

Strategies for a Networked Approach

Building intentional relationships and processes
to achieve transformational change in change-hesitant cities.

max stearns, Mélodie Caraty, Juan López-Aranguren Blázquez, Nadja Nickel

WHY A NETWORKED APPROACH

GLOSSARY

GOALS

STRATEGIES

ENABLING CONDITIONS

TL;DR

ABOUT DEMSOC

“Nos services internes sont habitués à travailler en silos, chacun sur ses propres projets et dans son propre domaine d’expertise. Force est de constater que cette façon de faire montre ses limites quand il s’agit de relever les défis environnementaux et sociaux d’aujourd’hui; il est temps de travailler de manière plus transversale, en recherchant des nouvelles façons de collaborer.”

“Our internal departments are used to working in silos, each one on its own projects and in its own area of expertise. This approach is showing its limits when it comes to facing today’s environmental and social challenges. It’s time for more cross-functional collaboration.”

-Civil Servant, Member of the Orléans Métropole’s Technical Team-

WHY A NETWORKED APPROACH

When it comes to advancing climate democracy, we believe in a Networked Approach.

This is a way to build impactful, purpose-driven relationships and processes around specific projects. These relationships and processes – developed and deployed authentically and strategically – allow collective work to emerge toward transformational systems change.

For us, our work in Madrid, ES, and Orléans, FR, reveals the tremendous value of this approach and the strategies that help achieve it. In each city, we are working toward climate democracy with governments that were initially hesitant about change. In spite of the initial hesitancy, we began by working with a few motivated individuals inside the city and metropole governments. Quickly, however, we recognised that any attempt to build momentum in isolation would not be enough – even with the institutional power of individuals within government. Instead, in these [change-hesitant cities](#), we needed ways to more collectively catalyse, mobilise, and sustain climate democracy.





What emerged are the **Strategies for a Networked Approach**. These strategies are not solutions, but ways of thinking, interacting, and working with others: humbly, intentionally, and collaboratively.

In technical terms, an effective and strategic Networked Approach looks like meaningfully inefficient processes to cultivate antifragile, purpose-driven, impact networks with the capacity to scaffold emergent configurations of climate democracy. (Ooph - Don't worry, we'll break this all down).

To put it more simply, the strategies are (some) ways to intentionally build genuine relationships around real projects with processes that allow transformational change to flourish and thrive.

Importantly, while the strategies were born out of complex and initially resistant cities, they can extend beyond those situations. For example, our collective experience at Democratic Society suggests the Strategies for a Networked Approach may show positive effects in courageous cities, already pursuing climate democracy, as well as in organisational and regional levels of action. In our future explorations of the strategies for a networked approach, we may dig deeper into these settings, but, here, we choose to focus on the challenging settings of cities with a reluctance to act. These are the cases where the most strategic and energetic action must be taken. For we can heighten the pace of those already acting, but we must enable those to act who have not yet already.

It is important to acknowledge we are not the first to recognise this kind of approach. Our aim, however, is to add our own hue to an already vibrant conversation about system transformation. We are eager to share how we've amended methods to the context of our own work and to contribute to further discussion and development of these ideas and practices.



GLOSSARY

Here are some of the existing ideas we're playing with, building on, and adapting in our own contexts.

Many of these words and phrases might feel like jargon; **we don't, necessarily, disagree**. And, yet, sometimes, words and phrases like these can be useful because they name something we've known to be true without the means to express it. They put a name on impactful work that is largely dismissed as insignificant because it doesn't have the jargon. By attributing the work of **relationship development, process design, authentic care, and genuine commitment to purpose** with language, we enable ourselves to argue for why this work is absolutely legitimate and highly consequential.

And, so, we will proceed with this "jargon" as the useful context, framing, and guard rails for our Strategies for a Networked Approach.

