

## **GEOGRAPHY:**

can micro-initiatives mobilise local resources and contribute to collective action and social innovation  
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## **The geography of micro-initiatives**

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### **Introduction**

Micro-initiatives attract quite some attention lately, in academic literature as well as in policy documents. As O'Connor argues, these initiatives have moved from the margins, right into the centre of the urban development agenda. Certainly when focussing on the creative side of micro-initiatives, the out-of-the-box thinking, the innovation in production, the non-formal side, etc. -which are thought to be characteristic for such initiatives, but were highly depreciated during the Fordist-Keynesian capitalist accumulation period- these same aspects are now considered as a crucial part of the economic development of our cities. Some scholars (Griffith, O'Connor) even consider them to be the *new fix* for the urban problem under post-Fordist flexible accumulation regime.

This paper focuses on the geography of micro-initiatives. Many authors have asserted that the emergence of micro-initiatives is in essence a geographical story (Scott, Drake, O'Connor, Hall, Moulaert,...), as these initiatives seem to cluster in certain places. These places go under many names: third spaces (Soja), cracks (Swyngedouw), experimental free-zones (Corijn),...

However, the spatial side of micro-initiatives cannot be limited to place (or locality) alone. Swyngedouw demonstrates that these initiatives have "*the potential ability to relatively easily build new spatial networks and relationships, to shift or jump between spatial scales and to ignore the constraints of location*". Thus, location -however crucial for face-to-face contacts and as a catalyst for collective creativity (Scott)- tells not the full story; networks and scale are important too. Last but not least, since micro-initiatives are thought to foster urban development (or at least area development), there's also a territorial dimension to them.

My goal here is to explore this last dimension -i.e. the potential of micro-initiatives to be a factor of mobilisation of endogenous and exogenous resources, collective action and social innovation for the city territory as a whole. I will however attempt this, starting from the *locus* where these initiatives emerge and inverting the question; "what kind of initiatives emerge at such loci?" By doing so, I hope to bypass the discussions on the exact nature of micro-initiatives. Since most of these initiatives, regardless of whether they are described as micro-, grassroots, creative, ethnic, cultural, informal, etc. initiatives, all seem to emerge in a specific type of area, it might be hypothesised that this locus offers certain opportunities for certain kind of initiatives that might have a potential for social innovative strategies.

### **Micro-initiatives and place**

The importance of place for micro-initiatives is stretched out by many scholars and many studies. However acting within a globalising context, micro-initiatives

seem to cluster together in certain localities. This clustering can be explained by the importance of face-to-face contacts, by an essential geographical proximity of employees to a by definition unstable activity (Scott), by marketing considerations (Hotelling)... Furthermore, once this milieu is in place, it causes an extra asset, namely this of a certain atmosphere, vibe, sense of place, a localised scene... which will attract other, similar initiatives to such places. (Scott, Drake, O'Connor)

It is agreed upon that these clusters of micro-initiatives occur mostly in cities. For Swyngedouw, this occurs due to typical contradictory dynamics of modern cities, which open up cracks for micro-initiatives. According to Lefebvre, cities are to be considered as ambivalent spaces, which are breeding places for opportunities, while being entwined with exclusion and marginality.

It is exactly this relation between opportunity and marginality that shapes the locus for clustering micro-initiatives within an urban structure. On the one hand, this locus is an area in the margins, outside the mainstream activities of the city. In concrete, one can find these margins in mostly disfavoured areas, which hosts households which are typically excluded from formal market mechanisms. In addition, they are excluded from formal redistribution systems and lack necessary networks to connect with decision makers that might be able to alter their conditions.

