

A Commons Transition Plan for the City of Ghent

The context and structure of the report



□ Executive summary by Michel Bauwens (P2P Foundation, research) and Yurek Onzia (project coordination)

☞ This study¹ was commissioned and financed by the City of Ghent, a city in northern Flanders with nearly 300,000 inhabitants, with the support of its mayor Daniel Termont, the head of the mayor's staff, the head of the strategy department, and the political coalition of the city which consists of the *Flemish Socialist Party SPA*, the *Flemish Greens (Groen)* and the *Flemish Liberal Party (Open VLD)*.

☞ The request was to document the emergence and growth of the commons in the city, to offer some explanations of why this was occurring, and to determine what kind of public policies should support commons-based initiatives, based on consultation with the active citizens in Ghent.

☞ The authors of the report are Michel Bauwens as investigator and Yurek Onzia as coordinator of the effort.

☞ **Timelab**, an artistic makerspace under the leadership of **Evi Swinnen**, and the Greek scholar of the *P2P Lab* Vasilis Niaros, played important supportive roles in the realization of this project. Wim Reygaert and partners provided the graphics used in the original report. Annelore Raman coordinated the connections within the city council.

The consultation, which took place during the spring of 2017, took the form of:

☞ A **mapping** of 500 or so commons-oriented projects per sector of activity (food, shelter, transportation, etc), through a wiki, which is available at <http://wiki.commonsgent>

☞ 80+ one to one **interviews** and conversations with leading commoners and project leaders

☞ A written **questionnaire** that was responded to by over 70 participants

☞ A series of 9 **workshops** in which participants were invited per theme, 'Food as a Commons', 'Energy as a Commons', 'Transportation as a Commons', etc ..

☞ A **Commons Finance Canvas** workshop, based on the methodology developed by Stephen Hinton, which looked into the economic opportunities, difficulties and models used by the commons projects

¹ A slightly graphically improved version of the official Dutch language version of the report can be found [here](#). Suggested citation: Commons Transitie Plan voor de Stad Gent. Michel Bauwens en Yurek Onzia. Ghent, Belgium: City of Ghent and P2P Foundation, 2017

The report consists of four parts.

☞ The **first part** provides the context on the emergence of urban commons, which has seen a tenfold increase in the Flanders in the last ten years. It focuses on the challenge it represents for the city and the public authorities, for market players, and for traditional civil society organisations, and how the new contributive logic of the commons challenges (but also enriches) the logic of representation of the European democratic polities, in this specific case, at the level of a city. It also looks at the opportunities inherent in the new models such as more active participation of inhabitants in co-constructing their cities, in solving ecological and climate change challenges, and in creating new forms of meaningful work at the local level.

☞ The **second part** is an overview of urban commons developments globally, but especially in European cities, and takes a closer look at the experiences in Bologna (with the Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons, now adopted by many other Italian cities), Barcelona (the pro-commons policies of the new political coalition of En Comu), Frome, UK (for its civic coalition that replaced the political parties in the running of the city), and Lille, for its experience with a Assembly of the Commons as a voice and expression of the local commons.

☞ The **third part** is the analysis of the urban commons in Ghent itself, highlighting some of its strengths and weaknesses.

☞ And finally, in the **fourth part**, based on our analysis in the three first parts, we offer our recommendations to the City, in terms of an institutional adaptation of the city to the new commons-centric demands that emerge through the commons activities. It's a set of 23 integrated proposals for the creation of public-commons processes for citywide co-creation. In some way, it represents the shift from urban commons to a more ambitious vision of the 'city as a commons'.

The P2P Foundation's Michel Bauwens and Vasilis (Billy) Niaros



► P 1 - The context for the Emergence of the Urban Commons

☞ We define the commons as a shared resource, which is co-owned or co-governed by a community of users and stakeholders, under the rules and norms of that community.

☞ There is no commons without active co-production (**commoning**), and without an important measure of **self-governance**.

Thus, it differs from both public and state- or city-owned goods, and from private property managed by its owners. Both a Dutch study by Tine De Moor (*Homo Cooperans*), and a study for the Flanders by the *Oikos think tank* have confirmed a steep rise in the number of commons-oriented civic initiatives (commons-oriented means that important aspects of the initiatives have commons' aspects).

This rise is related to a growing awareness amongst a layer of citizens that a social and ecological transition is necessary given the relative state and market failures, but also by the effects of the great economic and systemic crisis of 2008, which has seen an austerity-driven retreat from public authorities in terms of common infrastructures.

