

DANUBE

FUTURE

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KEYNOTE ESSAY

CRISTIAN IAIONE

CO-CITIES –
INNOVATIVE TRANSITIONS TOWARDS JUST AND SELF-SUSTAINING
COMMUNITIES

In his keynote at Danube Future Works #2: New Governing Models on the Danube, the public-law scholar Christian Iaione argued that democracy survives only if the capacity to govern is shared more widely, and that cities are the place to begin. His talk ran from a diagnosis of weakened democratic institutions, through a theory of the commons, to concrete Italian experiments, and ended with a warning about European funding priorities.

AN OPENING JOKE AND A SERIOUS POINT

Iaione began lightly. While preparing, he had learned that Ivano-Frankivsk, now in Ukraine, belongs to the Danube region under the Interreg programme. His grandmother came from that city, then part of Poland, and later studied medicine in Naples, so he declared himself a quarter citizen of the Danube region. He then turned the joke into a point about cooperation. The Danube region has brought many sovereign states under one framework, while in Rome he struggles to make the Lazio Region, the City of Rome, the local district and the health agencies cooperate on a single project. Governance, he concluded, is not about the result of a multi-stakeholder agreement but about the dynamics of cooperation itself.

THE PROBLEM: CONCENTRATED AND CAPTURED POWER

For a public-law scholar, moving from government towards governance means enabling many actors to recognize their common interest. Iaione was trained, and trains his students, in the premise that the sovereign state is the sole holder of power. This is “Administrative Law 101”: government holds authoritative power and can change the destiny of others without their consent. He asked how far this remains from the truth today.

His answer was that the design principle persists while its reality has eroded, because governments are now often in the hands of private interests. His example was seven CEOs holding their grip on the president of the world’s most important democracy. He recalled friends in the United States mocking Italy over Berlusconi and conceded that Italian democratic quality was low. Yet he had also witnessed the 2000 US election between Al Gore and George W. Bush and concluded that “this democracy was a joke.” Every democracy, he said, can become one if it loses sight of the common interest.

THE CO-CITY: GOVERNING THE CITY AS A COMMONS

This diagnosis, sharpened by the years when Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain were labelled the PIGS over public debt, prompted his project. Greece paid the highest price and now has everything privatized. He wanted to rethink government through governance so that more subjects share the possibility of holding power.

His theoretical anchor was Elinor Ostrom's work on the governance of the commons, which concerns the cooperative stewardship of social-ecological systems and natural resources. His contribution was to apply it and show that it could be tested. Since he could not remove Berlusconi himself, he chose cities as the arena and asked what would happen if urban governance were treated as a commons. With Sheila Foster, now at the Columbia Climate School, he developed a framework for governing the city as a commons, the idea he and his colleagues call the Co-City. They started small, with what is closest to inhabitants, to "activate the synapses" that let people see themselves as agents of governance.

THE TRANSITION LADDER: FROM SHARING TO SELF-SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES

laione described a gradient of rising complexity, along which a community gradually becomes able to sustain itself.

Sharing. In Bologna, about fifteen years ago, inhabitants began co-managing basic infrastructure such as benches, parks, squares and community gardens. Legal tools called "simple pacts of collaboration" enabled collective action and self-organization. This was a novelty then, before placemaking and tactical urbanism became common, because city governments did not relinquish power in everyday management. Resistance came not only from politicians, for whom power is like the ring in *The Lord of the Rings*, but from civil servants, who work through administrative acts that exercise administrative power. Yet since civil servants outlast political cycles, he argued, they should be the ones enabling democratic governance. Citing a remark from earlier in the conference about children's right to govern, he suggested that civil servants must come to see that they are parents too.

Collaboration. The second level applied the same design to abandoned buildings. Cities hold thousands of idle housing units because private owners will not renovate and public owners cannot afford to manage them or prefer to sell, while inhabitants want social infrastructure. "Complex pacts of collaboration" let participants take responsibility for such assets, but only with a business model that makes them self-sustaining. Otherwise civil servants will refuse to hand them over, since government wants them off its balance sheet without bearing maintenance and utility costs. Here the ideal of self-sustaining communities becomes a practical condition.

