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From Crisis to Crisis: Emergencies and Uncertainties in Large Metropolitan Areas and Cities of Southern Europe

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Solidarity networks for grassroots collaboration in response to the pandemic: the case of the city of Valencia (Spain)*

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic drove the emergence of grassroots solidarity initiatives designed to alleviate the impact of the subsequent health, economic and social crisis. Some of these initiatives were organised collectively in a process which can be considered as social innovation. Taking the city of Valencia (Spain) as a case study, this paper examines the grassroots solidarity initiatives which sprang up in the first wave of the pandemic, analysing their features, their relationship with previous initiatives and their roots in the territory to make an initial assessment of their potential for social transformation.

Keywords: pandemic and socioeconomic crisis; solidarity; collaborative initiatives; social innovation; social networks.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic was a disruptive force which widened disparities in precarious living, working and housing conditions that were already an issue in specific urban areas, and it deepened social vulnerability. In

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Spain, the pandemic had a significant impact on towns and cities that had already been hit hard by the 2008 financial crisis, crippling attempts at recovery and exacerbating inequalities (Méndez 2020). Although the policy response to this crisis clearly diverged from the one rolled out to tackle the 2008 debacle, especially in relation to support for jobs (Consejo de Ministros 2020), the disease's rapid spread and the impairment of public services brought about by the welfare state cuts of previous years meant that the health, economic and especially social consequences have been particularly harsh (Fundación FOESSA 2022).

On 14 March 2020, a state of emergency came into force in Spain in response to the rapid spread of the first wave of contagion, bringing with it a lockdown of the population and the closure of non-essential activities (Royal Decree Law 10/2020 of 29 March). This situation continued until 28 April 2020 when the "lockdown de-escalation process" began during which business activities were gradually reopened, though there were restrictions on capacity and differences between regions, until full de-escalation with the end of the first state of emergency on 21 June. The shutdown of business activities led to a significant drop in economic turnover resulting in a 21.6% fall in GVA in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the second quarter of the previous year (Banco de España 2021) with major knock-on effects on employment and people's living conditions.

Nonetheless, in this same period and following the pattern in other countries (Achremowicz and Kaminska-Sztark 2020; Duque *et al.* 2020; Córdoba, Peredo, and Chaves 2021; Blanco, Gomà, y Nel·lo 2022), numerous solidarity-based grassroots initiatives emerged to fill the gap left by the shortcomings of the public sector. A significant number of these initiatives operated primarily at local level and were organised collectively as part of a process that went beyond mere solidarity, and which could be described as a social innovation process. Many of these initiatives were anchored in the associations and collaborative networks which had sprung up a few years earlier in response to the social crisis triggered by the Great Recession of 2008. In addition to depicting the scale and features of this solidarity movement, it is also essential to assess the extent to which these initiatives might last over time and their potential for social transformation and for influencing public policies in such a way that they actually mitigate the vulnerability of the areas in which they operate. This paper explores these dimensions in a case study based on the city of Valencia, a second-tier Spanish metropolitan area which has been hard hit by both crises and where Covid-19 brought about a striking social response.

2. Theoretical framework

Blanco, Gomá and Nel·lo (2022) argued that the upsurge in these solidarity-based initiatives is part of a new cycle of collective action involving more diversified practices which are connected to the territory and to everyday locations. This new cycle reflects the changing economic, socio-cultural and ecological dynamics of the times and is closely tied to urban spaces in terms of its configuration, impacts and responses.

In this new scenario, collective practices are triggered not so much by ideological frameworks as by experience itself, which means that mobilisations and initiatives are linked to the territory and the community becomes a basic vector of the emerging rationales for collective action. Furthermore, besides contentious collective action founded on rationales of resistance, protest and building awareness and identity, there is also prefigurative collective action embodied in self-management and solidarity practices and associated with catering for material needs. This prefigurative collective action does not eschew altering power relations in the territory as it has a transformative potential which can help to overcome traditional systems of governance by encouraging public participation in decision-making. Consequently, some of these collective solidarity initiatives can play a twofold role of solidarity and political empowerment (Blanco and León 2017) and become catalysts for social innovation.

