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Towards Democratisation of Public Administration:

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Towards Democratisation of Public Administration: Public-Commons Partnerships in Barcelona

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the relational dimension of public-commons partnerships, examining its role in shaping novel practices in public administration (PA). Focusing on the role of civic actors and public officials who support the emergence and development of public-commons partnerships, we aim to contribute to Bollier and Helfrich's conceptualisation of public-commons partnerships as long-term agreements based on cooperation between state actors and commons members to respond to specific needs. We look at how actors involved in developing and sustaining public-commons partnerships help to create trust and alliances that can overcome resistance from both sides. This relational work enables the creative interpretation of existing legal frameworks to respond to the needs of the commons, strengthening capacity to prefigure alternative economic and policy regimes. To illuminate the novel policy instruments that can emerge from this collaboration, we analyse the Citizen Assets Programme in Barcelona. Based on documentary analysis and qualitative interviews with the actors involved in the process, our findings illustrate through a series of vignettes the repertoire of strategies and how these have enabled new working practices within the PA, which we argue can contribute to its democratisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The commons, defined as a "robust class of self-organised social practices for meeting needs in fair and inclusive ways" (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019, p. 4), prefigure ethical and democratic forms of social organisation. Although the state has historically engaged in partnerships with the private and the third sector, it has reason to support, and has an interest in, the emergence of the commons. Assets and services managed by the commons can offer flexibility and efficiency (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019) and promote citizen participation in the management of public resources (Laval & Dardot, 2015). The state can coordinate with the commons to marshal resources, relying on the community's situated knowledge and experiences. Moreover, the collaboration between the commons and the state can contribute to democratising political and economic governance informed by social movements' aspirations of social renewal (Bua & Bussu, 2023).

Bollier and Helfrich (2019) introduced the term public-commons partnership to describe long-term agreements between state institutions and members of the commons to respond to specific policy needs. The role of the state in public-commons partnerships transcends the bureaucratic control of services delivered by non-state actors. Instead, the state provides legal, administrative and economic support to the commons, while recognising their capacity to manage community projects. While the potential and risks of public-commons partnerships have been examined (Bianchi et al., 2022; Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Pera, 2022; Russell et al. 2022), limited attention has been paid to the relational dynamics that enable public-commons partnerships to unfold. This paper examines this relational work and how, by opening space for public-commons partnerships, it can encourage democratisation processes within PA.

As a case study, we analyse the Citizen Asset Programme (CAP) in Barcelona that was approved in 2016. CAP represents a substantial and ambitious step towards the consolidation of public-common partnerships "through the construction of an institutional and regulatory framework that allows the recognition and promotion of citizens' experiences of community use of public goods" (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017, p. 3). Public-commons partnerships face important challenges, and in previous work Pera et al. (2023) identified crucial barriers to the implementation of CAP in Barcelona, including the lack of an appropriate and robust legal framework that encompasses public-commons agreements; resistance from public servants; and activists' scepticism. While acknowledging these barriers and the contested territory and push and pull dynamics between the state and commons, this paper

looks more closely at the relational dynamics that enabled the formulation of novel administrative tools under CAP to support the commons. Drawing on qualitative analysis of official documents and grassroots organisations' reports and semi-structured interviews with members of the commons, consultants and public servants involved in CAP, we study the interactions and strategies that helped these actors to address resistance and scepticism, promoting a more collaborative culture in public administration (PA) and creating *buffer zones* (Bennett & Brunner 2022) to build shared visions and language across very different cultures (Bartels, 2017; Bynner et al., 2023). Through this lens we develop novel understanding of the relational dimension behind the establishment of public-common partnerships and contribute to Bollier and Helfrich's conceptualisation of the commons.

The article is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, we conceptualise public-commons partnerships and reflect on their relational dimension, drawing on literature on the relational approach in participatory governance (Bartels, 2020). The third section presents our methodology and provides background information on CAP. In section four, we present and analyse our findings through four vignettes representing different roles in public-commons partnerships. Finally, the last section critically reflects on the relational dimension of public-commons partnerships and offers some concluding remarks on its role in shaping novel practices that can further the democratisation of PA.

