

Dare to Design for Disaster: Cooperative Economies for Resilient Urban Development

Examples from France,
lessons for Germany?

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Zusammenfassung

Mit einer wachsenden Polycrise aus sich verschärfenden Klimafolgen, globalen und ökonomischen Verwerfungen sowie autoritären Griffen nach Macht könnte das notwendige Momentum zur Transformation und Anpassung in einem neuen, gemeinsamen Verständnis von Demokratie und Wirtschaft liegen – und im bewusst gestalteten Zusammenspiel von staatlichen und zivilgesellschaftlichen Akteuren – getragen von der Einsicht, dass Suffizienz und Postwachstum nicht Verzicht bedeuten, sondern die Voraussetzung für eine Wirtschaftsweise sind, die soziale Grundversorgung und ökologische Grenzen gleichermaßen ernst nimmt. Die Dringlichkeit dabei ist groß: Infrastrukturen der Resilienz – der Nahversorgung, der Kreislaufwirtschaft, der sozialen Grundversorgung und der Klimaanpassung – müssen angesichts sich beschleunigender Krisen nicht nur entstehen, sondern in die Fläche getragen und in dauerhaften rechtlichen und administrativen Grundlagen verankert werden.

Kooperatives Wirtschaften und Netzwerken können beim Aufbau und der Verankerung dieser Infrastrukturen entscheidende Elemente sein – weil sie Bedarfe, Kapazitäten und Entscheidungskompetenzen dort bündeln, wo Infrastruktur tatsächlich gebraucht wird: im Quartier, in der Stadt, in der Region. Anhand anschaulicher Beispiele aus Frankreich und ausgewählter Ansätze in Deutschland arbeiten die Autor:innen wiederkehrende Faktoren kooperativen Wirtschaftens und kooperativer Multistakeholder-Arrangements heraus, die effektiv zu resilienter Stadtentwicklung beitragen – und sie fragen, welche institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen Erfolge möglich machen und in die Fläche tragen. Sie schließen mit passenden Empfehlungen für den deutschsprachigen Raum.

Summary

Amidst a growing polycrisis – characterized by climate breakdown, global economic upheavals, and authoritarian power grabs – the necessary momentum for transformative adaptation lies in a renewed, shared understanding of democracy and the economy. This requires carefully managed cooperation between state and civil society actors, underpinned by the realization that sufficiency and post-growth do not signify renunciation but rather constitute the prerequisite for an economic model that equally meets both social sufficiency and planetary boundaries. The urgency of this task is immense: in the face of accelerating crises, infrastructures of resilience – encompassing local supply networks, the circular economy, universal basic services, and climate adaptation – must not merely emerge, but be rapidly scaled up and embedded in robust legal and administrative frameworks.

Cooperative economies and networking are pivotal to building and scaling these infrastructures, as they aggregate needs, capacities, and decision-making authority at the local level – within communities, cities, and regions. Drawing on examples from France and approaches in Germany, the authors identify key factors in cooperative economic activity and multi-stakeholder arrangements that foster resilient urban development, and explore the institutional frameworks that enable success and wider implementation. They conclude with targeted recommendations for German-speaking countries.

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1 Relevance

“It’s very difficult to save the world in your spare time when others have made a full-time job of its destruction,” remarked physician and science communicator Eckart von Hirschhausen in 2022 on the failure of international climate protests to overcome the fundamental imbalance between eco-social movements and the forces of societal inertia. In view of this, von Hirschhausen emphasized the need for “professionals, networks, philanthropy and time”, while younger climate activists called for alliances with trade unions and employees in the public transport and transition sectors through campaigns such as “Wir fahren zusammen” (see also Liebig & Lucht 2022). Escalating crises at Europe’s external borders and upheavals across European industry prompted the employees of an Italian automotive supplier to revisit historical alternatives such as the Lucas Plan—a social-ecological approach that workers in Germany have also examined. This is precisely what Oliver Pye, an analyst of the Global South, advocated as early as 2017, describing it as the environmental movement’s “*labour turn*”.

In late 2018, a new slogan surfaced amidst the Yellow Vests protests in France: “*Fin du mois, fin du monde, même combat*” (“End of the month, end of the world, same struggle”; see Novethic 2018). The slogan framed the climate crisis and the financial hardship experienced by many citizens as the consequences of policies and a system of wealth distribution that disproportionately shifts the costs of ecological restructuring onto low-income and commuter-dependent households. In this sense, *fin du mois* points not merely to the declining purchasing power of the individual, but to a wider structural conflict over prices, taxes, mobility and the unequitable outcomes of contemporary eco-social transformations. The slogan originated in the widely quoted juxtaposition of “end of the month” and “end of the world” by the former Minister of the Environment, Nicolas Hulot; but gained political traction when it was subsequently adopted by protestors and the “Green Vests”, who, in effect, fought to maintain the status quo (Durand & Keucheyan 2026).

It is the phrase “*même combat*” that makes the slogan analytically and politically relevant: it functions not merely as a call for the reconciliation of two distinct concerns, but provides a framework for understanding the convergence of social and ecological struggles. The phrase points to more than the need to coordinate social and climate policy, framing both as expressions of the same underlying context of crisis and power relations. Its salience, therefore, lies in the critique of a transformation pathway that pursues ecological goals without addressing the class, power dynamics and distributional consequences of its implementation, and simultaneously in the attempt to formulate a common project of socio-ecological justice from this foundation (see also Gaborit et al. 2024).

“The questions raised by the *labour turn* have never been definitively answered.”

Germany now faces the intertwined challenges of mitigating the looming climate crisis and achieving socio-ecological transformation—a transformation that must actively include workers—amidst a climate of social uncertainty. Increasingly, awareness is growing that the 1.5-degree target is likely unattainable; key scientific organizations have warned that the 3-degree threshold could be reached by 2050 (Böttcher et al. 2025), and debates surrounding a potential collapse of the North Atlantic Current cast further uncertainty over the predictability of future environmental conditions. At the same time, government responses to extreme weather events in both France and Germany have exposed conflicts over the accessibility and availability of basic necessities, including water, as demonstrated by disputes over the *Bassines de Saint-Soline* in 2022. In many cases, rather than pursuing a collective response, authorities have instead emphasized the need for individual preparedness in their crisis communications. The continued downplaying of these facts has been accompanied by an erosion of social norms and cultural techniques for “empowerment through acceptance” and “rediscovered realistic hope” (Müller 2024).

Yet the questions raised by the *labour turn* have never been definitively answered—a risk that affects not only workers, but also banks, insurance companies, and whole economies. Political scientist Nancy Fraser has described this constellation as a feature of “cannibal capitalism”, which systematically undermines the social, ecological and democratic foundations of its own reproduction (Fraser 2023). Which “relationships with nature” (Pye 2017) enable us to shape and cultivate our regions and living environments without conflict, so

that we may continue to enjoy the “freedom to stay” (von Redecker 2023)? How can the “reappropriation of labour” mediate between the satisfaction of needs and decision-making? What role does the “transformative power of cities” (WBGU 2016) play in these questions of an “Earth for all” (Club of Rome 2022)? Even now, there are remarkable examples in major European cities that are attempting to match the scale of the impending upheavals through similarly ambitious objectives: The transformations underway in major French cities—towards fossil-free mobility and green infrastructure to mitigate extreme weather—have been noted in German-speaking regions, where they have stirred debate and occasionally garnered support. The significant role of the cooperative economy in these processes, and in the transformation of French industry, however, remains under-examined.

Reports from recent disasters (such as the Ahr Valley in 2021 (Petermann 2021), the 2026 power outage in Berlin (dpa 2026) and studies of other incidents document the resilience of the cooperative economy and practices of mutual aid in acute crises and disaster zones (cf. Barton 1970, Vale & Campanella 2005, Solnit 2009, Nembhard 2014, Remes 2016). Structures of mutual support and democratic self-organization—cooperatives, neighbourhood initiatives, and solidarity-based economic networks—can be activated at short notice to provide emergency relief, leveraging logistical systems and decision-making routines that state systems often struggle to replicate in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Targeted capacity-building within this sector could enhance capacities for self-help and self-sufficiency before shifts in political majorities make this more difficult or even impossible.

“Structures of mutual support and democratic self-organization can be activated at short notice to provide emergency relief.”

To ensure that this potential is not limited to isolated projects, two dimensions of scaling are crucial: *scaling out* (Colombo et al. 2023), the dissemination of proven models to new territories and neighbourhoods, and *scaling up*, their integration into new legal, administrative, and financial frameworks, ensuring continuity. The examples from France described below demonstrate that this is possible, not by chance, but through institutional arrangements—including legal forms, funding instruments, experimental frameworks, and cooperative structures—that facilitate scaling. The question for Germany, therefore, is not whether such approaches exist, but whether the conditions for their scaling will be created. As early as 2020, Schmid, Schulz & Weck identified scalability as a key challenge for resilient urban development (Schmid, Schulz & Weck. 2020).

