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Title: Empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives: blending social innovation and commons theory.

Abstract

Social innovation scholars see grassroots welfare initiatives as being potentially empowering. However, they also argue that this potential is enhanced when these initiatives receive support from local governments through a bottom-linked approach to social innovation. This article examines how empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives can be provided within a bottom-linked approach, while considering the reservations expressed by critical urban scholars on the link between them. By introducing the concept of self-government developed within commons theory into the bottom-linked approach to social innovation, it argues that policies aiming to empower grassroots welfare initiatives should provide adequate material and legal support, and should foster the emergence of new initiatives, but should always be careful not to limit their self-governing capacity. The article carries out a comparative analysis of two cases of grassroots welfare initiatives in Barcelona, comparing two different policy interventions adopted by the local government: one is a case in which an empowering policy was implemented, and the other one is a case in which this did not take place. The article concludes by highlighting the contribution made by this study for both policymaking and scholarly research.

Introduction: the emergence of grassroots welfare

Since the 2007/2008 crisis, the austerity-driven public welfare recalibrations initiated in the 1970s (Ferrera, 2008) have intensified (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017). Budget restrictions and reforms have been widely implemented according to each national context, leading to what critical scholars have defined as the "becoming productive of public welfare" (Vercellone, 2015). Practices of mutualism based on social cooperation, solidarity and self-organisation have always existed (Oosterlynck et al., 2020), but this austerity-driven process transforming public welfare has led them to proliferate in many European cities (Moulaert et al., 2013). These projects include community centres, migrant-led housing squats, parenting groups and health care centres, among others. These practices provide a form of grassroots welfare through which diverse people work together to offer a response to these needs.

Scholars have interpreted the emergence of these grassroots welfare initiatives ambivalently. Some argue that these initiatives, since they are highly localised, often carried out on a small scale, and operate at the margins of the welfare system (Oosterlynck et al., 2020), do not represent an effective response to unmet social needs that would still most effectively be addressed by public welfare institutions (Martinelli, 2012). Others, instead, see these initiatives as an opportunity to improve the response to those needs, since they promote a diversified welfare provision in contrast to the social homogeneity pursued by top-down welfare (Subirats, 2016), they provide tailor-made, innovative solutions in contrast to the path-dependent and conservative nature of public welfare institutions (MacCallum et al., 2009), and they empower communities, unlike the relative paternalistic approach of the Keynesian welfare state (Moulaert, 2010).

Rather than exclusively embracing only one of these perspectives, this article takes a more nuanced stand, a stand that already appears in the academic literature on social innovation. It posits that grassroots welfare initiatives cannot represent the only solution to the new forms of social, economic and territorial exclusion –because they suffer from a series of economic, legal and universalistic limitations (Martinelli, 2013)– but that they do have the potential to improve welfare production, by diversifying and innovating welfare production and by empowering communities, especially if they are interweaved with public welfare through a "bottom-linked" approach (Moulaert, 2010; Pradel-Miquel et al., 2013). This approach recognises "the centrality of initiatives taken by those immediately concerned, but stresses the necessity of institutions that would enable, gear or sustain such initiatives through sound, regulated and lasting practices and clearer citizen rights guaranteed by a democratic state-functioning" (Moulaert, 2010: 9).

The article aims to contribute to the social innovation literature by exploring the articulation between the bottom-linked approach and the empowerment of grassroots welfare initiatives. Although the empowerment dimension is central to the literature on social innovation, very few studies have analysed the relationship between the bottom-linked approach and the empowerment of grassroots welfare initiatives (Eizaguirre et al., 2017). Delving into this issue is particularly relevant since several critical urban scholars have pointed out that the bottom-linked approach, despite being important for the consolidation of these initiatives, can actually be a barrier to their empowerment, since it can foster co-optation processes (Arampatzi, 2021; Bragaglia, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2005). By taking on board the ideas expressed by both social innovation and critical urban scholars, the objective of this article is to understand how empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives can be enabled. We understand empowerment as a process that increases an

initiative's socio-political capability by granting it access to adequate resources to meet people's human needs, and by enhancing political participation (Moulaert et al., 2016).

By incorporating the concept of self-government developed by commons theory (Dardot and Laval, 2015) within the bottom-linked approach to social innovation, the article argues that, to be empowering, policies for grassroots welfare initiatives should provide adequate material and normative support, and foster the emergence of new initiatives, but without limiting their self-governing capacity.