However, any assessment of the connection between solidarity initiatives and social innovation needs to take into consideration their roots in the social and territorial context where they are located. Social innovation is a path-dependent and space-dependent process which cannot be separated from its territorial and historical context; initiatives are "embedded" in specific socio-political and socio-economic contexts; they are built on local knowledge, shaped by particular circumstances on the ground and implemented through horizontal multi-sector networks which run across functional and action programme boundaries (Moulaert and Sekia 2003; Van Dyck and Van den Broek 2014, 133). The existence of networks of actors is a decisive factor for the emergence of innovation (Klein *et al.* 2015, 235) and their empowerment (Galego *et al.* 2021) and consolidation in a "social innovation ecosystem" which furnishes a supportive environment for empowering initiatives and spreading the new social relations driven by them (Kaletka, Markmann, and Pelka 2017).

Any assessment of their transformative potential should thus factor in the three levels of analysis defined by Moulaert and MacCallum

(2019), corresponding to three central dimensions of socially innovative initiatives: (1) the way they meet human needs, their organisational strategies and principles, their values and ethics, and the types of leadership that emerge; (2) the social relations behind the organisational dynamics, including how they are territorially embedded; and (3) their potential for socio-political transformation and collective empowerment.

The analysis of this case study provides an initial approach from this standpoint to the initiatives identified in the city of Valencia based on: (1) their origin and the factors which led to their emergence; (2) their features and, in particular, their integration in social and territorial networks; and (3) their potential transformative power.

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology blended qualitative and quantitative aspects. Firstly, the main features and collaborative relationships of the civil society solidarity initiatives which emerged in the city of Valencia during the first wave of the pandemic and the lockdown period were analysed statistically (March to June 2020). The baseline information came from the database of the INNODES research group at the Inter-University Institute for Local Development[2] and was expanded in 2020 by searching social media and websites and conducting an online and phone questionnaire from April to June 2020. The information gathered was fed into the SOLIVID collaborative database[3].

The quantitative analysis was rounded off by holding semi-structured interviews with a sample of 21.4% of the organisations in the city of Valencia which undertook some kind of solidarity initiative during

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[2] The database was built between May 2016 and June 2017 as part of the project to draw up the *Social Innovation Map of the City of Valencia* funded by Valencia City Council (Salom-Carrasco, Pitarch-Garrido, y Sales-Ten 2017).

[3] SOLIVID is a collaborative, non-profit, open data project that arose from research entities linked to the Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona, and which has been joined by 33 research groups from different European and Latin American countries. Its aim is to compile, disseminate and analyse solidarity initiatives to combat the Covid-19 crisis. Between 5 April 2020 and 21 May 2021, this website (www.solivid.org) had collated information about 2,866 initiatives in 28 countries around the world.

the first wave of the pandemic. These interviews were carried out by phone due to the health situation from April to June 2020 and addressed issues related to their previous track record, their position in cooperation networks and the timeframe of their activities. This search identified 55 entities (mainly companies, associations and social organisations) that had developed some kind of solidarity initiative during the first wave of the pandemic (*Tab. 1*). Although no specific search was made for actions carried out by the administration, some were identified in which the local administration had acted as an organisational framework for citizen collaboration. For each of these 55 initiatives, information was collected on the characteristics of the promoting entity, the actions undertaken, their geographical location (when this was fixed[4]), the territorial scope of action (neighbourhood, municipality, region or supra-regional), and the type of beneficiaries.

Table 1. – Number of initiatives identified according to the type of promoting organisation.

TYPE OF ORGANISATION	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Third Sector	21	38,2
Private company	17	30,9
Local Government	7	12,7
Neighbourhood associations	7	12,7
Self-organisation	2	3,6
Universities and training centres	1	1,8
TOTAL	55	100,0

Source: author's elaboration.

