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Interpreting patterns of interaction between civic activism and government agency in civic crowdfunding campaigns

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Abstract

The emergence of civic crowdfunding as an alternative model of financing local projects, has generated much enthusiasm regarding their potential to enable communities to actively participate in the transformation of their urban environments, as well as their ability to plug local government funding gaps resulting from years of austerity. Addressing the under-researched interplay between civic activism and government agencies, this paper focuses on the conditions for broad local support for civic crowdfunding projects and the interaction between proponents of such projects, their associated stakeholders, and more traditional and structured urban planning frameworks. Building on ongoing work by Pacchi (Pacchi, 2019) studying the relationships between community and state within instances of local activism in European cities, the paper applies four recurring types of relationships between community and state: (a) state regulation and community implementation; (b) cooperation; (c) community autonomy; (d) community opposition. These types are used to unpack the different phases of civic crowdfunding projects (from an initial idea to the final implementation) and to show how relationships with the state evolve throughout the lifecycle of a project. Drawing upon qualitative research carried out in London and Milano from 2015 and 2017, we examine one case study in London, the Peckham Coal Line, a proposed urban elevated park along a disused coal line. Chosen for its long-term ambitions, its substantial local support and financial backing through mayoral match-funding, the case of Peckham is used to examine in detail the dynamic nature of the patterns of interaction between the digitally enabled activism of civic crowdfunding and local government agencies. Our study of the development of the Peckham Coal Line project gives important insights on the shifting nature of the relationship between civic actors and the state (local government, specifically) showing that: 1) whilst the 'autonomous' development of local projects is an important aspect of civic crowdfunding projects, this does not mean the state disappears, but local groups need to redraft new forms of interface with Local Authorities; 2) the online and offline activities are only one step in the redefinition of contemporary forms of citizenship and the claim that of civic crowdfunding can deliver extended citizen participation should be more closely scrutinised.

The paper concludes with a discussion on the complex and fluid configurations of autonomy, cooperation and regulation within civic crowdfunding campaigning, and the challenges that both grassroots initiators of civic crowdfunding projects and state actors face around trade-offs within each of those configurations.

Keywords: civic activism, state, civic crowdfunding, Peckham, empowerment

1 Introduction

In this paper we explore the changing social dynamics associated with emerging digitally enabled forms of civic activism, urban participation and governance in London. More specifically, we focus on a particular civic crowdfunding campaign - the Peckham Coal Line (PCL hereafter), in South London - in order to explore this emerging form of participatory placemaking and its potential to enable communities to actively participate in transforming their urban environments and to plug local government funding gaps resulting from years of austerity.

Drawing upon ongoing research on civic crowdfunding and grassroots movements in the UK and Italy (Seetzen, 2016; Gullino et al., 2018; Pacchi, 2017; Pacchi, 2019; Seetzen and Gullino forthcoming)¹, this paper explores civic crowdfunding in London as an emerging form of local activism. The growing number of civic crowdfunding projects is partly due to changed socio-economic conditions (austerity) and a revamped focus on local agendas (localism), but also, in the case of London, at least in part, to the availability of match funding by Greater London Authority (GLA). By concentrating on a project in Peckham to crowdfund a feasibility study for an urban elevated park, the paper will explore the community dynamics around crowdfunding as a form of civic activism, and explore how the interface between forms of civic activism and local government action is negotiated throughout the life of a project. A deeper understanding of this evolving interface is in fact a necessary step to both situate individual cases within a wider picture, and to avoid oversimplification in the interpretation of the shifting roles of state and non-state actors in shaping contemporary cities.

Whilst the emergence of such crowdfunding projects has generated some enthusiasm, their tangible contribution the community/local/urban level has not yet been sufficiently explored. To critically understand participation within civic crowdfunding processes, the following interconnected questions need to be explored: what are the circumstances under which civic crowdfunding projects are able to create local enthusiasm and support? What is their transformative potential, in the context of communities' interaction with more traditional and structured urban planning frameworks? How are these interactions structured and negotiated? In exploring such questions, we choose to focus on the PCL project for a number of reasons: first for its high ambition for long term impact, through a vision to develop an urban park along a disused coal line in Peckham; second because PCL has generated a significant amount of enthusiasm and support, showing the potential of local activism in transforming local environment. Moreover PCL it was one of the first projects supported by the GLA under the High Street Fund (now Crowdfund London). As such, it almost took on the role of a pilot project in which the Local Authority could explore relationships and procedures around civic crowdfunding. Finally, we chose to focus on the PCL project because the social context of Peckham is both of a rapidly gentrifying area and yet maintains strong traditions of community activism.

¹ This paper draws upon qualitative research carried out in London and Milano from 2015 to 2017 to investigate the growing phenomenon of civic crowdfunding projects in contributing to the making of future cities. The project involved fieldwork activities conducted in London and Milano consisting of semi-structured interviews with policy makers (from both the Greater London Authority and the Municipality of Milano), local grassroots organisations (4 in London and 16 in Milano), and two workshops in Amsterdam and London with civic crowdfunding platforms (based in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Italy) and local authorities (from London and Milano) (see for example Gullino et al, 2018; Pacchi and Pais, 4 2017; Pacchi 2017 and 2019). Over the years, some actors (namely the GLA and civic activists from the case study explored in this paper) have been interviewed in three different occasions. While we are aware of a number of scholars investigated civic crowdfunding from economic and financial perspectives (see for example Langley and Leyson, 2017; Light and Briggs, 2017; Langley, 2016), our research aims at investigating alternative forms of participation, urban development, and governance, generated through collaborative actions between a range of local community groups, with the support of local government.

Our analysis looks at the extraordinary way in which the PCL project was able to develop strong community networks, the nature of the relationship between local activism and state, and how this changed over the lifetime of the project. Building on research on the relationships between community and state within instances of local activism in European cities, we use four recurring types of relationships identified (Pacchi, 2019) as a lens to understand and describe the PCL project. These types are: (a) state regulation and community implementation; (b) cooperation; (c) community autonomy; (d) community opposition. Drawing upon our broader research on civic crowdfunding and on specific work on the case of PCL, this paper uses these typologies in order to decipher the different phases of civic crowdfunding campaigns and to show the evolving relationship with the state throughout the lifecycle of a project. This analysis highlights the complex and fluid configurations of autonomy, cooperation and regulation within civic crowdfunding campaigns as well as the tensions around balancing support for campaigning groups and public accountability.

The paper begins with a discussion of emerging patterns of community and state interrelationships (regulation, cooperation, autonomy, opposition) and moves onto exploring the political and social contexts within which civic activism in the UK and, in particular, in London, by introducing the case of PCL within a wider context of civic crowdfunding projects supported by the GLA. The final sections of the paper reflect on changes taking place both within the PCL community network and in the way PCL relates to the state. The paper concludes by highlighting that, as the project develops, significant changes in the relationship between grassroots initiators and state actors occur; such changes may require different organisational forms and the mobilisation of different resources, thus making the project potentially more fragile in the face of actual implementation challenges.