The analysis is set in the urban context of Barcelona, and examines two cases of grassroots welfare initiatives: the Can Batlló community centre and the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat. It compares the policy interventions adopted by the local government in each case: in one, empowering policies were implemented and in the other case, they were not. While focusing on understanding *how* public policies can empower grassroots welfare initiatives, the article does not address the question of *why* these policies are implemented. Understanding the political rationales of local governments in deciding whether and how to support these initiatives is a complex issue that has been addressed by the author in a dedicated contribution (Bianchi, 2022a). The article begins by illustrating the benefits and drawbacks of a bottom-linked approach to grassroots welfare initiatives. It then introduces the concept of self-government, showing how it can help configure policies that empower grassroots welfare initiatives within this approach. It goes on to perform a comparative analysis of two different cases of grassroots/public welfare articulations in the context of Barcelona. The article concludes by highlighting how this research contributes to both policymaking and scholarly research.

A bottom-linked approach to grassroots welfare initiatives: social innovation theory

Grassroots welfare initiatives have been studied by several scholars in the frame of the broad field of welfare studies (Fumagalli et al., 2018; Vamstad,16). As part of these studies, the results gleaned by urban scholars in the framework of social innovation theory represent some of the most theoretically sophisticated and empirically informed accounts on the topic. By analysing a multitude of social innovation initiatives in urban contexts in Europe, scholars have illustrated in this perspective how such initiatives, which have emerged from the bottom up in the face of increasing social, economic and spatial inequalities, hold the potential to empower communities (Moulaert et al., 2013; Oosterlynck et al., 2020). However, the same scholars who underscore the empowering potential of grassroots welfare initiatives have also shown how, in some cases, their potential is

hampered, since a series of limitations prevent these initiatives always satisfying the social needs they aim to address.

Following Martinelli's work, (2013), we can categorise these limitations according to three main dimensions: material, legal, and universalistic. The material dimension is linked to the possibility that these initiatives will encounter difficulties in accessing financial and property resources. The projects are often run in contexts of poverty and vulnerability, and can face serious difficulties in securing adequate property and economic resources. This scarcity may have a direct implication on the continuity of these initiatives, as well as on their capacity to effectively address the needs identified. The legal limitation is linked to the unfavourable legal framework in which these initiatives may be embedded. They may develop on the margins of legality, employing tactics that are not recognised by the law, such as carrying out informal economic activities or squatting buildings. These limitations can also have an impact both on their continuity and on their ability to respond effectively to unmet needs. Even initiatives that do not function outside legal frameworks find that regulatory structures are important in order for them to consolidate over time, something already shown by studies on housing cooperatives (Huron, 2018). The universalistic dimension is linked to the configuration of these initiatives: they tend to be formed by collective units, each only with a limited number of members. If these units do not grow in number, they will fail to secure universal social rights.

Taken together, these limitations, as well as seriously affecting the welfare provision capacity of these grassroots practices, have an impact on their empowerment. If these initiatives have to struggle to achieve economic self-sufficiency and to have a stable access to property, if they are forced to cope with a restrictive or unfavourable legal framework, if they are run only by and for certain social groups, and if they are scarce and unevenly distributed throughout the urban fabric, they are unlikely to become vehicles for empowering communities. If faced with these limitations, members of grassroots welfare initiatives, rather than using their energies to improve their socio-political capabilities, have to devote their time and resources to overcoming the various hurdles, sometimes unsuccessfully. In this way, they risk becoming socially and spatially marginalised self-exploitative practices that may even increase social, economic and spatial inequalities instead of reducing them (Blanco and Nel·lo, 2018).

In light of such limitations, social innovation scholars are calling for the local state to support these initiatives materially and legally, and encourage more of them to emerge (Kazepov et al., 2020)

within a framework that has been defined as a bottom-linked approach to social innovation (Moulaert, 2010; Pradel-Miquel et al., 2013). According to this approach, state support for grassroots social innovation initiatives should be inscribed within a broader vision that rethinks the governance of welfare institutions, where the relationship between these initiatives and public welfare is defined in a more imbricated way: together they co-produce, co-learn and negotiate more democratic welfare institutions (Oosterlynck et al., 2020). The bottom-linked approach to social innovation can be beneficial for both public and grassroots welfare: the state can transform public welfare incrementally thanks to the innovative "messages" conveyed by these initiatives in terms of policy values, contents, objectives and modes (Evers and Brandsen, 2016); and the initiatives, by overcoming the above-mentioned limitations, can develop, consolidate and, most importantly, empower themselves (Kazepov et al., 2020).

