration of radical economic practices presupposes a detailed, in-depth understanding of the logic underlying the current hegemonic economic system.

One key dimension of modern-day reality is the progressive privatisation and mercantilisation of spaces and social relations in our cities. Cities are arenas of speculative real-estate, housing and 'urban development' practices, the privatisation of crucial public services like water, transportation, education and healthcare, and the promotion of consumption through mass advertising. Common spaces like popular markets – such as the San Roque Market described in Chapter 4 or the weekly markets of New Delhi – and cultural, social or youth centres are all under pressure, and often end up being replaced by commodified spaces. Sometimes they reflect the interplay between the formal and informal economy, whereby the latter directly supports and further consolidates the former.

Secondly, capitalist expansion should be seen as a complex and multifaceted process that adapts to different circumstances. Capitalist accumulation has always relied on the appropriation of unpaid and undervalued care and reproduction work as well as nature, to maximise profit and guarantee growth and expansion. Accordingly, capitalist processes actually root privatisation and commodification in the decommodification of other practices or their maintenance or organisation as non-commodities. This implies that our discussion about decommodification should, in each situation, analyse which capitalist practices, relations and processes simultaneously involve commodities and non-commodities. Several such examples can be found regarding the environment, public goods or even public spaces in cities.

A third crucial aspect which, according to our discussion, needs to be considered when building communitarian and solidarity economies, is the dual challenge posed by constant impoverishment and dominant discourses around poverty and its eradication.

On the one hand, dispossession and expansive appropriation inevitably and constantly cause inequality and impoverishment, forcing many people to dedicate a large proportion of their life ensuring their survival, meeting their material needs and dealing with constant insecurity, anxiety and fear as a result of their precarious living conditions. In other words, poverty is actively engendered as the counterpart of the accumula-

tion and concentration of wealth, following and reasserting lines of class exploitation as well as racial and patriarchal divisions of labour rooted in the colonial past and its continuing imperial legacy. Thus, poverty can also be seen as a regime for exercising control over large swathes of the world's population, for it shapes the aspirations of millions of people around the globe who are striving to attain different levels of security, consumption and life opportunities for themselves and/or their children.

On the other hand, the ways in which poverty has been discursively framed by dominant development institutions reduces human needs essentially to capitalist market requirements. The most common indicators of poverty are centred around money, income and consumption, thereby making affective, relational, cultural and spiritual needs 'visible' in different terms, translating them into aspects of capital. In this way, cultural needs become needs for 'cultural services'. Accordingly, poverty eradication policies often promote features like competitiveness, individual entrepreneurship and property, the quests for profit and access to international markets, all of which are diametrically opposed to the values needed to build communitarian and solidarity economies. Instead, by focusing on income and consumption, mainstream top-down poverty eradication programmes often reduce capacities for self-organisation and self-reliance to resolve social, economic and political challenges.

Consequently, both radical economic vision and narratives as well as radical emancipatory forms of production, distribution and consumption are needed to replace the privatised and commodified city by building ways of living well that combine social and economic justice with access to social relations, community embedding and cultural belonging.

Our general outlook on building a transformative urban economy is based on combining the democratisation and decommodification of the economy by bringing it under communitarian or common control. Instead of enshrining profit-making and economic growth as the main organising principles of social relations and institutions, we agreed that the economy needs to be embedded in social and cultural relations and must sustainably nurture all dimensions of life.

One starting point of discussion was the notion of economies embedded in non-economic relations. Several members of our Working Group did not agree with this distinction between 'embedded' and 'non-embedded' economies, because in their view it implied that the capitalist economy is somehow not or never embedded in non-economic relations, which they argued is not the case. In their opinion, all economies are embedded. The key question, then, concerns the nature of embeddedness:

Does it enable life to flourish and foster wellbeing for all? Or do social and cultural relations rely on domination (extractivism, expropriation, accumulation by dispossession and the externalisation of costs and impacts that sustain contemporary urban centres) and the regimes of privatisation and neoliberalism that govern them? At the same time, our Working Group is aware of the historical limitations of state control over the economy, which has in many cases led to corruption, inefficiency and authoritarianism.

Bearing this in mind, it seems crucial to abandon the public/private divide as the principal, if not and only, way of organising the economy and society in general, by enlisting the notion of 'the commons' and embracing community-based economies and politics around the globe, as a radical form of social, economic and political relations. The commons are a historical construct, the result of hundreds of years of struggle, but also a contemporary theoretical, political vision deployed in struggles against privatisation and neoliberalisation to reclaim what belongs to everybody under community rules and norms.

As a Working Group, we collectively understand the usefulness of thinking about processes, like those evoked by the commons, for shoring up local power and harnessing 'people's power' to defend our dignity and existence by regaining control over our economies and politics. At the same time, we are very aware that the term 'commons' is an Anglo-Saxon concept that is not easy to translate into other languages, even when the cultures in question have (and have always had) communitarian practices of decommodification. Occasionally, academics and activists 'discover' de-commodified practices that are actually long-established communitarian structures.

Conscious of potential eurocentricity, and mindful of the different viewpoints regarding the concept of 'commons' within our own Group, we therefore opted to use it as an instrument to encourage an open debate, rather than as a narrow political framework for our discussion. This was particularly relevant in Barcelona, where we had seen during the week how the notion of commons had inspired local activism and policymakers to imagine other ways of organising the city, its politics and economies. Our discussion led us to define elements of the following general vision on radical economies that we share as a Group.