The quantitative analysis was rounded off by holding semi-structured interviews with a sample of 12 (21.8%) of these 55 organisations in the city of Valencia which undertook some kind of solidarity initiative during the first wave of the pandemic (*Tab. 2*). These interviews were carried out by phone due to the health situation from April to June 2020 and addressed issues related to their previous track record, their position in cooperation networks and the timeframe of their activities.

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[4] 12.7% of the initiatives identified had no fixed headquarters, as they were organised through online platforms or social media.

Table 2. – Number of semi-structured interviews conducted according to the type of organisation.

TYPE OF ORGANISATION	NUMBER
Private company	3
Foundation	2
Cooperative	1
NGO	4
Neighbourhood association	1
Local administration	1
TOTAL	12

Source: author's elaboration.

4. Background: the collaborative response to the 2008 crisis

Valencia was one of the Spanish cities hardest hit by the impact of the economic crisis which began in 2008 due to the immense importance the real estate sector and low-tech activities had acquired in previous years (Méndez 2013). Economic activity in the metropolitan area had been shrinking since 2006 and the social and economic fallout from the crisis was prolonged over time, with signs of a significant upturn only emerging from 2015 onwards.

Part of this adverse trend was due to the urban strategy pursued in the pre-crisis expansion period and to the political response at this time. Over the period 1990-2015, conservative local and regional governments inspired by entrepreneurial approaches to urban management (Harvey 1989) rolled out policies which sought to achieve economic regeneration and urban renewal by hosting major events and implementing high-profile architectural megaprojects (City of Arts and Sciences, Conference Centre, America's Cup sailing, Formula 1 Grand Prix, etc.). In addition to fuelling a speculative bubble, this policy also created an urban space with huge social inequalities and significantly increased the number of people at risk of social exclusion (Romero *et al.* 2018).

As in other Spanish cities (Blanco *et al.* 2016; Sánchez 2019), the rise in social vulnerability coupled with the shortcomings of public policies and the social and political discontent associated with the 15-M anti-austerity movement led to the emergence of a number of grassroots

initiatives geared towards meeting unsatisfied needs in urban planning, consumer affairs, environmental sustainability and social inclusion. The research conducted by Salom-Carrasco, Pitarch-Garrido and Sales-Ten (2017) identified 80 such initiatives in the city of Valencia, mainly in the areas of *social dynamics and inclusion* (23.8% of the total), *exchange and collaborative economy networks* (18.8%), *urban ecology and sustainable consumption* (16.3%), and *urban planning and heritage* (12.5%). These initiatives were geographically concentrated in a small number of the city's neighbourhoods and districts, thus displaying their close relationship with the socio-demographic, economic and territorial conditions of their environment, and were organised in a network of cooperative relationships which, while not overly dense, was nonetheless a critical factor in their survival and consolidation [5].

Although only 68.73% of the initiatives identified were still going three years later in 2020, this pre-existing social fabric was, as will be seen below, a significant reference framework for the emergence of grassroots initiatives in response to the pandemic.

5. Collaborative initiatives to tackle the pandemic

As in previous social and economic crises, the pandemic also led to a wave of grassroots solidarity initiatives. During the first wave of the pandemic, a total of 55 solidarity initiatives were identified in the city of Valencia which were run in the private and associative realm by a wide range of stakeholders, albeit with a predominance of third-sector organisations (38%), businesses (31%) and neighbourhood associations (13%).