How did France’s Social and Solidarity Economy achieve such rapid and visible changes in public space? What public and administrative measures have fostered this growth? And what forms and models of cooperative economic activity are contributing to a more humane future for our planet?

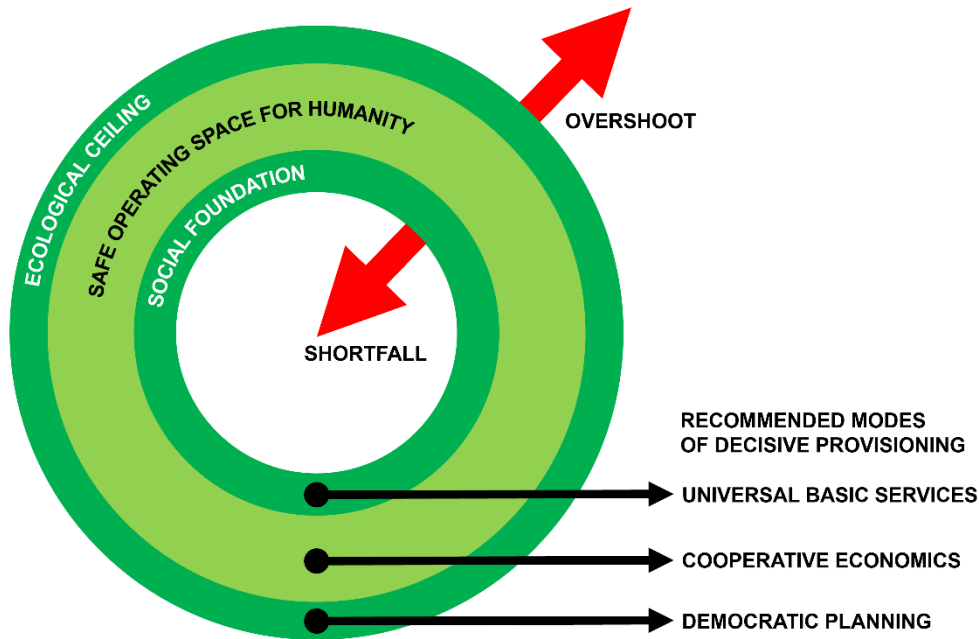
2 Definition

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the cooperative economic sector, widely referred to internationally as the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), as “enterprises, organizations and other entities that are engaged in economic, social, and environmental activities to serve the collective and/or general interest, which are based on the principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic and/or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and social purpose [...] in the distribution and use of surpluses and/or profits as well as assets.” (ILO 2022) Socio-ecological sustainability is as much a concern for solidarity economy actors as securing livelihoods and formalizing their economic activities.

Originating in their modern form in Germany and elsewhere, cooperatives are a key component—though not the sole expression—of the Social and Solidarity Economy and have been recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage since 2016, operating under the principle of “one member, one vote.” The Statement on Cooperative Identity (ICA 2016), identifies seven core principles and emphasizes the importance of cooperation among cooperatives, which supplants competition, the *modus operandi* of market economy actors, and thus opens up new conditions for transformative action. In short, the SSE, and cooperative economic activity more broadly, comprises “a specific economic model based on certain [democratic] organizational principles and oriented per se towards shaping society” (Blome-Drees et al. 2024, p. 257). International examples show that cooperative economic activities are a significant feature of the economic landscape, despite often being perceived as a marginal sector, part of the secondary labour market, or a form of “civil society economy” within the “third sector” (Degens & Lapschies 2021). While comprehensive statistics are lacking, SSE actors represent a substantial economic force on every inhabited continent (ILO 2022, OECD 2024). At least twelve percent of the global population are members of one of the planet’s three million cooperatives, and ten percent of the global workforce are employed by cooperatives (EURICSE & ICA 2025).

While some economists view the separation of the economy and state decision-making as fundamentally artificial, sustainability research locates a key advantage of cooperative economic activity elsewhere: namely, in systemic interaction. Although there are ample examples of ecological and social issues being addressed in parallel, the conflict between the ‘silent compulsion’ of profit expectations and capital accumulation on the one hand, and successful decarbonization on the other, cannot be denied—for instance, when weighing up the production costs and profit margins of fossil fuels versus necessary industrial transitions. Cooperative economic activity resolves this tension, in effect, by “agnosticizing” the pursuit of perpetual growth (Göpel), rendering competition between market actors optional, and embedding the consideration of external factors and employee wellbeing within a common framework. This allows cooperative economic activity to function as a productive level of action, where local coordination mechanisms, planetary boundaries, wages, and investments can be considered equally and collectively. Consequently, cooperative economies can play a mediating role in sustainable development, fostering agency through harmonization while upholding and deepening liberal-democratic governance.

FIGURE 1: OPERATING WITHIN PLANETARY BOUNDARIES: COOPERATIVE ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AS THE CORE OF A REGENERATIVE ECONOMY (LEVERMANN 2023)



Source: Authors' design based on donut model by Raworth 2012; other details based on Fraser 2023 and Kasper & Euteneuer 2025.

Democratic co-governance has been shown to reduce extremist and radical tendencies among workforces (Kiess et al. 2023). Recent studies have also shown that companies with high levels of employee co-governance make climate-friendlier decisions (Scholz 2023) and tend to prove more resilient in crises, as they favour lower-risk investment and financing strategies (Götz 2021). They also benefit from a functional alignment of needs and skills profiles, with direct feedback from a wide range of stakeholders that can be incorporated into ongoing processes and decisions. In urban contexts, this can be indispensable, for example, where diverse individual interests must be reconciled or the available resources and parameters of possible solutions weighed against one another. In view of the complex conflicts surrounding city centres (see, for example, Maikämpfer & Klemme 2025), urban housing, and climate adaptation, it is crucial to examine the distinctive characteristics of cooperative business models and their practices in greater detail.

3 National contexts

3.1 History in Germany

The modern cooperative movement emerged in the mid-19th century with a strong local focus and as the association of equals based on shared interests and mutual aid. A host of indigenous and medieval practices of *commoning* and the management of collective goods laid the foundations for this development. Alongside Anglo-Saxon pioneers such as the social reformer Robert Owen and the Rochdale Pioneers, it was the creation of consumer and producer cooperatives—bridging political divides—by figures such as Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen and Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch that laid the foundations for the German cooperative movement now recognized on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Often vehemently criticized by the Marxist Left, this movement served well into the twentieth century as a project of economic self-help for Christian Social, Liberal, and Social Democratic forces alike.

“A specifically German scepticism towards
collective, economic democracy
persists to this day.”

After surging during the Weimar Republic, the number of cooperatives in Germany declined sharply and remains low relative to other countries, despite recent growth (Henke 2025). Experts attribute this—alongside their dismantling and *Gleichschaltung* (forced alignment) under the Nazi regime—to several factors (cf. Birkhölzer and Lautermann, building on Mieulet 2026): In West Germany, post-war prosperity and the welfare state stifled a renewed commitment to cooperatives, despite the formal presence of housing cooperatives and a strong social democratic tradition. In the former GDR, however, the experience of authoritarianism and the subsequent commodification of public property created a further rift, leaving a legacy of “scepticism towards collective, economic democracy that persists to this day” (ibid.).

Beyond the achievements of the welfare state and provision of social welfare, the contemporary social entrepreneurship movement—which has recently gained significant public attention—draws little inspiration from its historical roots in social welfare. The fact that its resources and capacities are now considered to be inadequate and no longer viable (see also Busemeyer et al. 2025) makes an examination of solidarity-based economic safety nets and the development of social innovations particularly relevant.

