Appraisal of the new wave of commons in the light of Polanyi's double movement: a case study of newly established commons in Belgium

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to document and assess the new wave of commons in Belgium. Although the focus of the paper is mainly empirical, we frame our interest in the commons through Karl Polanyi's notion of the 'double movement'. This notion has been used widely over the past two decades to analyse the neoliberal disembedding of the globalized economy and the range of counter-movements this has triggered across the world over the past decades (Altvater & Mahnkopf 1997; McMichael 2005). According to Frazer (2011: 139), what "we call today *neo*liberalism [is] nothing but the second coming of the very same 19th century faith in the 'self-regulated' market' that unleashed the capitalist crisis Polanyi chronicled." As Polanyi (1944: 138) explained in *The Great Transformation*, the double movement "can be personified as the action of two organizing principles in society", with the one being "the principle of economic liberalism, aiming at the establishment of a self-regulating market", while the other is "the principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature as well as productive organization"[2].

Also Stiglitz (2001: vii) emphasises the actual relevance of Polanyi in his foreword to the 2011 edition of *The Great Transformation*: "His arguments – and its concerns are consonant with the issues raised by the rioters and marchers who took to the streets in Seattle and Prague in 1999 and 2000 to oppose the international financial institutions." In the same way other scholars saw at the turn of the century the emergence of a new and international movement that includes a wide range of resistances, against corporate power, free trade and international financial institutions, privatisation of public utilities and nature, etc. (Eschle 2004). At the time of massive street protests and the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, the destructive force of the markets was quite a central theme in many anti-globalisation critiques. And although there was wide consensus within the movement that alternatives to global marketisation were both possible and necessary, there was no unifying concept to 'name' these alternatives. The commons, for example, were mentioned by some, but not widely shared as a guiding principle to fashion alternatives. Interestingly, the well-known anti-globalisation writer and activist Naomi Klein (2001: 82) used at that time 'reclaiming the commons' as a phrase to indicate what unites this 'movement of the movements' and uses the concept to include all that is threatened by enclosures: "The spirit they share is a radical reclaiming of the commons. As our communal spaces – town squares, streets, schools, farms, plants – are displace by the ballooning marketplace, a spirit of resistance is talking hold around the world."

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[2] Whereas the theory of Polanyi is still a powerful analytical frame, scholars rightly argue it needs adaptation to our current times. So, we should avoid reductive economism and avoid romanticizing society (Frazer 2011), be aware that Polanyi does not provide us with superior prognostics (Novy, 2017) and acknowledge that the nation-state in the 21st century has less regulating power than in the post-war 20th century (Bugra and Agartan 2007).

The anti-globalisation movement suffered a serious setback after the 9/11 attacks, reducing seriously the space for protests. As described by an active member of the anti-globalisation movement, the movement could be considered as a 'political casualty of 9/11', although this does not implicate the more localized resistance to enclosures has diminished.[3] But as the global progressive anti-globalisation movement has become weaker, the analytical interest in the 'double movement' is also partly shifting to the rise of authoritarian version of social protection against neoliberal disembedding (Novy, 2017). So, for instance (Block 2008: 11) observes that "part of the protective counter movement in the U.S. was channelled into the activism of the religious right that worked to strengthen the conservative movement's influence at the national level", an activism that took advantage of the feeling of increasing economic insecurity connected with economic dislocation. In this paper we will not discuss the consequences for the political landscape of this rising authoritarianism but is clear that in many countries their political representatives, using territorial and cultural boundaries as an instrument to offer a kind of economic security to their population in exchange for giving up liberal freedom rights, are on the rise (Holemans, 2017a). This is a context we shouldn't ignore while focussing on the democratic version of social protection.

2. The Commons: rediscovering its characteristics and political dimension

It is without any doubt that the work of Elinor Ostrom has contributed widely to a better knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of commons, in academia as well as in the broader society. Her book *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Ostrom 1990) gave a powerful insight in the governance systems of commons and identified eight key design principles for successful commons. Awarding her the Nobel Price for Economy in 2009, not coincidentally in the midst of the financial-economic crisis caused by neoliberal deregulation, enlarged greatly the legitimacy of the commons, although at the same time "in modern industrial societies, it enjoys only modest understanding and respect" (Bollier and Helfrich 2015:2).

In the literature on commons, one can notice in the last two decades a shift from discussing commons primarily as 'common goods', the enclosures that threaten them and how to protect them (De Angelis 2007, Bollier & Helfrich 2012) towards discussions of commons as 'commons systems' and how they can act as vehicles for radical social and ecological change (De Angelis 2017, Bollier and Helfrich 2015). This evolution can also be described as a shift from a more *essentialist approach* – "that postulates that a good is characterized by intrinsic attributes" – to a *constructive approach* – "that considers the nature of goods cannot be separated from their property regime and the governing institutional design" (Périlleux and Nyssens 2017:5). The latter does not mean that everything man-made can be seen as a commons, but it makes clear that every commons is a socio-political construction.

From this perspective, influential authors such as Negri and Hardt (2009) explore in *Commonwealth* whether the commons can be the backbone of a political paradigm, whereas Dardot and Laval (2014) do not hide their ambition as can for example be seen from the subtitle of their book *Commun*: 'essay on the revolution in 21st century'. Also Holemans

[3] A Political Casualty of 9/11: The Anti-Corporate Globalization Movement, September 15.09.11 Daniel Denvir, Truthout. See http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/3361:a-political-casualty-of-911-the-anticorporate-globalization-movement

(2016a, 2017a) sees the commons in *Freedom & Security in a Complex World* as the potential basic organizing principle of a new socio-ecological society.

Whether the common(s) form a revolutionary principle for the 21st century, or one among other important so-called Transition Discourses, "dealing with the cultural and ecological transitions necessary to deal with the interrelated crises of climate, food, energy and poverty" (Escobar 2015: 356), is not the focal point of this paper, but serves to highlight the relevance of engaging in empirical research on the new wave of commons and provides the context against which our empirical findings can be assessed. It is to this empirical research focus we want to turn to now. It starts from the observation of a growing wave of commons initiatives, as also described in a growing body of literature on the subject (see e.g. Hess 2008; Bollier & Helfrich 2012). Despite growing scholarly interest in the commons, however, little is known about concrete numbers, so one of the relevant research questions that arises is if we are really witnessing a relevant increase in concrete commons initiatives. At the same time, from a Polanyi's perspective, it is crucial to examine whether these new commons are providing new forms of social protection against current forms of marketization, and how they organise themselves in the current times. And furthermore: how transformational or politicized are they?