As we see it, radical economies:

- > are sustained by people's ability to control and direct the economy for the common good, whereby economic priorities and policies are subject to democratic processes;
- > favour relationship building over capital accumulation, as the example of community currencies shows (see Chapter 7), for although they provide an alternative way of accessing capital, their success may depend even more on the creation of dynamics and relationships based on solidarity, interchanging, risk sharing and mutual support, which strengthen the community's power in general;
- > require values other than capitalistic ones: the Quito market example (see Chapter 4) underscores the importance of prioritising use value over exchange value, to enable solidarity, intercultural dialogue and social relations to be woven into the market dynamic, being not exclusively or principally focused on maximising profits;
- > imply the need for sharing, including access to work, resources and benefits and also taking responsibility for the consequences of our activities;
- > value care work and include it in their modelling and cost-benefit analysis to ensure that it is recognised and paid for;
- > value and internalise environmental impacts with a view to steadily mitigating damage caused to nature by humanity;
- > require environmental justice and consciousness to transform the root causes of ecological destruction that are concentrated in our cities;
- > favour proximate links and networks for production, distribution and consumption over global capital flows by deglobalising supply chains and localising economies, to reduce their environmental impact and bolster interchanges and solidarity at the local and regional levels;
- > redistribute wealth, but also limit levels of consumption in search of a balance between our societies' impact and the limits posed by nature;
- > require different legal frameworks for property and commons;
- > provoke thought processes geared towards challenging the need to measure economic success, which may prove highly challenging, as it is not easy to think of indicators for wellbeing (having universal indicators would violate the idea of physical and material evidence of living 'well'); so here the indicators may focus more on processes and ways of creating accountability;
- > are rooted in the knowledges of communities, so we need to extend our criticism to development and processes that generate knowledge, whereby local and/or indigenous and/or ancestral knowledge (as opposed to the 'knowledge' of technocratic neoliberal experts) should drive our generation of knowledge and our creativity.

These principles associated with radical economies constitute a framework for a model that also needs to guarantee access to paid work as well as certain levels of consumption and access to goods. This makes it important to acknowledge that radical, emancipatory economic practices and commons often exist in complex and incomplete forms, establishing hybrid spaces and processes that are simultaneously (partly) anti-market, but also relate to its practices. After all, capital definitely requires commons to survive, even though at the same time it destroys them. For example, community currencies or interchange practices do not entirely rule out the use of money, but build radical, emancipatory practices and spaces that complement and articulate with conventional currencies.

In short, radical economies entail creating an ecosystem of different, articulated, coexistent economic rationales in which solidarity economies and cooperativism must occupy centre stage in a web of economic relations, enabled by common decision-making and public policies that transform and impede the current dominance of large-scale, transnational economic processes. The Working Group agreed that this transition does not necessarily mean creating a new 'model', because capitalism is not a model itself and therefore does not need an alternative to replace it. Rather, the transition is an ongoing struggle. Treating it as a 'model' reinforces the notion that change is the implementation of new plans formulated by elites. It is not.

Where commodities are concerned, gradual disconnection from global value chains will be required in order to protect territories or communities against damaging external market dynamics. This is where consumers can play a crucial role, for their daily choices will define whether local markets and grocers, short value chains, organic food and fair-trade produce have a chance of competing with global value chains and shopping malls. This makes raising awareness about consumption, campaign strategies targeting consumption or non-consumption (such as boycotts, divestments and sanctions) and establishing direct relations between consumers and producers absolutely vital for building radical solidarity economies.

The San Roque market example shows how this can work in practice. Since multinational companies lack a strong presence in Ecuador, production and commercialisation are still pretty much in the hands of national groups and local people. This allows markets to retain their place at the heart of local societies, not just as places for buying and selling, but also for fostering relations, intercultural dynamics and bonding. However, defending market commons also requires associations or other forms of economic linkage and stronger connections with rural collectives.

## TRANSFORMING RURAL-URBAN DYNAMICS

Radical urban economies depend on the transformation of relationships between cities and the countryside. Urbanisation can be seen as a process whereby self-sustaining rural communities lose their sovereignty and self-reliance, are destroyed by cities' expansion, marginalised and incorporated in relations of dependence with urban constructs and/or are penetrated by capital focused on creating new markets. At the same time, urbanisation is also a process of destruction and domination over the environment, transforming nature in resources and disciplined spaces to allow urban growth. This observation takes into account the fact that, throughout history, rural communities have been exploited in different feudal and other pre-capitalist societies around the world. Moreover, rural communities have their own endogenous dynamic for undermining their self-reliance and sustainability, e.g. fencing, the appropriation of land and water or the industrialisation of agriculture.

We need to confront any truly exploitative relations between cities and the countryside and subverting dichotomist discourse that portrays the urban and rural spheres as radically separated opposites, with wealth, opportunities and power located in cities and the importance of the countryside residing in its capacity to provide resources for metropolitan areas and absorb external pressures.

Our discussion underlined the fact that in today's world, distinctions between urban and rural areas have blurred, creating space for a 'rurban' reality, where rurality and urbanity are continuously connected, mixed and transformed. These new 'ruralities' and 'rurban' cities offer opportunities for overcoming the historical exploitation of the countryside and strengthen fundamental connections and dialogues between urban and rural areas.

Firstly, then, we must strive to promote and raise the profile of rurality in cities, by opening urban spaces and supporting agricultural practices and communitarian organisation there, as has happened with Black-owned cooperatives in the United States (see Chapter 5), with urban resistance in Brazil (see Chapter 3) and Nigeria (see Chapter 6), and even in the struggle for food sovereignty during military sieges in Syria's civil war (see Chapter 8).

Secondly, we need safe, visible spaces where providers of goods and services to cities can promote the valorisation of rural spaces within the city, following the ancestral traditions of, say, pre-Colombian American cities, where farmers were allocated prominent spaces to facilitate their connection with city dwellers.

A third strategy to follow is based on building alliances and connections between the countryside and cities, as in the examples of the markets in Ecuador and India. The creation of organisational bonds between rural producers and urban vendors with a view to developing a common political agenda or agendas on issues like environmental health and access to water, is a great way to build bridges.

