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Metropolitan geographies of urban commons: mapping socio-economic alternatives in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona

Abstracts

Urban commons literature has grown in diversity and theoretical sophistication. Methodologically, however, it has consistently privileged in-depth case studies at the neighborhood or city scale. This approach reproduces bounded and administratively defined notions of the 'urban' and risks neglecting the interconnections between 'commons' initiatives and wider economic, social, cultural, and political processes. Moreover, the place-specific articulation of urban commons as an alternative mode of socio-economic organization has rarely been studied as a metropolitan process. In our study, we combine the Marxist, institutional, and environmental justice traditions of urban commons scholarship to advance debates beyond methodological 'cityism'. The paper offers a discussion of methods and insights from the assemblage of a database of over 1100 geolocated citizens' initiatives in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona in Catalonia (Spain). Through a reflexive approach, we identify a subset of 364 urban commons across social and solidarity economy practices, social innovation, and peer-to-peer production, and analyze their prosumer approach, transformative socio-environmental orientation, and capacity to provide alternatives to the state and/or the market. We conclude by arguing for the need to move beyond the municipal scale to address complex and interconnected territorial processes of emergence in social movements and policies for urban commons.

Keywords: citizen-led initiatives; socio-environmental transformation; prosumer; economic alternatives; social and solidarity economy

Introduction

Over the past decade, proposals have been put forward to transform social, economic, and political relations towards a commons-based understanding of socio-economic activities and their governance (Bollier & Helfrich, 2014, 2019; Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021).

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship has begun to critically explore these transformations empirically and theoretically, with different degrees of depth, across a variety of sectors, from cultural and digital commoning to housing, green, and productive spaces. In urban geographical debates, transformations have been approached through the lens of urban commons as a way of advancing questions of spatial justice (Chatterton, 2010, 2016; Eidelman & Safransky, 2021). In this paper, we aim to further critical debates on the geographies of urban commons, understood as the transformative spatial articulation of alternative social, economic, and political relations and rationales. We propose an innovative theoretical and methodological framework that moves beyond sectoral distinctions and methodological 'cityism' (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015). Ultimately, our purpose is to reflect on the analytical and methodological tools needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of commons-based activities and their governance at the metropolitan scale, understood as an administrative unit and as institutional, social, political, and economic relationships across and beyond municipal boundaries.

While the academic literature on urban commons has seen extensive growth in diversity and theoretical sophistication (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021), methodologically, there has been a tendency to privilege place-specific in-depth case studies, limited to neighborhoods and cities (Eizenberg, 2012; Ferreri, 2023; Huron, 2015; Zapata Campos et al., 2023) and specific sectors (Aernouts & Ryckewaert, 2018; Bollier & Pavlovich, 2008; Ferreri, 2016; Reyes-García et al., 2018; Rogge & Theesfeld, 2018; Villamayor-Tomas et al., 2022). These studies have the merit of producing detailed qualitative analyses of socio-economic and political processes in the making. However, they tell us little about the social and spatial articulation of commons as generative of socio-economic and political alternatives over wider landscapes of urbanization and across administrative boundaries. Understanding this articulation beyond sectoral and

localized case studies is crucial for distinguishing urban commons from other forms of collective organizing, including citizens' initiatives and the Social and Solidarity Economy at the metropolitan scale (Thompson et al., 2022). Additionally, engaging with a larger set of cases (Poteete et al., 2010) can support the development of a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between commons and broader social, political, and economic processes that transcend the narrow focus on the scale of neighborhoods and cities.

To understand how urban commons can engender transformative social and spatial articulations at the metropolitan scale, we need to adopt an expanded epistemology of the urban as produced by multiscale socio-spatial processes rather than as a fixed and bounded administrative unit. In doing so, we build on the work of urban scholars who have stressed the importance of the metropolitan scale for understanding the spatial dimensions of complex socio-economic phenomena (Safri, 2015; Thompson et al., 2020). In our mapping, we 'jumped scale' by engaging with multiple metropolitan datasets of civil society and social and solidarity economy organizations to disentangle the economic, social, and institutional processes influencing the emergence of urban commons in a densely urbanized area. As discussed below, this enabled us to outline complex and unexpected historical and territorial dynamics and to identify urban commons as a subset emerging within and through much wider metropolitan activities across formal and informal, institutional, and self-organized movements.

In what follows, we begin by discussing the theoretical underpinnings of our framework, which builds on three key theoretical traditions of interdisciplinary urban commons scholarship across political and environmental sciences, human geography, and planning. We then discuss the framework's development and operationalization through an iterative, inductive, and reflexive process of assembling and evaluating a database of 1154 citizens' initiatives in the Metropolitan

Area of Barcelona (MAB), ultimately including a subset of 364 commons. In our step-by-step explanation, we examine how critical distinctions between such initiatives and urban commons developed, alongside an analysis of economic sectors and their spatial distribution, raising key issues and advancing methodological insights. We conclude by arguing for a more nuanced and territorially articulated combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of urban commons at the metropolitan scale to better understand the complex dynamics of emergence and interconnection.

Mapping urban commons at the metropolitan scale

Commons beyond 'the urban'

The 'urban' dimension of commons has been the subject of increasing research in urban studies and geography. Scholars over the past decade have put forward an understanding that carving out the commons in urban spaces, particularly in the global North, is different and, arguably, harder than in other places. As succinctly put by Huron (2015), this is because urban spaces are 'saturated' by competing claims to place and to the use of space and by the concentration of interest by capital and state institutions. On the one hand, she argues that urban commons are distinctive from rural commons due to the rapid economic and political changes and intensity of social contestation that have historically accompanied processes of urbanization and commodification of space in cities. On the other, while the collective subjects of rural commons are understood to be relatively homogeneous and stable over time, cities are characterized by a high density of diverse populations and by greater transience of inhabitation. In consequence, commons governance models can take different forms (Huron, 2017), as urban communities vary in their socio-demographic characteristics and needs, the objectives they propose, and their inter-personal relations (Eizenberg, 2012). Furthermore, urban areas are much more exposed to fast changes and punctuated crises than rural areas, and it is in moments of urban crisis that

existing state and capital power relations and institutions are challenged through the formation of new commons (Huron, 2015). In sum, such studies have provided great insights into how urban dynamics impact the emergence and development of urban commons but have rarely engaged with what that might mean beyond neighborhoods and municipal boundaries.

To further an expanded approach to the geographies of urban commons, we cannot continue to replicate a methodological approach that understands the urban as a spatiality corresponding to a particular type of settlement space and governance unit, the 'city' (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2015). Recent scholarship has discussed how the urban highlights contradictions between the everyday practice of commons and the existing disaggregated state institutional order (Beveridge & Koch, 2021). In our mapping, we have adopted an expanded understanding of the urban to unveil these contradictions and link the analysis of urban commons to multiple social, economic, and political processes and practices that go beyond the city. This move reframes urbanization as a multiscale process of socio-spatial transformation that "transgresses, explodes and reworks inherited geographies" by creating dense agglomerations that can cut across multiple administrative units (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 166). Focusing on interconnected dynamics at the metropolitan scale does not mean denying the importance of municipalities as political and policy-making actors. Recent scholarship on the relationship between urban commons and local governments in new municipalist contexts has shown how the latter can facilitate the emergence, development, and consolidation of urban commons through the implementation of commons-based policies, as shown by the cases of Naples and Barcelona (Bianchi, 2022). Our research thus takes a complementary, not substitutive, approach. We do not argue for replacing a bounded urban scale with a bounded metropolitan one but rather for adding complexity to the analysis of socio-economic processes of emergence and establishment of political and socio-economic urban alternatives.

Defining urban commons

Defining the boundaries of urban commons is dependent upon the theoretical tradition deployed (Cámara-Menoyo et al., 2021). Works on urban commons belong to different academic schools, including most prominently, the institutional economics school of Elinor Ostrom (Feinberg et al., 2021; Foster & Iaione, 2019); the political ecology school (Calvet-Mir & March, 2019; Özkaynak et al., 2015) and the autonomist Marxist school (De Angelis, 2017; Federici, 2018). These schools share an understanding of the urban commons as an organizational form through which a group of citizens self-organize to manage a material or immaterial urban resource. However, they differ in terms of their research focus and object (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021). Institutional economics approaches aim to understand whether and how citizens can design and change the rules that promote cooperation and collective management of shared resources (i.e., commons). The political ecology school focuses on the political nature of commons initiatives as solutions to ecological distribution conflicts and their entanglements with social movements. The Marxist school is interested in understanding how the commons can develop a path of emancipation from capitalism by building an alternative mode of production to the state and the market.

The presence of different schools of thought on urban commons makes their definition and identification particularly challenging as each focuses its analysis on different commoning practices. As a result, defining 'commons' remains controversial; the difficulty is further compounded by the fact that some practices defined as urban commons can overlap with practices analyzed in the literature on social innovation, cooperatives, and the social and solidarity economy (Guttmann, 2019). Commons practices share with social innovation practices a way of responding to collective needs not met by the state and the market. The

commons share with social and solidarity economy and cooperative practices the emphasis on creating an alternative economic model beyond the dogma of profit and capitalist competitiveness. To acknowledge the blurred boundaries between commons and other alternative social, political, and economic practices, we initially built a dataset of what we called 'citizens' initiatives', including a variety of social innovation practices, cooperatives, and social and solidarity economy organizations. By reflecting on and analyzing this large dataset, we produced an inductive definition of urban commons. Drawing on the richness of approaches to the commons - the Marxist, the neo-institutionalist, and the political economist – we reached an operational definition of the commons as socio-economic alternatives.

Urban commons in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona as a case study

The Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (MAB) is an administrative delimitation that comprises approximately 3.2 million inhabitants over 36 municipalities, including the City of Barcelona.[1] This is one of Spain's most densely populated urban areas and is characterized by profound socio-economic inequalities that express themselves through spatial segregation (Cruz et al., 2017). Importantly, it is worth noting that the MAB has only been in effect as a metropolitan authority since 2011 and is responsible for three areas: territorial planning, urban planning, and infrastructures of metropolitan interest (AMB, 2023). Despite its limited jurisdiction, the MAB is considered one of the most developed metropolitan administrations in Spain (Barres and Martí, 2023). Its governing bodies are the Metropolitan Council, with representatives from the 36 municipalities, and the Governing Board, which includes councilors from the City of Barcelona municipal authority. The choice of examining the territorial articulation of commons within the MAB was grounded in two considerations. The first was the widespread and diverse emergence of commons-based models and initiatives in its municipalities, particularly since the 2008 economic crisis (Varvarousis et al., 2021). The second was the considerable range of geo-

referenced maps of citizens' initiatives, which provided an invaluable grounding for building the dataset of this study and for reflecting on a more nuanced understanding of the criteria of inclusion and exclusion. In what follows, we offer a historical overview before moving on to discussing the methodological decisions that led to assembling the dataset.

Citizens' and commons initiatives in the MAB

To begin with, the most recent emergence of citizens' and commons initiatives in Catalonia builds on a longer tradition of autonomous self-organization and of demands for greater citizens' participation in municipal policymaking and administration (Pera, 2020). The MAB, and particularly the city of Barcelona, has a long tradition of self-organization and community projects, which is the result of the legacy of different mobilizations and transformation agendas. These include the 'popular athenaeums' (Cat. *ateneus populars)* that emerged in the 19th century to provide meeting spaces for working-class education and cultural expression (Solà, 1978), alongside many clandestine neighborhood and cultural associations established during the Francoist regime, which became the backbone of social and political life in Catalonia (Andreu Acebal, 2014). More recently, several coordinating efforts have emerged to connect such initiatives and promote learning across policymakers and grassroots political practice (Pera and Bussu, 2024). The *School of the Commons* (Escola dels Comuns de Catalunya), for example, is a horizontal platform for the production, exchange, and dissemination of knowledge resulting from the communal management of gardens, software, and digital information, just to name a few, through bi-monthly training sessions since 2011.

Another example is procomuns.net, an action-research initiative to support meetups in Barcelona of individuals and groups working with commons-oriented collaborative economies and policies, technologies, and urban planning. Within the Catalonian Network for Social and

Solidarity Economy (XES, in Catalan),[2] there is a 'commons commission' whose mission is to share knowledge, resources, and the ways of working of the digital commons tradition, to generate training and self-training spaces, to promote the use of technology solutions based on free and open-source software, and to support XES and its partners in the adoption of practices and values of the commons economy. The membership of the XES includes workers' and consumers' cooperatives and other organizations involved in exchange, production, commercialization, and financing beyond the commercial-productivist mode.[3]

The above experiences have permeated discourses and practices of local and supra-local governments as well as of policymaking (Economistas sin Fronteras, 2015). The clearest example of this was the creation, in 2017, of the Network of Municipalities for the Social and Solidarity Economy (XMESS, in Catalan). The inclusion of Social and Solidarity Economies (SSE) in the agenda of several local and supra-local governments has been reinforced by coordinated efforts to influence local and regional policymaking since 2015. This is illustrated by the elaboration of two sets of policy proposals by the XES to enhance the SSE at the municipal scale, which were presented before the municipal elections of 2015 and 2019.[4] The recent 'new municipalist wave' - the coming to power of left-wing parties with close links to social movements - has affected various large cities in the MAB, such as Barcelona (2015-2023), Badalona (2015-2018) and Sant Cugat (2019-2023), leading to the adoption of several policy instruments in support of urban commons. In Barcelona, for example, the Barcelona en Comù party promoted the development of autonomous civil society organizations through the ownership or the management of resources and services in the areas of cultural production and housing, as well as the incorporation of citizens' groups in urban decision-making spaces (Bianchi, 2022; Thompson, 2020). The existence of this tradition, and of more recent networked territorializations of commons, make Catalonia, and particularly the MAB, an exceptional case

study for understanding urban commons' spatial articulation and their relationship with the public administration (Cruz et al., 2017). In what follows, we explain how we built on the above research and networks in our mapping approach.

Assembling the MAB's citizens' initiatives dataset

The MAB has not only been the site of considerable social and economic innovation through notions of commons; it has also been the focus of a range of academic and practice-based maps and territorial studies that, although not all focused on urban commons, provided a good starting point for our study. We searched for existing databases of citizen-led initiatives in the MAB and identified 14. The maps and datasets selected had been produced over a decade by different types of organizations, from the Social and Solidarity Economy sector to academic researchers, for different aims and at different scales, ranging from individual municipalities such as the City of Barcelona to the MAB and the whole Catalonia. The rationale for engaging with these datasets as opposed to starting from individual initiatives was both pragmatic, to 'jump scales' without engaging with data collection of localized case studies, and political, to insert our study within a longer continuity of research, within and beyond academia, at the service of those engaged in forms of commoning.

The process of assembling the dataset was laborious and involved scrutiny of the data in terms of the kinds of information available, its accuracy, the level of detail, as well as the degree to which they recorded still existing, rather than temporary, initiatives and groups. This phase also required understanding how and when the 14 datasets had been produced and included qualitative interviews with some of the data analysts involved in their creation. After discarding overlaps, we built a preliminary database in Excel, which combined the most comprehensive four: 1) *P2P. Directori d'iniciatives de l'economia col·laborativa procomú a Catalunya* (2016)

(in English: P2P. Directory of commons-oriented initiatives in the collaborative economy); 2) *PAMAPAM* (2013- 2018) (in English: 'step by step') by Setem and the Network for Social and Solidarity Economy (XES); 3) *Mapa d´innovació social a l´Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona* (in English: Map of social innovation in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona) by two research centers, the IGOP, and the IERMB; and 4) *COPHAB* (2018) (in English: Co-producing Housing) by the IGOP. Contrary to expectations, we found very little repetition of cases across these four databases, with less than 15% overlap among the entries. Despite the shared theoretical reference points, we interpreted this as a result of different methods of data collection and the different purposes of the studies. We interpreted this to mean that bringing these datasets into dialogue enabled us to assemble a more diverse range of initiatives, some of which had remained left out in previous cartographic exercises.

All initiatives mapped in the four databases were examples of social, environmental, or economic activities that originated in citizen-led organizing and aimed at needs unmet by the existing provision by the state or the market. To gain a more robust understanding of the databases and to hone our criteria for analysis, we ran an expert workshop in December 2018 with scholars and practitioners working on social innovation, urban commons, and mapping, some of whom had been involved in the elaboration of the databases above. The workshop enabled the research team to gain a clearer understanding of which of the four databases could be taken as the most comprehensive, fine-grained, and up-to-date. Based on this, we decided to focus on the Pam a Pam database, which we integrated with specific case studies from the other datasets and additional sources such as recent doctoral research[5]. The final database required careful data cleaning, updating, and integrating, as some initiatives in the database were no longer active, while others had limited data. This phase of assembling the dataset involved two postdoctoral researchers working on online research and follow-up phone interviews to collect

missing data. After several months, the team completed a database of 1154 citizens' initiatives, geolocated across 34 of the 36 municipalities of the MAB.

Geographies of citizens' initiatives

Geolocation data was obtained for most initiatives to enable descriptive and analytical GIS analysis using Complement MMQGIS (Geocode Google Maps). These enabled us to gain preliminary general insights about territorial distribution and the articulation of the initiatives in relation to municipal and neighborhood administrative boundaries. As expected, the initiatives concentrated in densely populated urban areas [Figure 1].[6] The list of municipalities with the highest total number of initiatives (>10) combined both municipalities with high socio-economic status and above median income, such as Sant Cugat del Vallès, with others such as Badalona that have been characterized since the 1990s by some of the highest indexes of urban vulnerability (Antón-Alonso et al., 2017, p. 38; see also Antón-Alonso & Cruz-Gómez, 2022). The highest concentration of initiatives (>11 per neighborhood) was located within the boundaries of Barcelona City [see Figure 1], with the highest concentration of initiatives (>70) in the neighborhoods of la Vila de Gràcia and la Dreta de l'Eixample corresponding to a low index of vulnerability within the MAB (Antón-Alonso et al., 2017, pp. 39–40).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE].

Regarding the nature of the activity, unsurprisingly, three-quarters of initiatives in the database (73%) could be described as providing 'services' (followed by 'goods and services' at 12%, 'goods' at 7%, and 'knowledge' at 4%)[7], in line with official indicators showing the service sector as the most important source of employment in the MAB, equal to 85,6% of workers (MAB and IERMB 2017).

Citizens' initiatives in the database were further characterized by defining their main economic activities as well as their sector: 1) Agroecology, energy, and environment, 2) Consulting and ethical financing, 3) Culture and leisure, 4) Education and knowledge, 5) Health and mutual support, 6) Technology and logistics, or 7) Housing. As expected, their spatial distribution by economic category presented similar patterns to more mainstream economic activities in the same sector. For example, initiatives in 'Agroecology, energy and environment' showed a high concentration of agricultural production in the municipalities in the green belt surrounding Barcelona city (IERMB, 2019). However, most of the inner Barcelona initiatives related to small-scale urban agricultural projects and agroecological consumer groups (see Domene et al., 2017) and are often the result of local policies in support of community gardens, such as through the temporary leasing of vacant plots of land for gardening (Calvet-Mir and March, 2019).

The date of establishment, the relationship with municipal and supra-municipal government, and the official legal status were also added. Data on the year of establishment confirmed that most initiatives emerged after the global financial crisis of 2007/2008, as just over half (51%) were established after 2010, with a clear peak in 2013 and 2014 after the implementation of fiscal austerity policies. For the sample for which data was available (N = 717), the most frequent legal typologies are cooperatives (40%), not-for-profit associations (30%), and 'platforms,' social movements, or other informal groupings (21%), followed by only 4% registered as companies, 4% as foundations and 1% as activities closely connected to local government programs.

The geolocation and characterization of each entry was the first step in the creation of a baseline of initiatives that had *the potential* to be urban commons. The second step was establishing which initiatives realized such potential in practice, which we achieved by building a three-

criteria framework. As we discuss in more detail below, this potential was tested through an iterative and reflexive assessment of each initiative in response to the three criteria, complemented by the in-depth knowledge of Catalonian commons gained by team members through in-depth qualitative studies, leading to the construction of our urban commons subset. Additionally, we facilitated a second participatory workshop in October 2019 to present preliminary results and facilitate feedback from researchers, policymakers, and participants in the social and solidarity economy sectors in the MAB, validating the main findings and co-developing policy recommendations.

Defining and analyzing metropolitan urban commons

Urban commons as socio-economic alternatives: a three-criteria framework

Building on the theoretical literature, the experts workshop, and a pilot coding of initiatives by all team members, we arrived at three criteria for defining urban commons: the initiative had to generate alternatives to the state and/or the market, including a 'prosumer' element, and aim for social and/or environmental transformation. In what follows, we explain and illustrate each of our criteria.

Our framework considers as a key component of urban commons the alternative they offer to existing welfare state and market provision, or both, without considering as exclusive the too-often collaboration with different levels of the state. The first element addresses the extent to which urban commons exist as an alternative to the modes and agendas of the market but also of the state, particularly concerning key areas of welfare, such as education, health, and social security. In this approach, we are mindful of geographical scholarships criticizing too simplistic accounts of the often-complex interconnection between commoning initiatives and the state in a market economy system (Cumbers, 2015). As observed by Cruz et al. (2017) in the Catalonian

context, self-organization is often seen as challenging institutional power and as "living proof of the deficient state" (Moulaert et al., 2010, p. 222) and markets, yet empirical studies often show that the relationship between grassroots initiatives and public administration can go through phases of cooperation (Bianchi et al., 2022). In the urban context, this relationship has been recently examined by looking at local government initiatives incorporating citizens' self-management in a new age of municipalist provision (Thompson, 2020). As discussed in more detail later in the paper, we also considered the third option of 'alternative to the state and the market' to identify activities that meet needs not traditionally contemplated by state or market provision.

The second component of the framework has to do with the question of commons as 'decommodified ways of responding to social needs' (De Angelis, 2003; Sato et al., 2024) and the position of different economic actors in this decommodification. While both production and consumption do not exist in a vacuum and "always interpenetrate" (Ritzer et al. 2012), in market economies, the two tend to be thought of as separate. In state provision, as in third-sector organizations, there is often a clear distinction between users and providers. Here, we propose to incorporate, in the discussion of commons, the distinction between 'prosumer' and non-prosumer activities to differentiate between service provision (to others) and self-organized, transformative practices of production and consumption. A careful use of the concept of prosumer is key to a reconceptualization of the binary between production and use, as typical to post-industrial societies (Ritzer et al., 2012). This idea can be traced back to both community and indigenous-based natural resource management experiences, where local groups are both responsible for the maintenance and use of shared resources (Ostrom, 1990), and to the emergence of the social and solidarity economies and the expansion, since the 1980s of 'prosumerist' circuits and lifestyles mostly in urban contexts (Martinez, 2020, p. 45). The

neologism describes the figure of a producer-consumer "located in an independent social niche where work serves the immediate needs of those inhabiting it" (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 176) through a principle of localized economic exchange across diverse sectors, from construction to education and care, and through both remunerated and voluntary work.[8] The 'prosumer' idea thus sketches out a clear element of commons economies as community-led and community-oriented. The creation of independent social niches and an aspiration to a circular economy, however, do not per se carry the transformative dimension of the commons as an alternative socio-economic rationale.[9]

In response to the point above, finally, we included a third criterion: the articulation of a transformative dimension beyond notions of closed, self-serving, and bounded production and consumption for a given community. Often discussed as the prefigurative dimension of commons (Tornaghi & Dehaene, 2020), the stress on self-organization towards social and environmental transformation becomes fundamental to the definition. At the same time, the literature points to a homology between 'internal' change for social and environmental justice and wider socio-environmental transformation beyond the concrete community or small-scale economic circuit (Pickerill, 2021). In our approach to the 'transformative purpose' of the initiatives, we considered both inward-facing and outward-facing aims at socio-environmental justice. Inward-facing identifies the incorporation of socially and environmentally transformative practices in the productive process and/or the management dynamics of the initiative itself; outward-facing identifies stated aims to generate socio-environmental changes of a systemic nature based on alternative development models. Distinctions between a social and an environmental focus were operationalized based on the SSE evaluation mechanisms developed in the PAMAPAM mapping. Social transformation covered a range of actions, from the implementation of fair working conditions and/or a feminist perspective within the

initiatives to the promotion of redistributive policies. Environmental transformation ranged from incorporating ecological criteria in the management of the initiatives to environmental conservation policy advocacy to promote environmental conservation.

Building the MAB's urban commons dataset

To characterize the citizens' initiatives of our database and understand whether they could be included in the 'urban commons' category, we evaluated the data collected against the three key criteria discussed above, expanding on our knowledge of each practice. This process was iterative and reflexive and tested overlaps and divergences of the multidisciplinary background of the team, which included political scientists, sociologists, geographers, and environmental scientists. We started by coding a first batch of cases to refine how to operationalize the three components: (1) aspiring to respond to social needs by offering an alternative to existing state and/or market provision; (2) involving collective practices in which people who collaborate in production benefit from it (prosumer); (3) aiming to be transformative, both internally and externally, in social and/or environmental ways. For each initiative, we carefully considered each organization's mission statement and aims, as publicly expressed online and offline.

At the end of this process, we identified 364 initiatives that fulfilled all three criteria and were still active in 2020: these constituted our metropolitan urban commons subset. As expected, their spatial distribution [Figure 2] presents similar patterns to those of the wider sample [Figure 1], with a higher concentration in densely populated urban areas and particularly inner neighborhoods of the City of Barcelona, both overall and by economic sector [Figure 2].

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE].

To reach this result, over six months, we conducted regular discussions of coding disagreements to familiarize ourselves with the dataset and improve inter-coding reliability. In what follows, we outline three key insights developed through a reflexive implementation of our methodology, which are relevant to further studies of urban commons as a subset of citizen initiatives.

Characterizing alternatives to market and welfare state provision

Concerning our first criterion, we had sufficient data – from online statements of intention to open access data about users and participants - to categorize most citizens' initiatives as alternatives to either market or welfare provision, or to both. In the Catalonian (and Spanish) context, this required bringing a contextual understanding of whether the social needs to which the initiative offered a response had traditionally or historically been met by the market, by the (welfare) state, or by both. In our categorization, we noted that of the 1096 initiatives, 43% offered an alternative to market provision, 19% to welfare state provision, and 38% to both across different socio-economic sectors (see Table 1).

Describing their sectoral distribution, we noticed that consumer groups and consumer farming cooperatives within the categories of 'Agroecology, energy and environment' and 'Consulting and ethical financing' were more commonly offering alternatives to market provision. At the other end of the spectrum, initiatives pertaining to traditional public sectors, such as health or social security (which we grouped under the label 'Health and mutual support'), tended instead to be mostly positioned as alternatives to welfare provision. Examples include libertarian self-managed nurseries and networks of families of mental health patients and individuals with learning difficulties. Finally, alternatives to both the market and the welfare state were found across all sectors, but especially in 'Culture and leisure' (167 examples of self-managed civic

centers and the already mentioned ‘popular athenaeums’); in ‘Health and mutual support’, particularly in the case of self-managed food banks; and in the emerging sector of ‘Housing’, especially through neighborhood-based housing rights assemblies and housing cooperatives. In the majority of cases analyzed, commons initiatives developed as an aspiration to provide an alternative to market and welfare state provision, reproducing the common definition of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) as “a third sector interjected between market and state to operate where both of those spheres fail” (Guttman, 2019, p. 43).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Reflecting critically on these categorizations, however, raised questions and especially a degree of caution around claims to alterity from state provision. Of the 207 initiatives that intervened in sectors dominated by (welfare) state provision, in 102 – nearly half – the public administration was nonetheless present either through subsidies or in-kind support (46 were in direct relationship with both municipal and regional administrations; 27 with regional; 29 with municipal administrations), pointing to the nuanced and complex interrelations between state and commons initiatives in the region (Bianchi et al., 2022). Their spatial distribution, specifically when observed in relation to specific sectors, also raised questions about distinguishing citizen-led from policy-led activities. For instance, the high number of self-managed urban gardens that developed after 2008 through the reclaiming of empty plots of land were often clustered in dense urban areas with stalled development plans and were often related to the local government-led response of the Pla Buits (2012-2018), a City of Barcelona policy initiative for community-oriented temporary uses (Calvet-Mir and March, 2019). In the category of ‘Housing’, similarly, a high concentration of high-profile citizen platforms, support organizations, and self-managed housing cooperatives were clustered in neighborhoods and municipalities with both strong libertarian movements and sympathetic public administrations

(Fernández & Miró, 2016). In this case, as in similarly advanced capitalist contexts, ascertaining a clear distinction between citizens' initiatives, commons, and 'the public sector' requires a more in-depth analysis than possible through quantitative surveying. Nonetheless, this method can provide a first identification of initiatives to be studied in a second phase through place-specific qualitative analysis.[10]

Prosumer commons beyond the binary of production-use

Characterizing initiatives according to the prosumer criterion of our framework also raised the need for scrutiny and a nuanced qualitative assessment, which we developed through debate. For example, we categorized as 'prosumer' those formal or informal educational activities where both children and parents are involved in the design of the curriculum and the governance of the educational program. These cases are more closely aligned to definitions of self-provision and participation (Ritzer et al., 2012). We categorized as non-prosumer a catering service or carpentry workshop where a cooperative organization produces goods solely for sale to others who are not involved in any of the phases of production or decision-making around production.

Of the initiatives that presented sufficient data to ascertain the prosumer component (N=928), we found that there was an almost even spread between prosumer and non-prosumer initiatives, with a slightly higher percentage of prosumer (51%). Despite this nearly even distribution in terms of the entire sample, the spatial distribution was highly uneven. There was a degree of correspondence between the neighborhoods with the highest concentration of initiatives and those with the highest concentration of prosumer initiatives, such as La Vila de Gràcia. However, this was not always the case, as important clusters were also found in other municipalities of the MAB characterized by high socio-economic vulnerability, such as L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Badalona, and Santa Coloma de Gramenet, all of which present

historically important examples of self-organizations by residents to supplement lacking public provision.

Regarding their legal status, most prosumer initiatives were social movements, civic platforms, or other informal social groupings; the second largest grouping was formally constituted as associations, while less than a third of all initiatives were formally registered as companies, usually under the category of service cooperatives. This shows a clear cleavage between Social and Solidarity Economy sectors and more fluid and often overtly political urban commons, where forms of social and economic self-provisioning emerged alongside, or overlapped with, social mobilizations.

This insight is reproduced in the subset of urban commons, which belong to social movements, platforms, or other informal social groupings (149), followed by associations (122) and cooperatives (72), with other legal forms remaining residual. Informal types of commons organizations were in both low- and high-income municipalities and neighborhoods, contrasting the results of studies that associate the emergence of citizen-led initiatives to welfare state deficits in low-income areas or "new lifestyle movements" in higher-income areas (Blanco & León, 2017). A large proportion (200, approx. 20%) of initiatives were established after 2009, confirming scholars who have interpreted the growth of social movements and other informal groups as self-organized responses to social needs in the context of economic downturn and widespread socio-economic decline (Cruz et al., 2017; Pera, 2020; Varvarousis et al., 2021).

However, it is worth noting that nearly 30% of initiatives and organizations were established long before the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, and most of them during the democratic transition of the late 1970s. This consideration would not have been possible without the survey

approach implemented in this study. Such an insight demonstrates the benefits of a larger dataset and a longer-term historical overview of the conditions and place-based social relations at the roots of seemingly novel emergence, which may otherwise reproduce the 'presentism' of much urban common scholarship, especially concerning 'new municipalist politics'.

Aspiring to socio-environmental transformation

Finally, the third criterion concerned the aspiration to socio-environmental transformation. This was a relatively uncontroversial criterion to apply since most initiatives tended to state their transformative aims publicly. The main issues concerned the distinction between social and environmental aims, as well as between internal and external transformations. Looking at the complete sample, we found a clear indication of an aspiration to internal social and environmental change (78%) as opposed to 15% mentioning only social transformation and 7% only, or mainly, environmental transformation. Concerning the aspiration to engender external transformations, we were able to collect information for nearly all initiatives in our database (94%, or N=1093). Of these, over half (52%) had social transformation as their stated objective, while 37% had aims that could be defined as socio-environmental, and only 5% were aiming solely at environmental transformation. As a result of these comparisons, we concluded that while there is a high sensitivity to environmental concerns within internal practices, the projects see themselves as acting mostly for the social good in terms of the wider benefits of the initiatives, followed by socio-environmental considerations. The difference between the two scopes of transformation – internal and external – could either be due to the limited data for internal social and environmental transformation or to a slower development of specific aims around the environmental impact of the practices; further qualitative research would be needed to reach more substantive conclusions. By aggregating aspirations to both internal and external socio and/or environmental transformation and by analyzing them by economic sector, we

found that the near totality of initiatives belonged to the sectors of 'Housing' and 'Agroecology, energy and environment'. As we explain below, this was unsurprising since housing, agroecology, and the environment have been key political issues in urban mobilizations and self-organization in Catalonia over the last decade.

These two areas of activity also stood out in the urban commons data subset and maps. The high proportion of initiatives in 'Agroecology, energy, and environment' can be interpreted as a result of agroecological developments, food justice cooperative groups, and urban gardens, which are in most cases championed by anti/post-capitalist and social justice urban movements in their alternative imaginaries of social-ecological transformation (Eidelman & Safransky, 2021; Pickerill, 2021). Within these imaginaries, initiatives work strategically towards a common-based urban vision, promoting the right to the city and the right to decision-making around consumption (Calvet-Mir & March, 2019; Eizenberg, 2012), both within densely built urban neighborhoods and in semi-urban areas. Similarly, the high proportion of commons initiatives under the 'Housing' umbrella can be explained by two drivers in response to the economic crisis and the mortgage repossession crisis that severely affected Spain, and especially Catalonia. The first driver is the presence of neighborhood-based groups offering advice and support around housing issues (IGOP and IERMB, 2016). The second driver is the exponential growth of cooperative housing projects and groups in Catalonia, particularly since 2011, in part thanks to significant municipal policies (Martí-Costa & Ferreri, 2021; Parés et al., 2021). The third largest proportion of commons concerned cultural and leisure activities, the bulk of which related to self-managed civic centers and the already mentioned popular athenaeums (Pera, 2020), the backbone of social and political life in Catalonia (Andreu Acebal, 2014). As with previous criteria, these long-term, place-specific histories of institutional and semi-institutional alternatives proved significant to understanding the blurring of the line

between social mobilizations, alternative economic provision, and citizens-oriented policymaking.

Conclusions: mapping the metropolitan geographies of urban commons

Despite the recent proliferation of academic and practice-based studies of urban commons, their social and spatial articulation beyond economic 'sectors' and neighborhood and city boundaries has remained largely unexplored. We understand the political potential of urban commons as capable of engendering wider transformative spatial articulations of alternative social, economic, and political relations. To move beyond localized experiences and administrative boundaries, novel analytical and methodological tools are required. With this paper, we present a reflection on what it takes to engage with large databases and metropolitan processes. By adopting an expanded and multiscale understanding of the urban, we have developed a rigorous analytical framework that integrates Marxist, institutional, and environmental justice traditions of commons scholarship and applied it to a large dataset of geolocated citizens' initiatives across social and solidarity economy practices, social innovation, and peer-to-peer production. The case of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona has enabled us to examine how alternative economic, social, and environmental rationalities (self-organized and institutional) emerge and produce territories of commoning that aspire to challenge and produce shifts towards more socio-environmental transformative modes of production and consumption, while also reflecting wider economic trends and mechanisms of state and autonomous institutional support. Beyond the new substantive knowledge gained through mapping and characterizing urban commons in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, there are three main conclusions to be drawn.

Firstly, the fact that a considerable number of citizens' initiatives fit our framework of alternatives to market and/or state, prosumer, and aspiration to social and/or environmental transformation indicated an opportunity for theoretical dialogue between the Marxist, institutional, and environmental justice traditions of commons scholarship. This is not trivial. Despite recent integrative efforts (Cámara-Menoyo et al., 2021; Clement, 2010), institutional and critical theories of the commons have tended to evolve separately (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021). By engaging with this framework, further urban geographical scholarship could gain nuanced and potentially innovative insights, particularly about the intersection of urban commons with environmental justice concerns and institutional policies.

Secondly, we have shown how complementing neighborhood and city-level case studies with the use of larger datasets generated both quantitatively and qualitatively rich interpretations. The effort to map, define, and evaluate metropolitan commons has offered insights into the path-dependent emergence and development of socio-spatial alternatives, reflecting interdependent traditions of urban mobilizations, self-organization, and progressive policies within and across neighborhood and municipal boundaries. This has generated interpretations that partly challenge 'cityist' narratives of the relationship between municipalism and commons. For example, while the highest number of urban commons initiatives was geolocated within the City of Barcelona, a metropolitan focus showed shared timelines with initiatives in the wider urban region, in alignment with periods such as the democratic transition or post-2008 organizing against fiscal austerity. Further research shall take on the combination of case study and quantitative methods to develop a more in-depth understanding of the territorial and longitudinal evolution of commons.

Thirdly, our metropolitan approach identified spatial patterns in the distribution of initiatives, pointing towards the possibility that socio-economic alternatives depend on the entangled relationship between the fluid and uneven self-organized, localized responses to 'social needs', second-tier citizens' networks and organizations, and path-dependent economic specialization, such as in the concentration of agricultural and ecological commons in Barcelona's green belt. Understanding the relational geographies of these processes is crucial to situating the development of urban commons within broader processes but also to understanding the role that metropolitan networks and institutions can offer in supporting them (Tomàs Fornés, 2019). This is particularly useful for expanding scholarship beyond local policymaking to include city-regions and metropolitan governments as significant actors capable of articulating an integrated vision for commons-oriented policy and planning. Further research shall better understand if and how collaboration with public institutions consolidates urban commons as a potential 'the third way' of urban service provision (i.e., beyond the state and markets).

Despite the richness of our metropolitan mapping, the analysis of geolocated data can run the risk of producing fixed representations of dynamic and fluid processes. As already noted regarding the legal status, the method is limited to those initiatives that are known, with many informal ones remaining invisible; moreover, on its own, it risks reducing 'territory' to administrative boundaries rather than as constituted by bundles of relationalities, historical path dependencies, and densities of power relations (Elden, 2010). Mapping the metropolitan geographies of urban commons can certainly benefit from the macro-analyses enabled by large datasets, but always in complementary dialogue with qualitatively nuanced understandings of social, economic, and political dynamics. In this paper, by crossing administrative frontiers and the boundaries between commons and citizens' initiatives, we have contributed to international debates on which theories and methodologies are needed for addressing complex processes of

territorial emergence and for extending a conceptualization of urban commons capable of grasping interconnected social and spatial relations and rationales.

Statements

Disclosure of interest statement: no interests to declare.

Data availability statement: The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on the webpage of the project 'Coproducció procomú: Territorialització de les polítiques econòmiques i coproducció amb la ciutadania', Autonomous University of Barcelona, available at https://igop.uab.cat/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020-14-04_Final-report_Commons-coproduction-web.pdf (DOI not available).

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[1] Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona, https://www.amb.cat (accessed 12 September 2021).

[2] The Catalonian Network of Social and Solidarity Economy (XES) is a powerful player in the SSE, with distinguishing features with the European sector, see Kalogeraki et al., 2018.

[3] XES 2002 Foundational Manifesto, available: https://xes.cat/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Manifest-fundacional-XES-1.pdf

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[6] While each address was individually checked, a caveat must be raised as in some cases, it may correspond to an officially registered address rather than necessarily the primary location of the economic or social activity.

[7] For approximately 4% of initiatives the data was inconclusive.

[8] Forged in the 1980s, the notion arises from a critique of the concepts and practices of production and consumption.

[9] In recent years, the term has been appropriated by the for-profit sector and has most frequently been associated with innovation through consumer experience and customization, especially in digital economies.

[10] See the final report of the project in English, Spanish, and Catalan (2020): https://blogs.uab.cat/coproduccioprocomu/resultats/

List of figure captions

Figure 1. Map of total citizens' initiatives in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona. The administrative boundary of the City of Barcelona is marked by a dashed line.

Alt Text: Map of the Barcelona Metropolitan Area showing the location of citizen-led initiatives.

Figure 2. Map of total urban commons initiatives in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, categorized by economic sector. The administrative boundary of the City of Barcelona is marked by a dashed line.

Alt Text: Map of the Barcelona Metropolitan Area showing the location of commons initiatives, with symbols categorizing the economic sector. The boundary of the City of Barcelona is marked by a dashed line.

Table 1. Distribution of initiatives according to the category of what they were alternative to and their economic sector (N=1096).

Alt Text: Table showing the distribution of initiatives according to the category of what they were alternative to and their economic sector.