

Interpreting Patterns of Interaction between Civic Activism and Government Agency in Civic Crowdfunding Campaigns

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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 traditional urban planning frameworks. Building on Carolina Pacchi's work on the relationships between community and state in examples of local activism in European cities, the paper applies four types of relationship between community and state: state regulation and community implementation; cooperation; community autonomy; and community opposition. These are used to unpack the different phases of civic crowdfunding projects and to show how relationships with the state evolve throughout the lifecycle of a project. Drawing upon qualitative research carried out in London and Milan between 2015 and 2017, we examine the case of the Peckham Coal Line in south London, 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 is used to examine the dynamic nature 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 insight into the shifting nature of the relationship between civic actors and the state, showing that while the 'autonomous' development of local projects is an important aspect of civic crowdfunding projects, the state does not disappear. Further, 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 scrutinized.

In this paper we explore the changing social dynamics associated with emerging digitally enabled forms of civic activism, urban participation and governance in London. 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 place-making and its potential to enable communities to participate actively in trans-

forming their urban environments and plug local government funding gaps resulting from years of austerity.

Drawing on ongoing research on civic crowdfunding and grassroots movements in the UK and Italy (Seetzen, 2016; Gullino *et al.*, 2018; Pacchi, 2017; 2019; Seetzen and Gullino, forthcoming), this paper explores civic crowdfunding in London as an emerging form of local activism. The growing number of pro-

jects is partly due to changed socio-economic conditions (austerity) and a revamped focus on local agendas (localism). In London, it is also partially due to the availability of 'matched funding' from the Greater London Authority (GLA). Through the study of a project in Peckham to crowdfund a feasibility study for an urban elevated park, the paper explores the dynamics around crowdfunding as a form of civic activism, the interface between forms of civic activism and local government action, and how that interface is negotiated throughout the life of a project. A deeper understanding of this evolving interface helps situate individual cases within a wider picture and avoids any oversimplification of the shifting roles of state and non-state actors in shaping contemporary cities.

While the emergence of crowdfunding projects has generated some enthusiasm, their contribution has not been fully explored as participation. What are the circumstances under which such 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 chose to focus on the PCL project for a number of reasons: first for its 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 was one of the first projects supported by the GLA under the High Street Fund (now Crowdfund London). As such, it represents a pilot project where the Local Authority could explore relationships and procedures around civic crowdfunding. Finally, we chose the PCL project because of its social context: it is the area that is rapidly gentrifying but maintains strong traditions of community activism.

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 the state, and how this changed over the lifetime of the project. Building on research on the relationships between community and state in instances of local activism in European cities, we use four recurring types of relationship (Pacchi, 2019) as a lens to understand and describe the PCL project. As discussed below, these are: state regulation and community implementation; cooperation; community autonomy; and community opposition. These typologies are used to decipher the different phases of civic crowdfunding campaigns and to show the evolving relationship with the state throughout the lifecycle of a project. The 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 on to exploring the political and social contexts of civic activism in the UK and the case of PCL. The final sections of the paper reflect on changes taking place both within the community network and in the way PCL relates to the state. The paper concludes that as the project develops, significant changes in the relationship between grassroots initiators and state actors occur, which may require different organizational forms and the mobilization of different resources, thus making the project potentially more fragile in the face of implementation challenges.

Emerging Patterns in the Relationship between Grassroots and Local Authorities: The Place of Civic Crowdfunding

The diffusion of grassroots initiatives aimed at urban transformation, especially civic crowd-

funded ones, raises a number of research questions concerning the role of such initiatives in the shift from government to governance at the local level (Denters and Rose, 2005). The relationships that civic crowdfunding campaign groups have with Local Authorities and institutional actors is under explored and warrants further research (Davies, 2014; ECN, 2018).

We propose an initial framework for the development of a taxonomy of how civic crowdfunding projects and grassroots initiatives relate to public policies and institutional actors, and to understand the patterns involved. We consider whether such relationships actually exist, whether they have a cooperative (Moulaert *et al.*, 2007) or contentious (Melucci, 1996; Tilly and Tarrow, 2007) orientation, in terms of the intensity of agency and engagement of civic society and their roles in implementation and design, and whether such relationships are mono- or bi-directional. For all of these elements, time needs to be considered.

