Realities, practices and contexts of community facilities in Barcelona and Sri Lanka

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Empowering Neighbourhoods:
Keeping Barcelona's Community Spaces Alive

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1. Introduction

Le droit à la ville (Lefebvre, 1968) could well characterize the spirit of numerous social and community initiatives that have prevailed in recent decades. Since Lefebvre's classic formulation at the dawn of Paris in 1968, in a context of rapid functionalist urban transformation in line with the strict direction of the state and capital, there has been extensive theorizing about urban expansion and its political implications, that is, about how the city is built and under what interests. Similarly, Harvey has emphasized the need to go beyond access to urban resources and change the city through collective power and following these desires (Harvey, 2012). That is to seek alternatives to the expansion of global capitalism and the paradigm of urban spaces as consumption goods and mere solutions for the capital surpluses capable of adapting the city's direction according to a reduced number of stakeholders.

From the Occupy Wall Street movements to Spain's 15M movement, there have been multiple expressions of rejection of global financial institutions and the dynamics of political cartelization, which go beyond the public-private dichotomy and seek a profound democratization of decisions with collective effects (Innerarity, 2015). In this regard, it is worth highlighting community management spaces or civic management facilities.

In recent decades, community management spaces have attracted significant attention from academia given their potential and diversity of expression. In this regard, community management spaces or civic management facilities in Barcelona stand out, embedded in the dynamics of mobilization and self-organization that have traditionally characterized the city. These initiatives, whose origins tend to lie in the neighborhood movements of the second half of the 20th century, although in recent decades new urban social movements have been the most prevalent in relation to these spaces, constitute spaces of democratization within cities. These facilities, usually through cultural and social activities, seek to respond to strictly local needs through self-management, although we often deal with civic management spaces, that is, spaces in which the facilities are publicly owned by the city council and managed by neighborhood entities.

In this sense, we can observe the relationship between these initiatives and a new paradigm in public administration that is more oriented toward a relational model, moving away from the managerial and technocratic precepts traditionally present in the public sector. Evidence of these new dynamics can be found in Barcelona's pioneering regulatory framework through the

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regulation of citizen participation in 2002, the conceptualization of civic management in 2013, and Patrimoni Ciutadà in 2024. Therefore, we are able to observe a new conceptualization of the relationship between the public sector and its target, society, taking into consideration a network approach and a strong bond with civil society and their entities and associations in order to have a substantive impact in the territory.

2. Research questions

In order to achieve a clearer understanding of the community driven spaces as well as their reality, practices, and contexts, we formulate the following questions, which this research seeks to answer:

1. What is the role of community-managed spaces, but also of public spaces and facilities, such as libraries, in building community and social cohesion? In terms of benefits and challenges?
2. What is the reality of community-driven spaces in other countries? What similarities and differences exist between the management models of community facilities in Barcelona and other international cities? What do they offer?
3. What are the current challenges facing community management spaces? What are the levels of participation and how does this occur in Barcelona and other cases?

In order to answer these questions, this report presents the case of Barcelona, that is, it attempts to systematize the characteristics of community-managed spaces, their realities, contexts, and most pressing issues. In this way, a comparative study is carried out with the case of the social movement of "Aragalaya" in Sri Lanka. Finally, we present a set of proposals and solutions oriented to keep these spaces alive and fostering their role as social cohesion nexus.

3. Theoretical Framework

Community management and civic management facilities have been defined through the relevant theoretical work of Ostrom and her well-known reconceptualization of the management of the so-called commons, defining its viability beyond the market-state dichotomy and responding to Hardin's well-known work and the *Homo economicus* paradigm when there are common resources or goods (Ostrom, 1990). From this theoretical framework, some authors have adapted the concept in terms of urban commons which would be institutions

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configured by the existence of a resource and a community engaged in its management, establishing norms and values to maintain it as well as rights over the use of the resource, although not necessarily an ownership (Pera, 2020).

