



Chapter 14: To Transform Cities, Support Civil Society

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14.1 Introduction

Civil society's current engagement in providing and fostering sustainability practices and services illustrates that civil society's role has expanded beyond advocacy, and that some civil society organizations aim to address the challenge of inclusivity via sustainability innovations. While some civil society organizations may provide basic services that are no longer met by a changing welfare state, others may play a critical role in changing unsustainable social, ecological, economic, and cultural patterns. In part, the different configurations of civil society visible today have emerged in response to social movements, and grassroots initiatives (Tomozeiu and Joss 2014; Williams et al. 2014; Warshawsky 2015).

Civil society organizes itself in collectives, networks, and nested hubs; mobilizes resources (people, ideas, and funds); and arrives to the wider public through its attempts to put sustainability into practice. For those affected by significant urban challenges, who thus become interested in transforming our cities and societies district by district and community by community, the sense of change that civil society brings can often be seen as a sign of hope that humanity can, collectively, steer away from a deeper crisis or trap. But at the same time, the activities of civil society can create systems where governments can avoid or limit their responsibility in taking daring action to deal with the structural, persistent problems behind these unsustainability crises.

We follow Androff (2012) and Belloni (2001) in understanding civil society as a broad notion, encompassing grassroots organizations, community-based organizations, advocacy groups (such as NGOs), coalitions, professional associations, and other organizations that operate between the state, individuals, and the market. This heterogeneity means that civil society includes various institutional logics, and it crosses the boundaries between formal and informal, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit. With civil society's initiatives and

social innovation networks proliferating across Europe, it is relevant to consider what is understood by civil society, its role in sustainability transitions, and how this role evolves and changes in different socioeconomic and socio-political contexts, across sectoral domains (such as energy, food, mobility, built environment, and education), and across spatial scales (local, regional, national).

Sustainability transitions are about deep, radical change towards sustainability in ways of thinking, doing, and organizing (Frantzeskaki and de Haan 2009), as well as in ways of knowing and relating (Loorbach et al. 2017). As such, the roles that actors assume and actively pursue in the course of a sustainability transition relate to their capabilities to mobilize resources and creativity and to exercise power for transformative action (Wittmayer and Rach 2016). Current sustainability transitions research has identified that not only is the role of civil society changing, but so are the forms of civil society participation in such transitions. Specifically, the adoption of new roles for civil society actors has led to a transformation of their relationships and forms of engagement with other actors (state actors, market-based actors, and so on). However, in the field of sustainability transitions research, studies on civil society have mostly been focused on the phenomena of community energy (Seyfang et al. 2013, 2014; Hargreaves et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2015) and the role of civil society and social movements in energy transitions more generally (Smith 2012, Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012).

Invigorating the role of civil society in sustainability transitions in sectors other than energy will further contribute to clarifying the importance of such sectoral contexts and add to debates on human-environment interactions in sustainability science. With civil society encompassing and representing a wide array of interests, values, and behaviors, a further examination and conceptualization of its evolving roles is needed. This will shed light on the social and economic dimensions of sustainability, as well as uncover the tensions between these and the environmental dimension of sustainability at local and global levels (Miller 2015).

14.2 The Nature of Civil Society

If we are to understand how civil society develops and how it participates in sustainability transitions, we need to have a clearer articulation of what civil society is. Some argue it encompasses grassroots and community-based organizations, advocacy groups (such as NGOs), coalitions, professional associations, and other organizational forms (Androff 2012; Belloni 2001); for other authors in sustainability transition studies civil society refers to all organizations that

are not part of the state. One thing that is agreed in the literature is that the state and civil society are different, with civil society being autonomous from the state. The border between the two is not a “hard” border, meaning it is sometimes difficult to decide whether an organization is part of civil society or the state. In some cases, civil society confronts the state (therefore NGOs are sometimes described *as* civil society; think, for example, of Greenpeace campaigns against deep drilling or nuclear power stations), while in other cases, civil society works alongside the state (for example, in the areas of health). A more recently expressed view is that civil society can be understood as a battleground where those competing for power (both the state and civil society *organizations*) confront each other. At the next level down, a battle for hegemony also takes place *within* civil society organizations. As Rätzzel et al. (2015: 160) write, there is a need “to investigate civil society as a ‘force-field’ in which multiple inter- and intra-relationships interact. While state and civil society organizations may oppose each other, and occupy dual positions in the space of civil society, they are present within each other.”

