

# Citizen-led Micro-regeneration: case studies of Civic Crowdfunding in London and Milano

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## Abstract.

This paper draws on qualitative research, carried out in London and Milano, to investigate the growing phenomenon of civic crowdfunding projects.

This approach is framed by interdisciplinary debates around governance and collaborative, community-led initiatives aiming at making cities more inclusive and sustainable. In particular, this work draws on discourses around Actor-Network Theory, diverse economies and spatial agency, to focus on the negotiation of new and alternative networks of urban governance (both off-line and on-line), and on to what extent these can be seen as socially innovative.

In this context the paper discusses how technologies can be employed to empower citizens in envisioning, designing and shaping the future of the city through local, bottom up and innovative initiatives like civic crowdfunding, but also what is the role of Local Government in fostering the emergence of and supporting such initiatives. By exploring innovative practices emerging in highly formal planning systems, in UK and Italy, this paper discusses the potential role of self-organised groups in producing alternative views of the city, against or within dominant urban development practices.

**Keywords:** Civic Crowdfunding; ANT; Bottom Up; Citizen Engagement; Social Innovation; Regeneration; Public Space.

## Introduction

The making of future cities involves the challenging of existing models of urban development whilst promoting alternative processes, practices and digital technologies to make urban areas more socially sustainable and livable, and more environmentally resilient. However, who takes part in defining and designing the cities of the future?

What roles do citizens play? How can their imagination, enthusiasm and energy be mobilized for new modes of collaborative city-making? And, crucially, how can public assets be used to support such initiatives in a way that is effective and fair?

This paper interrogates alternative forms of participation, urban development and governance, generated through collaborative actions and interactions between a range of local community groups, with the support of local government agencies. This study draws on 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, walking interviews with local grassroots organisations, and workshops with civic crowdfunding platforms (based in the Netherlands, UK and Italy) and local authorities (London and Milano). Whilst reflecting on the specificities of the case studies and their associated constellations of actors through translocal and transdisciplinary dialogues, this paper also seeks to pose questions that need answering. What are the affordances of urban spaces produced in alternative ways and with the endorsement and support of local governments? What are the openings created by the shifting roles played by all actors involved, working together in an oscillating dance that bypasses the conventional dichotomies of bottom-up/top-down, public/private, individual/collective and creating a third spaces of alternative urban life?

This paper is structured in five sections. In the first, we explore the origins of civic crowdfunding and the role of digital platforms in enabling citizens at promoting and/or supporting civic initiatives. In the second and third we discuss the conceptual frames of the paper by using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and diverse economies. After discussing Civic Crowdfunding in UK and Italy in section 4, in sections three and four we then explore a series of case studies in London and Milano as a starting point for a discussion on understanding civic crowdfunding projects and their ability to generate alternative urban spaces, drawing our conclusions in the last sections.

### **Civic Crowdfunding: a brief history**

Crowdfunding is a model of financing projects generally through contributions from large groups of individuals and organisations (the crowd) (Bellflamme et al, 2013; NESTA, 2013) that can be used to support a wide range of projects. The term crowdfunding was first used in 2006, on the now-defunct 'fundavlog', an experimental site for producing video blogs, and became popular from 2008 with the establishment of the global reward-based crowdfunding platforms like Indiegogo (2008) and Kickstarter (2009) and, later, with the emergence of dedicated civic crowdfunding platforms 'ioby' (2009), Spacehive (2011), and Neighbor.ly and Citizeninvestor (Stiver et al, 2015).

Crowd funders offer financial support to projects that they feel an affiliation with or that offer desirable returns. Projects can vary hugely, ranging from cultural production like commissioning artwork, producing movies or music, to the development of high tech products, to socio-spatial projects concerning specific localities, like, for instance, connecting communities through food or events.