However, it is necessary to conceptualize community management, although the regulatory framework in Barcelona presents these agreements in terms of civic management with civil society entities. Therefore:

Gestió cívica ("civic management") is a legal-political category that includes public facilities—cultural centres, community centres, youth clubs, and more—owned by the city of Barcelona, which is governed by the Barcelona City Council (henceforth City Council), and transferred to the non-profit grassroots organisations that manage them: civic management facilities (CMFs) (Pera, 2021)

Despite the existence of several cases of community management in private or squatted spaces, it is worth noting the potential of these spaces in terms of discourse articulation and the representation of a critical, counter-hegemonic and anti-capitalist way of understanding the community appropriation of resources, services and facilities. They can thus be understood as an alternative to the public-private duality.(Eizaguirre, 2021)

Moreover, it has been analysed the interaction or bond between these initiatives and related social movements as well as the local state. In this sense, it has been stated that the relationship with multiple social movements, from the neighbourhood grassroots and their associations to the more recent feminist or ecologist entities, may be mutually beneficial since the goals of democratization and improvement of the living conditions are usually shared and these spaces may foster them (Pera, 2020).

At the same time, depending on the type of relationship with the city council and local administration, especially when there is an agreement on civic management of the space, powerful oversight dynamics arise that result in significant limitations on the functioning of these spaces, such as excessive bureaucracy (Pera, 2021).

Similarly, it should be noted that there is general consensus regarding the positive effects of social media and networks on civic engagement, as demonstrated empirically through various experimental designs (Pang, Qin & Jin,). Thus, there is a significant positive correlation between activity on social networks, comments, or posts, and civic participation in social or

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community initiatives. Therefore, the availability of information, such as news, in digital media, together with the development of informative applications with interactive elements typical of social media, can substantially promote contact and participation.

4. Methodology

In order to answer the main questions raised, a review of the existing literature on community management spaces and civic management facilities has been carried out. In this regard, we have taken a genuinely qualitative approach, under which we have decided to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews. Three interviews were conducted: the first with the former president of the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona, followed by an interview with two managers of the Casal de la Font d'en Fargues in Horta-Guinardó, and finally, an interview with the coordinator of the Casal de Barri de La Prosperitat in Nou Barris. In this way, we complemented our fieldwork with visits to centers such as Canòdrom, together with the community management platform and other entities such as La Veïnal and Quepo, as well as our visit to Nau Bostik and the definitions of the regulatory framework for these spaces in Barcelona by Enric Capdevila, linked to Casa Orlandai.

Therefore, a comparative analysis is proposed between community management spaces in Barcelona and *Aragalaya* (Struggle), a social movement with a strong component of self-management of public spaces that took place in Sri Lanka during 2022.

5. Analysis and Results

a. The Case of Barcelona

In Barcelona, there are around a hundred public community spaces that have a significant degree of connection with the city council (civic management model), without taking into account self-managed initiatives in non-public spaces, such as Nau Bostik. It is therefore necessary to highlight civic centers, neighborhood centers, youth centers, cultural associations, sports facilities, etc. Such facilities, from a perspective of self-management and mobilization that is well established in the context of the city, have achieved significant successes, such as those derived from the cases of Ateneu 9barris and Casa Orlandai. To a greater or lesser extent, these spaces manage to establish themselves and provide feedback to the associative and social fabric of the neighborhoods in which they operate through a range of activities, mainly

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sociocultural, but also sporting. In this regard, it is worth highlighting the testimony of those responsible for the La Font d'en Fargues neighborhood center:

> "Here we organize all kinds of activities, in accordance with the proposals of the entities that manage the center through an assembly. We have a group of young people, but also a group of very committed older people."

In this way, the dynamics of self-management in horizontal terms that develop self-management spaces can be observed, through a participatory component related to a model of democracy that is more community-based, deliberative, or even cultural, according to some authors (Eizaguirre, 2021). Thus, theatrical activities, festivals, debates, seminars, art and photography exhibitions, etc. would be developed. In this sense, the Xarxa d'Economia Solidaria (Solidarity Economy Network) highlights as its main objective the improvement of quality of life and meeting the needs of communities from within the communities themselves (XES, 2024).
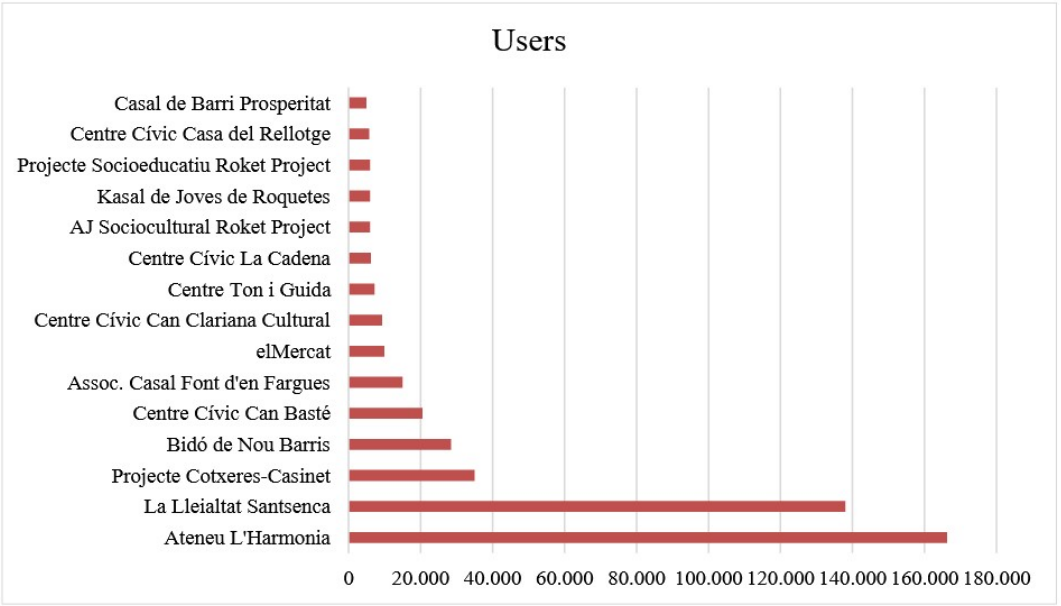

Illustration 1. Names of users of community management spaces in Catalonia. Source: XES

Social cohesion

In terms of social cohesion, it is worth highlighting some indicators collected by XES in the main community management areas in Catalonia. In this regard, we can see that a significant majority of the facilities associated with community balance have promoted the creation of new projects or groups, as well as providing support to other entities and projects. Similarly, social

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and community mobilization actions have been carried out alongside the creation of new networks, although to a lesser extent.

Activity	Percentage
Boost new projects or groups	85%
Support for entities and projects	75%
Social and community mobilization actions	70%
Creation of new networks	60%
Others	5%

Tabla 1. Activities to promote community dynamics

Participation and democracy

In terms of participation and democracy, it should be noted that most projects follow fairly horizontal organizational models with a strong deliberative and community component. As a result, we observe a high turnover in positions of responsibility, given that their duration is mostly between 1 and 4 years and the structures they adopt tend to correspond to some type of coordinating body, management body, or board through which the daily work is carried out, along with specific working groups or committees, which are directly linked to a general assembly or similar body where the most important strategic decisions are made regarding programming, new projects, etc. In this regard, it is worth noting a tendency towards opacity with regard to the general public in decision-making in spaces where we can see that only 26% hold public meetings. However, spaces such as Nau Bostik, Casal de Barri de la Font d'en Fargues, and Casal de Barri de La Prosperitat claim to be open to any external proposals, beyond the entities directly involved in civic management. These claims are evident when we consider that around 89% of facilities hold open days and, to a lesser extent, other activities such as surveys or welcome plans to encourage participation.
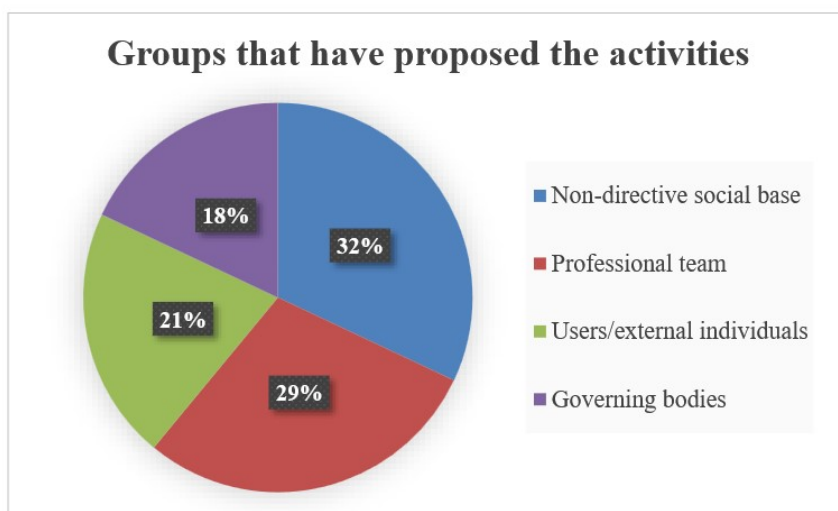
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Ilustración 1. Origins of the proposed activities in 2024. Fuente: XES