The bulk of the actions aimed to cater for the basic needs of vulnerable and/or low-income families (30.9% of the total). This aid consisted of assistance with essential hygiene and food requirements together with support for processing financial aid to cover household maintenance costs. Secondly, neighbourhood action networks were set up which performed a wide range of activities during the first wave of the pandemic. Healthcare measures (producing and distributing masks and PPE) and

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[5] The network analysis carried out in 2020, three years after their identification, showed that the surviving organisations had on average a higher number of cooperative relationships and a better position of betweenness in the network than their defunct counterparts (Salom-Carrasco y Pitarch-Garrido 2021).

cultural activities and educational initiatives for children were also significant. Other schemes targeted specific groups such as the homeless, and vulnerable children and women who were victims of gender-based violence and/or at risk of social exclusion (*Fig. 1*).
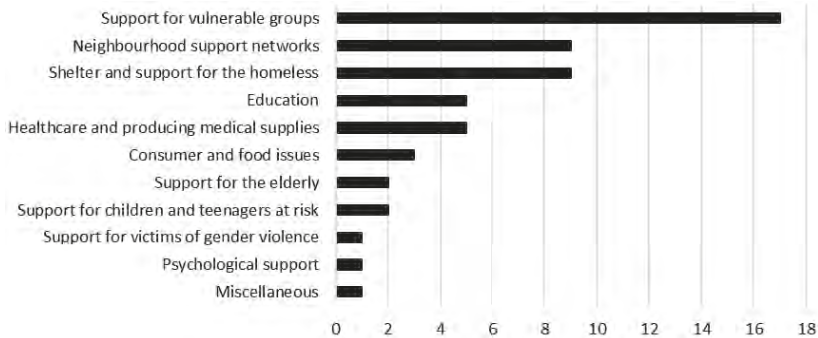

*Figure 1. – Type of private and association initiatives in the city of Valencia in the first wave of the pandemic (March-June 2020)[6]. Source: interviews elaborated by the author.*

This distribution is similar to community actions in other geographical areas (Duque Franco *et al.* 2020; Hila and Argemí-Baldich 2020; Almeida 2021) and contrasts with the measures implemented by governments which primarily addressed support for businesses and employment (42.52% of initiatives) and paid less attention to catering for the basic needs of vulnerable and/or low-income families, which only accounted for 14.96% of the initiatives (Salom-Carrasco y Pitarch-Garrido 2021).

In terms of territorial roots, the scope of the actions was mainly municipal (58%) and neighbourhood-based (28%) while regional and national schemes together accounted for a further 16%. Furthermore, the geographical location of the initiatives shows that they were clustered in a small number of the city's neighbourhoods and districts, thus attesting to their close relationship with the socio-demographic, economic and territorial conditions of the environment in which they were rolled out. Around a 40% of the initiatives with fixed headquarters were in three of the city's districts (18'9% in Ciutat Vella, 12.5% in Els Poblats Marítims and 12.5% in Campanar) (*Fig. 2*). Other areas with a significant share were the adjoining districts of Benimaclet, Saidia and

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[6] The categories "support to vulnerable groups" and "neighbourhood support networks" include initiatives aimed at different groups and issues.