These new urban commons however do not exist 'on their own' as fully autonomous projects and entities but by necessity interact with both public and market forces, for access to resources and support.

Thus the commons is a challenge for the other institutions as well:

☞ It is a challenge for the city, as commons are a claim to both public and private resources that were governed by the city, or which may have been private properties currently in disuse.

☞ Self-governance in the commons most often takes a contributory logic, i.e. the contributors and participants manage the projects, but this doesn't necessarily involve all the citizenry. This also poses a challenge for representative democracy. Conversely, commoners may want support, but may resent control and limitations to their autonomy.

☞ It is a challenge for market forces, which may feel challenged by commons projects as alternatives to privatized provision, or may profit from them in ways that are considered extractive by the commoners, or their actions may 'enclose' and destroy the commons, creating conflictual relations.

But it is also a challenge to established civil society organizations, which were based on memberships, a professional cadre, and bureaucratic forms of organization and management; elements which are often rejected in the commons initiatives.

☞ The commons requires a 'partner' city, which enables and empowers commons-oriented civic initiatives.

☞ It also requires generative market forms which sustain the commons and create livelihoods for the core contributors as well as facilitative types of support from civil society organizations.

An important discovery in our analysis of the 500+ urban commons projects in Ghent, is that their structure strongly resembles that of the commons-driven digital economy. This means that at the heart of urban commons we find:

☞ Productive communities based on open contributions.

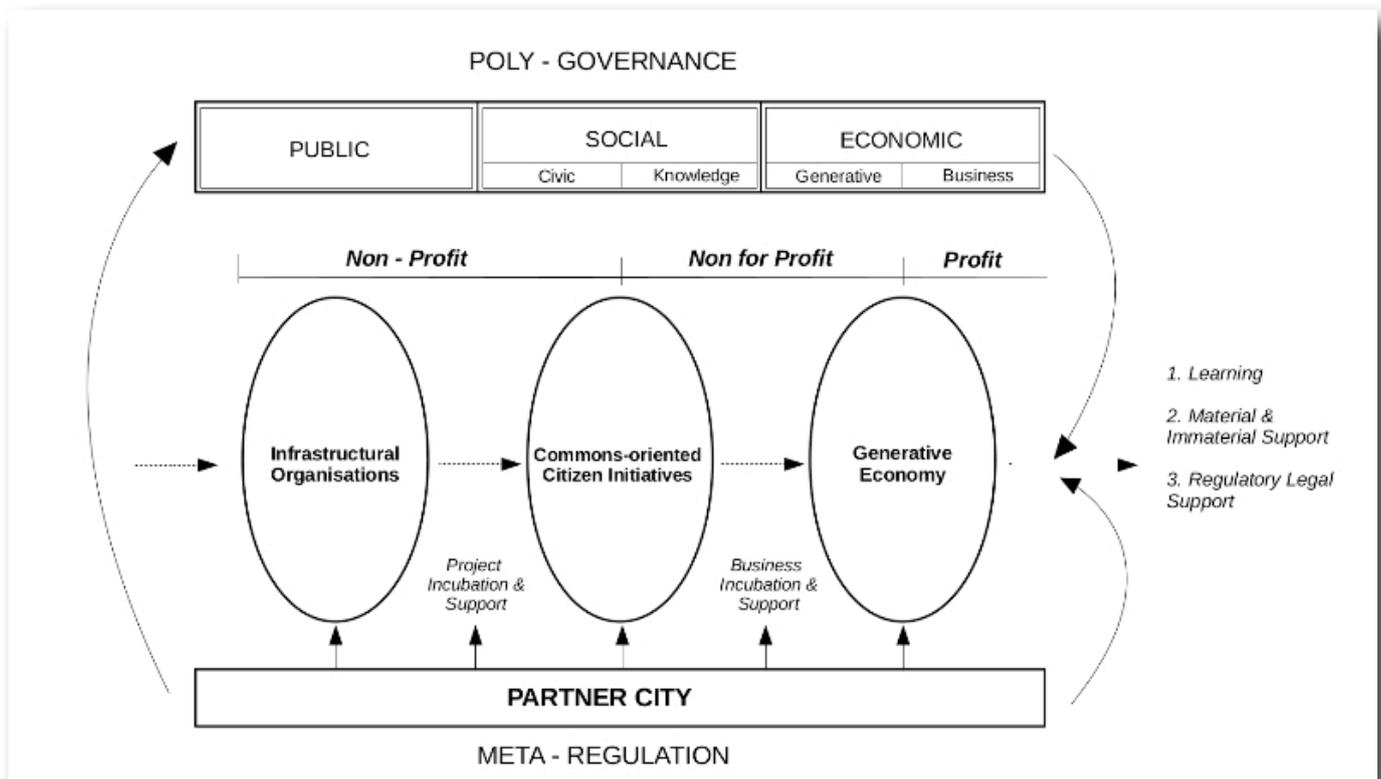
☞ That these urban commons and their platforms may generate (and are obliged to if they are to be resilient and self-sustaining over time) generative market forms — i.e. entrepreneurial coalitions that have a positive relationship with the commons and the commoners.

