

# **Potential and ambivalent effects of grassroots initiatives on neighbourhood development**

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## **Abstract**

From a historical perspective, a conceptualisation of grassroots initiatives in reference to new urban social movements has been progressively completed by the analysis of a new generation of local initiatives, which are understood as more pragmatic socio-economic responses to crises in employment and social exclusion, including urban regeneration and access to services in deprived areas. The first section of this paper describes the hybrid logic of local initiatives, such as the dual socio-economic and socio-political aspects, multi-stakeholder dynamics, the co-production public action, social entrepreneurship, the mixed economy of resource allocation. The second section questions the ability of local initiative to produce a virtuous urban circle that would meet unsatisfied needs and create local jobs, empowering the community through direct participation in local governance and strengthening urban social cohesion. The final section reconsiders the conditions of resistance and innovation of local initiatives in the city from a context and spatially sensitive perspectives.

**Keywords:** Grassroots; local initiatives; social cohesion; local development.

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## **1. Introduction**

Faced with persistent unemployment, a lack of job security, a changing family structure, and territorial polarisation, European states are having a hard time guaranteeing individual social rights and putting into place the new forms of solidarity required to combat the rise in urban inequalities and impoverishment. This explains why governments are increasingly calling for society as a whole to mobilise so as to maintain and strengthen ‘social cohesion’ (Novy, Coimbra de Souza and Moulaert, 2009), which is no longer presented as the sole responsibility of public authorities.

These socio-economic changes provide the context for the increasing attention local governments as well as international organisations have paid over the last twenty years to the potential offered by grassroots initiatives in terms of economic activity and job creation, local development, and social cohesion.

Whereas grassroots initiatives have been progressively recognised as playing important roles in neighbourhood development strategies, and partially integrated into urban development policies, there is no consensual definition of what exactly they encompass. From a historical perspective, a conceptualisation of grassroots initiatives in reference to new urban social movements has been progressively replaced by the analysis of a new generation of local initiatives, which are understood as more pragmatic

socio-economic responses to crises in employment and social exclusion, and include urban regeneration and access to services in deprived areas. There has been a shift from grassroots initiatives based on protest and activism to more consensual and entrepreneurial ones. Beyond the plurality of conceptualisations, it is possible to describe the hybrid logic of local initiatives and some of their common characteristics across local and national contexts, such as the dual socio-economic and socio-political aspects of local initiatives, multi-objective and multi-functional activities, multi-stakeholder dynamics, the co-production of collective and public action, civic and social entrepreneurship, multi-level governance and the mixed economy of resources.

However, an overview of the literature reveals some limits of local initiatives, which contests their ability to produce a virtuous urban circle that would meet unsatisfied needs and create local jobs, empowering the community through direct participation in local governance while strengthening urban social cohesion. Coming from diverse theoretical perspectives, this criticism of the ambivalent impacts of local initiatives in the age of globalisation concerns the quality of jobs created, civic commitments and citizen participation, a cohesive social community, and possible multi-scalar dynamics from below in the face of the new localism emerging in deprived neighbourhoods. In the final section, new perspectives

and opportunities are presented for reconsidering local initiatives as a strategy for urban social cohesion in the context of the current global crisis.

## **2. ‘Local initiatives’ supporting urban local development: multiple definitions and conceptual approaches**

A notion such as ‘grassroots initiatives’ is not easy to define, because the concepts used do not have universally accepted definitions in the social sciences and belong to different theoretical spheres and national traditions. Simply listing various notions that are close to each other, such as local initiatives (Wilson, 1995; Demazière, 2000), local development and employment initiatives (Jouen, 2000), solidarity-based initiatives (Gardin, 2006), community-based initiatives, and social innovation (Hiller, Moualart and Nussbaumer, 2004), shows that using the term ‘grassroots initiatives’ as a unifying concept is not self-evident. This explains why it is necessary to examine the previous attempts to conceptualise local initiatives in order to understand the emergence of this field of research while attempting to define its common characteristics.

### **2.1. From “grassroots initiatives” to local initiatives: some defining aspects**

First of all, the use of the term ‘initiatives’ helps to situate the nature of the action involved. It designates the *capacity to act or undertake actions*, and *the power to make or have an influence on decisions*. It also suggests a *beginning*, the starting point of an action, which can be a place, a stakeholder, or a social group. In a certain sense, the term ‘initiative’ pre-supposes that the individual(s) who take(s) action has/have a certain degree of autonomy. The origins, meaning, and content of an action are not the simple result of a functional adaptation to environmental constraints and opportunities, such as orders given by public authorities, economic or market pressures, or a media-imposed agenda. Finally, the term initiative leaves the future open, or even uncertain, in terms of whether or not the action will have a long-lasting effect. The action is constantly evolving, and its future structure and institutional form are partly undetermined.