This way of fundraising, which has recently gained popularity for a wide range of purposes, takes place online through digital platforms, like for example Kickstarter and Crowdcube, where projects ideas become visible to potential funders. Fundraisers set up the project, with its target funding, in one of the platforms and invite pledges from a wide range of supporters. Most platforms operate on an 'all or nothing' basis by which pledged sums are collected only if a funding target is achieved. In order to help reach their financial target, fundraisers generally also develop a suite of online tools (websites, social media channels etc.) complementary to the crowdfunding platforms

and, occasionally, as an alternative to them. Money is raised through different networks of peers (including family and friends), but mainly through social media (Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, Instagram) in order to secure a larger base of support. Depending on what specific platform is used, supporters can receive different forms of benefits that are unique to that project: they 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). However, supporters can also choose to donate because they believe in a particular cause, without expecting anything in return;

By supporting a great variety of goals like spatial interventions, community and artistic activities and small start-up businesses, fundraising through crowdfunding has also found application in the built environment, often with a particular 'civic' angle. 'Civic' crowdfunding, as a sub-type of crowdfunding, shares its donation-based fundraising model, but has distinctly civic, and often spatial, aims. Whilst Davies (2014) frames civic crowdfunding as aiming to fund public assets without rewards in return, in this paper we adopt a broader definition of civic as benefitting the broader community, often within specific localities.

Raising funds from citizens to support civic, urban-regeneration projects, however, is not a new mechanism. Practices of public fundraising for civic projects, either through bonds or donations, have a long history: the Statue of Liberty, the University of Sheffield, the High Line Park just to name a few. The key innovation of civic crowdfunding is in the recently developed digital dimension of the platforms, which increases the potential and enhances communication to raise funds from relevant communities, local and trans-local. The use of digital platforms, such as the UK based Spacehive and the Italian PlanBee or Eppela, allows citizens who have an internet connection to become either funders on projects of interests (e.g. a local park or a new high street market) or promoters of new initiatives: from improving or designing new green spaces to creating art hubs, reusing derelict buildings and underused spaces, or creating shared community food growing spaces.

Through the mechanisms of civic crowdfunding, citizens acting as initiators can proactively design a project proposal, publish it on an online platform, attract supporters (funders), reach the funding target and develop the project (Bellflamme et al, 2013). Although projects can vary in scale and type of financial support received – from a large number of people giving small donations to a small number of supporters giving larger donations – in general they tend to be locally-driven, capturing the imagination, enthusiasm and energy of local people and contributing to local changes that go beyond the boundaries of the actual physical changes.

By channeling 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.

Crowdfunding, as an emerging and rapidly evolving field of practices and fundraising models, is constantly adjusting to changing technology and policy contexts and experimenting with hybrid models; this paper aims to contribute to the development of critical understandings of the emerging field of civic crowdfunding and it might contribute to the production of alternative urban space, through altering local power dynamics, forging unexpected partnerships, and prototyping new governance and financial models.

## **Crowdfunding through the Lens of Actor-Network Theory**

In this section we aim to set out civic crowdfunding projects as part of a shifting set of actor-networks, as initially described by Bruno Latour in his outline of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 1993), which despite its name has been described not so much

a theory, but a methodology or a means of conceptualising and describing the different elements of agency that make up social phenomena (Law, 2009). As such ANT has been used by different researchers and in conjunction with a range of theoretical perspectives (Sheehan & Vadjunec, 2012). In the context of our research on civic crowdfunding, using an ANT perspective allows us to draw out three particular characteristics of crowdfunding projects. These are: (a) their socially horizontal organisation (both online and offline), (b) their flexibility and (c) the underlying constellations of the symbolic and the material. In particular, the first two seem to constitute civic crowdfunding as an exciting, potentially inclusive and more dynamic alternative to more traditional means of participation. At the same time however, they also make crowdfunding projects harder to describe as well as to organise or even control, given that the direction of horizontally inscribed relationships can be multi-directional and more ambiguous than vertical (hierarchical) ones and are more frequently subject to change.

With regards to the first of these characteristics - socially horizontal organisation - ANT develops a topographically, rather than vertically, organised model of social and material relations. It emphasises the way in which social practices, connections, processes of inclusion and exclusion, and instances of power are not simply the effect of social structures and hierarchies, but are complexly inscribed, negotiated and shaped through different networks that operate through both micro and macro settings. Similarly, civic crowdfunding projects have no evident hierarchies or pre-inscribed structures. They link ideas, individuals and groups of people (crowds), resources and spaces through malleable networks and shifting connections. Despite their topographical arrangement, however, these networks are not inherently inclusive and certain elements (people, spaces, organisations etc.) may form more or less powerful or more or less successful connections than others. In order to understand these connections we need to look beyond common notions of social organisation and power, investigating how, often at the micro-level, networks and connections are formed, shaped and re-shaped.

