cities BEYOND GROWTH

POLICY PRIMER

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Executive summary

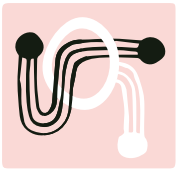
This primer, *Cities Beyond Growth*, offers policymakers and civic organisations a practical bridge between post-growth and wellbeing-economy thinking and concrete municipal action. Its core argument: the current growth-oriented economic model is both driving ecological breakdown and deepening social inequality. As the sites where economic life is most intensively operationalised, cities are where an alternative, sufficiency- and care-based economy must be built. Drawing on real practices from mostly European cities, this primer presents both overarching strategic approaches as well as specific policy recommendations across five domains: energy, housing, food, mobility, and digital technology.

Overarching approaches

The three institutional strategies apply to all five domains discussed here, but their relevance extends well beyond them. (1) *Public-civic partnerships*, which transfer ownership and control of urban resources into shared arrangements between municipalities and collectives of citizens, rather than leaving them to private markets; (2) *Community Wealth Building*, an economic-development model built on local, cooperative and public ownership, organised around progressive procurement, fair work, shared ownership, just land use, and local financial power; and (3) *Participatory and Deliberative democracy*, embedding citizens' assemblies, neighbourhood and food councils, and digital participation tools directly into municipal decision-making.

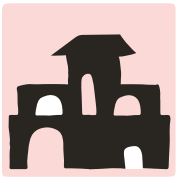
Domain-level policy recommendations

Energy



Move energy towards public and community ownership through (re) municipalisation; introduce progressive tariff structures paired with usage caps for high consumers; and actively support the creation of citizen-led energy communities via public-civic partnerships.

Housing



Decommodify housing by transferring it into democratically managed public ownership models, and new "affordable"/cooperative zoning categories; expand refurbishment programmes financed through revolving funds while enforcing rent control to prevent cost pass-through; and strengthen tenants' rights alongside support for tenant organising.

Food

Reconnect territorial planning with agroecological land-use policy (e.g. public land leased to agroecological producers); adopt sustainable public procurement standards for schools and public institutions; reduce food waste along the supply chain; and build institutional capacity for collaboration through food policy councils and similar networks.

Mobility

Regulate and phase out high-emission, privatised transport (car-free zones, congestion pricing) while embedding social-justice safeguards against displacement; expand inclusive walking, cycling, and public transport infrastructure; and support mobility-sharing initiatives including subsidised access for lower-income residents.

Digital

Adapt procurement and tendering rules to favour democratic, non-extractive technology; establish municipal digital-commons service providers; foster public-civic "democratic tech hubs" (knowledge-sharing, incubators); and invest in shared basic digital infrastructure (networks, protocols, platforms) as a public utility, akin to roads or electricity grids.

The primer includes real-world "best practice" cases in each domain and poses a set of guiding questions to help policymakers assess who currently benefits from local policy, where transformation is most needed, and how ownership, governance, and citizen participation could be redesigned in an integrated way across domains. Across the practices and policies discussed in this primer, three patterns consistently recur: decommodification, democratisation, and redistribution.

Practices across Europe

The different practices discussed in the domain sector of this primer

- Carbon Co-op, Manchester; United Kingdom
- Energy cooperative Schönau, Germany
- Austrian Federation of Limited-Profit Housing Associations
- Community Action Tenants Union, Ireland
- Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen (Deutsche Wohnen & Co expropriate), Berlin, Germany
- Voeding Verbindt (Food Connects), Leuven, Belgium
- Pluk! Community Supported Agriculture, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- 10-minute city, Utrecht, The Netherlands
- Free-fare public transport, Tallinn, Estonia
- Som mobilitat, Catalonia, Spain
- Open Protocols, Beckn, India

Critical questions for policymakers

1. *Who is benefitting and what are the societal costs of your local city policies in the various domains of this primer (energy, housing, food, mobility, tech)?*
2. *What domains in your city would benefit from - or are in dire need of - transformation?*
3. *How do the examples in this primer help you to rethink and reshape a current policy towards a more democratic economy and community wealth?*
4. *Do any of these approaches relate to practices already present in your city?*
5. *How can you increase citizen participation and public accountability in redesigning ownership, governance and decision-making in care, energy, housing, food, mobility and the digital infrastructure?*
6. *How can your city approach these different domains in an integrated way?*
7. *What tensions and trade-offs need to be addressed?*
8. *Which actors do you need to bring together for the change you would like to build?*

Introduction

This policy primer for Cities Beyond Growth outlines practices and policies that enable urban environments to thrive beyond GDP growth. While post-growth and wellbeing economy ideas are gaining visibility, concrete pathways for change have largely remained under-explored. This can make it hard to translate ambition into action. This policy primer offers accessible explanations and practical insights that connect post-growth principles to real-world policy, bridging the gap between vision and practice. It contains learnings and strategies for citizens and public bodies in cities to increase their transformative agency and accelerate their post-growth transition in times of climate emergency. The primer builds on existing practices and policies in mostly European cities but also draws from other contexts when relevant.

The need to transition towards an economy that functions within planetary boundaries and is more socially just is clear. Our current economic system is unsustainable and has driven us into a wider, interconnected eco-social crisis, in which ecological breakdown and social inequality are mutually reinforcing. Cities are the places where economic practices directly shape everyday realities. Most people live in cities and what happens here has a disproportionately large impact.

The current growth and profit-oriented economic model, reliant on carbon-intensive and extractive practices, is harming planetary health by generating CO2 emissions and numerous other adverse environmental harms.[1] With 7 of the 9 planetary boundaries identified by scientists already breached, the current economic system will lead to ecosystem collapse unless it undergoes profound transformation.[2]

As cities are among the largest carbon emitters, reducing their emissions and environmental footprints is key. Our cities function the way they do due to the high material throughput, largely relying on the constant supply of energy. Energy is needed for heating, cooking, food production, mobility and the digital infrastructure. The continued reliance of cities on fossil fuels is a major driver of the problem, yet scaling up renewables alone cannot meet our ever-growing energy demand. The current expansion of renewable sources, the so-called "energy transition", does not replace fossil fuels but rather expands overall energy use.[3] Furthermore, emissions are not the only problem, as growth is inseparable from material impact. Renewable energy itself depends on the extraction of raw minerals, which is linked to severe impacts for local communities and ecosystems.[4]

The social fabric in European cities is fraying too. The negative impacts of consumer cultures and productivity-driven competitive work cultures become impossible to ignore as anxiety and loneliness are increasingly widespread.[5] Moreover, unprecedented concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few have produced dangerous asymmetries of power, eroding the stability of our parliamentary democracies and the international geopolitical order. This inequity is structurally reflected in cities, for example, by the sharp increase in house and rental prices, which has widened the gap between those who can afford decent housing and those who cannot. In combination with rising energy prices and a poorly insulated housing

stock, this has exacerbated the risk of energy poverty among many households. Similarly, the way food is currently produced, processed, distributed, consumed and disposed of is highly dependent on energy inputs and is a main driver of social injustices and ecological crisis. Over the past decades, global food systems have become increasingly industrialised and structured according to the logics of economic growth and accumulation.[6]

Digital technologies, the control of which has become highly concentrated in a few large private tech corporations, are largely reinforcing and accelerating these extractive dynamics through centralised platforms and practices such as mass surveillance. The energy demands of data centres, now spurred by the AI boom, are almost incomprehensible.[7] Here too, growth remains the guiding mantra, even as its societal benefits remain unclear.