2. THE RELATIONAL DIMENSION OF PUBLIC-COMMONS PARTNERSHIPS

2.1 PUBLIC-COMMONS PARTNERSHIPS – BETWEEN COOPERATION AND CONTESTATION

The commons were popularised by Elinor Ostrom (1990), who studied the rules and norms that allow for community governance of public resources. Ostrom demonstrated that resources managed by a community following accepted rules could be efficient and sustainable over time. However, she disregarded the hermeneutical dimension of the commons, failing to consider the meaning and interpretation that social actors give to the commons and the process of commoning (Wagenaar & Bartels, this special issue). Moreover, the commons in Ostrom's approach are understood as a complementary form to the state-market binomial for managing resources. A more critical standpoint conceives the commons as prefigurative practices of an alternative socio-economic system (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; De Angelis, 2013; Laval & Dardot, 2015). In this conceptualisation the commons can provide a

counterpower to neoliberal institutions, establishing more ethical, sustainable and democratic forms of social organisation. Thus, the notion of the commons can reinforce an imaginary of cooperation and deliberation, beyond the competition and maximisation of profits prevailing under capitalism (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). Grassroots initiatives attempt to defetishize markets, replacing relations among commodities with social relationships, recognising we cannot decouple the practice of democracy and politics from socio-economic constraints. By collectivising spheres of production and consumption, these experiences contribute to socialised and egalitarian modes of governance, as well as decision-making.

As a reaction to the expansion of the sectors and resources commodified under neoliberal regimes, from land, culture, and education to reproduction of life (Feinberg et al., 2021), the notion of the commons has become widely used to recognise and name forms of community management based on equity, democracy and justice (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Laval & Dardot, 2015). As Wagenaar and Bartels state in this special issue, "commons emerge and operate in resistance to enclosure and austerity spurred by an unsustainable political-economic system".

Critical perspectives on the relationship between the commons and the state warn against risks of assimilation (De Angelis, 2013). However, Stavrides (2016) points to the difficulty for the commons to emerge and survive without any relationship with the state or the market. The author states that "we must abandon the vision of common space that fantasises enclaves of emancipation" (Stavrides, 2016, p.56). Wagenaar and Bartels (in this special issue) observe that many commons only survive with public subsidies. Whereas the commons emerge as alternative to state governance, they are also grounded in an understanding of democracy that move beyond political institutions and into the realm of everyday democracy, with a pragmatic policy orientation that distinguish them from protest politics. Naturally all these spaces of governance and contestation are in a dynamic relationship, generating "new fields of power" imbued with democratic possibilities and challenges (Barnes et al., 2007), but also at perennial risks of co-optation or closure.

Recent literature has recognised how the relationship between commons and the state can provide opportunities for citizens to influence public policies (Bua & Bussu, 2023) and change administrative practice (Pera et al., 2023). Inevitably several challenges and conflictual dynamics permeate these public-commons partnerships, which entail interactions across two different socio-political worlds with different practices and organisational cultures. In addition, not only are the commons vulnerable to political cycles, but they also must navigate resistance

from bureaucracies or business. This is not necessarily always on ideological grounds, but because they challenge existing, routinised practices. So much of economic and political decision-making is hardwired in laws, regulations, fiscal arrangements, customs, practices that are often all but invisible to outsiders (Wagenaar, 2023). Understanding how we can engender and embed a participatory culture within PA and public service delivery, thus becomes a crucial challenge (Pera et al., 2023; Bussu et al. 2022), as well as addressing the frustration of activists dealing with PA's slow pace and myriad regulations (García-Espín, 2023). This can turn grassroots activists into ideological pragmatists, as they navigate technologies of governance to achieve their projects of radical change. In this respect, they display what Fung and Wright (2003) describe as *collaborative countervailing power,* as they collaborate with institutional actors to open space for alternative modes of governance consistent with their original oppositional platform.

2.2 A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF PUBLIC-COMMONS PARTNERSHIPS

Much has been written about these conflictual dynamics, but there is limited research on the relational dimension of public-commons partnerships and the processes of reproducing and transforming the social relations that constitute new spaces of participatory public management (Bartels, 2020). Our case sheds light on two aspects: firstly, how these interactions establish and sustain long-term collaboration between the commons and the state, and secondly, how this relational work can help shape novel democratic practice within PA.

Bollier and Helfrich (2019, p. 43) underpinned the *relational ontology* of the commons when they stated that "the very terms individual and collective are *relational* — they can only convey meaning *through one another*". Interdependent interactions among lay citizens are crucial to collective action in the commons. However, the relational ontology of public-commons partnerships has not been examined in depth. We draw on literature on relational models in public policy (Bartels, 2017; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Bartels & Turnbull, 2020), coproduction (Durose & Richardson, 2016; Bussu & Galanti, 2018) and collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash 2007; Bussu, 2019) that have traced how policy outcomes emerge from the (re)working of relationships among policy actors (Lejano, 2021). We examine how the relational dimension shapes public-commons partnerships pushing for more participatory policy instruments.