The second characteristic - flexibility - is at the very heart of the appeal of civic crowdfunding. The fact that crowdfunding projects are not rigid or formal structures, but are shaped and reshaped through the input of individuals, groups, crowds or organisation, means that they have the potential to allow for the spontaneity and immediacy, as well as the specificity of locality, often associated with high levels of engagement and activism. Within ANT, social structures such as *communities* do not exist as 'things' or 'glue', but, instead, the *social* is assembled by constantly changing relations between heterogeneous elements (Sheehan and Vadjunec, 2012: 919). On this understanding social phenomena cannot be easily captured by referring to a more-or-less stable structure as they are messy, inchoate and constantly developing. However, the flexible landscape of networks is also characterised by moments of stabilisation and entrenchment, which Sheehan and Vadjunec (2012) identify as instances of community. These temporary crystallisation and coalescences are contributing factors to the success of civic crowdfunding projects, and finding out how they develop over time is one of the challenges of our research.

Finally, one of the more intriguing aspects of ANT, is that the elements of agency (actants) in a given actor-network are not necessarily human or indeed social, but combine the human and the non-human, materials, ideas, meanings or even emotions (Sheehan, 2011). The crowdfunding projects analysed below are very much assembled as a set of simultaneously meaningful and material relationships between people and identities, material objects and built spaces, images of community, emotional attachments and social concepts, social practices and ideals of collaboration.

Intended as a theoretical backdrop and initial frame of reference, these three ANT features provide a starting point for how we might begin to theorise their social shape, helping us to understand the way in which they might, or might not, be helpful in developing citizen-led approaches to regeneration.

## **Political Economies of Civic Crowdfunding**

Another starting point in understanding and categorising civic crowdfunding projects is to look into their political economies. Situated within a spectrum of initiatives trying to reconfigure citizen involvement in local state/planning - from participatory budgeting to *fora* for citizen planning - civic crowdfunding makes use of digital platforms to raise money and fund assets and services for the public, sometimes with support from Local Government. Many of these projects explicitly frame themselves as alternatives to neoliberal modes of production of the city, putting forward their collective endeavour as a pragmatic, viable, alternative.

This broadly citizen-led nature of crowdfunding and the fact that, through backing, a mandate is given to projects, has been read as a mechanism for strengthening non-parliamentary democratic structures and practices, crucial for civic integration (Hollow, 2013). From a political economy perspective, however, crowdfunding has also been framed as a form of platform capitalism (Langley, 2016). Criticisms to crowdfunding refer to the challenge of its suitability as replacement of public services, to the fact that, through narratives of project success, it regularly masks unpaid labour associated to projects and that it monetises networks of social relations (Ridgway, 2014). Gibson-Graham's conceptualisation of diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008) and their intentionally 'weak', loose, theory might offer another fruitful lens for looking at the spectrum of civic crowdfunding projects, describing them in terms of enterprise, labour, property, transactions and finance and on whether they are considered capitalist, alternative capitalist or non-capitalist. This could offer the foundations for a developing framework for articulating specific characteristics of crowdfunding projects in relation to economic understandings.

Many civic crowdfunding projects create and occupy precarious, shifting spaces that could be described as what Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) call 'autonomous geographies': spaces produced through a blend of resistance and creation, fuelled by a desire to explore non-capitalist models of citizenship. The social and physical spaces resulting from civic crowdfunding initiatives, therefore, can potentially emerge as an alternative to neo-liberal city production.

## **The Civic Crowdfunding Context in UK and Italy**

Current understandings of urban regeneration evade easy definitions and remain ambiguous in relation to scope, approaches, actors and goals. Policies and practices vary significantly across different European regions, but in the UK and Italy, the geographical focus of our study, top down approaches have traditionally prevailed, alongside local, specific, pioneering initiatives at the margins (Evans and Jones, 2013). In the UK since the post-war period, urban regeneration meant reconstruction redevelopment and renewal of bombed sites and of slum housing. In the 1980s Thatcher era, regeneration became synonym of market-led redevelopment and flagship projects like shopping, leisure and sport centres, redeveloping central urban areas as catalysts and in attracting new financial capital. After the Urban Renaissance of the 2000s and its dominant design-led approach (Urban Task Force, 1999), more recently, urban regeneration has come to present strategies to change the urban

environment in order to stimulate economic growth through for example infrastructure and residential-led development often for the global market (Imrie et al, 2009; Evans and Jones, 2013). These approaches have left little space for locally led initiatives which, in the specific London case, are not harnessed in state-led policy initiatives (see for example Bailey and Pill, 2015 for discussion on empowering local communities through the Localism Act).

In Italy, urban regeneration broadly refers to an approach to planning within existing cities that firstly emerged around the mid-1990s, aimed at an integrated and comprehensive intervention, able to work simultaneously on the physical, spatial, economic and social aspects. The presence of a large amount of brownfields, as well as the need to improve the quality of public space, and the need to intervene in a comprehensive way on the (physically and socially) decaying public housing estates, brought about a wave of experimentation on urban projects. These were co-funded by EU programs, like in the case of the URBAN projects, (Palermo, 2002), and by national ones, like Neighbourhood Contracts, launched in the early 2000s, to improve the spatial and economic qualities and social liveability of public housing estates. In the last decade, urban regeneration initially has been associated, at least in the public debate, with more sustainable urban planning models and with urban resilience (Sbetti et al., 2013), with a focus on urban 'peripheries' through an integrated policy approach – through national funding programs and local area-based regeneration project proposals (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2016).

Crowdfunding projects, by promoting bottom-up processes and encouraging new forms of partnerships, raise questions for dominant processes of 'urban regeneration' that are harnessed to achieve goals of economic growth and infrastructural developments, driven by political agendas, and often controversial residential developments glossed as regeneration. What implications have hundreds of civic crowdfunding projects envisioned by local groups in re-defining urban regeneration practices? Also, how are civic crowdfunding projects affected by being partially funded by local authorities and what are the characteristics of these spaces of temporary convergence and alignment between bottom up and top down, mainstream and countering, 'us' and 'them'?

This paper attempts to explore potential answers to these questions by looking at case studies in London and Milano, where local authorities developed match funding programmes to support civic crowdfunding initiatives.

In London, projects that specifically aim at improving local areas, have the opportunity to receive additional match funding through Crowdfund London from the Greater London Authority (GLA) (formerly the London Mayor's High Street Fund) (GLA, 2016). At the time of writing and since the London Mayor's High Street Fund initiative was launched in 2013, the GLA has provided support to 59 projects, by pledging £800k and attracting over 5500 backers.

All civic crowdfunding projects backed by the GLA are funded through Spacehive, a UK crowdfunding platform for civic projects varying hugely in terms of dimension, financial target (from a few hundred pounds for a music performance in a park, to over one hundred thousand pounds for a sculpture walk in East London), pledge size (from a few but large pledges for a project on community art to almost a thousand of small pledges for a new green space), and promoters (from local community groups with a large and capillary support basis to a few local business investing locally). The GLA currently pledges funds at multiple points of the fundraising campaign for selected projects that meet the GLA priorities, differently from the Municipality of Milano, who matches funds at one specific moment - when 50% of the fundraising target is reached. GLA provides match funding to projects that if a) show an impact on the high street, b)

are innovative and show potential for achieving the final target<sup>1</sup>. By pledging while still fundraising, the GLA has taken a conscious decision of endorsing some projects and this helps to attract further pledges from supporters

In Milano, concurrently with the GLA in London, the Municipality started engaging with civic crowdfunding initiatives in 2014, with a programme that match funds civic initiatives once they reach 50% of their final target (Comune di Milano, 2014). Unlike the case of London, where Spacehive appeared as an official partner, the Milano Municipality identified a suitable platform through a public tender, through which Eppela was selected, a large reward-based Italian crowdfunding. Through a public call, proposals for civic crowdfunding projects were selected and 18 effectively launched their campaign. Projects were hosted, in turns, on the Eppela platform for 50 days, giving each project some visibility. If within this time frame, they were able to collect pledges for half of their target, then the Municipality would contribute the other half (up to a total of 50K Euro for each project). The underlying approach of Comune di Milano is that the, within a pool of promising grassroots projects, the Municipality prefers to support those which are the expression of community interest and engagement, and considers the quantity and quality of pledges as a good proxy of these latter.

The projects which took part to the subsequent rounds of crowdfunding campaigns range from local welfare networks for disadvantaged social groups, to local food systems, to the reuse of abandoned buildings, to innovative forms of neighbourhood welfare provision (Pacchi and Pais, 2017).

## **Stories of micro-regeneration from London**

This section focuses on two London projects which made use of the digital platform *Spacehive* to raise funds to implement innovative ideas: 'The Peckham Coal Line', a proposal to transform an old railway line in South London into an urban park; and 'Global Garden, Global Kitchen', a project to transform unused space in Tottenham, North London, into a new community food garden and kitchen where local people can learn to grow and cook a mix of produce.