We see the effects of the current economic system every day, through droughts, floods, fires, deepening social inequality, poverty, precarity, mental health crises and popular unrest. The political results are also in plain sight: a profound erosion of public trust in institutions, deepening geopolitical instability and the resurgence of fascism. **If we want to reverse this situation and move toward prosperity within planetary boundaries, we will have to drastically change the way in which we provision for our needs.**

How do we transition to an economy that is socially and ecologically sustainable? What can cities do? In this primer, we first present key concepts and several overarching policies. We then explore five areas of basic need: energy, food, housing, mobility, and digital technology. Each section presents a range of post-growth practices and outlines key policies that cities can adopt to support them.

Global Justice Report and Roadmap for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth

In 2026, two major reports gave the "beyond growth" agenda, as in the idea that policy should prioritise wellbeing and sufficiency over ever-increasing GDP, an important level of institutional weight and technical rigour.

The Global Justice Report: A Plan for Equality and Prosperity within Planetary Boundaries, led by economist *Thomas Piketty* and colleagues, is the first fully quantified global plan to combine reducing inequality, cutting emissions, and living within planetary limits into a single coherent framework running to 2100.

Separately, the United Nations.' Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, *Olivier De Schutter,* published a detailed **Roadmap for Eradicating Poverty Beyond Growth**, setting out 80 concrete policy proposals across areas from care work to democratic governance. Hence, some of the world's most prominent economists and UN institutions are now treating "beyond growth" thinking as an actionable policy direction.

Key Concepts and Overarching Policies

Key Concepts: Care and Sufficiency

> *"Care is everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes (not only) our bodies, ourselves (but also) our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."*
>
> Joan Tronto, Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice, 2013[8]

To transition to an economy that is socially and ecologically sustainable, we must decline from treating the economy as separate from its environment, as neoclassical models do, and instead understand it as embedded within society and nature. This involves centring two main concepts, namely care and sufficiency.

Centring care places the health of individuals, communities, and the environment at the core of societal organisation, treating both paid and unpaid care work as the foundation of a sustainable society, an antidote to hyper-capitalism and neoliberalism.[9] Production, trade, and provisioning depend on natural resources as well as on reproductive care work in households, communities, and culture. This interdependence demands that care and stewardship take centre stage. It also means recognising what truly allows people to thrive. GDP growth, centred on capital accumulation, does not equate to human wellbeing.[10] While growth once tracked with rising prosperity, this no longer holds for people in European cities in recent decades. Beyond a certain threshold, wellbeing is driven less by consumption than by community, connection, meaning, and relationships, while equality remains one of the strongest predictors of collective wellbeing.[11]

Endless growth, and the extraction underpinning it, is therefore neither possible nor desirable. The task is to build an economy and society where capital's extractive, commodifying logic no longer dominates, and where non-transactional social relations, such as conviviality and community, can flourish. This means an economy that serves communities rather than extracting from them, regenerative rather than wasteful: an economy guided by **sufficiency.**[12]

Sufficiency asks not how to maximise production and consumption, but how to ensure enough energy to keep warm, enough food to eat well, enough housing to live with dignity, enough time to care for one another. It asks how much is enough, and for whom, considering

ecological limits.[13] Sufficiency is not austerity. For most people in European cities, it would mean more, more security, more time, more connection, not less; it is consumption at the top that needs to contract. It shifts the measure of success from throughput to outcomes: wellbeing, security, time, connection.

This shift towards care and sufficiency requires cultural change, but also an economy in which people control the foundational conditions of their lives: food, health, energy, education, housing, digital infrastructure. No one is truly free when their basic needs are out of their own control, yet this disempowerment is currently the norm. This thus demands real democratic processes: decisions about resource use, value creation, and who benefits cannot be left to markets alone but must be subject to collective deliberation. The eco-social transformation, across energy, digital, and other domains, must be democratically shaped to serve the collective interest.

Yet regaining self-determination also means shifting ownership models away from privatisation toward collective and public ownership, and away from maximising surplus value toward producing what is genuinely needed. Transition can only go so far if the underlying productive fabric of the economy, who owns companies, in whose benefit they operate and how they relate to workers, communities and ecosystems, remains organised around shareholder primacy, capital accumulation and the commodification of essential goods and services. Transforming economic systems around sufficiency and care therefore requires transforming economic organisations themselves.[14]

To measure wellbeing and thriving communities, multiple value wellbeing indicators can be used. These are comprehensive frameworks used to measure societal progress beyond traditional economic metrics like GDP. These systems evaluate a diverse range of dimensions, such as health, education, environment, and social connections, to provide a more holistic view of quality of life and sustainability.[15] Examples are the wellbeing index and the OECD Better Life Index.[16]

Overarching Policy Approaches

> Transition requires both the uptake of these practices and collective ownership models, as well as the institutional infrastructure to support them. Before the dive into the specific domains, we will discuss three key overarching policy approaches. This includes structural public-civic partnerships that work to democratise the economy, targeted policies to build community wealth and collective control, as well as new democratic institutions fostering participatory and deliberative democracy.

Public Civic Partnerships: Institutional partnership in decommodification

Public-Civic Partnerships (PCPs) are collaborative arrangements in which local governments partner directly with citizen collectives, non-profits, cooperatives or community groups to

manage public assets or services. These models emphasise shared ownership, community welfare, and localised decision-making over private profit maximisation. PCPs thus offer an alternative to the state-market binary underlying public-private partnerships (PPPs), which rely on private actors' investment interests and put public interest in the back seat. PCPs instead couple citizens' democratic agency with the institutional stability of public administration, transferring ownership and control of urban resources into citizens' hands.

PCPs can be viewed as commons-led institutional models, offering ground for 'commoning' the city. ***The commons*** are shared resources and frameworks for social relationships managed by a community. Often these are provisioning systems where communities democratically steward a certain resource such as a square, a garden, an energy coop or a community centre. Resources such as water, technology, knowledge and housing can be managed as a commons.[17] In recent years, cities such as Barcelona, Bologna, Naples, Gent and Amsterdam, among others, have been developing commons-oriented strategies and municipal networks that enable and promote PCPs.[18] The focus differs across cities and ranges from urban spaces (Bologna), buildings (Naples), and vacant lots (Barcelona) to Food strategy (Gent), neighbourhood centres and public green maintenance (Amsterdam).[19]

Public Common Partnerships are a specific form of PCPs. Commons communities - groups that collectively govern shared assets - can partner with public authorities to co-produce and co-manage those resources democratically, establishing *a joint enterprise*. Such a PCP can, for example, run a supermarket or a housing coop. A key role will be that, in contrast to private owners that privatise profit, PCPs can use the profit to reinvest in the sector. It can, for example, be used to develop another PCP supermarket in the neighbourhood or another housing unit with affordable rent. Here municipalities have an interest in supporting an external body that is commons-based instead of private-based exactly because surplus value is used to fulfil public interest objectives.[20]

(Re)municipalisation is an adjacent approach, most visible in Southern Europe and Germany, that brings services into public, local-authority ownership and control. In energy, this means transferring generation, distribution, or supply out of private hands into municipal ownership, enabling decisions on investment and supply to serve the public interest. This can take different forms: public *authority-led* (the city takes over directly), *community-led* (citizen groups or cooperatives drive the takeover), and *public-civic partnerships* (shared governance between the municipality and residents or energy cooperatives). In each case, the goal is the same: moving a basic-needs resource out of extractive private markets and into ownership accountable to the people who depend on it.[21]

Community Wealth Building: Flourishing local economy and communities

Community Wealth Building (CWB) is an economic development model that transforms local economies based on communities having direct ownership and control of their assets. It addresses wealth inequality and capital drain at its core in order to produce broadly shared economic prosperity and ecological sustainability. It foresees public bodies playing a pivotal role in fostering a different ecosystem and offers an integrated approach public authorities can employ to achieve the needed reforms.[22]

Community Wealth Building builds on a long and rich history, including the cooperative movements, the social democratic tradition, and community-based economic justice activities. The current movements for a more democratic economy have further shaped the community wealth building approach, which combines *top-down and bottom-up approaches*. Various cities in the United States and the United Kingdom are known for successfully reorganising their economies through CWB strategies. Other governments have started exploring this approach, including the City of Amsterdam and the Scottish national government.

