P181 / Governing the Urban Commons: Policy Instruments, Public Intervention and Implementation at the Local Level

Topic : Multilevel Governance and Local Policy

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

In rapidly urbanising societies, collaboration pacts between residents and local administrations are frequently adopted for urban regeneration, services are taken back into public hands and collective knowledge is produced. Building on Ostrom's (1990) institutional approach, scholarship has examined how urban commons are constituted through the interaction of shared resources, communities and governing arrangements, as proximity, density and agglomeration shape how urban assets are contested and used (Foster & Iaione, 2016; Feinberg et al., 2021).

Within this framework, the role of the local state cannot be overlooked. Local government is central to many examples of participation and urban commons governance, enabling and facilitating collaborative arrangements. Urban experimentation adds a learning dimension to how commons are governed, as experiences with new partnerships and forms of engagement may feed back into local policymaking. A more critical strand warns that co-production with the local state can lead to enhancement or co-optation (Bianchi et al., 2024), and that participatory commitments made during remunicipalisation may be rolled back (Turri & Vitale, 2026).

This literature risks a normative bias, assuming that collective arrangements for commoning resources are intrinsically good and better suited to resolving distributional conflicts. Advancing the concept for policy studies requires examining the disputes over governing urban commons within complex local dynamics, where public authority is fragmented and nested within other levels of government. The literature has paid limited attention to how commons governance gains prominence and relates to policy design and instrumentation. For example, how urban commons claims enter agendas, become policy instruments and are reshaped or reversed in implementation.

The panel proposes a policy instruments lens (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Halpern et al., 2026) to address this gap. Regulations, collaboration pacts, concessions, service contracts and partnerships are not neutral devices as each embodies a theory of the relationship between governing and governed and produces its own effects. The overarching questions are: through which policy instruments do public authorities intervene in urban commons? How are these instruments chosen, implemented and revised, and with what consequences for control, access, distribution and accountability?

Bianchi, I., Pera, M., Calvet-Mir, L., Villamayor, S., Ferreri, M., Reguero, N., & Maestre Andrés, S. (2024). Urban commons and the local state: Co-production between enhancement and co-optation. Territory, Politics, Governance, 12(9), 1333–1352. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2022.2108491

Feinberg, A., Ghorbani, A., & Herder, P. M. (2021). Diversity and challenges of the urban commons: A comprehensive review. International Journal of the Commons, 15(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1033

Foster, S. R., & Iaione, C. (2016). The city as a commons. Yale Law & Policy Review, 34(2), 281–349. https://yalelawandpolicy.org/city-commons

Halpern, C., Lascoumes, P., & Le Galès, P. (Eds.). (2026). Policy instrumentation: Theoretical debates and controversies. Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035372508

Lascoumes, P., & Le Galès, P. (2007). Introduction: Understanding public policy through its instruments: From the nature of instruments to the sociology of public policy instrumentation. Governance, 20(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2007.00342.x

Ostrom, E. (1990). Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511807763

Turri, V. M., & Vitale, T. (2026). The Politics of Participatory Rollback in Urban Water Remunicipalization: Paris and Naples. Urban Affairs Review, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874261441878

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites papers that examine how various public authorities intervene in the governance of the urban commons through policy instruments, how these instruments are chosen, implemented, revised, and with what consequences for control, access, distribution and accountability. We are particularly interested in papers that address one or more of the following themes:

Prominence, agenda-setting and instrument choice. How do commons claims enter local agendas, and why do authorities choose certain regulations and partnerships?

Remunicipalisation and public intervention. How do the rules of remunicipalised services (water, energy, waste, housing) open or close spaces for citizen participation? Why are participatory commitments kept or rolled back? Through which policy instruments do these patterns materialise?

Urban regeneration and natural resources and the commons. When do regeneration programmes, collaborations, planning tools and nature-based solutions enhance commons, and when do they co-opt them? How do regeneration programmes, collaboration pacts and spatial planning tools turn vacant buildings and brownfields into commons?

Multilevel and polycentric governance. How are shared services and shared resources managed across multiple public authorities such as neighbourhoods, municipalities, and metropolitan levels and higher levels of government? What does the degree of territorialisation of services mean for access and accountability?

Grassroots knowledge. How do public authorities recognise, regulate or resist it? What role do grassroots initiatives reclaiming commons, living labs and maker communities play in reclaiming public space and producing knowledge commons?

Urban experimentation. How do experiments turn into policy learning? Who learns, what is learned, and how do lessons travel across neighbourhoods, cities and levels of government? Who governs eco, smart and AI-driven urban experiments once they leave the ‘laboratory’ and enter the city? Which policy instrumentation prevails?

Urban commons across contexts. How are urban commons conceptualised and put into practice across countries and regions? How do political, institutional and socio-cultural contexts shape their defining features and governance arrangements?

We welcome qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods approaches. Single case studies or papers that compare cases across countries or sectors, or that connect the urban commons to wider debates on policy design and policy instruments are especially welcome. We particularly encourage early career researchers to apply, as well as scholars from underrepresented backgrounds.