

Empowering Neighbourhoods: Keeping Barcelona's Community Spaces Alive.

How can we rethink public facilities in Barcelona to ensure they remain locally driven spaces of connection, belonging, and inclusion?

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Introduction.....	3
Guiding Question	3
Theoretical Framework.....	3
Citizen Participation.....	3
Urban Commons	4
Methodology	4
Research Results	5
The Role of Public Spaces in Neighbourhood Empowerment	5
Comparative Policy Analysis of Civic Empowerment	7
Barcelona – Legal Empowerment and Civic Ownership.....	7
Turin – Commons-Based Co-Management Through Civic Pacts.....	7
Vienna – Institutionalized Consultation with Inclusion Focus	8
Stavanger – Inclusive Design with Limited Co-Governance	8
Case 1: Stavanger (Norway)	9
Case 2: Vienna (Austria).....	10
Case 3: Turin (Italy).....	10
Fieldwork Findings	11
Proposed Solutions	12
References.....	14
Annex.....	15

Introduction

In Barcelona, community spaces like neighbourhood centres, cultural hubs, and sports facilities play an important role in bringing people together. Many of these places have been managed by local organizations, but today they face growing challenges. Rising rents, mass tourism, and a lack of strong legal protections make it harder to keep these spaces open and community led. At the same time, urban planning often doesn't respond to local needs, creating a gap between institutions and the people who use and care for these places.

This report looks at how public facilities are managed in four European cities: Barcelona, Stavanger, Vienna, and Turin. Using a comparative case study approach, the research is based on policy documents, interviews, and fieldwork done in Barcelona, Stavanger, and Trento. The aim is to explore different approaches to public facility management, identify key strengths and challenges, and highlight practices that could inspire change. Building on these insights, the report offers concrete proposals to help Barcelona protect and strengthen its community spaces, ensuring they remain inclusive, accessible, and connected to the needs of residents.

Guiding Question

How do political and legal frameworks for managing outdoor public spaces empower or constrain civic participation and social inclusion for public facilities?

Theoretical Framework

Citizen Participation

Citizen participation refers to any process that actively involves members of the public in shaping urban change. Effective participation is guided by several key principles:

- a) People should be involved from the early stages of decision-making.
- b) Participation should be meaningful—people's time and input should lead to real influence.
- c) Engagement should be ongoing, allowing trust and relationships to develop over time.
- d) Participatory processes should be connected to existing democratic structures, local institutions, and partnerships.
- e) Extra efforts are needed to include groups often left out, such as people with disabilities and ethnic minorities.
- f) Methods and processes must be adapted to the specific local context.
- g) Rules, funding, timelines, and expectations should be clearly defined and communicated from the beginning.
- h) Participation must be properly supported with adequate resources and facilitation.
- i) Clear goals and measures of success should be set at the outset for both the participatory process and its outcomes.

Urban Commons

Urban commons are city-based resources that are collectively managed by their users in a non-commercial, socially oriented way. These resources can range from housing and parks to community Wi-Fi networks. What distinguishes urban commons from public, or consumer goods is the process of "commoning"—a participatory, collective practice through which communities' access, manage, and care for shared resources. This approach emphasizes collaboration, mutual responsibility, and long-term stewardship over profit (Cowan, R. (2005). *The Dictionary of Urbanism*. Streetwise Press).

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to analyse and evaluate urban policy frameworks across four European cities: Barcelona (Spain), Stavanger (Norway), Vienna (Austria), and Turin (Italy). These cities were selected due to their active roles in sustainable urban governance, civic engagement, and public facility management.

The study aims to:

1. Compare policy frameworks related to public facilities management
2. Identify institutional enablers and constraints in each city's policy environment.
3. Analyse best practices and transferable policy elements across the four cases.

The research uses qualitative data, primarily sourced from: document analysis from municipal documents, policy reports, academic literature and grey literature.

The fieldwork was conducted using methods such as interviews, observations and surveying in Stavanger, Trento and Barcelona. We used different methods in order to analyse the relationship between neighbourhoods and public facilities, working both before and during the mobility week in Barcelona. We developed an interview guide (Appendix 1) in advance of conducting interviews. The interview guide was designed to be used on different kinds of informants, both community representatives, public employees and citizens. The interviews had a semi-structured form to both secure that we got to talk about topics relevant for our project, and at the same time secure that we got an impression of the informants' perspectives and what they found important.