However, in parallel to these studies that envisage the benefits of a bottom-linked approach to social innovation, a considerable number of critical urban scholars have underlined how this approach might be counterproductive for the empowerment of grassroots welfare initiatives (Arampatzi, 2021; Bragaglia, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2005). The local governments' development of dedicated programmes to enhance social innovation initiatives has been interpreted as a process that may co-opt these initiatives. In light of ongoing austerity-driven and consensus-building welfare reforms and approaches, co-optation is enacted by shifting the cost for welfare production onto communities, but without granting them adequate financial support (Bragaglia, 2020), and also by including these initiatives in the policy-making process but without granting them sufficient decision-making power (Swingedouw, 2005). In her insightful analysis of these dynamics in the contexts of Athens and Madrid, Arampatzi (2021) illustrates how this type of co-optation is taking place: programmes that were developed to enhance social innovation initiatives in a post-crisis urban scenario have diminished the empowerment of the initiatives, since they have either not been adequately supported by local governments or have not been fully included in long-term public deliberations.

In other words, the bottom-linked approach may have ambiguous implications for the empowerment of grassroots welfare initiatives. On the one hand, the empowering capacity of these initiatives may be significantly enhanced, as this approach may help them to overcome their limitations and, thus, strengthen their socio-political capabilities. On the other hand, their empowering capacity may be considerably damaged, since the aim of including them in this approach might be to transfer welfare responsibilities to them without adequately redistributing

resources and decision-making power. In recent theoretical developments, the literature on social innovation that advocates for a bottom-linked approach recognises this tension (Pradel-Miquel et al., 2021). However, the question of how grassroots welfare initiatives can be empowered while being embedded within a bottom-linked governance remain unsolved. The article addresses this issue in the next sections by answering to the following question: how can empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives be developed within a bottom-linked approach? We suggest a concept that can be mobilised effectively to answer these questions: that of self-government developed within commons theory.

Self-government in commons theory

Commons theory represents an additional lens through which grassroots welfare initiatives have been studied within the neo-institutionalist and Marxist currents. With the intention of overcoming the twentieth-century state/market dichotomy, commons scholars have analysed self-organised communities that manage resources and services in both rural and urban settings. The neo-institutionalist literature mainly examines how the commons can manage to endure over time by establishing norms and enforcing them (Hess and Ostrom, 2007; Ostrom, 1990). Conversely, the Marxist literature examines how the commons fit into macro-economic and macro-political dynamics, and speculates on the possibility of these initiatives designing pathways of emancipation from capitalism in the urban fabric and beyond (De Angelis, 2017; Stavrides, 2016). Thus, it is primarily from this last stream of literature that we draw inspiration for answering our research question. This stream, in fact, sees that the commons hold an empowering potential as communities: by being involved in self-organised practices, they can free themselves from the multiple forms of capitalistic domination (De Angelis, 2017; Stavrides, 2016).

For Marxist scholars, the grassroots welfare initiatives' potential for empowerment is associated with them constructing their autonomy. They suggest that the commons can become vehicles for this empowerment when they are able to maintain their autonomy from the institutions that seek to destroy or co-opt them, namely the state and the market (De Angelis, 2017). However, autonomy here is not understood as absolute autonomy – i.e. with no relationship allowed with state and/or market actors. This type of autonomy would be hard to achieve as many commons have to relate to state or market actors, especially in the urban environment, either to obtain funding or to secure their project within a stable legal framework (Huron, 2018). Autonomy is thus understood as relative: as self-government (Bianchi, 2022b). Self-government means that a commons' members hold the decision-making power about how the project and its objectives are carried out (Dardot and

Laval, 2015). Marxist scholars argue that when initiatives are self-governed they enhance their empowerment, since they strengthen their power vis-à-vis other forms of political and economic domination.

The concept of self-government developed within the commons literature can be integrated into the bottom-linked approach to social innovation to define the margins of how empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives can be put forward. To guarantee the self-government of these initiatives within a bottom-linked approach, local government policies should grant them adequate economic and legal help, and foster new ones emerging, but always taking care not to undermine their decision-making power. Respecting the decision-making power of these initiatives does not mean that local governments cannot oversee them and intervene if they detect any inappropriate conduct. Self-governed grassroots welfare initiatives have often proven to be exclusionary and discriminatory (De Angelis, 2012). The capacity to oversee and intervene remains, therefore, a prerogative of local governments to guarantee that these initiatives act in the public interest. However, if local governments allow these initiatives to make decisions independently about their project and objectives, even while ensuring that they act in the public interest, this do enhance the initiatives' socio-political capabilities and, thus, their empowerment. We will now look at in which contexts these empowering support policies are provided to grassroots welfare initiatives by the local government in the context of Barcelona.