If urban-rural relationships are to be transformed, rural life must be (re)dignified, breaking with stereotypical notions of rural backwardness and urban modernity. Because capitalism hinges on invisibility (people do not know where their water comes from) or on a form of visibility translated into capital terms (for example, ancestral and/or indigenous clothing and ceremonies are considered mere 'folklore', to be exploited for touristic purposes), it is crucial to convey more clearly the urban metabolism and the exploitative relationship within cities and vis-à-vis the countryside, and to facilitate mindful dealing with energy, food, water, people and animals. In other words, the correct way to respond to the market economy's shroud of invisibility is by raising awareness of people's lives, living environment and the connections between nature and all living beings.

The general strategy to follow entails ousting the city from our narrative of well-being and effectively decentralising economic and political processes in ways that promote rural access to power relations and resources and enable the local retention of wealth. Counter-policies to enable such decentralising processes, as well as grass-roots initiatives to build them up from the bottom up (e.g. energy cooperatives) are indispensable, while new, fairer circuits of exchange between urban and rural areas need to be supported.



## **TAKING BACK POWER: RADICAL DEMOCRACY, COUNTER-POLICIES AND TRANSFORMATIVE GOVERNANCE**

One crucial question is what kind of political regimes can foster urban radical transformations in the short and long term. At our meeting in Quito, we acknowledged that if deep structural change is to occur, our society needs to overcome the 'civillisation crisis'. In other words, the current state is poorly equipped and should probably be progressively subverted and transformed, whereas some of its characteristics should simply be abolished. That said, the state is currently a reality in our contemporary societies and should therefore, always be considered in our political strategies.

A serious evaluation of the emancipatory potential of the state should start by recognising that it is a complex landscape of interrelated institutions (at the local, provincial, regional, national, executive, legislative, and judicial levels in authorities, public health and education systems, public-sector companies and other state bodies). Historically, states were built by linking up different power regimes and regulatory practices in societies, territories and populations to form an increasingly coherent administrative apparatus.

In our modern, globalised world capital seems to be undermining the state, using it for its own ends. Local elites integrate state constructs in their power structures, and multinational companies and national elites 'hold states captive' to guarantee and promote their investments. This makes it important to understand that a specific type of urbanism can generate transformative and/or progressive movements. Several central states are opposing these progressive agendas at the municipal level. Another, more strategic question would be what kind of institutions beyond state policies can sustain radical urban transformation.

At our meeting in Quito, we learned that state institutions and representatives can play important roles in supporting – particularly defensive – social struggles. Nevertheless, the challenges of safeguarding sustainability while expanding radical transformative practices by institutionalising and stabilising them bring us back to the contradictory nature of the state's capacity to promote change through public policies. Since one of the state's main objectives and functions is to ensure stable conditions for the accumulation of capital, it comes as no surprise that radical emancipatory practices created by social movements have on many occasions been co-opted and depoliticised via state institutionalisation. However, it is hard to envisage short-term transitions from the urban metabolism occurring unless the right regulatory environments are created

and the huge impact on society of public investments and procurement, which can either enable or dismantle transformation, sovereignty and communalisation, is taken into account.

In general, we feel that active (counter-)policies designed to simultaneously enable solutions to the problems faced by urban populations and transform government institutions by giving power back to organised communities and decentralising the state, will initiate a more constructive discussion on a different political approach vis-à-vis the state, based on the notion of commons as the main context for public governance. In the cases of Brazil (see Chapter 3) and Bhuj in India (see Chapter 9), communities were not given back any power; they seized it! In Brazil, communities created their own territories; in Bhuj, slum dwellers took over urban planning to design the city, then state institutions took on board the practice already being applied, more effectively and transformatively than in the state's own urban planning. Such counter-policies can be envisaged for urban planning, public transport, environmental and other issues, and be implemented by organised movements and common institutions that can be integrated into political processes without becoming dependent on state institutions. Barcelona is an excellent example of an attempt to transform the local state by occupying and subverting institutions, building commons and implementing transformative regulatory frameworks, while at the same time using local policies to limit privatisation, financialisation and speculation.

A second debate covered the notions of democracy and self-determination, considering the birth of the concept of democracy in the Greek notion of people ruling themselves. In the globalised world of today, we tend to talk about democracy in two different ways: liberal representative democracy that can be exported around the world, or radical democracy that implies people governing themselves through various institutions and practices. Liberal representative democracy limits self-rule by the people to elections and referenda, while economic processes are left at the mercy of the principles and institutions of the free market. On top of this, economic actors, elites and institutions are increasingly penetrating and conditioning democratic political processes through lobbying, media coverage, financed campaigns and corruption. Although some representative and radical democratic practices and institutions may be complementary, people cannot rule themselves if political democracy is not also inextricably interlinked with social justice and economic democracy.

Our case studies highlight the varying potential and limitations of approaches aimed at building self-determination and radical democracy while also dealing with the state. Brazilian, Black communities in the United States and Nigerian urban communities are

calling for recognition, public services, and the implementation of local policies that support their plans and causes. Their organisations and leaders have either joined or maintained close relationships with progressive political parties, with mixed results. Quito's market and the Kenyan community-controlled credit-voucher-based currency need support and protection from local authorities, if their communitarian practices are to survive. At the same time, in each case, new political institutions are being built via practices based on self-organisation, since state-run institutions cannot satisfy or fully recognise the emancipatory potential and horizons of these respective experiences.

Our discussions also revealed the complex nature of self-determination, for communities can also conceal exploitative practices, and in many cases people lack the information and experience they need to make decisions. We therefore, need to avoid romanticising our analysis of forms of inequality, whether traditional (based on caste, class, race, patriarchy, etc.) or newly emergent (e.g. modern class relations).