2 Emerging patterns in the relationship between grassroots and Local Authorities: the place of civic crowdfunding

The diffusion of grassroots initiatives aimed at urban transformation, and among those using civic crowdfunding as financial mechanism, raises a number of research questions concerning the role of such initiatives in the shift from government to governance at the local level (Denters Rose 2005). The relationships that civic crowdfunding campaign groups entertain with Local Authorities and with institutional actors in general is an under explored area and warrants further research, even if these relationships are complex and sometimes difficult to interpret and pin down (Davies 2014; ECN 2018).

We propose an initial framework for the development of a taxonomy of how civic crowdfunding projects and grassroots initiatives in general, relate (or not) to public policies and institutional actors, and through which specific patterns. Factors we are considering are whether *such relationship exists at all*, whether they show *cooperative* (Moulaert et al. 2007) or *contentious* (Melucci 1996; Tilly and Tarrow 2007) orientation the *intensity of civic society agency* and engagement (from an implementation role to a designer or co-designer role), and whether such relationships are *mono- or bi-directional*. Finally, there is a relevant *time element* to be factored in.

We propose an embryonic definition of *emerging patterns of interface* between forms of community activism and government agency by identifying four *recurring typologies*. Such typologies are not a description of empirical phenomena and they are not mutually exclusive: on the contrary, they are analytical categories aimed at identifying possible ideal-typical configurations, and any grassroots local initiative may fall within more than one over time.

The first typology, *state regulation and community implementation*, sees the state and community organisations in their traditional *regulatory* and *implementation* roles. This is the typical case of plans, both spatial and of other nature, in which the state sets the basic rules, while other actors (private, corporate, civic, etc.) contribute to the implementation of these plans through their uncoordinated activities and choices. In other cases, the state sets the framework rules and, on this basis, it tries to actively engage societal actors in the implementation phase, as in the case of public calls for the contracting out of (local) public services or for the rehabilitation and management of abandoned or underused public buildings.

The second typology identifies cases in which there is structured *cooperation*, via different explicit coordination mechanisms, between community initiatives and local authorities. The coordination in some cases is *simultaneous*, in the sense that state and civic actors jointly design programs or projects. This happens for example in different forms of public-private partnerships as well as in some civic crowdfunding initiatives, which are jointly designed and implemented from the beginning. This strategy usually has a strengthening effect on the programmes themselves.

On the other hand, coordination may happen in two steps, in the sense that community actors play a creation or design role, while local authorities play an organisational role, which supports initiatives already initiated and developed by grassroots. This may generate effects in terms of scaling up and replicability. An example of this model is the case in which Local Authorities provide match funding for civic crowdfunding initiatives, in particular when a Local Authority takes up a curator role (Davies 2014; ECN 2018).

The third typology frames community initiatives as *completely autonomous*, without any contact with local authorities, without seeking and sometimes explicitly refusing forms of cooperation with the state. Many forms of local food chains, self-production, small circuits of urban agriculture (Seyfang and Smith 2007) are instances of this typology, together with local networking initiatives such as the Social Streets, as well as community enterprises and traditional forms of self-organisations such as time banks, Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) and some civic crowdfunding campaigns.

Finally, community organisations and local authority can be in open *opposition*. This is the case when local authorities decide to operate in a certain direction and community activists react, taking a clear contrary, oppositional stance, and thus producing effects in terms of impasse and stalemate, but also explorations of radically alternative possibilities (Vitale, 2007; Silver, Scott, Kazepov 2010). Very common examples of this typology are the cases of local conflicts, both opposing urban regeneration programmes or enacted against cuts and restructuring in local welfare systems. Even if this pattern is less typical and, on the surface, relatively absent from civic crowdfunding initiatives, it is important to recognise that conflict can act as a first trigger for the launch of grassroots civic crowdfunding campaigns, as it acts as a powerful motivator to gather support (Gualini 2015).

From this overview of possible patterns of reciprocal engagement, it clearly emerges that the *structuring elements of the interface* between forms of community activism and local government action are a crucial node to investigate as well as the *position of the actors* along the development of each initiative (e.g. grassroots organisations and local authorities in the first instance, but also other intervening actors such as corporate ones, technical agencies, foundations and NGOs).

This paper focuses on civic crowdfunding as an example of local activism that tends to be proactive and not oppositional, and has fluid configurations of autonomy, cooperation and regulation.

3 Political and social context

The political and social context in which civic crowdfunding has found space to grow in the UK, and particularly in London, is the localism agenda promoted by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government (2010), which raised expectations that citizens should be more involved in their communities, and for citizens to be actively operating as part of a community of networks within their own living environments. At a time when the UK was still amidst a global financial crisis, the Tory-Lib Dem Coalition government (2010-15) elaborated and launched what was called the 'Big Society' agenda. Its rhetoric was effectively to mask deep public spending cuts (Kisby, 2010). However, as publicly presented, its political agenda was designed to: *[...] give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want. We want society – the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form the fabric of so much of our everyday lives – to be bigger and stronger than ever before. Only when people and communities are given more power and take more responsibility we achieve fairness and opportunity for all* (Gov, 2010).

As other commentators have observed, the increasing narrative emphasis on localism or community empowerment and increasing interest in decentralisation is only one of the latest steps in a longer-term move away from the idea of local councils as local service providers (Leigh 2015). This trend can be traced back to the 1980's notion of the 'enabling council' that was firmly contextualised by the Conservative governments embrace of New public Management, followed by New Labour's vision of the 'Third Way' and its 1998 White Paper *Modern Local Government*, which underlined the vision of local authorities as community leaders. The 2007 Lyon's enquiry into local government stressed the notion of local government as 'place-shaping', which essentially meant creatively 'shaping' and 'influencing' local well-being in partnership with other bodies rather than the delivery of services (Leigh, 2015; Skelcher 2000; Fyfe, 2012; Lyons, 2007).

Such developments have been critically discussed in different ways by contemporary critics, and analysis often shows up the tension between local empowerment and disempowerment (Fyfe, 2012). In 1994 Rhodes described what he saw as the 'hollowed-out-state' that was emerging, despite the rhetoric of localism and community empowerment, as a result of increasing privatisation, limitations placed on forms of public intervention and the loss of function to alternative service delivery systems (Rhodes, 1994). According to Skelcher (2000) this was replaced with the 'congested state' in the late 1990's, when the creation of collaborative institutions became a core strategy in UK public policy, giving rise to a rich web of linkages between public, private, voluntary and community sector actors.

Whilst austerity has affected the funding available to third sector organisations such as charities and other voluntary organisations, this web has only got denser with emergence of more entrepreneurial interventions and actors. At the core of the current agenda are three key elements: the redistribution of power from the state to citizens, a call for civic activism and the promotion of a volunteering culture (Office for Civil Society, 2010). The first two were supported by the Localism Act of 2011, which was designed to give councils, professionals and citizens more decision-making powers to transform their communities and neighbourhoods (Gallent and Robinson, 2012). The third key element included promoting voluntary work in organisations and charitable giving, all in order to decrease citizens' and

communities' reliance on the state (Verhoeven and Tokens, 2013)². The promotion of 'active citizenship'³ therefore meant encouraging citizens to act in domains that were formerly the realm of the state (van der Pennen and Schreuders, 2016).

In an age dominated by austerity, in Europe, state support has been withdrawn with an increasing expectation that citizens and local communities will be less dependent on state intervention and will proactively engage in finding solutions to challenges they might encounter (for example, social care, social services, community initiatives). Citizens are increasingly expected to step in to provide services where public funding is no longer available and get actively involved in community projects (van der Pennen and Schreuders, 2016). The question is, however, how can the state manage to persuade citizens to volunteer and take on more responsibility?

In an interesting comparative study on the English⁴ and Dutch political approaches to create active citizenship, Verhoeven and Tokens (2013) investigated how these two countries' governments have so far encouraged volunteers and civil society organisations to take on tasks which were formerly provided by the state. While 'responsibility talks' seem to characterise Dutch political discourses, 'empowerment talks' have been dominating the English ones.

The way empowerment⁵ has been articulated within the English political agenda can be synthesized as: (1) rhetoric of the 'big government' to blame for what went wrong (2) strong focus on power transferred to citizens: '*We will promote decentralization and democratic engagement, and we will end the era of top-down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals*' (Cabinet Office, 2010a); (3) great emphasis on language and emotions: the tone is enthusiastic and passionate, almost seductive with its appeal to the positive feelings associated with being an active citizen and with the opportunities associated with these changes; (4) citizens are seen not much as individuals rather as part of communities and as such more active locally.

As pointed out above, this emerging 'local dimension' is antecedent to the Tory-Lib Dem Coalition agenda. Particularly, through area-based approaches and initiatives to neighbourhood regeneration, the focus on the local was already part of the Labour agenda (1997-2010). However, as Bailey and Pill (2015: 294) point out, the models of intervention at the neighbourhood level were different: they were *state-led policy* initiatives under Labour after 1997, as a continuation on how they were devised by the Tories in the early 1990, and they were *state enabled* under the Coalition government from 2010. Underpinning this second type, bottom up *state enabled* projects is an assumption that citizens and communities operate on a volunteering basis, with few resources but with the possibility of transforming spaces, at least to a certain degree. However, the level of empowerment, according to Bailey and Pill (2015), tends to be quite low and dependent on at least four key elements which will be explored throughout the paper: the political, social and economic context in which projects operate; the interface with the state (which is the main focus of this paper); availability of resources (not only financial, but also human); the type of organisation and the ability to be a representative and credible voice (p.301).

² However it might seem though, this decentralisation of power through localism and devolution has been recognised as a way the government aimed to reconnect with communities initiatives and with citizenry, and reclaim its authority and further centralizing its own power (Gallent and Ciaffi, 2016: 11).

³ For the purpose of this paper, active citizenship is defined as the capacity of communities to engage with their own environment (Ton van der Pennen et al, 2016).

⁴ The focus is on England, instead of on the entire UK, because of differences in devolution.

⁵ In this paper, this is intended as a transfer of power over decision making or the allocation of resources from the centre to the periphery (Bailey and Pill, 2010: 289).

As well as introducing a more entrepreneurial aspect to local governance, in the sense that it requires individuals and small groups to show initiative, take risks, as well as giving time and creativity in the creation of projects, the increasing shift towards state enabled projects has also seen the network of actors involved in local governance grow and become ever more complex. It is also for this reason that understanding the ins and outs of local governance - governing with and through a network of organisations, actors and markets - rather than government has become increasingly important (Rhodes, 2007; Peters and Pierre 1997; Pierre and Peters 2000). The emergence of civic crowdfunding adds yet another dimension to the increasingly complex and growing network of local governance, both in terms of technology and in terms of social actors. Focusing perhaps more specifically on the latter than the former, although as we later acknowledge technology and actors are of course intertwined, this paper hopes to contribute to deciphering this ever growing network and understand how some of its constituent parts, e.g. individuals, communities, localities and online platforms interrelate. More specifically, given this context of radical political and societal changes, we pose a number of questions: who are these active citizens? How do they come together with the motivation of taking responsibility of their own local environment? What brings them together and triggers their actions? And how do they operate within the network and in relation to state/public bodies? In particular, in the context of the typologies discussed in the previous section, to what extent does active citizenship require independence from, regulation by or cooperation with the state, and how does this change over the course of projects.

Before addressing these fundamental questions, another issue requires attention: the frame within which citizens operate. Civic activism and local intervention entail the existence of a community dimension (Rydin, 2016). However, the questions of what constitutes 'a community' is a difficult one to answer, given the ambiguity of the term. Despite having been at the centre of sociological studies for at least the past century and eluding a satisfactory definition, the concept of community still holds something extremely appealing and desirable, particularly in urban studies. As Bauman claimed (2001), the rising interest in community has been linked to a growing feeling of unpredictability, precarity and unsafety at a global level. 'Community' offers a reassuring and almost nostalgic dimension and as such has long been a key level of policy intervention (Gullino et al., 2007; Edwards and Imrie, 2015). The more we feel unsafe, the more there is the impelling desire to invest in rebuilding our physical living environment (Bauman, 2001). However, as widely argued (see for example, Bauman, 2001; Young, 1990; Harvey, 1997), community also tends to represent social homogeneity (rather than diversity and inclusivity), and almost an adversity to those who do not conform to localised ideals.

As Rydin (2016) argues, there is a growing need for more flexible and realistic ways of thinking about communities (and therefore active citizens within them) which reflect radical societal changes: people are more mobile than in the past, have affinities and interests that might overlap and go well beyond the place of residency or work. Connections among people have also changed dramatically over the last century: they do not occur necessarily on a face to face basis within small geographical areas (Edward and Imrie, 2015), but they can be generated and sustained at a global level thanks to accessible technology. Therefore, communities should not be thought as stable, unified and place-based bounded entities, rather, they should be thought and seen in terms of (sometimes temporary) networks of people connected by identities, common interests and activities, rather than places. If seen as a system of overlapping networks, communities are then defined by connections among people (Rydin, 2016).

One of the questions this paper touches on is what holds together these community relations/networks and, most of all, enables collective actions. Interestingly, as we shall see below, this seems to be the temporary shared interests in particular projects, rather than just more static forms of social capital: 'shared knowledge, understanding, norms, rules and

expectations' (Ostrom, 2000: 176). And if what enables collective action is temporary, project-specific and relational, how can it be harnessed and maintained over time?

4 Civic Crowdfunding and Crowdfund London: the Coal Line Project in Peckham

Having discussed the political and social context in which the new forms of activism discussed emerged, we now turn to addressing the rising significance of civic crowdfunding.

A subtype of crowdfunding, civic crowdfunding is an alternative model of financing local projects in the civic sphere, often through the contribution of small amounts of money from a large number of people (the crowd) and with the support of a digital platform. In particular we look at Spacehive as an important emerging digital platform for civic crowdfunding in the UK. More specifically to our case study, we examine the history and significance of the Mayor of London's programme in developing and supporting civic crowdfunding as a form of local activism in London and introduce the case of PCL, as a particular example of local activism, which, operating in a specific social, cultural and economic context, utilised civic crowdfunding with match funding from the Mayor of London's High Street Fund (now Crowdfund London) to develop a shared vision and commission a feasibility study to develop it as a new urban park.

4.1 Civic crowdfunding and Spacehive

Crowdfunding is a model of financing projects through contributions generally from large groups of individuals and organizations, the crowd (Bellflamme et al, 2013; NESTA, 2013). It can be used to support a wide range of projects like artwork, film production or product development. Recently, crowdfunding financing mechanisms have also increasingly found application in socio-spatial projects in the built environment. However, as Davies (2015) points out whilst crowdfunding is beginning to attract the attention of scholars, many approaches have tended to focus on the dynamics of the fundraising projects and have not always distinguished between projects that provide a community service and a consumer product. The former fall more broadly into the domain of '*civic* crowdfunding'. Again, although there is some growing attention towards the notion of *civic* crowdfunding, as a concept it still needs fleshing out (Davies, 2015). As a subset of crowdfunding, it has been broadly defined as 'projects where citizens contribute to funding community-based projects ranging from physical structures to amenities' (Stiver et al. 2015b: 1; 2015a) and 'crowdfunded projects that provide services to communities' and often involves 'participation in collective activities' and aims to produce services, spaces or goods that can be accessed equally by members of the community. (Davies 2015: 343; Davies 2014).

In other words, then, a subset of crowdfunding, *civic* crowdfunding specifically aims to fund *public* assets. It, also, often creates a public social network of communities and actors (Gullino et al. 2018). By either becoming funders of projects or promoters of new initiatives, citizens proactively engage with their local environment promoting projects that range from improving or designing new green spaces to creating art hubs, reusing derelict buildings and underused spaces, or creating shared community food growing spaces. In the context of urban development, in the past few years, crowdfunding has also found space in the property domain as a form of investment opportunity in real estate, as a form of equity or lending via online platforms. However, these practices, as argued by Sedlitzky and Franz (2019), cannot be considered as civic crowdfunding as they lack of community oriented

services. Of course, raising funds from citizens to support civic projects in the urban realm in itself is not new. What is new, however, is the use of digital platforms in order to fundraise, and the reach of these platforms enabling local activists to generate new local networks and communities. By channelling efforts on specific outputs, civic crowdfunding projects have the ability to encourage community building and bottom-up placemaking, and the potential to create new, alternative, forms of public participation and governance through citizen-led actions (Gullino et al, 2018).

Over the past ten years, crowdfunding has gained popularity through global reward-based platforms like Indiegogo (2008) and Kickstarter (2009) and, later, with the emergence of dedicated civic crowdfunding platforms like for example the UK Spacehive, the Dutch Voor je Buurt, the Italian PlanBee, and the US Patroncity (Gullino et al, 2018). Internet diffusion and increased confidence in processing online payments, together with state cuts to public services and the opportunity for people to promote their own ideas have certainly contributed to diffusion of civic crowdfunding practices. Digital platforms enable and facilitate people's intervention to act in domains that were formerly the realm of the state. As Stiver et al. (2015a; 2015b) point out, civic crowdfunding addresses the present-day reality that there is less availability of government funding on the one hand and a shift in citizens' needs and expectations for civic participation with impact on the other.

Technically speaking, the process is simple. Fundraisers set up their project with a financial target on a digital platform and invite the crowd to support it by pledging money. In order to support the fundraising process and reach an established target, fundraisers operate both *on* and *offline*. By making use of social media like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter and often a dedicated website, they increase their power reach and therefore the chances of succeeding. However, as it will clearly emerge from the case study in this paper, offline events (for example, local community events, festivals, design workshops and meetings) are also of key importance for socially oriented projects, as they consolidate relationships developed online. Besides, managing both on and offline activities is also important to balance power and limit marginalization through digital divide. Crowdfunders offer financial support to projects that they feel an affiliation with or that offer desirable returns. Supporters can receive different forms of benefits that are unique to that project, which is often dictated by the type of platform used. Thus, supporters can pledge money as a form of lending with financial returns (in exchange for equity, as a loan or as a pre-order of the product produced) or they can choose to donate to a particular cause, with no expectation of receiving a return (Light and Briggs, 2017). What motivates civic crowdfunders varies, but, significantly, often seem to be related to more intangible benefits like outputs, actions and communication (OECD, 2017), while other times support is attracted by the promise of innovation.

With the increasing popularity of crowdfunding, there are now a growing number of platforms each with its own characteristics and funding models. Only a few of these platforms, however, are specifically dedicated to civic crowdfunding. Spacehive is the main UK platform that supports projects aimed at improving local civic and community spaces. It was set up in 2012 by Chris Gourlay, a former Sunday Times journalist with an interest in architecture and planning.

Since 2012, Spacehive has supported over 500 projects to achieve their targets worth over £10 million⁶ and over £5 million in extra funding with a project high success rate of 52%. A quick review of current and past projects listed on this digital platform reveals a great variety of projects. Over time, they have changed in terms of dimension, financial target, pledge size, and promoters (from charities to local community and grassroots groups with a large and capillary support basis, to a few local business investing locally). Essentially, projects register online (registration is free, but then there is a 5% fee to be paid) but, before

⁶ Data updated as of October 2018 from www.spacehive.com.

campaigning to promote them and fundraising can begin, their viability is verified by Locality, the national membership network for community organisations whose aim is to support local organisations. It is also worth noticing that platforms like Spacehive operates on an 'all or nothing' basis: local groups can collect pledged sums only if the funding target is reached. Through Spacehive, projects have also the possibility to be matched with funds on the basis of relevant projects categories (e.g. sports & play, parks & gardens, arts & culture, buildings, food & farming, streets & infrastructures). Spacehive, which operates across the UK, works with local governments across the country. Councils can create their own 'hives' and co-finance local projects already supported by the 'crowd'. Currently, funds available to potentially support local projects mainly come from local authorities like London and some of its boroughs, and like Manchester and Leicester.

The emergence of civic crowdfunding platforms, such as Spacehive, has obvious benefits. As Hollow (2013) points out, for civil society activists and others concerned with local welfare issues, crowdfunding has opened up a new source of funding at a time that governments and businesses around the world are cutting back on their spending. Moreover, in addition to altering the way in which charities and non-governmental organizations can finance their activities crowdfunding platforms can offer new and uniquely decentralised information-sharing capabilities. As such they have the potential to encourage a democratic openness and participatory ethos that can sustain civic society. As our research shows the offline/online communities or networks that develop around civic crowdfunding projects can be complex, passionate and lively and are often characterised by an intermingling of the offline and online (Gullino et al. 2018; see also Stiver et al. 2015a & 2015b). Crowdfunding projects often depend on mobilising existing offline communities who become active both offline (workshops, meetings, local newspapers) and online (social media, online discussion forums). Moreover, in this context civic crowdfunding projects both draw on and grow community networks both online and offline. These are then more or less successfully maintained after the 'fundraising'.

Whilst the civic and financial opportunities associated with crowdfunding are thus indeed tangible, they also have to be taken with a pinch of salt. As Davies (2015) argues, the emergence of civic crowdfunding demands a fresh set of questions. In particular he sets three provocations, questioning to what extent civic crowdfunding is truly participatory, can address social inequality and augment or weaken the role of public institutions. This succinctly summarizes wider concerns about the civic benefit of civic crowdfunding (see also Gullino et al. 2018). Pointing to the tensions at the heart of civic crowdfunding, which are not dissimilar to the tensions that inform the localism narrative discussed above, Davies (2015) suggests that civic crowdfunding is capable of quite divergent outcomes, and its positive contribution will depend on the extent to which participants feel they have a continued stake in a project they supported, the range of stakeholders who participate or are able to participate in projects and the relationship that government departments and agencies choose to have with crowdfunding projects (ranging from curating, informally supporting or operating standalone platforms). The way the relationships and networks surrounding a crowdfunding project are indeed crucial when it comes to assessing the participatory nature, inclusivity and civic benefit of individual projects, and as our case study shows these relationships are not static but can change throughout the life of a project.

4.2 The Mayoral Programme in London

The Mayor of London have supported crowdfunding campaigns by local communities wishing to improve their neighbourhoods by offering them match funding since 2014. The Regeneration team of the Greater London Authority (GLA) started the civic crowdfunding programme as part of the formerly London Mayor's High Street Fund, which aimed to

support community proposals focussing on improving local high streets. Each proposal was encouraged and sustained with pledges up to £20,000⁷.

One of the aims of our empirical fieldwork has been tracking the changes the programme has undergone since its inception. Over the past five years, the mayoral crowdfunding initiative has changed as a result of its growth, shift from a more experimental initiative at the beginning, to a well-established programme. The current Crowdfund London funds are part of a much larger funding portfolio to improve London, which includes the Good Growth Fund, with a £70 million regeneration programme to support community development in London. Initially, the GLA provided match funding to projects on the basis that they could impact on the high street, were innovative and showed potential for achieving the final target. The focus has now changed from the high street to local communities more in general, although a focus on innovation and achievability still remain. Whilst funds have increased and community projects can now receive up to £50,000, projects cannot receive more than 75% of the total project cost. Interviews with members of the GLA regeneration team (June 2017 and January 2019) revealed that there has been an increase in formality in the funding process in order to make it more transparent. Since GLA is investing public money in supporting local initiatives, it needs to be accountable and ensure that the money is used fairly. As a result, the GLA is increasingly under pressure to make sure the projects supported are deliverable, meet wider community needs, and talk to wider audiences. The risk of this increased formality is that it might come at the expense of losing ingenuity, spontaneity and creativity.

Civic crowdfunding is a growing, but still nascent, method of supporting local campaigns, the dynamics and potential of which will need mapping over a longer period of time. The London context is particularly rich and a good candidate for future longitudinal studies since the GLA has supported over one hundred projects through Spacehive to date, while other organisations, including some London Boroughs have successfully used other platforms, like Crowdfunder.

4.3 The case of Peckham: from the context to the project

As already mentioned, over the years, Spacehive has hosted on its platform a wide range of projects in terms of scale, location and communities' involvement. Some of the civic crowdfunding projects supported through this platform have managed to generate wide local participation, new forms of urban governance and innovative processes, raising questions around the potential of such platforms in activating citizen-led micro-regeneration projects.

An example of one of such successful projects is the PCL project. The local context, and its rich heritage, is of note here as it defines the project itself as harnessed in its industrial landscape. At the beginning of the 19th century, Peckham was a rural village. Yet, with the introduction of the railway line from the 1860s, the area changed profoundly as, together with Peckham Rye station (1865), homes and shops (Rye Lane's shopping street) were built for people working in the city and artisans. The railway brought coal in the area from the north of England. The coal was then stored in a depot which closed down in the 1950s (the Coal Drop site, currently a scaffolding yard). In more recent years, Peckham started developing a reputation of neglected urban neighbourhood in South-East London, marked by poverty and portrayed through media representations of gang violence and ethnic tensions (Hall, 2015). Today Peckham is rapidly gentrifying and, bolstered by the arrival of cultural events like the Peckham Festival and the building of new art and cultural centres (The Bussey Building and Peckham Levels), is seen as an increasingly desirable area. The

⁷ Over 4 different rounds of funding since 2014, the Mayor of London has supported 101 successful campaigns and pledged £1.8m. There have also been 14,000+ crowd pledges so far and £2.2m pledged by the crowd (February 2019 data)

gentrification⁸ of Peckham has been greeted with a degree of suspicion and with fear that local residents will be pushed out by a predominantly white middle-class of urbanites. Despite the increasing and ongoing gentrification, however, Peckham still maintains traces of the long term presence of grassroots movements/initiatives and existing networks of social capital.

PCL is a community-led project, developed through bottom up processes involving different local communities. It aims to connect two neighbouring high streets in Queens Road Peckham and Peckham Rye in the southern Borough of Southwark with a one km long green park, designed to run on the disused railway's coal sidings, which despite having being damaged by the bombing during WW2, still exists (fig. 1).

[insert fig. 1 here]

This park, which will follow the northern embankment of the railway, will unfold at both street and at elevated decks level, connecting pockets of residual spaces, blocked-off roads and a natural reserve on land mainly owned by Network Rail and Southwark Council (see fig 2 and fig 3)⁹.

[insert fig 2 and 3 here]

When developed, this park will increase the connectivity of an area which was historically constrained by rail and road infrastructure and will create a missing link in a network of greenways that run from Brixton to the river Thames (Adams & Sutherlands, 2018) (fig. 4).

[insert fig 4 here]

Like other civic crowdfunding projects, the PCL developed slowly, inadvertently and organically, starting with an idea, almost haphazardly finding connections and gathering momentum only later on. The project started out as an undergraduate architecture project, which was deemed too ambitious in many ways. However, both the originator of the idea and his partner had a long connection to Peckham and it was through their own experience and the experience of others in the area, that the idea began to take on a more definitive shape:

"...but because we've lived here - I've lived here 12 years; he's lived here 8 years - we know lots of people – we started to talk to lots of others about the ideas. And a couple of other people had spotted that land. Those conversations almost gave confidence that there's something in it that can be explored. [...] While [name of the person] was looking for a job, started doing some sketches, shared those on Facebook and at community council meetings and it got traction

⁸ The process of gentrification of Peckham started in the 1970s with the progressive arrival of artists. A second wave followed from 2007/8 when young professionals and first time buyers moved into the area, attracted by more accessible house prices (which in the meantime have increased by over 50%) and by the opening of the London Overground in 2012 (Håkansson, 2018).

⁹ The fact of turning a disused infrastructure in an elevated park raised similarities with the New York Highline. Yet, these seem to be apparent. The PCL activists took some distance from comparisons media claimed and this is for a number of reasons. First, the PCL park is not just an infrastructure, rather an opportunity to create a community network. It has been crowdfunded by locals rather than necessarily property owners aiming to raise real estate values. Second, the project aims to bridge a gap in an otherwise existing greenway network in South London. PCL fits in a larger strategy of improving walking and cycling routes. Third and consequently, PCL is mainly directed to locals and commuters, rather than tourists. Finally, the park intends to retain the semi-wild, rather than a sleek and landscape appearance, atmosphere of the derelict rail line (Richardson, 2015).

and it just grew from there. [...] I got involved – when people started emailing saying ‘I love this, I want to make it happen’. I said ‘Oh I know what I can do, I can help organize this, I know what we can do’ – we have I build a website, a twitter account, we have to create a presence for this and turn it something that’s not just an idea but something more” (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2016)

The PLC proposal is in many ways a successful one: not only has it attracted wide-scale publicity and official support, but it also involved different local organisations and caught the imagination of local residents.

In 2015, this collective of local residents elaborated a formal proposal which they launched on Spacehive. After a three months funding campaign both off and online, the project attracted funds (over £75,000 funds from local supporters) from over nine hundred people, going well beyond the financial target, which aimed at just over 64k to mainly cover for a feasibility study and for the cost of promotional materials and events/workshops. Most of all it has generated lots of enthusiasm, large local participation and the development of a shared community vision for the area. Backed by £10,000 from the London Mayor through Spacehive, at an urban scale this project has the potential to generate new urban governance relationships, where Network Rail (the UK Railway line authority) and the London Borough of Southwark will team up with the Peckham Coal Line group in delivering the community vision, and to connect with other green networks, contributing to the transformation of urban spaces at a wider scale.

Funding raised through crowdfunding will clearly not cover the costs of such a complex infrastructure, however it allowed the newly registered charity Friends of Peckham Coal Line (FPCL) to appoint in January 2016 the architectural firm Adams & Sutherland commissioning a design and feasibility study to explore delivery, construction, benefits and funding aspects. The feasibility study was then published in June 2018, showing that the project is achievable, that can be delivered in eight stages as the different sites, and that it can generate not only physical, but also social and economic connections (Adams & Sutherland, 2018)¹⁰.

On the one hand, FPCL are working with Southwark Council, the GLA and Network Rail (NR) to further the project, on the other hand they are working in the community, initially gathering and communicating ideas at grassroots level, and now keeping residents informed of the projects’ progress in order to maintain support and interest.

In July 2017, the PCL vision showed its vulnerability, as it risked being jeopardised by a planning application for a mixed scheme by Bluecroft Development on a small site along the route of the Coal. The PCL team made a last minute discovery of this proposal on the ‘Old Stables Yard’¹¹ which - if developed - would jeopardise the park and the work of local communities. With only had five days before the public consultation period closed, the PCL team had to collectively act fast to protect a public route through the site. Initially, discussions between local groups and local actions seemed to influence this development

¹⁰ FPCL have all the intentions to bring this project to reality. As it emerges from the feasibility study, the approach chosen is that of designing the route and safeguarding it through outline planning, followed then by delivering individual sites when available. This in-between solution was an alternative to either ‘a whole scheme delivery’ or a ‘phased delivery’ approaches. FPCL have a vision to bring three of the eight sites to reality by 2023 (Adams & Southerland, 2018).

¹¹ The Stable Yard was the site of the Spike Surplus Scheme, a community project which started in 1999. When they arrived, the squatters cleared the site and converted it into a garden growing fruit, vegetable and flowers. The Spike, which derives its name from its past use as a doss-house offering shelter to homeless, offered cheap spaces for yoga and studio rent for musicians. The site was eventually evicted in 2009 by Southwark Council.

leading to revised plans. However, at the time of writing, following the sell of the site from Bluecroft to Picfare Homes and the submission of a new planning application, there are serious concerns that, in the words of the PCL team, ‘the quality of the originally agreed plans that we collectively worked so hard to achieve is watered down, losing the ideals of preservation, aesthetics and the importance of the site as a community asset’.

5 Reflections on the Peckham Coal Line project

After discussing patterns of relationships between state and local activist groups and the specific political and social context in which civic crowdfunding has emerged, this paper focused on the London context and, in particular, on PCL as an example of a project that has been able to galvanise the support and enthusiasm of local people over a period of five years. The paper now turns first to exploring what particular aspects of the PCL campaign triggered people’s involvement with the project and how the network around the project has grown over the years and it then focuses on two sets of changes, internal and external. The internal changes occurred within the PCL activists network, both as a result of the ‘natural’ flow of people arriving and departing from the area (community of networks) and the project, but also as a result of the changing role of the group from participatory phase of envisioning the project to designing and implementing it. We also consider the external interface of PCL, which changed throughout, mainly as a result of the GLA endorsing the project.

5.1 Growing a Community Network

Like any forms of local activism, civic crowdfunding projects are defined by specific sets of circumstances, dynamics and complex networks of social actors that organically grow and change throughout the life of the project. As Latour has argued (Latour 1993; Gullino et al. 2018), in the context of social networks power does not operate through relatively fixed top-down structures, but it is inscribed and diffused through fluctuating connections, ties and relationships. One of the notable aspects of the Peckham Coal Line project is the way it empowered local communities more and the way that it managed to develop and mobilise a strong network of local communities, activists and residents.

According to the initiators of Peckham Coal Line, what was significant in garnering interest and support, in the first instance, was that project would make a positive contribution to the place they lived in and, as such, they consciously avoided an oppositional relationship to the state. According to participants it was this insistence on being positive that inspired others and allowed the network of local activism around the project to grow:

“Because we’re trying to create something positive, people’s first association tend to be positive and joyful and ‘oh, that’s a really great thing’, which is different to some other localized projects, which are often averse to. They are often stopping something, preventing something. Just by entering the conversation differently, that provides a difference. It’s not about being angry, it’s about being hopeful. Seeing the potential. And that is very intentional, it’s a propositional project, not an oppositional project. So that changes how people enter into it, but I think it’s also quite unusual” (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2018)

From this perspective, the project succeeded in connecting different groups and individuals around a shared vision of the park. This vision had emerged slowly as open and shared: in many ways not definitive, but open to further development. Drawing on local skills and resources, local activists (which included architects), created sketches, plans and three-dimensional models of the proposed park. However, these were not intended as definitive

ideas, but only to 'add flavour' or 'to help people visualize' what the park might look like. As one of the organisers explained: *'We still need to explore what everyone wants it to be'*. Indeed, in a way the project started more as a question, rather than a plan or a statement: *'a provocation – what if there was a park here?'* (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2016).

Initially, the vision for PCL was consciously under defined. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this, it became a nodal point around which shifting networks of actors, ideas and resources clustered. It started out with a small group of local activists who publicised their ideas through social media channels, as well as by handing out leaflets (and cakes) and organising workshops. In this context then PCL started out as an autonomous project (the third category discussed in section 2), initiated by a small group of local activists who then began reaching out to other residents, organisations and platforms. After the initial idea was proposed, the project gathered momentum and the idea of the park only took on a more definitive shape in the context of meetings, workshops, local conversations: *"people discovering and talking about a piece of land and about ideas of what can be done with it"* (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2016). The vision for the park and the social network around it evolved slowly and support was very much grown bottom-up. After the project had garnered support on Spacehive (both financially and through active offers of support received via emails), the organisers invited interested parties to a series of workshops. Involvement and participation grew from there. Additionally, PCL reached out to and gained the support of existing local groups (e.g. a local nature reserve and a homeless shelter located near the Coal Line). As one of the organisers put it: *"We made a point of talking to people playing in the space already"* (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2016). Gaining the support of local residents as well as those that are already actively involved in making and shaping the surrounding gave the project local legitimacy and a sense of collective ownership.

Besides generating strong social networks by connecting with existing local groups, the project has generated emotional, physical and symbolic connections on personal levels. Significantly, the time local activists invested in the project - together with the growth of a larger social network of interested residents, volunteers and organisations - created a deep emotional attachment to the project as well as a sense of place.

"They've been stories of people who have been quite heavily involved in the project and making it happen, and I know one of them who really didn't want to leave the neighbourhood. Partly because of being part of the project and the community they had become part of. And it, they needed to for other reasons but they were really sad to move away" (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2018)

What is also notable here is the symbolic significance that developed around the vision for a park on the Peckham Coal Line. It was not only about creating more green space in a relatively built up urban area, but also about creating physical connections and enabling mobility within Peckham. Currently the disused area around the coal-line acts as a barrier for many residents, who are prevented from accessing certain areas or forced to take roundabout routes:

"This bit here is often used for fly tipping. It's a really anti-social space. There's a nature reserve – but it's tricky to go through. It's a non-space. People from the estate here can't go into the nature reserve. The coal line would be much quicker, or even to the station- but it's just not connected" (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2016)

And also:

"At the moment you have to wriggle round back-streets. [If Peckham Coal Line was made accessible] It could 10 minutes rather than 25 minutes. It would be connecting Queens Road and Peckham Rye, creating connections in the local

community. It could also be potentially part of a much bigger cycle network right across South London" (Interview Peckham Coal Line 2016)

The fact that the project itself was about creating physical connections meant that it also easily leant itself to becoming a symbol of 'connection', 'community' and 'place-making' that residents could easily relate to. Local perceptions of place and locality are in part related to our ability to easily move through it. In this context PCL offered not only a simple vision of a park (although it did that to), but opened up the possibility of creating a greater sense of locality and place in Peckham. In this context the initiators of the project described how overwhelmed they were with the interest that it garnered. Having started with '*just a few sketches whilst [name of the person] was looking for a job*', it soon gathered momentum as it grew bottom-up.

The fact that Peckham Coal Line gained so much local support so quickly was the result of a number of factors. First the organisers felt it was the simplicity of the idea - 'the idea of a linear park was easy for people to understand'. Second, the fact that the idea was not initially presented as definitive allowed others to contribute to the project, leaving room for imagination, and responded to local practices and experiences. This meant that the project and the networks around it could be 'grown' relatively organically and autonomously. Indeed the fact that the project has become a platform for people to connect and to meet is one of its major achievements to date.

"It's a platform for people to connect. Creating connections without physical connections. [...] The core team – we don't know what to call each other anymore. We're not friends, but we've done this amazing thing together. We don't really know each other – we just came together around shared vision – which is very powerful" (Interview, Peckham Coal Line, 2016)

Finally, the success of the PCL project lies in the fact that it combined both the material and symbolic, creating a powerful vision that brought people together. The benefit of a publicly accessible park in an urban area that currently impedes movement is something that supporters easily related to. In addition to this the vision of the park, a symbol of connection, is one that made the proposal even more powerful. Communicated through a variety of means, both online and offline – combining social media channels, community meetings, workshops and face-to-face outreach work (often involving cupcakes), this vision created a central magnet around which networks of people, groups and local organisations could assemble and become entrenched in.

5.2 Collaborating and working with the public organisations

Earlier in this paper, we discussed typologies of community/state relationships, in this section we discuss how such relationship has changed over the time of the PCL project, showing fluid relations changing from autonomy, to cooperation to regulation.

If the initial autonomy of the community vision for Peckham Coal Line provided the spark that shaped the project and allowed community networks to grow around it, the network was then sustained and taken to the next level because of support from organisations (the regulatory/implementation typology). Thus, despite the topographical, non-hierarchical organisation of the project, the network managed to key into powerful networks which gave the project both real resources and symbolic credibility. These included Southwark Council and local MP Harriet Harman, who expressed her support and organised a 'local stakeholder walk', which further connected the project to other organisations as well as opening doors: "*Network rail have been really open to the idea. But it makes a difference that our local MP sent them a letter stating 'I endorse this'*". Crucially, endorsement for the project also came

from the Urban Regeneration Unit at the Office for the Mayor of London, which match funded selected civic crowdfunding projects on Spacehive:

“The Mayor of London match funding the project obviously helped. Aside from putting money in, it was also an endorsement. It gives confidence. It says ‘these aren’t just crazy people’ aside from the money it’s given us legitimacy” (Interview Peckham Coal Line, 2016)

Securing the match funding from the Mayor of London, transitioned the PCL project from an autonomous to a more cooperative relationship with the state. The Mayor's Office provided real resources (£10,000) and, by doing publicly, it led to more backing by the ‘crowd’. Notably, in the context of this particular case, this collaboration was very successful. Representatives from the Mayor’s Office and organisers of Peckham Coal Line were both very aware of the likely risks that came with governmental support of a grassroots community project. In particular, there was the possibility that the involvement of a powerful governmental body might straight-jacket a community vision that was still in the process of developing. However, in this particular case this did not occur. It could be argued that the risk of ‘the state’ exerting too much influence over or even strangling a locally grown idea was mitigated by the fact that the PCL was supported by a relatively strong community network. The sensitivity and awareness of GLA officers’ of the dynamics and importance of local activism and the fact that PCL was one of the first crowdfunding projects supported by the Mayor's programme, played a positive role. In this early project of the programme the GLA was still relatively flexible in its support of the PCL project, but this flexibility, however, is likely to diminish, as the Mayor’s London Crowdfunding Programme develops. In particular, as a policy officer from the Mayor’s Urban Regeneration Unit explained, given that the money used is public, projects need to be *‘deliverable, they need to meet wider community needs, they need to fit in with our urban planning priorities’* also *‘the way support is allocated needs to be transparent’* (Interview at the GLA, July 2017). This means that, going forward, the GLA’s support for crowdfunded community projects, might be less open ended and contingent. In addition to this the funding process will need to be more formalised and the process, mainly in terms of governance is likely to become more complex. The challenge, in this more formalised context, would then be how to retain the enthusiasm and spontaneity associated with local activism, creating a framework within which local energy can be harnessed whilst making sure local governmental guidelines are not compromised.