The latter is important as research in the field of food commons in Belgium indicates that after a first wave of radical local food movements, sharing strong anti-institutional and decommodification stances in the frame of the anti-globalisation movement, a rising part of the local food activists sees themselves as 'social entrepreneurs' willing to collaborate with public institutions (Pleyers 2017). Are we observing the growth of practice-oriented commons that focus more on the concrete alternative they develop (e.g. growing local food) than being part of a politicized movement? Therefore, knowledge is needed on how new commoners position themselves vis-à-vis government and market actors.

Answering the above formulated programmatic research question - whether the democratic version of the social protection movement is reflected in the growing wave of more practice-oriented commons – requires multi-national, longitudinal research. The research presented in this paper can in this light only be presented as a first exploratory and preparatory study, providing building blocks for further more far reaching research.

Concretely, in an effort to shed a light on the current state of the democratic (counter)movement the new wave of commons could be part of, this paper aims to provide an empirical analysis of the recent wave of newly established commons, as they have emerged in the past decade in fields such as energy, housing and agriculture. More specifically, we focus on the new commons established in the Belgian region of Flanders since 2000.

3. The new commons in Flanders: a first exploration

There is increasing evidence of the growing number of citizens working together with a view to meeting their (local) needs in the future (De Moor 2013). They show that next to market and government there is a third way to organize society. Also, in Belgium there is a visible growth of new initiatives that range from cohousing projects, energy cooperatives to community-supported agriculture and LETS (local exchange and trading system) groups. So

far, an inventory of these initiatives has been lacking. Also, little empirical knowledge is available about such initiatives: who is establishing new commons, how do they organize themselves and how do they position themselves in relation to state and market actors?
In this light, a research project was carried out in 2016 by *Oikos. Think Tank for Socio-Ecological Change* in collaboration with Tine de Moor, professor "Institutions for Collective Action in Historical Perspective" at the department for social and economic history of Utrecht University. The projects aimed at mapping new commons established from 2000 onwards in Dutch-speaking Belgium, which for the largest part consists of the region of Flanders (6,5 million inhabitants), but also include the much smaller Dutch speaking community in Brussels.[4]
The project consisted of two parts. First an inventory was made of all initiatives that met the 'criteria' (see further). This resulted in an inventory of 480 citizens' initiatives spread over 10 sectors.[5] Different kinds of methods and data were used: desk research, interviews with commoners and representatives of network organisations in fields such as renewable energy co-ops and local food movements, and using the well-known snowball methodology, asking representatives of identified commons' projects to list other projects they were aware of. Although this method led to a sufficiently high degree of redundancy to be reliable – at the end of the project most of the projects communicated by commoners were already enlisted in the inventory – it is clear that the inventory is not exhaustive. This also is related with the selection criteria: what makes a citizens' initiative a commons?

The second part of the research was a structured questionnaire. Of 250 listed collectives reliable contact data were available. They were sent a questionnaire so that their methods and, among other things, relationship with the government as well as with market partners could be identified. The response by 80 of them - a response rate of one-third - proved sufficient to draw tentative conclusions about the growing number of commons in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium.

3.1. What makes a citizens' initiative a commons?

In the literature, a wide range of definitions on commons circulate. There exists no definition on which all scholars or activists agree, let alone that a set of testable criteria would exist. This notwithstanding, in most definitions three elements appear in a connected way. In this 'grammar of the commons', there is always a common good, a community that governs the good by self-determined rules (governance structure) (Helfrich et al. 2010). This focus on an institutional dimension clearly fits with the importance Polanyi attached to the fact that economic action is always instituted, in different ways in different circumstances.
With this context in mind, the research team used a slightly changed version of the definition drawn up by the research team of Tine De Moor for earlier research on the commons in The Netherlands: "*institutions for collective action, or institutional arrangements that are formed by groups of people in order to overcome certain common problems over an extended period of time by setting certain rules regarding access to the group (membership), use of the resources and services the group owns or takes care of collectively, and management of these*

[4] A first report on this research project was published in Dutch in the journal Oikos, see Noy & Holemans, 2016.
[5] The inventory offers an overview of contact data, number of members, starting year, legal framework and the relevant sectors in which the collectives operate.

resources and services."[6] Next to this, the research needed guidelines – not as strict as formal criteria, as they yet don't exist – to decide whether or not identified citizens' initiatives were included the inventory. The guidelines were developed by the research team and formulated as the following set of four questions:

1. Does the collective have a well-structured framework and does it aim at specific results in the long term? A one-time project that is active for only a limited period of time – say people organizing a one-day repair shop - is not considered as a common. The initiatives should have co-operative structures that intend to meet (local) needs on a specific and long-term basis. One concrete requirement is that the initiative should have a legal basis, and it should also set out its objectives.

2. To what extent did the initiative start from grassroots action rather than by government or market? In Flanders, a community centre for instance is not usually a citizens' initiative but is developed by the local authorities. Likewise, initiatives developed by market actors in which citizens only buy a share and gain some financial profit, are not considered as commons.

3. Do citizens have a say in the design, organization and future of the collective? This does not imply that neither government nor market actors can support the initiative, but the extent to which the initiative is managed by citizens themselves or the civil society should be clear.

4. Are citizens themselves actively involved in the production/implementation of the good, service or activity of the organization or is this another operator's responsibility? One example is the CSA farms (*Community Supported Agriculture*). Here, the farmer (the market operator) is often the initiator, but members are more than consumers as they themselves often take care of harvesting and are engaged in CSA meetings deciding on management and design.

On the basis of the above guidelines, a number of initiatives were excluded from the inventory.
Facebook communities, for example, because they lack a set structure, have no legal character and are often managed by individuals. Nor were Repair Cafés included because they are often sub-activities of larger organizations such as local transition groups.