All this underlines the importance of processes designed to build communities and territories and bolster self-determination, in an autonomous and relational way, based on different notions and cultures of power. Accordingly, the creation of new political cultures via social movements is a precondition for the existence of radical democracy. In many cities around the world, in recent years, the most visible struggles have involved women, feminists and the LGBTQ+ community, addressing specific issues of violence and discrimination, while simultaneously resisting authoritarian, conservative imaginaries and standing up to political power. Other social struggles, like those fought by the anti-racist, youth, environmental and animal rights movements, are also pushing for cultural shifts. Their practices call not only for an end to the status quo, but also for individual awareness, personal change and internal debates within left-wing movements and political organisations on ways of reducing inequality, oppression and the destruction of the natural world.

The often contentious and complex dialogues and meetings between these movements, both generally and in more localised struggles, create opportunities for weaving relational autonomies with the capacity to democratise our societies. The notion of polycentricity is very important, because decisions are often taken in several places simultaneously, creating a need to analyse how different 'nodes' are interrelated. Another crucial challenge is how to weave virtual online spaces into political processes and their practical implementation. These considerations are producing new political cultures and practices that are still emerging alongside traditional politics.

## CREATING A PATH BY WALKING: FINAL THOUGHTS ON STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Our Group's meeting in Barcelona explored community practices and political horizons for radical urban transformations. Once again, our discussions revealed capitalism as a many-headed monster – or hydra, as the Zapatistas in Mexico call it referring to the many-headed serpentine monster in Greek mythology – that takes on different guises in different places. What we need, then, is a number of strategies, pathways, demands and political methodologies to outsmart those deployed by capitalists. These strategies need to take account of temporal constraints, for time is running out to bring about the kind of radical change our society needs, while at the same time only limited conditions are conducive to radical change.

### THE INTERGENERATIONAL RESPONSE

The struggle to achieve radical transformations forces us to impose timeframes on what the movement and specific communities are yearning and endeavouring to achieve. Sometimes, in the short term, we may lose on important issues, whilst still making headway towards long-term goals. Likewise, we must keep a close eye on the future, the potential lack of immediate transformations and possible positive or negative impacts on future generations, e.g. via debts or climate-related factors. Communities like Detroit in the United States (see Chapter 5) have understood that transformations require intergenerational mobilisation, so movements and struggles in general need to create spaces where multiple generations can gather and communicate, not only in times of protest, but in order to talk strategy.

Embracing an intergenerational approach does not entail adopting a defeatist attitude in the present. Defending commons and resisting violence are immediate priorities that cannot be compromised, as indicated by all the case studies presented in this book. Similarly, some broader struggles, particularly in relation to coloniality, imperialism, land and dignity, have consequences for different generations and must not be jeopardised, even if short-term gains would benefit the movement in question. Movements pressing for radical transformation and the Left in general need to be clear and oppose occupation, colonisation and continue resisting and defeating imperialism. To this end, the Left must not fall into the trap of complicit silence, but instead express its unconditional solidarity with any colonised people who are losing their land. This is the lesson learned from the Black community in the United States and their indefatigable solidarity with the Palestinians.

Creating spaces where multiple generations are working together is grounding, it provides clarity and allows movements to push back their horizons even further, tapping into new creative domains. This is best exemplified in the United States by Afrofuturism (see Chapter 5) and digital occupations, i.e. virtual occupations of art exhibitions using smartphone technology. The recent spate of climate demonstrations taking place in cities around the world, led by schoolchildren, marks a break in the 'one-generation-in-charge' model inherited from capitalism. It is a call to pay attention to what all generations have to say. Children will not sit quietly and idly by. They are already taking responsibility and challenging the capitalist distribution of roles based on accumulated skills and competencies. This tendency is likely to grow in urban spaces.

## NEW URBANISM: TOWARDS ESTABLISHING TRANSFORMED AND TRANSFORMATIVE URBAN SPACES

However, as contemporary economic geography reminds us, capitalism is not a set of coordinates or poles and anti-poles: it creates space in a specific way, by setting up intersecting power relations related to the purpose of each space in the system. Yet, our contemporary world cannot be characterised by a simple dualistic pattern. It is more than evident that current patterns of growth are affecting many places at once, in uneven, but highly interactive, processes of expansion that often create dependencies. And even these processes come in many different shapes and forms.

At the same time, urban centres like cities are often manifestations of the exercising of power, where the ruling classes require capital investment as one way of consolidating their ruling order. This can lead to building up cities of capital to demonstrate power. Cities are where consumption occurs, where value extraction is concentrated and the power and creative potential of capitalism is unleashed and demonstrated. They are islands of demonstrative exclusivity and exclusion where subalterns, whose presence violates the creation of spaces of supremacy through processes of gentrification and/or the privatisation of public spaces, are squeezed out.

Cities and centres of capitalism are often pivotal to economic renewal and further waves of accumulation, precisely because they transform how things are done in a fundamentally competitive economic environment. This aspect heightens our challenge, of course, since our movement needs to define a 'new urbanism' in the same cities where solidarity, counter-hegemony, democracy, collective thinking, actual politics and radical transformations are exercised, extending beyond a growth-and-accumulation narrative.

## DEFENDING COMMONS, RESISTING VIOLENCE AND BUILDING COUNTER-POLICIES

As discussed at our Working Group's second meeting in Quito, societal transformation requires a combination of short-term strategies to limit and fight back against socio-ecological destruction, and it also needs to create and defend emancipatory practices that envisage radically different societies and build long-term social strategies conducive to structural change. In the short run, radical social struggles in defence of common spaces and interests are needed to stop speculation, financialisation and privatisation, and to resist the regimes of violence and criminalisation imposed on impoverished and racialised populations and neighbourhoods as seen in the Brazilian case (see Chapter 3). The design and implementation of counter-policies on different scales by decentralising economic policies can promote redistribution, sustainable livelihoods and an ecological transition, wherever possible with state support, but also through grassroots organisations and autonomous measures. This is to some extent what the slum dwellers of Bhuj in India (see Chapter 9) did when they attempted to take over their urban planning through a process they called 'decentralisation', albeit not in the neoliberal sense of the term, but signifying self-rule or *swaraj*.