The PCL project has successfully negotiated the tensions around the dichotomy of enthusiasm and energy vs. policy and planning legal framework. After the success of its crowdfunding campaign, the project has now moved away from its autonomous and cooperative phase to the implementation phase, with the state as regulator (first typology). The feasibility study has been completed and launched and a smaller group of activists are developing the next steps. This phase is in many ways the most challenging one. The work that is being carried out by activists is not necessarily visible, but defined by meetings with architects and other bodies to explore the practicality of the projects. In the word of one of the organisers: *‘now the funding has stopped, it’s the boring stuff’*. Whilst those who work quite closely on the project are still involved with the project at this stage, it becomes difficult to communicate such practices in a way that pulls in and engage the rest of the community: *“Because it’s such a long process, it can be quite hard to keep everybody in the loop, and I know people thought ‘oh is it still happening?’”* (Peckham Coal Line Interview 2018).

In order to keep the energy and sustain the wider community networks initially excited by the project, those involved more closely with developing the next steps have organised public-facing events, keeping volunteers and backers informed. PCL organisers stress the importance of pre-existing community platforms that can support such efforts. And in this case, as well as bringing out newsletters, activists organised events during the Peckham Festival and published updates in the Peckham Peculiar (a crowdfunded and self-defined ‘hyper-local’ newspaper). As well as sustaining the wider circle of community interest and

support, another challenge is retaining local activists and volunteers working on the project over longer period of time. According to one of Peckham Coal Line volunteer, the project has seen ‘a natural ebb and flow of volunteers’. Anecdotally volunteers on the project reported most participants stay roughly for 6 months on the project, longer is difficult to sustain as circumstances change and ‘people move away’ or ‘have families’. Indeed even those who have worked closely on the project from the beginning have found giving the project enough attention difficult. This was quite poignantly described as the ‘Peckham Coal Line guilt spiral’:

“For those involved in the core, something interesting is happening. Interesting and troubling happening. We all feel tired. It has been 4 years and on a good day we have done loads but the scale of it... it is just massive [...] it feels overwhelming. We call it the ‘Peckham Coal Line guilt spiral’. There is so much to do and there will always be more to do, but our enthusiasm is not there in the way it was” (Interview Peckham 2018).

Conclusions

By looking at the case of PCL in South London, this paper has focused on the emerging of new forms of civic activism, on the use of digital platforms, on online/offline networks and on financing systems. In recent years, civic crowdfunding campaigns have gained momentum, conditioned by both socio-economic conditions (austerity), longer-term political agendas aimed towards the decentralisation and redistribution of power and ongoing, partially problematic narratives of community empowerment. If on the one hand civic crowdfunding campaigns have galvanised enthusiasm, creativity and energy of local communities, on the other hand they have raised a number of questions about their effective transformative potential, the type of participatory processes they enact and their relationship with traditional planning frameworks. We specifically interrogated the role of civic crowdfunding in the shift from government towards networked forms of governance at a local level; and it used emerging patterns of community and state interrelationships (regulation, cooperation, autonomy, opposition) as a framework to better understand the broad range of experiences in which civic activism can operate.

Seen within its wider context, the PCL project is in many ways a result of national and urban policies that have, over several decades, promoted ‘active citizenship’. One of the reasons the project was singled out by the GLA and the media was that it is one of the few projects that showcased the positive potential of active citizenship, since PCL united so many residents behind its ambitious vision. From this perspective the project shows that there is indeed a creative role to play for urban citizens in contributing to the design of their environment and that participating in this creation can have a positive effect on community, experience and sense of place. At the same time, we must not forget that expecting citizens to act in domains that were formerly the realm of the state (see discussion in section 3), is not always successful and whilst communities can and in some cases want to act and plan autonomously, they will still require state support in terms of resources and implementation. In other words, whilst ‘active citizenship’ does have something to offer, it cannot also be a saving mechanism.

For the PCL project, a number of circumstances and factors came together to enable success. As noted earlier, the level of local empowerment in bottom-up state enabled projects depends on, amongst other things, its socio-economic context, the availability of financial and human resources and its relationship to the state (Bailey and Pill, 2015). As a rapidly gentrifying area with a history of community organisation and movements, Peckham brought together financial resources (through a crowdfunding campaign), human resources (professionals and architects able to plan campaigns and create architectural visualisation),

community networks and groups that could support PCL and offer platforms for publicity. Moreover, the project gained credibility and additional financial resources, by securing the support of the High Street Fund. Crucially PCL gained that support at a time when formalised demands (regarding outcomes and vision) were not yet fully developed, so that the project managed to marry autonomy of vision with state support in a way that may not be easily repeated, but which may teach us something about what kind of state/community interface might work. How much or in what form cooperation can be offered without detracting from the autonomy of a project is one of the more long-term questions to emerge from our observation of this project.

The shifting nature of the relationship between the State (and, specifically, Local Government) and civic actors, which we introduced in section 2, comes into play to better define the conditions in which the PCL project emerged and developed. In particular, the development of the project shows two interesting aspects, which may be taken into account for future analysis of similar initiatives.

First, the fact that the project is state enabled (Bailey and Pill, 2015) does not mean that the state disappears from its design and evolution, but on the contrary that local groups need to redraft new forms of interface with Local Authorities. It is exactly through this redesign, which implies new, more sophisticated and, in some cases, innovative interface patterns, that 'local empowerment' agendas (critically introduced in section 3) are being enacted and implemented in real-life situations. Such a change does not happen overnight, and it does not allow any simplification of the on-going relationships: on the contrary, as clearly shown in section 4, it requires more sophisticated capacities on both parts. Civic or community groups need to understand in which moments it is useful to start an autonomous path, and when, and with which objectives, it becomes more appropriate to test a cooperative interface (in this case, through the crowdfunding initiative). Local Authorities, on the other hand, when a need for cooperation emerges, should be able to move on the very thin line between real empowerment, which implies a very high degree of flexibility and a case-by-case evaluation, and the need for transparency and accountability, which are crucial when public resources (financial ones, but also civil servants' time and competences) are part of the game. As we have seen for the Mayor of London initiative, this may trigger a more rigid and bureaucratic attitude, which does not enable to fully tap into the potential of civic and community initiatives.

Second, a relevant consideration concerns, more specifically, the digital, internet-based dimension of this interface. The combination of online and offline activities does not exclusively respond to an organisational need, aimed at maximising the opportunities of fostering engagement of different actors on the part of local groups. On the contrary, the use of digital means can be seen as one step in the redefinition of contemporary forms of citizenship (Isin and Ruppert, 2015), and participatory practices (Fung and Wright, 2003), both extremely complex and controversial paths. Also in this case, the ability to widen the range of tools that enable different forms of citizenship, as Isin and Ruppert (2015) discuss, and, more specifically, the ability of civic crowdfunding experiences to deliver on promises of extended citizen participation (Davies 2015), should be more closely scrutinised.

In Peckham what we might call 'its spark' came from its 'autonomy', the fact that it was originated and developed by local residents (from Peckham about Peckham) inspired others and helped it gain followers. However, as well as a strong and autonomously developed vision, in order to work the PCL project also needed a unique concentration of skills, resources and cooperation with support from state. The most challenging aspect at time of writing is the implementation/regulator phase, in which state or corporate actors need to step in, appropriating the project and offering to grassroots actors a completely different role. It is here that it is proving difficult to maintain the enthusiasm that was originally generated. And it is here that communities and local activists need the most support to see a project through to the end.

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