The discourses and practices of community-by-community transformation performed by civil society hold the potential to consider afresh how civil society can initiate and support sustainability transitions while responding to citizen demands for more direct participation in decision-making and more control over defining collective courses of action. We argue that civil society performs a new function in society: civil society is altering deep-seated societal values and beliefs in urban areas towards more sustainable ones, creating and establishing social-ecological and economic literacy and putting knowledge into action for sustainability (Moore and Westley 2011). Such profound change creates the conditions for demand and acceptability of sustainability policies.

14.3 The Roles of Civil Society in Urban Sustainability Transitions

The roles of civil society and the ways in which it interacts with other actors are diverse. In order to capture the recent shifting roles and new forms of civil society, we base our analysis on empirical case study work about civil society in urban sustainability transitions from five research EU-funded projects: ARTS, GLAMURS, GUST, InContext, and TRANSIT. Researchers across these five European research projects convened in a workshop in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to investigate the role of civil society in sustainability transitions. During the workshop, a wide diversity of empirical cases also informed the discussion and deepened the questions on how to systematically conceptualize

the roles of civil society in sustainability transitions and how to search for new evidence.

The case presentations and debates at the workshop allowed researchers with an in-depth knowledge of specific case studies to identify the recurrence of three different roles civil society organizations play and three categories of dangers they face in their interactions with state institutions and actors. This initial inductive analytical framework was then used to orient a thorough literature review, intended to systematize a larger pool of analyzed cases in urban sustainability transitions in Europe. The review covered articles from 2010 to 2015, along with some key additional references from earlier years. Even though many publications were identified (860 papers in total) and thoroughly reviewed, in this chapter, we emphasize those that take a critical perspective on the interactions and interdependencies between civil society and urban systems of provisioning and governance (81 papers). The conceptualized roles are novel to the fields of urban governance and sustainability transitions as a result of our work for this chapter and a related positioning paper (Frantzeskaki et al. 2016).

This chapter characterizes three major roles for civil society as being central to the success of moving towards sustainability transitions. First, local initiatives by civil society can *pioneer and model new practices that can then be picked up by other actors* (for example, policy-makers), eventually leading to incremental or radical changes in our practices and ways of organizing things. Civil society can therefore be an integral part of, and driver for, such transformations; by establishing new connections in the system, it may trigger wider change. Second, civil society can *also fill the void left by a changing welfare state*, thereby safeguarding and serving social needs, but doing so in new ways. Last, it can act as a *hidden innovator – innovating in the shadows, disconnected from public or market actors* – through initiatives that may contribute to sustainability, yet remain disconnected from wider society. There are challenges with each of these roles; we will discuss each in turn below.

14.4 Civil Society as Pioneer, Model, and Driver for Sustainability Transitions

In the last decades, we have witnessed increasing skepticism about the ability of dominant institutions (such as national governments and large businesses) to support transformations, and a growing distrust of their interest in adopting a social agenda alongside economic and political agendas (Birch and Whittam 2008). Given the understanding and local knowledge that civil society has gained in urban contexts through people's direct experience of systemic

problems, once initiated, civil society actors' efforts can lead to a fast-paced realization of new ideas and new approaches for more socially, culturally, and ecologically responsible governance (Aylett 2010, 2013). Their proximity to local urban contexts, flexibility (due to operating on the fringes of complex bureaucratic settings), and elasticity allow for transformative innovation to be created and seeded by and through civil society. Civil society organizations have the knowledge and capacity to bring about projects that directly contribute to sustainability, showcasing and gathering evidence in favor of their feasibility as legitimate alternatives. Aylett (2013: 862) argues that "community organizations can show the feasibility of alternative practices" and points out the direct impact civil society has in providing evidence of "what works" for sustainability.

