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Episode Information

Topic: Networks for Sustainable and Just Cities

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Guest: Matthew Bach, Flor Avelino, and Tom Henfrey

Publishing date: 30.09.2020

Link to Podcast: https://podcasts.ceu.edu/content/networks-sustainable-and-just-cities

Transcript

[Music]

Episode Introduction (0:08 – 0:50)

Kate: What are all of these sounds?

Ian: I think we're travelling along the nodes of a network surfing on the connexions between people's ideas and groups.

Kate: That's pretty trippy.

Ian: Yeah. Can you hear these voices?

Kate: I can. Press record. We can use them for Urban Arena – a podcast about sustainable and just cities.

Ian: All right. We're recording. Let's listen to the voices in the network talking about, well, sounds that they're talking about networks.

[Music]

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Voices from the Networks (0:50 – 24:11)

Flor: My name is Flor Avelino. I work as a researcher and lecturer at Erasmus University of Rotterdam. I've been doing research on sustainability transitions and social innovation, particularly on power. I've studied a lot of networks, and I've been involved in a lot of networks ranging from Sustainability Research Network, the Power Research Group, to also being involved in some of the networks that I've studied, like the Impact Hub Network of Social Entrepreneurs and the Global Ecovillage Network.

Mathew: Hi, so my name is Matthew Bach, and I'm a coordinator for Just Transitions within the governance and social innovation team of ICLEI Europe. I've been involved in a number of networks, although today I would really just highlight one, which is ICLEI the largest city network purely dedicated to sustainable urban development.

Tom: My name's Tom Henfry, I'm research coordinator in ECOLISE, which is a European wide meta network of community led initiatives in sustainability and climate change. My background comes from a lot of hands-on involvement in networks. I've been very hands-on at local level in the past with transition and permaculture groups and networks in northeast England, where I used to live. I also played a central role in setting up the Transition Research Network, a academic practitioner network associated with the transition movement. Lots of that work fed into the broader process that led to the establishment of ECOLISE as a network of networks.

Flor: Well, besides the more obvious things like, you know, you need collaboration between people and networks is a way for people to, to get to know each other, from a perspective of power, networks are important to connect people in different places that in their own specific contexts, they might not have a very powerful position. But by networking with different people across different places, they- they empower themselves through those networks. So this is an important thing. It's a way of, um, of empowerment through collaboration beyond maybe also the usual suspects. Of course, you also have usual suspect networks, but you know it's the, the knife cuts both ways. I don't know if that's proper English expression, but, so on the one hand, it kind of reproduces existing old boy networks, but at the same time, it also enables the networks that are not there yet because it's not in a formal institution or it's not, It's institutionalised yet, or there is no formal organisation yet. And then you can have informal networks or even formal networks that enable connections that weren't there before. So then it's also not just a way for the kind of soft connections between people, like relations and trust, but also in the more kind of heart sharing of resources, whether it's money or product or physical spaces, knowledge.

One example I have studied is the Global Ecovillage Network, and that is a, I think, a very extreme example, because if you look at individual ecovillages, they are often by definition quite small and they're often people with quite a very idealistic ideas. Very specific, like strong ecological and social ideals. So a lot of people then see it as something very small, very radical and also quite marginal and outside of society. So when I present the existence of the Global Ecovillage Network that connects hundreds of ecovillages across the world and has this website and has the solution library where they pool their knowledge and their, their information and their resources, I noticed that people are often quite surprised that together it's actually quite, you know, a significant organisation.

And the same goes for the Impact Hub like in Amsterdam. The Impact Hub Amsterdam, I don't even know how many members they have now, but a few years ago they had like 200 or 300 members. So within the Amsterdam context, that seems small compared to, you know, big businesses. But if you look at the Global Impact Hub Network as a whole, the last time I checked and they're continuously growing. So by now, it's probably much more. But a few years ago, they, they had like 16,000 members and like over 100 impact hubs across the world. So these are examples of how things when they're- when you just look at isolated local initiatives, they might seem very small or marginal. But if you look at the more at the network level, they become significant.