☞ The communities, platforms and possible market forms require, and receive, facilitative support from the various agencies and functionaries of the city, and the Civil Society Organizations, which have adapted to the needs of the new citizen-commoners.

This relationship is shown by the graph below.

This graph shows the five entry points of the commons economy in which the city is actively intervening (bottom), the 3 elements of the commons economy, and the public-commons processes and institutions which could be set up as a meta-structure to frame the cooperation between the city, the commoners and the generative economic entities.

It is also clear that the commons initiatives and their emerging economy, hold great potential for the social and economic life of the city.



Graphic 6: Polygovernance model.

The three main potentials are in our opinion the following:

☞ The commons are an essential part of the ecological transition: shared and mutualized infrastructures have a dramatically lower footprint than systems based on ‘*possessive individualism*’, but on the condition that ‘*it is done in the right*’ and systemic way. A good counter-example is how the competition between drivers in the *Uber* model negates the environmental advantages of ride-hailing. Huge reductions in the material footprint (and carbon footprint) are possible with the commons-centric models.

☞ The commons are a means for the re-industrialization of the city following the *cosmo-local model* which combines global technical cooperation in knowledge commons with smart re-localization of production; an example is how city procurement could be used to reintroduce healthy local meals for children in public schools (5 million a year, not counting other anchor institutions which could join); a combination between procurement from the urban/rural short-circuit farmers in the organic sector, carbon-free transportation (Ghent is flat, which allows for bike-cargo transport), and local cooking, would create hundreds of jobs for the local economy. Socially, this means jobs not just for the technically-savvy but for the desperate blue collar workers who have been hit hard by the ecologically unsustainable neoliberal globalization model

☞ Representative democracy is, for a number of interlocking reasons, in deep crisis and facing a crisis of trust. And the world of production is still nearly entirely un-democratic. The commons however are based on the self-governance of the value producing systems and are therefore one of the few schools of true democracy and participation. Inclusive and diverse commons could be at the very least an adjunct to representative democracy, creating a system of Democracy+, augmented with participation, deliberation and multi-stakeholder governance models in cooperation with the commons initiatives.

► P 3 - The analysis of the situation in Ghent

The city of Ghent is a dynamic city of nearly 300k inhabitants including a huge number of young people and students. It's a city in which the commons already have a distinct presence, with support from an active and engaged city administration.

❑ A tradition of center-left coalitions have created a distinct political and administrative culture with many engaged city officials. The city is actively engaged in carbon reduction, traffic reduction, and has neighborhood and social facilitators, connectors in schools, street workers and other types of staff that is actively engaged in enabling roles at the local level. This includes different kinds of support for commons-initiatives.

❑ The city has an important policy to support the temporary use by community groups of vacant land and buildings.

❑ The city counts around 500 commons-oriented initiatives in all sectors of human provisioning, such as food, shelter, mobility, etc. Many of these are active around the necessity of socio-ecological transitions in their respective domains and neighborhoods.

These positive aspects should be tempered by the following issues:

❑ Both the efforts of the city and the commoner's initiatives are highly fragmented;

❑ There are many regulatory and administrative hurdles to hinder the expansion of commons initiatives, for example in the field of mutualized housing; (for example, we received a 7 page memo of such obstacles from housing activists).