Governance processes are relational in nature, and interactions among the actors involved in these processes can help us to understand how collaboration emerges and

develops (Bartels, 2017; 2019; Escobar, 2019). Without ignoring the influence of structures as emphasised by scholars such as Jessop et al. (2013), a relational analysis shifts the attention to the actors that shape collaboration (Williams, 2012). These actors, often working across different spaces, are described by the literature as boundary spanners (Williams, 2012), as they use their relational and interpersonal skills to understand and navigate the complexities of collaboration. They can protect safe space for creating shared visions, helping to build trust (Bussu & Galanti, 2018).

By showing an understanding of interlocutors' codes and cultures, they contribute to trust-building processes, which are crucial when facing risk and uncertainty as in the developments of new partnerships and practices (Lane, 1998). Facilitating the process of cooperation and building social capital across different areas and organisations can be exhausting and time consuming, and the work of boundary spanners is not always valued by institutions anchored in a bureaucratic culture and rigid administration structure (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018). As pointed out by Bynner et al. (2023), facilitators of collaborative processes often challenge taken for granted "rules in use". By doing so, they inevitably face resistance but also contribute to the expansion of forms of interactive governance and the dissemination of a collaborative culture.

A relational perspective, as we adopt it in this paper, entails a focus on practices and processes generating change (Haxeltine et al., 2017). These practices facilitate successful cross-sector collaborations to address complex societal issues. They underline the significance of cultural and contextual sensitivity to enhance the relevance and acceptance of innovation and policy change. The novel contribution of this paper lies in the acknowledgement and exploration of how this crucial relational work sustains public-commons partnership. We provide insight into how the commons move from (and between) contestation and collaboration with the state, opening new avenues for democratisation from within PA.

3. PUBLIC-COMMONS PARTNERSHIPS IN BARCELONA

3.1 METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this article stems from a broader mixed-method study (2018–2021) of the relationship between the Barcelona City Council and the commons from a community development perspective (Pera, 2022).[1] To deepen understanding of the relational dimension of Barcelona's public-commons partnerships, we conducted a further 10 semi-structured interviews[2] and

included recent documents in our analysis.[3] Interviewees comprise a balanced mix of civil servants, local politicians, cooperatives and commons representatives. Interviews, analysed thematically with Atlas.ti, elicited important insights on the interactions, conflicts, and challenges within public-commons partnerships and the strategies used by these different actors to keep working together and develop new commons-led approaches to asset management.

To illustrate the relational dimension of public-commons partnerships, we present our findings through four vignettes describing the perspective of four different characters, each a composite of several interviewees working in a specific role. The vignettes aim to reflect the experience of these relationship-building efforts. First, we provide a brief historical background on the commons in municipal assets in Barcelona. We follow with a description of two administrative instruments developed under CAP by these public-commons partnerships, which, we argue, strengthen democratic practices within the PA: the Community Balance Metrics and the Social Return on Investment in the Can Batlló asset transfer agreement.

3.2 COMMONING MUNICIPAL ASSETS IN BARCELONA

The transfer of the municipal assets to organised citizens in Barcelona began in the late 1970s, when residents of peripheral and disadvantaged neighbourhoods demanded not only more public investment in but direct management of social infrastructure. The transfer of assets was regulated through weak local frameworks and was decentralised to the districts, and this translated into different procedures and criteria for transferring an asset, the type of assets, and the subsidies available to manage these assets. The relationship between the local associations that managed the municipal assets and the City Council was historically characterised by alternating episodes of tension and collaboration (Pera, 2022). However, the rise of New Municipalism, defined as a political movement that conceives cities as key spaces of transformation and power redistribution to counteract the neoliberal economy (Blanco & Gomà, 2020), marked an important shift in this relationship. In 2015, the new municipalist coalition *Barcelona en comú* (BeC), which had emerged from the social mobilisation following the 2008 financial crisis, won the local elections. This opened space for more radical projects of change and innovation, often driven by "commoning practices". Barcelona has implemented policies to promote citizen participation since the re-establishment of democracy in Spain after Franco's dictatorship. Nevertheless, the BeC government's stronger narrative on participatory democracy has placed particular emphasis on the role of urban commons (Blanco et al., 2022).

The approval of the CAP in 2016 represented a substantive step towards the recognition and promotion of the commons, as well as an improvement in the standardisation and transparency of asset transfer mechanisms. The implementation of CAP was hindered by several barriers, as mentioned above, such as the lack of an appropriate and robust legal framework that encompasses public-commons agreements, resistance from civil servants and scepticism from activists (Pera et al., 2023). However, here we focus on relational dynamics that enabled the creation of the Community Balance Metrics (CBM) and the Social Return on Investment (SROI) in the Can Batlló asset transfer process.