3.2 The situation in France

With the adoption in 2014 of the *loi relative à l'économie sociale et solidaire* (Law on the Social and Solidarity Economy)—commonly known as the *loi Hamon*—France became one of the first countries in the world to establish a comprehensive legal framework for the governance of the Social and Solidarity Economy. The law defines the SSE as a *mode d'entreprendre* (independent form of enterprise), comprising traditional actors such as co-operatives, mutual societies, associations and foundations, but also enterprises of any legal form, provided their activities are shaped by three fundamental principles: social utility (pursuing a goal other than profit-sharing), democratic governance, and the reinvestment of a majority of profits to sustain or expand the enterprise. At the same time, the law establishes institutional structures to promote the SSE and support local clusters of social economy actors—including the *chambres régionales de l'ESS* (regional chambers of the SSE), access to financing instruments from the *Banque publique d'investissement* (public investment bank), and the *Pôles Territoriaux de Coopération Économique* (territorial poles of economic cooperation). The international influence of this legislation is noteworthy: the ILO, OECD and the European Commission have all largely based their definitions and enabling policies on the French model (Loi Hamon 2014). The law's enactment was accompanied by efforts to map and monitor activities across the SSE in France. In 2024, 10.4 per cent of the French workforce was employed in the Social and Solidarity Economy (ranking second in the OECD; OECD 2024), playing a key role in the delivery of public services

in rural areas and a ‘pioneering role in the circular economy’. SSE enterprises account for two-thirds of the French recycling, refurbishment and reuse sector (Baaklini, N. & Millard, E. 2025)—a significant market share that has facilitated their operational scaling and expansion into the European market.

In France’s knowledge-intensive industries and emerging sectors, worker-managed firms demonstrated significantly higher productivity than traditional companies (Young-Hyman et al. 2022, cited in Dow 2024). According to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, French SSEs exhibit low risk and insolvency rates, mirroring international trends. Because they often operate locally with limited capitalization and lower margins than profit-maximizing firms, specific support mechanisms have been developed, expanding their access to public financial products and state savings accounts (ibid.). These enterprises receive targeted subsidies based on a mission-driven economic approach (Mazzucato 2021), along with tax relief and procurement opportunities. The 2014 *Loi Hamon* formalizes the SSE as a distinct economic model and mandates that procurement agencies consider public-interest enterprises. Complementing this, the *Loi d’expérimentation* integrates experimentation into standard administrative practice—rather than treating it as a temporary project—enabling the scaling of innovative arrangements.

“France associates cooperative economies with essential services and the circular economy – and productivity gains in future-oriented industries.”

Renewed interest in the solidarity economy, which has deep historical roots in France, aligns with the growing convergence of socio-ecological transformation efforts. Recent plans to modernize and decarbonize French industry include substantial investments, alongside internationally pursued sectors like hydrogen production, heat supply, and data processing, in strategically advantageous industries for resource recycling and the development of corresponding material and digital platforms—ultimately reducing the need for primary raw materials. These legislative packages and initiatives—collectively known as “ecological planning” (*planification écologique*)—have sparked a dynamic and productive cross-party debate regarding these approaches (Ministères Transition Écologique 2023, Viennot 2025, Durand & Keucheyan 2026). “Ecological planning” has thus created both an investment framework and a political climate in which SSE actors are recognized and supported as strategic partners in industrial transformation—a situation that currently lacks a parallel in Germany.

In Paris, a decisive, though ambivalent, interaction with New Municipalism is also evident, yielding mutually reinforcing effects that would likely have been otherwise unattainable. One prime example of this is the city’s participative budget (Budget Participatif, Ville de Paris 2025) under which a quarter of the city’s investments are decided in collaboration with the citizens of Paris—approximately 100 million euros are allocated annually to projects chosen by the public; since 2014, over 3,500 projects have been realized, including initiatives focused on ecological transformation, urban agriculture, and basic social services. This instrument thus serves a dual purpose: it establishes a permanent democratic channel for the co-creation of urban space and provides the city’s transformation—particularly toward SSE infrastructures—with a continuously renewed foundation of legitimacy through the direct expression of the public will (ibid.). However, this dynamic faces structural pressures, and it must be emphasized that—as observed in other European countries—recent measures of “radical, centrally imposed austerity, without any significant financial leeway at local level” (cf. van Dyk, Gerstenhöfer & Kip 2025) continually threaten to erode these achievements, for instance when their limited visibility as a new cultural practice, stemming from a failure to scale up, contributes to the further strengthening of authoritarian tendencies.

4 Examples from France

The following examples of a cooperative economy in France are not isolated cases, they are embedded within an institutional framework that is itself the product of decades of societal negotiation—between civil society movements and local authorities, between solidarity economy actors and state institutions—and represent the outcomes of social struggles and their gradual legal codification. Rather than a single law, this framework comprises a coordinated set of instruments: legal forms balancing social purpose with economic viability; land-use policies supporting cooperative ventures beyond market logic; collaborative structures fostering equal partnerships between public and civil society actors; and frameworks that normalize experimentation within administrative practice. What appears today as a functioning ecosystem has been fought for, tested, and solidified over decades. The following examples illustrate what becomes possible when these conditions converge—and thus indicate the structural prerequisites that still need to be established in Germany.

4.1 Institutionalized instruments for promoting resilience at scale

Experimentation Act (*loi d'expérimentation*)

The French Experimentation Act (*loi d'expérimentation*, affecting Art. 37-1 and Art. 72 of the Constitution and supported by the 2021 reform of *loi organique*) allows the state and local authorities to suspend statutory or regulatory provisions for a defined purpose and limited period in order to test new policy approaches under real-world conditions. Specifically, a local authority or the state defines the scope and duration of the trial, ensures scientific monitoring, and establishes evaluation criteria; at the conclusion, parliament decides, based on the results, whether to abandon the model, maintain it in select territories, or roll it out nationwide. This transforms experimentation into a permanent feature of administrative practice, rather than a one-off exception. Current applications include, among others: the Zones without Long-Term Unemployment (TZCLD), the VRAC food bank network, and the nascent Food Social Security scheme (*Sécurité Sociale de l'Alimentation*).

Further information: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/loi/275530-loi-19-avril-2021-experimentations-locales-differenciation-territoriale>

Société coopérative d'intérêt collectif (SCIC): Collective Interest Cooperative Company

The workers' cooperative (SCOP) is a long-standing legal vehicle, established after WWII, that has enabled the creation of democratically governed enterprises in which employees are the majority shareholders. Since 2014, the newly created SCIC (cooperative of general interest) has resolved the tension between serving members and the common good—a conflict often perceived in Germany—by allowing public institutions, local authorities, and third parties to hold up to 50 percent of the shares. Combined with the requirement to set aside the majority of profits as reserves, the SCIC could serve as a democratic model for the emerging legal form of "responsible ownership" (*Gesellschaft mit gebundenem Vermögen, GmgV*) in Germany, which will also likely include an 'asset lock.' While the German GmgV model pursues similar objectives, it does not yet have the same legal standing. The SCIC demonstrates that this legal form works in practice—and thus provides a compelling argument for a corresponding reform of German company law."

Further information: www.les-scic.coop

Solidarity Lease for Cooperative Business Activities (*bail réel solidaire d'activité*)

Another legal instrument that has become established in France and can substantially facilitate the development of secure, long-term transformative infrastructure in urban areas is the solidarity lease for cooperative business activities (*bail réel solidaire d'activité*, BRSA), which provides activities serving the common good with affordable, long-term access to premises. This is made possible by separating land ownership from the building: a legally defined variant of a community land trust (*organisme de foncier solidaire*)—usually run by the local authority—retains ownership of the land, whilst the operators are granted long-term usage rights and can thus invest without being displaced by sale or skyrocketing rents.

This is pertinent to Germany because it provides a blueprint—long-term usage rights combined with a commitment to the public good as the standard—as a complement to instruments such as leasehold rights and municipal property policy.

Further information: <https://outil2amenagement.cerema.fr/outils/bail-reel-solidaire-dactivite-brsa>

PTCE: Cluster funding, or Commons-Public Partnerships at scale

The *Pôles Territoriaux de Coopération Économique* (PTCE) represent a key social innovation in France, comprising alliances of various social economy actors as well as public institutions, research centres, universities and other educational establishments. They combine the insights of conventional economic clusters with the infrastructure-building function of cooperative economies, enabling them to contribute to revitalization efforts and the establishment of new value chains, not only in structurally weak regions or those undergoing transformation. As a legal and financial framework, they thus transform existing isolated initiatives into a coordinated, locally embedded system.

Further information: www.lalabo-ess.org/poles-territoriaux-de-cooperation-economique-ptce

4.2 Climate protection and urban nature: Transforming Paris

The transformation of public space in Paris is often described in terms of its visible symbols—cycle expressways, school streets, and green spaces—but its deeper significance lies in the way these changes have been implemented. Over the past decade, Paris has not merely delivered a series of flagship projects; it has also developed replicable programmes: standardized interventions that can be rolled out across neighbourhoods through established municipal budgets, technical specifications, and planning procedures. Through *Plan Arbre*, for example, more than 130,000 trees have been planted since 2020—a notable achievement given that Paris covers only around one-eighth of Berlin's land area—and a further 40,000 are expected to be planted by the end of the year (Ville de Paris 2026). Similar approaches can be observed in waste management, where measurable performance indicators and planning instruments are linked to ecological objectives.

