

Why we fund municipalise in France and how

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1. How we define municipalism?



As a translocal movement, Municipalism in Europe seeks to address current global crises from a local perspective, including:

- a crisis of representative democracy, embodied by the collapse of major traditional political parties in many European countries which is accompanied by the slow collapse of the social-democrat political apparatus in some of them;
- a crisis of urban planning, in which most European cities face gentrification trends which push the poorest inhabitants outside city centers towards “dormitory suburbs” or peripheral areas, while rural areas lose basic public services (hospitals, postal services,

schools, public transportation...) and suffer from lack of investments in basic infrastructure (high speed internet, building renovation, road maintenance);

- a crisis of the current globalized economy, with the closure of factories in Western Europe but also the creation of a new urban class of precarious intellectual independent workers offered “bullshit jobs” (D. Graeber), in which the most socially useful jobs (teachers, nursing staff, organic farmers...) are the least well-paid, deeply undermining the value and virtue of serving the common good;
- an environmental crisis related to the current extractive and deterritorialized economic system, with cities becoming insane engines of unending and useless carbon emissions¹ rooted in an objectionable consumerist system, built on inappropriate infrastructure devoid of any understanding of organic urbanism.

While Municipalism won't become the single remedy for all these modern diseases, it does at least have the ambition to systematically address them and to deliver small-scale but scalable solutions, place-based but replicable innovations. Indeed territories and places possess some of the keys and tools to move faster and further on just and ecological transition policies than do any nation states still caught within the GDP growth paradigm. While acknowledging an enormous and valuable diversity, we consider the main municipalist political goals as twofold: participation in democracy and building the

urban commons. The relocalization of our economy and of consumption, the urgent decrease in our thermodynamics costs² will only happen if the City acts as an enabling partner for a new organized civil society. These new forms of citizens' organizations will allow “Right to the City” activists to engage their contributive capacity and civic responsibility through peer-to-peer relationships, public-commons partnerships, community-led coops, open participation in designing the city's future... These are not mere words, these are happening in many places, yet still in fragmented, frustrating and often informal ways.



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¹See the 2018 report on Consumption-based GHG emissions of C40 Cities: <https://www.c40.org/researches/consumption-based-emissions>

² i.e. lowering the footprint, producing good food with a lot less waste and energy, etc. Regarding the relationships between thermodynamics and commons based production, see P2P Foundation last report: P2P Accounting for Planetary Survival. Towards a P2P Infrastructure for a Socially-Just Circular Society (<http://commonstransition.org/p2p-accounting-for-planetary-survival/>)

2. Why municipalism is important in France?

France must “decolonize its provinces”, as the French philosopher Michel Onfray wrote in the title of one of his books published during the presidential campaign in 2017. Culturally speaking it's not an easy path to walk, since France as a nation has been built over the centuries on strong central power. It's been successful to the extent that the elites in Paris were trusted and able to generate obedience and wealth in the provinces. The recent “yellow vests” crisis has emerged as one the many signs that this Jacobin system can no longer work in the 21st Century. The occupied roundabouts revealed “invisible” faces and unaddressed social conditions of those who not only suffer from precarious wages but also from a kind of institutional contempt that comes from unequal power relations within French society in various fields (political, administrative, economic, cultural, entrepreneurial, gender, race...).

With its focus on participatory processes, Municipalism can be instrumental in rebuilding trust in our political systems. It can allow the “roundabout people” to regain a sense of ownership over our currently vertical political systems.

In my opinion, this socio-cultural crisis combined with the enormous generational climate mobilizations can offer the foundational ground on which to build a municipalism “à la française”. It would start with a strong collective leadership comprised of transition movements and social movements, and would then spread to the traditional not-for-profit sector that is thriving in every single commune of the country, which would eventually force the current political parties to either make room for citizen candidates or to incorporate their demands into their own municipal programmes.

Nevertheless, many challenges are to be found on this journey for territorial transformation.

The first is the extreme complexity of the French institutional architecture, which never really achieved a clear and effective decentralization. Navigating the aptly named “*millefeuille territorial*” requires solid expertise that needs to be disseminated quickly. In France municipalism can't stop at the gates of the commune; advocacy and the political strategies must include the inter-territorial dimension (“*communautés de communes*”, “*communautés d'agglomération*”, “*métropole*”), where most of the local power and competencies have been transferred.

Second, it is to be expected that local innovations in citizen participation will be seriously limited by State regulations and legal control. It's already happening in the few cities that are bold enough to experiment new radical mechanisms such as a binding citizens referendum.