3.2. Border cases and the Triangle of organizational structures

The questions listed above are guidelines, not strict requirements. As the research is innovative in its field, the inventory is the result of exploratory research that for certain can raise debate on whether or not certain organizations are included. Yet, in a sense it is precisely these border cases that make the inventory interesting and force us to reflect on how to interpret initiatives. One useful tool is the triangle below. In its angles it represents a society which in completely organised by market, government or autonomous citizens as a possible organizational structure for goods, services and activities (Holemans 2016b, 2017a). As Van Parijs (2009:3) points out, "it should be clear that nobody can wish our societies to be driven into one of the three corners of this triangle". So for Polanyi, a total market-based society is an unrealistic and undesirable utopia which provokes the double movement. In this way, the

[6] We added the underlined words "… *use of the resources and services the group owns or takes care of collectively…"*in the definition so it also includes properties owned by the state (e.g. green urban area) but managed by a citizens' collective*;* See http://www.collective-action.info/introduction

triangle also stands for the dynamics in a society: as it moves into one of the corners, it will probably trigger more societal reaction.
Most initiatives are a combination of these and are situated somewhere within the triangle. The initiatives found are placed there on the basis of the previously defined guidelines. The examples in this triangle, viz. CSA farms and community centres, are ambiguous cases since they show characteristics of citizens' as well as of market or government initiatives.

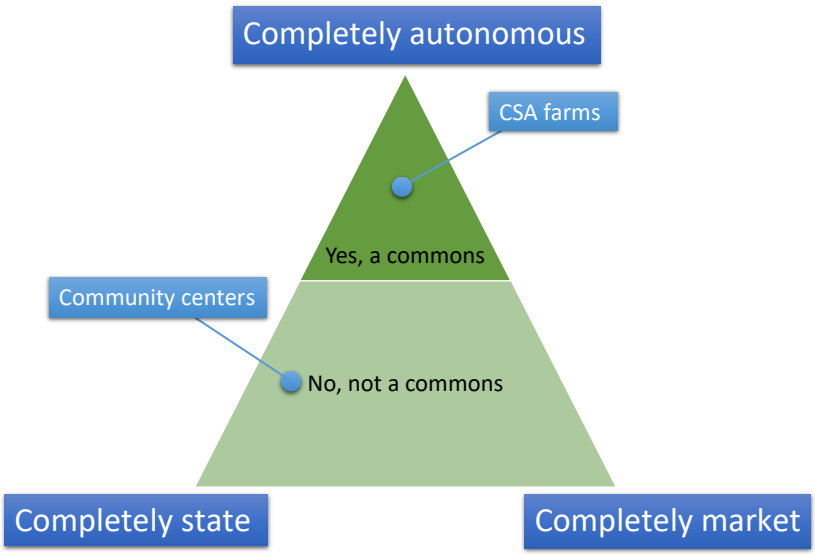


Figure 1. Triangle presenting the field of three modes of organizing

On applying the guidelines, initiatives can be placed in the triangle (*Fig. 1*). This leads to the conclusion that a CSA farm can indeed be considered a citizens' collective whilst a community centre cannot. The daily activities of community centres are often run by volunteers, i.e. unpaid citizens who use their time and competences in order to keep the centre going (*guideline 3*). Community centres have a set structure and a legal basis (*guideline 4*). However, the initiative to establish community centres in Flanders almost invariably starts from the (local) government (*guideline 1*). It is the local authorities who decide what activities are undertaken or not and how the available money should be spent (*guideline 2*).

As a rule, CSA farms are started by local farmers in their role as market actors (*guideline 1*). The citizen, however, does not so much pay for agricultural products as make a contribution to the enterprise in advance payment for operating expenses and the farmer's labour costs (7). This way, the citizen both shares the farming risks and is assured of participation in the ins and outs of the collective. The farmer makes choices in consultation with the members (*guideline 2*). In addition, the majority of CSA farms offer their members the opportunity to harvest their own share of fruits and vegetables (*guideline 3*). CSA farms are long-term projects with an organizational structure and operate in line with international CSA standards. Also, the farms have a legal framework (*guideline 4*). Of the 13 CSA farms whose legal framework is known to Oikos, 10 are one-man businesses (among which one is a private limited company), two are cooperative companies with limited liability and one is a farming corporation. The dominant choice for a one-man business is a logical consequence of the fact that after all the farmer is the only owner of the farm. From a legal point of view, this weakens

guideline 2, as since members buy their harvest share and also share the risks. In exchange, they will have a say – in practice - in the activities and decisions of the farm. Legally, however, they do not share the farm (only its harvest) while the farmer keeps ultimate responsibility and full ownership.

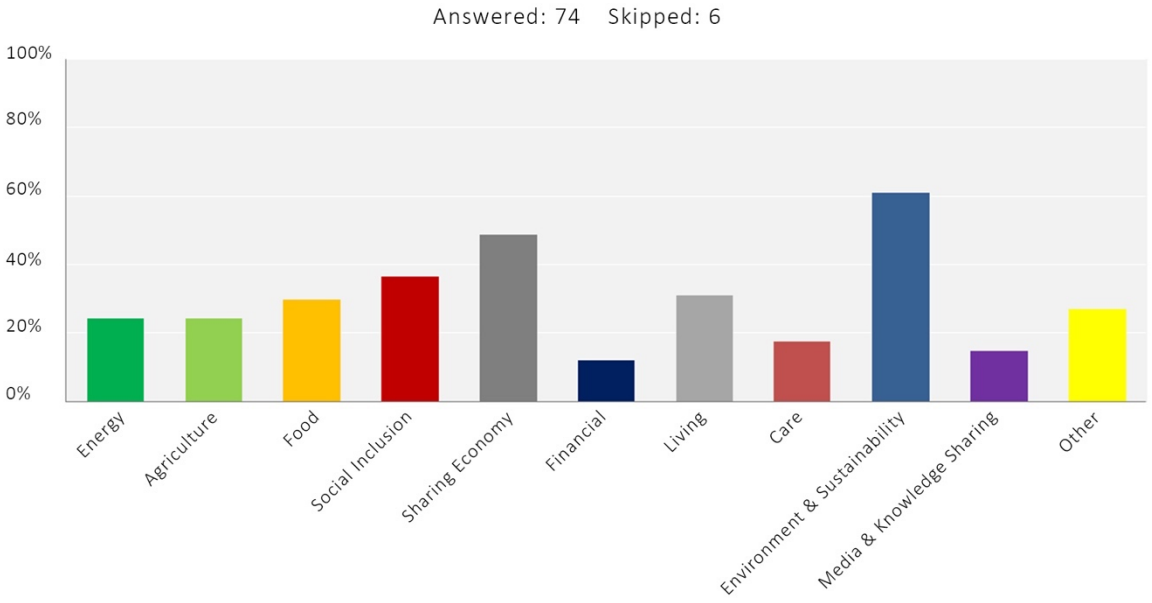
The guidelines make clear that strictly speaking a CSA farm cannot be called a 100% citizens' collective or commons. However, on the basis of all the guidelines combined, it was decided to position such initiatives along the 'commons' side of the triangle. From their functioning and intentions, it is clear they function according to principles that are very much alike the principles identified for commons. Further research and debate in the research community may in the future lead to a change in the choice of guidelines and implementation of them.