Methodology

The research study adopts a qualitative-interpretative approach, basing its analysis on a cross-case comparison of two grassroots welfare initiatives that emerged in the context of Barcelona, Spain: the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat and the Can Batlló community centre. The Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat was set up in 2011 by a group mainly made up of sub-Saharan immigrants, to provide themselves with shelter and to carry out informal economic activities to subsist. The Can Batlló community centre emerged in 2011 from the mobilisation of neighbourhood residents to self-provide cultural facilities. The cases were selected according to two key criteria: they had to be carried out in the same time period by different social groups and produce different type of grassroots welfare. Selecting two initiatives that were carried out over the same time period by different social groups allowed us to examine how the same local government might adopt different policy interventions. The underlying hypothesis was that the local government would develop different policy interventions for each initiative. The cases represent two different examples of how grassroots and public welfare can be articulated: the Can Batlló community centre

received empowering support by the local government, while the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat was an initiative that was first disarticulated, and then embedded into two innovative welfare schemes that did not, however, pursue an empowering policy approach. The two-case comparison has the objective of contrasting the different policy interventions that were produced in each case, to better distinguish which could be considered a supportive policy approach and which could not. The research was mainly carried out from March 2016 to June 2017. However, more analysis was carried out between January 2021 and June 2021 to obtain updated data on both case studies. Data collection was based on the triangulation of different sources of evidence. This was mainly document analysis, such as articles in local newspapers, press releases issued by Barcelona City Council, and policy reports; in addition, 25 semi-structured interviews were performed with members from each grassroots welfare initiative, municipal public officers and politicians, activists and experts. Interviews were recorded and manually transcribed. They were analysed using Nvivo10 software that facilitates data coding and cross-case analysis.

Introducing the Barcelona context

Barcelona is the capital of the region of Catalonia, Spain. It is a city which has a tradition and history of progressive politics. Since the democratic turn (1979), with the exception of the 2011-2015 mandate, it has always been governed by left-wing coalition governments that have gradually expanded local welfare institutions, in line with European tendencies to promote more localised forms of welfare provision (Andreotti and Mingione, 2016). However, Barcelona has not been exempted from the processes of "the becoming productive public welfare". Especially from the 1990s onwards, many local social services have been outsourced (Ramió et al., 2007). This trend intensified in the aftermath of the 2007/8 economic crisis, when all scales of government, including the municipal level, responded with the implementation of severe austerity measures (Davies and Blanco, 2017) that aggravated social needs in many segments of the population, and led to the emergence of many grassroots welfare initiatives in the city (Cruz et al., 2017). However, in recent years Barcelona has also experienced an important change in progressive politics. In both 2015 and 2019, Barcelona en Comú (BComú), a party that stemmed from the social movements, won the municipal elections and, although it governed either as a minority or in partnership with social-democratic parties, it began to produce important changes in the city's governance and in the local welfare provision model (Blanco et al., 2020). The policies implemented by the left-wing government ranged from ones aimed at strengthening local public welfare provision, such as the re-municipalisation of previously outsources social services, the creation of new innovative welfare schemes for elder and child care and the expansion of existing schemes, to policies aiming at

supporting and enhancing grassroots welfare initiatives, such as support for social housing cooperatives. The two grassroots welfare projects under study are situated in this changing political context. They emerged in a post-crisis Barcelona governed by the liberal conservative government, and were then included in the local welfare reforms carried out by the BComú government.

Grassroots welfare initiatives: emerging from unmet social needs

Our two cases of grassroots welfare initiatives emerged in Barcelona in 2011 to respond to the unmet social needs of two diverse social groups. The Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat was set up in the aftermath of the 2007/8 economic crisis, when many sub-Saharan immigrants, especially ones that were undocumented and had been employed in the agricultural and construction sectors, lost their jobs and became excluded from the formal labour and housing market (Pradel-Miquel, 2017). The City Council did not put forward any specific policies to enable this marginalised group to subsist, and re-directed them towards general social care services. As one public officer mentioned, this was an ineffective strategy, since these services target a profile that is very different from that of these sub-Saharan immigrants. Thus, in 2011, a group of 15-20 sub-Saharan immigrants began to squat a privately-owned factory in the former industrial neighbourhood of Poblenou. By squatting the building, they managed to provide themselves with an integrated form of subsistence. This was a building where they could live, as well as a location to carry out informal economic activities, such as waste-picking,[1] and a place to help each other in their daily lives. Indeed, living together in the factory was not easy. Conflicts proliferated because of the allocation of sleeping places, and of inter-ethnic rivalries. However, they managed to build a governing structure, based on national sub-groups where each one had a representative, to deal with daily problems and taking decisions. Due to the poor conditions suffered by many sub-Saharan immigrants in the city of Barcelona, the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat quickly grew, reaching 300 inhabitants in a few weeks.

