

Chapter 5

Urban Commons and Sustainable Cities

Birgit Daiber

I. Introduction

The paper brings into focus the discourse and practice of urban commons, through a discussion of some ongoing movements and projects in the cities of Europe and Global South. In many ways, these initiatives anticipate and affirm the vision of sustainability and equity, as outlined the New Urban Agenda. They also help build our shared knowledge of what works in real-world scenarios.

Today, most megacities of the world are run like for-profit corporations where sustainability is used as just another buzzword, emptied of meaning and value. At its core, the idea of sustainability links our everyday consumption practices with imperatives of production. In contemporary society, particularly in urban contexts, citizens are increasingly disconnected from the conditions and processes of production, such as of the food they eat, the electricity they use, or the houses they live in. As a result, a large number of them fail to relate to concerns of climate change, biodiversity, food security, or urban poverty.

This alienation of people from concerns of degradation of productive resources, pollution through wasteful consumption and social justice, has been described in urban theory as a 'social metabolic rift' (McClintock 2010). A move towards sustainability requires therefore that we first overcome this rift. One of the ways this can be achieved is through the adoption of the three tenets derived from the philosophy of urban commons. These are as follows: One, reinstating a social/civic sense of collective ownership of environment so as to discourage wasteful consumption; two, curing the 'extinction of experience' of nature and an 'environmental generational amnesia' among urban inhabitants, by reviving their proximity to nature and participation in collective production and sustenance activities; and three, innovatively reorganizing our urban governance institutions, so as to ensure equitable participation of rich and the poor.

The realization of the New Urban Agenda hinges upon our capacity to the urban commons approach in all aspects of urban life. In this context, our proposals and plans for smart cities need to pay greater attention to this approach, in particular affordable housing, open public spaces, urban agricultural activities, and participative democratic governance of urban resources and institutions.

II. 'Reclaiming our Commons'

Commons and commoning can be seen “active processes whereby subaltern organisations and groups of people identify and take control of resources and manage them in common, i.e. democratically and collectively, not privately or in an exploitative manner” (Cato and North 2017). In nearly all parts of the globe, initiatives and projects on commons are on the rise.

As such, the movement on commons is not very old and one can perhaps trace its emergence to the massive struggle against privatisation of water in Cochabamba, Bolivia in the early 2000s. Notably, in 2010, the UN general assembly made a decision to include access to clean water as a basic human right into the Human Rights’ Charter. In 2012, Italian citizens also decided in a referendum that water should be a common good. The same decision was taken by citizens of Berlin and Thessaloniki. Also ongoing are struggles of small farmers for land and natural seeds, such as the Brazilian movement, ‘Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)’, wjocj is the largest social movement in Latin America with an estimated membership of 1.5 million people and a presence in 23 of Brazil’s 27 states. It is about landless peasants settling on the land of absentee landlords, and using it for cooperative farming and construction of houses, schools and clinics. Another example is the struggle of fishermen in India and Brazil for common access to the sea, and against the privatisation of coastal areas.

These few examples show the growing resistance of people all over the world against commodification of nature and essential resources. The declaration, “Reclaim the Commons” at the World Social Forum in Belém 2009, captures it as thus: “...a new vision of society is arising - one that honour human rights, democratic participation, inclusion and cooperation. People are discovering that alternatives and commons- based approaches offer practical solutions for protecting water and rivers, agricultural soils, seeds, knowledge, sciences, forest, oceans, wind, money, communication and online collaborations, culture, music and other arts, open technologies, free software, public services of education, health or sanitization, biodiversity and the wisdom of traditional knowledge.” In many ways, the commons approach represents one of the most constructive pathways to sustainability, bringing together ecological, democratic and social needs in a harmonious blend.

III. Initiatives on Urban Commons

Examples from Europe

Urban commons is an important area within the overall field of commons, and a whole set of approaches and questions have shaped its course. Foster and Iaione (2016) pose: “what are the possibilities of bringing more collaborative governance tools to decisions about how city space and common goods are used, who has access to them, and how they are shared among diverse urban population?” On similar lines, the P2P-Foundation in Ghent, Belgium, which is developing a general urban commons transition plan for cities and proposing new forms of public commons partnerships, asks: “what can cities do to respond to the new demands of citizens as common; what their role may be in

facilitating a social-ecological transition; and what institutional adaptations would favour such a role” (Bauwens 2017).

A number of initiatives on urban commons are currently underway within Europe, started variously by specific groups of citizens or by municipalities working on participatory democracy. These include projects such as decentralized use of regenerative energy sources, social housing, digital democracy, urban gardening, open spaces for culture and art, among others.

As an example, in the city of *Naples* in Southern Italy, the Mayor de Magistris responded to the demands of the Italian movement “Bene Comune”, to create a department for commons in his Municipality. Further, the City Council changed the municipal statute by inserting ‘commons’ as one of the interests to be protected and recognised as a fundamental right. Backed by these municipal policies, movement activists occupied more than 20 abandoned buildings for social, political and cultural use.

