gE.CO LIVING LAB

Summary of Survey Results

gE.CO Living Lab is a project which aims at promoting and supporting formal groups or informal communities of citizens who manage fab-labs, hubs, incubators, co-creation spaces and social centers which are created in regenerated urban voids. These innovative practices are considered **generative commons**, because they are based on sharing and collaboration between citizens and establish new partnerships between public institutions and local communities, they set forth new models of governance of these urban spaces based on care, solidarity, inclusion, participation, economic and environmental sustainability. The project has mapped **more than 250 initiatives of urban commons in Europe**, divided in communities and public policies aimed at their promotion and dissemination. **More than fifty of these experiences** completed a survey, the results of which are summarized here.

The survey was aimed at better understanding such initiatives under several perspectives, such as participation, governance, use of technology, political and legal issues, reliance on temporary uses.

The result of this survey will inform the development and configuration of **specific toolkits**, accessible for free through the online platform gE.CO has created. We hope that these toolkits will help with the overcoming of the main obstacles faced by local communities and organisations producing urban commons, related to local policies and access to technological infrastructures. More specifically, these will cover areas related to: **governance, temporary uses, technology and legal issues**.

A) Communities

Socio-demographic issues

Most of the initiatives currently producing urban commons in Europe and that were accessible to our consortium of partners, are engaged in the field of **arts and culture**, although many other activities are carried out, such as **food, inclusion of underrepresented groups, education and others**. In many cases, communities carry out different and diverse activities, and as such, their field of action cannot be easily defined. The great majority (although not all) of communities have a **formal legal entity**, usually either **an association or a cooperative**. In this respect, the survey has surfaced **a great level of creativity** in the use of the already available legal tools (especially with respect to governance) and their diversity among the member states of the EU. Also, most of the times there is no perfect overlapping between those who are formally part of the legal entity and those who are actively part of the community and/or beneficiaries of its services.

The **participants** of the organisations that we surveyed are in most cases young (between 25-35 years old). While **a substantial balance of gender** was found, the same cannot be said with reference to the **background and origins** of the participants, most of the times communities are formed by local-born people belonging to the dominant ethnic group. Most experiences show a

mild use of technologies, resulting in the use of social networks for promoting the activities and engaging with the public.

Funding

Public contributions (European, regional or local, and regular or punctual) remain the major funding source of commons initiatives under analysis. This affects the **economic stability** of communities and causes several internal tensions (e.g. difficulties in facing bureaucratic and administrative barriers to get funds and justify costs, time and work consuming, etc.). Although important and necessary, **self-financial sources** such as sponsorships, members' contributions, commercial activities, leasing out spaces, entrances and donations are not quantitatively as important as other source of funding.

Space

90% of the commons organisations or initiatives that we surveyed operate in **buildings and spaces that they do not have ownership**. Most of the times, the building belongs to a **public entity**, and the community obtains the use through a free cession, a facilitated rent or similar agreements. Sometimes, **these agreements represent the result of political struggles**, starting from illegal occupations of public buildings. Most of buildings identified used to be big or old factories, workshops, schools, colleges or public hospitals, mostly being unused or partially used when the groups or associations got into. The inability of the public sector to take care of these spaces due to their dimensions, the lack of resources and significant legal shortfalls explains why free cession and public-communitarian sessions are so common. Although some of these places are only opened during while activities are performed, in general, full and permanently open to everyone stands as a common rationale for almost all cases.

Internal organization and governance

Governance structure does usually comprise a **General Assembly**, an **Executive body** and a **Legal representative**, but this is mostly a formal arrangement implemented on paper to meet legal requirements. In fact, **the real way** to organize is often through smaller **working groups or commissions**. Other groups, although being a single 'legal entity', are in fact formed by various smaller organizations and this make internal organization even more complex. This kind of structure (an association compound by various associations, and based on working groups or commissions) may generate **some problems**, such as a lack of efficiency, difficulties in distributing information and in the decision-making procedures, asymmetries in members' engagement and commitment and when distributing tasks and responsibilities among them. Almost all cases report some difficulties on their internal organization resulting from **a lack of active participation or commitment** of some members which is linked to the participation's costs and benefits.

Issues and problems

The most reported issues refer to **economic sustainability and legal/bureaucratic hurdles**. Many experiences have reported problems with reference to the **relationship with the public owner and/or the public sector** (municipality/region etc.) These groups are usually managing expensive resources (buildings) through complex legal status (partial or limited rights of use or possession instead of clear full ownership or rent). Internal governance and organization model also arise as important issues. This is not new – all types of organizations do face these same collective action' problems – but they may be qualitatively different since these groups are managing 'public assets' in a way that traditional organizations do not. The above may explain why most of cases are primarily interested in the 'legal toolkit' gE.CO project offers them – as a way to reinforce or to help their legal structure which affect their daily activity.

With specific reference to the relationship with the public sector, many communities show difficulties in fitting their activities in the **traditional scheme of public administration procedures** (e.g. public tenders) due to the inconsistency between the model assumed but such procedures (competition) and the one pursued by generative commons (cooperation and participation). This result is symmetric to what found with respect to public policies.

Technology

Regarding **the intensity use of internet and ICT solutions for organizational purposes**, almost 50% of cases reflect a high degree of technology uses, while the remaining half of cases show lower degrees. In relation to internet penetration for personal rather than organisational use, individuals and members of these organisations have indicated a high degree of internet use (more than 75% of the respondents). As expected, there is a higher individual use of internet and ICT solutions than when it regards the organization or collective uses.