3.3. The survey

As mentioned above, in this exploratory research we want to gain insight in the characteristics of newly established commons, their governance model (citizens' role in the initiative, member commitment, …) and how the commoners see their relationship with government and market.
Respondents included 17 LETS groups, 14 co-housing initiatives, 12 CSA farms, 10 transition groups, 4 urban collectives, 3 living initiatives for young adults with a disability, and 20 other collectives.

The collectives in the inventory were classified in ten sectors, viz. energy, agriculture, social inclusion, money, work, care, food, sharing economy (peer-to-peer economy), environment & sustainability, and media & knowledge sharing. Respondents could choose to give more than one answer. It appears from the survey that activities often belong to more than one sector. The main focus of plenty of citizens' collectives may well be on activities within one particular sector but often side activities are undertaken that touch on other sectors. This applies to wide-ranging initiatives such as LETS and Transition groups but also to collectives with a more specific objective like cohousing, where living together is linked to environment & sustainability, food and the sharing economy.

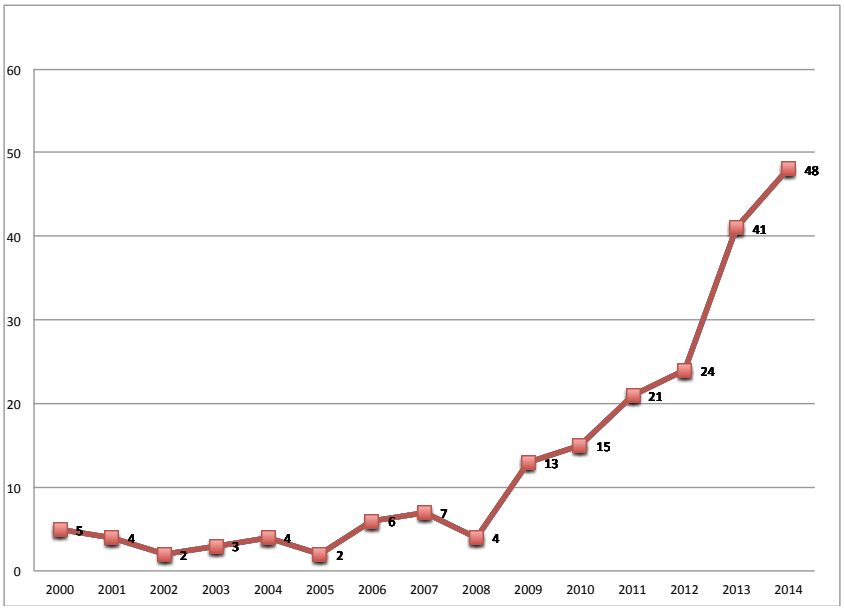
Graph 1: Classification of initiatives



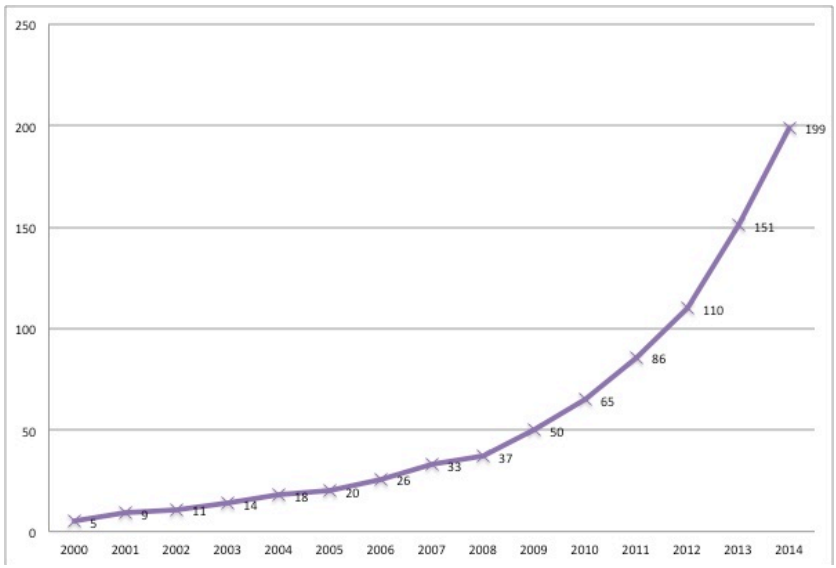
3.3.1. The quantitative evolution

As indicated in section 2, a crucial question is whether there is a significant increase in newly established commons. Therefore, an overview of the collectives' starting year is presented. On the basis of completed surveys and websites the starting year of 189 collectives could be found. Graph 2 shows the increase in the number of citizens' collectives per year while graph 3 shows the cumulative growth per year. During the investigated period 2000-2014 new initiatives were started every year. The results show an exponential increase in new established commons in Flanders; in 2014 ten times more commons were started compared to 2004. Also remarkable is the significant increase since 2009.