01. Meaningful Inefficiency

"Meaningful inefficiencies represent the design of systems" and processes that temporarily slow things down for the purpose of enabling shared meaning making. "The results . . . can be increased civic learning, reflection, empathy, and increased awareness of civic systems and their effects—which citizens can then leverage in creating new forms of action in the normal processes of civic life." Gordon, Eric, and Stephen Walter. 2019. "Meaningful Inefficiencies: Resisting the Logic of Technological Efficiency in the Design of Civic Systems."

02. Scaffolding

"Whether we call [it] a scaffold, a lattice, a platform, a culture, an infrastructure, a framework, a schema, or a rule set, the intent is the same: to design an intermediary framework that is not the thing itself [in this case, climate democracy], but the means by which many different configurations [of climate democracy] may emerge." Hunt, Jamer. 2020. Not to Scale: How the Small Becomes Large, the Large Becomes Unthinkable, and the Unthinkable Becomes Possible. Additions by author.

03. Antifragile

"Beyond resilience or robustness", antifragility is a property of artefacts, processes, and systems, which regenerate themselves "continuously by using, rather than suffering from, random events, unpredictable shocks, stressors, and volatility." Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. 2016. Antifragile: things that gain from disorder. (With addition from the author).

04. Purpose-Driven

Distinct from action inspired purely by obligation or transaction, purpose-driven action is an orientation to learn, collaborate, design, build, maintain, repair, and—most generally—act—based on the intrinsic meaningfulness of the act itself.

05. Emergence

"Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions." Nick Obolenksy (as referenced by adrienne maree brown brown in Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change and Changing Worlds. 2017.)

"In these systems, agents residing on one scale start producing behaviour that lies one scale above them: ants create colonies; urbanites create neighbourhoods," citizens create climate democracy. Johnson, Stephen. 2006. Emergence: the connected lives of ants, brains, cities, and software. New York: Scribner. (With addition from the author).

06. Impact Networks

Neither "spontaneous or accidental", . . . these networks deliberately connect people and organizations together to promote learning and action on an issue of common concern. " Ehrlichman, David. 2021. Impact Networks: Creating Connection, Sparking Collaboration, and Catalyzing Systemic Change.

07. Systems Change

"Systems change is about shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place." Kania, John, Mark Kramer, Peter Senge. 2018. The Water of Systems Change. FSG. www.fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change.

08. Climate Democracy

Climate democracy is the entanglement of two, perpetual processes. Democracy enables everyone to participate in the imagination, creation, and repair, and maintenance of their joint future. It entails having a say in shaping the democratic infrastructure that allows us to collectively thrive. Climate action is a process by which individual, collective, and systemic decisions are made to nurture and ensure the possibility of an ongoing future on this planet.



Climate action enables us a future and democracy allows it to be a future for all. It is both metaphorical and actual [rooted collaboration](#), which affords equitable, thrivable futures for all. Thus, advancing climate democracy today, affords climate democracy tomorrow.

09. Courageous Cities

Some city governments demonstrate the effect transformational courage can have. They are trying new strategies, acting with their citizens, and trusting them as capable partners, all while developing ingenious configurations of climate democracy. This is courage to act—albeit with imperfect information and uncertainty about exact outcomes—so they can learn, adjust and respond to the climate emergency democratically.

10. Change-Hesitant Cities

Many city governments are risk averse. Others are outright resistant to change. Whether this is because of political, operational, or historical reasons, these governments will not act unless action is made necessary, by external or internal pressure or rationale. We are not naïve to the realities and risks that political turnover has on governance and municipal management. Nevertheless, hesitancy or

resistance must be only part of the journey, not the end, and it is important to find ways to mobilise action even in settings that are hesitant to act.

11. Change-Makers

Individuals within a government, who may not have the title of chief or director, but with the motivation and authority (or permission) to leverage the institutional power of the government to design and advance participatory projects. These individuals can be found in both courageous as well as hesitant cities. A Networked Approach multiplies the effectiveness of these individuals.