Challenges of civic or community management

The following points are worth highlighting in relation to the current challenges facing community management spaces:

- **The bureaucratic issue:** The relationship with local government gives rise to oversight mechanisms that limit the potential of these initiatives, creating a bureaucratic burden. Similarly, the issue of funding is a common problem that manifests itself in the precarious situation of workers in these spaces. Similarly, we can include the political leanings of local political institutions and their interests with regard to civic or community management.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting the perspective of the coordinator of the La Prosperitat neighborhood center regarding the city council's model of the city and the strategic interests at the local level to limit the promotion of the community management model and the different dynamics during the last decades between community management and the council.

- **Participation and social base:** One of the elements that pose a problem for community-managed spaces is the organizational difficulty of maintaining them due to a habitual lack of resources, which translates into precarious staff despite their high willingness to provide public service. These dynamics are related to demands for improved working conditions for workers in these spaces, as evidenced by the testimonies of those responsible for the Font d'en Fargues community center, but also to the need for facilities to formalize a relationship with the city

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council through a civic management agreement that allows them to carry out the necessary reforms, as in the case of Nau Bostik. Similarly, participation is sometimes limited, and knowing how to access certain demographic groups, such as young people, presents greater difficulties given the general context of weakening public life and participation in community activities. In this regard, the issue of generational renewal arises, as in many cases the social bases related to civic, or community management initiatives are very old and there is a lack of new young leadership.

b. The Case of Sri Lanka: Aragalaya

Aragalaya (meaning "struggle") was a youth-led, non-partisan, community-driven movement in Sri Lanka in 2022. In this sense, Sri Lanka's economic crisis created an environment ripe for public mobilization, but the Aragalaya movement transcended conventional political protest. Youth organized spontaneous assemblies, converting spaces like Galle Face Green into a citizen-built village reflecting equality, cooperation, and mutual aid. Other similar sites emerged across the country. This movement was unique in its composition and its method: collective decision-making, art, and education became tools for resistance. It became a platform where communities reimagined their relationship with civic life and one another, beyond political affiliations (Fernando, 2023).

This case study examines the Aragalaya movement in Sri Lanka (2022) as a civic initiative driven primarily by the youth. What began as a protest against economic hardship transformed into a dynamic, grassroots movement promoting public engagement, mutual aid, and cultural solidarity. Youth were not only at the forefront of physical protests but also designed systems of informal governance, education, and community resilience. By intentionally excluding political party influence, the movement became a civic platform for inclusivity, creativity, and democratic experimentation.

How Young People Organized the Movement?
- Protest Villages and Community Infrastructure : Created symbolic protest spaces like GotaGoGama (GGG) and MynahGoGama (MGG) — fully functioning, youth-managed community hubs. Although Aragalaya lacked a centralized command, there was a shared consciousness among youth that "we are in this together." Protest sites

like GotaGoGama hosted separate groups (e.g., student unions, youth collectives) that coexisted under mutual respect.

Facilities included:
- Free food stations & kitchens
- Medical tents & first-aid centers
- Legal aid booths
- Charging stations and solar energy panels
- Citizen libraries and educational corners
- Art galleries and public discussion zones
- Recycling and eco-friendly systems

These reflected a model of self-managed, inclusive civic engagement and youth-led organization.
- Non-Hierarchical Leadership: Operated with no formal leaders; everyone took initiative where needed. But still religious leaders from multiple faiths marched together valuing the ideology of new generation. Because of this most of traditional barriers were bridged, symbolizing cooperation between previously marginalized and majority communities. Youth embraced horizontal decision-making and shared responsibility. Youth were central to creating a space where "everyone shared equal responsibility," promoting horizontal solidarity rather than vertical control.

