



Elucidating the changing roles of civil society in urban sustainability transitions

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Understanding the diversifying role of civil society in Europe's sustainability pathway is a valid proposition both scientifically and socially. Civil society organisations already play a significant role in the reality of cities, what remains to be explored is the question: what is the role of civil society in the future sustainability of European cities? We first examine the novelty of new forms of civil society organization based on a thorough review of recent case studies of civil society initiatives for sustainable transitions across a diversity of European projects and an extensive literature review. We conceptualize a series of roles that civil society plays and the tensions they entail. We argue that, civil society initiatives can pioneer new social relations and practices therefore be an integral part of urban transformations and can fill the void left by a retreating welfare state, thereby safeguarding and servicing social needs but also backing up such a rolling back of the welfare state. It can act as a hidden innovator—contributing to sustainability but remaining disconnected from the wider society. Assuming each of these roles can have unintended effects, such as being proliferated by political agendas, which endanger its role and social mission, and can be peeled off to serve political agendas resulting in its disempowerment and over-exposure. We conclude with a series of implications for future research on the roles of civil society in urban sustainability transitions.

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Introduction

European societies are faced with amalgamated crises: ecological degradation and loss of ecosystem functions, welfare systems that struggle to provide services needed to fulfil basic societal needs and maintain social security, and the resurfacing of dichotomies between social needs and aspirations of different social groups. In the midst of these crises, the conventional ways of dealing with problems and their manifestations appear ineffective. The complexity and magnitude of the challenges deem top-down steering approaches insufficient. Civil society has been playing a role in addressing sustainability challenges for the past several decades, and is a key actor contributing to sustainability transitions. Existing research describes civil society's ability to provide sustainability practices and services and demonstrates that it has diversified its activities beyond the historical role of civil advocacy [1]. While some civil society groups may

provide basic services no longer met by the retreat of the state, others may play a critical role in helping to reshape unsustainable social, ecological, economic, and cultural practices and patterns. In part, the recent configurations of civil society have emerged in response to the challenges described above [2–4].

The nature of civil society

If we are to understand how civil society develops and participates in sustainability transitions, we need to have a clear articulation of what we understand as civil society. Some argue it encompasses grassroots and community-based organizations, advocacy groups (*e.g.* NGOs), coalitions, professional associations and other organizational forms [5], while others define it as all organizations that are ‘institutionally separate from the state’ [6**] and the market. One thing agreed upon in the literature is that the state and civil society are different, with civil society being somewhat autonomous from the state and acting upon interest and motivations that do not aspire to winning political office nor economic benefits [6**]. The boundary between the two is not a rigid one given the many hybridized forms that have emerged. The relationships between organizations that represent civil society and the state are diverse, ranging from contestation and confrontation (this is why NGOs are sometimes described *as* civil society) to coalitions and partnerships that help provide state services (for example in the areas of health).

Examining the new situation with civil society

The fast-evolving changes in civil society discourses and organizational forms, as well as the high hopes it is asked to fulfil require a systematic scrutiny of the different roles civil society plays in sustainability transitions. This also relates to the shapes these roles take in different socio-economic and political contexts, across societal issues or domains (*e.g.* energy, food, mobility, built-environment and education) and across spatial scales (local, regional, national).

This paper is an outcome of an intense collaboration of researchers across four European research projects (ARTS, GLAMURS, TESS, and TRANSIT) that convened in a workshop on 2014 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands to investigate the role of civil society in sustainability transitions. During the workshop, a wide diversity of empirical cases 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 discussed empirical cases are documented in Table 1 and feature in depth empirical cases that are researched by pan-European research teams with a focus on sustainability transitions in cities. 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 plays and three categories of risks they face in their interactions with state institutions and actors that we address as unintended effects.

This initial inductive analytical framework was then used to orient a thorough literature review, in order to systematize a larger pool of analysed cases in urban sustainability transitions in Europe (Table 1). The review covered articles from 2010 to 2016 with some key additional references of earlier years (Table 2). Even though a large number of publications had been identified (1083 papers in total) and thoroughly reviewed, we emphasize here those that take a critical perspective on the interactions and inter-dependencies between civil society and urban systems of provision and governance and support our conceptualisation of the new roles of civil society (111 papers). The critical literature review reports on papers that address and/or implicate the conceptualized roles presented in this paper and go beyond the typical role of civil society as an advocate of civil rights that dominated the evidence in earlier writings from 1970s to 2000s. Our paper stands out by being inductively built from a plethora of contemporary empirical cases on the new roles of civil society (Table 1) and indicating 111 papers of the past 6 years that implicate similar roles without however bringing together the new conceptualization of roles into the foreground. Our paper features a new conceptualization of roles of civil society as active contributing to urban sustainability transitions.

This paper has a threefold aim. First, we discuss the roles civil society in sustainability transitions, building from a systematic review of cases from various domains (energy, water, food, education, land use change, biodiversity) in urban contexts. Second, we critically examine these roles and the unintended effects that arise from the interaction with other societal actors and their agendas for civil society. Third, we elaborate on the implications of these roles and interactions for a new research agenda, including directions for empirical explorations.

The roles of civil society

The roles civil society assumes and the ways in which it interacts with other actors are diverse. Far from attempting to describe all possible roles, we choose to focus on the three most important roles of civil society. We critically examine their interactions with other elements and actors across specific contexts in which they operate. In so doing, we seek to engage critically with the idea of civil society as having a pre-determined, uniform role with regard to sustainability. This allows us to consider how the wider context influences the roles that civil society can play.

A common assumption is that civil society plays an inherently positive role in processes supporting democracy and sustainability [7*]. Local initiatives can *pioneer*

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