Graph 2: Rise in absolute terms



Graph 3: Cumulative rise



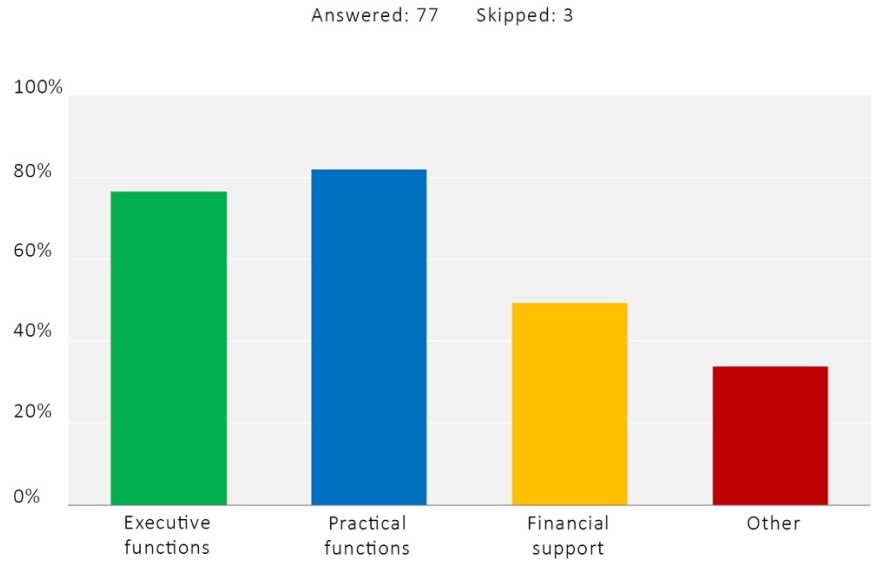
3.3.2. Start of the initiative and the role of citizens

The majority (68) of collectives were started by individuals or groups of citizens. There are five cases of an initiative started by a business enterprise (notably CSA farms). In various cases there is collaboration between citizens and other actors, among whom professional organizations or government authorities, to set up the collective.

In over 80 percent of the initiatives, citizens carry out practical tasks; in more than 75% they also have executive responsibility, which suggests that citizens in most collectives participate (substantially) in the management of the organization. In half of the cases members also make a financial contribution, e.g. they pay a share in a co-operative, pay a membership fee to a LETS group or buy a harvest share in a CSA farm. Various collectives stated that actually all the functions are performed by the citizens themselves. Thus, they form a third, autonomous sector in society, complementary to market and government.

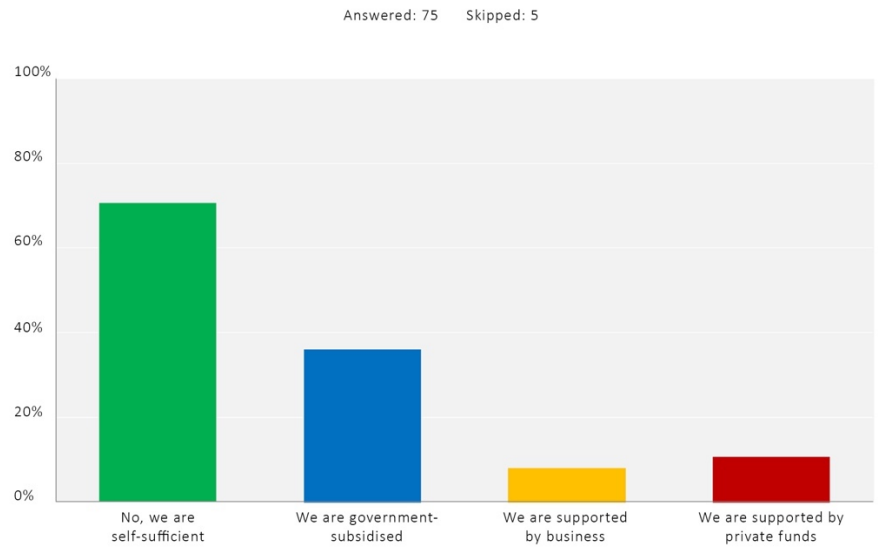
Some collectives tend to move towards the market and employ professional paid workers. 32 % of collectives contract professionals to provide particular services, activities or goods. This especially applies to activities requiring specific expertise. Co-housing projects hire architects, day care for young adults with a disability is performed by professionally trained staff and a great number of initiatives have their web hosting and project design carried out by third parties. So citizens' collectives are – with reference to the Oikos guidelines – not automatically identical with initiatives that do not involve any money exchange or professional workers. Engaging paid workers can in some cases be the reason to position the initiative closer to the market angle in the above-used triangle (Fig. 1). Although there exist examples of new commons that experiment with new ways of value creation and distribution instead of money, it is obvious that if commons want to develop themselves as alternative to private companies in our current world, paid work and money exchange are 'part of the game' (Bauwens and Niaros 2017).

Graph 4: The role of citizens in the collective



70% of respondents claimed not to receive any financial support. This, again, shows the initiatives' high rate of autonomy. The majority of those that do receive financial support, receive it from the government. A small number are supported by business or private funding. 36% are government-subsidized, 10% receive private funds and 8% are given support from business. Some respondents in the survey stated that they are self-reliant and are at the same time given financial support. Such initiatives were usually subsidized in the past, e.g. in their starting period, and have meanwhile become self-sufficient. In fact, not all initiatives choose to be self-sufficient. Quite a few would like to be subsidized by the municipality whilst others wish to remain independent of subsidies or any other type of financial support.

Graph 5: Financial support



The section *Establishment and Role of Citizens)* of the questionnaire ends with the question whether respondents regard their initiative as a true citizens' initiative. The answer by 70 out of 75 respondents is 'yes'. Independence from market and government especially, is very

frequently offered as the reason. One respondent says “to be proud to set their own course, independently and without any structural government involvement”. Another reason is that through collectives, citizens are able to shape their immediate living environment themselves rather than to rely on professional civil organizations or project developers. Other frequently mentioned reasons are that the initiative is open to all, that it needs the support of a large section of the local community, that its aim is to enhance good relations within the neighbourhood and that it wants to represent common interests. However, some respondents admit their initiative has been considerably professionalized throughout the years. The five respondents who do not see their initiative as a citizens’ collective, say so because they were set up by independent entrepreneurs.

