



Smart cities: the solution or part of the problem?

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In May 2016, air pollution in parts of Amsterdam, Maastricht and Rotterdam reached hazardous levels, breaking EU quality standards.

But only one month later, a new Dutch smart technology appeared: the Wi-Fi tree; a smart birdhouse that monitors air quality by changing colours. When air quality is good it glows green and as a reward, it offers citizens free Wi-Fi.

The Guardian reported that this is the type of invention that can help improve air quality in cities and The UN’s New Urban Agenda, presented at the October 2017 HABITAT meeting, seems to agree.

For the first time, cities are recognised not as problems but also as opportunities for driving change in Sustainable Development Goal agendas.

But to drive this change, to become more sustainable, cities have to invest in bigger data collection and analysis technologies; in better technical management, and more sophisticated indicators.

In order to become more sustainably resilient, inclusive and safe, cities first have to become smarter, the New Urban Agenda suggests and promises to help cities across the world invest in smart technologies for better monitoring and for the collection of big data that can be fed into improved sustainability indexes.

We all love smart cities. They sell well, they create new investment opportunities, and –most of all they stand in as the totem of our hope to repair the environmental damage we have created.

Unfortunately, however, smart cities and technologies cannot be the solution to our socio-environmental ills. Because, in fact, they are part of the problem.

If we care to perform a full socio-environmental cost benefit analysis of the production, consumption, and final disposal of smart technologies, we will come across some very unsettling findings.

Take for example the smart birdhouse. One of its vital components is COLTAN, a metallic ore that is necessary for all mobile communication switchboards. COLTAN is present in everything smart: our smart phones, smart cars, smart fridges. And sells at up to 3000 EUROS per kilogram

But if we follow the global metabolic flows that enable COLTAN to be present in every smart device, in every city, home and pocket, we get a very disturbing picture about how sustainable technologies really are.

More than 40% of the world's COLTAN is mined by hand in Congo, under conditions that the UN reports to be a systematic and organised exploitation of people and environments.

So, our improved sustainability and smartness is someone else's socio-environmental disaster.

Equally, Amnesty International reports that Masdar eco-city, Abu Dhabi's post-carbon urbanisation icon, was built by underpaid and often uninsured migrant labour, working under inhumane conditions. All in the name of sustainable development.

And you may think that Abu Dhabi or Congo is far removed from us to care. However, the perversions of pursuing sustainability through techno managerial solutions and indexes are closer to the western world than we may think.

The San Francisco Bay area is a prime example of a new type of displacement taking place in cities; it is termed ecological gentrification (Anguelovski 2015). Greenberg (2016), for example, documents how the new urban policies that turned San Francisco Bay into a smart 'ecotopia' were the very same policies that also turned it into one of the most unequal areas in the United States. San Francisco's sustainability indexes rose, while its poverty and homelessness indexes skyrocketed.

In short, sustainability has become an empty signifier, as smart techno-managerial solutions become the perfect alibi for intensifying resource extraction, profiteering, and increased inequality in our cities.

Sustainability has come of age. Facing the failures and false dilemmas of the past

What does all this tell us? It tells very loudly, to those who care to listen, that there is something seriously wrong with the methods and policies we have been using so far to pursue sustainable cities.

Over the past 30 years, since the Brundtland report coined the term sustainable development, we wanted so much to believe that a better world was a matter of better design, management, and better technological solutions. We so much wanted to believe that global socio-environmental equality was a form of medication which we could simply inject into our cities, in the form of smart roofs, monitoring technologies, recycling, or smart cars.

But 30 years onwards, the failures of the past can no longer hold the alibi of the new. We can no longer pretend we do not know. Today, we have ample evidence that we have been

deluding ourselves believing smart technologies could save people and environments. Today we know that these solutions do not deliver socio-environmental protection and equality.

Yet, despite the ample evidence, we are still deluding ourselves, sleepwalking into disaster. And the New Urban Agenda unfortunately suggests continuing depending on our path into sleepwalking, by re-packaging old and failed methods as new solutions, and by promoting agendas driven by the very same questions that drove failed policies of the past.

Should we pursue top down or bottom up solutions?

Should we trust the management of urban infrastructures to the public or the private domain?

But sustainability has come of age and we need no more experiments to know that socio-environmental protection cannot be reduced to sustainability or resilience indicators and smart solutions. We also know that the 'top down' vs. 'bottom up' and private vs. public dilemmas that drove our decisions in the past are false dilemmas.

We have ample evidence that the World Bank's global water privatisation programmes left the global South with incomplete networks, destroyed traditional water supply systems, and depleted public funds. In the global north too, cities and countries are buying back water and rail infrastructures to repair damages caused by privatisation.

We, (academics, policy makers, urban professionals, journalists) can no longer pretend we don't know; and we are no longer legitimised to advocate failed techno-managerial solutions as a way forward. This is a mature moment to take the failures of the past seriously – and dare to change our questions, our methods, our policies, and –more importantly, to change our interlocutors.

Stop Calling me Resilient: moving away from Consensus Building Exercises and focusing on Dissent And Conflict

So what I propose is:

Instead of focusing on yet another consensus exercise over new sustainability indicators amongst the usual suspects, we actually focus on where dissent and conflict arises. I suggest we seek out and engage with actors, groups, and communities who pose fresh questions and produce new radical imaginaries for environmental management but who have been systematically excluded from the sustainability debate.

How do we find and how do we engage them? We need to invest on qualitative research and data collection, instead of big quantitative data.

Here Are A Few Concrete Examples of what we can do with qualitative data.

Example 1.

What if we took seriously the "STOP CALLING ME RESILIENT" campaign, launched by Tracie Washington at Louisiana justice institute?