When it is not more specifically defined, the term ‘initiative’ is very general, that is to say it is difficult to restrict it to a specific area of human activity. Initiatives cannot be restricted to only political, economic, social or cultural endeavours. When we speak of initiatives, we do not specify the mode of action, which may range from conflictual to consensual processes (Diani and Bison, 2004), or from collective action to social entrepreneurship: initiatives are structured and institutionalised in a variety of ways. In principle, initiatives cannot be reduced to ‘companies’, ‘interest groups’, or ‘social movements’, although they can adopt or combine some

of their aims, strategies, and structures according to the local contexts. If, in the emergence phase, initiatives cannot be defined within the boundaries of specific organisational forms, their action is progressively formalised in various types of organisations or networks. Although many initiatives do have a socio-economic dimension, equating them with simple service providers or formal enterprises is often overly simplistic, because the reasons behind their actions, as well as the results expected, are not always material, monetary, or utilitarian. An initiative embodies a framework of action with an explicit socio-political dimension, in the sense of a capacity to decide for itself and take action in its geographical and relational environment.

Moreover, this socio-political aspect is present to a certain extent in the term 'grassroots,' which hints at the origins, place, and stakeholders of initiatives. Although this term is rarely defined in the social sciences, it indicates both *a direction*, initiatives that come 'from below' *a place*; these are 'locally situated' initiatives, and *a category of stakeholders* with little (weak) institutional status. In the Anglo-Saxon sense of the word, 'grassroots' refers first of all to the idea that initiatives are rooted in the community. In a more socio-political approach, 'grassroots' is often used to designate popular movements that are less institutionalised and hierarchical than more formal political organisations, such as political parties and workers' unions. Because they include 'ordinary citizens,' these grassroots

movements can also be distinguished from groups of experts and lobbyists who defend particular or specific interests (Castells M. and Pflieger, 2006, p.156). 'Local Initiatives' is another common expression that is often used, meaning that the origins of an action are its 'social environment,' and it does not come from a higher level (national or international). Finally, within the context of urban development, 'grassroots initiatives' can be likened to 'residents initiatives' and more generally to actions in which the people are directly involved in the decision-making and implementation processes. Whether we speak of the mobilisation of citizens, the participation of inhabitants, or the commitment of users, the idea is that in no way should 'grassroots initiatives' be mainly initiated and determined by political institutions (government) or economic entities (major companies).

## **2.2. From a close relationship with urban social movements to hybrid modes of action**

From a historical perspective, the use of a term as broad as 'grassroots initiatives' is the expression of several economic and social transformations that have occurred over the last three decades. First, a change from an alternative and conflictual vision of the city, in which 'the grassroots' could be likened to the 'urban social movements', as they are described, for instance, by Manuel Castells in 'The City and the Grassroots'

(1983),<sup>1</sup> to a much more diversified, negotiated, and entrepreneurial vision of local initiatives in an urban setting.

The term 'grassroots' can be linked to a relationship, explicitly established by several authors (Cummings, 2001; Klein and Fontan, 2003; Bacqué, 2005; Mayer, 2006; Lévesque, 2007; Martinelli, 2010), between local initiatives and the protest wave of the 1960s and 70s. In addition, depending on the approach used, there are theoretical references to the sociology of new social movements (Touraine, 1981; Castells, 1983; Melucci, 1989), to various modes of collective action, and to resource mobilisation and politics of contention (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tilly and Tarrow, 2008), or even the notion of public space (Habermas, 1989).

If we consider a social movement as a distinctive form of informal networks linking a multiplicity of stakeholders, sharing a collective identity, and engaged in social and/or political conflict (Diani and Bison, 2004), the integration of the properties of urban social movement dynamics varies according to the local initiatives approaches.

The relationship between social movements and initiatives takes on many forms. Different dynamics can be identified in reference to the processes of transformation of social movements described by Kriesi (1996). First, a process of 'commercialisation' through individual trajectories of professionalization or the conversion of former activists into social entrepreneurs, and the progressive prevalence of paid service

activities, which replace the initial political commitment. Second, a process of institutionalisation, with the partial incorporation of a system of values and practices from civil society (autonomy, democracy, participation, and so on) in the transformation of public action and the local governance regime. The permanence of elements of contention and advocacy with change in the repertoire of 'voice' and share some common agenda with activists organisations is another aspect in the construction and consolidation of local initiatives. In this third perspective, local initiatives can be analysed as a particular form of contention (Tilly and Tarrow, 2008), without 'movement' dimension, which presupposes an ongoing campaign and an organised public effort to make collective demands of authorities.

Nonetheless, analyses of local initiatives do not always mention their relationship with the urban social movements of the 1970s (Jouen, 2000), particularly when their emergence is above all analysed using mainly socio-economic approaches, which because of their perspective downplay the socio-political aspect or analyse it as merely a strategic resource helping make the project work. Moreover, the increase in unemployment and the concomitant fight against social exclusion during the 1980s, represented a moment of change as far as the origins and trajectories of the promoters of local initiatives are concerned (Laville and Gardin 2007; Lévesque, 2007). They were less likely to be former activists than professionals seeking to create a new service, unemployed people creating their own jobs, or

employees of major corporations who wanted to turn to a new type of employment in meaningful local activities.

Yet, recourse to the concept of 'local initiative' instead of urban social movement can be related to the establishment of a new generation of urban local development in the 1980s and 90s. A significant part of the theoretical debates on local initiatives concerns the interpretation of these processes of conversion, which can be analysed as phenomena of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) of local initiatives with various structural constraints, or, on the other hand, as processes of social innovation or as a hybrid system of action.