3.3.3. Member commitment and participation

The second part of the survey deals with the members’ commitment to the organization. In 64 % of the initiatives no distinction is made between so-called active and non-active members. The remaining 36 % do make a distinction and to almost half (55%) of these there are no consequences for the members’ impact. In the other cases, there is an essential difference in the position of active vs. non-active members. Especially in transition groups, a core group is determining the policy and making the decisions. However, there is post-consultation with the other members. Also, a number of co-operatives distinguish between e.g. active and silent partners, or A, B and C type shareholders, who each have a different form and degree of participation. In the majority of collectives (71%) all members do their share. On the other hand, there are also respondents who explicitly state that in their organization this does not and even cannot happen: ‘*each organization has leaders and followers’.* This is certainly true for co-operatives. A large number of their members are only financially involved. Yet, most co-operatives explain that their members are given the opportunity to carry out management or practical tasks.

A third of the citizens’ initiatives organize monthly group sessions. For a small number of the collectives (10%) there is a weekly gathering and the remaining 53% meet twice or once a year.
This does not always imply that all members will attend. Some LETS groups invite all their members on a monthly or three-monthly basis, but about one fifth actually participate in the evening discussions. In fact, this is their intention. To many members, LETS groups are exchange networks, not associations whose structure requires them to meet. The same goes for major activities organized by CSA farms.

Most collectives have annual, three-monthly or monthly general meetings, which are open to all members. In addition, they have task forces meeting more frequently. Smaller collectives, for whom the collective character plays a more important role in daily life, will meet on a structural basis. E.g. some co-housing collectives organize a housing council every 3 or 4 weeks and set up task forces with interim meetings. Almost all collectives find it hard to bring all their members together, the more so as the group is growing. Some collectives, especially larger and non-committal initiatives, are then faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they hope for their members’ commitment and responsibility, on the other hand, they loathe obliging them, but more commitment and participation would mean a lesser burden on individual shoulders. In reality, it is often the case that it are the same members who carry out tasks in the various bodies of the collective.

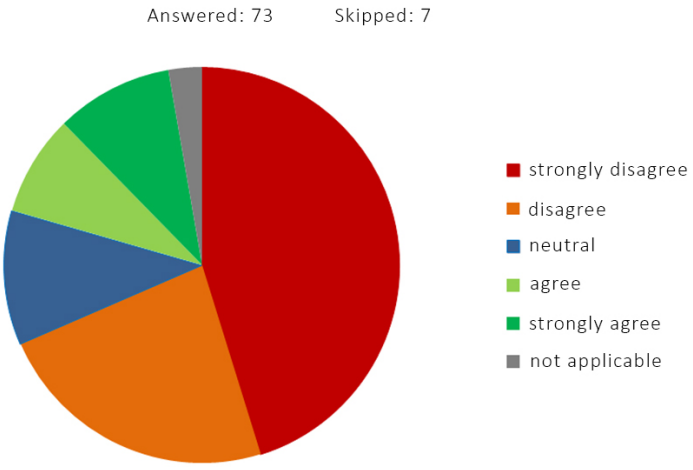
3.3.4. The relationship with public authorities

The last part of the survey focusses on the relationship of the commons with other actors. Like in the triangle (Fig.1) this refers business enterprises (in the market corner) and (local) authorities (the government corner of the triangle).
Although a sound relationship with the government is important to most initiatives (21% neutral; 38% agree; 38% strongly agree), they function independently of the (local) authorities. The majority of collectives were established without government involvement (80% agree/strongly agree; 3% neutral; 13% disagree/strongly disagree) and can survive without government support (The statement: *Without government support our initiative is not viable:* 78% disagree/strongly disagree; 11% neutral; 17% agree/strongly agree). Especially co-operatives – whose members contribute money by buying a share – function independently of the government. One of them explains that civil servants behave as inspectors rather than advisers and therefore believes it a missed opportunity to show that "*entrepreneurs and government can be partners in creating welfare and wellbeing".*

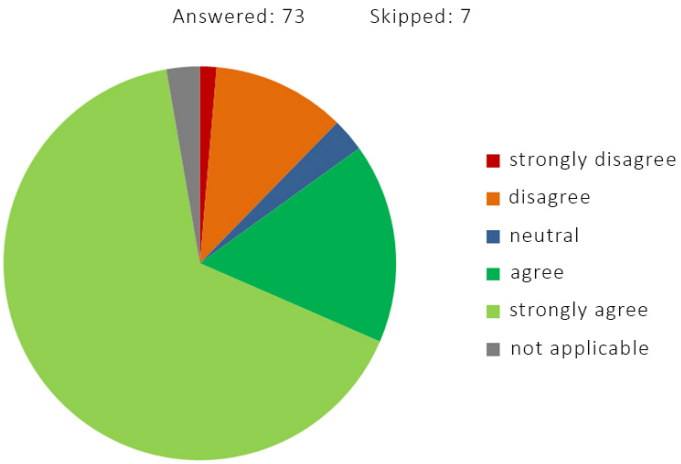
Co-housing and electric car sharing collectives depend on the (local) government for some critical parameters. Co-housing initiatives need building permits, and for electric car sharing the government has to provide charging posts, parking places and control of the latter. So, these collectives rely on government support for technical aspects. In the project's initial stage they consult government officials more often than in later stages. Projects for day care and living space for young adults with a disability appear to work in closer collaboration with the government in that the residents' personal care budget, coming from state subsidies, will pay for the staff.
Also, initiatives making use of municipal territory work more intensely in partnership with the local authority and self-evidently cannot operate without the authority's consent.

Most LETS groups seem to cherish their independence of the (local) authority. On the other hand, it strikes us that quite a few transition groups are very much in favour of a municipal partnership: "for financial reasons (subsidies) as well as for energy (opportunities to invest in renewable energy) and regulations…".