The Can Batlló community centre emerged to fill the historic lack of public facilities and green spaces in the Sants-la Bordeta neighbourhood. The City Council had planned to create these new spaces through the adoption of the General Metropolitan Plan in 1976. This set out that the 14 hectares of the privately-owned former Can Batlló industrial site located in the neighbourhood was to be entirely transformed into public facilities and green spaces. However, the City Council never finalised the legal framework for the redevelopment of the site, and it remained derelict for decades.

[1] Waste-picking is an informal economic practice that involves individuals collecting metal waste from public spaces and selling it to recycling companies to make a living.

In 2009, this led to neighbourhood residents, along with newly-mobilised groups –connected to networks on the national scale (such as the 15M[2])– launching the Tic-Tac (countdown) campaign to demand the creation of public facilities and green spaces on the Can Batlló site. They set a specific date, 11 June 2011, threatening to squat the factory if the building work had not been started by then. During the campaign, their demands for redevelopment evolved into demands to self-manage part of the public spaces and facilities located on the Can Batlló site. The local government was keen to avoid further disturbances in the city after the 15M mobilisations, and ceded one of the warehouses on the Can Batlló industrial site to neighbourhood residents to set up the Can Batlló community centre.

The limitations of grassroots welfare initiatives

Material limitations

Both projects emerged and evolved in contexts of scarcity, albeit very different ones. In the case of the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat, the immigrants had come together to try to subsist, but this subsistence was verging on extreme poverty. The sub-Saharan immigrant waste pickers were exploited by more powerful actors within the economic chain of waste-picking, such recycling companies that set low purchase prices for waste-picked materials. Thus, making a living with waste-picking was a struggle for sub-Saharan immigrants since, even if they worked all day, their average daily earnings ranged between 10 and 15 euros each, leaving them under the poverty line. Moreover, the sub-Saharan immigrants faced serious health and safety risks because the factory they were squatting had no running water or electricity. In other words, in the case of the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat, the grassroots welfare took place in extremely precarious conditions in terms of poverty and health and safety.

In the case of Can Batlló, the neighbourhood residents lacked a property where they could set up a community centre. They demanded a location from the public administration through a mobilisation process that began in 2009 and culminated in 2011, when Barcelona City Council decided to temporarily transfer a warehouse in the Can Batlló industrial site to them. In addition, once the property had been transferred to them, neighbourhood residents did not have the resources needed to renovate and maintain it. The building had been derelict for many years and required expensive repair work that could not be paid for by the neighbourhood residents through self-financing. Moreover, when the centre was set up, this self-financing scheme was the only financing source for

[2] The 15M was a series of demonstrations and occupations against austerity policies in Spain that began the 15th May 2011.

the community centre, since revenue-generating economic activities, such as the café, were established only later. The limited economic capacity of Can Batlló's members was an obstacle to the full development of the community centre, which intended to include different types of facilities, such an auditorium and a library.

Legal limitations

Both projects were set up in hostile legal environments, albeit very different ones. The Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat revolved around two illegal practices: squatting private property and waste-picking. Throughout Spain, the enforcement of the 1995 Spanish Penal Code criminalised squatting, which became punishable with prison sentences. As for waste-picking, in Barcelona, individuals were permitted to sell metal waste to recycling companies but, the 2005 Civic Ordinance established that the collection of this waste by individuals was prohibited in the public space and punishable with fines of up to 500 euros. Thus, the production of grassroots welfare in the case of Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat could only last as long as these two activities were tolerated by both the property owner and by the public authorities in charge of rule enforcement.

Can Batlló, conversely, emerged in rather less difficult legal circumstances. This would have been different had the social group decided to squat the Can Batlló site to claim public facilities and green spaces for the neighbourhood, but in the end, through a series of negotiations, they managed to obtain the legal cession of some warehouses from the City Council. However, the cession of the Can Batlló spaces to the neighbourhood resident group was based on the 2003 Public Administration Asset law, which stipulated that the contracts had to be renewed every four years at most (in the case of the Can Batlló community centre it was renewed yearly), leaving this decision to the discretion of the public officer in charge. These short timeframes and politically insecure situations limited the workings of the Can Batlló community centre, since its members were doubtful as to whether they would be granted management of the spaces in the long term.

