

# Learning from nine initiatives that are paving the way for a sustainable and just future

## 1. Introduction

Environmental sustainability and social justice are deeply connected, and it is increasingly crucial to prioritise both in a world affected by climate change. However, urban sustainability initiatives have not fully incorporated social justice considerations. To ensure social justice is an integral part of urban sustainability efforts, it is essential to acknowledge that without deliberate steps to embed equity, certain groups are likely to be excluded from the benefits of sustainability projects or to even face negative consequences. Promoting justice involves identifying the groups likely to be excluded, alongside the barriers that hinder their meaningful involvement in, and ability to benefit from, sustainability-focused interventions. It also means ensuring that these interventions address their unique needs and preferences.

Justice and sustainability transitions are closely related. Sustainability transitions aim to transform society towards a more sustainable future by reducing environmental degradation, improving human well-being, and promoting social justice. Achieving sustainability transitions requires **systemic change: fundamental changes in thinking, doing, and ways of organising that affect economic, social, and political systems.**

Achieving systemic change requires following a long-term process that is unpredictable and complex. A way to visualise this process is by means of the so-called 'X-curve' (Hebinck et al. 2022), depicted in **Figure 1**. The X-curve shows two parts of systemic change: building up a new system, and phasing out the old system. Building up a new system does not happen overnight; it starts by experimenting with radically new ways of doing, thinking and organising that challenge the current societal systems. An experiment like this, which can lead to systemic change, can be defined as: **"an inclusive, practice-based and challenge-led initiative, which is designed to promote system innovation through social learning under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity"** (Sengers et al. 2019).

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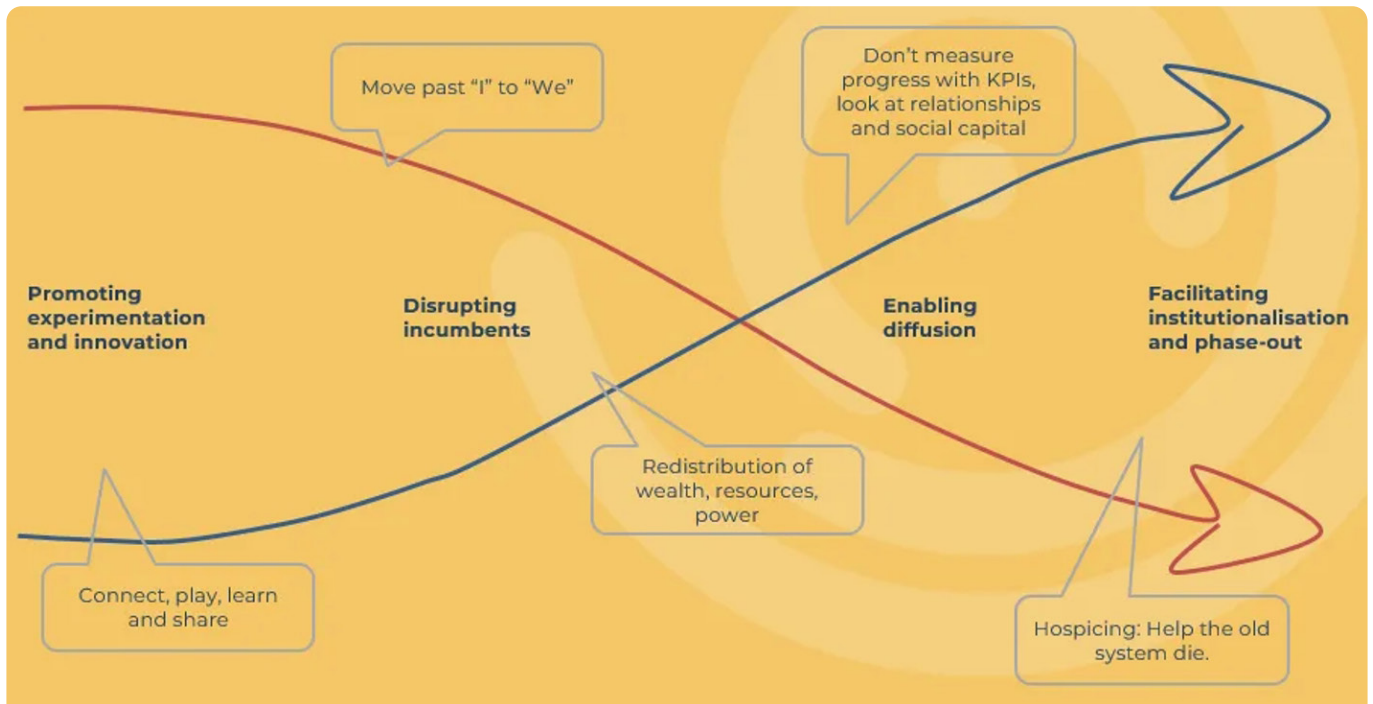
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FOR SUSTAINABLE  
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**Figure 1:** Visual depiction of the X-curve concept, whereby the red arrow represents phasing out an existing system over time and the blue arrow represents introducing a new system over time; diagram adapted based on DRIFT and UrbanCommunity member inputs, and first published on the UrbanCommunity blog:

<https://sustainablejustcities.eu/news/making-sense-systemic-change>

**In this report we discuss nine local initiatives in Europe that centre social justice in their experimental sustainability approaches.**

These initiatives are based in diverse urban contexts, with different trajectories and compositions, and in cities large and small, spread from Istanbul to London. They display various ways to tackle social justice issues, through sustainability initiatives that tackle various justice issues, from housing to food production, urban planning, education and urban greening.

The content of this report was based on interviews with the core organising teams driving each initiative. We strive to support these initiatives by reflecting on what the people driving them shared with us, and by distilling key insights for the broader community of those working at the

local level to create sustainable and just cities. In the sections that follow, we analyse their knowledge and experiences, in the hopes of inspiring others and contributing towards the deep societal changes needed to realise truly just and sustainable cities.

First, the section that follows (Section 2) briefly overviews the nine initiatives. Next, Section 3 discusses the ideas, actions, and means through which these initiatives aim to bring systemic change for justice and sustainability (3.1), their self-assessed impact (3.2), and what successes and challenges they face in relation to questions of justice (3.3). Finally, we draw lessons regarding the survival and blooming of such initiatives, and reflect on how they could further strengthen their activities moving forward.

## 2. Nine experimental community initiatives

### HubRen mobile climate hub, London, UK



HubRen is an initiative based in the UK, which self-defines as a mobile, pop-up hub of community resilience. Its founder is a mum, activist, and photographer who repurposed a cargo bike to serve as a mobile reading room, information desk, learning space, art installation and much more. It invites people to together imagine and cultivate a future that is climate-safe and fair, opening up conversations in neighbourhoods and communities that may sometimes get left out of climate debates. The purpose of HubRen is to enable these conversations to happen in a friendly, non-judgemental way, changing the narrative that “nothing can be done” or that “it’s too late to address the climate crisis”. The mobile hub curates resources that are easy to look through, commissions art-filled posters, and collects activities like letters from the future that make use of images that people recognise today.

[www.hubren.org](http://www.hubren.org)

### Saber Dar skill sharing sessions, Cascais, Portugal



Saber Dar is a small-scale project in Cascais that harnesses and disseminates locally available knowledge by facilitating skill sharing sessions with residents from diverse communities. In this municipality on the periphery of Lisbon, social housing areas are characterised by socio-economic inequalities. By engaging NGOs, neighbourhood associations



**Figure 2:** Map of the locations of the nine urban experiments whose work forms the basis of this publication

and the networks developed through existing municipal programmes, Saber Dar invites community members to participate in skill-sharing as learners and facilitators, thereby fostering a sense of purposeful belonging and collaboration. The initiative is headed by Cascais Ambiente, a municipal entity that provides environmental services. To implement Saber Dar, the team first identifies the needs and assets of the neighbourhood through a consultation process with residents. Their activities so far have, to name just a few examples, spread knowledge on sewing, composting, and gardening, and have fostered a culture of community guardians or liaisons.

<https://ambiente.cascais.pt/pt/noticias/projeto-saber-dar>



### **TheSpace\_Coolhaven neighbourhood commons, Rotterdam, the Netherlands**



TheSpace\_Coolhaven is an initiative that is part of peer\_protocol, a grassroots collective of urban thinkers and designers. TheSpace\_Coolhaven collectively runs an old apartment in Rotterdam, in part through a budget made available to several neighbourhood collectives. The initiative's participants renovated and improved the space, while inviting others to join and make use of it. The space serves as an experiment in commons space management and self-organisation, while at the same time offering valuable space for various artistic, academic and casual encounters. Thanks to its approach of keeping all knowledge open access, the project hopes to enable more collectives to do the same, using tools TheSpace has developed with a just transition philosophy.

