

Policy Brief

For just urban transitions, from below

How municipalities can support circular grassroots initiatives



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Circular Grassroots Innovations for Sustainable and Inclusive Urban Transitions

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1. Why circular grassroots initiatives matter

Across cities, circular grassroots initiatives such as repair groups, food-sharing initiatives, waste-pickers' networks, libraries of things, community kitchens, and housing cooperatives are creating practical alternatives to linear, waste-intensive urban systems.

These initiatives are significant contributors to urban circularity, accounting for a substantial share of material recirculation. Yet material flows alone do not capture their wider socio-ecological value. Through reuse, repair, sharing, gleaning and recirculation, they extend the life of materials, while supporting livelihoods and material subsistence, building local communities and social resilience, and creating spaces

for care, collective learning, environmental awareness and local democratic participation.

They are especially important in cities marked by inequality, housing pressure, food insecurity and ecological stress. In many cases, circular grassroots initiatives are addressing needs that neither markets nor public institutions adequately meet.

Yet despite these contributions, they often remain invisible, under-supported or poorly understood in municipal policy and planning. They typically operate under conditions of spatial precarity, time scarcity, limited recognition, unstable funding and heavy dependence on unpaid labour.

Local governments also matter!

This brief argues that municipalities have a crucial role to play in enabling circular grassroots initiatives to thrive. To support circular grassroots effectively, municipalities need to move beyond narrow economic or output-based understandings of value. Municipal support should secure the conditions that allow initiatives to operate on their own terms, without over-formalising or disciplining them into losing the flexibility, inclusiveness and inventiveness that make them valuable.

2. Key research messages for policy

The following policy messages summarise the research findings from the Circular Grassroots project. They are intended as lenses for municipal action, with detailed recommendations integrated in Section 4.

Grassroots decalogue	What the research shows	Policy implication
Space is scarce	Circular grassroots initiatives lack space across the studied cities and are often pushed into marginal or temporary settings.	Treat affordable, stable and visible space as transition infrastructure.
Work is intensive	Initiatives invest significant work, energy and time in tinkering with spaces, resources, materials and people.	Support the slow work of coordination, maintenance, adaptation and care.
Networks are under-recognised	They form loose networked social movements and local ecosystems while many contributions remain unseen.	Invest in visibility, networking and intermediary support.
They are political by doing	Many initiatives create change through practice rather than contention. This strengthens impact but can weaken voice.	Create channels for representation, advocacy and policy dialogue.
Public-common arrangements are emerging	Public-community and public-common partnerships can provide access to space and resources, but many initiatives face institutional voids that ignore or penalise informality.	Develop flexible partnership models that enable support without heavy control.
Dominant valuation misses value	A mismatch exists between grassroots value and valuation regimes shaped by New Public Management and ecomodernist logics.	Use broader evaluation frameworks that recognise more-than-monetary value.
Inclusion is not automatic	Inequalities of class, ethnicity, gender, age, language and time persist, even when initiatives actively try to counteract them.	Fund inclusion, facilitation, outreach and infrastructures of care.
Rationales are mixed	Some initiatives are necessity-driven, while others are driven by environmental and social values. In practice, these rationales blend and reinforce one another.	Recognise both subsistence circularities and values-led initiatives.
Transformation is relational	Grassroots initiatives often transform society by reshaping norms and social relations rather than by growing bigger.	Support diffusion, learning and norm change, not only scaling metrics.
Paradoxes are part of the work	Initiatives are essential yet invisible; risk becoming service providers rather than transformative actors; and rely on care work that can become exploitative.	Protect autonomy, reduce burnout and avoid extracting unpaid labour.

3. The municipal challenge

Municipal officers often encounter circular grassroots initiatives through fragmented policy fields: waste, public space, social affairs, culture, housing, sustainability, procurement or community development. As a result, these initiatives may fall between departments and remain partially invisible in governance.

At the same time, municipalities may support circularity mainly through top-down, growth-oriented or techno-managerial approaches, while under-

estimating the contribution of grassroots actors. This creates a mismatch: initiatives are expected to deliver public benefits, but often without the conditions needed for continuity, inclusion and autonomy.

