Reshaping the Future: How local communities are catalysing social, economic and ecological transformation in Europe

The First Status Report on Community-led Action on Sustainability and Climate Change in Europe

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Community-led initiatives across Europe and elsewhere are actively envisioning, creating and living within alternatives that are rooted in sustainability, equality and social justice. Largely located on the margins of mainstream society and limited by material, cultural, institutional and structural constraints, they are far from realising their potential as catalysts for society-wide transformation. However, they are the best working models that currently exist of how a sustainable and fair society under current global circumstances might look. Their progress towards global sustainability targets far exceeds that of mainstream society. This has been achieved in ways that radically challenge existing social, cultural and political paradigms. These challenges need to be embraced, and these alternatives become the basis of a new normal, if Europe is to achieve its ambitious targets on climate action and sustainability.

About the Report

The first Status Report on Community-led Action on Sustainability and Climate Change in Europe seeks to capture the state of the art of current knowledge regarding community-led initiatives (CLIs) across the continent, in order to inform policy and practical action. It was initiated by ECOLISE and the Faculty of Science at Lisbon University, and undertaken with the support of several other partners. It represents a new form of engaged scholarship that actively seeks to participate in the societal and cultural transformation necessary to avoid ecological, social and political disaster.

The Status Report is a first step in an ongoing process of assembling, synthesising and communicating information about CLIs. All interested parties are thus invited to collaborate in and support efforts towards a more comprehensive and in-depth follow-up release, alongside coordinated efforts to address knowledge gaps through further research.

Community-led Initiatives

CLIs are diverse in nature and motivation. They arise whenever people self-organise within their local communities to take constructive action on issues that matter to them. They are usually motivated by environmental and/or social concerns, and seek to provide meaningful, local responses to global and/or national sustainability and related challenges.

CLIs complement centralised action on sustainability and climate change on the part of governments, business and other established actors. They are neither a ready-made solution to environmental and social problems, nor an antidote to inadequate, insufficient or inappropriate government action or diversion from the deeper structural changes necessary to create a fairer and more sustainable society. They represent an entirely different mode of action, which recognises the deep social and cultural roots of current crises and seeks to address these from the bottom up.

Meta-networks such as ECOLISE bring together networks of organisations representing CLIs from across Europe
Inspiring new models for the future

Evidence for the impact of CLIs shows they provide effective pathways to implementing key policy frameworks such as the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They do so in ways that have multiple social benefits and that eliminate the tensions between sustainability and wellbeing inherent in current economic models.

CLIs are effective because they act, organise and understand very differently to mainstream society. They thus demonstrate the need for radical shifts away from current dominant social, political and economic models and the worldviews that underlie them.

At the same time CLIs provide working examples of alternatives that can replace current models. They point towards more transformative transition pathways that might require higher initial levels of investment and initially proceed at slower rates. However, in the long term they allow deeper and more enduring cuts in greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental impacts than can be achieved by simply integrating greener technologies into existing structures.

CLIs collaborate at all scales: from local to global

CLIs interconnect and collaborate through translocal networks, at all levels from the regional to the global. Some of these networks are connected because they work in similar areas, and/or with similar approaches.

Examples include networks of community energy projects such as RESCoop; of food-based initiatives such as community-supported agriculture and slow food; and of alternative economic approaches such as complementary currencies and timebanks. Other networks are based on holistic models such as ecovillages (mostly intentional communities set up as experiments in more sustainable ways of living); permaculture (a design system for sustainable lifestyles, communities and organisations); Transition (a movement of local initiatives for envisioning and creating more resilient communities via economic relocation and self-determination), and the RIPESS network of social solidarity economy initiatives.

More recently, CLIs have begun to organise in cross-movement and cross-sector networks, such as ECOLISE (European Network for Community-Led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability), which was founded in 2014. ECOLISE is a Europe-wide meta-network of national and international representative organisations of CLIs, particularly in the permaculture, ecovillage and Transition movements, along with specialised members in fields such as research, education, communication, project development and process facilitation.

Many CLIs also have affinities with movements such as Degrowth. It is network of researchers and activists making and acting upon the case that meaningful action on sustainability requires abandoning the assumption that endless growth in GDP is necessary, possible or desirable.
CLIs are numerous and widespread

The exact numbers and full distribution of CLIs across Europe are not known, with only partial data available and figures varying widely according to methodology and source.

- The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) website lists 130 established communities in Europe (among more than 1,000 worldwide), while the Transition Network website lists 600 local initiatives in European countries. Both these figures reflect initiatives who have self-registered and are likely to be substantial underestimates.