Civil society is generally concerned with ensuring that marginalized voices are heard by decision-makers and can participate in ongoing debates on solutions and governance for sustainability transitions (Calhoun 2012). As such, civil society can advocate for more radical and progressive ideas, rather than "returning to old ideals" (Calhoun 2012). The radicalism of innovation that civil society creates is also shaped "by the attempt to sustain local levels of organization (including local culture as well as social networks) that make possible ... relatively effective collective action" (Calhoun 2012: 12). Beyond acting as advocates, though, civil society organizations are often modeling the innovations themselves, and rapidly experimenting and adapting ideas to the local context, which, if successful, can contribute to altering ways of doing, organizing, and thinking (cultures, structure, and practices) (Boyer 2015; Burggraevae 2015; Bussu and Bartels 2014; Calhoun 2012; Carmin et al. 2003; Cerar 2014; Christmann 2014; Creamer 2015; Foo et al. 2014; Forrest and Wiek 2015; Fuchs and Hinderer 2014; Garcia et al. 2015; Kothari 2014; Magnani and Osti 2016; Seyfang and Smith 2007; Seyfang and Longhurst 2013; Seyfang et al. 2014; Somerville and McElwee 2011; Touchton and Wampler 2014; Verdini 2015; Zajontz and Laysens 2015; Walker et al. 2014; Warshawsky 2014; Wagenaar and Healey 2015).

If we zoom in to the workings of sustainability transition initiatives led by civil society, we see that they can provide empirical ground or proof of concept for new market forms (such as shared economy, or economy of the common good (Felber 2015), or for new economic structures (such as co-management, cooperatives, and alternative currencies (Orhangazi 2014; Riedy 2013; Walljasper 2010) by responding to a market need in a socially, culturally, and ecologically responsible and value-creating way, or in a socially structured way (Somerville and McElwee 2011). As such, civil society organizations can gain both direct and indirect in market structures as well as in business organizations "through other stakeholders ... via increasing consumer awareness" (Harangozo and

Zilahy 2015). An example of an initiative led by a socially driven enterprise is the Impact Hub Rotterdam, a “locally rooted, globally connected social enterprise with the ambition to connect, inspire and support professionals within and beyond the public, private and third sectors working at ‘new frontiers’ to tackle the world’s most pressing social, cultural, and, environmental challenges.” (Impact Hub Rotterdam 2015). Essentially, Impact Hub Rotterdam offers access to a working space and to a community of people working on meaningful ideas related to sustainability. Rather than competing, its members (mainly social entrepreneurs themselves) are supportive of one another, as it is in everybody’s interest that all members have maximum impact in shaping the world more sustainably (Wittmayer et al. 2015). In this way, the Impact Hub stretches standard ideas of how a company *ought* to be run, and demonstrates how companies *could* operate, as everybody is invited to co-shape the structures, space, and content of the Impact Hub and how a company relates to its immediate surroundings. The Impact Hub Rotterdam is connected to a global network of Impacts Hubs and, at the same time, is firmly rooted in a disadvantaged neighborhood of Rotterdam and aims to add value to these immediate surroundings by engaging in partnerships with local government, welfare organizations, and schools.

Civil society organizations not only alter ways of organizing, but also alter practices that relate to urban lifestyles. By connecting evidence on environmental degradation and impact from the global scale to local practices, civil society organizations have been able to target ways of living and consuming in cities. Being linked to a community of practice via creating stronger ties with others enforces citizens’ efforts towards leading a low-carbon lifestyle (Howell 2013). Examples that illustrate this point emerge from civil society organizations in cities that have focused on food production, distribution, and consumption (Laestadius et al. 2014). Miazzo and Minkjan (2013) show how food can be an instrument of invention and inspiration for more sustainable lifestyle choices, as well as an entry point for holistic understandings of how lifestyles connect local to global solutions and challenges. Food-centered/food-focused civil society initiatives around the Global North partake in city making and in urban regeneration projects. As Miazzo and Minjan (2013: n.p.) note, “locally based food production, processing, distribution and consumption initiatives are supporting social equity and improving economic, environmental and social outcomes.” Food initiatives can be instrumental in creating urban planning synergies with local governments and in altering planning practices and approaches to include social interests, ideas, and innovations. As such, they can influence how urban regeneration may be designed and implemented, and may contribute to the creation of institutional spaces needed to revitalize local economies.