As Laville argues (2005, p. 44), the 'imaginary of rupture' attributed to mass social movements, was replaced by an 'imagination based on hybrid systems' of local initiatives. To understand the specificity of local initiatives requires therefore an analysis of their hybrid and mixed dynamics, which embodies their originality and their ambivalence, since stakeholders are pulled between professional and activist mindsets, between making demands and building partnerships, between cooperative and contentious coalitions, public action and entrepreneurial activities, mobilising commercial, non-commercial, and non-monetary resources, and taking action at multiple levels.

### **2.3. New coalitions of stakeholders and multi-stakeholder dynamics**

This conversion can be identified in the concepts used to designate the origins of local initiatives. Stakeholders are mobilised more on a project basis than on a strong collective identity constructed in relationship to a public and organised expression of contention with a view to transforming society. Some authors continue to speak of social actors, or even local development social movements (Wilson, 1995, Moulaert and al., 2010); others refer to project promoters (Laville and Gardin, 2007), civil society actors (Lévesque, 2003), neighbourhood associations, social entrepreneurs, or the third sector. This conceptual multiplicity is testimony to the transformation of collective action, which is no longer based on a homogeneous social group, such as workers, women, youth, or ethnic minorities, which can be easily identified, or an ideology upon which an overall project for society could be based. Current analyses of local initiatives place more emphasis on multi-stakeholder dynamics, whether they are social networks of promoters with mixed groups of users and professionals (Laville and Gardin, 2007), networks of neighbourhood workers (Beaumont, 2003), a broad coalition of stakeholders from the public and private sectors and associations (Demazière, 1995), or new alliances for employment bringing together community groups, unions, and local government agencies (Fontan and Klein, 2003). These multi-stakeholder dynamics are not necessarily based on a common commitment to a 'cause' or a perspective of social change, rather on a pragmatic coalition

or organisational process to address specific social needs. Often loosely structured, in the emergence phase, via informal networks of individuals and organisations, multi-stakeholder coalitions are increasingly equated in organisational and institutional processes with for instance the creation of the specific status of social enterprises (Defourny, 2006) or different kinds of local partnerships and committees in local governance structures. This diversity of coalition trajectories explains to some extent why the notion of 'local initiative' is sometimes preferred to that of 'grassroots initiative'.

#### **2.4. From contentious actions to constructive ones: a diversification of collective action repertoire**

Speaking about local initiatives would also imply a diversification in the forms of collective action. Whereas the 'urban social movements' were often opposed to bureaucratic action with centralised urban planning managed by political leaders, public administration, and town planners, 'grassroots initiatives' have been gradually integrated into the urban policies aiming to resolve the growing problems of unemployment, social exclusion, neighbourhood decline, and other daily life issues.

Local initiatives may or may not include a contentious aspect in their various actions for challenging local authorities and institutions. Political commitment can also be the result of more cooperative or consensual processes of collective action (Diani and Bison, 2004, p. 284). Originally in

an 'anti-establishment' position as 'activists,' local development actors have gradually become partners or 'stakeholders' of public actions. Placed within the context of industrial restructuring, urban fragmentation, and growing unemployment and social exclusion, local initiatives are the result of action that is more pragmatic than partisan-based, more focused on solving the local problems facing citizens in their daily lives than on the ideological contestation of a system.

Despite the motivations, representations, and discourses are often opposed to the dominant conceptions of local economic development, the aim of the activity is mainly constructive, in the sense of a concrete local intervention in the economic and social field. While contention and protest are not excluded (Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2007) when it is a matter of defending a social space, combating an industrial rehabilitation scheme, mobilising for local jobs, or opposing the privatisation of a social service, it is not the principal factor explaining why different kinds of stakeholders voluntarily act together in a geographical area. It is nevertheless a fact that the status of conflict and contention, at the heart of the theory of social movements (Nicholls, 2007; Tilly and Tarrow, 2008), occupies various positions in the theorisation of local initiatives.

First, there is the disappearance of contention given the imperative to participate and negotiate in the creation of local networks of stakeholders. Constructing local political consensus and collaborative class relations

around urban regeneration have sometimes been presented as a pragmatic strategy for developing local economic initiatives and an empirical response to problems in an urban area (Gough and Eisenschitz, 1996). Second, conflict is considered to be one mode of action among others leading to the emergence of local initiatives. Third, a dialectic or continuity of perspectives: Social and public contention remains both a founding moment in the creation of solidarity and a collective consciousness shared by the various stakeholders in a geographical area, and a condition which may enable the establishment of a fair partnership (Fontan, Klein, 2003, p.28).

## **2.5. The interweaving of collective action and public action**

Local initiatives have been partly integrated into local public action and urban development programmes. The movement for the professionalization of social leaders and civil society organisations has occurred at the same time as the implementation of new local social governance rules (Geddes and Bennington, 2001) and project-based funding programmes (Taylor, 2003). The shift from the state government playing the central role in urban policies to the governance model paradigm (Garcia et al., this volume) could have been presented as a new political framework for local initiatives to be involved in the urban decision making processes.