Community Wealth Building focuses on broad-based and democratic ownership in a variety of forms, from local and cooperative to community and public ownership, so that more people can share in wealth that is generated and have control over their economic conditions. The approach consists of five pillars:

i) Progressive Procurement: using the purchasing power of both public and private institutions to support local businesses. ii) Non-extractive or pluralist ownership: moving away from an economy in which economic assets are mostly in the hands of large private companies and bringing them into the hands of communities and public authorities. CWB therefore promotes locally owned and democratic or socially minded enterprises. iii) Socially Just Land and Property Use: utilising community assets to benefit locals. iv)Local Financial Power: developing local financial systems, harnessing the wealth that exists locally. v) Fair Work: ensuring living wages and high-quality jobs.[23]

Participatory and Deliberative democracy: active participation instead of disempowerment

An important part of democratizing decision-making is to slow down the processes and empower citizens through participatory governance models. This is enabled when public bodies integrate representative citizen panels, such as assemblies or juries, into formal decision-making to address complex issues through informed debate and deliberation.

Deliberation means weighing evidence and considering a wide range of perspectives in pursuit of finding common ground. It can help unlock action where decision-makers are stuck or may be facing resistance from a small portion of a community. Deliberative bodies like neighbourhood councils, food councils, or citizens' assemblies create the democratic spaces for broadly representative groups of people to learn together, grapple with complexity, listen to one another, and find common ground on solutions.

A Citizens' Assembly is a group of people selected by sortition (a lottery designed to ensure demographic representativeness) who spend structured time learning about an issue, hearing from experts, and deliberating together to reach consensus-based recommendations for policymakers. Sortition ensures the group reflects the community's actual diversity. To be effective, the process usually requires a public authority's formal commitment to respond to and act on the recommendations. Citizens' Assemblies have been used worldwide on issues from climate policy to city planning and budgets.[24]

Digital democracy tools can enable these processes online and can be used by governments and civil society to enable participatory decision-making. Applications such as Decidim

and CONSUL are widely used for participatory budgeting and policy proposals. Platforms like Loomio and Pol.is allow large groups of people to participate in structured, open-ended surveys and collaborative decision-making.

These processes and tools, increasingly adopted by local governments to boost trust and reduce polarisation, can provide policymakers with actionable, legitimate recommendations.[25]

GRENOBLE: PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

Grenoble is a recognised hub for participatory and deliberative democracy in Europe, embedding citizen-led conventions, neighbourhood councils, and robust civic input directly into municipal policy. These mechanisms complement representative government by giving randomly selected and engaged residents a direct voice in decision-making. Key mechanisms include:

Citizens' Climate Conventions. Randomly selected citizens deliberate over several months to draft actionable proposals for regional carbon neutrality.

Citizen Interpellation Mechanism. Allows residents and property taxpayers (16+) to submit legal proposals of collective interest directly to the municipality, bypassing traditional petitioning.

Conseils Citoyens Indépendants (CCI). Independent counsels combining volunteers and randomly selected (sortition) members. They can raise oral questions in the municipal council, manage their own association, and launch project workshops.

Citizen Food Assemblies. A participatory body focused on food policy.

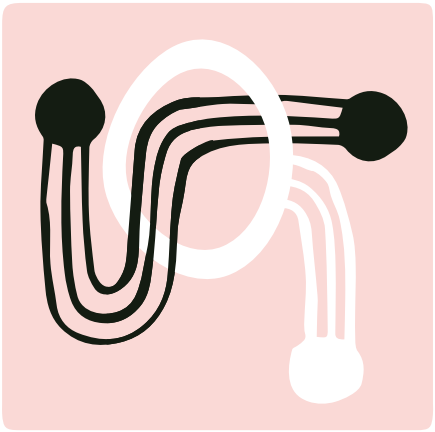
Participatory Budget. Running since 2015; a biennial €1.8 million envelope for citizen/collective-proposed projects.

Municipal budget co-decision (emerging). An announced expansion letting residents help shape the full municipal budget, beyond the existing participatory-budget envelope.

Domains

This section discusses five domains of social basic need: energy, housing, food, mobility and digital technology. For each domain, we first map out the current landscape and its key challenges, then outline a post-growth approach, before turning to concrete practices and policy recommendations that could help cities meet people's needs more fairly and sustainably.

Energy



The high demand for energy, particularly in the industrialised countries of the Global North, not only serves the interests of fossil fuel businesses but is also the root cause of devastating climate change. Energy accounts for more than three-quarters of total greenhouse gas emissions globally, with fossil fuels still the primary source of electricity and heat generation.[26]

Over the past decades, many governments around the world have --to some extent-- supported a transition from fossil-fuel-based energy systems to renewable ones. However, the growth of renewables has not replaced fossil fuels; rather, it has added to the overall energy demand that accompanies electrification.[27] In other words, sustaining continuous growth in capitalist economies requires a vast increase in resource extraction, whether for renewables or otherwise.

The transition to renewables depends on critical minerals and metals whose extraction, much like fossil fuels, drives environmental harm, human rights violations, and land grabs.[28] Meanwhile, the urgency of reducing energy consumption is systematically overlooked, as private actors across the energy chain, from extraction to supply, profit from higher consumption. The dominant profit motive underlying today´s energy system undermines both the shift to renewables and the pursuit of energy sufficiency.

While the production as well as the consumption of energy is still expanding, 666 million people do not have access to electricity.[29] In Europe, over 41 million people are affected by energy poverty and are unable to keep their homes adequately warm or pay their bills.[30] Urban areas are primary sites where energy poverty unfolds and intersects with poorly insulated housing, food and transport precarity as well as limited access to social amenities and digital infrastructure.[31] Gendered, racialised and impoverished groups of people are disproportionately affected by energy poverty and its negative impacts on health and mental well-being.[32]

Post-growth thinking and strategies offer solutions that go beyond expanding renewables or relying on the market to deliver the energy transition. Sufficiency and energy democracy offer

a concrete vision for how local governments, together with citizens, can increase well-being, participation, and autonomy in and through the design of energy systems. Energy sufficiency aims to ensure decent living standards for all without exceeding planetary boundaries.[33] Energy democracy, on the other hand, calls for collective ownership structures and citizens´ participation in the design and decision-making processes of energy systems.

Putting energy systems into accountable public and community ownership challenges the extraction of value by large energy corporations and private actors and instead turns energy into a common good. Legally redefining energy as a shared resource and human right provides the leverage to effectively eliminate energy poverty.