- Creative, Culture-Based Participation

Activities included: Street theatre, poetry, mural painting, and live concerts. Open-mic nights and discussion circles. Meditation, yoga, and interfaith rituals. Examples include open-air dramas, pride concerts, mural walls, and spoken-word poetry sessions that combined protest with expression.

These have transformed protests into spaces of cultural and emotional engagement. Artistic participation (e.g., music) was a powerful tool. One respondent contributed by performing at the first public concert at Aragalaya, seeing art as a means of social change.

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Social Cohesion & Community Engagement
- Cross-Ethnic & Interfaith Unity: Youth brought together Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and others. Even during crises, people brought traditional sweets and homemade dishes to support protestors.
- Religious and cultural events like Vesak, Ramadan, New Year, and Pride celebrations were openly held at protest sites. These events promoted unity across religious and ethnic boundaries, breaking longstanding divisions.

Inclusivity of Marginalized Voices: Protest sites offered space for: LGBTQ+ communities. War victims and veterans.Women, domestic workers, and minority youth

The protest environment resembled a "carnival" — offering "something for everyone," from intellectuals to casual observers. This wide cultural spectrum allowed people from various walks of life to feel connected. Everyone was encouraged to speak, perform, or contribute, regardless of background. (While Colombo's middle class formed the core, there was partial underrepresentation of Tamil and rural communities. Some minorities felt hesitant due to historical exclusion and glorification of war figures at the protest site.). Youth created forums and discussion spaces like the People's University and GotaGoGama College to debate issues such as democracy, governance, caste, gender, and justice.

Neighborhood-Level Actions: Beyond protest sites, youth: Organized local cleanups and food drives. Used sports (like cricket) to build local participation. The "Tea Shop Technique," informal discussions in local tea stalls, helped reenergize disheartened youth activists.Taught in underprivileged areas and ran community workshops

Advertising & Communication Methods
Digital Campaigning and Social Media: Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp were used for: Sharing updates, protest times, and logistics. Broadcasting live events and speeches. Creating viral hashtags (e.g., #GoHomeGota). Spreading infographics and educational content. Protesters joined groups and forwarded media and alerts rapidly.

Creative Protest Infrastructure - Branding of protest zones like "GotaGoGama" as a "village" was a clever advertising strategy as it gave identity and coherence to a spontaneous protest.

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Creative Messaging

Visual tools included: Banners, placards, graffiti, murals. Memes and art installations. Public performances with symbolism and satire

Peer-to-Peer Communication: Youth relied on word-of-mouth, friend groups, and university networks to gather and mobilize. Peer groups and friend circles functioned as micro-communication hubs. Youth preferred organic sharing of ideas over traditional advertising techniques.

Challenges and Internal Issues

Lack of Strategic Planning: Movement lacked a clear long-term vision after initial demands were met. Many participants felt uncertain about the future direction.

Fragmentation and Co-optation: Over 70% feared political actors infiltrated the movement. Attempts to form centralized leadership caused disagreements and withdrawal among youth. Efforts to form a central leadership committee led to internal disagreements and disillusionment. Some felt it was about ego and media presence rather than coordination.

Hidden Exclusions: Despite inclusivity, LGBTQ+ individuals and women were underrepresented in leadership or decision-making. Rural and Tamil youth sometimes felt alienated when nationalistic figures were celebrated. Participants with family, employment, or financial responsibilities struggled to remain engaged. Many could not afford sustained visibility due to employer restrictions. As Aragalaya shifted from socio-cultural to more overt political agendas, some early participants felt alienated. The involvement of political groups blurred the initial neutrality as it questioned on momentum and trust.