The connection to cooperative economic activity and the mobilization of civic engagement is not merely rhetorical but operational. Transforming public space is labour-intensive and requires ongoing maintenance, management, and adaptation to local conditions. Cities can unlock public capacity by engaging with mission-driven organizations, civil society groups, and social enterprises on maintenance issues and neighbourhood care. This requires the establishment of appropriately mandated programmes, as well as stable municipal interfaces and contact points that enable cooperation between public authorities and civic actors. If a city seeks to enhance everyday resilience—through cooler streets, safer routes to school, and reduced dependence on private cars—it must treat these objectives as infrastructure rather than as a succession of isolated experiments. For Germany, this does not mean simply copying Paris; rather, it is about adopting the underlying logic: transformation becomes scalable when it is designed and implemented as replicable, systematically structured infrastructure, complete with financing mechanisms, procurement frameworks, and local co-production involving residents and cooperative enterprises.

4.3 Food

La Cité Maraîchère (Romainville)

Focussing on food security and health, the *Cité Maraîchère*—a large-scale urban greenhouse in Romainville, one of the poorest towns on the outskirts of Paris—combines local food production with educational and community initiatives. A social pricing policy ensures affordability while maintaining economic viability. By employing permanent staff, the project avoids a pitfall faced by many civil society initiatives: delivering public services without institutional stability. Municipal ownership and broader engagement from regional authorities—often initiated by these bodies—are essential for the long-term sustainability of the organization’s food provisioning and educational programmes. This secures their function as part of municipal public services, while their solidarity-based economic elements enable participatory governance and adaptation as needed. Learnings from these activities support the development of similar initiatives in neighbouring regions or food producers.

Further information: <https://www.lacitemaraichere.com/cite-dagriculture-urbaine-et-dalimentation-solidaire-pxl-11.html>

VRAC: local, community-based purchasing networks

In parts of France where sourcing fresh, healthy and regional ingredients is difficult, purchasing cooperatives known as Vers un Réseau d'Achat en Commun (VRAC, roughly: “Towards a community-based purchasing network”) help people to access affordable food by leveraging economies of scale. Founded in Lyon in 2013 by a church foundation and a municipal housing association, the cooperative organizes neighbourhood shopping groups that jointly purchase organic and local produce at wholesale prices on a monthly basis—directly from producers, without costly intermediaries. Orders and distribution are organized by volunteers and (thanks to the savings achieved by this model) partly by paid staff. A means-tested scale of membership fees provides a support mechanism for low-income households. By 2024, VRAC was active in twenty-three regions across France and Belgium, running 124 buying groups in low-income neighbourhoods and on university campuses, reaching around 10,300 member households, or roughly 31,000 people. The network is supported by ninety paid staff and 1,600 volunteer members (VRAC 2024). This was made possible by a five-year, fully funded and scientifically monitored pilot scheme administered under the Experimentation Act.

Further information: <https://vrac-asso.org/notre-reseau/>

Sécurité Sociale de l'Alimentation (SSA)

One widespread example is the *Sécurité Sociale de l'Alimentation* (SSA, roughly: Social Food Insurance): participants make (means-tested) contributions to local food funds and receive monthly credits in a local complementary currency on a smart card, which can be spent at approved businesses. Members democratically select vendors based on sustainability criteria, deciding which businesses to partner with. From around twenty networks in 2022, the number has risen to just under sixty active or planned initiatives in 2024 (ADEME 2025). The most advanced of these is the *Caisse alimentaire commune* in Montpellier, which has operated since February 2023: 380 members receive 100 MonA each month—a specially created digital local currency—and use this to fund half of the total budget, with the other half provided by local authorities (Toubin-Perre 2025). The results of the accompanying scientific research by INRAE and the UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems are striking: more than 80 per cent of purchases made through MonA are for organically produced goods, while participating retailers have reported increases in turnover of between 2 and 7 per cent (Crépin-Leblond 2025). An expansion to 600 participants is planned for 2025, with a total budget of 800,000 euros; by 2029, the city aims to involve 1,200 households—in a metropolis where 28 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line (Toubin-Perre 2025). In Gironde, a similar trial has been running since April 2024, involving 400 households across four districts, both urban and rural. In Paris’s 14th arrondissement, residents voted in March 2025 by a 72 percent majority in favour of introducing a local food fund, which has operated since September 2025 (Mairie14ème 2025). Furthermore, a national legislative initiative has been in place since October 2024, intended to facilitate up to thirty pilot schemes across twenty territories. The SSA thus combines food justice, the ecological transformation of the food system, and democratic self-governance within a single instrument.

Further information: <https://securite-sociale-alimentation.org/la-ssa/>

4.4 Employment

TZCLD and Activ'18

Another example of cooperative, mission-oriented socio-ecological transformation is the programme “Territories with Zero Long-Term Unemployment” (*Territoires Zéro Chômeur de Longue Durée*, TZCLD), established under France's constitutional experimentation framework. Initiatives like *Activ'18* demonstrate how social policy can be mobilized to advance ecological and community objectives by creating meaningful employment opportunities for people who have been excluded from the labour market due to illness, disability, or caring responsibilities. Rather than forcing participants into precarious or unsuitable forms of work, the programme supports their reintegration through locally rooted activities that address unmet social and environmental needs. The jobs created are paid at least the minimum wage, are permanent, and offer flexible working hours agreed upon with each participant. Local committees identify unmet needs within their neighbourhoods that are not currently addressed by existing businesses and offer these services. These activities may include repair and maintenance work, ecological restoration, care services, and neighbourhood support. The programme's costs are offset in two ways: directly through reduced expenditure on unemployment benefits, social assistance, and related administrative costs, as well as through additional tax revenues and social security contributions generated by employment; and indirectly through reductions in harder-to-quantify social costs associated with poor health outcomes, social isolation, and community fragmentation. An independent scientific evaluation led by the government agencies France Stratégie and DARES confirms significant positive effects for the employed individuals and local ecosystems and recommends the programme's continuation—but notes that the scheme is not completely cost neutral (Maisonnavé 2024).

Further information: <https://www.tzclld.fr/> and https://activ18.fr/?page_id=35

4.5 Recycling and reuse

Circularity hubs, *ressourceries* and *recycleries*:

Community-based circular infrastructure

With over 250 member organizations in the *Réseau National des Ressourceries et Recycleries* (National Network of Resource and Recycling Centres, RNRR) and an estimated total of more than 350 organizations—including non-affiliated facilities—resource and recycling centres across France serve as community hubs for repairs and the reuse and collection of recyclable materials. Between 2019 and 2023 alone, the network expanded from 146 to 216 members, a rise that reflects the growing demand for local circular economy facilities. With over 6,500 employees, more than half of whom are on reintegration pathways, and a total turnover of around 41.7 million euros, they represent a significant economic factor. 96 per cent of the *Ressourceries* are organized as associations; their funding mix combines shop takings, local authority grants, reintegration support funds and, since 2024, grants from éco-organizations' REP funds. The REP, or *Responsabilité Élargie du Producteur* (extended producer responsibility), is a legal instrument that obliges manufacturers to co-finance the costs of disposal, reuse and recycling of their products at the end of their life cycle. Thanks to state recognition, local authority support in utilizing commercial premises and vacant properties, and access to waste collection, valuable materials and products can be reused locally more often than through conventional disposal channels. This fosters the long-term stabilization of jobs and activities within the circular economy, with increased community participation as these initiatives become firmly rooted in neighbourhoods—a stark contrast to struggling sole traders, repair cafés and hobbyists whose practice suggests that ‘repair is a privilege’. Many of these circular economy centres benefit from public provision of suitable premises, such as the *bail réel solidaire d'activité* (Solidarity Lease for Cooperative Business Activities, BRSA), which permanently removes commercial space from market forces and secures it for public-interest actors on stable terms, also serving as a hub for reintegration. In doing so, the cooperative approach of these repair centres bridge the gap between individual repair efforts and the infrastructure of traditional waste management.

Further information: <https://ressourcerie.fr/>

Repairability Index (*indice de réparabilité*)

As early as 2021, France captured the attention of the hacking, DIY, and repair communities with initiatives such as the repairability index for electrical appliances (*indice de réparabilité*). Social enterprises such as the cooperative start-up Commown pledged to maximize the lifespan of leased appliances and positioned themselves as advocates for durability and repairability (Keil 2026). Paris has set a quantified target of reducing annual waste generation by 100,000 tonnes by 2030. This drive for repairability and waste prevention also brings the tension between individual action and systemic barriers into focus: you cannot expect people to reuse and repair on a large scale if the necessary infrastructure is not in place, including collection and sorting points for recycling and refurbishment, local repair workshops, and trustworthy points of contact for training and resale. The requisite infrastructure is needed to deliver on the declared political objectives.

