Circular Grassroots Symposium

Gothenburg | 7–8 December 2026

About the Symposium

The Circular Grassroots Symposium brings together researchers working on grassroots initiatives, alternative economies and sustainability transformations to explore how everyday practices of sharing, reuse, repair and collective provisioning contribute to more just and circular futures.

Moving beyond dominant technological and market-centred approaches to circularity, the symposium places grassroots practices, experiences and values at the centre of the conversation. Across six thematic sessions, we explore how grassroots initiatives create and negotiate diverse forms of value, mobilise care and collective action, and interact with institutions, markets and urban environments.

The symposium provides a space for critical dialogue, collective reflection and the exchange of ideas on both the transformative possibilities and the tensions and contradictions of grassroots circularity.

Venue

The symposium will take place at the **School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg**, Konstepidemins väg 2, Building C, Room C417. Nearest Tram Stops: Olivedalsgatan, Linnéplatsen, and Seminariegatan.

The venue is less than a 30-minute walk from Comfort Hotel Göteborg, near Stenpiren tram stop, or approximately 18 minutes away by public transport (tram).

For any questions or assistance, please feel free to contact the organisers:

María José Zapata Campos: +46 709 326 272 | mj.zapata@gu.se
Patrik Zapata: +46 762 654 314 | patrik.zapata@gu.se

Programme

Monday 7 December

08:30–09:00 Welcome to the Circular Grassroots Symposium

09:00–10:30 Session 1 · Learning and imagining Circular Futures: Storytelling, Repair and Design

Helen Holmes | Local citizen storytelling for hopeful, circular futures

Blanca Callén Moreu | Staying with the breakdown together: an analysis of grassroots repair into design and engineering education

10:30–11:00 Coffee break

11:00–12:30 Session 2 · The Spatial-Material Politics of Grassroots Circularity: Affordances and Value

Ulrika Holmberg, Bruno Chies & María José Zapata Campos | What Comes to Matter? Socio Material Affordances and the Making of Grassroots Values

Lisa Säfdal & Marco Adelfio | Making Space for Grassroots Circularity: How Socio-Spatial Conditions Shape Grassroots Initiatives

12:30–13:30 Lunch

13:30–15:00 Session 3 · Caring and governing in the City: Grassroots Autonomy, Co-governance and Green Gentrification

Søren Christensen | "Gentle" green gentrification and infrastructures of care: Reordering care and urban green space in a stigmatized neighbourhood in a Nordic welfare city

Vera Sadovska & Yuliya Voytenko Palgan | Governing Food Sharing in Barcelona, Milan and Utrecht

15:00–15:30 Coffee break

15:30–17:00 Session 4 · Beyond Political consumerism: Quiet Activism, Food Rescue and Market Contradictions

Francesca Forno | The sound of silence? Grassroots mobilisation, quiet sustainability and democratic provisioning

Maike Melles | Consumerist Contradictions: To the pre-emptive rescue of food and the market

18:00 Dinner at Hagabio, Linnégatan, 21

Tuesday 8 December

08:30–10:00 Session 5 · The Politics of Value: Grassroots practices, Quantification and Ecomodernistic logics

Petr Jehlička | Czech and Chinese urban food practices as an already existing sustainability: Insights from two epistemic peripheries

Anastasia Zisakou & Patrik Zapata | What counts as value? Negotiating quantification and community values in grassroots initiatives

10:30–11:00 Coffee break

11:00–12:30 Session 6 · Grassroots Transformation: Scaling, Frictions and Collective Action

Michele Castrezzati | Scaling Through Friction

Christian Koch | Social Action – A Tourainian approach

13:00–14:30 Lunch

14:30–15:30 Wrapping up

Authors, affiliations & abstracts

Papers are presented in programme order.

Helen Holmes

University of Manchester

Local citizen storytelling for hopeful, circular futures

In this paper I outline the beginnings of a project exploring how local citizens and grassroots organisations can be equipped with the skills to tell their hopeful, just and circular stories. Part of the Joined Up Sustainability Transformations (JUST) Centre, this pilot project recognises that public support for climate policies is increasingly challenged by climate scepticism, economic pressures, and concerns that sustainability initiatives fail to align with everyday priorities. At the same time, many communities are already undertaking hopeful and practical forms of just transition, combining environmental sustainability with social justice through activities such as DIY home retrofit schemes, repair cafés, clothing banks, food-sharing projects, and community hubs that address both climate impacts and long-term inequalities.