12. Network Cultivators

Occasionally, a change-maker is also a network cultivator: an individual who—by strength of character and relational competencies—is uniquely able to facilitate genuine connections, grow relationships, and responsibly and thoughtfully support the pruning of networks. Often, however, these network cultivators are individuals or organisations outside the bounds of city government with existing, deeply rooted connections around, across, and throughout the city.

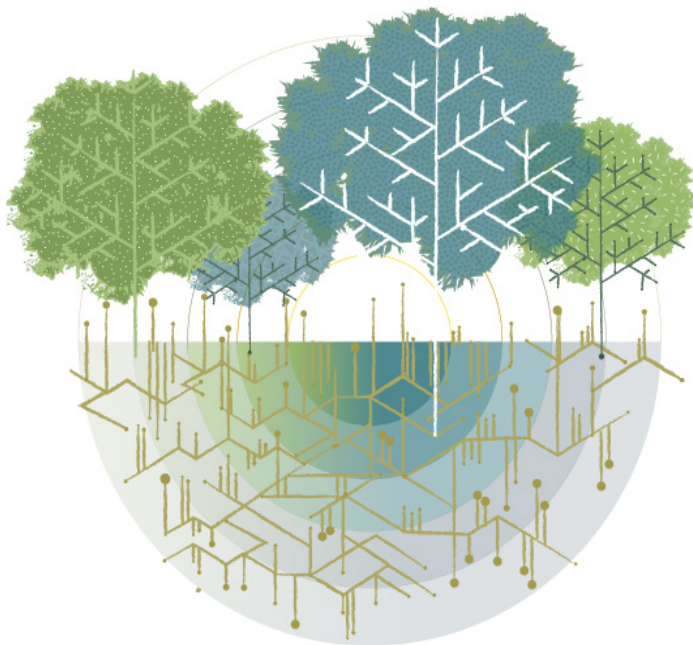
GOALS

Two goals often come to mind when engaging in the work toward climate democracy.

Foremost, there is the goal of **system transformation**: to establish, advance, and actualize climate democracy and climate democracy practices. This goal is as ambitious as it can feel ambiguous. It offers visionary purpose, but, generally, lacks the tangibility to feel immediately achievable. Nevertheless, it offers inspiration and a vision for what an ongoing process toward climate democracy might be.

The other pressing goal is **project success**. Rarely is our work done in the absence of a project. These are important because they offer actionable opportunities to enact change in tangible ways. Moreover, these projects can act like windows, through which we can glimpse and touch elements of the systems we seek to change. By engaging at the project level, we find the entry points and tangible opportunities for action that can have systemic impact. That said, the scale and singular nature of projects can make them feel too constrained to affect the kind of change we are driven to make with our first goal: climate democracy.

What makes the Networked Approach so effective is that it offers an intermediary, enabling goal: **scaffolding**. With a Networked Approach, an impact network can be cultivated around a project—with a two or three year time horizon—to facilitate the emergence of ongoing, intergeneration efforts to actualize climate democracy. While change may be gradual, a Networked Approach offers ways to tangibly enact climate democracy at expanding scales. This includes shifts in forms and approaches of governance, expansions of acknowledged and demanded skills and capacities, new visions, adopted senses of shared purpose, cross-city culture change, and, frequently, more quality projects from which climate democracy can be tangibly actualized.



Root systems begin by supporting a single tree, a mushroom, a dandelion. These roots nourish the plant's growth and ecological contributions. But, as time goes on, these roots expand and weave and grow themselves. And in so doing, the roots become underpinning, interconnected, communicating and collaborative. They become networks of networks and systems of systems by which a full forest can become interdependent, flourish, and thrive.

Like the roots of a plant, a networked approach facilitates the success of a single project. But, the approach—and the strategies by which it can be achieved—cultivates the interconnected impact networks necessary to enable emergent and ongoing opportunities toward systems transformation; toward a climate democracy that can become interdependent, flourish, and thrive.