A pivotal role was played by the City Council's Active Democracy Division (AD) which was responsible for elaborating CAP in collaboration with cooperatives. AD promotes citizen participation and decentralisation of municipal policies. It is part of the Department of Social Rights, Health, Cooperation and Community and comprises 15 employees: one director, one head of department and 13 public officials who work on coordination and administrative tasks. Two of these public officials are in charge of the implementation of CAP. They are supervised by the director and, higher up, by the elected representative responsible for this policy area. The next sections describes the two CAP instruments in more detail.

3.2.1 The Community Balance Metrics
The Community Balance Metrics (CBM) is an instrument of evaluation to visualise the democratic and transformational practices of communitarian activities (Forné & Castro, 2022). CBM is divided into four dimensions: internal democracy, rootedness in the community, social impact and care for people and the environment. It was developed through a collaborative process between the City Council and XEC (Network of Communitarian Spaces) with support from a few cooperatives of consultants. XEC has the aim to coordinate and defend communitarian facilities managed all over Catalonia by grassroots organisations, based on principles of horizontal governance and mutual support. XEC covers a range of commons' activities, from arts and cultural centres to community centres, many of which located in the city of Barcelona, such as Ateneu Popular de 9 Barris dating back to the late 1970s. Table 3.2.1 describes the main actors and their role in the formulation of CBM.

CBM responds to both XEC's ambition to self-evaluate and visualise the transformative impact of their practices and the City Council's goal to map out the social impact of all CAP projects. The new metrics was first designed in 2018. The City Council contracted out cooperatives to gather data from the various community projects, working on the indicators and configuring the software.

Because of the diversity of the activities run under CAP, CBM is being implemented gradually. It includes both a longer and shorter version based on the type and size of the project and activities. Grassroots organisations involved in managing these services currently receive support from the Citizen Assets Office to fill in the metrics. While CBM is currently implemented on a voluntary basis, it is planned

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MAIN ACTORS INVOLVED IN THE FORMULATION OF CBM

Actor	Description	Role
XEC (Network of Communitarian Spaces)	Network of spaces managed by local grassroots with democratic and social justice aspirations. Some of the spaces and projects of the network are municipal assets under CAP. Representatives of XEC deal with the City Council in Barcelona and consultant cooperatives.	Proposed the initial idea of CBM. Worked together with public officials and consultants from two cooperatives (see below) to develop CBM. Manage relationships with the rest of the commons' members.
Hidra cooperative Ekona cooperative	Cooperatives providing social consultancy and research work. Experts of innovative and transformative policies.	Hired by the City council to facilitate the initial formulation of CBM.
XES (Solidarity Economy Network)	Association that groups together Social and Solidarity Economy entities. Experts of social metrics.	Hired by the City council to transform CBM evaluation dimensions into indicators.
Active Democracy Public Officials	Public officials that work in AD on citizen participation.	Work with the representatives of the commons and consultants from the cooperatives to ensure that CBM is not in breach of regulations. Explain CBM to City Council Departments responsible for and/ or affected by its implementation.

Table 3.2.1 Actors in CBM.

to become a requirement for renewals of asset transfer agreements every three years.

3.2.2 Social Return on Investment (SROI) in the Can Batlló asset transfer process

The second instrument is the transfer agreement of the industrial zone of Can Batlló to the neighbourhood organisation that had been managing it. Can Batlló is a community centre run by a local grassroots organisation that brings together anti-capitalist movements, neighbourhood associations and local activists. Its organisation is based on horizontal governance and deliberation. It comprises various committees, each working on different projects to respond to the diverse interests and needs within the community. These committees come together every 15 days in an assembly of around 70 people. The centre has become a symbol of insurgent urbanism (Martí-Costa & Dalmau-Torva, 2013).

The establishment of Can Batlló as a community centre dates back to 2011, as a result of several decades of social struggles led by neighbourhood associations reclaiming this space for cultural and community projects. In 2011, neighbours and grassroots organisations started a campaign to demand the transfer of the old warehouses to neighbourhood groups. After threatening to occupy buildings, grassroots organisations finally forced the conservative mayor Xavier Trias to transfer the asset, despite the agreement being temporary and legally precarious. The community organisation established

to manage Can Batlló demanded a better transfer agreement and investment to improve the dilapidated buildings. However, it was not until 2018, under the BeC administration, that a committee involving state and civil society actors was created to work on a long-term transfer agreement.