Algirós (8.9% each). This geographical pattern is linked to a number of territorial variables and in particular, to the community and association structures and the social capital of these neighbourhoods which has been nurtured over time. Ciutat Vella, Benimaclet and Els Poblats Marítims are areas with a long tradition of formal or informal sociality and significant hubs of associations backed by a strong residents' movement (Torres and García 2013). These social networks have been built in response to long-standing marginalisation and the territorial and social conflicts they have experienced as they are neighbourhoods afflicted by urban development projects that have sparked controversy and opposition (Hernández y Torres 2013; Ilisei and Salom-Carrasco 2018).
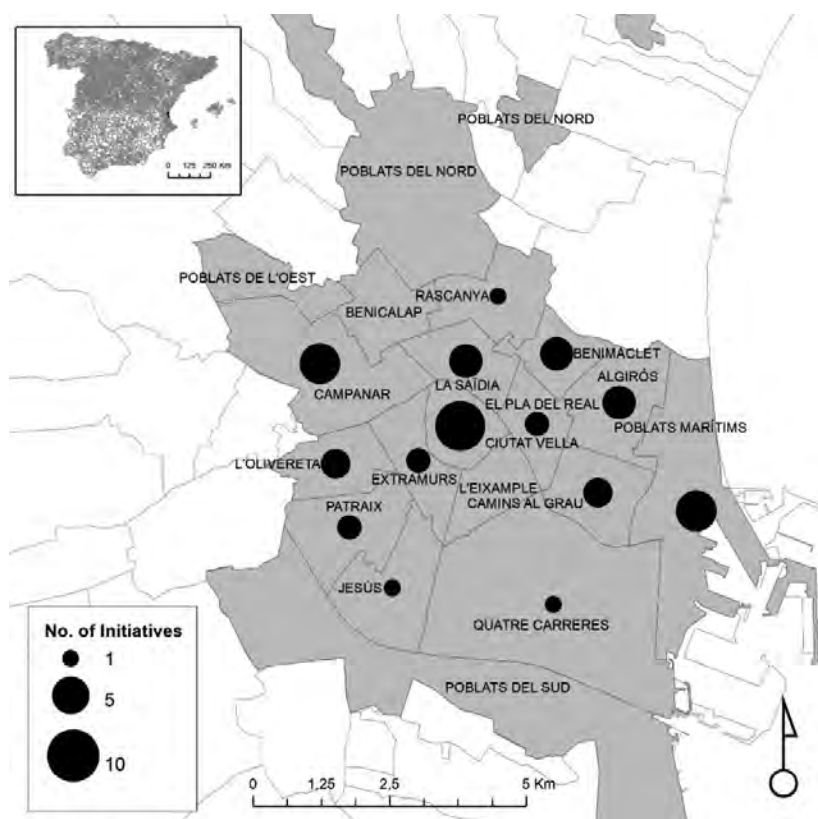
Figure 2. – No. of initiatives per district in the city of Valencia.
Source: interviews elaborated by the author.

A salient point is that the interviews revealed that a significant part of the initiatives (75%) were run by organisations which were already operating in in the field of collective needs and solidarity (foundations and NGOs, residents' associations, etc.) while the rest were mainly undertaken by entities, mainly companies, which set up solidarity actions on an ad hoc basis outside their usual sphere of operations. In the former case, the organisations' supportive response was swift, and following the lockdown announced on 14 March 2020, they adapted and redirected their usual operations to cater for the new needs, in some cases pursuing entirely new action strands. These organisations extended their activities beyond the end of lockdown in June 2020 and were still running in September of the same year. By contrast, the second group of organisations reacted somewhat later, primarily addressing the emergency health needs of the first wave (masks, medical supplies) and, in general, did not prolong their solidarity initiatives beyond lockdown.

An example of this second type is the case of the company "Tissora", a private tailoring and dressmaking workshop-school which during the period of confinement organised, in collaboration with other companies and NGOs, a network of more than 200 volunteers who made PPE with water-repellent fabric for different hospitals, health centres and residences. Once the confinement period was over, and the company resumed its usual activity, the solidarity action came to an end.

Another relevant distinguishing factor between the two types of initiative is the existence or otherwise of collaborative relationships with partners other than the promoting organisation and their position in the network of cooperative relationships. Although the network of relationships built up around the response to Covid-19 by the organisations interviewed was generally not very dense, there were differences between the two groups. Thus, while the former had a relatively dense network of cooperative relations both locally and with other territories, the latter displayed very little connectivity (*Tab. 3*). This difference stems from the existence of previous experience in the field of social and collective action which shapes the availability of resources of all kinds and has an impact on the medium-term sustainability of the initiatives undertaken.

This analysis concludes with a few points on the initiatives' capacity to influence public action and their transformative potential. Although, as noted above, there were widely divergent situations depending on the kind of initiatives, there are nevertheless some examples of actions which are associated with more complex pathways that manifest a desire for political transformation.