One of the main findings of the GLAMURS project has been that living more authentic lifestyles and experiencing more meaningful connections to others, especially around food production and consumption, are among the main motivations for starting and joining sustainability grassroots initiatives (Dumitru et al. 2016). An example of one food cooperative that brings together fulfillment of such motivations, as well as contributing to altering urban planning policies in the city of Rome and enhancing their own model of land stewardship, is the Cooperativa Romana Agricoltura Giovani, or Coraggio, one of the case studies selected in GLAMURS. The cooperative joins together women and men (farmers, agronomists, chefs, architects, day workers, anthropologists, and educators) with a passion for sustainable agriculture, healthy food production, and environment and landscape preservation. It is committed to developing an urban agricultural model that is healthy, organic, and multifunctional. Overall, Coraggio's aim is to replace degraded concrete buildings in the neighborhood with a new way of living based on environmental concerns, on respecting the dignity of labor, and on the social value and meaning of agriculture. Coraggio carried out a public debate with the Rome Municipality to obtain the concession of public lands to young farmers who can create public, multifunctional farms capable of producing food as well as services (agricultural training and experimentation, didactics, workshops, urban gardening, food services, restoration, green tourism, and outdoor sports). This transfer of lands was successful, and farmers have been managing it since 2015.

In Rotterdam, the civil society-led initiative "Uit je eigen stad" (From your own city) has emerged because of individuals desiring access to locally produced food for local consumption and the removal of middlemen in the food market. The initiative is based on a farm that also has an adjacent restaurant and market, all of which were built on vacant space in the former city harbor of Rotterdam. The civil society organization holds seminars and information days on how urban dwellers can grow their own food in the city and how to celebrate vegetarian cuisine; it has grown into a learning hub not only for urban citizens but also for smaller-scale urban farming initiatives in the city of Rotterdam. The "Uit je eigen stad" initiative contributed not only to the rethinking of vacant space in the city harbor area, but also in reimagining life in an industrial city during its slow transition to post-industrialization. The first five years of operation have positioned the founders in a diversifying and upscaling pathway; in response, the initiative has now connected and collaborates with multiple food entrepreneurs. It is prime example of successfully establishing sustainable local food production with traditional methods, with hydroponics and aquaponics that reuse waste nutrients, and with a fully operational restaurant as a circular organic food initiative.

Many cities face challenge of segregation when less affluent neighborhoods with higher proportions of low-skilled individuals who have little education and find it difficult to remain employed become socially and economically separated (Zwiers and Koster 2015; van Eijk 2010). Civil society initiatives in these neighborhoods often respond to socioeconomic needs, including providing individuals with new skills to integrate them in society and the job market. Gorissen et al. (2017) further illustrate that civil society initiatives contribute to establishing new local markets and repurposing existing, but unused, infrastructure for sustainable services and jobs.

An example of a civil society organization performing this function is Cultural Workplace, a foundation in Rotterdam. It originated from a one-year project by the Museum Rotterdam, which focused on creating encounters between inhabitants by renting a former shop-space in the middle of the neighborhood. Some of the interactions of residents were recorded as “modern heritage,” for example, through a radio programme. The project reached “unusual suspects” and, subsequently, a core group of those individuals stood up to continue and even broaden the purpose of the initiative, which now also includes a range of skills training workshops.

Civil society organizations also play a facilitating role between individual citizens and local and state institutions because they are trusted by individuals, employ “locally legitimate mechanisms” in mediation and communication (Stephenson 2011), and serve as a buffer of first responses from and to individuals in the event of a market failure. They thus serve as empowering contexts, enabling the seeking of new courses of action (Stephenson 2011) and working as vehicles for individual political engagement (Androff 2012; cf. Belloni 2001). Civil society organizations do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in many ways with dominant government and market logics. This raises questions concerning the distance they establish from the “centers of power” and whether they can be truly transformative. Tension occurs when civil society actors need to decide whether they strictly adhere to their core values and try to fit in while transforming dominant structures, or make compromises to make their organization adaptable to the system in which it operates (Seyfang and Smith 2007: 593).