### *Peckham Coal Line*

The 'Peckham Coal Line' project is one such London-based civic crowdfunding project that received match funding from the Mayor of London in the form of a pledge on a chosen crowdfunding platform, Spacehive. The Peckham Coal Line is an elevated 1 km long park, designed to run on disused railway coal sidings and to create a green link between two neighbouring high streets in Queen's Road Peckham and Peckham Rye. The park has been envisioned to run along the railway line, across underused sites, and behind residential developments<sup>2</sup>.

At a local level, this project has already attracted funds (over £75,000 funds from local supporters) from over nine hundred people, going well beyond the financial target, but most of all lots of enthusiasm, large local participation and the development of a shared community vision for the area. Backed by the Mayor's funds, at an urban scale this project has the potential to generate new urban governance relationships, where

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<sup>1</sup> The match funding approach the GLA is using shows how the process of crowdfunding is changing, at least in London. From a recent interview with the GLA (June 2017), it emerged that there has been an increase in formality in the funding process in order to make it more transparent. As the money invested in supporting such initiatives is public, the GLA is increasingly under pressure to make sure the projects they support are: deliverable, meeting wider community needs, and talking to wider audience. The risk, however, is that this increase in formality might come at expenses of losing local spontaneity and creativity.

<sup>2</sup> At the time we are writing this paper, the Peckham Coal Line vision is under threat as a planning application for a residential development on a small site along the route of the Coal Line has been recently put forward. Although discussions between local groups, the Council and the developers are undergoing, this recent turn highlights how fragile and vulnerable this type of projects can be.

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.

The Peckham Coal-line project is in many ways a successful project: 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.

Every crowdfunding project has particular dynamics. There are two notable aspects about the Peckham Coal-line project, and its success is in part a result of these aspects. The first was the way the project managed to connect different groups and individuals around what we might call 'a shared vision' of the park. This vision had emerged slowly and was in many ways not definitive, and was open to further development. It nevertheless became a nodal point around which shifting networks of actors, organisations, ideas and resources clustered. Crucially this vision was communicated through a variety of means, both online and offline – combining social media channels, community meetings, workshops and face-to-face outreach work. 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 and involvement and participation grew from there. Additionally, they reached out to and gained the support of local groups (e.g. a local nature reserve and a homeless shelter located near the Coal Line).

The second characteristic, which contributed to the Peckham Coal-line's success, was the fact that despite the topographical, non-hierarchical organisation of the project, it managed to key into powerful networks which gave the project both real resources and that enabled resources and credibility.

Local skills played a relevant role. These were not planned for in advance, but were mobilised flexibly around the project and the idea as it developed. Furthermore, a theme of 'connections', stands out as a recurrent feature in this project. The idea of the park took shape through local connections, people discovering and talking about a piece of land and about ideas of what can be done with it. Moreover, the project itself is about creating physical connections between two town centres, but also social and symbolical.

However, the project was also a symbolic connector. Significantly the sketches and plans produced as part of the development of the project were not intended as definitive ideas, but only to 'add flavour' or 'to help people visualize' what the park might look like. The focal point of the project – of the network of supporters and organisations – combines both the material and the symbolic: a material space, real spatial practices and a relatively open idea of a park and of creating connections. Indeed, at the moment, despite the tangibility of the space this project concerns, there is still a chance that the project might not be realizable.

### *Global Garden, Global Kitchen*

The 'Global Garden, Global Kitchen' project is located in Haringey, North London, an area with multi-cultural communities. It is a community food hub and, as it happened in the case of Peckham, it started with an idea.

The originator of this initiative, Dexter, after re-training for a year as urban gardener, decided to find some local, unused land, start growing organic vegetables, fruit and herbs and distribute it at affordable prices. The aim of 'Global Garden, Global Kitchen' was in fact to reconnect and re-educate communities regarding healthy eating by offering alternatives to poor, fast food habits (*'Lots of obesity...You can still keep healthy on a budget'*). As per the other project, his ideas started growing organically



by spotting a vacant land near a local school ground in Haringey, which ended up becoming the location of Global Garden. *'It was a walk way, where people walk through, a public walk way'*. After a not very successful approach with the school, he contacted the Selby Trust, a charity located near the school and where he used to volunteer as youth worker. Selby Trust, which acts as an umbrella to many community organisations, granted him permission to use the land for his project. The management of the charity gave him confidence in his own ideas (*'There is lots of potential...let's try it'*) and employed him as the project manager.