Universalistic limitations

The projects in each of the case studies provided grassroots welfare through a single collective unit. This kind of provision may encounter limits in terms of universal reach because the units may not be sufficiently large to address the needs of the entire population in need. The two cases in question, however, did not suffer too badly from this limitation, as they were not isolated cases, but part of two broader phenomena of grassroots welfare production. The Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing

squat only produced a means of subsistence for its 300 inhabitants. However, it was only one of many sub-Saharan immigrant-led squats that were taking root in the post-crisis period in the Poblenou neighbourhood. This group of squats was referred to as the informal Poblenou settlement phenomena (Pradel-Miquel, 2017). All together, they provided an integrated form of subsistence to a considerable number of sub-Saharan immigrants.

In a similar way, Can Batlló provided community facilities mainly for residents of the Sants-la Bordeta neighbourhood, although the services were open to all Barcelona residents. In addition, it was also part of an ecosystem of self-managed (both squatted and non-squatted) community centres that were very widespread in the city. This ecosystem developed from the 1980s onwards in line with the Barcelona tradition of self-organisation (Martínez López, 2013). These centres guaranteed community facilities to all Barcelona inhabitants, well beyond the capacity of Can Batlló. Thus, these cases show that the production of grassroots welfare based on single collective unit may be limited, but that the significance of this limitation can be reduced thanks to the proliferation of these projects. This proliferation does not transform grassroots welfare into fully universalistic welfare, but it does help it trace out a trajectory towards possible universalisation.

Combining grassroots welfare with public welfare: different modalities of policy intervention

The Barcelona local government reacted in different ways to each grassroots welfare project, intertwining each one with local public welfare structures by using different policy modalities. One of the modalities could be considered empowering: that of the Can Batlló community centre. Instead, the one of the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat could be considered disempowering.

An empowering policy modality for grassroots welfare initiatives

In the case of the Can Batlló community centre, the City Council developed an empowering policy to support the grassroots welfare initiative: it contributed to addressing the centre's material, legal and universalistic limitations without undermining the initiative's self-governing capacity. It did so by implementing a series of policy interventions and by developing a community asset transfer scheme. Firstly, as already mentioned, initially, the conservative local government temporarily ceded one of the warehouses on the Can Batlló industrial site to neighbourhood residents to carry out their activities, with an annually renewable contract. Secondly, since the warehouse needed renovation, the local government carried out the necessary building work, such as re-roofing, to guarantee the structural safety of the building. In addition, it paid for expensive work that had not initially been budgeted for but that could be considered as structural, such as soundproofing the

auditorium. Moreover, it kept paying all the utility bills such as water and electricity, thus lessening the economic pressure on the Can Batlló members. This economic and infrastructure support (even though it was not something to be counted on long term) was added to the centre's revenue-making capacity obtained through opening a café, allowing the Can Batlló members to set up one of the best-known and active self-managed community centres in the city. The centre eventually included different activities and projects – a cafè, a library, an auditorium, a carpentry workshop, etc. -. Each activity and project had its own governing body, but all were part of the Can Batlló community centre and they participated in its general assemblies, where representatives discussed and decided issues together.

The most relevant aspect of the support given by the City Council was that the public administration's contribution was not bound to any requirements, apart from maintaining the public nature of the space, i.e. that all Barcelona residents could take part in the activities freely. In this way, neighbourhood residents maintained decision-making power over the community centre; they were the ones that defined the programmes and the activities for the public, without being subjected to any guidelines from the public administration. As mentioned by a Can Batlló member:

> "What they [the City Council] do is to invest in their assets, in their buildings, and what we do is to use them and manage them as public facilities for the neighbourhood. The way we use and manage them means that we decide on our cultural programme, our activities, and our economic model."