> In 2022, Honduras passed legislation to make energy a public good, shifting electricity from a purely commercial product to a fundamental social service. The law set out to guarantee free electricity for the lowest-income households, which would benefit the 900,000 poorest families in the country. The legislation contained a clause that enabled the government to take over energy assets if renegotiation of private energy company contracts did not align with the new law. These private companies could then be brought into public ownership or pressured to comply with social-environmental standards.[34]

Local governments can take the lead in reclaiming privatised energy infrastructure and support citizens´ engagement to democratise the energy system. Moving towards an energy system beyond growth, municipal efforts must be accompanied by a country-wide reclaiming of energy from the market.[35] Today, nine out of ten countries leading the energy transition have publicly owned energy systems.[36]

Best practices

Carbon Co-op: Public–civic partnerships combat energy poverty

In the metropolitan area of Manchester, around 15.5 % of all households live in fuel poverty.[37] This is among the highest percentages across the UK and combines with an ageing and poorly insulated housing stock. To reach its net zero carbon target by 2038, the City of Manchester has identified energy-efficient housing as a key policy priority.[38] However, publicly funded retrofit schemes reducing the negative ecological impact of poorly insulated housing often remain inaccessible for lower-income households.[39] This is where the cooperative Carbon Co-op comes in, increasing accessibility and implementation of available schemes among lower-income householders living in social housing.[40] Carbon Co-op partners with local authorities, housing providers and communities and has installed, for example, the project "Retrofit for All". Through the project, Carbon Co-op enabled a more people-centred approach to retrofit by building networks with public and civic actors, facilitating knowledge exchange, providing tenant-facing resources and empowering lower-income residents to access and implement retrofit schemes.

Community-led municipalisation in Schönau (Germany)

Following the Chornobyl disaster, the residents of the small municipality Schönau organised to take democratic control of their local electricity grid and generate energy from water, wind and the sun. In the year 1997, the "Stromrebellen" (electricity rebels) transformed Schönau into the first German municipality to phase out coal and nuclear energy.[41] By offering tariffs that encourage energy savings and expanding the heat network, the energy cooperative Schönau continues to work towards a socially and ecologically just energy transition. Whereas Schönau is an example of a community-led municipalisation, in other cities local authorities took the lead to municipalise the energy system.[42]

Over the past decades, a plethora of energy communities emerged in Europe and beyond, contributing to democratic participation in energy generation and distribution. 2,500 European energy communities and their 2 million citizens active in the energy transition are, for example, part of the growing network of REScoop.[43] Despite these successes, energy communities together with public authorities need to continuously put people affected by energy poverty at the core of a restructured/diversified energy system.[44]

Key takeaways

1. *Energy should be approached as a public good and put into democratic public and community ownership.*

2. *Energy sufficiency ensures that transitioning towards renewables results in a decrease in overall energy demand and a fair distribution of available resources beyond growth and within planetary boundaries.*

Policy recommendations

Make energy a public good and work towards accountable public and community ownership of energy systems across scale

- (Re-)municipalisation strategies provide key pathways to democratise energy systems and implement people and environment-centred designs.
- Municipalities, citizen initiatives and civil society organisations should assess which municipalisation pathway fits the local context best (Satoko et al., 2020; see endnote 21):
    I. Public authority-led municipalisation
    II. Community-led municipalisation
    III. Public-community partnerships
- Municipal actors and public-civic partnerships must frame their efforts at the local level within strong advocacy for a country-wide reclaiming of energy from the market.

Introduce income-based energy pricing and combine with subsidies and cap policies

- Today's energy pricing policies are predominantly based on a regressive model, in which lower-income households spend a larger share of their disposable income on energy than higher-income households. Public energy utilities can mobilise their legal authority to introduce income-based energy pricing schemes that charge consumers in proportion to their disposable income and ensure affordable access to energy for households affected by energy poverty.

- If pricing authority to change the local energy tariff scheme is not given, municipalities can subsidise households affected by energy poverty by providing energy vouchers, accessible retrofit schemes, efficient appliances, legal and advisory services, etc.

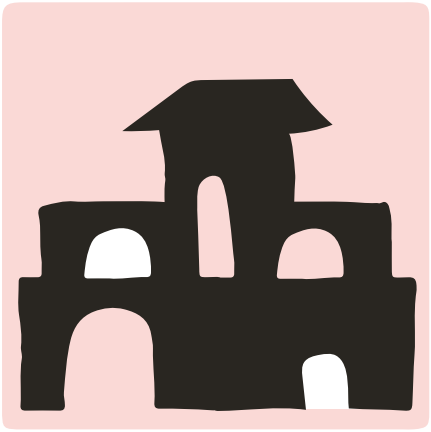
- Caps on utility profits and high use of energy by wealthy consumers and industry to work towards energy sufficiency. Public authorities can implement rising block tariffs, which increase the unit price of energy as consumption rises but must critically assess any negative consequences for vulnerable consumers.

Support the creation of energy communities as part of a municipal strategy around public-civic partnerships

- Local governments can take up an active role in supporting the creation of energy commons by providing clear and accessible legislation as well as toolkits and subsidies for citizens and workers to set up their own energy cooperative.

- Investing in public-civic partnerships and networks is key to facilitating knowledge exchange and fostering the engagement of citizens in a democratic energy transition. This can restore trust in local governments and increase legitimacy for the expansion of renewables and overall energy sufficiency.

Housing



Over the past decades, housing has been turned into a hyper commodity, treating it as a speculative objective rather than a human right. This is reflected in the sharp increase in house and rental prices growing much faster than disposable income, with billions in profits going to large housing corporations.[45] On average, house prices in the EU have risen by up to 60 % since 2015, while rent prices and energy costs have also continuously increased.

Around one in ten Europeans is unable to pay rent or mortgage on time.[46] By contrast, the availability of social housing has significantly decreased, largely due to privatisation and the immense sell-off of publicly owned housing in the past three decades.[47] All this has widened the gap between those who can afford decent housing and those who cannot, deepening housing precarity and heightening the risk of displacement for many city dwellers.

> After the global financial crisis in 2008, Dublin´s rental prices sharply increased, resulting in growing homelessness. In the city centre of Lisbon, citizens need to pay 116 % of the average Portuguese net salary for a one-bedroom apartment, making housing unaffordable for the large majority.[48] Evictions, (green) gentrification and homes turned into hotels and touristic short-stay rentals push local citizens out of the competitive market and into poor housing conditions at the peripheries of the cities.

Precarious housing conditions and a shortage of affordable housing are no new phenomena, specifically not for low-income populations and marginalised groups in increasingly dense urban centres. Yet, dominant policy approaches to address the complex housing crisis are continuously reduced to a "build, build, build" paradigm, pushing a definite pro-growth agenda. However, research shows that expanding the housing stock does not automatically translate into cheaper housing for all; it rather causes a dramatic increase in the housing sector´s negative ecological impact.[49]

Today, housing accounts for around 52 % of the EU´s material footprint.[50] A growing building stock causes urban sprawl and the sealing of soils, reducing the quality of life for both humans and non-humans. Even well-intentioned reductions of CO2 emissions through retrofit tend to sharpen social inequalities. If policies accounting for social justice are lacking, costs are often passed on to tenants, leading to the displacement of lower-income households. [51]

A *post-growth perspective* challenges the growth-driven logic that shapes today's housing sector and its policies. Access to decent housing becomes a fundamental prerequisite when building societies that prioritise collective well-being within planetary boundaries. Instead of enabling the limitless extraction of value from rising property prices, post-growth approaches reimagine housing as a shared resource, a public good, and the foundation for belonging in a place.