Dexter's vision was that of creating an inclusive space where people with very different cultural background could volunteer and grow fruits and vegetables using raised beds, learn new skills and contribute to local healthy life styles. Very coherently, the project fitted in the ethos of the charity: *'Many cultures, one community'* who became the major partner in this initiative. Unlike the Peckham project, Global Garden did not reach out for other partners like for example the local council, but rather focused on engaging with the different, diverse local communities and on generating a long lasting impact on people's lifestyles.

At the end of 2012, Selby Trust decided to use the platform of Spacehive to raise funds to support this initiative (2013). The project exceeded the target and benefitted of matching funds from Experian Charity Trust. At that time, this charity, which supports small organisations that aim to make a difference, was offering matching funds on Spacehive exactly like the GLA.

As already pointed out, social media like Facebook and Twitter are an important dimension of the online crowdfunding campaign, reaching out to local communities, involving them and getting their support. However, as Dexter admitted: *'I am not a social medial person: I am a gardener!'* A great, well-timed help to the fund raising campaign came from the BBC program *'London Inside out'* (2013), which interviewed Dexter and broadcasted him on TV promoting his initiative. This helped him connecting offline with local communities.

Dexter has a very clear vision for the future of the site. He aims to expand his project even more by creating a roof top garden with beehives, by setting up a farmers market, by using part of the local crop to feed into the Trust's local kitchen, where local communities (*'The Turkish, the Caribbeans, the Greeks...'*) can come and share what and how they cook.

Global Garden is not just an allotment. It made use of vacant land and it aimed to generate connection with the local context, its diverse, low income communities and their needs, and to promote education.

Although Dexter raised concerns about the future of the garden in terms of making sure the project will keep running and the council will carry on granting the use of the land, what clearly emerge is the replicability of such project: to some extent, and without undermining its amazing value, its ordinary dimension, rather than unconventional like the Peckham one, and therefore its feasibility.

### *Reflections on the London Case Studies*

Although both of these projects are very different in terms of scale and aim, they both typify the three aspects of crowdfunding projects we laid out at the beginning: a) horizontal social organisation, b) flexibility and c) a combination of symbolic and material contexts. Moreover the difference between the projects can be captured with reference to these three dimensions.

With regard to their social organisation, these projects both plugged into and created a network of individual actors, groups and organisations. However whilst Global Garden mainly connected to local communities, the Peckham Coal line project combined a more diverse network of local residents, local community groups and powerful actors (including the local council and an MP). Its network was therefore more

far reaching and more powerful when it came garnering support (although to what extent this will translate into the material success of the project remains to be seen). With regard to the second dimension, flexibility, neither of these projects started as a rigid or formal proposals, but evolved organically over time, allowing them to be shaped and reshaped over time. In the Global Garden project, the idea of one individual combined with local needs and the vision of a local charity. The Peckham Coal Line, even more radically, evolved through the ideas of many local individuals (crowds), groups, and organisations. As such both projects were grounded to the local specificity of the area and community they were based in, and were able to inspire participation (this was particularly the case for Peckham Coal Line).

In terms of the third dimension, combining the symbolic and the material, both projects were about more than a material intervention in landscape. The Global Garden, aimed to create a space through which communities can connect to each other and their locality, and the Peckham Coal Line, again more radically, became a symbol for participation and local community around which a diverse groups and individuals could come together.

### **Stories of micro-regeneration from Milano**

In this section, we discuss the civic crowdfunding framework programme launched in 2014 by the Municipality of Milano in the broader context of civic crowdfunding initiatives in Italy. These two Milanese projects show significant variations in terms of success, ability to strengthen horizontal ties and to fully exploit the innovative potential of this tool within the same programme. The projects, one located in a residential neighbourhood and the other one in the rural fringe of the city, show two different approaches to the use of civic crowdfunding. It is worth noting that both these crowdfunding initiatives were part of larger projects and this presented some challenges in communicating the projects to potential donors/supporters and lack of clarity about what exactly each pledge would fund.

#### *It Makes Your Life Easier (Tifacilita la vita)*

The first initiative is part of WEMI (Welfare Milano), co-funded by a local grant-making foundation and promoted by the Milano Municipality with a number of community organisations and cooperatives.

