

Reviving the city as a commons

DH www-deccanherald-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.deccanherald.com/amp/opinion/reviving-the-city-as-a-commons-1235238.html

Is there nothing we can do at the local level, nothing that can hold out a promise of a better future?



Harini Nagendra,

- UPDATED: JUL 09 2023, 03:12 IST



Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong. Credit: DH Illustration

Climate change is a problem of the here and now, no longer a spectre on the distant horizon. It is the Ghost Who Walks – not a friendly, protective ghost like the Phantom of old comics, but a fearsome beast that strikes without caring about the consequences. Heat waves in the US, Europe and India, floods in Spain, Pakistan and China, forest fires in Canada that blow smoke all the way to the US – our present ills are just a small taste of what lies in our future.

This is the year the world will cross a threshold of 1.5C of global warming – a tipping point that can trigger further catastrophic events, such as the melting of the Arctic glaciers and the desertification of the Amazon. Climate change is a global calamity and requires global action. But is there nothing we can do at the local level, nothing that can hold out a promise of a better future?

Some experiments I saw in Rome earlier this summer, over a long visit to Luiss University, are very promising, giving us a glimpse of how we might do things differently. LabGov, a real-life ‘working laboratory’ set up by Prof Christian Ianone, works with city

administrations in Italy and other parts of the world to rejuvenate local commons, supporting the idea that cities of the 21st century can be re-imagined as collectives, with citizens, companies and governments collaborating to make their city better.

Imagining this project as an effort to strengthen 'administrative collaborative democracy', LabGov embeds Master's and PhD students within communities. The project helps neighbourhoods to set up collaboratives that grow and sell local food, create community cafes, and fund libraries, work with local schools to improve the quality of education, and establish sustainable neighbourhood enterprises. What I found most impressive was the fact that they focus on underserved areas, places at the edge of the city – where land rates have risen fast, but so have inequities. Where there are high levels of poverty and crime, daily life is a struggle for many, and trust in local governments is often low.

LabGov and Luiss University have developed inspiring ideas of action research that we can all learn from, especially in Bengaluru. For instance, their Master's programmes have innovative graduation requirements, creating a context where students can graduate with a thesis or a sustainable start-up!

Very aware of the potential dangers of imposing ideas from the outside, LabGov seeks to work from within communities. Ianone was inspired by a long trip he took through India many years ago, and the instances he saw all around him -- of communities working together, often selflessly, seeking to improve the quality of life for others. While commerce and enterprise is at the heart of LabGov's approach, their intent is to develop ways through which local shops, restaurants and other enterprises can be co-owned and co-managed, helping profits reduce inequity, and spread through the communities where they work.

What does this have to do with climate change? The possibilities are rich, if we imagine them innovatively. Bengaluru is developing a Climate Action Plan, and so are other cities like Mumbai and Ahmedabad. What if community management and co-owned enterprise was at the heart of such solutions – for example, restoring wetlands to protect lakes, and setting up foraging classes where women from informal settlements taught wealthy apartment residents how to use the diversity of nutrient-rich greens that grow in these wetlands, and ran local cafes to serve organic produce that came from these wetlands?

There could be as many ways to revive local neighbourhoods as there are people – if only we can think outside the box for a moment. Climate change may be the spectre on the horizon, but with a little forethought, we can keep the spectre away for a while longer – giving ourselves, and the world around us, a chance to breathe more freely.

[Get a round-up of the day's top stories in your inbox](#)

[Check out all newsletters](#)

- Climate Change
- Environment awareness
- heatwaves
- Opinion
- Prism