In 2019 this committee calculated the socio-economic returns that community projects such as Can Batlló could generate. Normally, in asset-transfers from public to private organisations, economic returns are calculated based on the monetary benefits generated. In the case of Can Batlló, social return on the activities was measured in the hours spent by volunteers and the nature of the projects carried out. This calculation served to visualise the social value of these projects in economic terms and was used to approve the 30-year lease of the buildings with the possibility of a 20-year extension (Forné & Castro, 2022). Table 3.2.2 describes the main actors involved in the formulation of Can Batlló's SROI.

4. BUILDING AND SUSTAINING PUBLIC-COMMON PARTNERSHIPS: A RELATIONAL APPROACH

This section uses vignettes to present the strategies by which state and commons actors shaped and implemented new administrative instruments to support Barcelona's commons.

MAIN ACTORS INVOLVED IN THE FORMULATION OF THE SOCIAL RETURN IN THE TRANSFERENCE OF CAN BATLLÓ

Actor	Description	Role
Can Batlló grassroots organisation	Non-profit organisation which manages the centre of Can Batlló. They demanded a better legal agreement for the transfer of Can Batlló.	Worked with different Departments of the City Council to propose and negotiate a new asset transfer agreement. Acted as boundary spanners, continuously feeding back to community members on the negotiations and ensuring transparency of the process. Disseminated benefits of CBM among associations not used to that level of evaluation
Hidra cooperative Ekona cooperative	Cooperatives providing social consultancy and research work. Experts of social innovation and public policy.	Hired for the period 2015–2019 by the City Council to facilitate a transfer agreement for Can Batlló. Supported development of SROI.
Active Democracy public officials	Public Officials that work on the implementation of CAP.	Collaborate with commons to develop the SROI in the asset transfer of Can Batlló. Shared information on how CAP framework could support Can Batlló's demands.
Heritage Department, Legal Department, District administration.	Public officials from other departments of the City Council.	Involvement in the formulation of the SROI. Responsible for guaranteeing that the new agreement for the transfer of Can Batlló was not in breach of any legal frameworks or existing regulations.

Table 3.2.2 Actors in the SROI on Can Batlló's asset transfer.

VIGNETTE 1

Anna is a public official from AD and she is involved in implementing CAP to standardise and add transparency to the asset transfer mechanisms. The transfer of assets had previously been decentralised at the district level, without a shared framework across different tiers and departments. As Anna mentions, "The asset transfer had not been clearly promoted by the City Council before. With CAP we give a conceptual and procedural umbrella". Anna and her colleagues set up a board representing different departments involved in asset transfer.

> The evaluation of the demands of new transfers and the renewal of old ones now is carried out by a board representing all involved. All these departments used to work autonomously, and at least now there's a board to work together.

Moreover, Anna has worked with representatives from the Legal Department, the Heritage Department, representatives of the Sants-Montjuïc district, and activists from Can Batlló to prepare the transfer agreement for Can Batlló. She explains that the involvement of the Legal Department was crucial since "these kinds of policies aiming to recognise the commons are constrained by the rigidity of the legal framework". Thus, involving the Legal Department helped the partnership to find legal wording and a framework that would not be vetoed.

Anna has faced resistance from some departments which preferred continuing to use their old tools and metrics to evaluate commons' assets falling under their jurisdiction. She works closely with these departments to explain the value of CBM and to negotiate which, among their traditional indicators, could be included in or adapted to CBM. When an agreement cannot be reached, Anna explores other avenues.

> We prefer to work with street-level bureaucrats, to work in a trustful environment and to collaborate. However, on some occasions, we have also asked for help from our director to talk with other directors to ease the situation.

Working with activists to develop innovative instruments also requires efforts to create an environment of trust, mutual respect and understanding. To this end, Anna engages in a dialogue with activists to explain administrative dynamics and possible barriers to their demands, working with them to identify ways of addressing feasibility issues. Her personal knowledge of the city's associative fabric has helped her to understand the demands of commons representatives and to find shared meanings and goals.

> We [AD public officials] know these associations. We have participated in civil society organisations or social movements; we already knew about some initiatives and knew some of the activists who had participated in these initiatives. We understand their demands.

VIGNETTE 2

Jordi is an activist who has been involved in managing a citizen asset that was transferred over 20 years ago. He belongs to an association that represents the interests of the commons in municipal assets. He was previously in contact with the City Council in 2012, when representatives of the commons demanded a more robust legal framework. In 2015, after three years of negotiations with the City Council under the Catalan Conservative Party (CiU) government (2011–2015), a new legal framework was approved. Although this framework was presented as an improvement, the association that Jordi represented was not satisfied with the result.

> We had several meetings to negotiate. Some of our demands were not accepted due to political reasons, some other demands were not accepted due to legal reasons. The result did not include some of our main demands.

In 2016, with the approval of CAP under the BeC administration, Jordi felt that the programme was finally "written in their language". He stated that cooperatives hired by the city council "knew how to recognise our expertise and use it to inform CAP". Since 2018, Jordi has been collaborating with AD and consultants from these cooperatives to develop CBM. He felt that these actors were able to create an environment of cooperation and trust.

> They show that they understand our demands, but the public administration is a macro-machine […]. Both parties want to achieve it [instruments to recognise the transformative potential of urban commons]. We are all working towards this, to generate democratic innovation."

Jordi feels that his and other groups' demands have been listened to, but some limitations exist due to regional laws, which for instance require open calls for tenders, ignoring the rootedness in the locality or the social value of a project. They are now planning to put pressure on the regional administration.

Despite recognising the strong collaborative ethos across all the actors involved in designing CBM, Jordi experienced

some conflicts. For instance, during the pandemic lockdown, AD public officials revised the CBM indicators without informing the commons representatives. Jordi and the other representatives understood that at times the inertia of PA translates into unilateral action, and this can lead to misunderstanding. When Jordi realised that they had been excluded from the decision-making process, they requested to reopen the process and revise the indicators.

> When they showed them to us (the modified indicators), we sent them back and told them that this was not the way things should be done. They cannot take something that you have done together and adapt it on our behalf. We should review it but jointly because we can explain the philosophy behind each indicator.

Although Jordi and the other commons representatives did not abandon their repertoires of protest politics, he admitted that when collaborating on the development of CBM, they first informed public officials about their demands before going public. This shows how activists recognised the importance of these alliances with the state, even in situations that raised frustration with the institutional modus operandi. Instead, they astutely chose pragmatic strategies to sustain these alliances.

Most commons in municipal assets in Barcelona endorse CBM, but Jordi points out that "there are some that have shown some resistance, since CBM measures some dimensions that they had never evaluated before. Not all the commons in municipal assets have the same level of democracy or inclusion in their governance". To address this resistance, Jordi and his fellow activists turn into advocates and educators, trying to explain that CBM has different versions, more or less detailed, depending on size and capacity, and promoting it as a tool to self-evaluate and improve.

VIGNETTE 3

Eric is an activist who has been involved in Can Batlló commons since its beginnings in 2011. In 2015, the grassroots organisation set up to manage Can Batlló started demanding a better transfer agreement, recognising the window of opportunity opened by the new BeC administration. Eric joined the group of Can Batlló representatives that worked with AD public officials and different City Council departments, such as Sants-Montjuïc District Administration, Heritage and Legal Departments, to develop the SROI of Can Batlló. "We wanted a better agreement, and we presented our claims to the district [AD], but other departments were soon added to the negotiations".

Two-and-a-half years after initial demands for a better agreement, the City Council and the cooperatives providing support informed the organisation about a case in Italy, where asset transfers were based on the social value generated by the projects. The Legal and Heritage Departments in Barcelona studied the case and found that some regulations would have to be changed to make transfers based on social value viable. As Eric explains, "We (Can Batlló members) had been internally keeping records of the projects developed in Can Batlló, as well as the volunteers that had been involved since 2013". The consultants from the cooperatives calculated the social value of Can Batlló based on the figures that the grassroots had collected for 2017. The City Council accepted these figures and approved the asset transfer for 30 years, with the possibility of extending it thereafter for another 20 years. The agreement established that the City Council must pay for the supply costs and for securing the public space, as well as for the refurbishment of some old buildings.

From 2019 onwards, although the government was still led by BeC in coalition with another centre-left party, Eric and the other representatives of Can Batlló did not experience the same supportive environment and had to engage in difficult negotiations over the renovation of specific Can Batlló buildings. The offer made by the City Council did not respond to their needs.

> We have been negotiating for four years (since 2019) about the renovation work on some of the buildings of Can Batlló. We have given up, it's impossible. In 2019, the politicians, the heads of the Legal and Heritage Departments had changed, and when we asked for the renovation of some buildings as it was set out in the transfer agreement, they told us that they had another interpretation of what must be done. They told us that they had already invested a lot of money in Can Batlló. We disagree and we presented our arguments.

According to Eric, despite the support received from AD public officials, changes in political leadership and staff turnover in the Legal and Heritage Departments raised new barriers. Eric and his colleagues are exploring what changes might be feasible within the current legal framework to secure the refurbishment of the buildings, but he is worried about growing frustration in Can Batlló.