14.5 Civil Society as a Self-Organizing Actor

Civil society operates as a self-organizing actor to meet social needs that have not historically been provided by the state or the market (Androff 2012; Barber 2013; Belloni 2001; Bonds et al. 2015; Brunetta and Caldarice 2014; Caraher and Cavicchi 2014; Célérier and Botey 2015; Christiansen 2015; Desa and Koch

2014; Devolder and Block 2015; Ferguson 2013; Flint 2013; Foo et al. 2014; Franklin 2013; Hasan and McWilliams 2015; Kothari 2014; Krasny et al. 2014; Mehmood 2016; Riedy 2013; Sagaris 2014; Sonnino 2014; Staggenborg and Ogrodnik 2015; Warshawsky 2015). They establish self-help dynamics (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Horsford and Sampson 2014) and contribute to new social orders of active citizens (Riedy 2013). Local civil society can counterbalance neoliberal policies and, in this way, reflect “renewed forms of democracy, solidarity and embrace of difference” (Williams et al. 2014: 2799).

When advocating or protecting common interests, issues, or values, civil society (organizations) can be aligned with or can be seen as forming a social movement. From the perspective of urban politics and urban governance, “social movements, nonviolent actions, and civic protest are not just efforts at reforming democracy, they are democracy in action” (Barber 2013). Androff (2012: 298) addresses the democratic role of civil society for advocating social justice issues, including human rights issues that are neither influenced nor framed by political agendas in a so-called truth-seeking mission that “counters the propaganda, misconceptions, myths and untruths that are often used to create a climate of fear and intimidation and can help in reducing the stereotypes, dehumanization and discrimination that often accompany violence and injustice.” An interesting example in this regard is the participatory budgeting initiative – a participatory democracy practice – in the Indische Buurt, a neighborhood of Amsterdam. Here, the initiative of citizens aiming to understand and increase their say in municipal budgeting united with the initiative of a local government for more budget transparency, together making “for more budget transparency and accountability on the local level and strengthens participatory democracy by increasing the awareness, knowledge and influence of citizens in the neighborhood about and on the municipal budget” (Wittmayer and Rach 2016). The citizen-led initiative was based on a Brazilian practice of budget monitoring aiming to increase transparency and legitimacy of budgets based on ideas of human rights, social justice, and democracy. A fair distribution of public resources is considered key in this respect. Civil society organizations also restore the ability of local communities to connect with different urban stakeholders – not only with the local government but also with businesses – establishing multiplicity in connections and possible collaborations (Harangozo and Zilahy 2015).

Another noteworthy example of a citizen initiative providing a space that promotes social contact and intergenerational exchange while people are having fun and acquiring new skills is the network of Repair Cafes in Schiedam, Delft, and The Hague, chosen as case studies in the GLAMURS project. Repair Cafés are free, accessible meeting places where people gather to fix broken objects by sharing knowledge of and experience with repairing things, as well

as to simply have a good time with other people. One of the main aims of Repair Cafés is to reduce the amount of waste that our society produces by extending the lifetime of objects, while also teaching people that broken items can often be repaired. The Repair Cafés have also fulfilled an important social function by offering a pleasant environment in which people can meet and bolster or strengthen social contacts. Repair Cafés also provide low-cost repair options for people that cannot afford to go to regular repair venues. Martine Postma, a journalist, started the first Repair Café in Amsterdam. Based on the success of the first Repair Café, people have set up many Repair Cafés within and outside the Netherlands since 2009. In March 2016, there were over one thousand Repair Cafés in 24 different countries; their number is still growing. Postma is still actively involved in the national Repair Café Foundation and currently works on the diffusion of Repair Cafés around the world.

With the ability to articulate social needs and to experience and express the way new practices and approaches can contribute to desirable urban situations, civil society furthers the capacity to self-organize and for citizens to serve their own needs. As such, local civil society can also establish the “capacity to act,” or even counterbalance neoliberal policies and, in this way, can reflect “renewed forms of democracy, solidarity and embrace of difference” (Williams et al. 2014). An example of self-organization contributing to changes in policy is the reopening of a community center in a disadvantaged neighborhood of Rotterdam by a local action group. Beginning in 2011, the local community center had been closed due to several municipal and organizational choices, such as the decision of the local municipality not to include resources for the center in a newly issued tender for welfare work. The action group investigated possibilities for reopening the center, including intensive lobbying with different organizations, launching a petition, and acquiring and disseminating information regarding ownership structure financial obligations, and neighborhood needs. Beginning in 2012, the action group formed a foundation and unofficially reopened the center, taking on all daily tasks on a voluntary basis, notwithstanding ongoing negotiations with the municipality regarding rent and exploitation, which were not settled until 2015.

This act of self-organization did not happen in a vacuum – additional initiatives in Rotterdam were trying to achieve the same goal. Civil society organizations and their networks create polycentric arrangements via co-provision of services (Healey 2015; Holden et al. 2015) and by supporting more economically resilient communities, or communities “consisting in economies of specialisation and flexibility” (Giammusso, 1999). However, such patterns blur civil society organizations’ functions with those of a retreating welfare state, and put them at risk of becoming stretched until their innovative potential, flexibility, and elasticity disappear in the face of existing demands.

14.6 Civil Society as Hidden Innovator

Civil society acts as a hidden innovator that contributes to sustainability while often remaining disconnected from other spheres of social life (Bacq and Janssen 2011; Célérier and Botey 2015; Desa and Koch 2014; Doci et al. 2015; Dowling et al. 2014; Feola and Nunes 2014; Forrest and Wiek 2015; Fraser and Kick 2014; Garcia et al. 2015; Hasan and McWilliams 2015; Healey 2015; Healey and Vigar 2015; Horsford and Sampson 2014; Napawan 2016; Staggenborg and Ogrodnik 2015; Romero-Lankao 2012; Viitanen et al. 2015; Zhang et al. 2015). In accordance with this mode of operation, civil society often innovates with the “rules in use” rather than with the “rules of the game,” meaning that they address lower-level institutions and their informal counterparts, and prioritize applying results in practice, then manifesting contrasts with existing policies and other types of formal institutions. This pattern of action is often reinforced by the public engagement and stewardship programs cities have in place for planning and by the governance of regeneration programs (Shandas and Messer 2008).

Researchers increasingly note the desire of civil society initiatives to remain below the radar, because, they explain, exposure comes at the expense of time and effort not spent on pursuing their founding mission. It therefore challenges the (perhaps naïve) notion that civil society wants to be discovered. The reluctance of civil society actors to become visible can be viewed in a few ways: (a) it could be the result of negative experiences, in which they have been instrumentalized by others, or, (b) it could be an expression of a desire to step away from wider society and pursue one’s own aspirations and ideas “far from the maddening crowd” (Androff 2012; cf. Belloni 2001). In such cases, do alternative pathways that rely on civil society maintaining its original, alternative status would work better for citizens and cities?

A clear case of citizen initiatives striving to create an alternative to existing consumerist and accelerated lifestyles are the Romanian ecovillages studied in GLAMURS: Stanciova Ecovillage, Aurora Community, and Armonia Brassovia. These types of communities are notable among other sustainability-related lifestyle initiatives because they require their members to undergo a more radical, across-the-board transition to new lifestyle choices, consumption habits, and time-use patterns. They are usually built on the principles of permaculture, downshifting, and a sharing economy. Promoting a safe space for experimentation with a different lifestyle is present in these initiatives. This does not necessarily mean that they are invisible (as they are very open to contacts with other such initiatives and a diversity of societal actors), but it does mean they exert efforts to protect the boundaries of their experimental spaces.

If we extend our scope of analysis to the food domain, one illustrative example of a hidden pioneer enhancing a short supply chain of organic food is Zocamiñoa, a cooperative of responsible consumption in the city of A Coruña (region of Galicia, Spain) whose main objective is to facilitate access to organic products. The initiative promotes short food distribution circuits and the consumption of healthy, locally sourced food products, while also striving to assure a sustainable livelihood for local organic producers. They actively promote a change in consumption habits towards local, seasonal, and organic products. Beyond such consumption patterns, they actively encourage local participation through a structure of working groups on different sustainability themes centered on food. With more than 300 members, they have become a hub for innovative and participatory activities focused on food, and represent a place where members experience a change towards slower, sustainable lifestyles that spill over into other lifestyle domains. They promote new values of trust and strive to embed them in norms governing the relationships between producers and consumers, joined by a set of common goals and a locally embedded, common identity (Dumitru et al. 2016).