A key municipal challenge is therefore not simply to 'use' grassroots initiatives as service providers. It is to create enabling conditions for them to operate, stabilise, experiment and expand their social and ecological contributions on their own terms.

Municipal governance challenge

Circular grassroots initiatives rarely fit neatly into one department. Municipalities can respond by creating cross-departmental working groups, a one-door contact point and shared guidelines for supporting grassroots circularity.

4. What municipalities can do

The six policy directions below merge the research findings with the corresponding municipal actions. Each section begins with what the research shows and then sets out practical steps for municipalities.

1. Space Treat space as transition infrastructure.	2. Partnerships Build enabling public-common arrangements.	3. Procedures Make municipal rules proportionate.
4. Valuation Recognise more-than-monetary value.	5. Inclusion Fund participation, care and accessibility.	6. Visibility Create interfaces across municipal silos.
Three shifts for municipal practice Municipalities can move from short-term pilots to durable infrastructure; from service-provider contracts to public-common partnerships; and from narrow output metrics to broader public value. The practical step behind all three shifts is a joined-up municipal interface that helps initiatives find space, navigate procedures and be recognised across departments.		

4.1 Treat space as transition infrastructure

What the research shows

Circular grassroots initiatives need space to exist. Space is not just a container for activities. It shapes who can participate, what practices are possible and how initiatives endure over time. Regular and stable spaces allow communities to form around routines, trust and shared practices. Temporary or flexible spaces can support experimentation and recruitment, but they are rarely enough on their own.

Municipal actions

- Map existing circular grassroots initiatives, their spaces, knowledges and needs through participatory bottom-up processes.
- Make underused municipal spaces available at low or symbolic cost, including spaces that are easy to reach and visible in everyday urban life.
- Support long-term access, not only short-term pilot use, and create temporary-use arrangements that can evolve into durable ones.
- Develop multifunctional shared hubs that allow organic synergies between initiatives, with umbrella organisations helping to manage shared legal responsibilities where useful.
- Adapt spatial allocation criteria, leasing rules and subsidies to the realities of grassroots initiatives, including rent subsidies and rights to use publicly owned spaces.
- Protect community spaces in areas under pressure from gentrification and displacement.
- Enable the use of schools, libraries, universities, squares, gyms and other public spaces for repair days, sharing activities, public events and visibility at low or no cost

4.2 Build enabling public-common partnerships

What the research shows

Grassroots initiatives govern themselves in many different ways, from informal and flexible arrangements to more formal cooperative models. They also operate within broader relational ecosystems, supporting one another through networks, partnerships and intermediary organisations. Some require hybrid arrangements with municipalities, especially when they need space, legal recognition or material support. Others operate in governance voids, where authorities are absent, selectively tolerant or punitive.

Municipal actions

- Shift from narrow contractual relations towards co-designed public-common partnerships that provide resources while preserving grassroots autonomy.
- Develop shared municipal rules and guidelines for public-common partnerships, so decisions do not depend only on individual discretion or personal goodwill.
- Create technical offices or contact points that help initiatives translate proposals, navigate municipal procedures and access suitable support.
- Train legal and juridical services to interpret rules flexibly where appropriate, so procedures serve collaboration rather than block it.
- Support intermediary organisations that connect grassroots initiatives, municipal departments, property owners and other public institutions.
- Recognise that different initiatives need different levels of formalisation. Avoid making formalisation a precondition for every form of support.
- Recognise informal waste workers, and support them to form legal associations and genuine partnerships to manage uncollected material streams.
- Invite municipal officers into regular dialogue with initiatives or intermediary boards where useful, while keeping initiative autonomy intact.

PRACTICE IN FOCUS: Access space through public-common arrangements

In Barcelona, locally self-managed civic centres can anchor grassroots infrastructures in neighbourhoods. Caixa d'Eines i Feines, embedded within Pou de la Figuera (a civic centre managed by a neighbourhood association in Ciutat Vella) illustrates how publicly owned facilities can be community-managed and loosely connected to wider municipal governance.

In Amsterdam, cooperative housing as De Nieuwe Meent, on public land and temporary-use arrangements, including Dutch antikraak agreements, show alternative ways to open vacant or public property to community-led initiatives.