We can think about each of these goals operating at three levels: Micro, Mezzo, and Macro. If we focus only on the micro level goal (project success) we may successfully deploy the project, but this achievement will not unlock any other goals. Likewise, if we only focus on the macro level goal (systems transformation), we may actually sacrifice our capacity to make a planned, tangible impact. But, by focusing on the mezzo level (the scaffolding), we can cultivate the people, organisations, tools, processes, and networks, which are uniquely capable and necessary to achieve success at the level of project design, deployment, and learning as well as toward advancing climate democracy.

LEVEL	DESCRIPTION
Micro Goal Project Success	We aim to design, deploy, and learn from a tightly scoped participatory climate action project we've co-designed with change-makers.
Mezzo Goal Scaffolding	We aim to cultivate the scaffolding necessary to enable the participatory climate action project to flourish into different emergent and antifragile configurations of climate democracy.
Macro Goal System Transformation	To establish, advance, and actualize climate democracy and climate democracy practices.

STRATEGIES

“Establecer alianzas duraderas con otros profesionales, instituciones y comunidades es imprescindible si queremos dar (y diseñar) un servicio público adaptado a las necesidades de hoy día.”

“Establishing lasting alliances with other professionals, institutions and communities is essential if we want to provide a public service adapted to today’s needs.”

-Member of the Madrid Working Group-

We have learned how we pursue the goals of the Strategies for a Networked Approach is what determines whether we will achieve them at all. In this sense, **how we make our impact becomes the impact we make.**

This is a process-oriented approach, with a heavy reliance on the value of meaningful inefficiencies: seemingly disruptive or ‘un-practical’ designations of time in a project process for participatory meaning making, learning, disagreement, and action.

This meaningfully inefficient process allows us to cultivate antifragile, purpose-driven impact networks that can scaffold emergent configurations of climate democracy. **This necessitates, at least, four, high-level strategies:**

The first strategy for a Networked Approach is to foster a shared sense of purpose.

Strategy #1	Description
<p>Foster a <u>Shared Sense of Purpose</u></p>	<p>Embed the project, the partnerships, and process with a collectively discussed and determined purpose. This purpose is why you even have a project, why you are working with the individuals and organisations you are, and why carrying out the process in a particular way matters. This purpose should be reflected in both the details and agreements of the project and in the way relationships are developed and cared for.</p>
Examples	
Madrid	Orléans
<p>To support the design of portfolios for the <u>EIT Climate-KIC Madrid Deep Demonstration</u>, we brought together individuals from the university, foundations, local entities, and the city administration, including individuals from different departments.</p> <p>We gathered these people and organisations around a shared vision towards a climate neutral city.</p> <p>Once there was enough of a shared sense of purpose between participants, we added more actors to the group. Participants split into groups to address concrete challenges. Coordination meetings allowed us to keep track and not lose focus.</p>	<p>With the support of Democratic Society, the <u>Orléans Métropole underwent an Assises</u> process—a participatory, multistakeholder process. Its purpose was to identify and establish a shared sense of purpose for the concrete actions to meet the Metropole’s climate objectives through a participatory approach. Workshops and meetings were organised across public agents over several months.</p> <p>This way of working internally was new for the Metropole’s agents.</p>

A shared sense of purpose enables you to identify and gather the folks necessary to cultivate impact networks.