Table 1: Overview of interviewees

<i>Interviewee number</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Date</i>
1	Stavanger	Community representative	Byverksted	26.06.25
2	Stavanger	Urban planner	Municipality of Stavanger	26.06.25
3	Trento	Citizen (student)	University of Trento	28.06.25
4	Trento	Citizen (student)	University of Trento	28.06.25
5	Trento	Citizen (student)	University of Trento	28.06.25
6	Barcelona	Community worker	Canòdrom	03.07.25
7	Barcelona	Citizen	Superilla San Antoni	03.07.25
8	Barcelona	Librarian	Biblioteca Sant Antoni	03.07.25

Some limitations must be considered: language barriers may limit access to certain municipal documents and interviewees. Differences in data availability and policy transparency may affect depth of comparison. Interviews (if included) are subject to response bias and contextual interpretation. All data were collected from public and reputable sources. If interviews are conducted, informed consent will be obtained, and participant confidentiality will be maintained.

Research Results

The Role of Public Spaces in Neighbourhood Empowerment

In the following, we present findings from a literature review examining how public spaces contribute to social inclusion and civic participation.

Urban green spaces are essential for improving the quality of life for the urban population, as they often can enhance public health and social inclusion (Bogan, 2018). Among others, research have found that nature activities can have a positive impact integration of migrants, as they have the capacity to promote “social interaction, emotional attachment, and a sense of belonging” (Rai et al., 2023, p. 87). The quality and quantity of urban green spaces also correlates with the mental health of migrants (Cheng et al., 2024). In addition, research suggests that public urban green spaces can play an important role in young people making contacts and friends across cultures, which is a prerequisite for social inclusion (Seeland et al., 2009). This demonstrates the capacity public spaces has to foster community across differences in background and length of residence.

Research has also uncovered different challenges that reduces the effects and possibilities of public spaces. When measuring inequality related to urban green spaces, the indicators considered usually are “park accessibility, park area, park quality, and park congestion” (Wei et al., 2023, p. 796). This ignores the potential of social benefits being unequally distributed among different income groups. The use of urban green spaces also has strong associations with park characteristics, the built environment and socio-economic characteristics of the surroundings. These aspects should therefore also be included in urban planning and design processes (Wei et al., 2023).

One example of unequal distribution was found in a statistical study on public sports facilities in the UK, which found an under-representation among the most disadvantaged socio-economical groups and people aged over 60 years. There was also lower participation among young people aged 11-19, and disabled people under 60 (Liu, 2009). Studies also find that children with disabilities often experience exclusion in community parks and playgrounds due to poor accessibility or usability – even when local authorities have committed to inclusion (Lynch et al., 2020; Wenger et al., 2023). To enhance inclusion for children with disabilities, user involvement could enhance playground providers and designers with deeper understanding of the needs of people with disabilities. Using design approaches which takes social inclusion into consideration are there for recommended (Wenger et al., 2023). Additionally, a cultural divide can often be identified between migrants and citizen when it comes to the use of urban green spaces (Seeland et al., 2009). The divide is often traced back to challenges related to feeling unsafe, discrimination, accessibility and lack of information and communication (Cheng et al., 2024; Rai et al., 2023). Social inclusion programs linked to schools, green spaces and leisure activities could be one way of bridging this divide (Seeland et al., 2009). Furthermore, there is a need for a deeper understanding of migrants’ perceptions, experiences and preferences related to green spaces. This calls for a shift towards a participatory approach to where the voices of people with different backgrounds are heard and taken into consideration (Rai et al., 2023; Seeland et al., 2009).

All though international conventions encourage citizen involvement initiatives in the management of urban green spaces; the social inclusion perspective is often left out of European scientific literature. In addition, participation is often project based and rarely integrated at all strategic levels managing urban green spaces. A need for adapting the participation process to the different participant groups, and especially to marginalized groups who has been excluded in the past. Suggested ways of achieving this is for local authorities to apply a cyclic model for long term participation. This should involve repeated project-based participation throughout all municipal long-term strategies, using a mix between different participation approaches (Fors et al., 2021).