We suggest an embryonic definition of emerging patterns of interface between forms of community activism and government agency using four recurring typologies. Such typologies are not a description of empirical phenomena and 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 organizations in their traditional regulatory and implementation roles. This is typical for plans, whether spatial or otherwise, where the state sets basic rules and other actors (private, corporate, or civic) contribute to their implementation through their activities and choices. The state may also set a framework of rules and try to engage societal actors in the implementation phase, for instance seeking to contract out public services, or engage them in the rehabilitation and management of abandoned or underused public buildings.

The second typology identifies cases in which there is *structured cooperation*, via explicit mechanisms for coordination between community initiatives and local authorities. The coordination in some cases is simultaneous, when state and civic actors jointly design programmes 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. In contrast, coordination may happen in two steps, when community actors play a creation or design role and local authorities play an organizational role to support grassroots initiatives already underway. This can limit scaling up and replicability. An example is where local authorities match funding for civic crowdfunding initiatives, and take up the role of curator (Davies, 2014; ECN, 2018).

The third typology is *completely autonomous community initiatives*, without any contact with local authorities, which do not seek and sometimes explicitly refuse cooperation with the state. This is typical for local food chains, self-production, small circuits of urban agriculture (Seyfang and Smith, 2007), local networking initiatives (see for instance the 'Social Streets'), and community enterprises, as well as initiatives such as time banks, Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) and some civic crowdfunding campaigns.

Finally, community organizations 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 oppositional stance, which may result in impasse or stalemate, but also explorations of alternative possibilities (Vitale, 2007; Silver *et al.*, 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 recognize 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, there are two critical aspects. The structuring elements of the interface between forms of community activism and local government action are critical. Likewise, the position of the actors throughout the development of each initiative will be pivotal. Initiatives might include grassroots organizations and local authorities, but other actors (such as corporate ones, technical agencies, foundations and NGOs) may intervene at particular moments.

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.

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. This 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 coalition government (2010–2015) 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 can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all. (Cabinet Office, 2010a)

As other commentators have observed, the increasing emphasis on localism or community empowerment and interest in decentralization were the latest evidence of a longer-term move away from the idea of local councils as service providers (Leigh, 2015). This trend can be traced to the 1980s notion of the ‘enabling council’ in the Conservative government’s embrace of ‘New Public Management’ under Thatcher, followed by New Labour’s vision of the ‘Third Way’, which presented local authorities as community leaders. The 2007 Lyon’s enquiry into local government stressed the notion of local government as ‘place-shaping’, which meant creatively ‘shaping’ and ‘influencing’ local well-being in partnership with other bodies rather than just delivering services (Leigh, 2015; Skelcher, 2000; Fyfe, 2012; Lyons, 2007).

Contemporary critics have noted how this led to empowerment and disempowerment (Fyfe, 2012). Rhodes described a ‘hollowed-out-state’ emerging and only rhetoric of localism and community empowerment, with increasing privatization, limits on public intervention, and the loss of service delivery systems (Rhodes, 1994). Skelcher (2000) noted the subsequent ‘congested state’ of the late 1990s, when collaborative institutions grew in UK public policy, and produced a web of linkages between public, private, voluntary and community sector actors.

More recently, this web has only got denser with emergence of more entrepreneurial interventions and actors, despite austerity and consequent reduced funding available to the third sector. 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). The promotion of 'active citizenship' therefore meant encouraging citizens to act in domains that were formerly the realm of the state (van der Pennen and Schreuders, 2016).

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 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 become involved in community projects (*ibid.*). The question is, however, how can the state manage to persuade citizens to volunteer and take on more responsibility?

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

The way empowerment has been articulated within the English political agenda can be synthesized under four aspects. Firstly, the rhetoric of 'big government' being to blame for what went wrong. Secondly, a 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, 2010*b*). Thirdly, a great emphasis on language and emotions, here the tone is enthusiastic and passionate, almost seductive in its appeal to the positive

feelings associated with being an active citizen and with the opportunities associated with these changes. Fourthly, citizens are seen not as individuals but as part of communities and as such more active locally.