The project explores how citizen storytelling can help counter scepticism, foster hope, and amplify authentic local experiences of climate action. Working in partnership with two community organisations in Greater Manchester, UK: Station South and What If Community Hub, alongside training providers, The Exchange, the project is delivering two intensive storytelling workshops that equip community members with the skills to share their green transition stories across a range of media. Following the initial training a range of co-designed, creative dissemination activities (e.g. kitchen table chats, community curated exhibitions, zine-making workshops) will be used to enable community organisations to share their hopeful, just and circular stories. This paper will outline our initial work and findings from the project.

Blanca Callén Moreu

Autonomous University of Barcelona

Staying with the breakdown together: an analysis of grassroots repair into design and engineering education

Within the context of the ecological crisis, higher education in design faces the need to move away from linear models of production-consumption-waste towards circular and sufficiency-based approaches. Planned obsolescence, non-standard fastenings and a lack of modularity are some of the market-driven design strategies that have fuelled this crisis. In response, we find circular grassroots initiatives, such as Restarters BCN, which promotes a culture of repair through ‘Restart Parties’ – community events where volunteer repairers help participants to repair their own devices. This paper examines what happens when this community-based initiative is brought into the educational context, and what lessons emerge when attempting to integrate circularity and a culture of repair into the teaching of design and engineering. The empirical corpus comprises participant-observation fieldnotes, 27 group interviews, and 80 worksheets documenting repair attempts. The analysis highlighted how disassembly opened the “black box” of everyday technologies, while diagnosis required students to test hypotheses, acquire practical skills and learn through objects’ material responses. This experience enabled students to remain engaged with uncertainty and frustration while developing greater confidence too. Repair also made visible the conditions that enable or constrain circularity, including product architecture, access to spare parts and documentation, tools and technical expertise. These encounters stimulated critical reflection on planned obsolescence, care and the ecosocial responsibilities of

design. We argue that collaboration with grassroots repair communities can reposition breakdown as a site of sociomaterial inquiry and collective learning, shifting design and engineering education away from novelty and production towards maintenance, longevity, sufficiency and responsibility. However, it requires curricular time, technical resources and sustained collaboration with community-based repair expertise. These experiences make us rethink design and its education for post-growth scenarios in partnership with grassroots initiatives and help identify future challenges for incorporating a culture of repair into the curriculum.

Ulrika Holmberg, Bruno Chies & María José Zapata Campos

University of Gothenburg

What Comes to Matter? Socio-Material Affordances and the Making of Grassroots Values

Scholarship on diverse and alternative economies has highlighted the plurality of social, environmental and economic values generated through grassroots practices of sharing, reuse and repair. Existing research has also demonstrated how participation in these initiatives is driven by heterogeneous motivations, ranging from material needs and environmental concerns to social belonging and aspirations for systemic change. More recently, scholars have drawn attention to the significance of materiality and place in shaping alternative economic practices. Yet, less is known about how different socio-material configurations of grassroots initiatives enable particular practices, experiences and processes of valuation, and how participation itself may transform what people come to value.

This paper examines how grassroots material affordances shape practices, experiences and values across different circular grassroots initiatives in Gothenburg, Sweden, including food-sharing initiatives, libraries of things, community kitchens and repair spaces. Drawing on the concept of socio-material affordances, we explore how the material characteristics of objects, the spatial organisation of activities and the social relations through which initiatives are enacted create distinct possibilities for participation and value creation. We argue that grassroots initiatives do not simply reflect participants' pre-existing motivations and values but actively contribute to their formation and transformation. Different socio-material arrangements afford different practices and experiences, from conviviality and social cohesion to environmental awareness, sharing, learning and collective agency. At the same time, these affordances are not inherently emancipatory, as they may also reproduce inequalities, exclusions and tensions between competing aspirations.

The paper contributes to scholarship on alternative economies by developing an understanding of affordance in grassroots valuation, showing how values emerge relationally through the interplay of materials, spaces and practices. In doing so, it advances a differentiated understanding of the transformative possibilities and limitations of grassroots initiatives in just urban transitions.