To summarize – in order to achieve the wanted results within public health, community empowerment and social sustainability for all groups, policies and regulations related to creating and maintaining public spaces needs to include social inclusion and civic participation as key aspects.

Comparative Policy Analysis of Civic Empowerment

Promoting community welfare, social inclusion, and civic identity largely depends on public facilities such as parks, sports services, and cultural centres in any community development. However, the extent to which residents are involved significantly depends on the governance, co-design, and management frameworks as these public facilities vary significantly across municipalities due to their specific legal structures and laws, public services related policy frameworks, governance approaches, and alignment with cultural backgrounds. This section of the report compares how different cities such as Barcelona, Turin, Vienna, and Stavanger models and administers their public policies to manage community assets and empower their citizens in decision-making processes.

Barcelona – Legal Empowerment and Civic Ownership

Barcelona offers bold policies to facilitate civic participation for community assets management and is widely encouraged in European Union. One important legal framework is “Patrimoni Ciutadà”, which empowers civic associations to deliver social value by managing and acquiring public facilities.

Barcelona has a strategic roadmap, Municipal Action Plan (PAM), which emphasizes citizens’ engagement and management of public spaces to facilitate civil society entities. Municipal authorities allow certain citizens to manage and control the public assets under formal framework. While this toolbox fosters real prospects for citizen empowerment, it also involves intricate bureaucratic frameworks. Organizations with less experience or smaller in size often encounter various challenges in navigating legal processes and regulations, securing public funds, or maintaining viable operations. This community-led-model, still, represents a high degree of citizen empowerment, where local communities are not simply consulted, but actively engaged in the co-governance process of asset management.

Turin – Commons-Based Co-Management Through Civic Pacts

Turin has established a modern framework for urban commons governance through collaborative agreements (*Patti di Collaborazione*) between citizens and the local government. These formal agreements enable citizens, associations, or informal groups with common social needs to manage public facilities collectively, varying from community green spaces to cultural institutions and sports amenities. This governance method is grounded in the view of the “urban commons” which refers to shared assets that require joint management of resources. The city’s Regulation on Urban Commons (*Regolamento per l’amministrazione condivisa dei beni comuni*), which was adopted in 2016, set out the foundational rules for co-design, co-utilization, and co-responsibility. Citizens can suggest new initiatives and projects, enter agreements with the municipality, and implement collaborative actions, with support from public institutions. This framework offers uniqueness in terms of flexibility and openness. It facilitates temporary or informal groups with no legal significance to enter into legal agreements, which lowers initial restrictions for involvement. The city usually offers professional or economic support, and a dedicated office which enables all coordination for civic related projects.

However, the approach has its own drawbacks. While it permits legal resident legally at the local level, it lacks law at the national level in Italy endorsing urban commons, exposing the structure reliant on political drive and susceptible to leadership changes. Additionally, the lack of standardized evaluation frameworks can lead to irregularities or perceptions of discrimination. However, Turin's model remains one of the most inclusive and legally grounded cases of co-management in Europe.

Vienna – Institutionalized Consultation with Inclusion Focus

The strategic policy framework of Vienna shows its long-term commitment to social and planned urbanism, but this model appears to favour more institutional consultation than collective collaboration. Citizens are consistently requested to contribute to urban planning consultations, public discussion, and neighbourhood associations, but these activities often operate as advisory rather than obligatory frameworks. Vienna's Smart City Strategy incorporates objectives for inclusive urban development and citizen empowerment, specifically in the design of new residential areas, transportation infrastructure, and green public facilities. The urban development of city agencies (MA 18) runs participation cyclic approach that incorporates different workshops, exhibitions, and digital programs to gather citizen viewpoint. In addition, a significant focus is placed on immigrants, youth, and other marginalized groups, through targeted outreach and inclusive facilitation strategies.

Although the engagement philosophy in Vienna is deep-rooted in managing public assets, the impact of these methods on actual policymaking remains inadequate and restricted. A potential risk of tokenism exists, where public opinion is collected but certainly not implemented in practice. Civil participation is frequently established in a top-down manner and the legal authorities have control over defining the conditions of engagement.