As already noted, the emerging 'local dimension' in the UK context preceded the Coalition agenda. Particularly, through area-based approaches and initiatives to neighbourhood regeneration it was present in the Labour agenda (1997–2010). However, as Bailey and Pill (2015, p. 294) point out, the models of intervention at the neighbourhood level were different; state-led policy initiatives under Labour continued the direction of the Conservative government of the 1990s, and subsequently state enabled under the Coalition government from 2010. Bottom-up state enabled projects contain 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 elements. These four 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 here); availability of resources (not only financial, but also human); the type of organization and its ability to be a representative and credible voice (*ibid.*, p. 301).

The developments discussed have introduced a more entrepreneurial aspect to local governance, which requires individuals and small groups to show initiative, take risks, as well as giving time and creativity in the creation of projects. However, the increasing shift towards state enabled projects has also seen the network of actors involved in local governance expand and become more complex. Thus, understanding the ins and outs of local governance – governing with and through a network of organizations, 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 of social actors. Focusing more on the latter, but recognizing that technology and actors are intertwined, this paper attempts to decipher the growing network and understand how some of its constituent parts interrelate. More specifically, given this context of radical political and societal changes, we pose a number of questions: Who are these active citizens? What is their motivation for taking responsibility for 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?

One further issue requires attention for this inquiry – the frame within which citizens operate. Civic activism and local intervention entail a community dimension (Rydin and Tate, 2016), yet what constitutes ‘a community’ is ambiguous and, despite sociological studies over the past century, a satisfactory definition is yet to emerge. Nonetheless, the concept remains appealing particularly within urban studies. As Bauman (2001) claimed, the rising interest in community has been linked to a growing feeling of unpredictability, precariousness and insecurity at a global level. ‘Community’ offers a reassuring, almost nostalgic dimension and has long been key in policy intervention (Gullino *et al.*, 2007; Edwards and Imrie, 2015). The more we feel unsafe, the greater the compulsion to invest in rebuilding our physical 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 adversity for those who do not conform to localized ideals.

As Rydin and Tate (2016) argue, 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 change. People are more mobile than in the past, have affinities and interests that might overlap, and travel well beyond their place of residency or work. Connections do not necessarily occur face to face within small geographical areas (Edward and Imrie, 2015), and can be generated and sustained internationally thanks to communication technology. Therefore, communities are not stable, unified and place-based bounded entities, rather, they should be thought of as networks of people connected by identities, common interests and activities, and they may be temporary. If seen as a system of overlapping networks, communities are then defined by connections among people (Rydin and Tate, 2016).

One of our questions is therefore what binds these community networks and enables collective actions. As seen here, this can involve the temporary shared interests in particular projects, rather than just static social capital of ‘shared knowledge, understanding, norms, rules and expectations’ (Ostrom, 2000, p. 176). If collective action is enabled by temporary, project-specific relations, how can it be harnessed and maintained over time?

Civic Crowdfunding and Crowdfund London: The Coal Line Project in Peckham

Having discussed the political and social context in which new forms of activism emerge, we now turn to the 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), with the support of a digital platform. We look at Spacehive as an important emerging digital platform for civic crowdfunding in the UK. We examine the history and significance of the Mayor of London’s pro-

gramme in developing and supporting civic crowdfunding as a form of local activism in London. We introduce the case of PCL, as a particular example of local activism, which used civic crowdfunding with matched 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.