Mathew: I think it's important to take a step back and, there is so much stuff happening at the local level all over the world. And you have citizen-based initiatives, you have local government initiatives, you have all kinds of initiatives that happen in isolation. And unless we have networks to bring people together and to bring to kind of get this

knowledge out of these very localised contexts and bring them across borders and across contexts, then it's very difficult for positive innovations, transformative innovations to spread and to upscale. So that's really one of the key things about networks. And of course, here we're not talking about the kind of LinkedIn style networking of, you know, push a button and oh, I've got 500 contacts, but much more about this real bringing people and groups together to really to take to raise motivation, to raise ambition and to have this whole kind of knowledge brokerage process and, and then move forward together.

So I think ICLEI itself is a good example. ICLEI kind of came out of the whole early sustainable development bubble with the Rio conference in '92, where there was this big question of okay, we want sustainable development at the global level. But how then do we do this at the local level? And so how do we translate this down to cities and towns and regions? And that's where ICLEI started with the local Agenda 21, which was about kind of trying to bring- create a platform to bring together all these different initiatives that were already taking place and to make it clear that these are all in support of these broader global level goals of sustainable development.

And then over time, then, it started as quite a small group with, I think there were a few dozen cities, not more. And it's slowly grown into a network of about 2000 cities worldwide, with 20 all offices all over the world to help and support cities and towns in in this kind of journey towards sustainable development. I think it's ICLEI has very much embodied the value of networks, so it's not at all about being exclusive, about saying, oh, we're the best, or we only take the shining examples, but it's about saying we have something to say, something to help you with. And we also want you to help each other. So we often act not so much as experts and telling people what to do, but much more as convenors and facilitators and kind of helping cities to then exchange their knowledge.

Tom: Well, I think when we work for sustainability and justice in many respects, we're going against the status quo with political and economic system, which has unsustainable and unjust outcomes almost designed in and, and built in. Um, for that reason, a lot of work on sustainability and justice is oppositional, not just in a practical sense, but often in a deep cultural sense, because a set of values, a set of social principles, that can often go against the grain of the status quo. And it's very difficult to sustain work like that working in isolation. So to me, networks offer a powerful way to bring together like-minded individuals for mutual support, for inspiration, for practical collaboration, for learning from each other, and above all, to get a sense of being part of a bigger picture. We all- it's easy to feel isolated, your little project, which may face all sorts of challenges and, and issues, and when you have the opportunity to connect with others, share experience, feel that you're understood and you belong then, but can really help energise, can help inspire and can really create a great deal of energy for improved practical outcomes and to avoid the experience of working for social change to become something that's dispirited and disillusioned and turn it into something that's energising and inspirational.

My relationship with Transition as a network really literally changed my life. It's become a transformation of my professional life. My professional background was as an academic where working in university settings, which I found personally dispiriting, disillusioning because of an obvious clash between my personal values and the largely corporate, neoliberal values that dominated how the university where I was working, worked. And I found that when I shared those experiences, when I brought them to contexts like

Transition, I wasn't alone. So I found on the fringes of transition of permaculture lots of people working as professional academics who really wanted to be part of something different, of making a difference really saw the possibility that their universities and their professional positions could be part of this change. The experience of collaborating at local level of creating and being part of a space where like-minded people would come together to meet, to explore, to come up with common projects to, to, to put those into action, to really work together to change where we, where we are; that was a real foundational experience for me in terms of setting me on the path to, to what to what I'm doing now. To understand that there's a bigger picture to be working towards and we can work together productively for that.

Flor: I think networks are more like, it's more like a specific form of, of, of collective action, but it doesn't have any inherent direction. Sometimes you see these conceptual models where people put the net- people say that the network is an alternative for the company or for the government, but for me, that doesn't make much sense because, you know, government is part of the kind of state logic, which is a very specific kind of mandate. And you know, it's, it has a bureaucratization and legitimacy, and it has this whole, you know so history behind the state. But a network is just like the word network is nothing else than a group of people or something. It doesn't really say anything about its aims.