‘Grassroots initiatives’ have participated in a movement in which public action has been restructured. This explains why the decentralised

social policies, employment policies aiming to integrate people through work, urban policies and neighbourhood renewal programmes, as well as European policies for employment and social cohesion have represented both opportunities and constraints for the recognition and integration of local initiatives into public action in specific geographical areas. The proliferation of political discourses and mechanisms for the participation of inhabitants, public-private partnerships, local urban governance, and participative democracy reveal that public action is becoming increasingly open to private stakeholders and non-governmental organisations, or even to the people themselves. Public action is more procedural and subject to negotiations with less hierarchical methods that are more open to deliberation, agreements, and compromise.

The literature on local initiatives remains cautious about this restructuring of public action taking into account the tensions inherent in the implementation of any partnership strategies as well as ‘new governance spaces in the neighbourhood renewal’ (Taylor, 2007), and stressing the context sensitiveness of popular involvement in interactive governance (Beaumont, 2003, p. 191). This critique stems from the fact that public action is not considered to be the functional integration of local initiatives in the ‘localization’ of economic, social, and urban policies, but rather the product of interaction and compromise between local initiatives and public policies (Laville, 2005). If local initiatives are to be consolidated and

disseminated, their capacity to really modify the institutional framework that conditions their development must be proven. Institutional change is, moreover, one of the conditions that must be met for local initiatives to be considered as examples of social innovation. The possibility of having a positive influence on the reference framework for public action so that there will be more dialogue and partnerships, debates with citizens, user participation, and “empowerment” of inhabitants (Bacqué, 2006) is emerging as one of the normative standards for local initiatives on the basis of successful local experimentations. In this case, institutional innovation refers to a process in democratization of public action (Levesque, 2007, p. 60) or to changes in the social relations of governance that involve the participation of groups generally excluded from the decision-making process (Hiller, Moualert and Nussbaumer, 2004, p. 135). In this sense, the institutionalisation of local initiatives is not to be thought of as an exogenous process imposed upon stakeholders (Hamel, Maheu and Vaillancourt, 1999), which would necessarily lead to a choice between two possible alternatives: recuperation or transformation (Castells, 1983).

## **2.6. From the socio-political aspect to the socio-economic aspect of local initiatives**

In addition to the diversification in the various modes of collective action, current research also emphasises the insistence on a socio-economic

dimension as much in terms of the aims as in the modes of organisation of local initiatives. The overly socio-political connotations of the term “grassroots initiatives” also explains why it has been replaced by “local initiatives,” which enables the economic aspects to be integrated into the analysis.

Indeed, with local initiatives, the aim and reasons behind the action are at first glance socio-economic (Jouen, 2000; Lévesque, 2003). Responding to urban social needs that are not satisfied: creating local jobs, making services accessible to local populations, preserving economic activities in neighbourhoods in crisis, and improving the attractiveness of the local geographical area are all examples of how the agenda and goals of local initiatives are being redefined to cope with the employment crisis and push forward the economic renewal of deprived areas. The issue of local initiatives embodies the emergence of civil society as a key actor in local economic development, which is no longer the exclusive domain of major corporations and governments.

The socio-economic aspect also reflects the shift towards entrepreneurial and managerial concerns in the modes of action, financing, and organisation of community initiatives (Cummings, 2001). Local initiatives are themselves often the driving forces behind the creation of economic activities. Faced with the inadequacies of market and state forces, it is the potential to create jobs in the services founded by civil society, and

organised and managed locally by new entrepreneurs that has received great attention. The issue of new local job opportunities and community services has been gradually placed on the European agenda (Jouen, 2007).

## **2.7. The social entrepreneur**

The entrepreneurial aspect of local initiatives has also become a subject of research. Socio-economic analyses highlight the emergence of the figure of the social entrepreneur (Defourny, 2006), the ethical entrepreneur (Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2007), or the collective entrepreneur (Lévesque, 2003). This research insists on the fact that the motivation to take the risks involved in starting an economic activity is not simply profit oriented and that the final aim of the economic activity is to serve the community. The specificity of social entrepreneurship is to make values such as solidarity, social justice, and sustainable development the driving forces behind the development of economic activity. In other words, these are economic projects with an explicitly social aim to benefit the community as a whole rather than its individual members (Defourny, 2006). Lévesque (2003, p. 112) argues that a social entrepreneur combines three types of attitudes: committed activism with professional skills, the capacity to be a visionary while remaining pragmatic, and an ethic of conviction with a sense of responsibility.

Whereas American approaches to social entrepreneurship (Defourny and Nyssens, 2008) strongly insist on the individual 'leadership' qualities needed to be a social entrepreneur and on the increasing use of managerial and financial techniques in the non-profit sector, the European approach emphasises the collective dimension of entrepreneurship. This collective dimension has been institutionalized in Europe by means of new legal forms of social enterprises (Nyssens, 2006),<sup>2</sup> which include the social aim of their production and/or their multi-stakeholder governance.

