

Globally connected, locally embedded: translocal networks and just and sustainable transitions in mobility

A blog by Clara Glachant

How does one limit car-use in cities and enable more just and sustainable forms of transportation? Governments are attempting to enforce new rules to limit the access of petrol vehicles to city centers and promote the use of electric scooters for short distances. At the same time, other initiatives facilitate new ways of thinking, doing and organizing mobility through translocal connections. This blog synthesizes some main insights of a study on the (intended) contributions of two translocal networks—The Mobility Factory and Carfree Cities Alliance— to just sustainability transitions in mobility.



Source: Ville de Paris

Just and Sustainable transitions in mobility

Air and noise pollution, congestion, public space fragmentation, oil dependency, health risks and socio-spatial inequalities are some of the main negative externalities produced and reproduced by automobility. While local and national governments encourage a shift towards the reduction of mobility-related carbon emissions by supporting low-emission zones or tax incentives for the purchase of electric vehicles, this certainly raises concerns in terms of sustainability and justice (Brand et al., 2020; Henderson, 2020). Other mobility alternatives, such as emerging micromobility practices in European cities, surely gained traction in recent debates for their potential to reduce mobility-related energy consumption. At the same time, they also fuelled discussions regarding equity, public space management, safety, and their actual impact on sustainability; The urgency of the

climate crisis calls for a “transition to more environmentally sustainable and socially just mobilities” (Sheller, 2018, p. 5). Despite the initial focus on sustainable mobility in transportation research, justice has gained currency in the past decade with the concept of mobility justice formulated by Mimi Sheller in her foundational book *Mobility Justice*. From this perspective, cutting GHG emissions and relying on technology is not sufficient: we need to rethink power structures unfolding around mobility to address social justice issues.

Translocal networks and cases

Translocal networks emerged very recently in sustainability transitions research, for example in the [EU-funded TRANSIT](#) project which outlined the relevance of translocal linkages for transformative social innovation. These refer to networks “in which local connections between actors in local initiatives are (at least) as important as transnational connections across actors and initiatives” (Avelino et al., 2020, p. 959) They propose to tackle global societal challenges by adapting, learning, inspiring and mobilizing local initiatives, resulting in tangible local action (Loorbach et al., 2020). Emerging literature on translocal networks addressed these in terms of how they empower initiatives towards transformative change through funding; increased legitimacy; knowledge sharing; learning and peer support; and visibility and identity (Avelino et al., 2020).

This study focused on two translocal networks and their contribution to just sustainability transitions in mobility. The first network investigated is [The Mobility Factory \(TMF\)](#), a European cooperative alliance of electric car-sharing cooperatives, founded in 2018. The second network studied is the [Carfree Cities Alliance \(CCA\)](#). Similarly to its predecessor, the World Carfree Network (1997-2010), CCA assists cities around the globe in transforming their car-based planning to people-focused practices and planning.

Insight 1: striving for mobility justice

Justice is at the core of the networks’ endeavor. They aim to contribute to deliberative justice, which refers to who is included in and excluded from decision-making, by involving network members and individuals in decision-making and planning processes. This is done internally by giving an equal amount of decision-power to all members, and externally by putting unheard voices at the forefront. CCA and TMF also contribute to procedural justice because they share information with all to ensure meaningful participation in the networks’ actions. This is especially the case for TMF through its cooperative model. Furthermore, TMF seems to facilitate the emergence of mobile commons, which Sheller (2018) describes as shared, cooperative and accessible to all. Behind this is the idea that community members can co-operate to exploit limited resources.

Insight 2: building shared narrative based on common values

This study shows that the contribution of the studied translocal networks to just sustainability transitions in urban mobility is strongly related to the creation of a narrative of change around common values. In the case of CCA, the narrative of change is based

around a car-free approach and presented in the form of a manifesto, which must be adopted by new members instead of a formal membership application process. Members also share relevant material through a mailing list, which participates in the development of their narrative and ultimately strengthens the network. For TMF, all cooperative members must adhere to the principles established by the [International Cooperative Alliance](#), as these are the DNA of cooperative work. In both cases, the study showed that common principles are essential given the diversity of local initiatives.