Lisa Säfdal & Marco Adelfio

Chalmers University of Technology

Making Space for Grassroots Circularity: How Socio-Spatial Conditions Shape Grassroots Initiatives

Grassroots circular initiatives contribute to more sustainable and caring cities through practices of sharing, reuse, repair and community engagement. Yet their capacity to thrive depends not only on what they do, but also on the spaces they inhabit. How do spatial conditions enable or constrain grassroots circularity? Drawing on a comparative study of 23 grassroots initiatives in Gothenburg, Sweden, this paper explores how different socio-spatial configurations shape their everyday activities and possibilities for practice. The analysis identifies five recurring socio-spatial situations and highlights how the fit between initiatives and their spatial conditions can either support or undermine their sustainability. The findings reveal how limited access to

suitable spaces places additional burdens on grassroots actors and restricts their capacity to generate societal value. We discuss the implications for urban planning and policy, arguing for approaches that recognise space as a resource for collective and societal value creation rather than merely an economic asset.

Søren Christensen

Copenhagen Business School

"Gentle" green gentrification and infrastructures of care: Reordering care and urban green space in a stigmatised neighbourhood in a Nordic welfare city

This paper develops the concept of “gentle” green gentrification to unearth how state-led urban transformation mobilises urban greening to reconfigure resident-driven infrastructures of care in Copenhagen, a Nordic welfare city. As liveability has taken root as an urban policy ideal, planners across the Nordics and beyond have increasingly sought to cultivate it through urban greening, while community gardens are often imagined as fertile grounds from which social and ecological benefits grow. Both approaches to urban greening purport to promote care but do so through different registers. The paper analyses these interrelations between care and urban greening through a community garden in Tingbjerg, a redeveloping, territorially stigmatised neighbourhood. The analysis shows how residents enact an infrastructure of care through maintaining the garden, and how racialised state-led transformation promoting social mixing, urban greening, and sustainable welfare urbanism threatens and transforms this infrastructure. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, photo elicitation, and document analysis, the paper highlights aporias of the neoliberal welfare state, showing how state-led transformation reworks infrastructures of care historically embedded in egalitarian welfare urbanism. Institutionalised forms of care can thereby render situated, resident-driven infrastructures of care expendable. This process is conceptualised as “gentle” green gentrification: a welfare-mediated form of urban transformation articulated through sustainability, social mixing, greening, and care, and enacted through the quiet reconfiguration of care and urban greening, shaping the conditions under which particular forms of care may take root while others are uprooted. The paper contributes to debates in postgrowth urban transformation, infrastructures of care, critical urban studies and planning by shifting analysis from the greening of urban space to the politics of the infrastructures that make urban life liveable in the first place.

Vera Sadovska & Yuliya Voytenko Palgan

Lund University; International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE), Lund University

Governing Food Sharing in Barcelona, Milan and Utrecht

Urban food governance is expected to address food insecurity, waste, social exclusion, and resilience. Food sharing initiatives (FSIs) can contribute to these goals, but their capacity to operate depends on the governance arrangements in which they are embedded. This article examines how governance modes shape the conditions under which FSIs operate, endure, and contribute to urban sustainability. Drawing on comparative qualitative case studies of Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht, the analysis focuses on actors, power, and rules. Barcelona is characterised primarily by self-governance: civic autonomy, neighbourhood embeddedness, and local legitimacy support responses to vulnerability, but initiatives depend heavily on voluntary labour and insecure spaces. Milan reflects closed co-governance, where recognised coalitions, infrastructure, and municipal coordination support food redistribution and access but privilege initiatives aligned with policy and philanthropic priorities. Utrecht illustrates open co-governance across health, green space, circular economy, welfare and neighbourhood development, but fragmented support limits continuity.

The article uses governance modes not only to classify arrangements but to evaluate how they shape the resources, recognition, and autonomy available to FSIs. Beyond 2030, urban authorities and their partners need to balance coordination, flexibility, and autonomy while recognising diverse forms of value, care, and participation.

Francesca Forno

University of Trento, Italy

The sound of silence? Grassroots mobilisation, quiet sustainability and democratic provisioning

Drawing on more than two decades of research in Italy on political consumerism and sustainable community movement organisations (SCMOs), this paper traces a shift from the "power of the shopping bag" to democratic provisioning. It argues that the transformative potential of political consumerism lies not primarily in redirecting individual demand towards more ethical products, but in making needs, resources and economic relations a matter of collective deliberation and action.