<https://peerprotocol.nl>

### **Città So.la.re neighbourhood concierge, Padua, Italy**



Città So.la.re. is a multi-purpose cooperative that specialises in social welfare, education, and job placement for people who are systemically disadvantaged. Their 'neighbourhood concierge' programme aims to build a point of reference in a peripheral social housing neighbourhood, whereby two people act as concierges and are at the residents' disposal. The concierges provide information, digital support, a tools library, a time bank, and free redistribution of unsold fruits and vegetables; organise cultural events; and promote good practices to tackle energy poverty. The neighbourhood concierge

programme strives to strengthen community cohesion and fight marginalisation by pooling and sharing community assets and skills to promote a more sustainable and inclusive way of living.

[www.cittasolare.org](http://www.cittasolare.org)

### **JUSThood future neighbourhoods method, Katowice, Poland**



Urbanists from the organisation JUSThood developed and applied their Future Neighbourhoods methodology to help residents and local stakeholders imagine and envision equitable neighbourhoods, while equipping them with tools in future thinking and urban design. The methodology encourages participants to rethink human-environment relations and to better understand their agency over their own neighbourhoods. The approach includes engaging and training two community leaders with this methodology, activating their role, and then helping them turn neighbourhood visions into action plans. JUSThood is implementing this path in two neighbourhoods in Katowice as a first step, with plans in place to for such case studies to be spread throughout the world, with a database of relevant stakeholders, methodology and open access workshop formats.

<https://www.justhood.net>

### **Szeszgyár community park, Budapest, Hungary**



Szeszgyár is a community park which started as a research project on ways of living with other species in urban environments (multispecies cohabitation). Working on a plot

of borrowed land in the heart of Budapest, volunteers and activists curated the space, created shaded areas and garden beds, and now host festivals and after school activities for kids, as well as programmes for refugee integration and support. According to initiators, the approach of this community-driven initiative is “intersectional, looking for ways to honour the knowledge, needs and dreams of the many”. The initiative showed how privately-owned land can be ‘lent out’ and managed informally by communities with support and loose collaborations with activist and academic networks (e.g., Budapest Pride, Central European University, refugee networks, etc.).

[www.facebook.com/Szeszgyar1/?locale=hu\\_HU](https://www.facebook.com/Szeszgyar1/?locale=hu_HU)

### **Gradinescu garden, Alba Iulia, Romania**

The Alba Iulia experiment aims to enhance sustainable development and promote social justice at the local level by implementing a small-scale project focused on permaculture knowledge and avoiding food waste, with social inclusion at its core. The project consisted of a series of three interactive workshops organised in the “Gradinescu” urban garden in Alba Iulia, which involved vulnerable youth and local small farmers in an educational event through which youth learnt practically and theoretically about sustainable food production, food waste and permaculture directly from small farmers/practitioners.

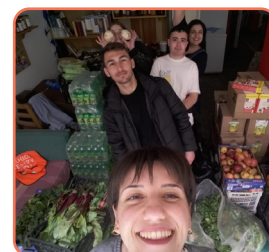
<https://gradinescu.ro/project/gradina-din-cetate-alba-iulia>



### **Pervolarides food reclamation, Thessaloniki, Greece**

Pervolarides is a community of people who came together during the economic crisis and recent period of austerity in Greece, which focuses their activities on food sustainability and social justice. They provide hot meals, and fresh fruit and vegetables to people in need, made from good quality reclaimed food products that would otherwise end up in the landfill. They also conduct workshops and community engagement activities. Founded in 2015, the team now counts 25-30 members, including members that hold different nationalities and ethnicities. They provide educational materials and train people in food processing, before donating the end products of these trainings to people in need. They maintain strong connections with other initiatives, such as cooperative housing projects and solidarity economy projects.

<https://facebook.com/PervolaridesThessalonikis>



### **Roof Coliving civic participation, Istanbul, Turkey**

Roof Coliving aims to create meaningful participation spaces and processes for citizens to contribute to transforming their cities, and their understandings of sustainability. The initiative’s team offers informal education methods, which people can use during co-design processes. They furthermore help create bridges between municipalities and local communities using codesign programmes and awareness-raising about Istanbul’s environmental, climate, and sustainability challenges.

[www.roofcoliving.org](http://www.roofcoliving.org)



## 3. Lessons for just urban sustainability transitions

### 3.1 Experiments' aims and strategies for systemic change

Each of the nine experiments started from a recognition of socio-environmental injustices identified in their local contexts. Some of these include: racist discrimination against immigrants or ethnic minorities, energy poverty, housing access inequality, urban segregation, and the concentration of unemployment and poor health in under-served and low-income neighbourhoods. **Accordingly, the experiments' common purposes are to raise awareness of these injustices, and to practise sustainability and social justice – both in their communities and with a view to broader systemic change.**

According to Loorbach (2007), systemic change can be pursued in three ways:

- **Structure:** Questioning established rules and regulations by building new networks and infrastructure.
- **Culture:** Questioning current norms and values through debate and by bringing in new perspectives and voices.
- **Practice:** Changing daily routines and connecting with actors in new ways.

The nine initiatives studied each depict ways to advance systemic change, in terms of structure, culture, and practice.

On a **structural** level, multiple initiatives question how *procedural justice* aspects are addressed in urban planning processes. **Procedural justice refers to the fairness and transparency of the processes and procedures used in decision-making around, in this case, urban sustainability.**

Procedural justice ensures that all individuals have equal opportunities to participate, be heard, and have their concerns addressed.

Many members of the aforementioned initiatives observed that the design and use of urban spaces are not shaped with direct citizen participation, but are rather implemented from governments in a top-down manner. This is either because no civil participation is invited at the time of conceptualising, designing, and implementing the project, or because the civil participation that is facilitated is not inclusive of all.

For example, individuals with low incomes often work long hours and are unable to delegate their caregiving responsibilities. Consequently, they cannot actively participate in public fora (and thus in decision-making processes). Similarly, residents with immigrant backgrounds may encounter language barriers that prevent them from being reached by announcements or invitations for civic engagement. Moreover, they may not feel included or welcomed in such processes (Kotsila et al. 2022).<sup>1</sup> In other words, the most marginalised community members may find it difficult to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes and to exert influence over sustainability policies, which ultimately affects their abilities to benefit from these policies.

To overcome this systemic hurdle, some of the initiatives we worked with developed new ways of organising within a community, building new networks and challenging top-down decision-

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<sup>1</sup> See also this informative video on the issue of civil participation: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thdnxt053tc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thdnxt053tc)

making procedures. For instance, Roof Coliving in Istanbul organises events and programmes that build bridges between residents and municipalities, and which raise awareness and encourage public participation. Roof Coliving partnered, for example, with the Municipality of Maltepe (part of Metropolitan Istanbul) to bring all community members into urban planning through ‘tactical urbanism’. Efforts like these aim to increase bottom-up agency and power in the organisation of public space and urban planning.

A similar process was seen in Budapest, with direct action towards reclaiming ‘the right to the city’ and to urban nature (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila 2022).<sup>2</sup> In that case, privately owned, unused, post-industrial land was taken over to create a queer, vegan ecofeminist community space and nature preserve, with expenses for renting the land and the small storefront space in it are mostly generated through small donations. The “Szeszgyár” initiative has hosted events in the communally cared for land – which had been lying idle for more than 20 years – such as the maintenance of a vegetable garden, community composting, movie screenings, nature walks, community cookouts, concerts, workshops, games and more. Ultimately, private space became available to all through bottom-up mobilisation and negotiation with land owners.

Many initiatives included in this report aim to enact change at the **cultural** level. They are doing so by, for example, raising questions around social

cohesion, and challenging dominant views of sustainability and of how to achieve sustainability in urban space.

For instance, HubRen challenges narratives that place the burden of sustainability and responsibility to take climate action solely on individuals. Instead of perpetuating the notion that individuals can simply buy their way out of carbon emissions or be blamed for unsustainable practices, HubRen’s education and sensitisation campaigns shed light on the underlying structural factors that drive unsustainable behaviour. They aim to bridge the gap between those who can afford to live sustainably and those who cannot, highlighting the need to address systemic barriers and create a more equitable path towards sustainability. By creating spaces to talk about a new future in a positive and inspiring way, the initiative has been able to engage more people in conversations about a climate just future. Through such activities, it challenges current narratives of being “too late” to address climate change, or that “there is no alternative” to current socio-economic systems and their environmental consequences.

Lastly, many of the initiatives are focused on making direct change by changing concrete ‘ways of doing’, putting forward new or alternative **practices**.

As part of Città So.la.re., for example, a neighbourhood concierge service was established in a peripheral Padua neighbourhood characterised by dense public housing and by many elderly, widowed, and disabled residents. The concierge provides digital support, access to a tools library, tackles energy poverty, and redistributes free fruit and vegetables – in other words, it puts in place new, sustainable, and equitable practices.