VIGNETTE 4

Maria is a social researcher who works for one of the cooperatives contracted out by the City Council as consultants for CAP. These cooperatives used their

expertise to bridge the gap between public officials and the commons representatives.

> "One of our goals was to influence the policies developed by BeC.[…] Hidra and Ekona were hired by the City Council to develop the prototype of the Citizen Assets Program. We gave talks about different types of municipal assets transferred to organised citizens […]. We offered our knowledge and skills to this reality (urban commons in the city)".

Maria was involved at different stages in the development and implementation of CAP between 2015 and 2019. She interviewed the commons on the dimensions that should be considered to measure their work, which were eventually identified as internal democracy, rootedness in the community, social impact and care for people and the environment. Maria attempted to visualise the different experiences and needs of the commons and to incorporate them in the CBM. She organised coproduction workshops to develop the most useful indicators.

Moreover, she facilitated the process of exploring alternative ways of calculating the value produced by Can Batlló, beyond economic returns. When a few members of Can Batlló felt reluctant to work with the City Council, she informed them that "there's an opportunity now, you are strong [in terms of active members and projects developed] and now there's a City Council that wants to listen". She argued that "the agreement is not only an improvement for Can Batlló, but it also creates a precedent that can inspire future initiatives". She proposed inviting members of the Asilo community centre in Naples to share their experience of collaborating with the local state to innovate regulations that recognise the commons as equal partners. Dialogue between members of different community centres helped the Can Batlló commons to visualise the potential of collaborating with the state, which would also inspire other commons in the city and beyond. Maria notes that, although her cooperative has been contracted out by the Council, Can Batlló members "see us as a neutral actor" and often reach out to them for help despite not being currently hired by the City Council. She thinks that, in order to advance the recognition by the state of the commons' transformative practices, it is crucial to work with governments at different tiers, beyond just local government.

These vignettes describe the work carried out by boundary spanners as they navigated conflicts, resistance and scepticism. They built alliances and thought creatively to open safe space where novel policy instruments could be collaboratively shaped and implemented. The result

was two innovative administrative instruments (CBM and SROI) that reinterpret and expand the existing legal framework to meet the commons' needs. This experience of collaboration through public-commons partnership is slowly contributing to changing the administrative culture and democratising working practices in the Barcelona PA. In the case of SROI, the Legal and Heritage Departments agreed to change their regulations to recognise the social value of commons' asset management, moving beyond a narrow focus on economic value. Furthermore, these public-commons partnerships were able to bring together different departments that used to work autonomously, in order to develop new practices and regulations that would recognise activists' work.

Within the PA, Anna and her colleagues promoted alliances with other public servants across sectors to address resistance from various departments. Participatory policymaking is not always a high priority within PA, where citizens might be perceived as having little to contribute to 'getting things done'. Participatory policymaking hardly features among the criteria by which public officials are evaluated (Dean 2023). Collaboration with activists and grassroots organisations can be a time-consuming task that delays results and might jeopardise agreed targets. By giving new visibility to a dedicated department for participatory democracy BeC signalled its support for the Commons' agenda. Although struggling with colleagues' resistance at times, the AD officials had enough leverage to build alliances across departments, which proved crucial to support public-commons partnerships in developing and implementing these new instruments and procedures.

Building alliances with and between civil society actors was equally important. Maria stated that the dialogue she initiated with community activists from Naples, who shared their experiences of working with local institutions, helped the commons in Barcelona to envisage the potential of collaborating with the City Council. Jordi and the other commons representatives established alliances with grassroots networks to promote CBM among civic associations and worked closely with those commons that had reservations about using it. Jordi's experience shows the *collaborative countervailing power* (Fung & Wright 2003) that social and grassroots movements often play in participatory governance. As ideological pragmatists, activists like Jordi recognise the importance of alliances with the state, displaying practical strategies to sustain them in the face of challenging situations.

These alliances rely on relationships of trust among the actors involved. Relationships between the commons and the City Council have historically involved a mix of contention and collaboration, especially in the working-class and peripheral districts where many of the transferred

assets are located (Pera, 2022). Boundary spanners invest time and efforts into active listening and conflict resolution. These strategies help to create a safe environment for collaboration, increasing the resilience of public-commons partnerships. These *buffer zones* (Bennett & Brunner, 2022) require constant care and can be easily damaged. Since 2019 the relationship between Can Batlló representatives and the City Council has been strained by high turnover of public officials, which meant some strategic allies were lost, changes in political leadership and the absence of external facilitators, such as the cooperatives that had previously mediated between public officials and commons' representatives. Current disagreements between Can Batlló members and the City Council are denting activists' trust in state institutions. However, the implementation of CAP, no matter how slow and precarious, remains an important milestone towards the consolidation of the commons in Barcelona and an important example of democratic innovation within PA.