Graph 6: Without government support our initiative would not be viable



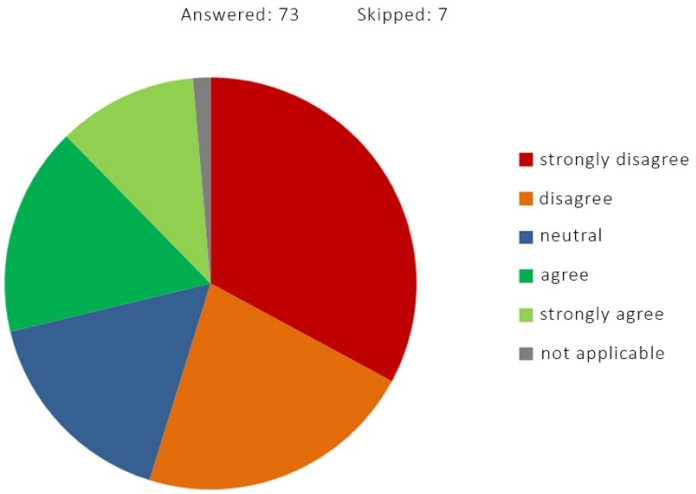
Graph 7: Our initiative was set up without government involvement



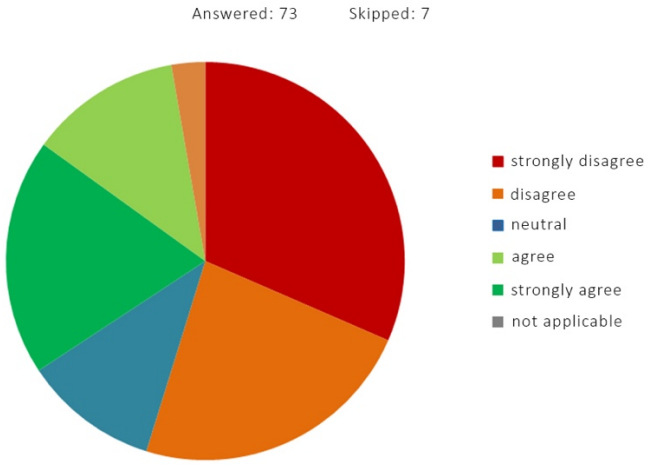
A similar trend, albeit a less strong one, appears from the statements "*We discuss with the municipality the types of service we offer*" (32% strongly disagree; 21% disagree; 16% agree; 12% strongly agree) and "*The municipality was actively involved in the development of our initiative*'"(32% strongly disagree; 21% disagree; 16%agree; 12% strongly agree). This strengthens the impression that the collectives are minimally connected with the (local) authority. This is not always a deliberate decision, though. Various collectives appear to be rather disappointed in the local authorities' attitude. The most disappointed seem to be the representatives of 'more unique' initiatives without an umbrella body (other than LETS groups, Transition groups, Co-housing and CSA). Recognition and support by local authorities seem less evident here. They phrase it as follows: "At best, we are kindly tolerated' and 'the municipal administration shows a rather negative appreciation of our initiative".

Yet, not all initiatives show disappointment in the local authorities. Some, among whom – amazingly again - the Transition groups, highly appreciate municipal collaboration. One co-housing initiative gives an apt summary of the overall involvement: "We sometimes had the impression they might have taken a more flexible stand or did not always realize how their decisions were a serious obstacle, but on the other hand we also received support in various aspects. It was give and take."

Graph 8: We discuss with the municipality the types of activity/service we offer



Graph 9: The municipality was actively involved in the development of our initiative

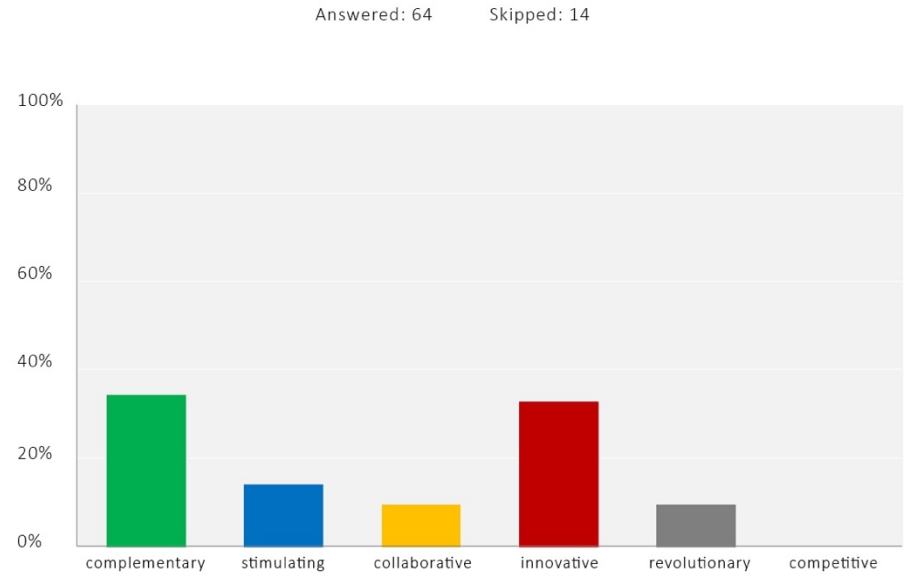


3.3.5. The relationship with private enterprises

Most initiatives state they do not feel connected with business since the activities they undertake are significantly different from what established market actors have on offer. This explains why more than half of the collectives do not feel established companies see them as competitors. Those who do have the impression they are seen as competitors appear to border more closely on the traditional market. E.g. car sharing affects the traditional car leasing market. One initiative says it is not taken seriously or cannot contend with the existing offer.

On the whole, most collectives then do not consider themselves competitors of companies that aim at the same sector. In answer to the question how they describe themselves in respect of traditional companies, none says 'competitive'. Indeed, they see their collective as a complement or innovation to the existing offer on the market. This does not mean collectives find contact with established businesses unimportant. 40% find a good relationship with business valuable.

Graph 10: The term that best describes our initiative in relation to companies operating in the same sector is:



3.4. Discussion

3.4.1. The quantitative increase

These remarkable findings raise the question if this is part of larger trend or a very specific situation. Unfortunately, as far as we could find out, there are no comparable inventories made in other regions or countries.[7] Yet, we have two points of reference, albeit from the same European region. First, we possess raw data of a new ongoing research project of Oikos, mapping all new commons' initiatives started in 2015-2016 in Belgium (and earlier for the Walloon region). Second, there are data available on new citizens' initiatives in the Netherlands (De Moor 2013).

