

Building a new Social Commons

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Understanding the commons

“The commons are not concessions. They are resources that belong to the people as a matter of life necessity. Everybody has a right to an equal share of the commons and must be empowered by law to claim equal and direct access to it. Everybody has equal responsibility to the commons and shares a direct responsibility transfer its wealth to future generations.”

Ugo Mattei

Meeting needs

- The central purpose of ‘social protection’ or welfare systems is not to supply a productive workforce, but to ensure that people’s needs are met
- This means everyone must have access to resources that are essential for survival and flourishing – for health, critical autonomy and participation in society.
- Care and meaningful relationships are just as important as land, water, air and energy.

Why now?

- Welfare systems in the rich world are in crisis - people are dependent but distrustful
- “Austerity” programmes have cut services
- Failure to prevent harm and adapt to change has led to rising demand, widening inequalities and unmet needs.
- Too much state control – people feel powerless
- New campaigns for “basic income” threatens to replace collective services with cash hand-outs to individuals.

Towards a new politics

- Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- Not competition, consumerism and choice, but caring for each other, pooling resources, sharing risks – reasserting the collective ideal.
- Valuing unpaid activities on which the formal economy depends.
- Goals: social justice, environmental sustainability, more equal distribution of power.

Social commons in practice

- Enforceable rights to meet basic needs
- People have more power to determine how to meet their needs collectively and to design and deliver ways of meeting them.
- Paid and unpaid work are both valued as mutually supportive
- The role of the state is to support this process, to ensure equal access, guarantee standards and distribute resources.
- A new dynamic between “top-down” and “bottom-up”, and local and national politics.

How can it be achieved?

- Build culture and practice: learn from pioneering cities – e.g. Barcelona, Bologna, Ghent
- Shape through 3-way dialogue: bring together experiential wisdom, professional expertise, political negotiation.
- At national level, a declaration with accumulating force: ‘soft law’ leading to enforceable measures.
- New models of shared ownership and control
- New, transformative relationships between people, the commons and the public realm.

Challenges

- What is included in the social commons – and who decides?
- Who is eligible – citizens or residents?
- How best to organise a 3-way dialogue?
- How are legally enforceable rights compatible with locally controlled activities to meet needs?
- How to transform public institutions?
- Which sectors, groups and organisations are likely to support the social commons?