Tom: The networks aren't an end in themselves. They're a means to enable what, first of all, were geographical communities of place to come together to exchange experiences, to collaborate.

Flor: I think sometimes people, they project things onto the idea of a network that are not inherent to networks. Some networks might strive for equality or anarchy or justice or sustainability, but I don't think there is anything inherently just or equal about networking. You can have a very hierarchical network. That that is something that I sometimes really worry about is when there is this idea that networking will replace everything and that we don't need government anymore or not even companies because everything will go through networks. I find that very problematic and naive thought. So obviously, we need all of it. It's complementary. It's, it doesn't replace the local governments or the national governments or international supranational institutions. So that's one thing. It's, it's really complementary. The question is, how do you get your government to act now? And this is where lobby networks can really help. So, for instance, the European Organisation of Energy Cooperatives – REScoop, they played an important role together with many other networks in, in, in getting the EU, getting a new EU directive about how to make new energy plans that provide more space for people to have renewable energy.

Tom: I completely agree that there's a need for urgent and radical and immediate action, and that networking makes sense as a means to support and even take such action, not for, not for its own sake. So again, network really always has to pay attention to its sense of purpose and how well it's fulfilling that purpose.

Flor: You want to act now, but the question is, how do you get your governments and your businesses to act now? And how do you provide space for people to act now? So this is where networks can play a big role. And I think here the, the whole digitalisation trend will play a big role. Will the grassroots community led networks, or even if it's not just grassroots or community, but the networks that are really oriented towards

sustainability and justice, are these networks able to utilise digitalisation in their advantage? And here I think we are currently seeing the opposite direction. So if you look at a lot of the platform economy developments that were very hopeful, we all know the examples like Uber and Airbnb, the way they have turned out, it's quite the opposite. Wikipedia is like the one example we all hold on to as something that became huge, and it's still a knowledge commons, even though you can still be critical about things how it could be improved. But at least it hasn't been entirely commercialised yet.

So we need more of these kind of smart digitalisations of networks for them to be able to grow and really challenge these, these kind of existing not only the existing kind of incumbents, but also the upcoming platform companies and there you need governments, right? So, so that's why I would really emphasise, you know, if you want to challenge an Uber on how it is completely ignoring labour laws, for instance, you will need government. You cannot do that as a network, you need to mobilise governments to kind of impose labour regulations, for instance.

Tom: Well, the experience of ECOLISE has shown and it has increasingly shown the importance of networking at multiple levels.

Matthew: It's not an either or it's an and. And I think we need both. If we just have global networks, then we lose the ability to act locally and to kind of embrace the specificities of each context and vice versa. If we only work locally without any global or at least trans-local component, then we lose the ability to enact a broader systemic change. Um, so I think the two elements go together and ICLEI, for example, very frequently does both kind of locally oriented processes and then brings together these to more international or global level.

Tom: ECOLISE arose from a common emerging understanding among different networks, that there was a, a need for a particular network that would operate both across movements, but most importantly, internationally at European scale, particularly as a mechanism for engagement between these networks and the EU and its institutions. We, we work across geographical Europe rather than political Europe. But although we're operating at European scale, ECOLISE are as all about supporting action at the level of the community. So, we're finding these cross-scale relationships of support, of learning, of collaboration, of connection to be vitally important in being able to mobilise the broad international scale and most importantly, to be able to support meaningful community action at local scale at the scale of the city, the neighbourhood.