Further information: <https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/politiques-publiques/indice-reparabilite> and <https://www.indicereparabilite.fr/>

La Venelle: a cooperative centre of excellence for solidarity-based reuse

Opening on September 3, 2025, La Venelle in Montreuil-sous-Bois presents a particularly impressive example of institutional support for this approach. Covering around 1,800 m², this innovative project brings together nine organizations dedicated to solidarity-based reuse—including Emmaüs Défi, Envie, La Collecterie, Neptune, and the Île-de-France Reuse Network (*Réseau Francilien du Réemploi*, REFER)—to form a ‘Solidarity Reuse Village’ featuring eight boutiques, a community repair studio, and a cultural café-restaurant. The project has created or secured around fifty jobs, with 70 percent of those positions allocated to individuals on reintegration pathways. Legally, La Venelle operates as a simplified public limited company (*Société par Actions Simplifiée*, SAS)—a flexible French corporate structure which allows collectives dedicated to serving the public good considerable freedom in drafting their articles of association—and features shared governance based on the ‘one structure—one vote’ principle, ensuring collaborative property management, cost-sharing, and decision-making—a model that was explicitly designed to be replicated in other cities. The total cost of the project amounted to 6.3 million euros, financed by a 1.8 million euro grant from ADEME, a 3.6 million euro loan from the Regional Development Bank (*Banque des Territoires*), and contributions from the Seine-Saint-Denis Department, the Île-de-France Region, and the JP Morgan Foundation. La Venelle exemplifies what becomes possible when cooperative actors do not compete with each other but instead manage logistics, equipment, and external presentation together—and can rely on a public funding ecosystem that enables the decisive step from individual project to permanent infrastructure.

Further information: <https://www.lavenelle-montreuil.org/>

Éco-contributions

In France, the environmental costs associated with new technical products are not addressed through a dedicated tax but through the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) system (*responsabilité élargie du producteur*, REP) and the associated *éco-contributions*. Manufacturers and first distributors are required to finance the collection, reuse, repair, recycling and disposal of products at the end of their life cycle by paying contributions to authorized producer responsibility organizations (*éco-organismes*). Although the costs are ultimately reflected in product prices, these contributions are legally distinct from taxation and form part of the product's cost structure. For product categories with significant reuse potential, French law also requires the establishment of dedicated reuse funds (*fonds dédiés au financement du réemploi et de la réutilisation*). In several EPR sectors, a fixed share of the contributions collected—at least five per cent—is earmarked for these funds and used to support activities that extend product lifetimes and promote reuse. Enterprises within the Social and Solidarity Economy, including resource centres and reuse organizations, are eligible for funding. Rather than creating a direct payment linked to each individual product sold, the system pools contributions and redistributes them through the *éco-organismes* according to defined policy objectives, eligibility criteria and funding rules.

Further information: <https://filieres-rep.ademe.fr/modulations>

Envie: A social franchise in the circular economy

A particularly instructive example of scaling up solidarity-based economic infrastructure through a so-called social franchise is the Envie network (*Entreprise Nouvelle Vers l'Insertion Économique*, roughly: New Enterprise for Economic Reintegration). Founded in Strasbourg in 1984, Envie seeks to extend the lifespan of electrical and electronic equipment through collection, repair and resale, while also providing employment and training for people facing barriers to the labour market. The network now comprises fifty-three reintegration enterprises and over 100 sites across France, specializing in the purchase, repair and recycling of electrical appliances. In 2023, Envie supported 2,851 people on their path to employment, with 69 percent subsequently finding permanent employment or gaining a qualification (Réseau Envie n.d.).

Envie's social franchise model reflects the principles of the SSE: the Fédération Envie is organized as an association and coordinates local structures, each of which operates as an independent, non-profit reintegration enterprise with democratic governance and reinvests its surpluses. These local units have sufficient autonomy to develop their own pilot schemes, which, if successful, are rolled out across the entire network—a model that combines standardization with local adaptability. Government funding has been crucial for the network's nationwide expansion: As an accredited operator within France's Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) system—which requires producers to finance the collection, treatment, and recycling of products at the end of their life cycle—Envie handles around one-third of the country's waste electrical and electronic equipment. These activities are financed through the *éco-contributions* paid by manufacturers and distributors under the REP framework. Support from the French Agency for Ecological Transition (*Agence de la transition écologique*, ADEME), together with accreditation as a Social Enterprise of Public Utility (*Entreprise Solidaire d'Utilité Sociale*, ESUS), has enabled Envie to access public procurement opportunities and dedicated funding programmes. Yet even this well-established model remains vulnerable to shifts in the institutional environment. A recent decision not to renew several regional contracts has placed around 1,000 jobs in work-integration enterprises at risk, illustrating the extent to which even mature SSE infrastructures depend on the stability and continuity of public policy frameworks.

Further information: <https://www.envie.org/>

4.6 Cooperative urban development

Plateau Urbain

Access to affordable space is a major barrier for cooperative and civil society actors. Agencies like *Plateau Urbain* and *Yeswecamp!* systematically identify urban vacancies and their causes, developing concepts for refurbishment and temporary use that they reliably implement. This facilitates stable interim uses in large properties that have often been vacant for years—due to lengthy approval processes for demolition or conversion—accommodating organizations working for the common good, the local solidarity and social economy, and even private companies, through skilfully combined financing. These actors strongly promote the 'repurposing rather than demolition' discourse, providing practical examples and influencing subsequent development, as seen at *Les Grands Voisins*. They enable what would otherwise be impossible for smaller actors: initiating contracts, ensuring compliance, managing sites, securing initial funding and tenders, and negotiating usage agreements with owners and local authorities—and they are themselves recognized actors within the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE).

The lesson for Germany is clear: With nearly two million square metres of vacant commercial space in Berlin (Angeloudis 2025)—and more than eleven million nationwide (ZIA 2025)—complex ownership structures, and strong civil society demand for access to space, the development of professional intermediary organizations could help provide security for community-based initiatives and prevent their displacement or disintegration. Taking its cues from the French model, a new public-civil society infrastructure could create a pathway for successful temporary uses to become permanent or for ownership to be transferred to cooperatives.

Further information: <https://www.plateau-urbain.com/en/home/>

Fondation des Solidarités Urbaines: Experimental Foundation for Social Housing Organizations

The *Fondation des Solidarités Urbaines* (FSU) is an experimental funding organization for Parisian social housing organizations (*bailleurs sociaux*), which pools resources and practical experience to advance social and environmental innovation in the region. FSU primarily supports research-backed experimental projects with high social value in the fields of inclusive, participatory, and sustainable cities, selecting projects through annual thematic calls for proposals focused on issues identified by housing organizations in their day-to-day practice. Support consists not only of funding—with an annual budget of around €1.17 million—but also the provision of pilot sites, networking with housing companies and tenants, and effective project support. FSU aims to generate robust insights and transferable solutions from locally tested projects: results are evaluated, documented, and disseminated so that—if successful—they can be adopted and replicated by participating housing companies and other urban stakeholders.

Further information: <https://www.fondationsolidaritesurbaines.fr/>

5 Approaches in Germany

Germany, too, has seen significant developments in cooperative forms of economic organization in recent years, the breadth and diversity of which extend far beyond the scope of this paper. Housing cooperatives have experienced a resurgence in recent years, with a new generation experimenting with multi-generational cluster housing and cohousing models in response to strained urban housing markets. At the same time, a growing ecosystem of advocates (#GenoDigital, Platform Cooperatives Germany, SEND, SIGU, VKW and others), together with the removal of bureaucratic barriers, has spurred a wave of new cooperatives, particularly in the service and technology sectors. At the same time, funding programmes promoting innovation and knowledge transfer have also been opened up to cooperative business models, reflecting a focus on these overarching goals in the National Strategy for Social Innovations and Social Enterprises (BMBF/BMWK 2023).

Germany's cooperative economic sector remains diverse and is shaped by a range of financing and organizational mechanisms. The lack of a distinct legal form for traditional productive cooperatives—such as the French SCOP—has led to a variety of hybrid corporate structures used by actors of the cooperative economy. While this ‘legal hacking’ is well-established in resilient niches, it sometimes hinders its recognition as a shared, meaningful economic principle—and thus its scaling up toward a nationwide, community-supported infrastructure.

“While Germany’s cooperative sector is exceptionally diverse, such variety can hinder the perception of it as a coherent economic paradigm.”