## BUILDING NEW SUBJECTIVITIES

As extreme inequality, in contemporary urban contexts, is rooted in racism, colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy, strong intersectional narratives and strategies are crucial for real social transformation. Unless we wrest control over the material conditions for restoring dignity, democratising economies and contesting the tyranny of private property through cooperativism and communitarian economic practices, urban radical transformations will not be viable. Simultaneously, political action based on interpretations of what dignity and 'living well' mean in urban spaces must serve to destabilise the notions of poverty, progress, and individualism that sustain the 'imperial mode of living' by building emancipatory visions that include commoning and the democratisation of contemporary cities and also limit and curb mass consumption.

In a context of reactionary and violent counter-offensives against emancipatory struggles, public discourse and (political) culture is a strategic battleground, where particularly women's and feminist movements are engaged in fierce combat for the future. Their struggles focus on deepening democracy by extending it to self-determination regarding our bodies, lives, sexual reproduction, the eradication of all forms of violence; questioning the institution of the family as a supposedly safe,

power-free space; and freeing societies from heteronormativity and its many brutal consequences. In this sense, they are intent on changing everyday relations, even in our most intimate domains, and unravelling the threads of patriarchal narratives.

The power of counter-narratives also became evident to us at the Global Working Group's meeting with the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) in Barcelona in April 2018, where we learned that the housing movement had initially struggled to convince people to join them, primarily because of a lingering stigma associated with debt: People thought they were responsible for their own financial misery. So between 2009 and 2010, the movement focused on changing people's mindsets, to make evicted people understand that they were victims of the financial system and of the system of expropriation, that housing is a right, that losing an apartment while retaining the burden to pay off debt is an act of violence and contempt by the banking sector and capitalist political class, and that their sense of indignity must cease. To this end, the PAH wrote a green booklet in which they tried to make some of the technical language used broadly comprehensible, help people revel in small victories, explain different ways of practising peaceful civil disobedience, and provide useful documents on what to say to banks, for example. As the PAH researcher, Lucia Delgado explained to us, an emotional transformation has to take place, a collective feeling whereby people realise they are victims. That realisation induces a paradigm shift. That is how the movement learned from its mistakes, as Jaime Palomera from the research group La Hidra Cooperativa<sup>3</sup> explained: Its biggest mistake had been to call for a major shift even before work on changing people's mindsets had begun. As a result, only 30 people showed up. But after two years of work, those 30 people became millions of indignados.

## RECLAIMING NARRATIVES

Sometimes what is required is not necessarily a change in people's mindset, but the maintenance of an existing community's narrative. The importance of claiming own narratives was echoed many times in localised case studies discussed at the Working Group's annual gathering. In Detroit, the activist, organiser and poet, Tawana Honeycomb Petty reiterated: "Our city has suffered from a negative narrative. How can people engage if they believe what is told about them?" Tawana's uses of poetry is a powerful way of countering the capitalist narrative of a bankrupt city. Similarly, the use of photography as an artistic expression of resistance and community-building strategy in Makoko helped to generate synergies aimed at preventing the slum area's destruction (see Chapter 6). More attention needs to be paid to how bases of knowl-

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3 For more information, see: <http://lahidra.net>.

edge and memories of eviction and/or slavery are passed on through storytelling and poetry (Detroit) or photography (Makoko), and how these narratives affect sustainable transformative processes. Working Group participant, Isaak 'Asume' Osuoka's powerful question: "Who gets to define what is a slum?" was an important reminder of the importance of claiming one's own narrative and questioning other narrators' legitimacy. Capitalism in the 21st century only allows very narrow conceptions of 'quality of life' and even 'dignity'. These conceptions are not only associated with the endless material accumulation of goods, but are profoundly unsustainable, excluding majorities and often people poor in what feminists might term 'affective and relational wealth'. The reclamation process could encompass past and/or present narratives or visions. Collectively brainstorming on whether Detroit could be the fictional country of 'Wakanda' or how the Black body, Black organisation or community might look in the future version of the city is Afrofuturism's attempt to avoid falling victim to narratives controlled by white people.

## REVEALING WHAT CAPITAL CONCEALS

The deconstruction of the developmentalist, capitalist, imperial narrative lies in the need to reveal what capital conceals. Awareness-raising, or practices of mindfulness, is especially important in urban spaces, where racist, imperial or colonial designs benefit from the alienation, segregation and hierarchisation of people, material conditions and nature. When referring to mindfulness, we do not mean some numbing spiritual introspection, but rather fostering a full awareness of life and the environment we live in and the connections between nature and all living beings. In urban spaces, this translates into seeing cities as living systems. Raising people's awareness entails observing, investigating and then disseminating information. Capital has already anticipated and put forward different acceptable initiatives for greater transparency which tend to follow a strategy of information overkill. Initiatives like open government and open budgets are necessary, but insufficient, and the neoliberal 'smart city' solution poses a danger to privacy and threatens to tighten the surveillance of urban communities.

On the other hand, disclosing information on land and real-estate ownership would be extremely useful for galvanising movements' grassroots support and calls for action. One example of this might entail mapping, say, who or which vulture fund owns which building and land in Barcelona and using that information to determine how the movement can use the global supply chain to its benefit, mounting campaigns involving boycotts, divestment and sanctions, such as the recent expropriation of an empty apartment block owned by a bank ordered by Barcelona's municipal council.



In the same vein, the disclosure of information should not be limited to capital: It can apply to 'green' initiatives, too. What is accumulated in one place is extracted somewhere else, and the accumulated pollution and waste is also dumped somewhere else. For example, recent reports exposing how tons of recyclable material (and waste) are being shipped from the United States, Canada and Europe to the Global South gave us a clearer picture of the global scale of extraction and/or dumping, which brings us back to the principles of self-determination and sovereignty. Community-devised solutions, including green ones, must be handled locally and not be allowed to worsen the situation of marginalised populations, especially in the Global South.