Beyond the legal status, the common point for these initiatives is the collective entrepreneurial dynamic and the social purpose of the economic activity, upon which is based the concept of "collective entrepreneur," defined by Lévesque (2003, p.112) as "an association of people who collectively take on the entrepreneurial function." The social entrepreneur is thus the catalyst of a vision and a project, of a coalition of stakeholders and local institutions, of the resources mobilised at several levels in the local geographical area; all of which are elements needed to constitute a collective entrepreneur. In this case, the local as well as the enterprise organisation can be considered as the place of reference for collective entrepreneurship. Without claiming that neighbourhood entrepreneurs' roots are in their own communities (Cummings and Glaser, 1985), it can be said that social entrepreneurs invest themselves mainly in 'locally-based organisations.' (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001, p. 361).

## **2.8. The rise of the plural economy**

The socio-economic analysis of local initiatives usually falls within the critical perspective of standard economics, which uses hypotheses and methods generally not considered to be adequate for understanding the political, social, and spatial embeddedness of local initiatives. Authors therefore typically categorise their analyses either in heterodox economics, such as institutionalism, evolutionism, or regulationism, or in the field of English (Smelser and Swedberg, 1994) or Francophone (Lévesque, Bourque and Forgues, 2001) economic sociology.

Within the perspective of the new economic sociology, the dynamic processes of local initiatives have been analysed less in terms of the social construction of new markets than in terms of a plural economy (Laville, 2006). Going back to a historical perspective and Polanyi's economic principles, the plural economy of local initiatives can be identified at several levels. First, in terms of the plurality of motives behind economic actions: the identification of local needs often results from an impulse of reciprocity between several stakeholders, which allows for the co-construction of the offer and demand on the basis of an immaterial investment. Second, the plural forms of entrepreneurship (ethical, collective) and of enterprises (social, community-based), which can in no way limit the institutionalisation of local initiatives to individual entrepreneurship or

profit-driven private companies. Third, a plurality of financing is available, as seen in the fact that activities are consolidated through a hybrid use of commercial, non-commercial, and non-monetary resources (Gardin, 2006). Finally, there is a plurality in the modes of coordination of agents: the market and price-driven competition are often secondary to deliberation, cooperation, and partnerships, which are the modes for coordinating the actions of local stakeholders and allocating resources. The plural economy perspective is reminiscent of the *economy of diversity* (Gibson-Graham, 2008), which is cited in the studies on social innovation (Hiller, Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2004, p. 84). Finally, the need for a more general approach to the economy is also present in the critique of models of ‘territorial innovation’ (Moulaert and Sekia, 2003, pp. 299-300). By including the satisfaction of needs not covered by the market as a key aspect of social innovation, the Integrated Area Development model does not limit the scope of innovation-driven development to the creation of local or regional markets, but aims to strengthen other aspects of the economy, such as the public sector, the social economy, cultural activities, and community action.

### **3. Critiques and limitations of local initiatives as strategies for urban local development**

Approaches presented in the first section have often conceptualized local initiatives as possible ways for new social and territorial compromises capable of creating a virtuous circle of local development linking the creation of economic activities, social cohesion, and participative democracy. This capacity for local initiatives to combine job creation and strengthen social ties, collective action and public action, economic and social development as well as local and global scales seems to be increasingly undermined as neo-liberal models of development become more widespread. The process of hybridisation that created numerous local initiatives seems to be having a hard time resisting against the structural forces behind labour market flexibility, urban polarisation, the commodification of social services, and the localization of social policies. The potential for local initiatives to become, —above and beyond successful local experiments—true social innovations that can produce social change, transform the local institutional framework, and disseminate throughout Europe does not always seem to be keeping all its promises. Two types of critiques can be identified, which are considered in this section. First, a series of findings expresses the fragility of local initiatives, but also the ambivalence of the resulting effects in terms of quantity and quality of jobs, civic commitments, and social cohesion in deprived neighbourhoods. Second, there are critiques that emphasise that local initiatives have little influence on the structural forces that harm urban social cohesion.

### **3.1. The difficult quantitative assessment of the socio-economic influence of local initiatives and the quality of the jobs created**

Many analyses of local initiatives are based more on qualitative case studies (Moulaert, Martinelli, Gonzalez and Swyngedow, 2007), along with a historical and institutional contextualisation, than on quantitative and statistical comparisons. The case studies make it possible to understand the interactions and coalitions of stakeholders, the dynamics of innovation, and the modes of organisation and institutionalisation of local initiatives as well as their effects on social cohesion and geographical areas. On the other hand, these case studies do not inform us quantitatively on the socio-economic influence of local initiatives in terms of the number of organisations, jobs created, or geographic and sector-based distribution.

The lack of ‘standardised figures’ on local initiatives is due to their initial conceptualisation, which makes their statistical categorisation difficult. Because modes of organising local initiatives are diverse and very sensitive to local institutional compromises, their reality is hard to perceive in existing nomenclatures. The inadequate statistical framework (Jouen, 2000; Laville, 2005) does not make it possible to quantitatively grasp the various families<sup>3</sup>. Given the performativity attributed to statistics in public debate, the absence of indisputable and reliable statistics at the European

level on local initiatives inevitably prevents them from being recognised as a subject of research and as public policy concerns.

Beyond the quantitative number of jobs created by local initiatives, the question of the quality of jobs is also raised. Many studies (Mayer 2006; Hély, 2008) have emphasised the low pay, atypical and precarious status of job contracts, and fragility of the paths of insertion that exist in many social enterprises working towards integration in the labour market and non-profit organisations that work with urban populations. The credibility of a view that makes local initiatives the driving force behind job creation in the geographical areas may weaken if, at the same time, these jobs contribute to the deterioration of working conditions standards. This is all the more true given that the social question has gradually shifted during the last ten years or so, from the figure of excluded people in the 1980s to that of the working poor today.

### **3.2 Marginalisation and instrumentalisation of local initiatives in urban social development**

The trend towards the institutionalisation and professionalization of local initiatives has led to a gradual interweaving of collective and public action. This somewhat ambivalent trend remained, nevertheless, potentially innovative as much in terms of the emergence of new social practices as in the renewal of public action.

These evolutions can be interpreted differently. In this institutionalisation of grassroots initiatives in local policies and their professionalization in the management of urban services, one critical analysis (Mayer, 2006) describes a trend towards the de-politicisation of non-profit and popular involvement in governance (Beaumont, 2003), or even the instrumentalisation of local initiatives by public authorities. In neo-liberal labour market policies, the role of local initiatives would be reduced to the rehabilitation of the disadvantaged without any perspective of reducing inequalities. In this perspective, urban social cohesion becomes disconnected from any critical discourse or demand for economic justice.

‘Local initiatives’ weak level of resistance to this functional integration raises questions. The initiatives managed -- not without tensions -- purport to be both partners in political discussions, which can be in a position to assert the needs of the inhabitants publicly, and a producer of services for the local populations. The evolution of active policies in the labour market and the restrictive conditions of eligibility for social benefits has made it increasingly difficult to maintain this hybrid identity, which combines citizen participation, local economic development, and job creation. While some initiatives resist against the injunctions made by public authorities (Mayer, 2006, p.53), many others have given up any contentious action, and have turned into simple providers of urban social policies.

### **3.3. Community participation against participative democracy?**

The recuperation by local public authorities of the participative and deliberative discourse and measures questions the socio-political autonomy of the latter 'grassroots initiatives'. Critiques of the limits of community initiatives, as a ways of democratising local public action, have been formulated, especially in political sociology. Participative injunctions (De Maillard, 2002; Besson, 2004) are not only interpreted as rhetoric by local authorities, but also as an instrument of political conformity and control of inhabitants, who turn against local initiatives (Atkinson, 1998; Amin, 2005).

Community participation and the promotion of active citizenship seems to be less interested in creating a local counter power and training local leaders than in making the inhabitants assume more responsibility and adhere to urban renewal operations within a consensual and pacified vision of social relations.

Institutional deliberative mechanisms are becoming the remit of professional activists and non-profit organisation experts, but do not always facilitate commitment and expression by 'ordinary citizens.' Consequently, community participation can play against participative democracy (Besson, 2004). The selective integration of community leaders into local governance (Taylor, 2007) does not necessarily reduce the democratic deficit between local governments and people from the community.

The 'proximity or community trap' (Blondiaux, 2008) as a 'natural place' for participative democracy (Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005) is also questioned when the spaces for deliberation are limited to the micro-local scale of the neighbourhood. The participants are often considered more as residents than as citizens (Blondiaux, 2008, p. 66). Consultation processes rarely lead to a real sharing of decision-making, which remains completely in the hands of elected representatives (Donzelot and Epstein, 2006). The inhabitants play a more symbolic and consultative role than a decision-making role (Amin, 2005). The price paid for an autonomous space for debates, when it is possible, is the denial of both political conflict and power relations that do indeed exist in the municipal bodies (Neveu, 2004).

Limited to the neighbourhood scale, deliberation deals at best with the local urban management of problems and community services, without any impact on the 'big policy' (Bacqué, Rey and Sintomer, 2005, p. 123) that nonetheless affects inhabitants' daily life in areas such as jobs, housing, and education. In other words, 'proximity democracy' is too rarely the stepping stone for multi-scale governance, which remains an affair of elected representatives.

#### **3.4. Local initiatives: spaces for socialisation and collective identity in deprived neighbourhoods?**

The capacity of local initiatives to be spaces for socialisation and the production of collective identity able to stir up autonomous processes of participation or even mobilise inhabitants in disadvantaged neighbourhoods has been called into question. Several researchers emphasise how urban relegation, local stigmatisation, and social segmentation are less and less conducive to neighbourhood development through local initiatives. Even in the approaches that underline the specificity of modes of socialisation, the intensity of reciprocity and mutual aid, and the existence of community life in deprived areas, inhabitant initiatives are rarely presented as a potential for the neighbourhood's endogenous development.

While the 'forced' sociability of disadvantaged neighbourhoods signifies neither absence of feeling of belonging nor a deficiency in the forms of mutual aid and neighbourhood exchange of goods and services (Avenel, 2007, p. 44), it rarely leads to an organised and visible demand or production in a public sphere that is often synonymous with insecurity. Solidarity is above all within the family or household, with the private sphere being the cornerstone of identity and projects. The inhabitants' ambivalent relations with their neighbourhood, ranging from attitudes of rejection and defence, are not necessarily conducive to positive actions for the neighbourhood.