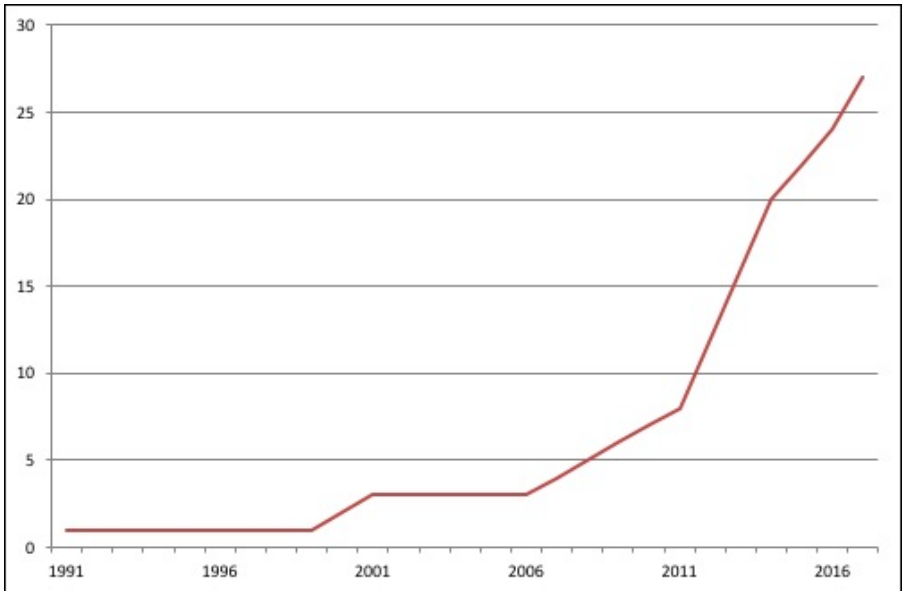
Out of the combination of the raw data of the new research project and the one presented here of 2016, we distilled as example the evolution of newly established commons for the field of energy throughout the whole of Belgium.[8] As graph 11 shows, we see the same pattern of exponential growth with a significant increase starting from 2007.

In the Netherlands, research on new established cooperatives -of course, only one type of citizens' initiatives- shows a *"particular leap forward since 2005, with dozens of new cooperatives formed every year"* (De Moor 2013: 9).[9] So, there is a comparable exponential growth but also a striking difference becomes apparent. In the Netherlands, the number of annually emerging citizens' initiatives has been rising since 2004, whereas our results for Flanders and Belgium rather point to the period 2007-2009 as the moment of increasing augmentation. One possible explanation is that since 2002, predominantly conservative

[7] Of course, there exist innumerable projects of mapping commons, in cities and regions. But they most of the time don't provide insight in evolutions over time.
[8] The new commons are geographically well distributed in Belgium, so there is no regional bias.
[9] There is also other research being done on citizens' collectives in the Netherlands. Knowledge centres such as *HIER opgewekt* (www.hieropgewekt.nl) and *Aedes-Actiz* (www.kcwz.nl), make an inventory of citizens' collectives in the energy and care sectors respectively.

governments imposed in the Netherlands an austerity policy (the so-called *participation society*) thereby deliberately passing on responsibilities like caretaking to local authorities and citizens (Verhoeven and Tonkens 2013). So citizens of villages in certain Dutch regions had to take initiative, if they for instance wanted to keep a care centre for elderly. Belgium was not yet immersed in austerity in that particular period – a government with focus on austerity policy was only installed in 2014- and the rise from 2009 could tentatively be explained as a reaction to the financial-economic crisis, which seriously undermined the citizens' confidence in the capacity of the government to regulate markets (especially banks and the financial markets), as well in the functioning of markets to fulfil the needs of people. So it seems that the crisis at the same time awakened their civil commitment.

Graph 11: Evolution of RESCOOPS (energy coo-ops) in Belgium (cumulative)



But maybe this difference of five years for the take-off the wave of new commons is not so relevant from a broader perspective. As an historian, De Moor (2013) sees the current wave of new commons as the third one in European history, in which every wave of new 'institutions for collective action' is preceded by a phase of accelerated development of the free market, with privatization playing an important role. This happened after the first developments of the markets during the Middle Ages (with an accelerated development of the land-labour market); after the strong wave of laissez faire economics in the 19th century, and in the last part of the 20th century after the privatization of public services (neoliberalism).
Summarising it is clear in order to substantiate the hypothesis of a structural wave of new commons, more empirical data are necessary from other countries in Europe and other continents.

3.4.2. Characteristics of the new commons

The results of the survey show that new commons in Flanders can have different types of internal organisation, but in most cases a majority of members is actively participating. Also the importance of internal communication is clear. Commoners are proud of their autonomy – most initiatives were established without support of governments or private sector- but do

not have per se a critical stance towards state or market actors. Most of the time, they find a good relationship with the local authorities important and are open to support from or cooperation with local governments. In a majority of commoning initiatives, commoners see themselves as complementary to (rather than competing with) market services. These observations suggest that, compared with the earlier period of the anti-globalisation movement around the turn of the century, the new wave of commons is more pragmatic, less anti-institutional and entails a bigger focus on local authorities. This mounts pressure on the latter to reconceptualise their relations they entertain with local civil society. The population is no longer a recipient of top-down politics but consists of creative citizens that at the same time have their own projects and concrete demands to local authorities.

4. Conclusions

Polanyi's double movement gives us a frame to understand the broad range of counter-movements that want to resist the neoliberal marketization of our societies and build alternatives. Just after the turn of the century, this resistance was conceptualized as a very visible anti-globalisation 'movement of movements', with -next to local and regional resistances and actions- large numbers of marchers who took the streets of the world to oppose the neoliberal policies and institutions. This inspired people to start new commons, for instance local food initiatives and movements, with rather strong anti-institutional and decommodification stances.

Our research results, of course only based on Belgium, indicate at the same time a pragmatic turn as well as a sharp rise in new commons. These new 'institutions for collective actions' still can be seen as forms of social protection against soulless market forces, but instead of marching in the streets, commoners are building the infrastructures of the future. So, if governments and companies fail to invest in, for example, windmills, citizens start cooperatives to put them themselves. If supermarkets and government policies do not provide local organic food, commoners establish CSA farms.

Our data clearly show an increasing number of commons. At the same time, the question arises whether they can organize themselves adequately and build up political awareness and power to counter the destructive forces of the market. This certainly requires further research on different aspects of the new commons: in what way do they provide protection from market-generated risks and for which groups in the population?

Is the strong rise also present in other countries? How politicized are the commoners, are they building new international networks as a new political force?

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