This general trend is also reinforced in relation to organizations' use of **social media** and the purposes for which these are used. As expected, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are, by large, the most intensively used to disseminate events and agenda. These social media platforms are widely used in **a mostly unidirectional way**, for publishing events and disseminating community organisations agendas and public information (of course, two-way communication on social media is also happening on however, mainly organisational-led topics). **Newsletters and Webpages** are also used but with much a lower intensity as these seems to be replaced by (rather than just complemented with) social media platforms. However, the reduced usage of these platforms might reflect that face-to-face remains the major mode of communication because of the location and neighbourhood-based character of these initiatives that prioritise personal and long-term engagement to online and detached communication.

It is worth to be noted that some online platforms are used not only to publish information as indicated above, but also to internally organize and coordinate members of the community and the

associations. Most of activities communities do are performed in-person and they tend not to be carried out online through platforms such as VoIP systems, remote discussions on video-streaming platforms, etc.). It must be noted however, that although in-person activities were the most extended way of carrying out public activities until now, **the Covid-19 crisis** has drastically altered this method and almost all of them are now conducting activities online. Things change when these communities are asked whether some of the activities they carry out, though not fully online conducted, are partially technologically supported or mediated with audio-visual systems for presentations or talks, using Google docs to collectively edit documents, etc. Although in general the activities are not yet fully technologically mediated and are not thought to be carried out online, it seems that several cases are using some digital tools anyway.

Asynchronous communication systems such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Telegram groups and channels are also tools community members rely on for their internal organization. The survey also shows that in both formal and informal communities technology plays a role in facilitating their internal organization (like mailing lists for different bodies or assemblies, decision-making systems, digital electing methods, etc.).

B) Public policies
Space

The **vast majority of urban policies** related with generative commons are devoted to the **regeneration of both buildings and open areas**. Just few of them (7%) do only refer to buildings, meaning that buildings management as generative commons are usually assumed by communities of citizens rather that by public authorities. Almost 90% of both kind of spaces belong to municipalities, and those belonging to particular owners are used by these policies through different sorts of public-private partnerships, contracts or agreements. Urban spaces are benefiting from these policies by improving both the physical spaces and the inhabitants' wellbeing and social cohesion. However, these may also lead to a **negative outcome**, such as the fostering of **gentrification**.

Citizens' participation

In most cases, participation when designing urban policies is not held directly by regular citizens, but by experts and their organizations. **Civic participation** is mostly mediated by these mid-term institutions used as 'advisers' or 'consultants'. On the contrary, direct participation seems more frequent and intense during the implementation phase. In any case, civic participation seems higher on average when compared with more traditional policies. These may affect the number of people involved and the way they are quantified. To which extent simple beneficiaries or sporadic users do count as participants? Due to their small size and their local character, a third of policies are participated by less than 100 people, while it is hardly to quantify in 53% of cases. **New legal tools** were developed to facilitate peoples' participation when implementing half of policies and

are mostly related with how to regulate the buildings' sessions to communities, how to follow up the **public-private-communitarian partnerships**, and how to regulate the uses of these properties. The use of new digital tools is not so frequent in most of cases. This may reflect that the small-size of these policies make it unnecessary, or that even though they really lack these technological solutions. Although most policies are not particularly targeted to a specific group, many of them take into account the **underrepresented groups** (mostly migrants, Roma and young people) when are designed and implemented. However, this is only explicit when assessing each case' national, regional and local context.

Funding and legal issues

The majority of policies are funded through **regular budget**, although **a significant presence of EU budget has to be highlighted** (UIA, URBACT etc.) The **duration** of policies varies according to: 1) the nature of the policy (size, type of spaces used, people involved and number of recipients, etc.), and 2) the national, regional and local legal framework. By absence or excess, legal framework always affects policies related to generative commons. **Legal obstacles** are always an important issue when implementing urban policies, since they are dealing with **new forms of ownership regimes** and they are not consistent with the ideas of competition, at the cornerstone of the legal conceptualization of the relationships between the public and private actors (embodied by the institution of public procurement, see above with reference to commons experiences). Also, the novelty of these policies often face the hurdle of the **uncertainty allocation of legal responsibility**, which may refrain public servant from implementing/enacting the policy.

Technology

The use of digital tools or technology by part of urban policies related with generative commons is average. 60% of cases are not using any specific technology solution, while just 40% do use some digital tools. **Technology is mostly used through webpages or web platforms** such as Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, mostly to unidirectional communicate these policies' activities and planned events and not so much as a manner to engage participants, to reinforce bidirectional interaction nor to foster civic participation. There might be plenty of reasons to explain this phenomenon, but two plausible hypotheses arise. First, most of these policies are **quite local and face-to-face based** and so they do not really require an intensive use of digital tools. Second, they do not entail so many beneficiaries nor participants which then may be **reached personally** – without digital tools. A third possible hypothesis is that most of urban policies are really **lacking of digital and technological resources** and that then they should develop **further tools** in this regard if they really want to reach more participants, to achieve a greater social impact and, in sum, to be more successful as urban policies.

Issues and problems

www.generative-commons.eu
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communities of citizens who manage fab-lab, hubs, incubators, co-creation
spaces, social centres created in regenerated urban voids.

Beyond the legal issues, urban policies regarding generative commons do face various issues which may by similar to others' 'traditional' policies such as the **lack of administrative personnel and budgetary capacity,** their relationship with other (upper) public authorities and legal obstacles, and problems associated with **political tensions** affecting the functioning of city councils and multi-level political governance. Others problems are more idiosyncratic of this kind of policies such as the ability to **demonstrate their 'social impact',** and to **reinforce civic engagement and participation** mostly of underrepresented groups.