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# Grassroots niches in urban contexts: exploring governance innovations for sustainable development in Seoul

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the crucial role cities play in the emergence and formation of grassroots socio-technical niches for sustainability transitions. Drawing on research engaged with strategic niche management, grassroots innovations and urban social innovations, it conceptualizes the interdependencies between urban contexts and grassroots niche dynamics, and explores a critical case in point: Current policy efforts in the city of Seoul to create, diversify and network social innovations in urban neighborhoods. The case illustrates how innovative place-making activities in everyday-life urban environs draws on empowerment, proximity and institutional thickness to meet basic conditions for niche formation in terms of networking, shared expectations and social learning, while also raising new issues of inclusion, legitimacy and strategy. In conclusion, four issues are highlighted that appear to decisively impact on the formation of urban grassroots niche and related sustainability transition pathways: 1) Urban empowerment capacities, 2) Embedded holistic innovation, 3) Novel community-oriented governance modes, and 4) Urban niche/regime interactions. These issues thus require particular attention in future research and policy in order to guide the coevolution of cities and urban grassroots initiatives towards sustainability.

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## 1. Introduction

Cities are critical hotspots for socio-technical system transitions towards sustainability. This is not only due to their quantitative importance in an urbanizing world, but also, and perhaps more importantly, regarding their role as incubators and catalysts of socio-economic and environmental change (Mumford, 1961; Jacobs, 1970; Douglas, 2010). It is essentially urban patterns of production and consumption, social interaction, as well as cultural practice that drive global flows of people, materials and information (Weinstein and Turner, 2012; Elmqvist, 2013; Vojnovic, 2014). Correspondingly, cities are also the places where all systems of provision that today require radical transformation eventually coalesce (McCormick et al., 2013).

Research on cities and socio-technical transitions has developed a strong focus on urban infrastructure systems, examining how cities shape and are shaped by their transformation under conditions of global environmental change and economic destabilization (Guy et al., 2001, 2011; Monstadt, 2009; Hodson and Marvin, 2010; Bulkeley et al., 2011). This has illuminated why and how actors at various scales engage in new forms of governance arrangements and local experimentation in order to reconfigure urban energy, water, waste or transport systems (Berkhout et al., 2010; Bai et al., 2010; Coutard and Rutherford, 2010; Hodson and Marvin, 2012; Späth and Rohrer, 2012; Hamann and April, 2013; Castán Broto and Bulkeley, 2013; Hodson et al., 2013; Moloney and Horne, 2015). Nevertheless, other urban dimensions of socio-technical change and related experiments have so far remained largely underexplored.

In particular, studies of grassroots innovations and niche formation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013), as well as urban social innovation (MacCallum et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2010) point towards implications of cities for the way in which citizens and local civil society actors get involved in the spatially embedded reproduction of socio-technical regimes and/or creation of sustainability innovations (cf. Bulkeley et al., 2014; Baker and Mehmood, 2015). Urban contexts enable and require the social and physical interconnection or ‘bundling’ (Shove et al. 2012) of diverse social practices that (de-)stabilize not only single systems, but ‘multi-regime’ configurations (Smith et al., 2010; Papachristos et al., 2013; Næss and Vogel, 2012; Mizuguchi et al., 2015). At the same time, cities also provide ‘protected spaces’ that allow people to articulate and enact diverse ‘alternative ontologies’ and ‘spatial imaginaries’ of socio-technical change (Longhurst, 2015), since they fundamentally enable the manifestation of diversity (Castells, 1983; Fincher and Iveson, 2008). Most importantly, cities draw on substantive policy capacities that directly affect citizens across all life domains, including e.g. housing, green space, employment, consumption, education or culture, among others. This also implies approaches for enabling citizen participation in planning and decision making, as well as for community support linked to a variety of purposes. These urban policies and interaction forms thus have an immediate bearing on the constitution of social practices and related (multi-)regime configurations, as well as on association- and coalition building processes for place-based socio-technical change, and may also be used strategically in this regard (Aylett, 2013, p. 870; Cohen and Ilieva, 2015; de Wildt-Liesveld et al., 2015).

Complementary to recognizing cities as contested sites of multi-level ‘low-carbon politics’ (Bulkeley et al., 2014; Moloney and Horne, 2015), or simply as ‘seedbeds’ for innovative businesses (Geels, 2011), there is thus a need to account for the role of urban contexts in shaping civil-society driven sustainability innovations. Especially regarding place-making activities that mutually engage citizens, local authorities and businesses in the transformation of the diverse socio-technical systems embedded in the urban fabric, this role appears to be more influential than so far discussed. Therefore, this paper takes up this perspective and explores how cities enable or constrain the emergence and formation of grassroots niches. In particular, it asks for implications in terms of urban policy and governance in this, considering the prospective for a purposeful orientation at sustainability transitions. To start with, basic conditions for grassroots niche formation and their relation to urban contexts are deduced from research dealing with socio-technical grassroots innovations, and with spatially embedded social innovations. Second, these conditions are then explored empirically through the study of a highly pertinent urban case - the evolving approach for ‘village community’ governance in Seoul - accounting for their articulation, identifying critical issues that arise from implementation, and deriving new insights for theory and practice. Finally, the conceptual and empirical results obtained are discussed to provide responses to the above questions, and to conclude about implications for future research and policy.

## **2. Cities and grassroots niches**

In order to unveil the interdependencies between cities and grassroots niches dynamics, two pertinent fields of research are invoked here, respectively dealing with grassroots socio-technical niches and urban social innovation. They offer distinctive insights about enabling conditions for bottom-up innovation dynamics and niche formation, as well as on the role of urban place and urban policy in this. To engage with these two strands, the concepts of ‘niche’ and ‘strategic niche management’ will first be briefly expanded.

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