*Table 3. – Features of the solidarity initiatives to address
the pandemic in the city of Valencia.*

FEATURES	PRE-EXISTING NITIATIVES (75%)	INITIATIVES SET UP ON AN AD HOC BASIS (25%)
Start of activities	Straight away after lockdown (14 March)	Delayed (April)
Continuity	Yes. Active in September 2020	No. Ended with state of emergency (June 2020)
Activity	Adaptation and redirection to cater for new circumstances	New initiatives often not related to previous operations
Organisation type	Mainly from the third sector	Mainly businesses
Cooperation networks	Tightly knit (average degree = 18.2)	Loosely knit (average degree = 3.33)

Source: interviews with the organisations involved, elaborated by the author.

One example is the residents' group "Espai Veïnal Cabanyal" (Cabanyal Residents' Organisation). This association, which describes itself as a "neighbourhood trade union", has a long tradition of community advocacy in opposition to an urban development project which entailed the destruction of part of the neighbourhood (Ilisei and Salom-Carrasco 2018) and has also engaged in other schemes to oppose evictions and the gentrification of the neighbourhood, including occupations of homes and business premises [7].

The day after the lockdown decree, this group set up the "Xarxa de suport mutu del Cabanyal" (Cabanyal Mutual Support Network) inspired by similar schemes run in Barcelona and other Spanish cities. The initiative was organised through online media and was more of a collaborative framework for the decentralised self-organisation of aid at the level of each block of buildings or section of street in the neighbourhood. Alongside this network, the association also offered information and advice on employment issues day in partnership with the trade unions and a food bank which is still running today.

However, this readjustment of the association's activities was still politically motivated as a member of the association explained just before the new activities began:

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[7] http://www.twitter.com/SBarriCabanyal/status/1282978157860057091.

[...] In principle, this network has been set up in response to the coronavirus health crisis, yet it also needs to have a class dimension and a solidarity and political dimension on top of that because we all know that this health crisis will probably lead to an economic and social crisis which will most likely be pretty bad [...]. Who knows whether it can later be turned into a support network ready to tackle this economic crisis and ensure that the economic and social recession is not borne by the proletariat? [...] It could have huge ramifications if it is used properly. Residents will rediscover the meaning of mutual support, solidarity, self-organisation, values that are ever more essential in a neoliberal society. [8]

6. Conclusions

This paper has examined the grassroots solidarity initiatives which emerged in the city of Valencia in response to the first wave of the pandemic from the standpoint of their transformative potential, based on: (1) their origin and the factors which led to their emergence; (2) their features and in particular their integration in social and territorial networks, and (3) their potential transformative power. The main conclusion is that although the situations vary, a significant proportion of the initiatives have the following propitious traits on this score:

· The territorial concentration of the actions in specific neighbourhoods with a strong association network and social capital consolidated over time, coupled with the preference for the municipality (40% of the initiatives) and the neighbourhood (20%) as the priority area for action, point to significant local roots, a key prerequisite to be considered as a socially innovative activity.

· Three quarters of the initiatives identified emerged from established community organisations and associations which redirected their focus to respond to the new circumstances. In these cases, the density of relationships and the position in the cooperation networks of the organisations which underpinned these initiatives seem to have played a major role in their ability to adapt and meet the new challenges posed by the health emergency and the subsequent social crisis and are, additionally, a factor conducive to their sustainability and

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[8] Interview with Guillem, member of Espai Veïnal Cabanyal, taken on 17/03/2020: www.enredant-radioklara.blogspot.com/2020/03/xarxa-de-suport-mutu-del-cabanyal.html, translated from the Valencian language by the author.

capacity for transformation. Most solidarity initiatives, therefore, did not spontaneously spring out of nowhere but rather emerged from a grassroots network which only becomes visible in crisis situations yet is an essential tool for tackling social challenges.

- Finally, and although more detailed qualitative studies are needed to assess their relative importance and potential to influence public measures, there are examples of organisations which have linked the solidarity initiatives undertaken to broader strategies of community empowerment, building networks and citizenship and, thus, have a twofold prefigurative and contentious dimension and the ability to play the twin role of solidarity and political empowerment, which is a hallmark of social innovation processes.

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