Strategy #2	Description
<p>Cultivate Impact Networks</p>	<p>Create a network of genuine, complementary relationships, which link transdisciplinary capabilities and resources from across a city to act in unison toward a shared purpose. This is a network geared toward action and capable of integrating the skills, people, practices, and processes necessary to deliver on the project while, simultaneously, scaffolding climate democracy.</p>
Examples	
Madrid	Orléans
<p>In Madrid, it was understood that regulatory frameworks are hindering progress towards climate democracy. In order to address the complex nature of regulations, different actors formed a working group to address the challenge with a multitude of different perspectives and experiences. The working group carried out interviews with different actors inside and outside the city administration. Findings were systematised to understand the main ideas, challenges and possible next steps. The working group held three workshops with experts across sectors to achieve agreement on priorities and define a strategy on how to overcome barriers. A joint calendar helped to highlight opportunities and work towards milestones.</p> <p>The process was led by a group of 5 organisations and experts from inside and outside the city administration. The workshops were attended by more than 40 experts.</p>	<p>In Orléans, a Participation Task Force (PTF) was created in order to ensure that stakeholder engagement and citizen participation was at the heart of the Assises process.</p> <p>The members of the PTF changed on a regular basis depending on current affairs and agenda. Different Departments of the Metropole were represented i.e Innovation, Culture, Environment, Strategic policy, and Participation.</p>

Given that enabling conditions have been put in place, you can take action with your impact networks to enable emergent impacts to flourish.

Strategy #3	Description
<p>Enable Emergent Impacts to Flourish</p>	<p>By cultivating impact networks and establishing enabling conditions (see below), we can enable relatively simple interactions within and across the impact networks to have emergent and evolving impacts toward climate democracy.</p> <p>In addition to the enabling conditions, we are aware of, at least, two additional enabling efforts that are profoundly important in this regard.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Encourage the change-maker(s) to learn and reflect with their impact networks. The additional insight they gain enables these change-makers to accelerate their ability to improvise and innovate throughout the project process while expanding their capacity to respond to the project and process complexities in introspective and creative ways. This makes them more capable to respond to emergent opportunities to advance climate democracy. 2. Enable the project, process, and impact network to facilitate proximity to the people—particularly people whose experience, imagination, and intersectional understanding of problems differs from those most commonly involved in government decision making. This proximity is important because it ensures the project has the meaningful interactions, input, and buy-in necessary for the project to have a positive and sustained impact. Moreover, This it also establishes a far reaching, meaningful, networked connection to the shared purpose of the work. This allows for additional climate democracy decisions, cultures, and actions to be scaffolded.
Examples	
Madrid	Orléans
<p>One of the Madrid portfolios focused, specifically, on nature-based solutions. In order to make the conceptual proposal a reality, a focus was put on a specific project: Ecología a Pié de Barrio. The project's aim was for schools to measure air and water quality in their area. To design and test the prototypes additional actors joined the project's working group, such as local associations, a university and a foundation. Partners brought in capacity, skills or resources, depending on their ability. Setting a clear purpose and vision for the project helped to implement the project. The partnership was built on high levels of trust, shared power and responsibilities. The project is now ready to incorporate new stakeholders and expand the prototypes created.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) In Orléans, several CSOs' reps argued that they were not consulted in the design of the Assises process. The Head of Environment decided to meet them - with the support of Demsoc staff- and she offered them the opportunity to facilitate 2 extra workshops regarding transition governance with citizens, elected officials and stakeholders. 2) Since citizen and stakeholder engagement was meant to be at the heart of the Assises process, it was decided that each public agent in charge of a core issue (food, waste, energy, etc) should be trained on collective intelligence and how to facilitate workshops with a group of very diverse persons. Those training sessions were identified as key in order to improve the confidence of each civil servant in their ability to facilitate workshops with citizens (capacity-building) and therefore participate in the Assises process itself. A few months later, the creation of a School of Transition was validated to train 3600 public agents to transition in its 3 dimensions: 1) relationships with residents/citizens 2) climate 3) New ways of working and doing things. The School of Transition is co-designed by a representative group of public agents (ie: from policemen to elected officials).

But these networks and the emergent impacts are at risk of devolving into nothing if you do not design with (a sufficient degree of) antifragility.