Safety and Surveillance: Protestors feared: Government surveillance. Repercussions at workplaces or universities. Physical violence and arrest

Emotional Burnout

Sustained activism led to: Mental fatigue and disillusionment

Feelings of emptiness after the movement's decline (Emotional and Psychological Aftermath - After the protest wave declined, many active participants faced psychological challenges such as emptiness and identity crises, prompting NGOs to initiate support programs)

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Need for psychological support, provided later by NGOs

Legacy and Post-Protest Transformation:From Protest to Civic Action

Many youth shifted from street protests to community service: Volunteering in NGOs. Teaching, cleaning, and running awareness programs. Organizing local democratic forums ("People's Councils")

Living Activism : Activists embedded movement values into their daily lives and careers: Musicians used songs to advocate justice. Educators introduced civic learning in schools. Artists continued protest-themed installations

Institutionalized gender and identity biases still shaped internal dynamics of the protest site. The movement became a training ground for democratic behavior — teaching negotiation, civic responsibility, and protest as a form of engagement rather than destruction.

6. Solutions

One of the good practices that the public spaces and civic management facilities had is the use of public space. Reaching people outside of the specific facility by making it visible in some public space, such a square or the surrounding streets (when a festival or event is organized outside, take profit of the situation). In this sense, cooperation through network structures in the neighborhoods is essential in order to have an impact on the territory. In this regard, some insights from the library worker of trinitat vella are related to the need of getting out and create a network, collaborate with the surrounding schools and civic centres to reach the people that actually need these spaces. From her perspective, they cannot expect that in a very complex neighborhood like Trinitat Vella people are just going to visit the library. Therefore, they need to be visible and represented, have an impact in terms of social and community action, facilitate those processes, accompany those who are interested in the library services in order to foster social and public life and promote social capital.

At the same time, an app is a versatile advertising method (a mobile app designed to strengthen advertising, communication of the neighbourhood facilities, events and so on). A simple neighbourhood app can advertise events, share updates, and connect people to local facilities and programs fostering participation in a digital environment.

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To attract participants, neighborhood entities can set up small, separate spaces in their building dedicated to social activities, such as a room with sewing machines available for temporary use or a room with musical instruments for practice. Inside the buildings, create small rooms for everyday activities (e.g., sewing machines, music practice rooms) to attract new people.

In addition, it could be useful to create new regulations to distribute soon-to-expire food to marginalized or low-income individuals. These distributions can take place within neighborhood entities or facility buildings and can also serve as opportunities to promote upcoming events. Like in Finland's Nauha model, use surplus food distribution to help low-income groups and also share information about free education, health, or skills programs in the same place.

Moreover, it is strongly recommended an horizontal model of decision-making. Encourage more shared decision-making, rotating roles, and collective responsibility to make people feel ownership and celebrating diversity like *Aragalaya*, spaces should be open for everyone of all ages, genders, and cultures with diverse cultural and social activities.

Community-managed spaces have a big role in keeping neighbourhoods strong and connected. Barcelona's model is an inspiring example, but it faces legal, financial, and participation challenges. The Sri Lankan *Aragalaya* shows how community action can happen anywhere when people feel ownership and trust each other.

To keep these spaces alive, cities must make them flexible, open, visible, and better supported. Local governments should protect them legally, fund them fairly, and listen to local communities. Technology, simple everyday activities, food aid, and strong local networks can help build trust and participation. By learning from local and global cases, we can help neighbourhood spaces stay alive and meaningful empowering people and giving everyone a right to the city.

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8. Annex

There were meetings prior to the mobility week in which we agreed that each participant would contribute information and analysis on community or civic management facilities in their respective countries to share. Fieldwork was proposed in the other countries, but it wasn't carried out, and the discussions were difficult because we didn't use the shared vocabulary derived from the literature provided by the challenge. However, I consider it very useful to have explored civic or community management spaces because, despite everything, we agreed as a group on the value of such initiatives and their impact on social reality. I consider the Barcelona example to be an international benchmark, and we view it as such as a group.

Thavisha: The Aragalaya case and the preparation of the presentation for the FAVB members, interview with Casal de la Font d'en Fargues during the mobility week

Sebastián: Coordination of online meetings among the group. The writing of the final assignment and the interview with FAVB (Camilo), Casal de barri de la Font d'en Fargues and final interview with the coordinator of Casal de barri de La Prosperitat. Preparation of the presentation for the FAVB members

Cibion: - Participation during some days of the mobility week

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