Putting post-growth strategies into practice helps to question the mere expansion of the housing stock and instead guides a critical reassessment of existing housing by asking who owns it, how it is used, and whether it is allocated according to social need rather than private profit. This can re-centre public spaces and spaces for care in urban planning, both essential ingredients for thriving societies. Redistributing space and decommodifying housing offers pathways to combat the root causes of evictions and homelessness.[52] This, in turn, increases social cohesion in urban environments and can help to decrease inequalities. The growing number of housing cooperatives, collective ownership models for housing, shared housing, and living communities are, moreover, prime examples of how citizens actively practice democratic principles and decision-making in everyday life.[53]

Best practices

The Austrian model: housing for people and not-for-profit

Today, the long-standing Austrian Federation of Limited-Profit Housing Associations (LPHA) provides housing for around 24 % of the Austrian population.[54] Member associations have diverse ownership structures, including cooperatives, municipal and private enterprises. Yet, they all operate under the framework of the Limited-Profit Housing Act and adhere to strict regulations ensuring affordability, quality, and reinvestment of surpluses in refurbishment and building new non-profit and limited-profit housing through revolving funds.[55]

Public funding has significantly aided the success of the Austrian model. It reveals how long-term public-civic partnerships can contribute to the stabilisation of the housing market and the reduction of the sector´s ecological impact. Combating both the housing crisis and energy poverty, complementary programs such as Wohnschirm (Housing Umbrella) support tenants facing rental or energy debt, and Housing First helps people experiencing homelessness secure permanent housing.[56]

Affordability through organising: tenants' initiatives

Ireland: The Community Action Tenants Union (CATU) organises tenants to move towards "homes for all".[57] CATU addresses precarious housing conditions through direct action, such as mould removal, refurbishment, supporting resistance against rent increases, and providing legal advice. The union also offers a platform for community building in many Irish cities and empowers tenants to stand up against the profit interests of housing corporations and landlords. CATU strengthens the rights of tenants and amplifies their voices in a housing system marked by significant power imbalances between landlords and renters.

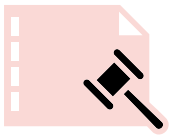
Berlin: The campaign "Deutsche Wohnen & Co enteignen" (Deutsche Wohnen & Co Expropriate) demonstrated the transformative potential of tenant organising.[58] In a 2021 referendum, 59 % of Berlin voters supported the expropriation of the city's largest housing corporations, which would transfer around 250,000 housing units into collective ownership. By organising tenants under the slogan "So that Berlin stays our home", the campaign

advocated for a democratically organised housing sector, legal protection against re-privatisation and binding commitment towards social and ecological justice. Although the referendum has not been implemented by the Berlin Senate, the campaign highlighted the potential of democratic housing governance and the need for accountable public authorities to prioritise affordable housing over corporate profits.

Key takeaways

1. *Access to housing must be treated as a human right for all and available housing stock redistributed according to social needs and not profit-driven interests.*

2. *Public, cooperative, and community-led housing models can deliver affordable and democratically organised housing, while reducing space and the ecological impacts of the sector.*



Policy recommendations

Decommodify housing

- De-privatising (social) housing and furthering municipal or cooperative ownership structures is a key strategy to address the housing affordability crisis in cities. Local governments should assess options for transferring privatised housing into democratically managed common good and strongly commit to eliminating homelessness.

- By developing new zoning categories, such as "subsidised housing" or "housing cooperatives" a city's planning department can ensure that land ownership is effectively changed and reserved for the common good. Plots, which are classified as belonging to the new category, can be acquired outside of financialised market structures. This contributes to rent control and supports the creation of housing cooperatives.

Expand refurbishment schemes coupled with rent control and the reduction of vacancy

- Instead of building new housing, local governments can expand refurbishment schemes to address green infrastructure deficits in the existing housing stock. Revolving funds are a well-rehearsed financial tool within the non-profit and limited-profit housing sector to secure funds for the refurbishment of social housing and can be adopted by local governments for public housing.

- Clear regulations for the private rental sector must demand socially just refurbishment commitments. Municipalities can introduce rent caps so

that costs are not passed on to lower-income tenants. Loopholes in existing rent control regulations must be scrutinised and addressed by the public authorities.

- Municipalities can reduce vacancy, for example through stricter regulation of second-home ownership, short-stay rentals and associated profit-driven platforms.

Strengthen tenants' rights and support community organising

- Local governments are dependent on the collaboration with tenants' unions and housing associations to develop a legitimate housing policy framework and integrate it with other policy domains, such as energy and mobility.

- Municipalities can implement strict checks and regulations to evaluate and address existing loopholes for landlords and support tenants with legal advice.

- Public authorities can provide the infrastructure and tenant-facing regulations to support community organising.

Food

Food is at the core of how we thrive and sustain ourselves. It is a basic need and a key element in the production and reproduction of our urban life. Food connects cities and rural areas, tying urban residents to rural communities through the flow of goods and resources between them. However, the way food is currently produced, processed, distributed, consumed and disposed of is a main driver of social injustices and ecological crisis. Over the past decades, global food systems have become increasingly industrialised and structured according to the logics of economic growth and accumulation.[59,60]

Food systems, once oriented toward nourishing urban and rural communities alike, have become increasingly exposed to financial speculation, while access to agricultural land has grown prohibitive for many small-scale farmers. The concentration of market power, land ownership, and biotechnology in the hands of a small number of agri-food corporations has entrenched their dominance over both global food markets and local food systems[61]. The costs of this concentration fall disproportionately on local communities and livelihoods, particularly in the Global South, where dependency on corporate-controlled seeds, agrochemicals, fossil fuels, and access to global markets continues to deepen[62].

In the EU, the agricultural sector is responsible for about 11% of total greenhouse gas emissions, as well as biodiversity loss, freshwater disruption, land use change, such as deforestation and imbalances of nutrient cycles[63,64]. At the same time, food production itself is negatively affected by droughts, floods, decreasing diversity, worsening soil health and changing climatic conditions. Hence, the dominant industrialised agricultural model jeopardises the very foundations of our food systems. The profits of large agri-food corporations come at the expense of workers, smallholders, and rural communities through extractive practices such as expropriation, dispossession, and the concentration of value along the supply chain. These practices reproduce social injustices, degrade ecosystems, and undermine democratic rights and participation in the food system.

A *post-growth approach* challenges growth-centric narratives pushed by the agro-food lobby and contests their continuous accumulation of capital. Instead, it asks how food systems can be reorganised around care, justice, ecological regeneration, and democratic control. This perspective highlights the need for local communities and citizens to reclaim control over how we grow, distribute, consume, and compost food. Across the world, agroecological practices serve as a guiding framework for action, applying ecological concepts and social justice principles to the study, design, and management of food systems. Agroecology integrates diverse knowledge systems and can be used as a transformative strategy to tap into the context-specific knowledge of peasants and small-scale producers.

City dwellers already experiment with a wide array of practices that contribute to post-growth food systems. These include community gardens and kitchens, food-waste reduction, urban

composting, local food hubs, cooperative supermarkets and solidarity food banks. Central to many of these practices is the transformation of the food system from below. However, support from local governments and public-civic partnerships is often decisive for an integrated approach to food-system transformations. An increasing number of Food Policy Councils (FPC) in cities around the globe offer the potential to bridge the gap between citizens and governments[65].

The Milanese FPC demonstrates how citizens and local authorities collaborate to discuss how the food system is working and ways to improve it. Since 2015, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) has embedded efforts to democratise urban food systems, challenging the reduction of food to a market commodity. Instead, food is framed as a strategic urban infrastructure, essential to social cohesion, public health, environmental sustainability and resilience (MUFPP). 330 cities have signed the MUFPP so far and committed to "developing sustainable food systems that are inclusive, resilient, safe, and diverse[66]".