Third, local administrative agents will need to adapt their culture and habits, to become partners of civil society. They will have to acknowledge that some public services can be managed as a ‘commons’ by a group of inhabitants, users, communities, etc., and that this is the only way to provide an alternative to the market-State duopoly (even as we're still lacking the legal foundations of those public-commons partnerships that will prevent the Municipal institution from unaffordable juridical risk).

Administrative, legal, socio-cultural engineering represent the three areas of work where movements and practitioners must build expertise and alliances with academics, think tanks and public agents.

3. How do we fund Municipalism?



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First, we don't fund politics, but political change. As a grantmaking foundation, we of course can't take part in any form of political elections or campaigns, supporting for example a specific electoral list or political party. But as a politically engaged foundation committed to a just and ecological transition, our goal is to support the organizations that want to change the broken system that is destroying the planet. Basically there are three ways to doing so: fighting the bad, changing the rules and building the new as we used to frame it within EDGE Funders Alliance.

The current trend, for more and more civil society actors and activists to cross the line from occupying the streets or lobbying the decision makers towards occupying City Halls and becoming themselves the decision makers, tells us something about a new political strategy and culture. It feels as if transition movements in their diversity had reached a tipping point where the sense of emergency is connected to a kind of programmatic consistency and clarity. They know what is to be done in terms of climate friendly policies, and they claim their proposals can be better implemented under their own citizen-movement leadership.

But as we saw, there remain many challenges to achieve such a plan. And those challenges should be the focus of our grantmaking.

First of all, municipalism requires a great deal of networking. In France, one such convergence of movements began in August 2018 with the CommonsCamp during the Summer University of the social and citizen movements organized in Grenoble by Attac, CRID and many other think tanks, associations, and grassroots groups. CommonsCamp was designed as a three-day journey through new forms of urban activism. Commons activists, Right to Housing organizations, and community organizers came together with municipalist leaders elected from Italy, Spain, UK. Given the context of a Summer University attended by more than 2.000 French activists, it also increased their visibility among the workers unions, the "altermondialistes", the climate justice fighters ... Supporting this kind of gathering is not a waste of money but on the contrary a strategic investment in movement and coordination-building. The next main cross-sectoral gathering in France will happen in Marseille in November. It is expected to give birth to a global strategy towards the French municipal elections in March 2020.

Second, municipalism requires more expertise. Some kind of citizen training institute is needed. If the movements have a clear understanding of an ideal city governance, they often lack the nitty-gritty knowledge on how a city works - especially in France, where so many local political institutions are under the regulation and scrutiny of the central State. But it's also a lesson that we've learned from the Spanish experiments: you can't afford loosing half of your mandate learning how to maneuver within your local administration, in how to engage with the legal frameworks and with all the other stakeholders involved (private companies, political opposition, mainstream medias...). To be ready once you're elected you must be trained in the basics of effective management of a city. In our foundation's general operating support to Utopia Movement in France, for example, some funds were used to develop a MOOCC (Massive Online Citizen's Course) on municipalism that will be available by early September. Registrations are now open here: <https://la-commune-est-a-nous.commonspolis.org/>

Third and finally, we noted that municipalism requires another kind of relationship with local administrations. Local civil servants and public agents need to be exposed to new practices that aren't part of their traditional education. Without local administrations being able and willing to mover out of their comfort zones, newly elected municipalists won't get very far in implementing their programmes. They'll be told 'it's not possible, legal, feasible, affordable...' In order to find the right means and levers of engagement on our side, we, funders, must also must upgrade our level of understanding of how you can change the rules from the inside towards building the new. We have already come to the conclusion that some of the gray zones or blind spots we have to delve into in France include the democratization of intercommunal governance bodies, and legal innovations around Urban Commons policies and citizen's participation. Today those topics are "owned" by an elite that keeps them enclosed whether in an alienating jargon, or within vested power dynamics. There is an urgent need for a legal policy toolkit but also for quick-response task forces that could land on specific territories, investigate cases, and provide both curated and tailored solutions.

Finally in terms of operational changes, we still have to ask ourselves how this support to municipalism can combine deep systemic changes at the local level and some kind of nation-wide (and global) impacts. One of the most inspiring examples in our progressive funders' community can be found in the USA, through the strategy the Chorus Foundation has been developing as part of its spend down commitment³. It's more than a prototype, it's a cultural revolution in philanthropy we all shall learn from!

³See : <https://medium.com/chorus-foundation/what-we-ve-learned-after-a-decade-of-climate-funding-and-what-we-re-doing-instead-e29c945c8ce0>