Similarly, the Gradinescu garden in Alba Iulia focuses on promoting permaculture and avoiding food waste, and engages specifically

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘right to the city’ concept emphasises the idea that all individuals have a fundamental right to actively participate in and shape the city or urban environment they inhabit (Lefebvre 1968), the right to the city encompasses not only the physical space but also the social, political, and cultural dimensions of urban life. The right to the city and the right to urban nature are interconnected concepts that emphasise the importance of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable urban environments.



with small farmers and students from minority or socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds. Pervolarides in Thessaloniki also addresses austerity and poverty by providing food to people in need, and training people in food processing. It furthermore facilitates the sharing of skills, materials, and knowledge between and within communities. Their main purpose has been to train people in sustainably processing food, saving food waste, and donating food to people in need. By experimenting outside the boundaries of formal institutions, they fill gaps in the state social welfare system, which has been shown to be unsustainable.

The Saber Dar initiative in Cascais also experimented with concrete new practices, bringing actors within a community together in such a way that participants set the agenda. Through a consultation process with residents, Saber Dar has promoted new ways of exchanging knowledge and skills, resulting in more interaction within a community, as well as a shift of perspective about how to value locally-embedded, everyday knowledge.

### 3.2 Community initiative impact unleashed

These nine initiatives presented are trying out fresh ways of thinking, organising, and doing. Through their efforts, they find unconventional solutions for societal needs. However, this learning process is often specific to a local context, and many of the experiments are in an early stage of systemic change, which can make it challenging to gauge their broader societal impacts. Regardless, in this section we present the impacts that initiators of, and participants in, these projects recognise and foresee based on their experiences. **Since most initiatives are small-scale and relatively young, it is valuable to look at their potentially long-lasting and future impacts, rather than solely at direct impact metrics.**

Many initiators underlined how the social and environmental impacts of their projects are often intangible, difficult to measure, and develop over time. As Saber Dar's spokesperson described, no regulatory or legal shifts resulted from their initiative. But, they did see changes in, for example, the ways that women from underserved neighbourhoods expressed themselves, their needs and demands, and gained agency in representing their communities in official municipal consultation processes. Considering this intangibility, how can we understand initiatives' impacts?

Given these realities – which can be seen in many long-term change processes – the 'transitions experiments web' (Figure 3, adapted from Roorda, C. & Van Steenberg, F. forthcoming) can provide a more layered understanding of initiatives' impacts. The web defines four characteristics of systemic change: mobilising, providing an iconic example, catalysing change, and delivering direct results.

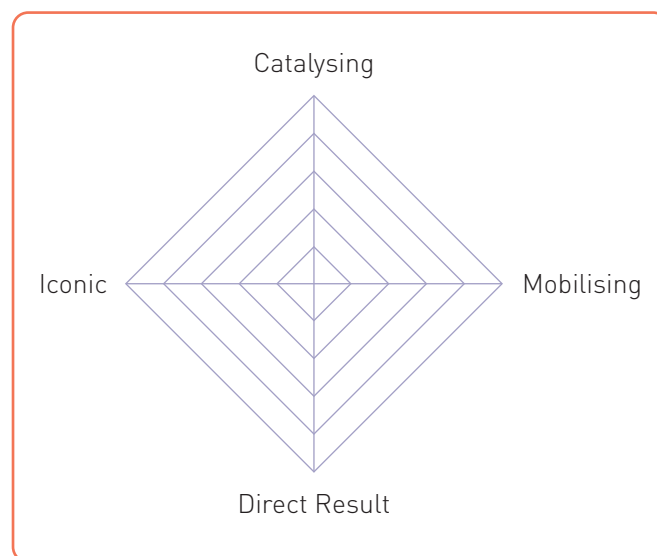


Figure 3: Visual depiction of the 'transitions experiments web', adapted from Roorda, C. & Van Steenberg, F., forthcoming.



By testing out new ways of thinking, organising, and doing, the UrbanCommunity initiatives prompt systemic change – visible across these four characteristics – for a socio-ecological transition towards just sustainable futures.

### 1. Mobilising Communities

The first aspect of such systemic change is the **capacity to “mobilise.”** Consider: is the initiative capable of mobilising people, getting citizens engaged, and sparking enthusiasm that attracts new members to join and follow its activities? Most of the projects indeed count a high number of participants and create new engagement opportunities within their neighbourhoods. Community building processes in Cascais (Saber Dar), Alba Iulia (Gradinescu Garden) and Rotterdam (TheSpace), effectively bring people from different backgrounds together to learn new skills (from sewing to gardening, direct democracy processes, and to commons management) that participants can then use and spread in different places and contexts.