5. CONCLUSION

The literature on the commons has mostly focused on conflict and contestation with the state and the barriers to collaboration raised by technocratic decision-making and the neoliberal political economy (Wagenaar, 2023). The story of CAP, its emergence and development, instead illuminates the possibilities of collaboration between these very different actors. The case we presented furthers understanding of how relational work at the intersections of state and commons can open space for more democratic PA instruments, by building trust and co-creating shared languages, visions and practices that bridge across different cultures and ways of knowing (Baker & Mcguirk, 2017).

Ansell et al., (2023, p.3) discuss co-creation in PA and argue that "[co-creation] carries an underexplored democratizing potential, as it enhances inclusion, empowerment, equity, and democratic legitimacy." The CAP case shows how this democratising potential might be realised, and the vignettes depict the day-to-day work underpinning public-commons partnerships. Despite the lack of an appropriate legal framework recognising the commons, the inclusion of activists and consultant cooperatives contributed to re-interpreting and expanding existing regulations to support innovative commoning practices of assets management.

Our findings thus contribute to perspectives that promote the analysis of relationships to study and foster emancipatory projects. Bartels stated (2020, p. 2880)

"transformative ambitions for more just, democratic and sustainable cities are reshaped by the intricate, emergent relational dynamics that constitute local spaces and their governance." Similarly, Bynner et al. (2023) and Escobar (2019) highlight the importance of facilitative roles in participatory processes, emphasising their capacity to promote shared meanings and an environment of trust. The case of CAP underscores the significance of this relational dimension for the study of public-commons partnerships, where it has so far featured only marginally.

The focus on collaboration and relational work also brings the paper into dialogue with the literature on participatory governance, which highlights the *collaborative countervailing power* of grassroots and social movements, as they can move beyond oppositional stance and protest politics to achieve practically oriented policy gains, particularly at the local level (Fung & Wright 2003). Similarly, the work of Baiocchi et al. (2011) and others (e.g., Avritzer 2010) recognised the crucial alliance of social movements and the local state for the emergence of democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In other work, Fung (2006) describes "*accountable autonomy*", whereby street-level bureaucrats have the capacity to act with discretion to design participatory spaces while preserving mechanisms of accountability, as crucial to encouraging and sustaining civic engagement. In Barcelona, public officials from AD enjoyed a degree of autonomy that enabled them to open and nurture spaces to work collaboratively with the commons. This capacity for discretion was important firstly, to reassure the commons and keep them engaged in the face of bureaucratic resistance and technocratic barriers, and secondly, to ensure that the new administrative instruments could meaningfully integrate the commons' situated knowledge while meeting feasibility requirements.

Notwithstanding the important achievement of Barcelona's public-commons partnerships, several challenges remain that might affect their sustainability. The role of public officials as boundary spanners clashes with existing working routines and performance assessments that do not always prioritise participatory policymaking. Previous literature has found that even where new practices are introduced and encouraged, it is easy to revert to conventional policymaking in the event of difficulties (Lowndes & Roberts, 2013). In one of the examples described above, commons members complained when AD public officials unilaterally modified several CBM indicators during the pandemic lockdown. Furthermore, the resilience of these collaborative processes

can be hindered when the individuals acting as boundary spanners move to different jobs, or when the government's attention shifts elsewhere as in the current standoff between Can Batlló's representatives and the City Council, due to different interpretations of the transfer agreement. Public-commons partnership demand ongoing investment and relational work, while protecting space for the commons' critical and *countervailing* capacity to prevent bureaucratisation of these alliances.

In conclusion, our analysis illuminates the potential for collaboration between the City Council and the commons and contributes to Bollier and Helfrich's (2019) conceptualisation of public-commons partnerships from a relational perspective. The case presented here demonstrates the daily work of trust-building and strategic alliances required to support these partnerships. These can be hard to sustain, but they also open safe space to experiment and do things differently. Further research could offer a more fine-grained analysis of how relational dynamics between the state and the commons influence different and more participatory practices within the PA, as well as examine the resilience of these new working routines and frameworks to changes in government.

NOTES

1   44 semi-structured interviews and 51 surveys of state and non-state actors involved in assets management.
2   All the interviews were carried out in Catalan and translated by the author (M. Pera).
3   The Citizen Assets Programme's framework; the indicators report 2019–2022; the CAP's Legal Analysis and regulation proposals; Can Batlló Annual reports; and the Community Balance Metrics (CBM) 2021 proposal.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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