Civic Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding is a model of financing projects through contributions generally from large groups of individuals and organizations, the crowd (Bellflamme *et al.*, 2013). It can be used to support a wide range of projects like artwork, film production or product development. Recently, crowdfunding financing mechanisms have increasingly been used for projects in the built environment. However, as Davies (2015) points out while crowdfunding studies are growing, they tend to focus on the dynamics of the fundraising projects and have not always distinguished between projects that provide a community service or a consumer product. The former fall more broadly into the domain of 'civic crowdfunding, which as a concept it still needs fleshing out (*ibid.*). It has been broadly defined as 'projects where citizens contribute to funding community-based projects ranging from physical structures to amenities' (Stiver *et al.*, 2015a; 2015b, p. 1) and 'crowdfunded projects that provide services to communities' and often involve 'participation in collective activities' and aim to produce services, spaces or goods that can be accessed equally by members of the community (Davies, 2014; 2015, p. 343).

In other words, as a subset of crowdfunding, civic crowdfunding specifically aims to fund public assets. It also creates a public social network of communities and actors (Gullino *et al.*, 2018). By 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 even creating shared community food growing spaces. Crowdfunding has also found space in the property domain as a form of real estate investment opportunity and means to transfer equity or lend via online platforms. However, these practices, as argued by Sedlitzky and Franz (2019), cannot be considered civic crowdfunding as they lack community-oriented services. Of course, raising funds from citizens to support civic projects in the urban realm in itself is not new. However, the use of digital platforms in order to fundraise is new, and the community networking reach of these platforms is greater. By channelling efforts towards specific outputs, civic crowdfunding projects have the ability to encourage community building and bottom-up placemaking, and the potential to create new 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, for example the UK Spacehive, the Dutch Voor je Buurt, the Italian PlanBee, and the US Patronicity (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 government funding available on the one hand and a shift in citizens' needs and expectations for civic participation with impact on the other.

Technically, 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 using social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and dedicated websites, they increase their reach and chances of reaching their targets. However, as will be demonstrated in the study of PLC, offline events (for example, local community events, festivals, design workshops and meetings) are also key to socially oriented projects, as they consolidate relationships developed online. The use on and offline activities is also important as it helps balance power and limit 'digital divide' marginalization. Crowdfunders offer support to projects with which they feel an affiliation or which offer financial returns. Supporters can receive different forms of benefits unique to a project, depending on the type of platform used. 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 a product) 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 may be related to more intangible benefits like outputs, actions and communication, or the promise of innovation (Charbit and Desmoulin, 2017).

Spacehive

With the increasing popularity of crowdfunding, there is a growing number of platforms each with its own characteristics and funding models. Few are specifically dedicated to civic crowdfunding. Spacehive is the main UK platform that supports projects aimed at improving local civic and community spaces and 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 raise over £10 million target funds, and over £5 million extra funding, with a project high success rate of 52 per cent. There is a great variety of projects which changed over time in terms of financial target,

pledge size, and promoters, who range from charities to local community or grassroots groups with a large support basis, to a few local businesses.

Projects are registered online for free, but subsequently incur a 5 per cent fee. Before promotion campaigns and fundraising can begin, their viability is verified by Locality, the national membership network supporting local and community organizations. Platforms like Spacehive operate on an 'all or nothing' basis, i.e. local groups can collect pledged sums only if the funding target is reached. Through Spacehive, projects have the possibility to be matched with funds on the basis of relevant projects categories, such as sports and play, parks and gardens, arts and culture, buildings, food and farming, streets and infrastructure. Spacehive, which operates across the UK, works with local statutory authorities. These can create their own 'hives' and co-finance local projects already supported by the 'crowd'. Currently, funds available to support local projects mainly come from the Greater London Authorities (and boroughs within it), Manchester and Leicester.

The emergence of civic crowdfunding platforms, such as Spacehive, has some direct 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 when governments and businesses are cutting their spending. Moreover, crowdfunding platforms can offer new and uniquely decentralized 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 characterized by an intermingling of offline and online (Gullino *et al.*, 2018; see also Stiver *et al.*, 2015a; 2015b). Crowdfunding projects often depend on mobilizing existing offline communities who remain active offline (workshops, meetings, local news-

papers) but take up online activities (social media, online discussion forums). They draw on and grow community networks that are maintained after the 'fundraising'.