Tracie Washington's community survived both Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil disaster and was repeatedly praised for their resilience. Sick and tired of the media and politicians' continuous praise for their resilience, Tracie Washington cried: "I don't want to be resilient!", because, she explains, every time you say, "Oh, they're resilient, this means you can do something new to me. Instead, I want to fix the things that create the need for me to be resilient in the first place

This is not only a clear message; it is also a proposed method that suggests a stop to focusing on improving resilience indicators, and start tracing who and what are the processes that generate the need for resilience in the first place

EXAMPLE 2.,

What if we took seriously the practices of the Platform for Mortgage Affected People (PAH) in Spain that was formed to support over 1 million people who are made homeless after banks repossessed their homes because they could not repay their mortgage debt after the crisis?

At the moment when welfare was becoming increasingly privatised, the PAH reinvented welfare as the commons. They established a new imagining of housing as neither private nor as public; but as the commons, as an undeniable right; when taken away, it has to be taken back. The PAH developed distinct methods for preventing evictions and for re-housing evicted families. First, they try to stop evictions by legal means, thus making evictions a lengthy and costly act for the state and for banks. Second, they physically try to stop evictions by providing a strong physical presence of human bodies during the moment of eviction; and third, they occupy empty buildings that belong to banks and re-house evicted families.

In short, they actively promote a process that not only re-houses, but also re-dignifies evicted people, by taking them outside the domain of defining themselves not only as powerless indebted objects that can only be saved by the banks' charity or the state's goodwill.

EXAMPLE 3

What if we take sustainability beyond the market efficiency vs. public accountability dilemma? What if we took seriously the initiatives that tried to produce a new imaginary for managing water as the Commons in Thessaloniki, Greece? Initiated by the water company's trade union, the movement spread to a wider citizenship base, including –amongst others – to movement 136 (K136) and SOSte to Nero.

Instead of simply protesting against privatisation, the citizens' movements and K136 instituted the means to bid for buying up the water company of Thessaloniki when it came up for sale, and run it as a citizens' collective in collaboration with municipalities. 'Buying back the public, 136 euros at the time' was their motto. And 136 actually refers to the amount of euros that each citizen would contribute in order to make this bid possible.

And to make the bid possible, they did not hesitate to form 'unholy alliances' (they got help from a former advisor to Margaret Thatcher's privatisation programmes). But they raised 1 billion euros as guarantee funds for their bid from global investors. And they were up there bidding for Thessaloniki's water - against global corporate giants (including Suez water and MERKOROT)

The movement turned the management of water resources from a techno-managerial dilemma (public or private management?) into a real political question. A political question posed not only to policy makers but also to each citizen: would you keep 136 euros in your pocket as spending power and turn it into six jumpers or a smart phone or would you turn this 136 euros into real capital - that is, into the ability to make decisions over the use, management, and allocation of water resources in your own city?

Refusing to take the medicine: desiring what does not exist yet as the *only* possible future

The examples I mentioned above, with all their contradictions and differences, share two key things in common

First: they point at exactly what is wrong with pursuing sustainability, through smart and techno managerial solutions.

Such solutions do not question the reasons that brought people and environments in the need to be made sustainable resilient or safe in the first place. They treat the symptoms, but do not cure the disease.

There is nothing wrong with smart cities *per se*, and better monitoring mechanisms.

As long as we **acknowledge** that the best they can do is act as IMMUNOLOGICAL PRACTICES. They are the vaccination injected into people's cities and environments so that they can take even more environmental destruction and inequality in the future. A prime example of this kind of immunological practices is a new policy adopted by the Netherlands only last week: 1.2 million Dutch citizens who live in the vicinity of nuclear plants will be handed iodine pills so that they can better protect themselves against cancer in the case of a leak in the nuclear plant in their vicinity. It is a practice followed by other countries too. Environmental politics has turned into a set of immunization practices. We don't ask what the source of the problem is. We just immunize citizens so that they can take even more socio-environmental inequality and destruction in the near future.

However, an increasing number of actors across the world refuse to take this medicine.

And this is the second important thing that the examples I mentioned above share in common

Instead of accepting vaccination with smarter immunological practices, they propose new and concrete methods for addressing the disease, not the symptoms. Methods that make urban management a political not a technical question again

Now, if we are looking for **real** smart solutions and **real** creativity and innovation, here they are! In the methods and practices born out of dissent and necessity; not out of consensus.

If we are looking for meaningful, game changing data, this has to be qualitative data that can systematically document and assess these alternative methods.

This is a mature moment to take the failures of the past seriously, break away from path dependency and stop sleepwalking into disaster by investing massive public funds in smartening up our immunological practices.

So let us stop talking techno-politics and talk real politics again.

Let us focus on practices of dissent, not consensus.

Democracy has never been a consensus building exercise! Ever since it was born, democracy has been an agonistic process;

So let us dare to be democratic again, and make policy-making imaginative again.

As Lucy Irigaray suggests, let us desire what does not exist yet as the *only* possibility for the future

It is our academic and political responsibility to experiment with these emerging methods for managing urban resources as the commons.

And if you think that such experimentations are risky strategies, think twice: the risk we take by continuing to invest in failed methods is much higher than the risk involved in experimenting with new alternatives

We may fail again. But let us at least try to fail better next time, as Samuel Beckett suggest.

This text is a transcript of the talk Maria Kaika gave at the conference Greece Forward III. The talk is based on her published article, which includes the full list of references and material that the article draws upon: Kaika, M (2017) "Don't call me Resilient Again! The New Urban Agenda as Immunology ... or what happens when communities refuse to be vaccinated with 'smart cities' and indicators.

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The article can be accessed here:

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