## BUILDING NEW PRACTICES

In another example, emerging practices of urban commoning and building urban social movements in Athens resulted in collective experiences that are reclaiming the city as a potentially liberating environment and reframing crucial inherent questions of emancipatory politics. The city is becoming not just an environment, but also a means for joint experimentation in potential radical forms of social organisation. So in cities, social movements can construct inspiring examples of culture based on equality, solidarity and collective inventiveness, provided they remain capable of extending egalitarian values and practices beyond their strict physical boundaries.

Furthermore, most social movements within the urban context restore people's sense of being able to participate in political life in a new way and help to shape policy implementation. This entails a fairly revolutionary take on politics, where movements function as social laboratories, creating space for social interaction, experimentation with new ideas, and innovative social norms and codes through real contact with creative, collective processes. Potentially, such experiments in and structures of popular self-action, inventiveness, collective will and solidarity can serve as constituent forms and therefore, as conduits of emancipation and transformed awareness. These initiatives in an urban context can and must offer both opportunities and tools for translating differences between views, actions and different subjectivities. While comparability is based on the necessary and constitutive recognition of differences, translatability lays the foundations for negotiations on differences without reducing them to common denominators.

In this sense, any action we can take beyond the imperative to develop, grow and/or accumulate is well worth it, but whatever happens, such action must take account of all the multiple and interrelated aspects embodying core political concerns and serving to define political practice as radical. With this in mind, we insist that transforma-

tive practices should define terms like justice, dignity, democracy, self-organisation, etc more broadly. To do this, we need to bring together theory (i.e. understanding, conceptualisation and analysis) and practice (actual implementation). In short, we need to find ways of interlinking theory, daily life and political action, because this is the only way in which transformation can make any sense. And the people affected must have their say in shaping part of the conceptualisation and practical implementation of policies.

## MUNICIPALISM

Seizing control of local state institutions by winning elections is becoming a strategy adopted by social movements. One example was members of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement's (MXGM) efforts to combat white supremacy and achieve self-determination in Jackson, Mississippi, where they helped elect a Republic of New Afrika member, Chowke Lumumba, as mayor. A second was the social movement Barcelona en Comú, which was born out of a housing association, but evolved into a municipalist political party platform. The challenge when seizing public institutions is that social movements are pressured to morph into political parties within the representative democratic framework, which limits their leeway to take action. In addition to pursuing the objectives they originally set themselves, once in office, movements find themselves having to articulate a platform on other issues for which they were not prepared that divert energy away from realising their original agenda. The visit paid by the Working Group to the housing movement activists and members of Barcelona en Comú was helpful for identifying these challenges, the latter tiptoeing around the question of Catalonia's independence being one example.

The participants of the Working Group broadly recognise that municipalism can play an effective long-term role in urban transformation, but we also feel that as long as municipalism confines itself within a representative democratic framework, it will face challenges. How to practise municipalism differently, taking it beyond development and outside the framework set by racist colonial capitalism, is a question that begs further investigation. It is certainly no easy task, as the example of Jackson Mississippi shows, for even though Chokwe Lumumba and his son, Chokwe Antar, successfully became mayor, both and their respective teams saw their scope to take action restricted because the material factors essential for ensuring dignity (e.g. a water and energy supply and infrastructure) are all controlled by a minority of white capitalists sustaining their domination against a backdrop of white supremacy. Consequently, seizing control of institutions must go hand in hand with a long-term

strategy aimed at restoring material conditions through cooperatives and by decom-modifying water, energy, infrastructure and the monetary system, as was tried with the Sarafu-Credit currency system in Kenya (see Chapter 7). Whereas it is important to rise to these challenges, we must also recognise that many such municipalist movements are goal-based and utilise specific entry points, e.g. demanding the remunicipalisation of public services or calling for energy democracy. Quite often, these movements evolve into broader platforms and parties that wrest control over municipal councils and elected seats. In this connection, we should underline a certain tension between the occupiers of institutions and the occupiers of the streets, which becomes particularly apparent when municipalist platforms lose their accountability.

## CHANGING RURAL-URBAN RELATIONS

The push for environmental justice and an ecological transition is crucial on all levels (energy production, pollution, water, patterns of consumption) as urban metabolisms concentrate root causes for the global environmental crisis. That said, any transition will definitely include and require technological innovation, though not entailing developments that follow the pattern of profit maximisation, which is what drives technological progress in capitalist contexts. Only real, systemic change can avoid an ecological collapse. Such change entails transforming urban-rural dynamics to overcome dichotomist binary distinctions, integrating the countryside as providing the urban metabolism with prerequisites for life like food, water, raw materials, and so on. A different future demands more rurality in urban areas, through agroecology and food sovereignty initiatives, as well as via communitarian and intercultural social spaces and a dignified countryside where people live well and the balance with nature is preserved.

All this can only be built on a solid basis of political organisation and social movement building, which necessitates building bridges between movements and struggles and above all maximising alliances between urban and rural organisations. Issues like food, water and environmental health seem to have the potential to deepen alliances. Popular struggles and alliances between more middle-class movements of activists, consumers, and so on are fundamentally important.