The aim of WEMI is to create an online platform, matching citizen needs with the supply of social services, both public and private ones, with a specific attention to the neighbourhood scale. To help achieve this wider objective, WEMI is also piloting two community hubs - one in District 5 and one in District 8 - set up as physical spaces to facilitate offline opportunities for strengthening community ties and brokering needs with potential suppliers.

L'Impronta Onlus, a charity involved in the project, decided to launch a civic crowdfunding initiative using the municipal programme, focused in particular on the opening up of District 5 Community Hub (created in a former shop), and with a lesser involvement in the District 8 Hub. The crowdfunding campaign, which took place in the spring of 2016, put under the charity, who was using crowdfunding mechanisms for the very first time, under significant pressure. In order to reach the funding goal, L'Impronta mainly mobilised offline resources (e.g. community events, networking...). As a matter of fact, L'Impronta, as many other Milanese small charities and community organisations, did not have extensive online networks, nor the ability to start developing new ones up in the very short time frame (fifty days). From the interview with L'Impronta, it clearly appears how the organisation of four offline events - one hosted by the other neighbourhood organisation, in District 8 - has

been crucial in convincing people to pledge, but also how these same events tended to involve people who already knew L'Impronta and its activities. It thus appears that the use of a potentially innovative tool relied in fact on quite traditional and locally embedded networks, mainly based on personal relations.

### *Put the Hurt on Mafia (Facciamo la festa alla mafia)*

Another successful project supported by the Milano Municipality through Eppela platform is *Put the Hurt on Mafia*, and more precisely *The Welcoming Garden* (Il Giardino Accogliente), part of a broader project promoted by a group of social cooperatives.

The broader project concerns the reuse of the largest asset confiscated to organised crime in the Milano urban region, Casa Chiaravalle, an abandoned villa with a private garden and 6 ha of agricultural land, located in a rural area on the Southern border of the city.

The Welcoming Garden, in particular, aimed at collecting resources, but also ideas and projects, for the reuse of the garden; the villa, originally owned by a family involved in organized crime, has been confiscated by the State and originally given to the SIS social cooperatives group for social purposes.

While the buildings will be converted to housing for fragile social groups, and the surrounding land will host an innovative social agriculture project, the abandoned garden will be devoted to activities for the local community. In parallel with the crowdfunding campaign, which took place in autumn 2016, the promoters have been running an open consultation on participatory decision making platform *Oxway* about ideas for possible functions and actions for the garden. *Oxway* is a crowd consulting platform, which allows citizens to first develop proposals and solutions to a common issue or problem, and then to vote and rank them. In this case, the project has been able to use online and offline tools and successfully involve both already existing networks and people who did not know the project or the promoters.

### *Reflections on Milano cases*

In terms of ANT perspective, both projects show a relevant socially horizontal organisation, but while in the first case it is mainly through already existing offline networks, in the second case the promoters have shown the ability to articulate such organisation both online and offline; moreover, in this case the identification of a group of citizens responsible for the project implementation is one of the outcomes of the consultation phase. Looking at other initiatives within the framework programme, the predominance of horizontal over vertical relations seems largely diffused, also because the Milano Municipality never played a central top-down role, apart from the final pledging, leaving the scene to local networks.

In terms of flexibility, the TiFacilitaLaVita initiative tried to constrain a potentially innovative tool within its existing networks, mainly due to a capacity gap and a lack of time (and support) to build new, more appropriate skills and networks; this in turn suggests, in line with evidence from other cases, that for established local organisations, already rooted in dense and strong networks, civic crowdfunding may not always be the most appropriate fundraising tool: other, more traditional tools, seem more effective and targeted (Pacchi and Pais, 2017); the Welcoming Garden showed a higher degree of flexibility in the choice, design and combination of appropriate tools: indeed, since the project was not aimed at functions already decided upon the promoters decided to accompany the process with the parallel *Oxway* consultation,

aimed at identifying relevant ideas and proposals coming from the community, thus giving full room to flexibility.

As far as the material dimension and the symbolic one are concerned, they are strictly connected and mutually reinforcing in both projects. In the first case, the offline dimension offered the main support to both dimensions: people identified themselves in the project of a future community hub by actually meeting and exchanging material and symbolic resources much as the hub would do in the future. In the second one the evaluation is more articulated: the material dimension can be seen in the importance of the actual space which will offer opportunities for community action, while the symbolic one revolves around the opportunity of giving back to the public an asset originally belonging to organized crime.