Insight 3: transforming mobility beyond traditional approaches

TMF and CCA aim to challenge mainstream approaches to mobility planning and provision. First, both networks address the siloed view of public agencies, which fails to tackle sustainability and justice in an integrated way. Beyond engineering and planning concerns, these networks also take mobilities and associated social interactions into consideration. Second, these networks tackle the dependence on unsustainable and unjust practices and supporting structures of the system of automobility – such as petrol car-use and car ownership. Indeed, they provide an alternative to mainstream mobility practices based on both (1) technological solutions i.e. electric vehicles and sharing platforms; and (2) new ways of organizing and doing (e.g. organizational forms based on cooperative principles). Third, they address global problems (sustainability, social justice) while taking into consideration local contexts and identities. Being closer to the issues at hand enables them to conceive more adapted solutions. Similarly, their contribution differs from one place to another, despite having a common purpose. For instance, in Spain, TMF's contribution is mostly related to providing an alternative to car-use while in the Netherlands, the contribution revolves around providing an alternative approach to traditional car sharing provision through a cooperative.

Insight 4: challenging mainstream perspective through community-based action

The creation of a community is central in both cases: it appears to be the channel through which radical change can be achieved. In the case of TMF, the cooperative model allows the organization of a more local provision of services, and the translocal cooperative connects these local communities across places. The community focus comes as a reaction to the incapability of traditional structures (e.g. state, market) to find solutions to complex societal changes. In the case of CCA, translocal solidarity is key to support the network's actions: it is done through peer support. Indeed, the network allows to share successes and struggles and break the isolation of resisting dominant structures. However, the emergence of new social patterns imply challenges for the initiatives, such as the difficulty to make decisions efficiently, individuals being discouraged by the lack of institutional support or the mismatch with mainstream structures and practices. These networks must consistently bargain with dominant structures in order to gain in stability and legitimacy.

Insight 5: enhancing support, peer learning and knowledge diffusion

Global networks support local initiatives on fundraising, organizational aspects or more technical aspects such as creating software for car-sharing. This is done by assisting local initiatives on specific issues but also more generally with tools and action guides. For CCA, knowledge diffusion also takes the form of campaigns, such as [the Build Back Better Cities](#) campaign. The global network develops a range of projects, activities, ideas, and best practices to support local campaigns which are focused on designing approaches adapted to their particular context. In addition, such channels of knowledge diffusion also consist of websites or mailing lists through which networks can present what they do and inspire others. Members also add content to these channels by sharing manuals and other good practices.

Conclusion

The necessity to change transport systems prevails, with numerous climate change mitigation policies at local, national and international scales. Nevertheless, existing approaches seem insufficient to trigger a transition towards more sustainable and just mobilities. Since challenging dominant unsustainable and unjust structures is increasingly critical, translocal networks support alternative ways of doing and organizing. This blog provided insights into translocal networks and just sustainability transitions in mobility with two case studies on The Mobility Factory and Carfree Cities Alliance. Five aspects are essential to the (aimed) contributions of translocal networks to just and sustainable mobility transitions: (1) supporting mobility transformations beyond technological determinism and institutional lock-ins, (2) follow principles of mobility justice, (3) inspire community-driven actions to challenge mainstream perspectives, (4) constitute shared narratives of change based on common values and (5) enhance organizational support, learning and knowledge diffusion.

Useful links

- [The Mobility Factory](#)
- [Carfree Cities Alliance](#)

Reference list

- Avelino, F., Dumitru, A., Cipolla, C., Kunze, I., & Wittmayer, J. (2020). Translocal empowerment in transformative social innovation networks. *European Planning Studies*, 28(5), 955–977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2019.1578339>
- Brand, C., Anable, J., Ketsopoulou, I., & Watson, J. (2020). Road to zero or road to nowhere? Disrupting transport and energy in a zero carbon world. *Energy Policy*, 139, 111334. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ENPOL.2020.111334>
- Henderson, J. (2020). EVs Are Not the Answer: A Mobility Justice Critique of Electric

Vehicle Transitions. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 110(6), 1993–2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2020.1744422>

Loorbach, D., Wittmayer, J., Avelino, F., von Wirth, T., & Frantzeskaki, N. (2020).

Transformative innovation and translocal diffusion. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 35, 251–260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eist.2020.01.009>

Sheller, M. (2018). *Mobility Justice: The*

Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes. London: Verso.

Ville de Paris (2021). Un nouveau plan vélo pour une ville 100 % cyclable. Retrieved

<https://www.paris.fr/pages/un-nouveau-plan-velo-pour-une-ville-100-cyclable-19554> on 30-05-2022.

About the author

Clara Glachant is a PhD candidate in the Technology, Innovation and Society group of the Faculty of Industrial Engineering and Innovation Science of Eindhoven University of Technology. Clara carries out research on micromobility and just and sustainable transitions in a comparative study of the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. She was involved with the JUSTRA Cities Network in 2021 for a research internship.