At the same time, civil society can be a medium for local people to participate towards a common mission or vision (Androff 2012; Feola and Nunes 2014). Arentsen and Bellekom (2014) point out that community energy initiatives, for example, are “seedbeds of innovation” in their aim to hybridize and embed sustainable energy practices and in their questioning of dominant energy practices and institutions, yet, they have little impact on wider institutional transformations or shifts. Schools of social innovation say that social innovation is a product of networks, groups, and formal and informal organizations rather than of “hero entrepreneurs” (Bacq and Janssen 2011). Likewise, civil society can be legitimized and supported by programs for community participation and activation when they are instrumentalized for active engagement rather than for passive consultation, and when the resulting synthesis incorporates ideas and innovative practices (Shandas and Messer 2008).

Thus, via active engagement of civil society in local programs and projects of urban regeneration, civil society can play a role in establishing a sense of place that is also transformative in the sense that it incorporates new ways of sustainable thinking, living, and practicing. Still, it remains unknown what the position civil society organizations can functionally occupy between overexposure and remaining in the shadows, and the effects that these different positions have on achieving transformations.

14.7 Unintended Effects of the Three Roles

Within the European Union, civil society initiatives can be used by neoliberal agendas to support their narratives on decentralization and retreat of the state (Blanco et al. 2014). As it recognizes that neoliberalism is contested (Newman 2014), civil society may unintentionally be supporting the argument of a “self-servicing” society that does not require governmental support for basic services, such as elderly care and education (Ferguson 2013). National and local governmental agencies responsible for social policy and welfare policy cut offs can use the presence and activities of civil society as justifications for the reductions of welfare state programs. We also observe a new surge of community-based initiatives, and that the state is increasingly calling upon “the community” to take over public services and responsibilities. This is especially apparent in discussions on welfare state reform such as the “Big Society” – as a part of which governments are reorganizing their responsibilities and tasks vis-à-vis their citizens (Scott 2010; Jordan 2012; Tonkens et al. 2013). Such reductions in government support come with a caveat: by relying on civil society for service delivery, there is a risk of deepening social inequalities between and within communities, given their uneven capacities to self-sustain and self-organize. By relying on “the community” in this way, the state further neglects structural injustice and masks ineffective governance by empowering civil society at the outset, and by reassigning responsibility from government onto local actors (Williams et al. 2014). What strategies civil society organizations use to resist such abdication of responsibility, while simultaneously assuring they have the resources to operate, is still an open empirical question.

Further, civil society activities can be structured as political responses to injustice or to deeply marginalized systems of provision. As political expressions, they can also be exclusive or provoke conflict. These facets position civil society as a politicized actor, often stigmatized as the troublemaker rather than seen as the whistle-blower for market failures. In view of the way large-scale infrastructure projects are planned in cities, the question remains how social needs and voids of services are being accounted for in such plans, and how to balance the risk of co-opting of civil society by utilizing it for municipal ends with the risk of ignorance or avoidance of civil society when designing such large service delivery plans (Meng et al. 2014).

As responsibility is reassigned to civil society, the state can hamper civil society organizations through complex and weighty bureaucratic procedures which can be challenging for organizations with minimal resources allocated for formulating responses (Blanco et al. 2014; Borzel and Risse 2010; Engelke

et al. 2015; Fisher et al. 2012; Fraser and Kick 2014; Ferguson 2013; Giammusso 1999; Hajer 2016; Semino 2015; Williams et al. 2014). Furthermore, if state policies and programs intervene by establishing or incentivizing civil society organizations to serve existing political agendas (Tomozeiu and Joss 2014; Griffin 2010), these organizations may be viewed as the “visible hand of the state,” which, in turn, may demoralize and delegitimize individuals working to create bottom-up civil society organizations, and may affect local democratic politics to a wider extent. The overexposure resulting from such utilization of civil society organizations by the state can leave these actors exhausted and erode their mission (Bonds et al. 2015; Busa and Garder 2014; Creamer 2015; Felicetti 2013; Foo et al. 2014; Giammusso 1999; Griffin 2010; Holden et al. 2015; Moss et al. 2014; Peck et al. 2013; Semino 2015; Shannon 2014; Tomozeiu and Joss 2014; Williams et al. 2014; Warshawsky 2015).