In the face of increasingly fragile supply chains and growing concerns about food sovereignty, cooperative initiatives are emerging in Germany to ensure a resilient, democratically organized local food supply. Community-run supermarkets modelled on Paris’s *La Louve* are particularly promising. Established in 2021, SuperCoop Berlin eG, for example, is a community-owned cooperative supermarket with 1,800 members, who are co-owners, customers, and operators at the same time (SuperCoop 2025). This model combines local sourcing with solidarity-based pricing, democratic co-governance, and a local economic cycle. Local food councils, land cooperatives, and community-supported agriculture networks are also developing bioregional supply chains that reach beyond city limits, as demonstrated by the remarkable local clusters fostered by the real-world laboratory “Cooperative Economy” in the Werra-Meißner district in Hesse—the only major regional network of cooperative economic activity in Germany. However, this too exemplifies the structural precariousness of such initiatives: their contribution to public services remains fragile as long as it is threatened by the withdrawal of public support and is not embedded in a sustainable infrastructure framework.

Metrics such as the Common Good Matrix provide a balance sheet for social businesses evaluating key social and ecological indicators with shared ownership and co-governance among their criteria. At times, however, these aspects may be restrained by more indirect criteria. The ongoing generational transition among Germany’s small and medium-sized enterprises, combined with succession challenges facing many family-owned businesses, has given rise to a growing number of successful employee-ownership models that secure business continuity. However, unlike in France, Germany has not yet seen examples on the scale of the long-established glass manufacturer Durelex or the textile processor *Bergère de France* (cf. Diard & Meier 2025).

Germany has also seen various cooperative models for urban infrastructure that go beyond traditional project funding and connect the public sector with civil society—concepts increasingly referred to as Common-Public Partnerships (CPP) and Public-Civic Partnerships (PCP) (Jerchel & Pape 2022). Both models are based on the same core logic: the public sector secures availability and the framework—through ownership, leasehold rights, or dedicated use—while civil society organizations take on the operation, programming, and community benefit governance, equipped with defined roles and genuine decision-making authority beyond symbolic participation. These models address three typical breaking points in cooperative infrastructure: unstable lease arrangements, lack of decision-making power, and, crucially, the structural underfunding of ongoing operating costs.

Investment costs for renovation and reconstruction (CAPEX: Capital Expenditure) are often covered by grants; however, whether a cooperative space remains open permanently depends on securing ongoing funding for personnel, energy, and administrative costs (OPEX: Operational Expenditure). Without this, cooperative third spaces will either be commercialized or collapse once project funding ends. Mixed OPEX models are also conceivable, in which operators and municipalities share ongoing costs—through permanently reduced rental rates and structural support on one hand, and through community-supported economics, income-dependent membership fees, or solidarity auctions on the other. When implemented consistently, CPP is not only more democratic but also more resilient and future-proof. Based on recent cases, several transferable cooperation components can be identified, each taking a different approach but solving the same challenge by securing public support, civil society operation, and long-term community benefits; a systematic overview of these models has been prepared by the Forum Wohnen und Stadtentwicklung (vhw FWS 1/2026).

“Short-term funding in place of lasting powers and self-governance rights weakens cooperative infrastructure and hampers scaling.”

Germany already has a range of institutions and initiatives that could form the backbone of a comprehensive circular infrastructure, including programmes for interim use of vacant retail properties, Cooperative Real Estate Agencies (Genossenschaftliche Immobilienagenturen, GIMA), and a nationwide vacancy reporting service. With stronger collaboration between civic and public actors, these foundations could be developed into a more coherent and accessible ecosystem. Pioneering model projects, such as the Dragonerareal and the Haus der Statistik in Berlin, demonstrate how such arrangements can serve as starting points for deepening democratic co-production, despite ‘productive misunderstandings’ and a partial lack of equality (cf. Farias, Marlow & Wall 2024). However, these remain isolated cases, as evidenced by contrary developments elsewhere. The phasing out of collaborations and funding for promising initiatives (e.g., the Hansa Forum by Münster’s B-Side or the real-world laboratory for the regional and cooperative economy in the Werra-Meißner district) are indicative of a structural weakness that contrasts sharply with the standardized collaboration between public and public-interest-oriented actors observed in France. Relying on temporary funding instead of a permanent transfer of powers and self-governance rights unnecessarily weakens the potential of cooperative infrastructures and prevents the scaling up that is essential for resilient urban development.

A Berlin-based example of efforts to build a distributed circular economy infrastructure through the reuse of vacant commercial premises is the non-profit network KREISLER e.V. The initiative is building a network of community hubs with lending and repair facilities, creating community-supported infrastructure for a circular society. At its first location, a partnership with a municipal housing company secured affordable premises, providing an early example of the CPP logic in practice and demonstrating how public actors can support solidarity-based economic infrastructure within existing institutional frameworks. Further branches are planned for 2026. The real potential, however, lies in scaling: expanding across the region via the franchise model (*scaling out*) and transitioning from ad hoc co-operation to standardized collaboration between local authorities and civil society actors (*scaling up*)—a system that does not rely on individual commitments but is institutionalized as the norm for public services. What is lacking is not the model itself—it is the institutional framework to enable its expansion: reliable access to land, recognition as a funding-eligible entity, and standardized cooperation with local partners—something taken for granted in France but still requiring a fight in Germany. Recent research by the German Environment Agency confirms that the greatest challenges for urban sustainability initiatives are the lack of access to suitable spaces, financing gaps, and insufficient political support (Stelzer 2026).

The transformation of public space by de-sealing and climate-resilient greening (‘sponge city’) faces particular cultural and structural resistance in Germany: As one of the world’s most car-centric nations, Germany has not only geared its industry and working world towards the car for decades, but also its policies and administrative procedures for urban redevelopment and land-use planning—a path dependency that makes restructuring road space and de-sealing land far more than a technical issue. Initiatives for land de-sealing and renaturation continue to grapple with inconsistent relationships with authorities (cf. Mieulet 2025), hindering their ability to mobilize volunteers and often leaving them reliant on largely private and individual efforts (cf. Abpflaster 2026). While guidelines on cooperation between civil society actors and public administration have been established (see

Vollmer et al. 2023), their legal recognition as ‘transformative aid organizations’ (Wans 2023, cited in Jerchel 2024) and integration into public administrative processes is pending.

“German cities are home to a robust ecosystem of social enterprises and cooperative businesses that policymakers should build upon.”

Since 2024, the Verbund Kooperatives Wirtschaften (Social Solidarity Economy Germany, VKW) has served as a cross-sectoral representative body for cooperatively run enterprises in Germany. Unlike previous organizations, it embraces a pluralistic understanding of alternative economic models and aims to facilitate knowledge transfer among member enterprises from diverse sectors. The VKW brings together established cooperative associations as well as newer alliances, such as the CSX Network and the Community-Supported Agriculture Network (SoLaWi).

A recently published analysis of the social enterprise sector demonstrated its “solid foundation” and deep roots in various communities, including Berlin. The study found that the success of approximately 3,000 social enterprises—generating nearly 6 billion euros in revenue—can be attributed to close cooperation with urban society and early integration into economic policy support structures. However, efforts to enhance their innovative strength and integration remain priorities for the future (Kenel et al. 2026). Unlike other cross-sectional studies (see, for example, Lautermann & Marken 2026) in major German cities, this study focused solely on enterprises generating the majority of their revenue through the free market, even though the Social and Solidarity Economy has long offered viable business models based on sustainable prosumer relationships. The actual potential of alternative economic models is therefore likely even greater in Berlin.

Unlike in Paris, where the circular economy and the solidarity economy are part of the Deputy Mayor’s remit, neither Berlin’s Senate Chancellery, its departments, local administration nor any other governmental body in Germany prioritizes the cooperative economy or community-supported infrastructure. Current guidelines on public procurement and contracting do not include mechanisms aimed at strengthening social and solidarity-based enterprises.

Further information: <https://kreisler.berlin/>

6 Conclusion

This study has highlighted a range of examples from France and Germany in which cooperative economies contribute both to securing social cohesion and to addressing pressing economic and environmental challenges. A common thread running through the French case studies is the principle of ‘more when we share’ (Ostrom, 2011), extending high-demand urban resources through their cooperative management and utilization. In France, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is not understood merely as an expression of civic engagement. Rather, it is treated as a means of expanding the capacity of infrastructures that serve the common good. As discussed in the previous section, Germany still lacks many of the institutional arrangements that have enabled this in France.