## Discussion

All four case studies present similarities and differences. First, all projects have been developed with a strong, inclusive vision with the involvement of local people at developing the project ideas and with the aim of addressing the needs of the local, diverse communities. Second, all projects are rooted locally and show great understanding of the local, both physical and social.

Unlike the others, the Peckham project proposes a vision for a new infrastructure, which will require time and additional funding to be developed. The current funding is only for a feasibility study. Interestingly though for the organisers this does not matter as much as it might seem. The value of the project at present lies in the way it has mobilised communities and created local networks. The Haringey and Welcoming Garden projects, albeit with differences, are smaller in scale, discrete and with a much more immediate measurable impact. The Haringey project shows its high level of replicability elsewhere in London and the Milano Welcoming Garden appears as a discrete, deliverable, project set within a much broader and complex program.

Institutional endorsement can be given to strategically important projects, like in London, or to those projects that appear to raise community support relatively quickly, like in the Milano examples. This institutional backing, not only, translates into money, but the endorsement itself generates positive feedback loops, leading to more backing from the wider community. But if support is to some extent engineered, can it really be seen as a proxy for a public mandate? Moreover, only a detailed analysis of the amount and distribution of pledges would illustrate if support is really widespread and growing at community level, or if it is supplied by a small number of pledgers, already connected to the project promoters. This is clearly the main challenge in the first of the two Milano cases.

The degree of specificity and uniqueness of the circumstances determining projects will affect their replicability. The Peckham Coal Line project is the product of a relatively unusual set of issues, spatial, social and political; whilst other projects may learn from it, it is not immediately replicable. The Kitchen Garden, on the other hand, responds with very widespread issues in a relatively common situation and its model could be easily adapted to other sites, and even the Welcoming Garden, offering a contained package within highly specific context, could also be to some extent replicated. The Welcoming Garden also holds a highly symbolic value, in that it involves the community in the transformation and re-appropriation of a confiscated asset, previously owned by organised crime. Since there are many such assets in search of new uses and functions across Italy, replicability is particularly relevant here.

In the WEMI cases it is important to underline that the replicability is a central dimension, because Milano Municipality is significantly involved in supporting local communities in the opening up of local or urban hubs, not exclusively devoted to

welfare and services, but also to cultural production, food and innovation in agriculture, or characterised by a hybrid nature (hosting and mixing different urban functions). Such hubs tend to reuse abandoned or under-used public or private space, and they can play a pivotal role in neighbourhood regeneration strategies.

## Conclusions

In this paper we discussed the emerging field of civic crowdfunding as a way of initiating and supporting projects and initiatives that benefit a range of communities and that are able to produce *alternative* urban spaces through *alternative* partnerships, governance and financial modules. We discussed civic crowdfunding in relation to ANT and diverse economy frameworks and through four case studies in London and Milano. The projects discussed vary substantially in scale and type of financial support received but they share significant experiences. Common to these projects is the significant journey from elaborating initial ideas, to reaching the financial target and implementing the project, a journey in which citizens become engaged in discussions/visions/strategies about the future of their cities, through designing innovative projects, mobilizing financial resources and transforming urban spaces. Yet, some projects more than others, seem to succeed in establishing wider networks of participation and collaboration with local communities and institutions, creating a multiplier effect. This has a potential to generate shifts in urban governance and to deliver innovative projects that consolidate a culture of citizen-led action. We argue that such projects need to be better understood and shared to support learning across networks and collective strengthening of initiatives that, albeit progressive and transformative, would otherwise only have a localized impact.

Building on our case studies, further research paths open up: while there is a need for more accurate quantitative and qualitative analysis of crowdfunding campaigns, there is also a strong need to identify more precisely criteria and indicators for evaluating their impacts and possible shortcomings or externalities, also in the light of the critical remarks highlighted in the preceding sections. Are crowdfunding campaigns really opening up alternative and potentially transformative new spaces of local democracy, or are they contributing to create club goods, thus replicating and not tackling spreading urban inequalities? Under which (cultural, societal, administrative, political) conditions are they producing the one or the other? Furthermore, as public administrations wake up to the potential of civic crowdfunding to support local cultural and economic development and urban regeneration, how are they going to mediate their need to formalise processes to guarantee accountability with the intrinsic flexibility and topological structure of crowdfunding projects?

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