With the arrival of BComú at the helm of the municipal government, Barcelona City Council expanded and strengthened this type of empowering support by developing a community asset transfer scheme, the *Patrimoni Ciutadà* [Citizen Asset] programme. This was implemented in 2017, and aimed to regulate the transfer of public facilities and spaces to communities; up until then, these had been allocated through ad hoc procedures that responded to direct requests from citizens' groups, but that entailed a lack of administrative transparency (as in the case of the Can Batlló community centre). Before the adoption of the programme, decisions were taken at the discretion of the public officer in charge of matters regarding the transfer of the asset and the renovation of the contract. The current programme now means that a commission made up of representatives from the different areas of the City Council –the *Taula del Patrimoni Ciutadà* [Citizen Asset Board]– evaluates and processes the transfer of the asset and the requests for renewal. The creation of this

Board ensures that each asset transfer and renewal is jointly assessed and decided on by the Board members, and not solely by the public officer in charge; this significantly reduces risk of patronage and of arbitrary decisions. During the evaluation process, the Board also determines the type of economic contribution to be provided to the community initiative by the municipality according to the needs of each project. In general, this programme aims to support existing grassroots welfare projects in the city and to foster the emergence of new ones, so that there will be more of them and their universalistic reach will be expanded (Bianchi, 2022c).

For the Can Batlló community centre, this programme represented an important step forward in consolidating the centre and overcoming the obstacles it faced. Since Can Batlló represented an emblematic example of the public-community partnerships that the left-wing local government aimed to foster city-wide (Barcelona En Comú, 2015), the City Council decided to grant important empowering support to the community centre. As a pioneering measure, the City Council altered the agreement concerning the assets that had been transferred. Through a resolution that was voted on in the Barcelona municipal plenary,[3] the City Council granted the spaces for 30 years with the possibility of a 20-year extension (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2019). Initially, not all members of the Can Batlló community centre wanted this extension, with some seeing it as an excessive formalisation of their relationship with the City Council. However, eventually, the members who appreciated the benefits of the extension managed to convince those that were resisting it. As expressed by one activist who supported it:

> "We didn't want to sign it [the agreement extension] just because we have some kind of obsession with the law; it was more for the feeling of saying: we can take advantage of the fact that there is a friendly government to generate something that could last longer in the future."

In this way, as recognised by the Can Batlló members, the City Council provided considerable stability to the Can Batlló community centre, but without tying this support to any specific administrative requirements, beyond the need to keep the space open and public. The centre, thus, has the freedom to plan its activities in the long term, without fearing that the local government might revoke its management in subsequent election cycles. In short, in the case of Can Batlló community centre, the City Council decided to provide empowering support to the grassroots

[3] It was necessary approve this measure in the plenary to overcome the four-year transfer limit established by the 2003 Public Administration Asset law.

welfare initiative, backing the project both materially and legally but without limiting its autonomous decision-making power, as well as encouraging the emergence of other similar projects.

A disempowering policy modality for grassroots welfare initiatives

In the case of Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat, the City Council did not provide the grassroots welfare initiative with the same kind of empowering support as that given to the Can Batlló community centre. Firstly, the City Council decided not to tolerate the factory being squatted. Since it did not own the factory, it pushed the owner to take legal action to evict the squatters. The sub-Saharan immigrants responded by mobilising to defend the squat. However, they could not halt the eviction, and it eventually took place in July 2013. This eviction cut short the grassroots welfare experience and caused a humanitarian crisis, since the sub-Saharan immigrants could no longer provide themselves with an integrated means of subsistence. To solve this humanitarian crisis, the City Council decided to implement two public welfare schemes: the *Plan de asentamientos irregulares* [Irregular Settlements Plan] and the *Cooperativa Alencop,* a waste-picking cooperative. These two programmes emerged to address the humanitarian crisis that had been detonated by the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat being broken up, but eventually came to address the whole Poblenou informal settlements phenomenon.

These two programmes contributed, albeit in different ways, to address the subsistence needs of the sub-Saharan immigrant population. However, the schemes were not intended to empower the sub-Saharan immigrant-led grassroots welfare initiatives, but to include the evicted members of the Puigcerdà housing squat and other immigrant-led housing squats in two public welfare schemes. The *Plan de asentamientos irregulares,* implemented in 2011*,* explicitly aimed to eradicate the informal settlements in Barcelona by providing personalised support to all people living in informal settlements, to help them towards social, economic and administrative inclusion and to guarantee decent living conditions in terms of housing, employment and administrative status (Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, 2012). However, the programme only achieved this aim to a limited extent: it managed to guarantee people shelter by housing them in B&Bs and hostels, which was a very costly solution, but it did not manage to guarantee them either employment nor to formalise their immigration status,[4] so that the immigrants continued to rely on informal activities to subsist, but now without the possibilities of pooling their resources in a shared space.

[4] Out of 260 people who were housed during 2013, only 20 managed to sign an employment contract and only four obtained residency permits. This trend continued throughout the following years.