In other cases, initiatives were able to deepen mobilisation by bringing new actors into their urban communities, creating new opportunities for interaction. For example, the initiative in Budapest (Szeszgyár) led state actors to visit the park, after which it was agreed that part of the land will be safeguarded as green, even when the rest of the plot returns to private use. Here, mobilising different actors proved to lead to systemic change.

When initiatives feature hands-on involvement activities such as skill sharing, participants were more likely to become involved – and to stay involved – in the overall project. This relates to **‘epistemic justice’, which recognises that knowledge is shaped by various social, cultural, and historic contexts, and considers valuing knowledge held by traditionally marginalised groups a way to advance justice.** In UrbanCommunity projects, appreciating and

mobilising diverse residents’ knowledge fostered collaboration and social cohesion.

Moreover, many emphasised the importance of personal communication and relationship-building among participants to maintain the function of initiatives and ensure they are engaging for local communities. In Città So.la.re., the fruit and vegetable “market” space has become a meeting place where people share coffee and tea, and the concierge is present to listen to the changing needs of the community. This helped build a sense of community and changed the way the district was viewed: from one identified as a “dormant” and lacking public space and activities, to a place of activity and life.

### 2. Providing iconic examples

The second characteristic of systemic change is to question **whether an initiative is “iconic”.** An initiative is iconic when it shows that the impossible is possible, by questioning and breaking dominant norms. In Roof Coliving dominant norms are brought into question through youth participation in co-designing public spaces. In the example of Szeszgyár, a commons greening project unfolded in a seemingly impossible place (due to perceived legal restrictions) thus providing a different narrative about how public green space can be accessed and managed. In both examples, even though the initiatives might not be guaranteed a long-term future, they have planted the seeds of debate about the role public green spaces can have in the city, and the role citizens have in imagining and implementing changes in their urban environments. The experiments set important precedents with the potential of impacting future urban planning decisions.

### 3. Catalysing Change

Thirdly, initiatives have the potential to be impactful by **being “catalysing.”** Through their innovative approaches, initiatives have the power to shed light on what is unsustainable or unjust in





an existing system, and to highlight the need for change. By diverging from conventional practices, they demonstrate that alternative, sustainable, and fair methods are feasible and attainable. These initiatives also prove that even formal rules and regulations can be transformed to align with new approaches.

For example, the representative of the Gradinescu garden noted how small societal shifts can be achieved by bringing people together that would otherwise not interact, especially as an inviting, comfortable place that generates common benefits. In some ways, this initiative catalysed a new way of thinking about which actors need to be brought together to share knowledge, skills, and ideas. For its part, TheSpace changes the ways people think about possible uses and management systems of residential property.

By establishing a commons-based approach to infrastructure, and by opening up a house's usage and governance to community discussion, the initiative is experimenting with new ways of understanding the distinctions between public, private, and communal property.

#### 4. Delivering Direct Results

Finally, multiple initiatives showed impact that could be measured as a **direct result**. Direct results can be part of systemic impact when they align with the transition to a sustainable and just society. A clear example of this is the Pervolarides initiative in Thessaloniki. Since they provide meals for people who need them, they offer a direct solution for those who otherwise are not able to get sufficient food, while also offering training and engaging in activities that build community capacity around sustainable food production and

circulation. Other examples include the skills and tool sharing enabled through the neighbourhood concierge in Città So.la.re.

### 3.3 Triumphs and trials on the path to justice

For more than 20 years, advocates have demanded that equity-oriented environmental justice principles be integrated into sustainability policies (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2002). Urban sustainability carries the promise of a “green, profitable, and fair” future with compatible economic, environmental, and social goals. Though the social dimensions of sustainability are often present and sometimes framed in terms of equity or justice, this dimension is often the lowest priority in sustainability public policy. Social goals are “named but not fully explored or addressed” (Pearsall and Pierce 2010). This shortcoming is something that the nine experimental initiatives have tried to address, though not without difficulties.

Applying an intersectional lens necessitates recognising that individuals hold unique and evolving positions in relation to power and privilege due to the intersections of their multiple identities (Amorim-Maia et al., 2022). This understanding was evident in certain initiatives’ concerns, actions, and aspirations for the future. By adopting an intersectional perspective, these initiatives acknowledged the intricacies of individuals’ experiences and strived to address the interconnected effects of various forms of oppression and discrimination.

