Executive Summary of ECOLISE policy papers

These papers were drafted by mini working groups of the Communities for Future Policy Circle through a collaborative process which began in January 2021.

1. Democratic practices

Community-led initiatives are a form of democratic practice. They are initiatives where people self-organise in the places where they live to take action on issues that concern them.

Democracy is the cornerstone of our society, depending on the form or shape that it takes it also reflects our values and priorities.

With climate change, biodiversity loss and the increasing pressure and demand put on individuals to save the planet, we now require political systems that engage people in the creative task of building community on a basis of environmental and social sustainability. However, despite the increase of tools (referendums, consultation, citizens' assembly, petitions, European youth events; citizens dialogue, climate assembly) available for citizens to provide their opinions and the increase of opportunities to shape policy, local budgets, and their planning, two distinct developments have emerged raising questions regarding the democratic nature of the EU. One is about the general lack of transparency and the other the lack of real impact for those citizens, local authorities or associations who engage in those dialogues, respond to consultations, write petitions etc.

In its recent report on Citizens' dialogues and Citizens' participation in the EU decision-making the European Parliament points out that the questioning, mistrust, and lack of participation of citizens, local authorities, and civil society in "democracy" comes from the current structure or tools used to engage citizens. These tools and structures seem to only enable a certain category of citizens to be heard, leaving out many voices. Marginalised groups represent many of those silent voices, which are often most impacted by decisions requiring them to adapt or change their habits, while at the same time letting slide shortcomings of fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and of assembly taking place in EU Member States.

Where at EU and national level the democratic deficits are screaming at us, there is however a vibrant and innovative set of democratic practices that have been emerging with the potential to reinvigorate European democracies and set the scene for bottom up, inclusive, and equitable systems of governance. This policy paper looks at those practices, re-evaluates and provides specific recommendations on how to create the right space and conditions and to provide the right support to ensure the democratic participation of marginalised groups. If climate change is social justice and social justice is climate change then for example the implementation and evaluation of European climate law must put citizens at its heart. This paper also reminds us that engagement is not an end in itself but should be a means to change a reality that does not satisfy us.

The full paper is here.

Authors: Matthew Bach, ICLEI Europe; Maëlys GARCIA, ATD Quart monde; Yara Sinkovec, Student.

2. Working with Nature

Community-led nature-based initiatives can have broad appeal to government and financial entities if they are brought to scale with appropriate financial instruments and enabling legislative environments

The world is facing a multifaceted crisis. Climate change is straining nature's ability to deliver resources that people need to survive and extinction rates are higher than ever before in human history. Nature's productivity, resilience and adaptability is faltering and causing extreme risk and uncertainty for our economies and lives. Economic systems that overexploit and pollute nature, accompanied by decision-makers' and people's helplessness and ignorance, are at the heart of the existential crisis faced by humanity.

To avoid the worst and in so doing limit climate change to a temperature-rise of 1.5 °C, Europe needs an all-of-society approach to the crisis. To achieve the dramatic changes we know are needed, we need to shift policy to help entire populations transition to sustainable lifestyles, economic activities and social interaction. Thus, we must find ways to engage the EU's population in Community-led Initiatives (CLIs). Research indicates that such action could reduce emissions of the EU as a whole of up to 73%. Communities for Future, the ECOLISE action programme, is ready to help bring about the required transformational processes and win the engagement of a wide swath of society for community-led action.

CLIs around the globe provide a roadmap to stimulating meaningful behavioral change, as they develop and implement a wide range of sustainable, nature-based solutions within key areas relevant for environmental and climate action. The European Commission defines nature-based solutions as "solutions that are inspired and supported by nature, which are cost-effective, simultaneously provide environmental, social and economic benefits and help build resilience." The social dimension of CLIs sets them apart from individual or commercial initiatives as they take a whole-of-society approach built on diversity, social justice and democratic decision-making and provide more economic opportunities and affordable solutions to the disenfranchised.

CfF seeks to provide replicable models for living and working with nature and to demonstrate the impact of diverse nature-based solutions implemented by CLIs through scientific method and observation. The programme not only aims at mobilizing large numbers of people to engage in and support these solutions, but also to offer education and training for people to learn how to set up their own CLI and/or develop the thousands of existing ones further. In order to bring CfF to life broad societal, political and financial support is required. This policy paper therefore sets out a range of policy recommendations that would allow for a successful implementation of the programme. The full paper is found here.

Authors: Leonard Doyle, Lost Glacier Association; Ad Vlems, Boekel Ecovillage & Global Ecovillage Network NL; Amelie Krug, ECOLISE.

3. Transition Design

Transition Design focuses on the necessity for 'cosmopolitan localism', a life-style that's place-based and regional, yet global in its awareness and exchange of data and technology.

Fundamental change at every level of our society, and new approaches to problem solving are needed to address twenty-first-century "wicked problems" such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, depletion of natural resources, and the widening gap between rich and poor. Transition Design offers design practice, study, and research that advocates design-led societal transition toward more sustainable futures. This reconception of entire lifestyles will involve reimagining infrastructures including energy resources, the economy and food, healthcare, and education. Transition Design focuses on the necessity for "cosmopolitan localism", a life-style that's place-based and regional, yet global in its awareness and exchange of data and technology. Transition Designers apply a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of social, economic, and natural systems and therefore the Transition Design framework proposes four key areas during which narratives, knowledge, skills, and action can be developed.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, a transition is "a process or period of adjusting from one state to another". We will identify many of those shifts throughout the history of mankind. These transitions are macroscopic, multi-actor and long-term processes that have revolutionized our lifestyles and habits, but that are negatively affecting the planet. The question is whether or not it is possible to intentionally direct these transitions towards more sustainable futures. This is precisely the aim of Transition Design.

Transition Design is a relatively new area of design research, study and practice that is aimed at systems-level change and societal transitions towards more sustainable futures. Due to its systemic perspective, when Transition Design addresses an issue it inevitably ends up uncovering a series of other interconnected problems, facing what researchers Rittel and Webber named "wicked problems". They are "problems that can't be definitively described and haven't any apparent solutions".

Transition Design applies a method that is articulated into three phases: (i) reframing present and future, the phase in which designers attempt to understand the larger picture and define the long-term goal of the transition; (ii) designing interventions, namely developing and implementing the projects that represent the steps towards the shared vision; (iii) waiting and observing, the verification phase in which designers evaluate how the system responds to the interventions.

In this policy paper we talk about the basics of transition design and its various levels of approaches and interrelations. We also discuss what transition projects are and various approaches to achieve them. We include the example of how, by using transition design, regulators & policy makers could transform the EU Common Agricultural Policy from action-based to result-based payments centred on soil carbon maintenance and enhancement.

The full paper is available here.

Authors: Sonali; Mateusz Ciasnocha

About ECOLISE: The European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability (ECOLISE) is a network of organisations engaged in promoting and supporting local communities across Europe in their efforts to build pathways to a sustainable future.

Members include international networks of community-based initiatives such as the Transition Network (representing over 1200 Transition initiatives), the Global Ecovillage Network (15,000 ecovillages), the Permaculture movement (3 million practitioners globally) and ICLEI, as well as other national and regional networks and specialist bodies engaged in European-level research, training and communications to support community-led action on climate change and sustainability.

By bringing these organisations together, ECOLISE seeks to establish a common, Europe-wide agenda and a platform for collective action. It has 47 member organisations in 17 different EU member states, and in Albania, Serbia, Switzerland and the UK. In 2020 ECOLISE spearheaded Communities For Future.