Grassroots initiatives such as Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) emerged at the intersection of protest and everyday consumption, shifting political action "from the streets to the shops". Through collective purchasing, mutual support and long-term cooperation with producers, they create infrastructures of care and laboratories of commoning, where needs and responsibilities are negotiated rather than left to individual preferences or market coordination. However, this path reveals persistent paradoxes. Alternatives may be absorbed into market niches or depoliticised as ethical lifestyles; participation requires time, skills and economic security; and organisational continuity often depends on cores of committed members. Despite their inclusive aspirations, these practices can reproduce inequalities and remain concentrated among privileged groups.

Consequently, grassroots organisations increasingly tend to move beyond self-organised alternatives and collaborate with public institutions. Through what we call "scaling through", they seek to reshape the rules and infrastructures through which everyday needs are met, pursuing institutional change rather than mere organisational growth. Although this process generates new tensions, it also opens up the possibility of public–commons partnerships centred on shared objectives.

The paper argues that democratic postgrowth transformation depends on linking three often-separate spheres: politically organised grassroots initiatives, public institutions and forms of "quiet sustainability". Everyday practices of thrift, repair, care and mutual aid are rarely framed as environmental activism, yet already underpin less resource-intensive ways of life. Linking these practices can broaden the social base of grassroots transformation while safeguarding it from political marginalisation and market incorporation.

Maike Melles

Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences

Consumerist Contradictions: To the pre-emptive rescue of food and the market

Since they first appeared around ten years ago, neighbourhood cupboards (buurtkastjes) and neighbourhood fridges (buurtkoelkasten) for food sharing have become widespread in the Netherlands. The cupboards and fridges, which are usually found in front of private or public buildings or in communal areas such as market squares and parks, are set up and maintained by individuals or charitable organizations. However, everyone is encouraged to get involved by stocking them with food and sanitary products and/or by visiting them to supply themselves with the donated goods. The buurtkastjes movement has been a major success in the Netherlands and now counts more than 500 neighbourhood cupboards, alongside a growing number of fridges. What is particular about these Dutch grassroots initiatives, however, is their dual aim of addressing both food waste

and food insecurity. On the one hand, participants are motivated to reduce food wastage at home and are alarmed by the food waste generated throughout the food supply chain. On the other hand, they engage critically with the fact that people in need of food support are often relegated to a secondary food landscape consisting of products that are “visibly substandard or otherwise undesirable” (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005, 184). This leads to a peculiar form of sourcing food for donation: pre-emptive food rescue, which involves the purchasing special offers from supermarkets to share with the users of the mini cupboards and fridges. This talk therefore examines how neighbourhood food-sharing initiatives challenge the stigmatizing effects of food insecurity not by challenging supermarket provisioning itself, but by extending supermarket standards of food quality and desirability into alternative systems of provision. This creates a contradictive moral economy in which efforts to redistribute food and restore recipients' dignity simultaneously reproduce the consumer norms through which food is differentiated and valued.

Petr Jehlička

Institute of Sociology, Department of Local and Regional Studies, Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences

Czech and Chinese urban food practices as an already existing sustainability: Insights from two epistemic peripheries

Drawing on long-term research on food self-provisioning in Central and Eastern Europe and a recent exploratory study of these practices in China, the presentation argues for embracing a greater diversity of notions of sustainability. These include the already-existing everyday behaviours and routines that mainstream sustainability scholarship tends to sideline in favour of technological and market-based innovations. Rather than prioritising one over the other, the presentation advocates placing innovations and the maintenance of ‘what already works’ on equal footing. The presentation highlights how large sections of the Czech and Chinese urban populations (millions and hundreds of millions, respectively) engage in the informal production, sharing, and consumption of non-certified organic food, thereby fostering social cohesion and communication. In the sphere of public policy, these widespread everyday sustainable practices are vulnerable to oversight or devaluation by the authorities that champion niche eco-modernist initiatives. There is a risk that the losses in sustainability outcomes due to the authorities’ marginalisation of already-existing and widespread sustainable practices may outweigh the gains brought about by future-oriented sustainability innovations.