Strategy #4	Description	
Design with (a sufficient degree of) <u>Antifragility</u>	<p>Change-hesitant cities are volatile settings; Social movements can generate momentum, as can early project success, but political leanings and politicians can shift and pandemics can hit. The world is uncertain and in such uncertainty, the wisest thing we can do, as we facilitate systems transformation, is design impact networks in such a way as to be sufficiently antifragile.</p> <p>This means connecting and establishing complementary, distributed, and redundant change-makers. These are generally other individuals or teams within or outside city government. This complementarity, decentralisation, and redundancy ensures the impact networks have enough foundational security to maintain emergent momentum. Even if something happens to one change maker—like taking a new job or a shift in responsibilities—the emergence toward climate democracy can continue.</p>	
Examples		
	Madrid	Orléans
<p>In Madrid, a specific project aimed at co-designing nature-based solutions along with citizens in different places of a neighbourhood. Four schools, a foundation, three local associations and more than four departments of the city were brought together to work in the same neighbourhood. The goal was to connect actors that are currently working in the territory with the resources of the city and vice versa.</p> <p>This allows partners to come together behind a common action plan, but in doing so we enrich, consolidate and strengthen local champions and change makers that are trying to achieve systemic change.</p>		<p>In Orléans, by doing things differently - i.e., co-designing the process internally in a transversal way and strengthening individuals' capabilities - some political representatives had challenges accepting a modification of the ways processes are usually handled in the Metropole. They could block the process at any time and partners and civil servants got very worried on how things will turn for the Assises process, especially in the absence of a key change-maker who was away for a few weeks. But finally the Assises took place, and at the final event, in September 2021, the Mayor validated the creation of a hybrid citizen committee to follow up the Assises recommendations. A thing that was unbelievable a few months earlier.</p> <p>This shift probably comes from the fact that the entire Metropole was already engaged in the process (civil servants, urban stakeholders and civil society organisations), and some elected officials kept on believing in the process, all of them creating a sufficient counter-power.</p>

ENABLING CONDITIONS

“La adaptación de los técnicos del ayuntamiento no pasa únicamente por incorporar conocimientos nuevos si no por aprender nuevas formas de hacer y crear nuevas redes que nos ayuden a afrontar los retos actuales, conectarse con el afuera es indispensable.”

““The adaptation of the city council technicians does not only involve incorporating new knowledge, but also learning new ways of doing things and creating new networks that help us face current challenges. Connecting with the outside world is essential.”

-Member of the Madrid Working Group-

In order to have a process which actually can achieve all four strategic activities, there are some key enabling conditions which should be established.

Build on Tangible Factors:

» **A Defined Project Scope with Clear, Shared Vision(s) and Commitments**

Projects are developed to address particular problems. The problems a project is developed to address tend to be the tangible elements of more sophisticated, intangible systemic challenges. Yet, the tangibility of the project gives it a concreteness and approachability in a way that systems change, in the abstract, does not.

It is, therefore, essential that project partners work closely with the change-maker(s) to develop a project that has a well defined scope. This includes developing early clarity regarding the shared vision(s), partner commitments, timelines, and what the shared sense of purpose is.

» **Malleable, but Authentic Checkpoints, i.e., Deliverables and Milestones**

Achieving precise project deliverables and milestones is often posed as an essential characteristic of a successful project. But, this kind of deployment of deliverables and milestones misses the point.

Rather than determinative steps in a successful process, deliverables and milestones can be authentic, collective checkpoints for reflection and reorientation. They are an opportunity to reflexively reassess whether a particular deliverable or milestone actually advances project success and emergence toward system transformation. And, if they are malleable, they can be redesigned and deployed to align with the shared sense of trajectory toward climate democracy.

Build in Intangible Considerations:

» **A Process-Oriented**

It's not just about where you're going, but how you get there

We engage in meaningfully inefficient processes that enable the evolutionary, adaptive, and ephemeral nature of networks to organically extend the impact of a project from the micro to the macro levels. These are processes motivated by a shared, generally non-transactional, sense of purpose and enabled by clear, honest, and authentic communication and care.