- A 2015 survey of the global permaculture movement identified 105 nationally significant organisations in 42 European countries. The number of active projects and practitioners is far higher: 250 projects are registered with the national association in Denmark, different sources list up to 200 projects in Portugal, and informed estimates suggest the UK is home to up to 800 community-level projects.

- The RESCoop.Eu network of European community energy projects includes organisations representing over 1500 such projects and estimates the total number to be around twice that.

- A 2016 survey of community-supported agriculture and similar initiatives in Europe identified over six thousand such projects.

- A 2016 survey of the social solidarity economy revealed it to involve over two million organisations in Europe.

- A map of CLIs in France by the grassroots movement Colibris has over 20,000 entries.

Given the incompleteness of available information, they are minimum estimates. Collectively the figures indicate a largely hidden movement operating on a very wide scale, albeit at the margins of or even hidden from the political and economic mainstream.

Research suggests that CLIs tend to replicate rather than expand, so most remain small in size. This may contribute to them remaining less conspicuous than might be expected given their collective significance.

The Coopernico renewable energy cooperative in Portugal is one of thousands of community energy cooperatives across Europe.
Ecological benefits

Most CLIs generate strong ecological benefits. Ecological footprints of ecovillages and other intentional communities tend to be a fraction of national averages as a result of infrastructural and behavioural measures. Carbon footprints of CLIs and individual participants and beneficiaries also tend to be measurably lower than national averages. This is particularly due to promoting renewable energy and low energy lifestyles, enabling the use of low-carbon transportation, and encouraging more plant-based diets.

Extrapolation from quantitative data suggests that:

- carbon savings resulting from active participation in CLIs by five percent of the population would allow 85% of EU countries to meet their 2020 emissions reduction targets
- participation of all EU citizens in CLIs would lead to emissions reductions over the EU as a whole of up to 73%.

Significant social and economic benefits

Evidence clearly shows the significant impacts of CLIs in key areas of climate, sustainability, economic and social policy, and the potential for such impacts to be vastly strengthened given appropriate support. However, these concrete and measurable effects do not reflect the full impact or potential of CLIs, whose self-evaluation often gives equal or greater emphasis to ‘softer’, more qualitative outcomes relating to interpersonal relationships, group dynamics and subjective experiences of participants.

CLIs documented in formal research consistently demonstrate positive social benefits, including increased social capital, civic participation through volunteering, and, not uncommonly, inclusion. Economic benefits include creation of direct and indirect employment, along with a range of more general benefits, tangible and intangible, to local economies. Politically, they employ various sophisticated methods of inclusive governance that could potentially form the basis of wider direct and participatory democracy, initially accompanying and eventually replacing existing centralised and top-down governmental structures whose flaws are increasingly exposed.

CLIs and the Sustainable Development Goals

Most CLIs have been active in areas covered by the UN’s SDGs since well before their introduction in 2015. Some have adopted the SDGs as a framework for evaluating their work and linking it with wider centralised action on sustainability.

The work of CLIs directly contributes to 16 of the 17 goals (effects on the other, life in water, are mostly indirect outcomes of dietary, lifestyle and consumption choices). The way they do this contradicts the expectation that economic growth is both an outcome of and precondition for progress towards the goals. In fact, most CLIs successfully address the SDGs through strategies that decouple wellbeing from material prosperity.
Enablers and constraints

Enablers and constraints affecting CLIs include general and place-specific factors, and can be either internal to the initiative or reflect external conditions. Key enabling factors include local circumstances, meaningful government action on environmental and social issues, effective local and translocal networking and collaboration, conducive political conditions, and existence of suitable legal and institutional arrangements. National and international research on and with CLIs has identified various structural constraints, particularly around access to material resources, including funding, and the nature of existing legal and institutional structures.

In response to such constraints, some CLIs choose to operate informally and avoid any monetary interactions in order to be free to operate in a completely autonomous and self-governed basis. Others consider it important to engage with existing institutions via an appropriate legal structure, and to be able to mobilise financial support for their work. However the process of engaging with established structures, which are themselves key drivers of the issues CLIs seek to address, forces CLIs to become different kinds of organisations than they would choose to be, compromising their ability to work effectively.

Key insights for policy makers

The Status Report presents important insights for policy-makers arising from in-depth research involving CLIs in Europe, mainly funded by the EU’s Seventh Framework Programme and the Horizon 2020 programme. Some of these are:

Institutional and governance recommendations

International
- Redesign the monetary system in support of sustainable and regenerative lifestyles
- Adopt new macro-economic models not structurally dependent upon GDP growth.