Polycentric partnerships. At the most complex level, laione calls for public-private-community partnerships. The private sector he means is the local one: small and medium-sized enterprises, shops and merchants who form the fabric, ingenuity and identity of a neighborhood. He contrasted them with externally financed actors who care little whether the centre of Rome resembles those of Paris, Tokyo or New York. Because such projects demand heavy technical expertise, universities, research centres and foundations should act as advisors, supplying the financial, legal and political engineering that city administrations lack. He did not expect the Big Four consultancies to support this work any time soon. Technology, such as community-based mobility and digital services, comes into play at this stage.

THREE TRANSITIONS IN PRACTICE

laione then turned from theory to practice, with examples of ecological, social and institutional transition.

In Castellana Grotte, a town of 20,000 in Puglia, he is working with the University of Salento on a recirculating aquaponics system that reuses treated wastewater to produce vegetables and fish. The region faces water scarcity by 2040. He warned that southern Italy, and even Rome, is drifting towards drought through rising temperatures and leaking distribution networks, with very little being done. Students from a local technical school are collaborating with university students, and the project is moving towards a cooperative spin-off involving the municipality, the university, the publicly owned water utility Acquedotto Pugliese and the Puglia Region. Publicly owned utilities, he suggested, including Germany's RWE, could be enablers of such projects.

At Santa Maria della Pietà in Rome, the largest former psychiatric hospital in Europe, more than forty pavilions, mostly regenerated through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, now need activities. Cooperation among the City of Rome, the Lazio Region and the health agency remains hard. The plan is a socio-cultural hub with a community restaurant using produce from the adjoining agricultural park, in the Agro Romano that once fed the ancient city. Its income would support two pavilions for incubating social enterprises, community cooperatives and solidarity-economy initiatives, while a smaller pavilion would host educational and social programmes. With the School of Medicine at Sapienza University, he aims to build an innovation hub for planetary health that integrates animal, human and social health through the concept of the exposome, treating individuals across their whole life exposure rather than only their disease.

Reggio Emilia is where he innovated most in legal tools. The Regulation on Urban Democracy and Climate Justice creates innovation and sustainable-development partnerships in which social organizations repay not through money but through measured impact, tracked in a community balance. This lets government show its accountants savings in areas such as healthcare and security. The city also created a City Science Office, a partnership of local, national and foreign universities that test ideas in specific neighborhoods when these serve local needs, and introduced a new district geography. It builds as well on Loris Malaguzzi's pedagogy of putting children in the driver's seat, stewarded by the Reggio Children Foundation.

LIMITATIONS AND RISKS FOR A JUST TRANSITION

laione devoted his closing section to limitations. He saw the Danube work as coherent with the EU Agenda for Cities and its emphasis on civil-society collaboration. He praised the New European Bauhaus (NEB), especially its stress on community-driven investment, but noted that delivery so far has consisted of prizes and projects. It must show more effectively that "togetherness is beautiful" and that sustainability can deliver solutions for vulnerable communities.

What frightens him most is the battle in Brussels over the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034). A large share of an EU budget of almost two trillion is shifting towards security, defense and resilience, with even schools being drawn into readiness strategies. Describing himself as a hacker rather than a revolutionary, he urged engagement over absence. The NEB could become a Trojan horse, framed as delivering security, resilience and dual-use capacity while steering funds back towards cohesion

and community-led innovation. Otherwise the next framework may be entirely about competitiveness and security, and the Cohesion Fund, a key source for such projects, might be recentralized to the governments of the 27 Member States. Horizon Europe is the other source, yet in its Cities Mission he found Southern and Eastern European cities systematically overlooked, with hardly an Italian city south of Rome. A more level playing field is needed, and working at Danube and Mediterranean scale through the Interreg approach is one way to counter the imbalance.

Further limits are insufficient investment and the need for more sophisticated technical skills inside city governments, which civil servants should be helped to build. Finally, the geographical imbalance has political consequences. Citing the urban geographer Andrés Rodríguez-Pose of the London School of Economics, Iaione linked the ineffectiveness of development funds to the rise of populism through the “development trap.”