» **Impact Sensemaking**

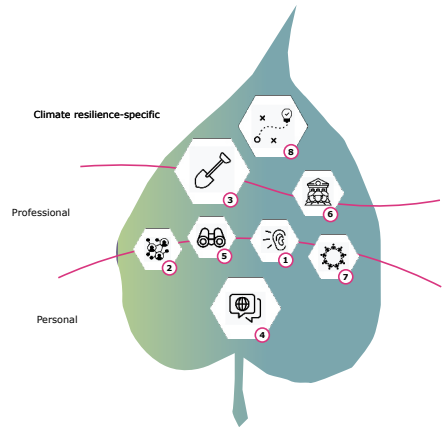
Discovery-based planning amidst an uncertain and ambiguous trajectory

Establishing mechanisms for ongoing, collective learning is an absolutely critical condition for deploying the Strategies for a Networked Approach. The right deliverables, the right strategy, the right methods cannot be known in advance. A discovery-based, impact sensemaking approach enables change-makers and project partners to develop iterative plans for learning and responding to what needs to be known to enable success on all three levels of goals, from project success to system transformation.

» **Relational Competencies**

Build, sustain, and, sometimes, end genuine relationships

The Strategies for a Networked Approach necessitate deep care, emotional intelligence, and nuance. They need the presence of maturity and interpersonal wisdom to build, sustain, and sometimes end genuine relationships. These competencies are fundamental to develop and scaffold impact networks, with authentic commitment and shared sense of purpose. This is where a Network Cultivator—an individual inside or outside of city government with existing, deeply rooted connections around, across, and throughout the city—may be most essential.



» **Collective Self-Awareness**

Be vulnerable enough to acknowledge current limitations and curious to find those actors who can support

To afford diverse and complementary impact networks it is essential to practice collective self-awareness and vulnerability. This allows the network to be mindful of its cumulative experiences and assets when working together. It also offers the network the capacity to be conscientious of its limitations. Acknowledging these gaps and practising vulnerability, i.e., not hiding but being open about these limitations, enables the network to more effectively find and build relationships with those who can add perspective, ability, experience, and imagination.

» **Cultures of Courage**

Go beyond risk tolerance to enable a culture of transformational courage

To achieve climate democracy, we need more than a willingness to tolerate risk. Risk tolerance centres the risk rather than the emergent opportunity or enabling efforts that can be taken. The Strategies for a Networked Approach conscientiously build courage at the relational level and nurture a culture of transformational courage across the impact networks.



TL;DR (To Long; Didn't Read)

In change-hesitant cities, Strategies for a Networked Approach can catalyse and sustain ongoing shifts toward climate democracy. These strategies respond to clearly defined city projects—designed with change-makers—to build purpose-driven, emergent impact networks. These networks grow to support and expand the reach of those change-makers and enhance the systems impacts of the initial projects. Simultaneously, these networks adapt to inevitable, yet unpredictable, changes in a city by introducing uniquely capable and connected, redundant change-makers across the city. These kinds of impact networks enable a sustained, evolving, and regenerative shift toward climate democracy.

This article introduces and explores the goals, strategies, enabling conditions, and examples of a Networked Approach by means of learnings that have been gained by the work Democratic Society has done in Orléans, FR, and Madrid, ES.



ABOUT DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Democratic Society works for greater participation and dialogue in democracy.

Democratic Society is Europe's leading international democracy organisation, supporting our cities and citizens to ensure that radical climate transformation is a democratic, not just a technocratic process. Through democratic design, organisational development and practical participation exercises, we build long-term citizens participation in all the decisions, plans and projects that affect them.

Democratic Society is a networked organisation, and we draw on the talent and experience of an international team to support each city. Through we, they bring in specialist advice, learn from other cities facing similar challenges, and promote the city's innovations worldwide.

demsoc.org

twitter.com/demsoc

linkedin.com/company/the-democratic-society