Another example is from Barcelona, where a participatory citizen’s platform, “Barcelona en comú”, has started work on decentralized and democratic controlled use of renewable energy sources at the Municipal level. The platform was mobilized when Ada Colau, an activist with the movement, “okupas”, became the Mayor of the city in 2015, with support of Left parties in the City Council. Briefly, “okupas” is about occupying abandoned houses and giving them to families who lost their homes during the European crisis. Its activists also try to save the old popular boroughs at the seaside, from being taken over by international investors. Once in power, Ada extended cooperation to many progressive socio-ecological local movements. One of the first international activities undertaken by her administration in 2016 was the signing of a proclamation on open and refugee-friendly cities against the inhumanity of EU and its member states, together with Mytilene (Lesbos) and Lampedusa (Sicily). In 2017, Barcelona was invited to “Fearless Cities”, an international conference with participants from 180 cities of the world. They raised the slogan “democracy was born in cities and here we’ll win it back” and resolved to create global networks of solidarity and hope “in the face of hate, walls and borders”. Like many other cities in the world, Barcelona is thus keenly embracing practices of urban participatory democracy.

In *Germany*, “MietshäuserSyndikat” (MHS) is a network that has been launched to support self-organized, cohousing projects. It also aims at reducing re-commercialization by ensuring that all inhabitants co-own the real estate assets of these cohousing projects. For a cohousing initiative to join MHS, some requirements must be met. The project needs to be self-organized by its residents, and a house and a financing plan must be on hand. The syndicate also connects successful projects with emerging ones to facilitate exchange, i.e., once a cohousing project establishes a secure financial basis, it needs to support new projects that are in the critical, cost-intensive early phases. Since 1983, the network has grown to consist of 111 cohousing projects with a total of about 3,000 residents. Twenty-one initiatives throughout the country are in the process of

joining the network (Kichler 2017).

Examples from the Global South

There are also numerous examples from cities of the Global South. A recent publication on urban commons, “Sharing Cities – Activating the Urban Commons” presents 137 case studies from across the world, of which at least 28 cases come from the Global South (Shareable 2017).

However, there are cases that are well known, but not necessarily included in such reports, such as the self-management initiatives in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro, which are often in conflict with both authorities and Mafias, and the “Bolivarian Revolution” in *Venezuela*. Since the beginning of this revolution, direct democratic participation and new forms of communism have been actively promoted - which are functioning even today though under very difficult circumstances. One also saw the establishment of communal councils, as legal and social structures, should be regarded with special interest in our discussion on commons. “In April 2006, the National Assembly approved the Law of Communal Councils, which was reformed in 2009 following a broad consulting process of councils’ spokespeople. The communal councils in urban areas encompass 150-400 families; in rural zones, a minimum of 20 families; and in indigenous zones, at least 10 families. The councils build a non-representative structure of direct participation that exists parallel to the elected representative bodies of constituted power. The communal councils are financed directly by national state institutions, thus avoiding interference from municipal organs. The law does not give any entity to the authority to accept or reject proposals presented by the councils. The relationship between the councils and established institutions, however, is not always harmonious; conflicts arise principally from the slowness of constituted power to respond to demands made by the councils and from attempts at interference. The communal councils tend to transcend the division between political and civil society (i.e., between those who govern and those who are governed)” (Azzellini 2013). Similar examples include the “Quiero mi Barrio” programme in Chile or the Social- Housing-Cooperatives in Egypt, where one third of the population is participating in about 2300 social-housing cooperatives.

Another example is from *Brazil*, which is discussed as follows by Cato and North (2016): “The Conjunto Palemeira is a rural town of 30,000 people in north-eastern Brazil which has traditionally suffered from high unemployment. Although the town did have small-scale manufacturing, the products were sold in nearby cities and much of the value was lost to middlemen. Communal activity in the town developed as a result of demonstrations against the poor state of infrastructure: the town had no facilities for sanitation, clean water, electricity or other public services. From the early 1980s an ‘Association of Inhabitants of Palmeira Neighbourhood’ was established and in turn this group set up the Banco Palmas, which issues its own currency without being backed by the national currency. There are currently around 30,000 palmas in circulation (more

than \$15,000). The bank has six paid employees, who receive 20% of their salary in palms. Banco Palmas makes small loans to local people which only circulate within the neighbourhood. With these loans local people to create small businesses, thereby generating an income and enabling them to pay the loans back. The creation of currency has enabled the strengthening of the local economy and the creation of more than 1,000 jobs” (ibid).