Vienna does not offer civic organizations operational authority over public assets in the neighbourhoods, nor does any other city possess legal transfer of public assets like Barcelona and civic participation laws in Turin. Therefore, Vienna achieves higher ratings in terms of inclusive consultation but performs relatively low on citizen engagement or co-ownership of communal assets.

Stavanger – Inclusive Design with Limited Co-Governance

Stavanger exhibits a Scandinavian model such as youth councils, public consultations, and workshops to ensure both inclusion and equality are embedded in urban design process, but the transfer of public assets does not exist. The municipal encourages the youth participation, inclusive environments, and accessibility in public facilities planning process, but the actual policymaking is mainly managed by municipal governments. Norway's Planning and Building Act, national planning laws, permit local governments to engage the public during the design processes, and Stavanger facilitates this commitment through open public hearings and digital modes. Spatial inclusion receives a significant focus in Norway. For instance, zoning regulations and park development strategies target to foster barrier-free environments which are accessible to people with different disabilities, senior citizens, and infants. Design is

considered a crucial tool for social inclusion, and such projects are frequently assessed for their social impact.

However, Stavanger lacks legal framework for collaborative management or legal transfer of public assets as in Barcelona or Turin. While citizens may be permitted to engage in the design process, they do not authorize the co-manage public facilities or request legal rights to control public assets. Additionally, smaller civic groups may face capacity issues or lack opportunities to shape strategic planning without their formal involvement through structured collaborations with municipalities. In this context, Stavanger serves as a model of inclusive design and consultation, however it does not enable to increase civic empowerment through co-ownership or legal engagement in operational decision-making processes.

From this comparative policy analysis among different cities, it is evident that empowering citizens to manage public spaces necessitates more than mere consultation, it demands the establishment of legal frameworks, implementation of accessible procedures, and long-term provision of support structures.

Case 1: Stavanger (Norway)

The first case is from Stavanger, Norway. Although it may seem different from Barcelona at first glance, both cities face similar challenges. Stavanger is part of the NEB-STAR project—one of five lighthouse demonstrators of the New European Bauhaus—aiming to improve collaboration between municipalities, businesses, and citizens in addressing climate and social challenges.

A key issue in Stavanger has been the lack of transparency and recognition in participatory urban planning processes. Two cases illustrate this:

Svankevigå, a former industrial harbour that became a cultural and social hub. When plans emerged to rezone it for private housing, the local community proposed a more inclusive vision. However, developers' plans were ultimately prioritized, leaving residents feeling ignored.

Nytorget, a central square near key cultural institutions, was transformed into a park. While the change was welcomed, many residents were frustrated by limited involvement, especially after the decision to demolish the old police station hosting youth and cultural services.

These cases raised questions about the role of public space and buildings, and when civic participation is truly fulfilled. Although participation is legally mandated (§ 5-1 of the Planning and Building Act), there are no clear guidelines for what constitutes adequate involvement. Information is technically public, but often inaccessible, and input is usually solicited only from immediate neighbours - even when plans affect broader communities. Language barriers between citizens, professionals, and politicians, along with late-stage involvement and selective feedback use by developers, further complicate participation.

Still, the interviewees pointed to examples of successful civic involvement. The first one was Paradis area plan, where resident pressure led to more inclusive planning. The other example

was Tou Scene/Lervig Park, where local protest and funding reversed a development plan, allowing the cultural venue Tou Scene to manage the land and integrate it with Lervig Park.

Case 2: Vienna (Austria)

The case of Vienna was included because the city repeatedly has been ranked the world's most liveable city in the world by The Economist (Vienna Tourist Board, 2025).

The Vienna Progressive Coalition, STEP 2025 Urban Development Plan, Master Plan Participative Urban Development, Practical Book on Participation, Smart City Vienna are all important documents and projects concentrating on citizen participation.

“The public consultation must last at least six weeks, and during this time, everyone has the right to submit a written statement. The district, as the legitimate representative of the population, is also given the opportunity to submit a written statement on the draft zoning and development plan to Municipal Department 21. This department, in turn, is obligated to review all received statements and consider whether the objections can be taken into account in the plan.” (Master Plan Participative Urban Development)

In addition, the “Wiener Supergrätzl” (Viennese Super-Neighbourhood) is an interesting project systematically reorganising, optimising and calming traffic, new open spaces are created in the public street space.

