

COVID briefs

BUILDING BACK BETTER: POST-PANDEMIC CITY GOVERNANCE



PANDEMIC, CITIES, AND MUTUAL SUPPORT: THE ROLE OF URBAN SOCIAL INNOVATION IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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Abstract

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has given rise to an outpouring of initiatives of solidarity and mutual aid around the planet. This article argues that city governments should take advantage of the momentum of urban social innovation to strengthen their ability to grapple with the social and health challenges posed by the crisis. Four main lines of action are proposed: 1) contributing towards expanding the territorial and populational reach of initiatives of solidarity by means of digital and other tools; 2) encouraging replication of the more successful experiences and facilitating their interconnection in physical and digital spaces; 3) fostering socially and spatially balanced development of these initiatives so that they can reach the most vulnerable urban groups and areas; and 4) promoting lasting relations of coproduction of policies and activities among local institutions and initiatives of social solidarity.

Social innovations and strengthening the welfare state

Richard Sennett has recently noted that the severity and depth of the effects of this crisis could lead to far-reaching changes in welfare states (Sennett, 2020) whose institutional architecture, necessary though it might be, is proving insufficient for responding to a situation of social emergency unlike any other in recent decades. This is partly because neoliberal policies have imposed cuts that have undermined their ability to provide a public response to social needs. But the weaknesses of the welfare state are also due to the magnitude of the social and health challenges we face, and the difficulties public institutions are having in adapting to the rapid social and technological changes characterizing the early years of this century.

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Citizen solidarity action: a bulwark against the effects of the pandemic

The early months of the pandemic saw the blooming of a huge array of solidarity initiatives around the world in response to the social and health emergency. Some of them were circumstantial, responding to the specific conditions arising from confinement, while many others seem to be crystallizing into new forms of collective action, more or less articulated with pre-existing social networks. The deepening of the social effects of the crisis and uncertainties about the future evolution of the pandemic and its consequences seem to have spurred on the momentum of citizens' solidarity, thus opening up an opportunity for establishing new frameworks for cooperation between local institutional activity and citizens' social initiatives. Obviously, actions of solidarity cannot be the only response to this social and health crisis, but they do seem to be called upon to play a crucial role in containing its effects in the medium and long term. The greater the capacity of this role to combine the desire to palliate the effects of the crisis with the thrust of new forms of social organization, the more transformative it will be.

In this framework, the present report has a twofold aim. First, we seek to describe the solidarity initiatives that are emerging in response to the present pandemic, while contrasting them with the social innovations that sprang up during the economic crisis that began in 2008. Our starting assumption is that the initiatives of solidarity that have appeared in the last few months are, to a large extent, fuelled by the social capital that has accumulated with the many protests and cooperative social actions arising in response to the economic crisis. Nevertheless, the new initiatives present some markedly novel aspects like their swift proliferation, their socially transversal nature, and their substantial presence in digital networks. Second, the report aims to consider the opportunities and challenges raised for local governments by this burgeoning of solidarity and cooperative initiatives. We therefore wish to analyse how cities can make the most of the present momentum of urban social innovation, as well as of the opportunities and challenges that are emerging in the collaboration between social initiatives and city governments.

From resistance and denunciation to practices of cooperation and mutual aid

Noteworthy among the innovative collective actions resulting from the pandemic are, on the one hand, the appearance of new forms of pro-

test, for example online demonstrations, car caravans, and rent strikes and, on the other, the proliferation of mutual support groups promoting direct social action to aid the more vulnerable social groups and to deal with the general social needs that are emerging in this situation.

The phenomenon we are referring to is not new but was observed in the years following the crisis of 2008 which, besides sparking a host of new social protests, led to the proliferation of a large number of solidarity initiatives. Some of these essentially aimed to alleviate the effects of the crisis on the population's living conditions. Others, however, went a step further to combine mutual aid with demanding rights and seeking alternative ways of providing goods and services (cooperative consumption of agroecological products, time banks, exchange networks, housing cooperatives, anti-eviction assemblies, and so on). Their development has highlighted a significant change, namely that forms of collective action are now tending to shift from a predominance of merely *resistant* and denunciatory models to creative, cooperative practices, with the aim of stimulating far-reaching changes by means of real transformative impacts on people's daily lives (Ibarra *et al.*, 2018).

The pandemic reactivates the social capital dating back to the crisis of 2008

In earlier work, we have drawn attention to the proliferation of such initiatives of social innovation in the specific context of Catalonia and the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Blanco and Nel-lo, 2018; Martínez *et al.*, 2019). We observed, for example, how these types of cooperative endeavours underwent significant growth after 2011, partly as a result of the worsening of the social and political crisis, but also thanks to the local consolidation of the 15M protest movement (Nel-lo, 2015; Pradel and García, 2018). We also found that similar initiatives have spread throughout Catalonia, albeit unevenly. Hence, they did not involve higher-income areas, they had a bigger presence in middle-income urban areas, and they had difficulty in entering the most disadvantaged areas. We confirmed that, although they constitute socially autonomous spaces, in many cases they had the support of (and were even encouraged by) local governments through, for example, allowing the use of municipal facilities. Finally, we were able to analyse how, in addition to satisfying a very wide range of collective needs (related with housing, care, food, energy, telecommunications, *et cetera*), these initiatives promote social and environmental alternatives, while also being spaces where citizens become politicized.

The phenomenon we are analysing in Catalonia shows significant parallels with what is happening in other European countries. Athina Arampatzi, for example, studied how "urban solidarity spaces" bloomed throughout the metropolitan area of Athens during the years of the sovereign debt crisis. Like those in Spain, the Greek social mobilizations in protest against austerity measures contributed to the expansion of new practices of solidarity, mutualism, and reciprocity among the social movements, for example with producer and consumer cooperatives, exchange and mutual aid networks, social pharmacies and clinics, educational cooperatives, soup kitchens, spaces of solidarity with immigrants and refugees, time banks, and community gardens (Arampatzi, 2017).

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We believe that the considerable volume of collective initiatives that appeared in the years after the onset of the crisis in 2008 favoured the accumulation of social capital, which has now been reactivated in response to the pandemic, giving rise to a new cycle of collective practices.

Swift expansion, prominence of digital networks, and transversality: the new cycle of collective practices

The new forms of social mobilization, especially those aiming to respond in solidarity to the social and health crisis, show some relevant qualities with regard to earlier movements. Notable among these are:

- a) the speed and intensity with which these solidarity initiatives have proliferated, partly as a reflection of the rapid spread of the virus and its social consequences;
- b) the fact that digital networks have played an important role as a space for diffusion and organization of solidarity, once again reflecting the particular circumstances of confinement;
- c) the socially transversal nature of solidarity practices, as a consequence of the equally transversal (although increasingly unequal) effects of the pandemic.

In April 2020, the Solivid (www.solivid.org) project, a network that presently includes 34 research groups from 11 countries of Europe and Latin America collecting information about 2,100 solidarity initiatives in 28 countries around the globe, was founded in order to study and make known the worldwide expansion of the solidarity initiatives that are appearing as a result of the pandemic. A preliminary analysis of this data confirms that the actions of solidarity are spreading across widely diverse thematic areas. Hence, the project identifies initiatives in fields like psychological support for dealing with the effects of the pandemic and confinement; help for the sick and production of healthcare material; food production and distribution; open-access collaborative cultural, educational, and sports initiatives; employment advice and cooperative economic projects; support for vulnerable groups such as immigrants, the homeless, the elderly, and children at risk, and support for victims of gender violence.

However most (61%) of the initiatives are not confined to any specific thematic area but act simultaneously on several fronts. One paradigmatic example of this is the groups or networks for mutual support. Projects like *htiyaç Haritası*, in Turkey (<https://www.ihtiyacharitasi.org>), *Mutual Aid*, in the United Kingdom (<https://covidmutualaid.org/>), *Territories Engagés*, in France (<https://territoires-engages.org/>), and *Territorios en Acción*, in Argentina (<http://territoriosenaccion.org/>) bring together information about such mutual support networks on the national scale and are complemented by many other platforms at the city level such as *La Roma Buona* (<https://goo.gl/maps/hVD1BVM4DMQyU6Vg8>) and *Mutual Aid NYC* (<https://mutualaid.nyc>). Just as the crisis has speeded up changes in fields like teleworking and education, it also seems to be bringing about a marked transformation in the forms of collective organization and action.

Citizen self-management or public sector/community coproduction? Opportunities and challenges for urban governments

The proliferation of socially innovative initiatives since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008 has prepared the ground for new practices at the local level. In this regard, projects of policy coproduction among local governments, social organizations, and citizens are of special interest. As happened in previous years in cities like Antwerp, Brussels, Milan, Naples, Newcastle, and Cardiff, social innovation initiatives often establish cooperative relations with the local administrations, mutually reinforcing each other in their capacity for social impact (Moulaert et al., 2010) even while they are presented as spaces of social autonomy. The new wave of solidarity and cooperative endeavours in response to the coronavirus crisis has opened up a new window of opportunity for promoting progressive strategies of urban social transformation based on egalitarian values and principles of democratic radicalism, which could come to constitute an important part of the necessary evolution of the welfare state we referred to at the beginning.

Local administrations should support citizens' (self-)organizational efforts and establish cooperative links with them in order to respond to the challenges faced by cities.

Taking only European and Latin American countries *as a reference*, with more than 100 cases identified through the SOLIVID project, we observe that, as a general rule, the initiatives that have appeared in recent months are highly self-managing by nature, so that only a minority say that they are working with public services, institutions, and/or facilities (17% in Spain, 24% in Argentina, 38% in Italy, and 45% in Colombia). This suggests that there is still a long way to go with this kind of collaborative work. By way of comparison, the social innovation initiatives we mapped out in Catalonia a few years ago, when asked about their origins, defined themselves as exclusively citizen-based in 66% of cases. Yet 35% said they received enough or a lot of support from the administration, and 19% some support.

Local administrations should support citizens' (self-)organizational efforts and establish cooperative links with them in order to respond to the challenges faced by cities in the short and long term, while also respecting the self-management proclivities of social initiatives. As Richard Sennett recognizes – quoting Theda Skocpol – “a welfare system needs a welfare state”, since voluntary organizations, by themselves, are not sufficient to cope with the kind of social and health challenges that arise in a crisis like the present one. Yet the contrary is also true: institutional action alone can be insufficient for dealing with the current challenges. Hence, one key strategy for increasing effectiveness could be fostering community action and strengthening ties of cooperation with it, thereby making the most of the social energies that have emerged during the crisis.

Key elements of public support for community initiatives that have arisen with the pandemic

City governments are in a privileged situation for taking on the role of encouraging and consolidating community initiatives (Blanco and Gomà, 2016). We believe that there are four main lines of work that will allow progress in this area:

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a) Scaling-up solidarity initiatives beyond their original territorial and populational limits, thus making it possible to reach more people and to act on a larger territorial scale. As Sennett notes, the digital nature of many of the solidarity initiatives that have appeared as a result of the pandemic could make it easier to go beyond the usual bounds of scale, which should make local governments think about strategies that reinforce the use of digital tools by these kinds of solidarity initiatives.

b) Favours scaling-out of the more successful initiatives and their coordination within the framework of horizontal exchange networks. The challenge of expanding the social and territorial scope of these initiatives does not necessarily mean increasing the size of organizations and, indeed, such growth could, in some cases, entail a loss of the advantages of proximity. Accordingly, their expansion can also be achieved by replication and horizontal interconnection, an aspect in which administrations could play a major role by contributing towards making them better known and fostering exchanges among them in both physical and digital spaces.

c) Contributing to socially and spatially balanced diffusion of such initiatives, with particular emphasis on bringing them to the most socially vulnerable groups and neighbourhoods and boosting their social inclusiveness so that they can reach underrepresented groups. The experience of the earlier cycle of social mobilization suggests that collective action often fails to appear where the social needs are greatest, precisely because the social deficits of the more vulnerable groups and areas make participation extremely difficult. A social-spatial imbalance is therefore created in collective action, an aspect that the administrations should analyse and help to counteract.

d) Enabling the consolidation of social practices over time and encouraging their contribution to the common good by means of lasting relations of coproduction with local institutions. Accepting the limits of both institutional and community action should be an incentive for promoting joint actions based on principles of stable cooperation. The resilience of cities in such a far-ranging and intense crisis as the present one will require, in good measure, the ability to weave networks of public sector/ community cooperation, uniting institutional resources with the social energies the crisis itself has helped to activate. We believe that urban governments should devote major efforts to this in the coming times.

The expansion of collective actions of solidarity is one of the few positive outcomes for social wellbeing and progress of the present crisis and contains the seeds of deeper social transformations as well as constituting an antidote to the exclusivist, authoritarian, and xenophobic trends that are also starting to emerge. City governments today have a singular responsibility to make the most of the opportunity presented by citizen solidarity.

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