❑ Though there are a number of fablabs/coworking spaces and some craft-related initiatives, there is at present a lack of activity around open design linked to real production;

❑ Though blessed with a large university, which is active around sustainability issues, there is very little evidence of relations between the university and the commons projects, and some of its spinoffs and players are sometimes distinctly hostile to open source and design projects;

❑ Though many of the leading commons activists are facing precarious lifestyles and incomes, they usually have good social and knowledge capital and mostly consist of long established inhabitants. There are many commons project in the post-migration communities, but they are mostly limited to ethnic and religious memberships, and there is as yet relatively little cross-over. They are however successful counter-examples such as the initiatives in the neighborhood Rabot.

❑ Old and newer Civil Society Organisations play a significant infrastructural and support role for maintaining urban commons projects, but perhaps perceive them to be mainly directed towards vulnerable population groups and not as key and highly productive resources.

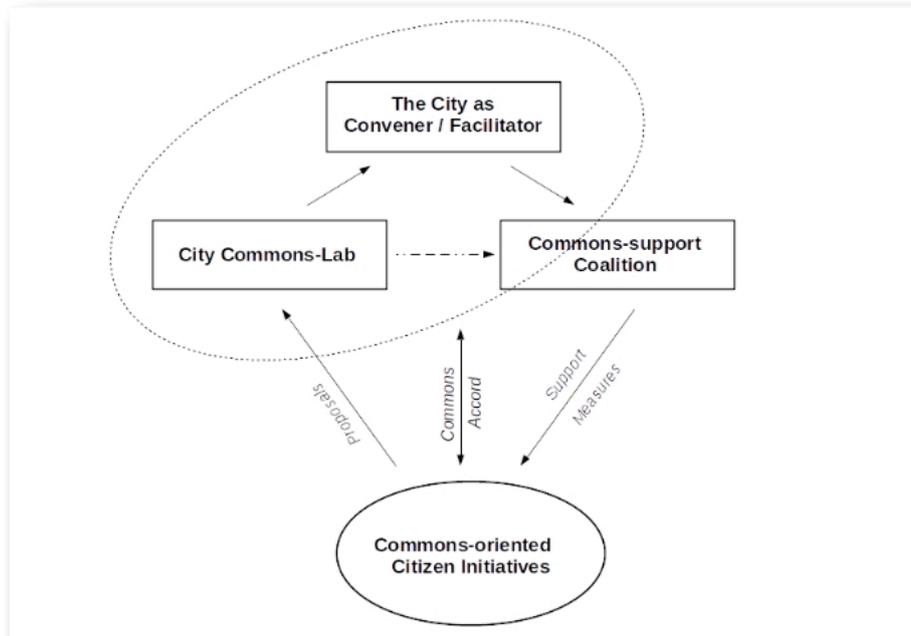
❑ Despite the city support, the major potential commons are largely enclosed and vulnerable to private extraction; the current models do not challenge the mainstream consensus but find a way to co-exist with the major imbalances.

❑ Despite its long history of self-organization with the guilds in the middle ages and a very strong labor movement in the 19th century, the cooperative sector and its support mechanisms are quite weak; there is a weak if not inexistent support infrastructure for a specifically generative and cooperative economy that could work with commons infrastructures.

► P 4 - The proposals for the city administration

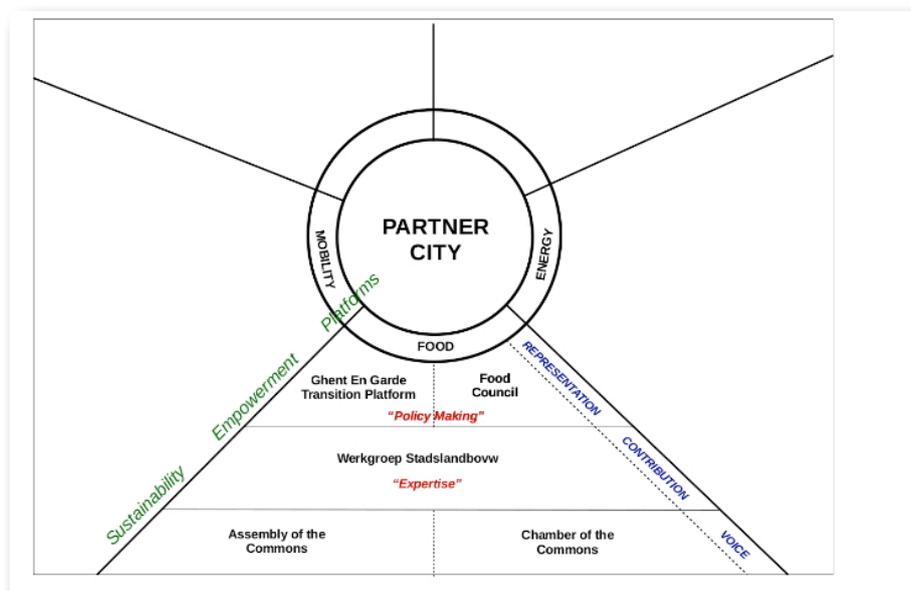
The general logic of our proposals is to put forward realistic but important institutional innovations that can lead to further progress and expansion of the urban commons in Ghent in order to successfully achieve its ecological and social goals. We propose public-social or public-partnership based processes and protocols to streamline cooperation between the city and the commoners in every field of human provisioning.