Figure 1 Barcelona, Caixa d'Eines i Feines, group discussion among initiative-taker and research team

4.3 Make municipal procedures proportionate

What the research shows

Circular grassroots initiatives are often labour-intensive and already stretched. Complex procedures, rigid regulations and one-size-fits-all compliance requirements can become major barriers. Initiatives may also be forced into competition or made to meet specifications that fit professional service providers better than community-led structures.

Municipal actions

- Simplify application and reporting procedures, shifting from excessive proof and audit culture towards trust-based, light-touch accountability.
- Create tailored regulatory pathways for small-scale circular initiatives, especially where activities are low-risk and community-based.
- Redesign public contracts, grants and procurement logics so they fit community-led structures and do not force fragile initiatives into unsuitable competition.
- Offer administrative support, legal advice and dedicated contact persons who can help initiatives navigate agreements, permits, landlord relations and rights.
- Review rules that unintentionally criminalise, obstruct or overburden grassroots activities, including informal reuse, sharing, repair and material recovery practices.
- Distinguish between high-risk and low-risk activities in regulation, and match oversight to actual risks rather than organisational formality.
- Make collaboration between initiatives eligible for support, rather than designing funding systems that reward competition.

4.4 Broaden how value is recognised and evaluated

What the research shows

Grassroots circularity often scales by changing norms, meanings and social relations rather than by growing bigger. These initiatives normalise repair, sharing, sufficiency, commoning and collective responsibility. However, because these effects are diffuse and difficult to quantify, they are often undervalued in public policy frameworks based on outputs, efficiency and short-term indicators.

Municipal actions

- Adopt broader valuation frameworks that recognise waste prevention, material recovery, social cohesion, community-building, collective learning, skill-sharing, inclusion, public health, wellbeing, care work and democratic participation.
- Combine quantitative indicators with qualitative storytelling, case narratives and grounded accounts of social impact.
- Design qualitative KPIs and reporting systems that account for impacts beyond economic efficiency and short-term outputs.
- Use neighbourhood-level monitoring, welfare indicators and long-term baselines over five to ten years where appropriate, rather than expecting every initiative to prove all impacts immediately.
- Let grassroots initiatives help define the criteria by which they are assessed.
- Create forms of two-way accountability: initiatives can report on public value, and municipalities can be accountable for the conditions they provide.
- Provide visibility and recognition through field visits by municipal officers, public communication, local events and inclusion in circular economy strategies.

Nº	NOMBRE	APARATO	MARCA/MOD.	AÑOS	AVERÍA	REPARADORA	SOLUCIÓN	
1.	Daniel	2 Cafeteras	DE'LONGHI DEDICA	7±	Bolón on/off?	DIONI	NO REPARABLE	☹
			KRUPS Nespresso	7±	Bomba agua del NO puede salir para limpiar	DIONI	La mira en casa	☺
2.	Eli	Batidora	Taurus	2±	Función de brazo para limpiar	Josep M.	Ajustar engranajes	☺
					Usado no gira			
3.	Patricia	Batidora gol	SOLAC	7±	L. Med. Conecte Cable?	Xelvi	Regularidad voltaje	☹
4.	Irene	Cadena música	Panasonic	25/30	Rueda Volumen	Xelvi/Dioni	Soldadura	☺
5.	Marta	Colifactor aire	S+P	2/3	Saltaban chispas y no va	Josep M./Dioni	Fallos contactos Motor quemado	☹
6.	"	Lámpara mesa de cocina	reajugable	2/3	NO VA. NO TAE	Gauden Andreu	Conectar nota Busen acumbro	☺
7.	Mari	Tablet	Samsung	2/3	Pequeño golpe. No arranca	Xelvi	Resetease	☺
8.	Anika	Robot aspirador	ROBORA	5±	NO Carga	Xelvi	Cambiar batería	☺
9.	Josep M.	Micromondas	SAIYOD	2	NO Calienta	DIONI	Le mira en casa	☺
10.	Tine	Robot aspirador	ROBORA	5±	Adelantado para espumas. Escumador no funciona	DIONI	Feder recomiendo	☺

Figure 2. Listing faults and device repairs, Restarters Barcelona.