Best practices

Transforming the urban food system in the City of Leuven

"Voeding Verbindt" (Food Connects) is the slogan under which the Belgian city of Leuven developed a strategy to achieve healthy, local and sustainable food by 2030[67]. Inspired by integrated food policy plans in various cities across the world, different actors in and around Leuven came together to co-design the city´s food strategy. Voeding Verbindt not only aims to address a singular aspect of the agri-food chain but fundamentally integrates various tools and strategies to move towards a more sustainable food system. What is special about Voeding Verbindt, is that it is designed and implemented through the participation and collective efforts of a diverse set of actors from all dimensions of the agri-food chain, including citizens, local businesses and networks, scientists, and the city of Leuven. The City of Leuven uses its own land as a lever to achieve the objectives set out in the food policy strategy. Through several projects, public land is allocated to small-scale producers who commit to ecological principles and local food production. By offering concession contracts alongside lease-free rentals of agricultural plots, the City of Leuven ensures that farmland does not become a speculative object but stays within public ownership. This gives "space" to sustainable food production and goes hand in hand with increased transparency, educational activities and shorter supply chains. In Leuven, consumers and producers reconnect and are brought closer together. A core objective of Voeding Verbindt is to increase the accessibility of healthy, local and seasonal food for all (FEAST)[68]. Leuven´s integrated food policy strategy shows that food policy can be used as a cross-cutting urban strategy rather than as a sectoral add-on.

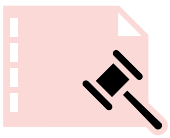
The case of Pluk! Caring for local food practices in Amsterdam

When the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Pluk! Groenten van West ("Harvest! Veggies from the West") was initiated in 2017, around 200 families from Amsterdam began harvesting their own locally grown organic veggies, herbs and edible flowers[69]. A CSA is a community-based organisation of growers and consumers based on mutual commitment concerning long-term planning and budgeting, fair prices for the farmers, and the supply of local and most often organic foods for its members. At Pluk!, the CSA members know the farmers, who grow the food, engage in community building and educational activities, and through their practices increase genetic diversity and decrease CO2 emissions. A sliding price scale facilitates access for socio-economically marginalised groups in the two different gardens in the west of Amsterdam. This makes CSA a useful example of how solidarity, access and local provisioning can be combined in practice. A growing network of CSA farms across Europe strengthens the voices of both consumers and producers calling for a more diverse and sustainable food system in local and national policymaking[70].

Key takeaways

1. *Industrialised, growth-oriented food systems concentrate power in the hands of a few agri-food corporations, driving social inequalities, environmental degradation, and dependence throughout the food chain.*

2. *Yet, local governments and communities resist and transform profit-driven food systems through public-civic partnerships, local food initiatives and integrated strategies, drawing from agroecology, food sovereignty and democratic control over food production, distribution and consumption.*



Policy recommendations

Reconnect territorial planning with agroecological agricultural policies

- Municipalities should allocate publicly owned land (lease-free or via concession contracts) to local farmers under conditions that require agroecological practices, such as soil health, biodiversity, social and gender equity and the co-creation of knowledge[71].

- Employing land-use policies to counter the influence of large agri-food corporations ensures that arable land close to the city is used to provide city dwellers with fresh, local and seasonal produce. Through that, local governments can shorten food supply chains and reconnect urban and rural areas and populations

Foster sustainable public procurement

- Municipalities can adopt public purchasing guidelines that increase local, socially inclusive and seasonal food production and consumption and facilitate healthy and climate-friendly diets in school cafeterias, hospitals, government offices and municipal facilities[72].

- Sustainable public procurement should be developed with local stakeholders and linked to broader food policy strategies[73].

Reduce food waste along the whole food-supply chain

- Reducing food waste across the whole food supply chain is one of the most effective ways in which cities can improve the sustainability of their food systems. Local governments can enact clear and accessible regulations on household waste, retail losses, catering surplus and redistribution systems, combining prevention, recovery and composting to close nutrient loops and reduce emissions.

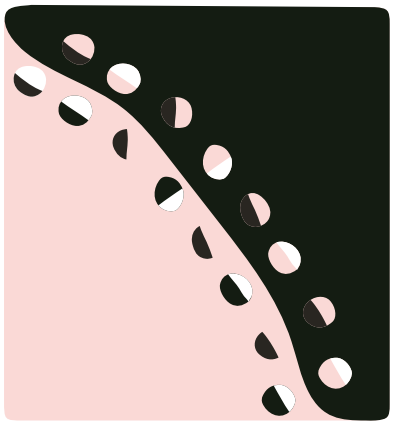
- Municipal action is especially effective when waste reduction is connected to education, redistribution and circular economy practices.

Support the capacity building for collaboration and networks around food

- Local governments can facilitate the democratisation of food systems by supporting local networks around food transformations and building public-civic partnerships. This includes creating food policy councils, supporting food cooperatives, community garden networks, community kitchens, the promotion of citizen participation and the implementation of integrated food policy strategies.

- Public-civic partnerships help to connect bottom-up initiatives with formal policy processes and make it easier to scale up successful pilots without losing local autonomy. Well-structured participation, clear roles, dedicated coordination and reliable funding are essential for developing and implementing transformations in the food system. In practice, networks allow cities to turn isolated initiatives into shared infrastructure for a fairer food system.

Mobility



Urban mobility is not only about how people move through cities, but also about how urban space is organised, whose mobility is prioritised, and which modes of transport are privileged. Across much of the Global North, mobility systems have been shaped around highly individualised, resource- and space-intensive forms of transport, largely based on fossil fuels. Decades of (public) investment in car-centric infrastructure have reinforced growth-oriented urban planning and cultures, despite evidence that expanding transport capacity often generates more social and environmental costs than benefits.

Current urban mobility systems contribute to pollution, climate change, traffic deaths, stress, and declining public health, while reinforcing structural inequalities[74]. Specifically, lower-income groups are disadvantaged through the dominant governance of urban mobility systems. Socio-economic inequalities intersect with other dimensions, such as gender, race, age and ability and affect people in terms of access, safety concerns and financial burdens. Transport systems are designed around the needs of able-bodied male commuters and private car users. Circular and public mobility patterns, which are disproportionately used by (female) caregivers, are disadvantaged within contemporary mobility systems[75].

An increasing number of cities are responding by redesigning mobility systems around the diverse needs of people and the well-being of communities and the planet, rather than prioritising cars, motorised expansion, and corporate interests.

A *post-growth approach* to urban mobility informs the transition towards just transport systems, localising the economy and furthering the well-being of both humans and non-humans. Concretely, this means addressing structural social-ecological inequalities and mapping out who benefits and who is disadvantaged in the mobility systems of our cities. It calls for expanding infrastructure for walking, cycling and affordable public transport and for radically reducing harmful modes of transportation like private jets and oversized sport utility vehicles (SUVs) serving urban elites and the accumulation of wealth. A shift to shared and community-based transport practices and systems is key for urban governance beyond growth and can equally be a tool for citizens to reclaim the city.

Barcelona's "Superilles" (Superblocks) provide insights into how expanding pedestrian-only zones not only reduces emissions, noise pollution and the heat island effect but also provides space for neighbours to meet and engage in active mobility, enlarges greenery and increases social cohesion and well-being in the city[76]. The superblocks limit the number of streets for car traffic by redistributing public areas between vehicles and pedestrians.

A *post-growth* perspective cautions governments to ensure that post-growth policies and planning centre social justice considerations and do not (involuntarily) stipulate processes of green gentrification and the exclusion of marginalised groups of people and essential workers[77]. Including the needs of marginalised communities and redistributing the costs and benefits associated with current and post-growth mobility systems is key for moving towards just cities beyond growth.