Lastly, The NGO Local Agenda 21 Vienna advises interested parties and supports them in implementing their projects on community spaces. This constitutes an important object in co-shaping the public space.

Case 3: Turin (Italy)

The third case for our comparative analysis is the case of Turin (Italy). In 2019, the City of Turin adopted an updated *Regulation for the Governance of Urban Commons*, aimed at fostering civic participation and the shared management of public and private assets deemed essential to community well-being. The regulation provides a structured legal framework that enables citizens, both individually and collectively, including informal groups, to collaborate with the municipality in the care of urban commons such as parks, buildings, or digital infrastructure. Central to this framework are the **Collaboration Pacts**, which formally define roles, responsibilities, timelines, and available resources for each initiative. To oversee and guide the implementation of these initiatives, the city established the **Permanent Council of Urban Commons**: a technical advisory body that evaluates proposals, mediates conflicts, and promotes inclusive, sustainable governance. The approach is underpinned by principles of trust, transparency, shared responsibility, inclusion, environmental sustainability, and fairness. Additionally, the city provides training programs to empower citizens in responsibly managing shared spaces. Through this regulation, Turin seeks not only to improve the quality of public spaces but also to strengthen community bonds and civic engagement. The model stands out for institutionalizing co-management practices and embedding participatory values into urban policy, representing a replicable approach for other cities aiming to democratize the governance of common goods.

Fieldwork Findings

Our field work findings consist of what we learned through visiting facilities, attending presentations from different community workers, and observations, surveys and interviews in Barcelona and other cities. Before the mobility week, we did interviews in Stavanger (Norway) and Trento (Italy). In Trento, for example, we focused particularly on public parks and how they are perceived from people who live in the city and use them, finding out that they are very useful for both relaxing alone and staying with friends or playing sports. In fact, sport facilities are very appreciated in parks. In addition, parks, if correctly managed, represent a very good context in which socialise and bring different people together.

Then, in Barcelona we conducted participant observation in relevant places and interviews while visiting them. We gathered the fact that Barcelona already represents a very good model in terms of cohesion and perception from the residents. Anyways, we thought about some suggestions about empowering these aspects, as we will explain later.

In fact, even though participation is claimed important in the policy documents we scrutinized, the reality we were presented with showed that facilities and citizens often experience being excluded from decision-making processes. Public spaces are not always developed in ways that reflect the needs of the communities they are intended to serve.

Public facilities consistently emphasized the importance of outdoor spaces for connecting with the local community. Yet, access to these spaces is often restricted due to regulatory and bureaucratic barriers. In response, some suggest that transferring the management of adjacent public areas to the facilities themselves could offer a more flexible and inclusive approach.

Canòdrom serves as a case where strong municipal ties have reduced certain obstacles. The facility actively uses its surrounding park for community outreach and promotes dialogue as a learning tool. However, despite these strengths, underrepresentation of some neighbourhood groups remains an issue, revealing the ongoing need for inclusive strategies.

A contrasting and more grassroots-oriented example is Jardins d'Emma - a community-managed urban garden that exemplifies participatory urbanism. This space integrates diverse initiatives such as sustainable mobility projects, agroecological markets, community composting, and educational collaborations with local schools. The garden is part of a broader vision to prioritize people over cars, promote biodiversity, and foster social cohesion. Its autonomy and user-driven structure highlight the potential of commons-based governance in urban contexts.

In the Superilla Peatonal Sant Antoni, residents reported positive outcomes following the redevelopment of the area. These included increased green space, better transparency in decision-making, and greater involvement of marginalized groups. Public libraries, particularly Biblioteca Sant Antoni, were noted as key institutions for promoting social cohesion and community engagement. However, disparities in support and visibility between different libraries, such as Sant Antoni and Trinitat Vella, illustrate uneven implementation across the city.

Despite these successes, tensions persist. Civic protests, such as the “Let self-management dance” campaign and the broader demonstration under the slogan “Barcelona expels culture that does not sell,” reveal a growing dissatisfaction among grassroots cultural and community groups. These movements criticize municipal policies that prioritize commercial and tourist-oriented projects at the expense of self-organized culture. They cite administrative obstacles, restrictive permit systems, and excessive surveillance as barriers to meaningful participation.