14.8 A New Urban Research Agenda Considering Civil Society’s Roles

Here, we formulate a few reflections for a new research agenda based on our account of the roles of civil society in emerging sustainability transitions. We propose five overarching future directions below.

Identify conditions that enable civil society to play a transformational role in cities. Intermediary organizations can help to create links between initiatives and government structures. However, in some cases, these are not needed, as initiatives can interact directly with governments and businesses (for instance, through leaders that link different organizations). This intermediate space can exist and might not need to be institutionalized in the form of lead offices, formal projects, or organizations. However, an intermediate space can be important for the spread of initiatives, and is a place where radical, bottom-up initiatives that operate only on the fringe of the system and top-down, dominant actors in the existing system can meet. Intermediary actors are therefore organizations and bridging actors that span several groups, such as, for example, living labs.

For example, in urban areas where segregation takes a socio spatial form, initiatives will tend to operate more in those communities where needs are greatest. Their presence will thus signal the hot spots of social and economic unsustainability while also, at least on some occasions, provide an excuse for welfare state program reforms to exclude areas from support due to the presence of self-organized communities. This argument implies a trade-off: while there is effectiveness in welfare measures when they are targeted spatially, since this enables their inclusion in policy mixes of urban regeneration, as Zwiers

and Koster (2015) argue, universal welfare programs for income support and re-skilling for socioeconomic integration “generate the broadest base of support.” Civil society organizations can indicate which urban localities or “which types of urbanity” are most vulnerable to social and economic segregation and can create an evidence-based for local welfare redistribution that has a systemic impact on urban poverty. When operating in this way, civil society (organizations) can radically alter welfare distribution approaches and transform cities towards social resilience.

Adopt a dynamic understanding of the role of civil society and use empirical designs that can capture their fluid nature in cities. While the emergence of civil society organizations is routinely hailed as a positive wave of change, we need to break away from romanticizing inclinations, and empirically investigate the different roles that civil society actors play in complex configurations of interactions and diverse agendas. Additional cross-case study analyses and meta-analyses, rather than in-depth, single case study research, would contribute to understanding both the bright and the dark sides of civil society roles today.

Understand and assess the true diversity of civil society in the present context. Civil society has a fluid and flexible nature that enables it to operate outside immobilizing constraints. This fluidity also leads to the existence of a wide variety of actors, who experience tensions with other actors and within their own groups. To avoid overly simplified typologies, civil society actors should be incorporated into research cycles so that they are embedded more deeply in sustainability transitions, to allow for a new understanding of the diversity of urban civil society and its multiple roles.

Conceptualize and empirically explore the dynamic interactions between urban civil society actors and other actors and elements in the contexts in which they are embedded. Rich conceptualizations of contexts that include geographical scale, as well as trends in cultural values, and perceptions of roles of different actors, are still largely missing from the literature on civil society. Examining the multiplicity of interactions beyond the dichotomy of collaboration and conflict will deepen the understanding of actors’ impact and enable a response to contextual conditions, as well as an understanding of the impact of context on sustainability transitions. Future empirical research should identify the conditions under which civil society may play a transformational role versus those that mainly lead it to perpetuating the status quo.

Encourage knowledge coproduction about the impacts of social agency and the relationship to urban transitions. As Haapio (2012) notes, there is no urban society that can achieve sustainability on its own, so partnership

work across multiple actors will bring about new solutions to deal with societal and ecological challenges. In an increasing specialized and globalized world, knowledge exists in multiple forms and is the property of different actors. Research must turn to new modes of producing knowledge in cooperation and cocreation with other actors (Frantzeskaki and Kabisch 2016). Including civil society actors in research design and cycles, as proposed earlier, will position them as local experts, contributing their knowledge and practices to local innovations rather than being involved solely in engagement and in raising awareness, when the capacity of civil society (organizations and actors) allows for this level of contribution (Laestadius et al. 2014).

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