Best practices

Transitioning towards the 10-minute city in Utrecht

In the Dutch city of Utrecht, access to food, care, work, social and cultural activities is granted to its citizens through a close-knit transport system. Walking, cycling and travelling by public transport are prioritised. The city´s vision for 2040 aims to drastically reduce travel times and distances, transitioning to a "10-minute city"[78]. In practice, Utrecht embeds this ambition in a holistic spatial strategy. Through this, the city's spatial distribution is scrutinised and henceforth reorganised to benefit the health and well-being of people living and working in Utrecht. The local government demonstrates that reducing car-dependency through extensive cycling infrastructure and an accessible and well-connected transport network drastically frees up space and possibilities. Space can become public and usable for greenery, meeting people, cultural activities, exercise and play. Building an inclusive city for all and prioritising liveability, public health, and climate resilience, Utrecht´s mobility governance is an integral pillar for its wider urban transformation. Importantly, the design and implementation of associated policies are characterised by long-term planning and the participation of citizens, entrepreneurs, organisations and other public authorities. Framing mobility as a common good, Utrecht demonstrates how cities can move towards just mobility futures beyond growth by making different policy decisions.

Experiments with free fare public transport in Tallinn

The public transport system of Tallinn is widely recognised as a prominent example of post-growth urban governance through the implementation of free-fare public transport for registered residents[79]. Introduced in 2013, the policy was designed not only to improve mobility but also to advance social inclusion, accessibility, and environmental sustainability. By reducing financial barriers to movement, Tallinn reframed urban transport as a public service that supports collective well-being rather than a market-based commodity. The policy has been accompanied by investments in public transport infrastructure and integrated urban planning, illustrating how mobility governance can prioritise equitable access, reduced car dependency, and quality of life in the design and implementation of mobility systems[80].

Key takeaways

1. *Today's urban mobility systems tend to reinforce negative ecological impacts, high material throughput and social inequalities by privileging private vehicles and overlooking the mobility needs of marginalised groups of people.*

2. *Through integrated planning, public spending and citizen participation, municipalities start to transform growth-oriented mobility systems and improve accessibility of essential services, reduce car dependency, reclaim public space, and redistribute costs and benefits of urban transportation fairly.*

Policy recommendations

Regulate and phase out high-emission modes of transport while ensuring a socially just transition

- Key instruments local governments can employ to regulate and phase out high-emission and private modes of transport include limitation of access to space for harmful vehicles. Making car use unattractive can be achieved through low-emission and car-free zones, parking space management, congestion charges and speed limits. Reduced government subsidies for parking lots and increased fees can be reallocated to fund higher-quality or free public transport systems.
- Simultaneously, governments can halt investments for ecologically harmful infrastructure projects, such as city airports and the widening of road systems. Green infrastructure should be prioritised instead.
- Social justice considerations must be at the core when designing and enforcing such regulations as well as green interventions. Authorities are advised to conduct displacement risk assessments to prevent the reinforcement of socio-economic inequalities and the spillover effects of low-emission zones or (green) gentrification.

Expand inclusive infrastructure for walking, cycling and public transport

- Regulating space critically includes the expansion of enabling and inclusive infrastructure in urban planning. Local governments can take measures to limit travel distances and times, benefiting the local economy, public health and availability of space, by strengthening a close-knit transport system based on active mobility and affordable or free public transport.

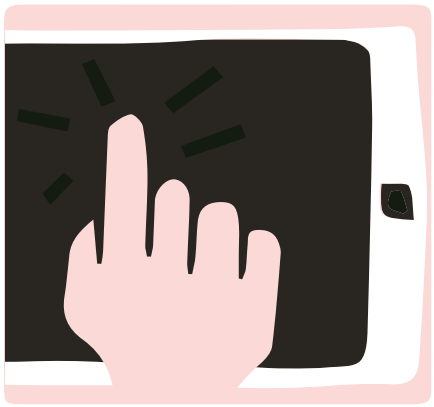
- Municipal decision-making processes ought to include diverse actors, with the needs of otherwise marginalised groups of people informing policies and mobility governance. The design of bicycle and walking paths, public transport networks, and the spatial reconfiguration of urban areas can move mobility systems beyond growth-oriented transport paradigms and towards social and ecological transformations. Prior assessments of behavioural change and (adverse) social and ecological consequences should be included in any planning and decision-making concerning mobility systems in and beyond the city.

Support mobility sharing initiatives

- Supporting mobility sharing initiatives, such as car and bike sharing, offers a key strategy for municipalities to transform urban mobility into a commonly managed good.

- Policy instruments for local governments include the provision of parking spaces for shared (electric) vehicles, subsidising free membership for lower-income citizens and the provision of free-fare bike sharing in urban and peri-urban areas.

Digital technologies



Transforming the economy means reckoning with the digital realm, which now provides the infrastructure and intermediaries for economic life. This brings opportunities in communication, information sharing and productivity alongside serious challenges: surveillance, commodification of daily life, and growing economic and societal power imbalances. The ecological footprint is substantial: data isn't really in a "cloud" but on servers consuming vast amounts of energy, water, and critical minerals, and the AI and cloud-computing surge has sharply increased demand for rare earths, lithium, cobalt, and other minerals concentrated in geopolitically sensitive regions, with related environmental and social costs[81].

Since the digital realm is now core economic infrastructure, who controls and owns it matters, just as it does for bridges, roads, pipelines, education, or housing; all public goods that ought to be governed in the public interest in line with democratic principles. Digital infrastructure largely is not. A handful of large tech companies now control the technology underpinning critical sectors, communications, healthcare, education, media, even government, putting digital autonomy, and therefore self-determination, under critical pressure. This brings risks to economic and democratic resilience, made increasingly visible by rising cyber threats and geopolitical tensions.

Cities have undergone the same transformation. From shopping to dating, mobility to healthcare, digitalisation touches every domain of urban life, nearly always driven by large tech companies, with citizens positioned as consumers rather than participants. The platform economy spans delivery (Uber Eats, Thuisbezorgd), e-commerce (Amazon), ride-hailing (Uber, Bolt), education (Google, Microsoft), and AI (OpenAI, Anthropic), among others[82].

These platforms' business models rely on extracting a large share of value for the platform itself, leaving a smaller share for users, workers, neighbourhoods, and cities. The platform-organised model reclassifies people doing full-time work as "gig workers," stripping them of the protections that status would otherwise guarantee, while opaque algorithmic management, setting pay, assigning tasks, and issuing penalties largely out of view, further undermines labour rights and leaves government and unions poorly equipped to protect them[83]. The digital transition thus reshapes not only labour rights and self-determination, but neighbourhoods, communities, and local economies at large.

A postgrowth approach points to the uptake of democratic digital environments built on transparency, choice, and agency for citizens and communities, all key to reversing the dynamics described above. The choice of technology matters: it provides the infrastructure our economies run on. It is precisely because a handful of large platforms currently control that infrastructure that value is extracted rather than shared, and citizens end up as consumers rather than participants. The digital tools and infrastructure we use shape our practices, and

their design, ownership, and governance either support or undermine democratic, sufficiency-oriented economic activity. Technology can be organised to support such practices instead, but this requires deliberate design and governance of our digital tools and environments. There are tools and environments that enable self-determination through democratic practice and the value created stays within communities, rather than flowing to distant shareholders[84]. We can refer to this as ´democratic technology´.