The example of Envie illustrates that even well-established SSE infrastructure remains vulnerable in the absence of, or disruption to, supportive public policy frameworks—highlighting that establishing cooperative structures is insufficient; they must be permanently embedded within a conducive institutional environment. The outcome is public-civil society interfaces that enable sustainable co-production, stable funding, and replicable implementation. In these examples, municipal administrations function not as centralized ‘implementation machines,’ but rather by combining publicly legitimized objectives with mission-oriented actors and their structured engagement. This approach aims to ‘reinvent an experimental tradition... that can no longer be reversed’ (Foundational Economy Collective, 2019, p. 244).

In Germany, however, the cooperative economy continues to occupy a marginal position within current economic policy and receives little attention in policy development (Teilgabe, 2024, p. 233). Despite the size of the cooperative and welfare sectors, the social economy remains largely overlooked as a strategic tool for advancing the circular economy and strengthening resilience. Recognition of its innovative potential is growing, but remains uneven across regions. Unlike in France, promising social innovations and cooperative initiatives often persist in temporary project phases or remain permanently confined to the hyper-local level, where the adoption of functional elements or their scaling up would be required. A lack of instruments for systematization prevents the long-term continuation of infrastructure-compatible concepts in partnership with public institutions.

“In an age of crises and climate breakdown, the cooperative economy offers a vital framework for both adaptation and the negotiation of shared interests.”

France’s success demonstrates what Germany seeks to achieve: scaling cooperative infrastructures—horizontally (*scale out*) across regions, vertically (*scale up*) into new legal and administrative frameworks, and in depth (*scale deep*) into the culture of public administration and civil society (cf. section “Relevance”)—a task requiring a shift from the current reliance on individual initiatives to the development of suitable policy. This requires, not least, that cooperative and solidarity-based economic actors no longer be treated as substitutes of a retreating state, but as high-performing partners on an equal footing, whose potential for socio-ecological transformation can be systematically tapped—provided the institutional conditions for this are consciously and jointly created. What is therefore decisive is not whether a social and solidarity-based economy with a common identity exists in Germany, but whether it is recognized as infrastructure and as a development-relevant economic factor—including appropriate governance, supportive intermediaries, stable financing, consideration in procurement and tendering, as well as its spatial planning and urban development. If we fail to mainstream ‘socio-economic innovations’ [sic!], resilience and successful transformation will become regional anomalies, and inequalities will continue to worsen.

Clearly, this is not about propping up a declining ‘cannibalistic’ economic model (Fraser 2023) or ‘filling gaps in public services through civil society’ [...] but rather about renegotiating the design and administration of social rights, infrastructure, and public services” (Teilgabe 2024, p. 245). The aim of the cooperative economy and its relationship with the

public sector is therefore neither further economization of the state nor state control of legitimate market activities, but 'non-competitive self-governance' (van Dyk 2024, p. 191) as a more climate- and crisis-resilient mode of survival and negotiation.

It remains to be discussed to what extent a shift towards a cooperative economy should also be linked to the broader issue of the post-national democratic governance of public goods, given that the prevalent fears of loss and claims to imagined "phantom property" (von Redecker 2026) in Europe ultimately rest "on a resource-intensive and globally unequal economic system" (Schmelzer 2026). Nevertheless, there is a need to professionalize prefigurative 'pilot projects' to make the collective stake in private property visible for a "new infrastructure policy" (van Dyk 2024, pp. 212 ff.). While "the democratization and decommodification of labour alone will not solve our ecological crises" (Battistoni 2020), the cooperative economy will be essential in mitigating impending crises."

7 Recommendations

The preceding examples and analyses show that cooperative economic activity is not a marginal phenomenon, but a demonstrably effective aspect of socio-ecological urban development—already institutionally embedded in France, and while present in diverse forms in Germany, structurally under-resourced. The gap lies less in a lack of ideas or actors than in the mismatch between what cooperative infrastructures need to function sustainably—reliable access to spaces, operational funding, decision-making power—and what public funding and administrative frameworks have so far provided. Closing this gap is not a technical matter, but a political one: it requires a conscious decision to recognize the cooperative economy not as a means to offset the impacts of state retrenchment, but as an independent form of infrastructure that is deserving of an enabling regulatory environment. The following recommendations are formulated as concrete implementation steps and are aimed at stakeholders in the executive and civil society at local, state, and federal levels. They aim to activate two key levers: first, the legal or at least administrative standardization of experimental approaches and a culture of cooperation—both in multi-stakeholder constellations between local authorities and civil society, and between public actors of equal standing; second, the consistent alignment of public funding towards the development of sustainable infrastructure rather than individual projects. Cooperative economies only realize their potential for socio-ecological transformation where the logic of public-interest-oriented infrastructure is reconciled with administrative logic at the necessary interfaces—and where the state acts not as a client commissioning short-term measures, but as a structuring partner in long-term co-production.

1. Improve the visibility and accessibility of the cooperative economy

Improving the visibility of the cooperative economy as a distinct sector alongside welfare provision and social entrepreneurship, and highlighting its contributions to the socio-ecological transformation is crucial to the success of all further measures. We recommend adopting a dedicated SSE definition that explicitly encompasses community-based infrastructure for local services, democratic ownership models for real estate and premises, and participatory service models. This should be accompanied by the introduction of an independent monitoring body to systematically track employment figures, value creation, and the regional infrastructure coverage of actors such as cooperatives, collective enterprises, purpose-driven businesses, and associations. Possible foundations for this include the Public Sector Capabilities Index (Mazzucato et al. 2026) as well as the national accounts and statistics from relevant industry associations.

“Capturing the full scope of the cooperative economy is essential to recognizing its contribution to public infrastructure.”

2. Shift from project-based to infrastructure-based thinking

If cooperative and solidarity-based economic actors are to be recognized as partners in socio-ecological transformation and providers of essential socio-ecological services, this recognition must be reflected in funding mechanisms. While cooperative actors generally seek to secure their long-term viability through community-based models, the public sector still has a role to play: when it comes to building resilient socio-ecological infrastructure, funding investment costs (CAPEX, see section on approaches in Germany) alone is insufficient. Essential services require core funding—ensuring continuity and equitable provision of services to communities requires stable, multi-year budgets for staff, training, administration, operation, and maintenance.

Despite the clear need, pressures on local government finances and a broader trend of state retrenchment mean that many local authorities are unable to provide OPEX funding. In light of this, a realistic middle ground must be found: financially constrained local authorities can provide targeted support for SSE infrastructures during their start-up phase—through seed funding, long-term access to premises, and the coverage of initial operating costs. The membership model adopted by many cooperative actors offers a structural alternative to reliance on public funding: if successful in securing start-up funding, SSE structures can gradually become less dependent on external support as their membership base grows and they generate their own revenue—without compromising their purpose-

driven character. Funding without self-governance is not infrastructure policy—it is project-based funding with an expiry date.

3. Procurement for the public good

Adapting public procurement criteria and regulations to enable the participation of SSE actors is one of the most readily available levers for change. This includes, in particular, revising requirements that currently favour larger, established companies; contract lot sizes should be limited to facilitate bidding by smaller providers; eligibility criteria should be limited to what is genuinely necessary; and documentation requirements should be simplified. In addition, social and environmental award criteria should be introduced to reward not only the lowest price, but also service quality, local value creation, and contributions to the common good. Public procurement is one of the most effective policy instruments available to cities and local authorities today—its targeted use in favour of cooperative actors requires no new legislation, but rather political will and administrative consistency.

4. Access to premises and shared ownership

Access to suitable land and properties is a critical prerequisite for developing robust cooperative infrastructure, a need that has long been overlooked. Precarious conditions are not conducive to the development of robust infrastructure. To address this, it is advisable to systematically expand the use of interim arrangements, developing mission-oriented tenancy agreements and cooperative usage models, establishing clear pathways to permanent use where public benefit can be demonstrated. While Commons-Public Partnerships and Civic-Public Partnerships have been established in isolated cases in Germany—such as at the Haus der Statistik in Berlin or the B-Side in Münster—these are the outcomes of laborious negotiations that do not provide a transferable framework. A standardized toolkit integrating leasehold agreements, municipal pre-emption rights, and interim uses into an overarching development strategy would significantly accelerate this process. France offers two legally standardized instruments—the *bail réel solidaire d'activité* (BRSA, Solidarity Land Lease for Business Premises) and the *organisme de foncier solidaire* (a social housing vehicle)—that secure public-interest uses within existing housing stock in a long-term, affordable manner by separating land ownership from usage rights, thereby providing the continuity that cooperative infrastructures require to function as anchors of local resilience. Recent guidance from the German Environment Agency identifies municipal leasing funds—whereby cities lease vacant commercial spaces and sublet them at affordable rates—as an effective instrument: two-thirds of the municipalities that employ this instrument assess its impact as positive (Stelzer, 2026).