## URBAN TRANSFORMATIONS, GLOBAL TRENDS AND THE LEFT

Cities in the Global North have accumulated and expanded through centuries of colonial and imperial mechanisms for dispossessing colonies in the Global South. In today's capitalist system, the Global South cannot close the gap in the accumulation of capital by Western countries in a system where cities have been designed to serve as focal points of extraction via transport and trade networks. Therefore, the historical relationship of accumulation and/or dispossession on a global scale cannot be ignored when analysing a localised practice of urban transformation. This is what makes the cases of Barcelona, San Roque, Makoko and Jackson Rising interesting, since these examples articulate how global economic and imperial trends directly impact cities. On the other hand, the danger that the 15th Garden network in Syria might end up being an ephemeral transformation is probably attributable to the conflict situation there, though the war in question has involved not just local actors, but imperial military forces as well. The ongoing debate on Syria within the international Left reinforces a kind of black-or-white duality that does not tally with reality. This duality silences local voices, like the one highlighted in the case study (see Chapter 8), but it also singles-out voices – deemed lacking of 'nuanced' analysis – who have called on the Assad regime to stop food sieges and at the same time rightfully acknowledged the devastation caused by imperialism. For too long, the left has hindered its own progress as it has failed to overcome what comes through as a dualistic tendency of the imperative to be for or against such-and-such a situation or regime.

What the Working Group has been discussing since the meeting in Quito in 2017 is that a strictly hawkish view does not paint a complete picture and can sometimes put obstacles in the way of localised resistance and the building of radical practices and territories. At the same time, each of us could undoubtedly speak about localised processes happening near where we live, places with which we are familiar because we are connected to them, but we have all also spoken about the effects of the global economy, climate change and imperial interventions, which affect us all. In that respect, just like within the Left, there are differences of opinions within our Working Group. On the question of possible strategies that communities and movements can display to articulate localised/national struggles without 'feeding the beast of imperialism', or on how to resist imperialism without silencing localised/national experiences and struggles, is a discussion that requires to be deepened in our Group. Some participants of the Working Group have acknowledged that the future of media, information and communication need further in-depth discus-

sion, especially in these times of great censorship and the criminalisation of white Western whistleblowers who have turned against their respective 'empires', the most notable examples being Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden.

## GROWING COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Whereas in many parts of the Global South, serious environmental issues are already likely to cause further geographical re-shaping and directly impact urban life as well, through water and human health crises, 'natural' disasters and migrations by climate refugees in the Global North. More movements in and out of cities are to be expected, because cities are – by colonial design – unsustainable. Awareness of environmental and dignity-related issues will probably grow enormously as the consequences of such ecological crises unfold. Since these trends are likely to evolve, we will have to be creative about how we keep on building transformative urban-rural spaces.



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Comrade Abiodun Aremu is a Pan-Africanist, socialist and revolutionary focused on the advancement of humanity on a global scale. Executive Secretary of the Kolagbodi Memorial Foundation since 1996 and Editor of the Nigeria Labour Factsheet since 2004, Comrade Aremu holds leadership roles as Secretary of the Joint Action Front (JAF), Joint Secretary of the Labour and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) and Co-Coordinator of the Amilcar Cabral Ideological School Movement (ACIS-M).

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Dr Mauro Castro Coma is an activist, researcher and associate professor at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (UPC). He graduated in economics before completing a PhD in Political Science and was a co-founder of consultancy and social research enterprise *La Hidra Cooperativa* and is an active member of the *Fundación de los Comunes*, a project driven by various experiences of autonomous research, education, publishing and political intervention in social movements in Spain. He has been involved in organising scientific events and research projects and has had various scientific publications in authoritative journals such as *EURE*, *Urbe* and the *Social Justice Journal*.

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Marion Cauvet has led various research projects on community currencies in Europe, Africa and Latin America since 2015. She focuses in particular on the potential of such currencies to foster the transition to sustainable agri-food systems at regional level. In 2018, she and B. Perrissin-Fabert published the book *Les monnaies locales: vers un développement responsable: la transition écologique et solidaire des territoires* (Editions Rue d'Ulm, Sciences Durables).

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## RAPHAEL HOETMER

Raphael Hoetmer was born in the Netherlands but has spent the last 15 years in Latin America, collaborating as a researcher, activist and popular educator with communities and social organisations in the Andean countries, particularly in the context of extractivist activities. Raphael is a member of the Permanent Discussion Group on Alternatives for Development and the Political Ecology Working Group of the Latin American Council for Social Sciences. He has published several articles, reports and policy papers, as well as editing five volumes on social conflicts, social movements, human rights, democracy and extractivism in Latin America. He is also the proud father of two wonderful little girls.

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Patric Hollenstein has a Master's degree in political studies from the Latin American Social Sciences Institute FLACSO Ecuador and the University of St. Gallen (Switzerland) and is a professor and researcher at the Central University of Ecuador. His research focuses on food markets, agri-food networks and chains, fair trade, popular and solidarity economies and rural areas. He is writing his doctoral thesis on the current transformation of popular fresh-food markets in Ecuador at the Andean University Simón Bolívar. He is a member of the *Grupo Tierra* research network and the *Red de Saberes*, an independent research group on urban studies.



## ANSAR JASIM

Ansar Jasim is an activist-researcher and studied political science at the University of Halle (Saale) in Germany, the CNMS in Marburg (also in Germany) and SOAS in London. Since 2012 she has worked with a German-Syrian human rights organisation based in Berlin. She sees herself as an ongoing student of emancipatory grassroots and resistance movements in Syria and beyond, to whom she ascribes her interest in and understanding of politics.

## MABROUKA M'BAREK

Mabrouka M'Barek was an elected member of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly from 2011 to 2014 and helped draft a new constitution. Her efforts focused on including constitutional provisions on food and economic sovereignty as well as efforts that led to article 13 which put an end to the non-disclosure of extractive contracts and permits and open the way to the Tunisian people's determination over their nation's material resources.

## MARY ANN MANAHAN

Mary Ann Manahan is a feminist activist researcher from the Philippines who works with social movements to demand equity, social and environmental justice and redistributive reforms. She is currently the Coordinator of Global Greengrants Fund's International Financial Institutions (IFI) Advisory Board, which provides small grants to grassroots organisations working on the socio-environmental impacts of international development finance. Mary Ann holds an undergraduate degree in sociology from the University of the Philippines-Diliman and a Master's degree in globalization and development from the Institute of Development Policy and Management at the University of Antwerp (Belgium).