Matthew: We're now facing a bit of a- this is related to, to the thing about oh no, not more networks, because it's true there has been a proliferation of networks. I mean, if you look at city networks, you know, when ICLEI started in '92, there were no real like city networks focussed on sustainable development. You had, of course, associations of municipalities and things like that, but they were much more in terms of broader support to public administration. And then, then you had ICLEI, and in Europe you had then Eurocities and CEMR and this and Energy Cities and whatever and UCLG at the global level and C40 and like, I mean, it's just and, and, and, and, and at some point, we need to ask ourselves how many of these do we need?

Because then if you take the perspective of a local group or a city or a city government official or someone else, if you're being drawn towards 10, 20, 30 different networks to

do this kind of network weaving and knowledge exchange and these important things that ultimately raise the ambition of what you can do and the knowledge of what you can do, then it becomes an empty exercise and it becomes it's too much. It's overwhelming. So I think we also need to think of how we can be modest and moderate in our network weaving how we can be respectful of the needs of those whom we are working with. And I think that's a very important element of network weaving in the 21st century.

Flor: Yeah, I think it depends very much on what it is, but I, I also I'm still looking for a way to, to also really incorporate this more in education and workshops to really challenge people and white people to look at whether the networks are in your own neighbourhood. Like, for instance, there's a transition towns network and there are transition towns initiatives in a lot of places. Not every neighbourhood, but a lot of cities have transitioned town initiatives. So you, you could start there, you could go to the website, see if there is a transition town initiative in your city. And then this transition town initiative is part of this global network of transition initiatives. But that is a very specific thing. It's about very ecological resilience thinking. So it's so urban farming and permaculture. But there's also other things like FabLabs, for instance, so digital fabrication workshops. So if you like the whole idea of 3D printing or, you know, making things. So these are digital, digital fabrication workshops where a lot of people are welcome. People can go there to make things and experiment with, with this idea of digital fabrication. So that's a very different interests and hobbies. So to say that urban gardening. But both of them are part of a larger global network.

Tom: I think in very significant ways in, in ECOLISE and in all our members- member networks was a close attention to how we show up in our networks, in our communities, in our meetings. And that's- brings to the sphere of relationships, the sphere of personal contact- conduct, this constant reflection, this constant learning from experience, it's a learning process. Am I acting in ways that are consistent with my values? Am I embodying my values? Am I expressing them? And when I don't do that, what are the reasons for that? Are there other things I can learn from that, other ways that I can change or grow in response to that. That's an ongoing process that's indefinite and open ended. I certainly know that there are many ways that I personally don't live up to, to the aspirations I set for myself and to, be in- how I'd like to be in the world as as I'd like to see it and experience it. And I find that a really exciting challenge day by day to live up to that, to be supported through communities and networks of people who are equally committed to their personal growth, their development to being part of an emerging and evolving cultural context that's consistent with our values.

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Post-Interview Notes (24:12 – 24:58)

Ian: Well, that was a lot of talk about networks, Kate, and we have another network, which is the network of our listeners who have been sending us voice clips. They are our urban arena correspondents talking about justice and sustainability. This month we have a voice clip from Christopher in Athens. But before we listen to Christopher, can you tell us how anyone else can get in touch with voice clips or anything else if they want to?

Kate: Yes, we want to hear from you, and we want to get your submissions, so you can email us through the contact form found at our website Urban-Arena.EU or at Urbana@ceu.edu. And you can also find us on Twitter or Instagram at the handle @arena_urban.

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Guest Contribution (24:59 – 26:22)

Christopher: Hi, my name is Christopher and I live in Athens. What is a sustainable and just city then? Is it the relationship between the public and private space? Is it the availability of green areas or the access to health care and other social infrastructure that makes a city sustainable and just?

Coronavirus has put a spotlight on our collective confrontation of the crisis. Conflict, capitalism, climate change, inequities. In confronting this multiple crisis amplified by the pandemic, it is now more than ever priority that we engage with issues of sustainability and justice in urban areas that cover major population, and reimagine alternatives to a pluralistic way of living together. Thank you.

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Disclaimer

This podcast is part of the three-year project UrbanA – Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities. It was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme.