research article

The democratising capacity of new municipalism: beyond direct democracy in public–common partnerships

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New municipalism, in its endeavour to democratise urban politics and policy, employs innovative strategies including public–common partnerships, which seek to support citizens in self-managing public goods and services. Proponents of new municipalism claim that these partnerships have a democratising capacity, as self-management is seen as an expression of direct democracy. In this article we examine this democratising capacity. By adopting an abductive methodology, the article analyses a case of a public–common partnership, the Citizen Assets programme promoted by Barcelona en Comú in Barcelona, Spain. The research findings show that the Citizen Assets programme does have a democratising capacity. However, democratisation is not achieved exclusively through self-management, which itself needs to be democratised, but by integrating different modalities of democratisation into the policy process, namely co-production and democratic control. Theorising this integration as a 'non-appropriable' form of policy making, the article makes an original contribution to research on democratisation in the context of a specific new municipalism-inspired policy programme.

Introduction: New municipalism, public–common partnerships and democratisation

In recent years, a form of urban–rooted leftist political practice called 'new municipalism' has surfaced in many European cities (Blanco and Gomà, 2020). It uses the local scale as an entry point (Russell, 2019) to transform politics and policy in cities and beyond, drawing on ideals of feminism, eco-socialism and egalitarianism that are grounded in Marxism and neo–Marxism (Thompson, 2021). New municipalist practices are

1

developed either by movements willing to engage with local public institutions, or by movement parties that manage to obtain power in local governments, for example, Barcelona en Comú (Barcelona), Grenoble en Commun (Grenoble), or Zagreb je naš (Zagreb). Its proponents argue that new municipalism has a democratising potential in that it re-articulates the relationship between social justice-oriented civil society organisations and local public institutions, forging alliances to progressively transform the city (Joy and Vogel, 2022). To ensure that these alliances endure and overcome election cycles, they should form public–common partnerships (Russell et al, 2022), that is, collaborative arrangements to manage and deliver public goods and services. Developing these arrangements has become central to new municipalist practices: they represent a strategic tool for democratisation, translating the civil society–local institutions relationships on which new municipalism is based into new institutional configurations (Bianchi, 2023).

Increasingly, public–common partnerships are not created ad hoc, but arise as part of a broader and widespread democratising approach to urban policy making pioneered by new municipalism practices (Bua and Bussu, 2021). Among these partnerships, one form that has prevailed is that of policies that enable groups of citizens to self-manage public goods and services. Some of these policies, especially those concerning the management of vacant urban spaces and buildings, are inspired by the notion of the common[1] (Quarta and Vercellone, 2021), such as the Regulation for the Care and Regeneration of Urban Commons adopted by Bologna City Council in 2014. Other policies facilitate housing cooperatives (Ferreri and Vidal, 2022), energy communities (Becker et al, 2017) and childcare cooperatives (Kussy et al, 2022). Despite the diverse policy sectors and varying designs and implementation mechanisms that reflect the administrative power and agenda of each city, these policies show the development of a new trend in new municipalism policy making, where modalities of citizen self-management of public goods and services are promoted through specific policy programmes. In this article, this trend is conceived as a 'common-based approach to urban policy-making'.

Policies supporting groups of citizens that self-manage public goods and services are not new and have a long tradition in urban policy practices. They have been promoted in the administrative changes developed since the 1990s. New Public Management reforms, inspired by a neoliberal ideology based on managerialism, have facilitated the self-management of public goods and services with the aim of improving public service efficiency by leveraging citizens' responsibility and knowledge (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). However, this has been achieved by shifting the burden of management onto collectives and reducing the state's administrative activity and resources (Bussu and Tullia Galanti, 2018). The Governance paradigm, inspired by the third way ideology based on networking and inclusivity, has promoted the self-management of public goods and services to increase the plurality of the state, as in the case of the mutualisation of public services developed in the UK under the Big Society iniative. However, this happened in the shadow of the state's hierarchy (Jessop, 2015) and in a context of fiscal austerity and erosion of workers' rights (Birchall, 2011). Therefore, in these cases, promoting self-management cannot be regarded as a comprehensive form of democratisation. It might not provide equal access to self-management for all citizen groups, favouring only those who are better equipped. Furthermore, it can result in inequalities in service provision across various social classes and geographical locations.

Common-based urban policies developed in new municipalism contexts also promote the self-management of public goods and services. However, these rest

on different values and objectives. New municipalism is rooted in a 'dual power' approach (Roth et al, 2023). This approach does not aim to reduce the scope and financial resources of the state but to reaffirm its responsibilities, as in the bureaucratic public administration approach, while empowering communities by granting them decision-making power, resources and rights. In this context, self-management can be seen as having democratisation capacities because it aims to give groups of citizens full and equal capacity to manage a good or service themselves, bypassing the mediating role of the state bureaucracy. However, this capacity has barely been investigated empirically.

Drawing on the suggestion of democracy theorists, such as Landemore (2020), that the democratising capacity of self-management cannot be taken for granted, in this article we explore the extent to which common-based urban policies, developed within the context of new municipalism, possess this capacity for democratisation. We understand democratisation in the sense of Landemore (2020), that is, as a process by which decision-making power over a policy, from agenda-setting to evaluation, is opened up to all those who are interested in that policy.

The article adopts an abductive methodology to qualitatively analyse a typical and influential case of a common-based urban policy, the *Patrimoni Ciutadà* [Citizen Assets] programme, which was initiated in 2017 by the new municipalist government of Barcelona en Comú (BeC) in Barcelona, Spain. The article contends that the Citizen Assets programme has a democratising capacity. However, democratisation is not achieved exclusively by implementing self-management. It is achieved by integrating different modalities of democratisation – self-management, co-production and democratic control – which are the expression of different democratic paradigms: direct, deliberative and representative democracy – into the whole policy process, thus leading to this process becoming 'non-appropriable' (Dardot and Laval, 2015). This means, we argue, that all stakeholders can consider themselves owners of the policy process, but without appropriating it, that is, without exercising absolute dominion over it.

The article adopts both a descriptive and normative approach to analysing common-based urban policies under new municipalism. On the one hand, the analysis intends to capture whether and how these policies have a democratising capacity. On the other hand, it provides recommendations on how they can maximise democratisation. Through this analysis, which bridges democracy theory with public policy and administration studies, the article aims to contribute to the academic debate on the democratising capacity of new municipalist governments (Bianchi, 2023; Bua and Bussu, 2021) and on progressive local politics more broadly (Joy and Vogel, 2021). More specifically, it addresses the debate at the intersection of urban studies and political science on how transformational urban policy pursued by such governments, of which common-based urban policy can be an expression, is capable of altering, in Conroy's (2016) democratic terms, the politics and policy making processes (Joy and Vogel, 2022).

The article is divided into five sections. The first section sketches out the academic debate on the relationship between common-based urban policies and democratisation. After the methodology is presented in the second section, the third section analyses the democratising capacity of the Citizen Assets programme in Barcelona. Finally, the article discusses the results of these analyses, theorising what non-appropriability means in common-based urban policy, and concludes by summarising the key findings and challenges for urban political scholarship.

Direct democracy in public–common partnerships: common-based urban policy

In the academic literature on new municipalism, public–common partnerships, and specifically common-based urban policies, are often seen as having a democratising capacity (Blanco and Gomà, 2016; Russell et al, 2022; Bianchi, 2023). Blanco and Gomà (2016), who have extensively analysed examples of the adoption of these policies in municipalities in Catalonia, argue that they allow for the integration of principles of direct democracy into public institutions. Through their adoption, communities gain empowerment and exercise direct collective action to make the right to the city[2] tangible for everyone. This is similar to an argument put forward by Bianchi (2023). Analysing the implementation of common-based urban policies in Barcelona and Naples, she argues that this approach can promote a radical democratisation by applying the principle of self-government, that is, by supporting people who self-produce and self-distribute local public services. The discourse set out by Russell et al (2022) follows the same lines. Using the example of the energy infrastructure in Wolfhagen, Germany, jointly owned by a cooperative and by the city council, they argue that this kind of model can promote radical democratisation by transferring power away from state institutions and allowing cooperative members to directly participate in decisions about their common resources.

In summary, these scholars see a democratising capacity in common-based urban policies because they tend to associate self-management with the exercise of direct democracy. This is consistent with the Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretation of self-management. From this viewpoint, the appropriation of the means of production by workers' collectives is envisaged as a repudiation of authoritarianism and state-imposed hierarchy, thus promoting a form of direct democracy characterised by egalitarian relations among workers and collective decision making (Selucky, 1974). The examples cited in Marxist and neo-Marxist literature are extensive and varied, and include the self-management models adopted in Spain during the Civil War, where workers' associations assumed control over companies, including public utilities and services (Fink, 2014), the legalisation of public companies self-managing in Yugoslavia under Tito in the 1950s (Seibel and Damachi, 1982), and more contemporary illustrations of self-managed cultural centres, providing public services independently of state machinery (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006).

In other words, new municipalism follows a long tradition of political thought that claims self-management of public goods and services as a democratising management modality because it puts direct democracy into practice. However, democracy theory suggests that we should be more cautious in claiming that certain practices, such as self-management, are a perfect form of direct democracy. Landemore (2020) argues that what is frequently purported to be an exercise in direct democracy, such as the legislative institutions of classical Athens or movements like Occupy Wall Street and Mexico's Zapatistas, often involves modes of non-electoral representation. This is also the case of the self-management of public goods and services, where citizen organisations make decisions that mediate the will of a wider community. Thus, since even 'direct democracy' modalities such as self-management often involve some form of non-electoral representation, the question, according to Landemore, is how to make this representation more democratic. One answer is to keep the decision-making process open to stakeholders who have an interest in the matter concerned.

Methodology

The research study adopts a qualitative-interpretative approach, applying abductive reasoning to analyse a single case study: the Citizen Assets programme in Barcelona. This case can be considered as both a typical example of a common-based urban policy (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) and an influential one. The programme is typical as it was adopted under the leadership of BComú (2015–23), which represented one of the most exemplary cases of a new muncipalist government, led by a party formed by a coalition of existing left-wing parties as well social movement activists (Blanco et al, 2019). The programme reflects the new municipalist dual power strategy (Roth et al, 2023) and it is inspired by the notion of the common, aiming to deepen democracy through non-profit community organisations self-managing public facilities and spaces (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022c). The typical dimension of the case allows us to draw relatively generalisable conclusions on the democratising capacity about common-based urban policies, especially with regard to the self-management of public goods and services. However, this case unfolds within the complex context of politics and policy in Barcelona. Compared to other European cities, this context is one of intense social mobilisation and community organisation activism, while participatory mechanisms and spaces at the administrative level are available (Bianchi, 2023). The Citizen Assets programme itself employs various participation mechanisms at different stages of the policy process. Because of this, the case can help uncover the dynamics of democratic deepening. Analysing these dynamics could be normatively beneficial in developing recommendations to maximise the democratisation of common-based urban policies.

The research was carried out from March 2021 to January 2023. Data collection was based on the triangulation of different sources of evidence, to provide a more complex understanding of the case and increase the validity of the findings. A document analysis was conducted, consisting mainly of Barcelona City Council press releases and policy reports. These documents were acquired via online searches and selected for their pertinence to the programme. They were used to establish i) the objectives, values, structure and functioning of the programme; and ii) the actors, phases, and participatory mechanisms in the policy process. In addition, 14 informants were interviewed in depth, ensuring the balanced representation of various roles involved in the programme's development. This included five members of non-profit community organisations, five local public officers and four policy experts. The interviews were conducted to i) obtain insights into the socio-political context of Barcelona; ii) understand the democratising capacity of self-management, focusing on the degree of openness in the decision-making process of self-managed spaces and facilities; and ii) verify and supplement the data collected in the document analysis, especially regarding the openness, function, and effectiveness of the participatory mechanisms used in the policy process. Finally, a three-hour workshop was held with three stakeholders – a local public officer, a member of a non-profit community organisation and a policy expert – selected according to their relevance to the programme's development as identified in the interviews. The workshop, based on the creation of a collective but not chronological history of the programme, aimed to complement the information gathered through document analysis and interviews.

Data analysis was carried out by abductive reasoning (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). The data analysis process followed different steps in which data sources were

5

integrated to form a coherent picture of the case. The first step was to understand the democratising capacity of the Citizen Assets programme through the different stages of the policy process: policy design, implementation and evaluation. Once it was understood whether and how democratisation was taking place in each of these stages, three categories were created and examined: self-management, co-production and democratic control. These categories were anchored in the existing literature, with a focus on public policy and management. They represent the three modalities through which democratisation occurs across the policy stages of the Citizen Assets programme, and express different democratic paradigms – direct, deliberative and representative democracy[3] (see Figure 1). The way the empirical section is presented reflects this process. First, it is divided into three sub-sections, each corresponding to one democratising modality. Second, in each sub-section, the findings on the corresponding democratising modality are cross-referenced with the public policy and management debate on that modality. Successively, by combining the findings with recent developments in common theory (Dardot and Laval, 2015), the discussion and conclusion section theorises how the interaction of these three modalities could lead to a democratising urban policy-making process that is defined as a non-appropriable.

Towards the Citizen Assets programme: civic management facilities and self-managed spaces in Barcelona

Since the Spanish democratic turn (1978), with the exception of the 2011–15 term, Barcelona has been governed by centre-left councils. These have equipped the institutional landscape with policy mechanisms for citizens to be able to participate and cooperate, to overcome limitations in resources and build political legitimacy (Blanco, 2009). Two of these policy mechanisms are relevant for our study: Gestió Cívica (Civic Management) and the transfer of public spaces.

Gestió Cívica (Civic Management) is a management modality which emerged informally from the demands of grassroots organisations in search of self-government. It allows non-profit community organisations to manage local public cultural facilities, such as community centres and youth centres. Today there are 56 Civic Management facilities in the city (Pera and Bianchi, 2022). The other policy mechanism that is relevant for our study is the transfer of public spaces, such as vacant lots or buildings,

Figure 1: Democratising modalities across the policy process of the Citizen Assets programme
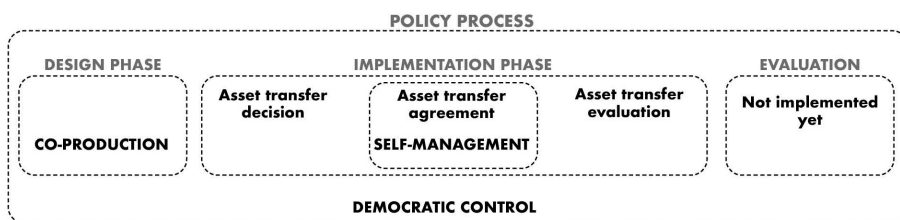
Source: Author.

to non-profit community organisations so that they can carry out projects in the public interest (Castro and Forné, 2021). Today more than 500 public spaces have been transferred to non-profit community organisations in Barcelona (Interview, public officer). Both Civic Management and the public space transfers show the existence of policy mechanisms to support citizens' self-management in Barcelona. However, these mechanisms have functioned separately and have not benefited from joint regulations and administrative procedures.
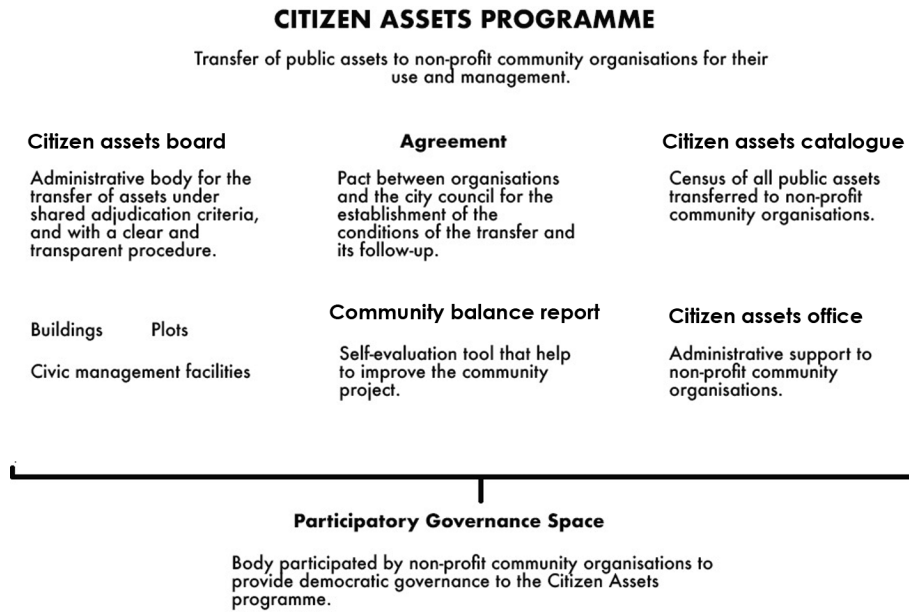
The Citizen Assets programme

When the new municipalist BComú coalition won the 2015 election in Barcelona, the discourse on the common entered the political and policy debate. One of the electoral objectives of this coalition had been to foster public–common partnerships (Barcelona En Comú, 2015). The local government thus decided to develop a new programme dedicated to this: the Citizen Assets programme. It aims to provide a theoretical and normative framework for the transfer of both public facilities and spaces to non-profit community organisations, combining Civic Management and the public space transfer policy mechanisms into one programme. This brings facilities and spaces together as so-called 'assets' and conceptualises them as urban commons, that is, 'locally-embedded institutions of collective action that produce public goods and services that are not managed by the state' (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022c). It establishes a new set of administrative rules, procedures and bodies to support the transfer of these assets to non-profit community organisations (see Figure 2) (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017a).

First, it established the *Taula del Patrimoni Ciutadà* (Citizen Assets Board), a municipal administrative body made up of officers from different departments, which coordinates the transfer of assets and renewal of contracts. This body centralises part of the decision-making power for transfers. Previously, this power was in the hands of the districts, where, in the opinion of most informants, patronage practices prevailed. Second, a new set of criteria for awarding or renewing transfers was established, reflecting the social orientation of non-profit community organisations: participation and internal democracy, bonds with the local area, social impact and return, and care for people and the environment. Third, the *Catàleg de Patrimoni Ciutadà* (Citizen Assets Catalogue) was created. This is a census of all public assets ceded to non-profit community organisations which it plans to make public. Fourth, the *Balanç Comunitari* (Community Balance report) was created, through which non-profit community organisations that manage assets self-assess their performance. Fifth, the *Oficina de Patrimoni Ciutadà* (Citizen Assets Office) was established. It provides two public officers to give support to non-profit community organisations on the asset management process, from preparing their applications to obtain a transfer to eventual evaluation. Finally, the programme is to be overseen by an *Espai de governança participada* (Participatory Governance Space), where citizen actors monitor the functioning of the programme.

In short, from an administrative point of view, the Citizen Assets programme centralises and codifies the transfer of public assets in the city of Barcelona. However, the programme has not only reformed administrative processes, rules and bodies with a comprehensive policy that brings together the various pre-existing programmes; it also seeks to democratise public policy as a whole.

7

Figure 2: Structure and bodies of the Citizen Assets programme

CITIZEN ASSETS PROGRAMME

Transfer of public assets to non-profit community organisations for their use and management.

Citizen assets board

Administrative body for the transfer of assets under shared adjudication criteria, and with a clear and transparent procedure.

Agreement

Pact between organisations and the city council for the establishment of the conditions of the transfer and its follow-up.

Citizen assets catalogue

Census of all public assets transferred to non-profit community organisations.

Buildings   Plots

Civic management facilities

Community balance report

Self-evaluation tool that help to improve the community project.

Citizen assets office

Administrative support to non-profit community organisations.

Participatory Governance Space

Body participated by non-profit community organisations to provide democratic governance to the Citizen Assets programme.

Source: Author, based on Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017b.

Direct democracy: self-management in the Citizen Assets programme

The promotion of self-management is perhaps the most emblematic way through which the Citizen Assets programme fosters democratisation. Self-management is seen by scholars of new municipalism as a democratising modality that puts direct democracy into practice (Blanco and Gomà, 2016; Russell et al, 2022; Bianchi, 2023). However, as suggested in the theoretical section, more evidence is needed to support just how directly democratic self-management is (Landemore, 2020). Research in public policy and administration reveals that this democratisation in resource management is not consistently achieved by collective organisations. These entities frequently exclude specific groups from the management process, particularly women (Hayes and Murtinho, 2023) and migrant collectives (Sen and Nagendra, 2022). This exclusion challenges the idealised perception of democratisation advocated by new municipalist scholars, casting doubts on its effectiveness. This also seems to be the case with the self-management of public assets in Barcelona.

In the context of the Citizen Assets programme, self-management takes place during the implementation phase, when the management of public assets is granted to non-profit community organisations, who make decisions about them without the mediation of political representatives. The transfer terms make the organisation independent to act, and responsible for decisions regarding the management of the asset and the socio-cultural activities that will take place in it, freeing the public administration from these tasks and leaving it with only an evaluation and monitoring role. The responsibility and independence of non-profit community organisations is well explained by a member of a self-managed social centre that is part of the Citizen Assets programme:

8

> We are autonomous in terms of our project because we can self-decide our cultural programme. The fact that we have public funding does not mean that the City Council can tell us to carry out activities that we do not agree with. (Member of non-profit community organisation, interview)

Thus, a substantial degree of decision-making authority is transferred to non-profit community organisations. However, these organisations are often not representative of the broad diversity that exists in Barcelona civil society. The decision-making boards of these organisations are predominantly composed of men with non-migrant backgrounds who are aged over 45 (Pera, 2022). Thus, they would need to ensure and encourage the inclusion of the most marginalised and overlooked voices in the community by keeping the decision-making process open to lay citizens.

Some non-profit community organisations keep the decision-making process open by holding regular open meetings that everyone in the neighbourhood can attend and have a say in how the asset is managed. However, these assemblies are the exception to the rule, as they are organised by a limited number of non-profit community organisations that have the capacity, resources, and willingness to do so (Pera, 2022). Moreover, while some organisations do not open up spaces for participatory management, others even act in an exclusionary manner. As the following quote shows, this view is widely shared by all the public officials interviewed:

> We find that some of them (facilities and spaces), I can't say whether a third or a quarter, have very negative dynamics and use the facilities as if they were their own homes … They do that, and they don't do it in a participatory or communitarian way or anything, they only use it to keep themselves busy and to run workshops, but without any kind of democratic quality to it. (Barcelona City Council officer, interview)

This problem is also confirmed by the respondents from the non-profit community organisations, as the following quote illustrates:

> There are some organisations that I think do not have community management. They hire people, give them a job, and these four or five professionals design and develop a cultural project, and that's it, with no participation. (Member of non-profit community organisation, interview)

These quotes help us understand that, although there are organisations that seek to democratise self-management, keeping the decision-making process open to lay citizens, this is not the case for all of them. Some of these organisations, in fact, enclose the decision-making process rather than opening it up. These results confirm the limited democratising capacity of self-management (Sen and Nagendra, 2022; Hayes and Murtinho, 2023), but they do not prove that self-management has no democratising function at all. It is still one of the most compelling democratising modalities, since it is a way for the administration to grant citizen groups significant decision-making power. However, the results do confirm that in order to perform this function, self-management must itself be proactively democratised by the organisation that mediates the decision-making process, although this can be a challenging task.

Deliberative democracy: co-production in the Citizen Assets programme

Enabling co-production in policy design is the second way through which the Citizen Assets programme enhances democratisation. Co-production puts deliberative democracy into practice, since it fosters policies that stem from the deliberation of free and equal individuals (Cohen, 2007). Initially, in the public policy and administration literature, the intention was not to deploy co-production in policy design, but only in the output side of the policy process: implementation. Moreover, it focused exclusively on the participation of lay citizens in the process (Ostrom and Ostrom, 1977). However, an increasing number of authors have employed the concept in a more comprehensive manner, to analyse the participation of both lay citizens and community organisations (Durose et al, 2017; Gazley and Cheng, 2020) in the whole public policy cycle: from agenda-setting to evaluation (Nabatchi et al, 2017). In order to inductively reflect the terminology used by actors who have participated in the policy processes of the Citizen Assets programme, we will refer to the concept of co-production to illustrate the inclusion of both lay citizens and non-profit community organisations in the programme's policy design.

The co-production of the design of Citizen Assets programme has benefited from different participatory opportunities. First, in 2015, the Participation and Territory Department of the Barcelona City Council commissioned La Hidra and Ekona, two critical consultancy cooperatives, to develop the programme's guideline documents and sketch out a theoretical and normative framework for it (Castro et al, 2016; Torra and Prado, 2016). In order to draft these documents, a working group was set up that included the public administration, legal experts close to civil society organisations, and representatives of organisations from the *Xarxa d'Espais Comunitaris* (Community Spaces Network)[4] that self-manage public assets. They drew up the preliminary guidelines and objectives of the programme, and proposed regulatory and administrative instruments for it (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017a). This process was seen by non-profit community organisations as a time when things were very open to discussion, and much constructive dialogue took place with the public administration. This view, confirmed by all the members of community-based organisations interviewed, is best illustrated by this quote:

> What I always say about the Citizen Assets (programme) is that it was a way of making public policy, of real co-production; co-production in the sense that we participated, but we were listened to. Moreover, we were listened to from the point of view of 'I recognise that you have real-life expertise', not from the point of view of 'I'm the expert and I'm analysing you, I'm drawing conclusions by observing what you do from the outside, and from there I'll decide as a professional expert what's best for you.' I don't know if I'm being clear enough. It was a conversation between equals and from the bottom up. (Member of a non-profit community organisation, interview)

When this phase ended, the first version of the Citizen Assets programme was presented at a public event on 21 November 2017 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017b). During this event, two workshops were also held, with the participation of lay citizens, to obtain feedback on the design of the programme and to work on the design of

the Community Balance report, which still needed to be defined (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017c).

Following this phase, the same working group developed the Community Balance report, a self-assessment tool for non-profit community organisations. As mentioned by their members, the organisations themselves had been campaigning for this to be able to evaluate the quality and impact of their projects, so that when the asset transfer was up for renewal, this renewal could not be arbitrarily questioned by the public official on duty. This process was also the result of a co-production process between the public administration and representatives of organisations that self-manage assets, through which, as stated by a member of one organisation, 'different assessment indicators were discussed and debated between the public administration and community organisations', a deliberative process in which both perspectives were taken into account. A first version of the Community Balance report was then tested by some non-profit community organisations in 2021. These organisations passed on their comments to the Community Spaces Network, whose representatives drew up a second and final version together with the public administration. At the end of this process, the Community Balance report had 55 indicators, which reflected the democratic, social and environmental value that organisations claim to provide through their projects (Comunitaris, 2021).

The Community Balance report is a tool to hold non-profit community organisations accountable to the public administration in order to show that public resources are being used effectively. However, as confirmed by all of the interviewees, it is not intended to be used by the administration to pass or fail a project, but instead, to enter into dialogue with organisations that are performing poorly and help them improve one or more of the earlier-mentioned dimensions of their projects (Comunitaris, 2021). The self-assessment tool is hosted on the server of the *Xarxa d'Economia Social i Solidària* (Social and Solidarity Economy Network).[5] Housing the Community Balance report on this server is another way in which non-profit community organisations ensure that it is not perceived as an administrative instrument designed to inspect their work but as a common tool used to develop a more collaborative and constructive evaluation process.

After finalising the Community Balance report, the updated version of the Citizen Assets programme was presented publicly on 21 June 2022 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022c). Two workshops were also held, with the participation of lay citizens, to discuss the development of the programme. In addition, two open meetings with lay citizens were held between November and December 2022 to discuss the future challenges of the programme and to sketch a way forward after the May 2023 Barcelona municipal elections (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022b).

In other words, the policy design process of the Citizen Assets programme benefited from different opportunities for co-production, made up both of spaces of invited participation, in which only some members of the non-profit community organisations could participate, and self-selected open participation spaces, in which decisions made in the first spaces were tested and debated with lay citizens interested in the programme. Combining these different deliberative dimensions in the policy design ensured its democratisation. Through the co-production of the design, the members of non-profit community organisations perceived that this policy was not only the administration's, but that it also belonged to them. The following quote is a great illustration of this point:

> The big change with the Citizen Assets programme is not just the policy itself, but the process by which the policy was developed: it has been a complete break with the public administration. The result was that we suddenly felt that Citizen Assets Programme was also our own policy. (Member of a non-profit community organisation, workshop)

This perception of belonging of the programme is not only expressed by the organisations, but also by the public administration, which sees the programme in the following way: 'This means that it belongs to no-one and that it belongs to everyone because everyone has contributed to it' (Barcelona City Council officer, interview).

The use of the words 'own' and 'belong' denote a sense of ownership of the policy, which will be crucial in the discussion section for understanding the impact of democratising modalities on policy processes.

Representative democracy: democratic control in the Citizen Assets programme

Embedding democratic control in the institutional design of the Citizen Assets programme is the third and final way through which the programme is producing democratisation. Exercising democratic control is one of the key features of representative democracy, as it brings the representative governing power under the scrutiny of the sovereign public (Przeworski et al, 1999). In the public policy and administration literature, the concept of democratic control is closely related to that of accountability (Mulgan, 2000). Democratic control can be exercised in periodic elections, which hold representatives accountable to the electorate and through non-electoral control processes, which make the work of all those who perform public functions accountable to societal stakeholders (Bovens, 2007). The non-electoral control processes can be both informal ad hoc practices, such as protests, demonstrations and advocacy, or formal institutionalised mechanisms, such as citizens' observatories, supervisory commissions, stakeholder councils and so on (Schillemans, 2008). These mechanisms help to embed democratic control within policy and administrative structures. They enable social stakeholders to formally request information, critique policies, and exert pressure, potentially leading to indirect outcomes such as changes in administrative behaviour and policy (Brummel, 2021).

In the case of the Citizen Assets programme, the institutionalised mechanism is represented by the Participatory Governance Space, a body that has not yet been implemented, that should be made up of social stakeholders who oversee the entire policy development. According to its early theoretical conceptualisation, the idea behind this space is to:

> empower citizens regarding their assets by incorporating this empowerment into the governance proposal of the Citizen Assets programme, therefore proposing the creation of a body to guarantee the interests of the community with regard to these assets. (Castro et al, 2016)

In concrete terms, its function should be to ensure transparency to avoid the proliferation of bad practices in the programme. This is well explained by a member

of the critical consultancy cooperatives who participated in the implementation of the programme and who, at the time of the initial design, saw this space as:

> A space for transparency in which, for example, if any wrongdoing or anything else were observed, it could be brought to the Citizen Assets board and say, reports could be asked for, information or whatever necessary could be asked for. (Policy expert, interview)

At first glance, the Participatory Governance Space appears to be a mechanism for embedding democratic control into the administrative governance structures of the Citizen Assets programme. However, according to the argument made by Bussu et al (2022), it cannot (yet) be considered an embedded space. They argue that the concept of embeddedness does not simply imply a formal incorporation of democratic control practices into administrative governance structures, but carries a normative value; in this way, in order to be embedded, these mechanisms must develop a productive relationship with the political and policy system to which they are linked. Unfortunately, we cannot assess this embeddedness in the case of the Participatory Governance Space, since it has not yet been implemented. There are two main reasons for this delay. First, the public administration has prioritised the implementation of the new administrative procedures, tools and bodies that ensure the transfer of assets according to the new cycle established by the programme. Second, initially, the functions and composition of this mechanism were unclear for both state and civil society actors. This lack of clarity was progressively overcome thanks to the open meetings held in June and November/December 2022.

According to the report from the participatory meeting held in November 2022 (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022a), the Participatory Governance Space should: i) be legally recognised by the City Council through adopting a regulation to guarantee its legitimacy and clarify its functioning; ii) operate at two levels, one at the city level, where it functions as a sector council[6] composed of 20 rotating participants, including councillors and representatives of the non-profit community organisations that are part of the Citizen Assets programme, and also at the district level, where it should function as a participation space where lay citizens and all the non-profit community organisations operating in that district can participate; iii) have the functions of monitoring the overall development of the programme, from implementation to evaluation; iv) have the capacity to influence the competent administrations in order to encourage the development of public–common partnerships; v) resolve possible conflicts regarding the use and transfer of assets and the correct functioning of the programme; this includes organising working groups in which lay citizens can participate.

According to Bua and Bussu, although we cannot therefore yet consider the Participatory Governance Space as a mechanism that is fully embedded in the programme, since it has not yet been implemented, these guidelines illustrate the desire to create institutionalised mechanisms that embed democratic control into the wider political and policy system of the city. Embedding spaces for democratic control, involving both organisations and lay citizens, into administrative structures is not new, especially in the context of Barcelona. The city has several of these spaces, especially at city and district levels, such as the City-scale and District Sectoral Councils, and District Hearings (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022d). These spaces have a broader policy

mission, as they monitor different policies at the same time in a given geographical area. Conversely, the aim of embedding democratic control to follow up one specific policy makes the Citizen Assets programme almost unique in the city's policy context.

Towards a non-appropriable policy-making process

The analysis of the Citizen Assets programme in Barcelona shows that the promotion of self-management of public assets does not in itself lead to democratisation. We assume that self-management carried out by non-profit community organisations needs to be democratised in order to have a fully democratising capacity, and we have shown that this does not always happen in the case of this policy. Non-profit community organisations do not always keep their decision-making processes open to lay citizens; some of them do, but in other cases, these can even become forms of enclosure. This evidence shows that self-management is a modality of democratisation that is constantly in tension between openness and closure, with ambivalent democratisation effects that can be uneven between self-management practices, and that change over time. This is not to say that there are no self-management practices that are fully democratising. However, is very likely that, in the case of common-based policies such as the Citizen Assets programme that promote a large number of self-management practices, it may be difficult for all of them to effectively fulfil this democratising function. The democratisation produced by common-based policies that promote citizen self-management through non-profit community organisations is likely to be an imperfect and uneven democratisation, especially if the democratic processes of these organisations remain unexamined.

The case of the Citizen Assets programme shows us, however, that the imperfect and uneven democratisation brought about by common-based urban policies can be mitigated by combining self-management with other modalities of democratisation that are the expression of other democratic paradigms. In the case of the Citizen Assets programme, these modalities are the co-production of policy designs, which represents the expression of deliberative democracy, and the embeddedness of democratic control, which represents the expression of representative democracy. Although only co-production has been actually practised for the moment, the embedding of democratic control has only been theorised, both demonstrate a democratising capacity. The first modality shows this capacity as it keeps the decision-making process on the policy design open by involving both lay citizens and representatives of non-profit community organisations through different participatory opportunities. The second modality offers the same capacity, but applied to the whole policy process. Inspired by our empirical analysis, where respondents referred to a sense of belonging and ownership of the Citizen Assets programme, we argue that the combination of all these modalities means that the policy process of this common-based urban policy is likely to become non-appropriable.

The idea of non-appropriability is one that already appears in the literature on the common, especially in the work of Laval and Dardot (2015). They (2015) understand it as a way to distinguish what is common from what is public and private. They draw on the Roman legal concept of property, to understand the ownership relationship in a radically different fashion. According to Roman law, ownership involves the 'absolute dominion' of a person – the proprietor – over an object. This dominion is exercised both in the case of private property, where the owner exercises it over what is possessed,

and in the case of public property, where it is exercised by the state (Mattei, 2011). In both cases, ownership implies that the owner fully appropriates the thing that they possess by exercising absolute dominion over it. The concept of non-appropriability, instead, means that no-one can exercise absolute dominion over a thing, since this dominion is equally shared between all actors who have a stake in that thing (Laval and Dardot, 2015). This does not mean that the relationship of ownership does not exist, but that it is understood differently from in Roman law. It means that everyone who has a stake in a thing sees themselves as an owner, which means that they treat it with care and have a say in the rules that govern it, but without appropriating it, that is, without having the primary decision-making power over someone else who has the same stake in it, and not exercising absolute dominion over it.

This idea of non-appropriability can also be applied to processes, such as the Citizen Assets programme's policy process. In this case, non-appropriability, that cannot be a quantitatively measurable attribute, appears in the way this process is perceived by the interviewees and, especially, by the non-profit community organisations involved: by exercising co-production, they feel that this is their *own* policy; by exercising self-management, they feel that they are able to decide the cultural programme of the assets *themselves*; and, in theory, when democratic control is embedded, they will be *empowered* in relation to all decisions that concern their assets. Moreover, non-appropriability can also be brought about by adopting alternative legal practices, such as in the case of the Community Balance report, which is a self-assessment tool that is useful to both the public administration and non-profit community organisations, and that is not hosted on a server belonging to Barcelona City Council but one belonging to non-profit community organisations. It is not the intention of this article to argue that the Citizen Assets programme is a fully non-appropriable policy, but it appears to be a policy which allows the policy process to tend towards non-appropriability.

The descriptive observations resulting from analysing the Citizens Assets programme in Barcelona can help us make recommendations regarding how a common-based urban policy should be shaped by new municipalist practices in order to promote democratisation. It is argued that, since it is often not possible to guarantee that all the practices of self-management promoted by a common-based urban policy will have a democratising function in the city, it is necessary to integrate self-management with other modalities of democratisation throughout the policy process, to ensure that a common-based urban policy has a democratising capacity. As Taylor (2002) posits, conferring decision-making authority solely to citizen groups in the policy implementation phase hardly qualifies as being more democratic. Consequently, it is essential to extend democratisation to other stages of the policy process through various democratising modalities that can contribute to making this process non-appropriable. The co-production of policy design and the embedding of democratic control are excellent examples of this, although they are not the only ones.

Conclusion

New municipalism has emerged as a growing political practice in several European cities, one that defines a wide-ranging transformative project that, while starting from the local scale, aims to go far beyond it (Russell, 2019). The transformation that new municipalism envisages is hardly conceivable without a profound democratisation

of local politics and policy making (Bianchi, 2023). One of the ways to achieve this democratisation is to develop public–common partnerships, particularly ones that enable citizens to self-manage public goods and services. These partnerships are referred to in this article as common-based urban policies. They are much lauded in the new municipalist literature for their democratising capacity (Blanco and Gomà, 2016; Russell et al, 2022; Bianchi, 2023). Echoing Marxist and neo-Marxist thinking, these scholars tend to equate the self-management of public goods and services with the exercise of direct democracy. In this article, we have examined the extent to which common-based urban policies, developed within the context of new municipalism, possess a capacity for democratisation.

Drawing on the literature of democracy theory (Landemore, 2020), we suggest that a little more caution must be used when equating the self-management fostered by common-based urban policy with the exercise of direct democracy. The self-management of public goods and services is in fact mediated by citizen organisations, which need to ensure their own democratisation. By analysing a case of common-based urban policy – the Citizen Assets programme promoted by the new municipalist government of BComú in Barcelona – we show that the democratisation of self-management is hard to achieve in practice. However, the Citizen Assets programme does have a democratising capacity. This capacity derives from the incorporation of multiple modalities of democratisation – self-management, co-production and democratic control –throughout the policy process. These are the expression of different democratic paradigms – including direct democracy, but also deliberative and representative democracy. It is the combination of all these modalities that makes this policy process tend towards what we have defined as non-appropriability (Laval and Dardot, 2015).

Before closing this article, it is appropriate to acknowledge the main two limitations of this research. First, by focusing on the analysis of a single case study, the research has not examined the democratising potential of other common-based urban policies, such as the self-management of public social housing or care services, in Barcelona or in other European municipalities. Furthermore, it cannot provide a definitive and conclusive assessment of the democratising capacity of the Citizen Assets programme, as certain elements have not yet been fully implemented, suggesting that its democratising capacity may evolve over time. This is why political scientists are invited to conduct further qualitative research on the democratising capacity of common-based urban policies in different new municipalist contexts. This includes following up on the Citizen Assets programme and analysing, comparatively, how similar policies in other cities either move towards non-appropriability or rely exclusively on the imperfect and uneven democratisation brought about by citizen self-management.

Notes

[1] I make a distinction between the commons and the common. The commons are self-managing practices that build institutional alternatives to those of the state and the market, and the common is a political project to overcome both neoliberal capitalism and state socialism, including creating commons practices. I refer to the common here because it encompasses a broader political scope, which is line with new municipalist principles.

[2] The 'right to the city' concept, coined by Henri Lefebvre in 1968, emphasises that urban inhabitants should have a significant say in how cities are developed and managed, aiming for inclusive, equitable spaces that prioritise social justice and community needs over capitalist economic interests.

[3] Each democratic paradigm would require its own discussion in the light of the relevant literature in democratic theory. However, given that this is beyond the scope of this article, we will limit ourselves to identifying a main school of democratic thought for each paradigm and then focus on analysing the data in relation to the public policy and administration literature.

[4] The Community Spaces Network is a second-level organisation that brings together the community organisations managing assets in Barcelona.

[5] The Social and Solidarity Economy Network is an umbrella organisation that includes entities and cooperatives that strive for an economy that respects people and the environment, and operates according to horizontal, transparent and participatory principles.

[6] Sectoral Councils are the highest ranking consultative body of Barcelona City Council, operating in different sectors – housing, ecology and so on – They are composed of one councillor from each political group in the City Council and citizens selected directly or from organisations in the area covered by the sectoral council in question.

Research ethics statement
The research obtained ethical clearance from the European Commission on 03/02/2023.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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