PRACTICE IN FOCUS

Qualitative valuation systems

In Nantes, the environmental NGO Ecopole has developed qualitative KPI software to alternative assessment methods and project evolution.

In Gothenburg, the Circular Grassroots project launched a Grassroots Observatory, using a participant survey to measure wellbeing, environmental awareness, social cohesion and other qualitative indicators across grassroots initiatives.

Rezero in Barcelona works with storytelling reporting to visualize the more-than-monetary value that Libraries of Things generate. Repair initiatives such as Restarters Barcelona also feed a global dataset on devices, brands, faults, and solutions, building shared knowledge on repair practices.

4.5 Fund inclusion, participation and care

What the research shows

Although many circular grassroots initiatives aim to be open and participatory, inequalities of class, ethnicity, gender, age, language and time shape who can participate and whose knowledge counts. More resource-intensive initiatives may unintentionally exclude precarious groups due to time poverty, cultural barriers or bureaucratic confidence. Circular grassroots spaces also function as infrastructures of care, but this work is fragile and can become exploitative as it depends on voluntary work or lowly paid labour.

Municipal actions

- Fund facilitation, outreach, translation, accessibility, coordination, volunteer support and other forms of relational work that make participation possible.
- Support low-threshold and welcoming spaces, including measures to reduce barriers related to fees, opening hours, language, transport, digital access and specialist expertise.
- Recognise care work, maintenance and community-building as legitimate activities and budget lines, not as invisible background labour.
- Support initiatives led by or working with marginalised groups, including those addressing material subsistence, food insecurity, housing pressure or livelihood needs.
- Recognise necessity-driven circularity as part of the circular economy, not only initiatives framed through environmental awareness or consumer choice.
- Work with initiatives to identify and reduce inequalities in participation, leadership, labour and access to resources.

4.6 Make grassroots visible across municipal silos, and support intermediaries

What the research shows

Grassroots initiatives are often political by doing rather than by lobbying. Their practices reshape norms and relationships, but their voice can be weak in formal policy processes. At the same time, municipal silos mean that initiatives may be partly visible to one department and invisible to another. Intermediary organisations can play a crucial role in translation, advocacy, coordination and trust-building.

Municipal actions

- Create a one-door municipal interface or named contact point for circular grassroots initiatives.
- Set up cross-departmental coordination between waste, public space, social affairs, culture, housing, sustainability, procurement, education and community development.
- Involve circular grassroots actors in local planning, circular economy strategies, climate plans, welfare policy and neighbourhood development processes.
- Fund intermediary and network organisations that connect initiatives with each other and with municipal institutions.
- Support platforms for exchange across initiatives, departments, researchers, civil society organisations and public institutions.
- Support public events, storytelling, knowledge-sharing and municipal mapping that make grassroots expertise visible.
- Pay, or compensate, grassroots actors and intermediaries for consultation, advocacy, translation and coordination work rather than expecting this work to be done for free.

PRACTICE IN FOCUS

Navigating municipal complexity

In Gothenburg, municipal centralization, silos organisation and fragmented municipal-company structures have made local government difficult for grassroots actors to navigate. A pilot guide system, known as *lotsar* (pilot boats), has been launched to connect initiatives with the right municipal contacts and reduce institutional complexity without comprehensive reform.

In Barcelona, Barcelona Activa's Social and Solidarity Economy strategy provides strategic, economic and legal frameworks that can help grassroots initiatives get established, by strengthening the conditions for cooperative, community-led and non-profit ventures.



Figure 2. Distributing food, Nantes.

6. Conclusion

Circular grassroots initiatives are already doing essential work in cities. They recover materials, reduce waste, support communities and model ways of living with less extraction and more care. But they do so under difficult conditions: with too little space, too little recognition, too little time and too much uncertainty.

Municipalities can make a decisive difference. By securing access to space, adapting governance frameworks, reducing administrative burdens, recognising broader forms of value, funding inclusion and making grassroots initiatives visible across municipal silos, municipal officers can help these initiatives move from fragile margins to durable urban infrastructures.

Supporting circular grassroots is not only a matter of environmental policy. It is also a matter of spatial justice, democratic participation and building cities that can care for both people and resources

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