To cope with daily life, they rely highly on all kind of survival strategies in order to reproduce themselves, for example some forms of community-related economic activity, like ethnic entrepreneurship, providing ethnic goods and services to the local community (Kesteloot & Mistiaen, Cassiers). Since these places are excluded from formal urban economic activity, the kind of micro-initiatives developed within these zones, are often situated in informal economy. (Vaiou, Moulaert)

On the other hand, these particular places at the margins of the urban reproduction system do offer opportunities –as friction zones and free-zones- for counter-culture movements, for innovative strategies, for social action; the kind of micro-initiatives that are described as creative, cultural, grassroots... Moulaert and Scott relate these micro-initiatives to the emergence of new social movements in the urban tissue. On the one hand, these movements are based in an urban tertiarised middle-class, who themselves are subject of strong restructuring processes, and who formed alternative milieus. But on the other hand, they also recognise the informal socio-economic organisation (caused by industrial decline and diminishing incorporating power of formal economic and political structures) which plays an increasingly important role in European urban development. Therefore I argue that, however widely diverse by nature, these different types of micro-initiatives are essentially interconnected, not only by being embedded in the same locus, but also by their particular place in the international division of labour (Scott). Furthermore, these embeddings in this particular locus determines their potential for social innovation.

### **Micro-initiatives and social innovation**

Among those excluded from formal society, there is an increasing consciousness of the factors determining their difficult accessibility to urban society. This entrance does not only depend upon their consumption level, but is related to the satisfaction of their basic needs within the urban system as a whole (Moulaert). In

other words, their inclusion into the city will be not only economic, but political and cultural as well. In developing social innovative strategies, they no longer accept the simple correction of exclusion by increasing their purchasing power, but challenge the urban system as a whole by playing an active/productive role in the solution of their problems. This is by no means a tribute to the market, since these initiatives develop outside the normative market system. Neither can these initiatives be implemented at the detriment of solidarity mechanisms, since they are embedded in community networks.

These initiatives have a potential for social innovation and fostering social cohesion, by exploring new forms of urbanity, which challenge the mainstream economic viewpoints and remodel urban democracy.

As showed above, micro-initiatives cluster in a certain locus, which act as crystallization points in a globalised space. In consequence, the question rises whether this crystallization is able to spark off the process of (re)developing this specific area.

Many scholars subscribe to this point of view. Healey, for example, sees creativity as an urban dynamic, developing new projects and new products, innovating local practices and governance. Fraise and Laville show how grassroots initiatives have a potential, not only in creating local employment, but they also foster social cohesion at large by covering basic needs, strengthening local networks en re-dynamiting the neighbourhood.

O'Conner demonstrates how policies which promote micro-initiatives are already implemented in neighbourhood regeneration. He however warns for the problems that arise within these policy programs when only concentrating on physical renovation, looking at the city from a purely economic viewpoint and focussing on one singular area, at the expense of other areas.

This last argument stretches the localist bias of some area development models. To overcome this bias, we have to understand micro-initiatives in their full perspective, not only embedded in a certain locus, but interacting between different scales and using different networks. Only then, these initiatives can contribute to territorial development, coupling it to global interaction and social innovative strategies for the city as a whole. This learns that territorial development should be, first and foremost, a strategy for satisfying local needs, using purposeful community action, small-sized projects, labour-intensive modes of production, appropriate technology and self-management and small-scale enterprises (Moulaert and Scott).

## **Conclusion**

Micro-initiatives emerge in certain areas within certain cities, in function of local context, structures, history, networks, embedding, tacit knowledge, etc. We can distinguish between two kinds of initiatives: one is related to survival strategies of the population, another one is linked with social action and cultural movements in alternative milieus that are present in such areas. Since both have the same locus, and also act along the same lines in regard to the formal economic sphere, it might be argued that both have a potential as social innovative strategies that challenge the main economic viewpoints and constitute new structures through which the future of the city is negotiated. Therefore, the loci of these initiatives host a potential, which can fuel and foster a dynamic development and social cohesion. Yet a localist bias occurs in this logic/reasoning. In order to avoid this

bias, social innovative initiatives have to use their potential for jumping scales, shifting networks and enlarging its territorial impact to urban structures as a whole.

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