5. Establish intermediaries and bridging institutions

Strengthening public and independent intermediary organizations that can reliably connect local authorities, housing companies, funding bodies, civil-society organizations, and cooperative enterprises—and actively identify, facilitate, and support suitable partnerships—is essential for scaling cooperative approaches. Rather than relying on ad hoc responses to individual requests, pilot schemes and standardized evaluation mechanisms should be established to efficiently replicate the most promising approaches. These should be embedded across different areas of public administration and complemented by thematic platforms that foster collaboration beyond administrative and departmental boundaries. France demonstrates, through the *Pôles Territoriaux de Coopération Économique* (PTCE, territorial poles of economic cooperation), how such multi-stakeholder structures can have a lasting impact: as territorially anchored clusters, they facilitate engagement among actors from the solidarity economy, public institutions, research centres, and vocational training institutions, transforming isolated initiatives into a coordinated, locally embedded ecosystem and enabling sustainable co-production between the public sector and the cooperative economy—even beyond the duration of individual projects.

“The cooperative economy can unlock underutilized urban potential—through intermediaries and partnerships that extend beyond temporary use arrangements.”

6. Promote social franchising as an instrument for scaling

Balancing local engagement with broader reach is a key challenge in the development of solidarity-based economic infrastructures. New initiatives must build upon existing local needs, spaces, networks, and trust—and in doing so, often encounter hurdles that have already been overcome elsewhere. The social franchise model offers a viable mechanism

for scaling impact. Proven approaches to delivering solidarity-based services—ranging from circular economy projects and local supply systems to forms of social infrastructure—can be replicated across new locations through shared organizational frameworks, common branding, quality standards, and mutual learning. This enables successful models to expand while preserving their local embeddedness and public-interest mission. Unlike commercial franchising, decision-making authority remains with local units; the federation or umbrella organization provides coordination, not control. Public funding should explicitly support this approach: by financing network infrastructure and knowledge transfer at the national level, by recognizing social franchise networks as eligible applicants in investment programmes, and by developing procurement criteria that favour their establishment and expansion. The strong territorial roots of solidarity-based economic structures create an economic cycle that generates non-relocatable jobs and restores social ties within an increasingly depersonalized economic landscape—an argument that particularly resonates in structurally weak regions and neighbourhoods, suggesting that scaling approaches should leverage local connections as strengths, not weaknesses. (cf. Le Labo de l'ESS o. D.).

7. Create an enabling environment for experimentation

The regulatory environment itself can serve as a bridging institution—if it establishes experimentation, scientific monitoring, and the scalable consolidation of new forms of cooperation as the standard for administrative action, rather than treating them as exceptions. With the Real-World Labs Act (ReallaboreG), adopted by the Federal Cabinet in November 2024, Germany has taken a first step in this direction: the Act aims to provide a more uniform and innovation-friendly approval process, improved knowledge transfer to legislative bodies, and the creation of a Real-World Labs innovation portal (BMWK 2024). However, the text falls short of expectations, particularly those articulated in the broad stakeholder consultation of 2023 (BDI 2024). Above all, the Act is heavily focused on technological and economic innovations and barely addresses the socio-ecological forms of cooperation and multi-stakeholder arrangements that are needed. Furthermore, its provisions are primarily directed at state authorities, which risks creating a patchwork of inconsistent approval practices.

By contrast, the French Experimentation Act (*loi d'expérimentation*) demonstrates how such a framework can be designed to be broader and more effective: unlike the strictly time-limited logic of the German real-world laboratories, it allows for the selective continuation of tried-and-tested approaches in individual territories—making experimentation not a one-off exception, but a permanent option for administrative action. Rather than simply streamlining approval processes, it creates a binding framework for scientific monitoring, evaluation, and parliamentary decision-making on scaling up. In light of this, it is advisable to expand the German Real-World Labs Act to include explicit experimentation clauses for socio-ecological cooperation projects and to enable the sustained implementation of successfully trialled innovations at the regional level—ensuring that regulatory learning does not end with individual projects, but is structurally incorporated into administrative action.

“France's Experimentation Act creates a framework for the long-term adoption of pilot projects and for decisions on their scaling.”

8. Establish professional infrastructure to enable interim use

Promoting and institutionally embedding professional temporary use agencies as intermediary actors in contemporary, needs-based urban development is recommended as a standalone instrument—particularly where urban land-use requirements are changing faster than planning and approval cycles allow. As the French examples *Plateau Urbain* and *Yeswecamp!* demonstrate, such actors can systematically tap into the vacant property stock and make spaces available for solidarity-based and public-interest uses. Approaches already exist in Germany—such as the Cooperative Real Estate Agencies (Genossenschaftlichen Immobilienagenturen, GIMA) and the nationwide ‘Vacancy Reporter’—that appear capable of being scaled up into infrastructure-building cooperation with public partners. Crucially, interim uses should not be treated as a temporary exception, but as a trial phase from which viable concepts can be transferred into permanent public-interest uses—for example, through a transition to cooperative ownership, leasehold arrangements, or municipal property models—thereby making significant contributions to local resilience.

“The benefits of community-oriented forms of economic activity should be recognized through appropriate incentives.”

9. Establish a real-world laboratory foundation for state-owned housing companies

State-owned housing companies possess substantial housing stocks, practical experience, and institutional reach—resources that have so far rarely been used in a coordinated manner for social and ecological innovation. Drawing inspiration from the Parisian *Fondation des Solidarités Urbaines* (FSU, Foundation for Urban Solidarity)—a joint initiative of various municipal social housing providers (*bailleurs sociaux*) that pools funds and expertise to trial, evaluate and scale innovative projects—the authors recommend establishing a foundation to support and coordinate real-world laboratories. Operating at the state or regional level, the foundation should issue thematic calls for proposals, focussing on problems identified by participating organizations in their day-to-day practice, finance the testing of cooperative provision and neighbourhood models in local areas, and systematically document and disseminate the results. Unlike temporary project funding, a foundation would provide a permanent institutional infrastructure that reliably involves civil society and cooperative actors and structurally anchors co-production between the housing sector, local authorities, and residents.

10. Tax incentives and public financing instruments

Another largely unexplored option in Germany is the use of tax incentives and the targeted opening of public financing programmes to cooperative and solidarity-based economic actors. It would be worthwhile considering whether a reduced trade tax rate for SSE actors (similar to existing municipal economic development instruments for structurally weak sectors or innovation clusters) could be linked to the targeted promotion of transformative infrastructure in the circular economy, local supply, and basic social services. In addition, it should be examined whether funding programmes of public investment banks—such as KfW and the investment banks of the federal states (e.g., IBB in Berlin, ILB in Brandenburg)—could be systematically opened to cooperative organizational structures and expanded to include specific product lines for financing the operating costs of SSE entities. France may offer a useful point of reference in this regard. The targeted involvement of the *Banque publique d'investissement* (Bpifrance) and the *Banque des Territoires* in supporting the SSE demonstrates that public financial institutions can do more than simply cover investment costs. They can also act as strategic partners in shaping and sustaining long-term solidarity-based economic development. Whether and how a comparable approach could be implemented within the scope of German financial and tax law requires a separate expert assessment. Nevertheless, this question appears sufficiently relevant to warrant its inclusion on the political agenda.

8 Final remarks

Many of the elements outlined in these recommendations already exist: in neighbourhood initiatives, pioneering projects, and local experiments that have demonstrated their value and earned public trust. The strength of the Social and Solidarity Economy lies in its ability to succeed where abstract promises of transformation fail: by delivering concrete results at community level and addressing real needs. What is lacking is not the capacity to implement these solutions—that has been proven time and again. What is missing is a systematic way to translate successful experiments into sustainable, scalable, and comprehensive structures.

A resilient city capable of withstanding future crises—climatic, social, and economic—will need these infrastructures. Not as a temporary fix, but as the backbone of public services that combine security of supply with democratic co-governance. The cooperative economy is not only a response to ecological and social challenges; it is also an instrument for stabilizing democracy. Collective decision-making, shared responsibility, and collaborative action foster strong bonds and empower communities—leaving little space for authoritarian solutions. This dimension should not be underestimated at a time when democratic cultures are under pressure.

The standardization and systematization of experiments that have yielded positive results—their transition from individual cases to widespread application, from pilot projects to administrative routine—is not a technical task. It is a political decision: in favour of resilience, participation, and an economic model that places people and the local community at its heart.

Interview partners

We wish to express our gratitude to the following interview partners:

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Cédric Mazière	La Venelle
Pierre Prochasson	La Bricole, Activ 18 (TZCLD)
Lorana Vincent	Vers un Réseau d'Achat en Commun (VRAC)

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