We are not summarizing all proposals here, merely the underlying logic.



Graphic 7 (“proposed transition infrastructure for the city of Ghent”) shows the general underlying logic.

Commons initiatives can forward their proposals and need for support to a City Lab, which prepares a ‘Commons Accord’ between the city and the commons initiative, modeled after the Bologna Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of the Urban Commons. Based on this contract, the city sets-up specific support alliances which combine the commoners and civil society organisations, the city itself, and the generative private sector, in order to organize support flows.



The model comes from the existing practice around the food transition, which is far from perfect and has its problems, but nevertheless has in our opinion the core institutional logic that can lead to more successful outcomes.

The city has indeed created an initiative, *Gent en Garde*, which accepts the five aims of civil society organizations active in the food transition (*local organic food, fairly produced*), which works as follows.

The city has initiated a *Food Council*, which meets regularly and could contribute to food policy proposals. The *Food Council* is representative of the current forces at play, and has both the strengths and weaknesses of representative organizations. The *Food Council* contains a contributive 'food working group' which mobilizes those effectively working at the grassroots level on the food transition by following a contributive logic, where every contributor has a voice. In our opinion, this combination of representative and contributory logic is what can create a *super-competent Democracy+ institution* that goes beyond the limitations of representation and integrates the contributive logic of the commoners.

But how can the commoners exert significant political weight?. This requires voice and self-organization. We therefore propose the creation of *an Assembly of the Commoners*, for all citizens active in the co-construction of commons, and *a Chamber of the Commons*, for all those who are creating livelihoods around these commons, in order to create more social power for the commons.

This essential process of participation can be replicated across the transition domains, obtaining city and institutional support for a process leading to *Energy as a Commons, Mobility as a Commons, Housing, Food, etc.*

We also propose the following: (not exhaustive)

- the creation of a juridical assistance service consisting of at least one representative of the city and one of the commoners, in order to systematically unblock the potential for commons expansion, by finding solutions for regulatory hurdles.
- The creation of an incubator for a commons-based collaborative economy, which specifically deals with the challenges of generative start-ups.
- The creation of an investment vehicle, the bank of the commons, which could be a city bank based on public-social governance models.
- Augmenting the capacity of temporary land and buildings, towards more permanent solutions to solve the land and housing crisis affecting commoners and citizens.
- Support of platform cooperatives as an alternative to the more extractive forms of the sharing economy.
- Assisting the development of mutualized commons infrastructures ('protocol cooperativism'), through inter-city cooperation (avoiding the development of 40 Uber alternative in as many cities).
- Make Ghent 'the place to be' for commoners by using 'Ghent, City of the Commons' as an open brand, to support the coming of visitors for commons-conferences etc.

❑ As pioneered by the *NEST* project of temporary use of the old library, use more ‘calls for commons’, instead of competitive contests between individual institutions. Calls for the commons would reward the coalition that creates the best complementary solution between multiple partners and open sources its knowledge commons to support the widest possible participation.

We also propose

❑ A specific project to test the capacity of ‘*cosmo-local production*’ to create meaningful local jobs (organic food for school lunches) and to test the potential role of anchor institutions and social procurement.

❑ The organization of a *CommonsFest* on the 28th of October, with a first *Assembly of the Commons*.

❑ A pilot project around ‘*circular finance*’ in which ‘*saved negative externalities*’ which lead to savings in the city budget can directly be invested in the commons projects that have achieved such efficiencies (say re-investing the saved cost of water purification to support the acquisition of land commons for organic farmers).

❑ The setting up of an experimental production unit based on distributed manufacturing and open design.

❑ Projects that integrate knowledge institutions such as the university, with the grassroots commons projects.

Header photo by [estefaniabarchietto](#)

❑ Key words & topics :

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policy

transportation