The desire to change is expressed less by collective dynamics to develop the neighbourhood than by individual strategies to get out of it. The

desire for social integration does not necessarily go hand in hand with a desire to become involved and active in the neighbourhood. Above all, taking initiatives is a way to increase opportunities for geographic mobility, which is often synonymous with social mobility.

But even in an institutional context in which community action is valued, as in the urban revitalisation projects (the New Deal for Communities programme) in the United Kingdom, the idea that it is not realistic to expect the inhabitants who have the least resources to be the most socially innovative also underlies certain analyses (Amin, 2005). For example, some studies show that the social economy is more dynamic and diversified in terms of economic viability, job creation, and entrepreneurship in prosperous and mixed areas that enjoy a diversified social structure, dynamic community activists, and a middle class (Amin, Cameron and Hudson, 2002).

While third-sector initiatives do exist in deprived areas, they remain inward-looking, do not mix populations much, have weak connections with institutions, and have a weak capacity to mobilise exogenous resources. Although the initiatives can reinforce community mutual aid, they are rarely the main driving force for economic and employment revitalisation in the neighbourhoods.

### **3.5. The localisation of policies to support initiatives: Towards a new localism?**

The dangers of “localism,” which would be the outcome of a conception of endogenous development based only on mobilising the resources of local populations, have already been exposed. Studies of local initiative have insisted on them for a long time (Hiller, Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2004, p. 149) with the idea that the success of initiatives depends on the capacity of local stakeholders involved in multi-level governance to be committed to becoming part of trans-territorial networks and to mobilising monetary and non-monetary resources from beyond their immediate geographical area.

The new critiques of localism are due to their functional and local integration as instruments of urban social cohesion. In the United States context, the ideal of localism has been criticized (Cummings, 2001) as one of the limitations of the market-based community economic development approach, which considers community initiatives as ‘place-based strategies’ for the promotion of local business development, the creation of jobs for the poorest, and the revitalization of depressed neighbourhoods.

In several European countries, the neighbourhood has become the geographical area of reference for a growing number of public policies in the fields of health care, employment, housing, and the environment (Morin and Rochefort, 1998). This process of ‘the localisation of the social’ (Amin,

2005), based on national programmes in which the local community is geographically limited to the deprived neighbourhood raises problems. The spatial framework of public action appears to be increasingly restrictive for the local initiatives whose area of action seems to be confined to a 'functional space defined by physical-spatial limits, an urban building framework, and a specific social composition' (Morin and Rochefort, 2003). Within this background, local initiatives are less and less recognised as self-producers of their own meaningful urban area, on the basis of social networks reaching beyond the administrative boundaries of urban and social policies.

The evolution of French urban policy is in this respect a significant example. Originally favourable to urban social development open to a bottom-up and participative conception of public action, this policy led governments to impose top-down zoning of so-called priority neighbourhoods (Donzelot, Mével and Wyvekens, 2003, pp. 204-205). Over the years, the borders of urban social development have become less the result of co-construction taking into account the socio-economic dynamics of initiatives and the daily life of the inhabitants than a task of statistical objectification of 'urban priority areas' based on a battery of economic and social indicators. As summarised by Jacques Donzelot (2003), 'from a certain bottom-up support for the forces of development, there has been a switch to an ostentatious top-down determining of action.'

Even the conception of spatial reality promoted by the Third Way is subject to criticism (Amin, 2005), whereas the New Deal for Communities programme has been explicitly based on community initiatives negotiated locally, within the framework of partnerships between the neighbourhood's various stakeholders - such as community associations, social economy and third sector organisations - and institutions. By blaming neighbourhoods' economic decline on the weakness of their social capital and on a lack of citizen participation, urban policies tend to make the social characteristics of neighbourhoods the causes of their difficulties rather than the consequences of global restructuring. Because community revitalisation is limited to deprived areas, it is turning out to be unrealistic to make local initiatives, citizen participation, and local partnerships the cornerstone of integrated local development. In other words, the neighbourhood as a space of endogenous development via community action can only have limited results on social cohesion, whereas poor neighbourhoods are confronted with social justice issues. By limiting the role of local initiatives to the management of proximity and community problems, the neighbourhood renewal policies tend to not deal with the redistribution of wealth between populations and between different geographical areas.

## **4. Conclusion: reconsideration of how local initiatives can resist and innovate**

The previous limitations emphasised in the previous section must be put into perspective and contextualised. To a certain extent, they reveal the growing risk that local initiatives will be instrumentalised within the framework of the neoliberalisation of urban governance (Mayer, 2009). In the context of accelerated economic globalisation, the claim that local initiatives re-connect the economic and the social via political intermediation is fragile when their action is restricted to the neighbourhood scale by public policies. ‘Neo-liberal localism’ (Novy et al., 2010) tends to ‘capture’ local initiatives as a ‘functionalist solution’ for maintaining urban social cohesion. In this view, the role of local initiatives is limited to the re-integration of those excluded from and by economic globalisation.

### **4.1 – A context- and spatially-sensitive approach for reconsidering the innovative potential of local initiatives in the city**

Nonetheless, the approaches that insist on the limits of local initiatives are too all-encompassing and pessimistic. By generalising the macro trends, they tend to underestimate the capacity of local initiatives to resist and innovate in certain conditions, which a more contextual-based analysis would enable us to understand.