HubRen, for example, connected London’s Renters Union (class) and women’s empowerment groups (gender), and promoted the use of bicycles by women representing ethnic minorities in the city (religion, gender). Pervolarides is explicitly inclusive of those who embody different nationalities and cultures, accommodating the participation of immigrants (race, religion, ethnicity), as well as people representing different

ages and educational backgrounds. The initiative creates safe spaces for respectful discussions, and maintains strong contacts with other movements (housing co-ops, solidarity economy projects).

However, there is still room for improvement in how all the initiatives explicitly integrate intersectional approaches when it comes to decision-making and accessible activity planning. In the following sections, we explore challenges surrounding accessibility, power imbalances, unequal responsibilities, and potential unforeseen negative consequences that can result.

#### How accessible are the nine initiatives?

Accessibility to urban sustainability initiatives and their benefits is not only a question of availability. An initiative might be geographically proximate and theoretically open to everyone, but still not inclusive in practice. In this sense, it is crucial to consider how people’s experiences shape their perceptions of access, and how different groups’ uses and needs are protected or sacrificed in order to create new access (Anguelovski et al. 2020).

In TheSpace, for example, although the *modus operandi* is based on principles of open access and the commons, participation can hinge on a certain level of technological literacy (accessing online forums of discussion, online passwords for opening the lock, etc.). Moreover, the main language used is English (TheSpace is located in Rotterdam, which is predominantly Dutch-speaking, with numerous migrant communities), which is likely to disproportionately be accessible to a specific group of young, international, higher-education students.

By contrast, Città So.la.re’s neighbourhood concierge engages the elderly through posters in places they usually attend, and relying on word-of-mouth. They struggle to collect written feedback on what kinds of activities community members



would like to see organised, since literacy levels are low. Città So.la.re. provides an example of how this hurdle can be overcome, as reflection on issues of accessibility generated alternative ways to collect feedback, such as using pictures that people can vote on, using visual maps where people can pin places they like and those they don't use, etc.

One of the challenges in making initiatives accessible to a wider range of community members stems from certain misconceptions about the radical nature of social movements and collectives. For example, Szeszgyár is explicitly grounded in ecofeminist ideals and LGBTQI+ activism. These may be misunderstood, leading some individuals to be deterred from engaging with them. Addressing misconceptions and other biases is crucial to foster inclusivity and encourage broader participation in these initiatives.

### Whose knowledge shapes initiatives?

Research has shown that if participatory formats are to authentically target social inclusion, procedural justice needs to inform both their goals and their processes (Kotsila et al 2022).<sup>3</sup>

**Procedural (or participation) justice refers to the fair and equitable inclusion of individuals and communities in decision-making processes that concern their lives and well-being.**

Many of the UrbanCommunity initiatives see themselves as an embedded part of the community, which operates in a horizontal way, collectively defining their goals and how to reach them (e.g., TheSpace, Pervolarides). Others, such as those led by private organisations or municipal departments, set their agendas in less collaborative ways, but aim to be inclusive with respect to who takes part (Saber Dar, Gradinescu). And, there are evolving hybrid structures whereby municipal staff running a project incorporate ideas that come directly from the community in question (Città So.la.re.).

Even in the (relatively) most top-down examples though, procedural justice can be pursued. In

Saber Dar, creating space for less visible people within the community to show their skills helped motivate their further involvement in community-based activities, including in municipal consultations, and in shaping future Saber Dar activities. For example, after two women of Cape Verdean descent demonstrated a traditional stew recipe and received a very positive reception, the demonstration became an activity that was repeated in the context of Saber Dar.

### Who bears the burden of participating and driving initiatives?

There is a noticeable dominance of women and non-binary people among initiative leaders, and initiatives' regular participants. This comes with the burden of volunteerism – in other words, their energy, time, and resources feed these projects, often without economic compensation or formal recognition. For example, Saber Dar's teachers and Città So.la.re.'s neighbourhood concierges are volunteers and mostly women, many of whom are mothers and come from immigrant backgrounds.

This is important to highlight, as the "entrepreneurship" of urban sustainability is often built on the shoulders of people who are otherwise disadvantaged and under-appreciated in the workplace and everyday life. This creates a tension between the systemic change potential and the intersectional justice potential of grassroots projects that are based on citizen effort.

Such initiatives can reflect neoliberal logics of state withdrawal (e.g., underfunding public services), and may receive minimal support despite offering substantial social and environmental benefits (Kotsila et al. 2020). This can exacerbate challenges; in grassroots initiatives like Szeszgyár, for example, it is challenging to maintain high participation in the face of diverse livelihood struggles.

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<sup>3</sup> See also this informative video on the issue of civil participation: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thdnxt053tc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Thdnxt053tc)





### **Unforeseen consequences?**

Well-intentioned sustainability projects and artistic initiatives can inadvertently contribute to gentrification. Research points to a tendency for the creative sector to be used as a cheap way to prevent squatting, while 'uplifting' a neighbourhood's cultural (and thus monetary) value. In gentrification processes, vulnerable residents – disproportionately those who are working class, immigrants, and people of colour – are pushed or priced out of their neighbourhoods, thus "remaking the city for the sustainability class" (Gould and Lewis 2016).

Any local initiative must consider these impacts. For example, TheSpace should question the regulatory framework that allows an empty flat to be allocated to a group of young people in a context of increasing home prices and gentrification. And, Roof Coliving and JUSThood must question who

actually takes part in participatory processes, and whose priorities will be missed in the resulting neighbourhood changes. One way to mitigate these risks is to include meaningful and inclusive participation of citizens in urban change processes, especially those in vulnerable and marginalised neighbourhoods, which face chronic underinvestment.

While the nine initiatives studied here are actively integrating aspects of justice in their work, we do notice a lack of reflection on how an initiative itself might be causing or propagating dynamics of urban change with unjust impacts. The underlying problems are systemic (e.g., housing speculation and neoliberal policies); but, sustainability initiatives still risk being caught in wider webs of influence that benefit elites, even while they aim to challenge this system.

### 3.4 Temporality, trust and survival

Reports from initiative leaders point to the more challenging aspects of forming, governing, and sustaining experiments for sustainable just cities. Often, the initiatives' own continuation is dependent on larger systemic change, and interactions with other institutions can challenge or hinder their progress.

There appears to be a stark difference between initiatives that, from their beginning, have committed institutional support and/or are part of other ongoing activities, when compared to those that are initiated directly and only from civil groups and activists. The latter often operate in a context of relative precariousness as they face an ongoing lack of economic resources, displacement, and low-levels (or burn-out) of voluntary participation.

As TheSpace representative reflected, this precarity of support by local authorities, in terms of access to space or resources, influences how involved people can be, and how much the community can invest financially, physically, and emotionally. The plot of land occupied by Szeszgyár may be sold in the near future, thus displacing the initiative and demotivating participants. In Thessaloniki, Pervolarides is driven by 20 volunteers, but is running short on resources and energy to keep going, receiving no support from local governments. These findings point to the importance of long-term support to initiatives if intersectional justice outcomes are to be strengthened and maintained.

In the case of HubRen, it was clear that to address class-based inequality and incentivise people to discuss energy poverty, climate change and social inequality together, the project needed participation of a variety of people, including local authorities. This required building trust within a community, which demands a lot of time and resources. In municipality-driven projects, such as Saber Dar, trust-building is also a challenge, which

needs continuous effort and time. When financial support for such projects is short-lived, their impact (and ability to build this trust) is also limited.

Given these challenges – which seem to face (to varying degrees) all the initiatives – how can we understand the future of the nine initiatives?

By taking a transition perspective, the initiatives can be viewed as experiments that are part of building-up new systems by enabling experimentation and learning (Sengers et al. 2019). The initiatives learn how to do things differently; for example in Szeszgyár that developed knowledge of how to manage private property collectively. By experimenting, the initiatives also learn the effects of these practices on the community, and can show other actors what does and does not work to make cities sustainable and just. Returning to Szeszgyár, the experiment shows the municipality that there are hybrid forms of property ownership and management.

Systemic change potential is accelerated when experiments are connected to each other or to organisations that share similar ways of thinking, doing and organising. Most initiatives lack stability within their context, and are eager to learn and connect with others that are facing the same challenges in different ways. Learning from other organisations and strengthening their voice collectively will help all nine initiatives to challenge unjust and unsustainable systems.

By experimenting, linking up to other organisations, and strengthening their bases, the initiatives become better able to spark systemic change. However, their impacts can only increase if they are taken seriously by those in power. **Multiple levels of government, private foundations, and all others with money and influence need to use their wallets and words to properly value the service provided by such local initiatives. When community led initiatives are supported in this way, they can be vital agents of change in building sustainable and just cities.**

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