## MARC MARTÍ COSTA

Marc Martí Costa holds a PhD (focusing on public policy and social transformation) from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and has a keen interest in analysing local policies, especially in the field of urban planning, housing and participation, and studying urban governance and social change. He has been a lecturer on the Master's Degree in Urban Studies at the Latin American Social Sciences Institute FLACSO Ecuador. He currently teaches at the Master's Degree in Urban Planning and the City at the Open University of Catalunya (UOC) and is Head of Governance and Public Policies at the Barcelona Institute of Regional and Metropolitan Studies (IERMB).

## ASEEM MISHRA

Aseem Mishra is a qualified urban planner who has been involved in multifarious aspects of urban life such as participatory urban planning and governance, slum redevelopment, informal economy and gender equity. For over a decade, he has worked with various civil society organisations (CSOs), urban local bodies (ULBs) and academic institutions on these topics. The idea is to make cities more inclusive, focusing in particular on marginalised communities. He has been playing an active role in the Homes in the City (HIC) programme in Bhuj (India) since 2016.

## RUTH MWANGI

Ruth Mwangi has worked on the design and testing of many projects within informal settlements in Kenya since 2004. She has served on the Board of Directors at the Grassroots Economics Foundation, managing its planning, strategy and operations. As a 2016 Mandela Washington Fellow and a finalist for the 2016 Echoing Green Fellowship, she has had the opportunity to speak at various international organisations, such as the Society for International Development - Netherlands Chapter (SID - NL) in The Hague, and to lead, train and direct numerous groups, conferences and events. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Management – BABM (Hons) from the University of Sunderland (United Kingdom). Her ambition is to overcome poverty and the flaws of the economic crisis in our society.

## ISAAC 'ASUME' OSUOKA

Isaac 'Asume' Osuoka is the Director of Social Action, a Nigerian organisation working for social justice through research, popular education and advocacy in solidarity with communities, activists and scholars. He holds a doctorate with a specialisation in state and civil society relations.

## ANA RODRÍGUEZ

Ana Rodríguez is a curator and researcher. She studied fine arts and philosophy at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne in France, and cultural studies at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito (Ecuador). She served as Ecuador's Minister and Vice-Minister of Culture from 2015 to 2016, after leading the Contemporary Art Centre from 2010 to 2012 and then directing the City Museums Foundation from 2012 to 2014 (all in Quito). At present, she is working on public policies encompassing cultural institutions, gang studies, food sovereignty and popular markets. She is also a member of *Red de Saberes*, an independent research group on urban studies.

## GIORGOS VELEGRAKIS

Giorgos Velegrakis is an adjunct faculty at the Philosophy and History of Science Department at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (Greece), researching and teaching on issues related to political ecology, radical geography, socio-environmental conflicts and movements, and the science-technology-society (STS) interrelations.

## SANDEEP VIRMANI

Sandeep Virmani, an architect by training, has helped establish four institutions over the past 29 years. The Hunnarshala Foundation has built thousands of homes reviving and modernizing the traditional techniques of building. Sahjeevan has helped governments recognize the science of pastoral animal husbandry towards a sustainable economic production system. Communities are being supported to scientifically conserve the habitats and key threatened flora and fauna in their villages. Arid Communities and Technologies has helped hundreds of villages in the desert use local water towards their drinking water security. Satvik's work on the genetic character verification and multiplication of rain-fed crops has shown their ability to reduce vulnerability to climate change.

## ELANDRIA WILLIAMS

Elandria Williams is a member of the Rosa Luxemburg Alternatives to Development Working Group and has been organizing since they were 12 years old in the footsteps of family and community. They are the Executive Director at PeoplesHub, an online social movement school connecting people, strategies, analysis, solutions and action. They also provide support to solidarity economic initiatives and is a co-editor of Beautiful Solutions, a project that is gathering some of the most promising and contagious stories, solutions, strategies and big questions for building a more just, democratic, and resilient world. They are proud to be from the US South especially Tennessee and Florida and are also the proud auntie/uncle/mama of four nieces/nephews and four god kids.

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The background of the page is a collage of three images. The top image shows a dense, multi-story urban housing complex. The middle image shows a protest with a large 'No' sign. The bottom image shows a group of people, including a woman in a white shirt, looking towards the camera.

Cities are the result of a variety of historical processes: the processes of state building and consolidation in general, capitalism, colonisation and imperialism, in particular, have led to the centralisation of political and financial power in administrative centres focused on ruling the general population and others further afield. As such, global urbanisation maintains mutual constituent relationships with the main patterns of domination in our societies, shaping their development. However, cities have also seen intense political disputes about their future, as urban populations have organised to meet the challenges of everyday life, resist dispossession and defend their rights. New forms of struggle have evolved from the intercultural dialogue between very different people living together in cities, meaning that these have also become centres for self-organisation and community building, based on solidarity, reciprocity and mutual support, thereby fostering some degree of resilience and security. Lately, the crisis of civilization, exacerbated by COVID-19, has shown how cities, usually understood as the sites where people move to in order to live 'successful' lives, where they can realize consumption and have easier access to many public services than in the countryside, have become deadly traps of contagion.

The catalytic political problem resulting from all this leads to a number of collective research questions: What conditions and strategies enable radical transformation in urban contexts? What kind of economic and political processes can sustain radical urban transformations? What urban realities does the countryside need in order to re-dignify rural life and rural-urban relations and vice versa? What theoretical and political frameworks contribute to radical urban transformations?

This volume, written by movement-based activists, organizers and researchers, is a joint effort to deal with all these questions. It includes seven case studies from various contexts around the world and two theoretical papers on the possibilities and challenges for radical urban transformation, highlighting the tremendous transformative potential of cities.

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