Beyond considering the global impacts of neo-liberal urban regimes, which tend to lead to an instrumental perspective of local initiatives for urban social cohesion, their potentials and limitations remain very dependent on the local and national contexts. Comparative European research projects (SINGOGOM, KATARSIS) have underlined the importance of context-sensitive and scalar-sensitive perspectives for analysing social innovation (Moualart et al., 2007). Depending on the local governance regimes, there are significant variations from socially creative initiatives to others related to the sense of place - embedded in the local community and/or acting on different places -, to the relevance of social networks at different scales as a way for empowerment of the most excluded and to their impact in the current governance arrangements (Garcia et al., 2008).

The analysis of institutional contexts makes it possible to specify in what conditions local initiatives are socially innovative. In other words, responding to material and non-material needs, which are neither satisfied by the State or the Market would not be considered as a socially creative strategy, unless these actions result in the empowerment of the local population and a transformation in the local governance system (Moulaert, 2010). To tackle the challenges of multi-scalar governance, the identification and analysis of bottom-linked coordination and strategies (Garcia et al, 2008; Moulaert, 2010) are crucial for assessing how much

relations and networks, between bottom-up initiatives and top-down policies, are favourable to participation in the multi-level decision making process.

Underlying the importance of policy frameworks in the emergence and consolidation of socially innovative practices and the potential for change in the local governance regime, this approach analyses the favourable urban environmental context in which tensions between innovation and institutionalisation can be creative (Garcia et al., this Special Issue).

A spatially-sensitive approach to collective action can also inform us on the possible multiagency urban coalitions and new organisational infrastructure needed for the progressive community (Nicholls, 2003). In this perspective, the 'de-politicisation' of grassroots initiatives (Mayer, 2007), and the weak networking among social movements are neither an irreversible nor a global trend. In some Latin American contexts, the popular imagination and the various actions taken by the social movements and grassroots initiatives are close. For example, the solidarity-based economic movements developed in Brazil (Lemaître, 2009) as well as in Bolivia (Hillekamp, 2007), in close interaction with the other social movements with which they share a common history of conflict and a radical contention of an economic system they consider to be fundamentally unfair and discriminatory. The Brazilian Forum of solidarity economy

seems to be emblematic in terms of its multi-organisational and multi-scalar dynamics (Gaiger, 2005; Singer, 2005).

#### **4.2 – A new transnational period of contention and the global financial crisis as opportunities for rethinking the place of grassroots initiatives in urban social cohesion strategies**

Embedding local initiatives in the transnational alter-globalisation movement (Mayer, 2009) is another way for reconnecting social experimentations in urban neighbourhoods with a vision of global justice. The global justice movement, which has contributed to creating a new dynamics and context of contention during the last decade, can reinforce the ability of grassroots practitioners for ‘connecting micro and macro-strategies’ and ‘developing a counter hegemonic discourse’ on social cohesion (Moulaert et al. 2007, Novy et al., this Special Issue).

New combinations between local socio-economic innovations, contentious collective and transnational actions, and alternative visions of development open up not only possibilities of global and local linkages in the field of urban community development but various new fields of action in which project area-based solutions to tackle urban social exclusion integrate bottom-link collective action to redistribute economic resources to deprived neighbourhood.

Finally, the 2008 global financial crisis may offer new opportunities for the institutional environment of local initiatives. Beyond the potential countercyclical role of local initiatives to save jobs within given urban areas and meet the needs of impoverished people, while stimulating social networks and encouraging mutual aid in different American and European cities, this unprecedented economic and social crisis may put grassroots initiatives back on the agenda of urban social cohesion.

The current crisis of capitalism questions the legitimacy of neoliberal solutions in terms of urban development as well as social cohesion. The growing contestation of the liberal regime of governance broadens not only the windows of opportunities for new urban social movements (Mayer, 2009), but also for the right to a 'socially creative innovative city' (Moulaert and Swyngedouw, 2010). New interest by governments and institutions for social innovation strategies in a context of strong uncertainty on the future of cohesive cities can facilitate different multi-stakeholder political coalitions and multi-level governance structures which take urban grassroots initiatives into account seriously. This would enable a new urban policy framework to emerge, in which local initiatives would be considered to be essential components and partners for rethinking urban social cohesion, no longer be separated from or subordinated to a global economic development that is limited to the expansion and regulation of markets. This perspective presupposes the institutional recognition of creative grassroots initiatives as

potential vehicles for reconnecting mix economic processes with participatory democratic dynamics as a condition for fostering cohesive urban economies.

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<sup>1</sup> Castells categorises as “social” urban movements that combine struggles for improved collective consumption with struggles for community culture as well as for political self-determination (Mayer, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Work integration social enterprises, social cooperatives in Italy and Poland, cooperative enterprises for the collective interest (SCIC) in France, social enterprises in Italy and Finland, community interest companies in the UK, social coops in Poland, and others.

<sup>3</sup> The personalised services of daily life, the services for improvement of living conditions, the cultural and leisure services, the services of environmental protection.

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