Anastasia Zisakou, Blanca Callén & Patrik Zapata

Autonomous University of Barcelona, University of Gothenburg

What counts as value? Negotiating quantification and community values in grassroots initiatives

Grassroots repair and reuse initiatives are increasingly required to demonstrate environmental impact, reach and cost-effectiveness for public recognition and support. Yet much of what participants value (including learning, technological confidence, mutual aid, neighbourhood belonging and cultural change) develops relationally, unevenly and over extended periods that are difficult to standardize and measure. This paper examines how grassroots initiatives and local administrations negotiate what counts as value and evidence, and how these valuation practices shape the conditions under which grassroots circularity is supported. The paper draws on a qualitative study of circularity initiatives in Barcelona, Gothenburg and Nantes, based on interviews with municipal officers, grassroots organisers, participants and activists. It brings scholarship on quantification and the constitutive effects of performance measurement into dialogue with work on value pluralism and incommensurability. The findings show that the conflict cannot be reduced to a binary

opposition between quantitative and qualitative evaluation. Actors distinguish between counting outputs, attributing effects, comparing heterogeneous values and monetising public value. Standardised indicators allow evidence to circulate within administrative systems, but they privilege activities already captured by municipal infrastructures and can render decentralised grassroots work less visible. Short funding and reporting cycles are also misaligned with the slower temporality through which trust, skills and local embeddedness develop, while evaluation requirements consume part of the limited capacity through which value is produced. Grassroots actors do not simply reject measurement, but instead they sometimes employ indicators strategically for public pedagogy, institutional recognition and funding, while, at the same time, resisting measures that reduce their activity to numbers. Some municipal officers similarly mobilise situated knowledge to interpret figures and advocate for initiatives internally. The central problem, therefore, is not merely that community effects are “unquantifiable.” Rather, different forms of value become unequally visible and reliable depending on scale, administrative control and organisational form.

Michele Castrezzati

University of Trento

Scaling Through Friction

From the more conservative debates on sustainability transitions, to the more radical ones on post-growth, two streams are flowing through the valley of the ecosocial transition. The first sees prefigurative social movements (grassroots initiatives that build alternative economic relations in the here and now) beginning to engage, and in some cases directly collaborate, with the local state. The second, running through the literature on new and radical municipalism, sees municipalities themselves emerging as experimental actors. We sit at the confluence of these two streams, looking for new theory to interpret this landscape. This paper takes Station for Transformation (S4T), a case of collaboration between the Municipality of Rovereto and the civic collective La Foresta, to study the dynamic of “scaling through”, where a prefigurative movement actively engages with public institutions to provide decommodified goods. The paper's central theoretical contribution is treating this encounter as frictional rather than smooth. Drawing on Tsing's (2005; 2012) concept of friction, we explore how actors convene and collide over the shared management of a renovation project. We employ months of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and analysis of internal project documents to make frictions between the partners emerge inductively. The results presented here are preliminary since fieldwork is still underway.

Christian Koch

Halmstad University

Social Action - A Tourainian approach

Current global instability has prompted a wide range of reactions, both within and across organizations. One interpretation is that governments appear immobilized, which weakens the role of regulation as a driver for phasing out incumbent sociotechnical systems, highlighting the need for socially driven initiatives.
During the past three years, a notable form of resistance has taken shape within the Danish construction sector—understood broadly as the network of professionals, clients, firms, industry bodies, and public authorities. Some actors refer to research on planetary boundaries to argue for rapid and far-reaching change, while others challenge the legitimacy of Danish climate regulation, which still follows a reduction paradigm. Since 2021, it has become evident that industry can comply with existing rules without difficulty, largely because the required emission cuts are modest. As a result, legislation is frequently criticized for being

symbolic—setting comfortable targets that established actors can meet effortlessly and thereby upholding existing practices rather than transforming them.

In response, two collective movements have emerged. The “Beyond Reduction Roadmap” initiative attracted more than 900 supporters in 2023–24. In late 2024, the “Building Stop Movement” was founded and has since mobilized around 100 individual professionals advocating a temporary national halt to new build as well as long-term priorities of redistribution, renovation, and social justice.

These developments call for conceptualization. Several sociological and organizational frameworks are relevant. Touraines approach is adopted here. On an interorganizational level, Touraine (1981)’s view of social movements as grounded in opposing positions and shared experiences of injustice are important contributions. As further backdrop Schultz and Latour (2023)’s idea of an ecological class shaped by socialized climate concerns, and the work of Stahl, Ellersgaard, and Mulvad (2025) on climate-based class formations all offer useful lenses. Concepts such as collective institutional entrepreneurship (Hofherr 2014) reveal tendencies toward collective inaction, while organizational collective theories (Astley & Fombrun 1983; Frederiksen et al 2025) and intraorganizational analyses (Kornberger et al. 2025) bring the focus closer to everyday organizational dynamics.