Comparisons across different models further illustrate the diversity of participatory experiences in Barcelona. Jardins d’Emma represents a genuine common. It is community-run, self-resourced, and inclusive. In contrast, Canòdrom, though effective, is more institutionalized and limited in the extent to which users can influence and shape the space. Other spaces, such as Casa de la Premsa or Espai Jove Garcilaso, are self-managed but face constant challenges in accessing public spaces, navigating regulations, and sustaining their operations without municipal support.

Proposed Solutions

Building on the comparative analysis of Turin, Stavanger, and Vienna, we propose the following suggestions to enhance the governance of urban commons and public spaces in Barcelona:

Utilize a Participatory Spatial Information Tool

Make use of a method that employs user-friendly apps and technologies to let people share their opinions on specific locations and facilities. Participants can use an app to share pictures and opinions from their experiences with walking in the neighbourhood, visiting public spaces and using facilities. This can lift the voices of the citizens and give valuable insight into their experiences with spaces and facilities (NEB-STAR, n.d.).

Develop a “Right to the City” Manifesto

Co-create, at the local level, a charter or manifesto that formally secures the Right to the City—including the rights to participation, cultural expression, housing, and freedom from displacement. Inspired by initiatives such as Listen to the City and the International Anti-Gentrification Alliance, this document would frame urban commons as essential rights, not privileges, and foster accountability in urban governance.

Enable Legislative Reforms for Full Participation

Advocate for changes in local and national legislation that remove barriers to civic participation in the co-design and co-management of public spaces. This includes recognizing informal initiatives, supporting self-organized projects, and institutionalizing the full participation loop—from proposal to implementation and evaluation. Legal frameworks should enable flexible, inclusive, and citizen-driven urban transformations.

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Annex

Elena is a bachelor's student in Sociology, and **Giacomo** is pursuing a master's degree in Global and Local Studies with a background in Political Science. Both are based at the University of Trento, Italy. **Yri**, with a background in Social Work, is currently a master's student in Change Management at the University of Stavanger, Norway, where **Salman** is also completing his master's in Economics. **Darya** studies Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Kaunas, Lithuania.

The diversity of our academic and cultural backgrounds significantly enriched our collaboration. Working together allowed us to view urban challenges from multiple disciplinary perspectives, which was particularly valuable during the fieldwork and analysis phases of the project.

We shared responsibilities equally throughout the process and all group members contributed actively to the fieldwork in Barcelona, including interviews, observations, and documentation. Additionally, Elena conducted interviews in Trento and contributed to the theoretical framework and contextual background. Giacomo, Yri and Darya each took the lead on developing and analysing separate case studies. Salman focused on policy document analysis, comparing legal and regulatory frameworks across the case locations.

The final assignment was a collaborative writing process, with each member contributing to both content and editing. We ensured regular meetings and clear communication throughout the project to coordinate tasks and maintain a balanced workload. Everyone also participated in the visual and oral preparation of the final presentation.

Throughout the challenge, we developed a deeper understanding of how civic participation is shaped by legal, social, and spatial conditions in different European contexts.

Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Introductory questions (mostly for warmup)

1. What is your name?
2. Tell me about yourself and your background
 - a. Location (where do you live), occupation, education
3. Tell me about your job/engagement related to public facilities

Policies and regulations

4. Can you describe how outdoor public spaces such as parks and open sports facilities are managed in your city?
 - a. Who is involved in the decision-making processes?
 - b. What legal or political frameworks influence how outdoor public spaces are planned and maintained?
5. Have there been any significant changes in how these spaces are governed over the past years?
 - a. What triggered those changes?

Civic Participation

6. How are local communities involved in the development or management of outdoor public spaces?
7. Do you have any examples of citizen input significantly influencing a public space project?
8. What mechanisms are in place to encourage and support civic engagement in decisions about public spaces?

Social Inclusion and Accessibility

9. In your view, who uses these spaces the most?
10. In your experience, are there any groups or communities that are underrepresented in using these public spaces?
11. How can one ensure that outdoor public spaces are safe and inclusive for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities?

Challenges and Visions

12. What are some of the biggest challenges in creating and maintaining inclusive and participatory public spaces?
13. In your opinion, how could one face these challenges?