This requires digital infrastructures that are open, interoperable, and decentralised and run through democratic practice and collective governance. In practice, this takes shape as digital commons, collectively managed knowledge and technology projects such as Wikipedia and Linux, or platform cooperatives, where ownership and decision-making sit with workers and members rather than shareholders, or decentralised open protocols, which let independent providers interoperate on shared, non-proprietary infrastructure rather than being locked into a single corporate platform. Preferably, communities co-govern the technologies they rely on, whether through commons-based production, cooperative ownership, or open standards. For municipalities, there is an important role to play here: namely to support and enhance the use and development of such democratic digital tools and infrastructure. This includes the adoption of adjusted procurement rules and dedicated digital commons support, rather than deepening dependence on a small number of dominant tech companies[85].

Digital Commons

Most of us use Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia that is maintained and renewed by a large community, which abides by a set of rules to have the best content. This is a prime example of a Digital Commons, which form essential building blocks for the digital infrastructure of the beyond growth economy.

Digital Commons illustrate how democratic technology works successfully in practice. As resilient community-led approaches to technology and data governance, digital commons encompass a variety of models and organisational forms in which knowledge and technology are collectively managed or developed. They are characterised by collaborative production and an active community, shared ownership and governance, and a democratic caring practice.

There are already many successful projects forming part of the digital commons:

- Widely used open-source projects such as the Linux operating system and the Apache web server.
- Wikipedia, Open Food Facts and Open Street Maps are examples of open digital knowledge commons.
- Widespread application of Creative Commons licences that ensure how shared digital infrastructure and knowledge serve the public interest.
- Examples such as Nextcloud, Framasoft, Mastodon, PeerTube, Drivers Cooperative, Data cooperatives such as Posmo, show that they can be deployed in diverse domains, from data and cloud to platforms and mobility.

Best practices

Cooperative mobility: a collective car sharing platform in Cataluña.

Platform cooperatives, such as Som Mobilitat, show how deliberate choices in tech design, ownership, and data stewardship can help build a cooperative, post-growth economy in cities. Som Mobilitat is a technology cooperative in Catalonia that combines democratic governance with practical mobility services, demonstrating that the community economy and digital innovation are not in tension. Most of its vehicles are collectively owned and co-financed by members or through crowdfunding, and key decisions are made democratically by the membership rather than driven by profit. The cooperative also shares its technological platform with other mobility cooperatives across Europe, such as Partago in Belgium, showing how cooperative ownership can extend to the digital infrastructure itself, not just the physical assets, and how data and technology stewardship can be organised collectively rather than concentrated in the hands of a single corporate platform.

Digital infrastructure as public good: Decentralised open protocols

Open protocols offer a way to build public, interoperable digital infrastructure beyond corporate platform control. The Beckn Protocol used in India is a leading example: an open-source standard that lets different mobility and service providers interoperate, much like email lets Gmail and Outlook communicate freely, unlike closed platforms such as Facebook. Namma Yatri, a ride-hailing app built on Beckn, shows what this looks like in practice: rather than charging the 15–25 % commission typical of Uber, it runs on a low flat subscription, letting drivers keep their full fare. Because the protocol itself is open, no single company controls the infrastructure and drivers, riders, and other providers can all plug into the same network. This illustrates how open protocols can remove extractive intermediaries and turn digital infrastructure into a shared, semi-public good, offering cities a concrete practice for organising mobility and other services beyond the logic of growth and platform extraction.

Key takeaways

1. *Technology is not a neutral intermediary.*

2. *Digital technology will have to be designed and governed in line with democratic principles and social objectives to avoid extractive practices and enable wellbeing.*

3. *Cities have a key role to play in making this happen.*

Policy recommendations[86]

Explore Adjustments to Procurement and Tendering Policy for Democratic Technology

- To drive and facilitate the use of democratic technology, the requirements of the current procurement policy and tendering rules will need to be adjusted. Tenders can be made smaller, for example, but this also concerns accountability and reporting criteria, such as the values on which performance is steered and measured.

Establish services and hubs for adoption and development of democratic technology

- Establish a digital commons service provider to support and enable the adoption of democratic tech for organisations and citizens. And to transition to safe digital spaces and friendly platforms, away from surveillance and extractive platforms.

- Public civic cooperation on a democratic tech hub: Enable a knowledge hub and incubator that facilitates accelerator programs, meeting places and exchange. With this, a municipality can contribute to a supportive ecosystem for initiatives such as Som Mobilitat.

Shared Basic Infrastructures

- Public digital infrastructure: Municipalities can roll out and support fundamental digital provisions such as networks, protocols, and platforms that can be used by multiple parties (just as roads or electricity grids in the physical world).

Conclusion

The crises discussed in this primer, energy poverty, unaffordable housing, industrialised food systems, car-dependent mobility, and centrally controlled digital infrastructure, are not five separate problems. They are five expressions of the same underlying logic: an economy organised around growth and capital accumulation rather than around care and sufficiency. Addressing them one at a time, through isolated technical fixes, will not be enough. What the practices and policies gathered here show is that a different logic is already being built, city by city, often starting small: a cooperative taking over an electricity grid, a tenants' union winning a referendum, a food policy council reconnecting a city to its farmland, a neighbourhood reclaiming its streets, a community choosing open protocols over centralised corporate platforms.

What these examples share is not a single blueprint but a common shift in who holds power and ownership over the systems that meet basic needs. Whether the resource in question is energy, housing, food, mobility, or data, the same three levers recur: **decommodification** (taking essential goods out of speculative markets and treating them as commons or public goods), **democratisation** (giving citizens real, structured influence over decisions that shape their neighbourhoods and daily lives, not just consultation after the fact), and **redistribution** (of costs, benefits, ownership and decision-making power, so that transition does not reproduce or deepen existing inequalities).

None of this happens by default. Every case in this primer, from Schönau's energy rebels to Berlin's housing socialisation referendum to Grenoble's citizen assemblies, required deliberate institutional choices: new ownership structures, new procurement rules, new democratic bodies, sustained political commitment, and often years of organising. Cities that want to move beyond growth will need to make similar choices deliberately and repeatedly, across every domain, rather than treating post-growth practices as isolated pilot projects.

This also means confronting real tensions. Refurbishment can displace the tenants it is meant to help if rent protections are not in place. Superblocks and low-emission zones can drive green gentrification if equity isn't designed in from the start. Deliberative processes can become symbolic rather than binding if they aren't backed with real decision-making power and follow-through. None of the policy recommendations in this primer is guaranteed to deliver justice automatically; they depend on being implemented with the communities most affected, and with explicit attention to who might be left out.

The path beyond growth is therefore an ongoing, deliberately democratic process of reorganising how cities provide for social and basic needs. The critical questions posed at the start of this primer, who benefits from current policy, what needs transforming, which actors need to be brought together, are not one-off diagnostic

exercises; they are questions cities will need to keep returning to as circumstances, coalitions, and constraints shift. The practices in this primer are not offered as a blueprint but as evidence that a different kind of city, one that measures success by wellbeing rather than throughput, is already possible. Its components are being built piece by piece, in cities today. We can indeed organise and provide for our needs differently, in ways that acknowledge the finitude of material resources and recognise that we are part of, not separate from, this planet's ecological systems

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Cities beyond growth

As cities worldwide face deepening social inequality alongside unfolding ecological breakdown, it is time to chart a different course.

Cities are where change is most needed and can have the greatest impact: most people live in them, economic life is shaped there most directly, and practices taken up in one city can scale to others. This makes them the place to build bold, systemic transformation toward an economy grounded in sufficiency and care, with democracy at its heart.

This primer offers concrete examples, strategic pathways, and policy recommendations across five domains of social and basic need: energy, housing, food, mobility, and digital technology. For policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and everyone working to transform cities, it provides both inspiration and practical guidance for building cities where people and planet can thrive within planetary boundaries.

Commons Network, August 2026, Amsterdam

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