The *Cooperativa Alencop,* founded in 2014*,* was an innovative welfare scheme that aimed to provide integrated support to a group thirty sub-Saharan immigrants, in terms of housing and administrative support, while developing a cooperative venture that aimed to formalise waste-picking,[5] spread cooperative values, and empower workers (Cooperativa Alencop, 2016). However, the City Council's idea of empowerment was far from the ideas that have been discussed here. The waste-picking cooperative was not self-managed by the sub-Saharan immigrants, but by two council officials. They supported the sub-Saharan immigrants in developing the cooperative, implemented the City Council's decisions, managed the public budget allocated to finance the project, did all the cooperative's accounting, as well as being in charge of bureaucratic and administrative work and maintaining business relationships with other partners. What the sub-Saharan members of the co-operative did was to carry out the waste collection activity. In short, they had little room to make autonomous decisions about the development of the cooperative: their agency was limited to providing labour to the cooperative, but without being included in the decision-making process. As one member of the cooperative mentioned, since they were not given the chance to become more accountable for the management of the business, they did not feel as though they were part of a workers' cooperative at all, but only part of a social inclusion scheme (Morales, 2017).

In other words, these two welfare schemes aimed to address the needs of the sub-Saharan immigrant population, but were far from providing them with any type of empowerment. As one opposition politician stated:

> "The Convergència i Unió [right-wing] government never had a personal and human attitude and never empathised with the possibility that something could have been developed there [the Puigcerdà factory] by the sub-Saharan inhabitants."

The approach taken by the local government did not change with the arrival of BComú in power. As mentioned by an informant, BComú maintained a more communicative attitude with all squats, but sub-Saharan immigrant-led housing squats continued to be dismantled, and the City Council continued to use the *Plan de asentamientos irregulares* as their welfare support. In 2020 the

[5] The formalisation was achieved by changing the nature of the economic activity. The cooperative provided a free service for home waste collection. Thus, the waste was freely and spontaneously donated by companies and private individuals to the cooperative, which then sold it to recycling companies.

Cooperativa Alencop was dissolved, not without controversy, because it was not considered an economically viable scheme.

Conclusion

Social innovation scholars have dominated the debate on the emergence of grassroots welfare initiatives in European cities. They see these initiatives as bearing an empowering potential (Moulaert, 2010). However, since these grassroots welfare initiatives face important material, legal and universalistic limitations (Martinelli, 2013) that limit their empowerment, social innovation scholars have argued that the initiatives should be articulated with public welfare through a bottom-linked approach (Moulaert, 2010; Pradel-Miquel et al., 2013). The benefits of this approach to the empowerment of grassroots welfare initiatives has been questioned by critical urban scholars that uphold that a bottom-linked approach may also lead to co-optation processes (Arampatzi, 2021; Bragaglia, 2020; Swyngedouw, 2005). In the light of this academic debate, the aim of this article was to understand how empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives can be provided within a bottom-linked approach.

By introducing the concept of self-government developed by commons theory (Dardot and Laval, 2015) in the bottom-linked approach to social innovation, the article argues that providing empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives entails creating policy programmes that provide adequate material and legal support to these initiatives without limiting their self-governing capacity, and that foster the emergence of other similar projects. In fact, these initiatives gain empowerment when they are adequately helped by local policy programmes to ease their material, legal and universalistic limitations, so that they do not function as socially and spatially marginalised self-exploitative practices that risk increasing inequalities instead of reducing them. The respect of the self-government of these initiatives in defining the objectives of their projects and how they are carried out, thus enhancing their socio-political capacities and their empowerment, is a crucial issue in developing policy programs to support them.

By contrasting the Can Batlló community centre and the Puigcerdà immigrant-led housing squat – one a case of a grassroots welfare initiative in Barcelona where the Barcelona local government employed an empowering policy and another in which it did not– we have shown how empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives can be provided within a bottom-linked approach. In this way, the article has sought to equip local policy makers with a guiding framework for designing

empowering policies for grassroots welfare initiatives, and to offer urban scholars an analytical tool for assessing the empowering animus of different modalities of supporting grassroots welfare initiatives. In light of the uncertain public welfare developments and the renewed increase in grassroots welfare initiatives in European cities in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (UN-Habitat, 2020), the article has delved into a field of enquiry that will continue to be of great relevance for urban scholarly research, and whose contribution can inform and inspire further research studies on the articulation between public and grassroots welfare.

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