Seoul, a city of 10 million inhabitants, represents one of the most promising examples in South-East Asia of a Municipality that is promoting democratic participation. In 2012, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) launched the Sharing City Seoul program, and also enacted the Seoul Metropolitan Government Ordinance on the Promotion of Sharing, which provides a legal foundation for this initiative. The purpose of the ordinance is to “maximize utilization of resources, recover communities and revitalize the regional economy” through emphasis on sharing. It defines sharing as “activities that create social, economic and environmental values by jointly using resources, such as space, goods, information, talent and experience.” The ordinance designates official sharing enterprises that address urban challenges and meet social, economic or environmental criteria. Specifically, the Mayor of Seoul may designate an organization that intends to solve social problems through sharing as a “sharing organization” or “sharing enterprise” following deliberations by the Sharing Promotion Committee of the SMG. The Mayor may also provide funds from SMG’s Small and Medium Enterprises Fund, and allow a sharing organization or enterprise to use a public facility at a reduced fee where necessary to serve the public interest (Sharp 2017)

The ethic of sharing is also at the heart of a peer-to-peer generosity project in *Ahmedabad*, on the issue of food, which one of our basic necessities in life, but which is becoming scarce across the globe. According to the World Food Program, approximately 795 million people in the world don’t have access to sufficient and healthy food. But what would happen if those who do start sharing their food generously with others? It may not of course solve the problem of food scarcity, but it could be a significant step in ending hunger. One such experiment is being carried out by Seva Café, which was launched in 2006, and is run by a few volunteers, who make and serve meals to guests everyday. Based on the model of gift economy, the meals are served as an unconditional gift, with no price. Guests may choose to pay or volunteer with the organization, but they aren’t required to do either. The bill at Seva cafe reads “0/-” with only this footnote, “Your meal was a gift from someone who came before you. To keep the chain of gifts alive, we invite you to pay it forward for those who dine after you.” Anjali Desai, a volunteer at Seva Café, says: “I think when you come into a space with strangers and you feel at home, you suddenly realise that this world is one family” (Balwani 2017).

Another successful initiative is from *Jakarta*, on disaster response management through crowd-sourced civic data. It is called PetaJakarta. Jakarta is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Every year it gets flooded during monsoons, since 40 percent of the city is at or below sea level - a problem that is going to intensify with the

expected rise in global sea levels due to climate change. Interestingly, Jakarta has one of the highest concentrations of active Twitter users in the world and an overall high use of mobiles. Given this context, a public-private partnership between Twitter, Jakarta Emergency Management Agency, the University of Wollongong in Australia, and others led to the development of CogniCity, an open-source intelligence framework that manages spatial data received from mobile messaging apps. The first platform built on CogniCity was PetaJakarta, a Twitter-based crowdsourcing map for flood data. It relies on Twitter to organize and display real-time information about flooding to the city's residents. It allows users to geotag Tweets to indicate hazardous flooded areas, which are verified and added to a map of government flood alerts that anyone can use. The platform has received international praise from organizations such as the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (Conway 2017).

In *Philippines*, social housing programmes for the urban poor and informal settlers are being designed and implemented by a consortium of organisations. The housing backlog in the country is currently up to five million. Almost 1.2 million of the urban poor live in precarious and untenured housing in informal settlements, of which 104,000 live in Metro Manila's danger zones, which includes the easement of waterways and right of way of power transmission lines. Another large group of 107,000 families live within the easement of the south railway system from Manila to Bicol. Yet others live on large estates of government owned and controlled corporations (GOCCs) or on private lands, without legal tenure.

Kilos Maralita (KM) is a network of community associations comprising informal settler families. The associations are registered either as housing cooperatives (with CDA) or homeowners' associations (with HLURB). Other members of KM are federations of urban poor peoples' organizations. Currently, KM focuses on assisting informal settlers' associations prepare comprehensive social housing project proposals, also called peoples' proposals, and negotiates for finance with government agencies, particularly the Social Housing Finance Corporation (SHFC). In recent years, KM also initiated the KM Federation of Housing and Community Service Cooperatives (KM Federation) to undertake business undertakings to support resettled communities. Two NGOs, the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD) and the Institute for Philippine Cooperatives and Social Enterprise Development (IPCSED) provide KM and the KM Federation and their affiliated community associations with various forms of organizational and business development assistance. Together, these bodies, KM, the KM Federation, IPCSED, and IPD constitute a Consortium for Informal Settlers Families.

To date, 13 housing projects proposed by KM affiliates have received final approval for funding by SHFC under the HDH program, with a total cost of over P4.4 Billion, covering a total of 10,400 families. The average project cost per family housing unit is P410,000 (the financing ceiling is P450,000 per family housing unit). Of these, at least eight projects are already under construction (Villanueva 2017).

IV. Conclusion

The cases discussed above exemplify the diversity of practices on urban commons, initiated variously by citizens, municipalities, local administrators and traditional NGOs. Many of the projects start as acts of disobedience against commodification of space, resource and basic services, but every such project is only the beginning of a process. What is often seen is that having gained experience in democratic participation and management, the stakeholders move on to develop new initiatives. The need of the hour is to recognize these successful alternatives and use these learnings to redefine our discourse and practice on sustainable urban development.

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