National
- Reduce working hours, allowing more people to be involved in community-led initiatives, and provide stimulating and meaningful jobs for all
- Implement Universal Basic Income.

Sub-national
- Recognise and support agroecological smallholdings that demonstrate high levels of economic, environmental and social sustainability
- Support farm diversification through land-based innovation centres
- Implement local currencies that can foster economic relocalisation.

Recommendations for funding CLIs
- Recognise that local action on the part of CLIs requires resources and support access to the necessary resources in transparent and efficient ways
- Expand participatory budgeting in European municipalities
- Diversify funding mechanisms to kick-start social innovation
- Recognise and support project applications from CLIs that demonstrate innovative and transformative processes and methodologies
- Enable dialogue between funders and CLIs to facilitate collaborative proposal development and to allow funders be more sensitive to local contexts.
Seven Steps to a Sustainable Europe

Based on the evidence assembled, the Status Report concludes with seven basic preconditions towards sustainable prosperity in Europe. These steps provide a basic framework for the creation and implementation of social, economic and environmental policy, in alignment with the Paris Agreement and SDG commitments, and with basic ethics of care for people and nature.

1. Moving Beyond Growth

Increasing volumes of evidence from many sources challenge the privileged status of continuous growth in GDP as a central and unquestioned goal of economic policy. Only through alternative economic models, that do not rely on endless growth, can workable strategies for sustainable prosperity be devised and enacted, and commitments to the Paris Agreement and SDGs met. By decoupling quality of life from material consumption and enabling and supporting low-carbon, ecologically regenerative lifestyles, it is possible to reconcile wellbeing and sustainability.

2. Nurturing Commons Ecologies

It is increasingly widely recognised that transition to a society able to support diverse human needs while maintaining and restoring ecological integrity will in large measure be a transition from markets to commons as the basis for economic and social organisation. Commons ecologies are interconnected local networks of commons. Policy can actively support commons ecologies by supporting new and existing commons directly, and creating conditions for supportive relationships with state and market institutions.

3. Eco-Social Regeneration

Many CLIs are experimenting with and applying regenerative methods such as agroecology, agroforestry and regenerative agriculture, and employing inclusive ownership and decision-making methods to enable these. These initiatives could be encouraged through key measures such as legally prohibiting the destruction of natural ecosystems; incentives for agroecological farming; taxes on agricultural and forest products that penalise ecologically and socially destructive forms of production; and land value taxes.

4. Solidarity Economics

The existing social solidarity economy already offers a basis for transition to a sustainable and equitable economy that does not undermine or put at risk employment, livelihoods or the provision of essential goods and services. Appropriate support measures include legislative and fiscal enablers such as supportive legal and administrative frameworks and taxation regimes that incentivise shared ownership, inclusive decision-making and entrepreneurial activities that promote growth and regeneration of common pool material, social, natural and cultural capitals.
5. Inclusive Governance

The sustainability crisis is above all a crisis of democracy, reflecting appropriation of national and EU politics by vested financial interests and consequent political disenfranchisement of the wider population. Community-led initiatives model inclusive forms of governance that fully empower participants in relation to all decisions affecting their lives. More widely adopted at multiple scales, these can provide the basis for genuinely democratic systems that can first operate and co-exist with, and ultimately replace, current political systems.

6. Transformative Social Innovation

Social innovation by individuals, organisations and networks dedicated to transformative change is vital to the creation and establishment of post-growth alternatives in Europe. The necessary enabling conditions for innovation of the type and scale necessary have been clearly elaborated as outcomes of two major EU-funded research projects - the Transformative Social Innovation Manifesto in 2017 and the Lisbon Declaration on Social Innovation in 2018. The latter identifies five priority strategies for Europe to incorporate social innovation fully into its social programme. It also details concrete policy measures in order to embed social innovation as a cross-cutting priority in EU policies and programmes; enable strategic partnerships at all levels of governance that empower communities to become drivers of needed change; and foster social innovation in the public sector.

7. Enabling Community-Led Action

Creating the right conditions for transitioning to a sustainable Europe means putting in place appropriate legislation and enabling frameworks for CLIs. An essential first step is removing legislative barriers and, where appropriate, introducing laws and regulations that recognise and address emerging needs. It is also essential that communities get the information and support needed to benefit from such opportunities. Awareness raising, technical assistance, accessible funding, and support for networking and exchange are also key elements of an enabling framework. To create appropriate enabling legislation and support provision, the roles of citizens and of community initiatives must be properly recognised and enabled. In turn, participation in policy development processes must be facilitated and, crucially, actively supported.