The tangible civic and financial opportunities associated with crowdfunding should be taken with a pinch of salt. Davies (2015) questions to what extent civic crowdfunding is truly participatory, addresses social inequality or supports the role of public institutions. This reflects wider concerns about the civic benefits of civic crowdfunding (see also Gullino *et al.*, 2018). These tensions are not dissimilar to the those around the localism narrative, and there is the possibility of divergent outcomes. Davies (2015) suggests that civic crowdfunding's 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; and the relationship that government departments and agencies choose to have with crowdfunding projects (ranging from curating, informally supporting or operating standalone platforms). The relationships and networks surrounding a crowdfunding project are crucial to participation, inclusivity and civic benefits of individual projects. As will be demonstrated, these relationships are not static but can change throughout the life of a project.

The Mayoral Programme in London

Since 2014 the Mayor of London has supported crowdfunding campaigns by local communities wishing to improve their neighbourhoods, offering them matched funding. The regeneration team of the Greater London Authority (GLA) started the civic crowdfunding programme as part of the London Mayor's High Street Fund, which aimed to support community proposals focusing on improving local high streets. Each proposal was encouraged and sustained with pledges up to £20,000.

One of the aims of our fieldwork has been tracking the changes the programme has undergone since its inception. As a result

of its growth, it has moved from a more experimental initiative 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. Initially, the GLA provided matched funding to projects on the basis that they could impact the high street, were innovative and showed potential for achieving the target funding level. The focus has changed from the high street to local communities in general, but the focus on innovation and achievability remains. While funds have increased and community projects can now receive up to £50,000, projects cannot receive more than 75 per cent 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 that the money is used fairly. As a result, the GLA is increasingly under pressure to ensure the projects supported are deliverable, meet wider community needs, and talk to wider audiences. The risk of increased formality is that it might come at the expense of ingenuity, spontaneity and creativity.

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

The Case of Peckham: From the Context to the Project

Over the years, Spacehive has hosted 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.

The PCL project is an example of one such successful project. The local context, and its rich heritage, is of note here as it defines the project itself. In the early nineteenth century, Peckham was a rural village, but with the introduction of the railway in the 1860s, the area changed profoundly as, together with Peckham Rye station (1865), homes and shops (Rye Lane's shopping street) were built for city workers and artisans. The railway brought coal to the area from the north of England; this was stored in a depot which closed in the 1950s (the Coal Drop site, currently a scaffolding yard). More recently, Peckham developed a reputation as neglected urban neighbourhood, marked by poverty and portrayed in the 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. This gentrification has been greeted with some suspicion and with fear that local residents will be pushed out by a predominantly white middle-class of urbanites. However, despite its gentrification, Peckham 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 bomb damage during World War 2, still exists (figure 1).

The park will follow the northern embankment of the railway at both street and elevated deck levels, connecting pockets of residual space, blocked-off roads and a nature reserve on land mainly owned by Network Rail and Southwark Council (see figures 2 and 3). When developed, it 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



Figure 1. Old coal yard signage (Rickett Coal) just off Rye Lane. (Source: Silvia Gullino)



Figure 2. Peckham Coal Line as it connects Rye Lane and Queens Road. (Source: Peckham Coal Line)



Figure 3. Rendering of the high-level walkaway. (Source: Peckham Coal Line)

of greenways that run from Brixton to the river Thames (Adams and Sutherlands, 2018) (figure 4).

Like other civic crowdfunding projects, PCL developed slowly and organically, starting with an idea, almost haphazardly finding connections and gathering momentum over time. The project began as an undergraduate architecture project, which was deemed too ambi-

tious in many ways. However, both the originator of the idea and his partner had a long connection with Peckham and it was through their 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



Figure 4. Access to the Peckham Coal Line from Queens Road. (Source: Peckham Coal Line)

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 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 organizations 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 900 people, going well beyond the financial target, which aimed at just over £64k mainly to cover the costs of a feasibility study 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 Rail 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 in January 2016 it allowed the newly registered charity, Friends of Peckham Coal Line (FPCL), to appoint the architectural firm Adams & Sutherland, commissioning a design and feasibility study to explore delivery, construction, benefits and funding aspects. The feasibility study, published in June 2018, showed the project is achievable, can be delivered in eight stages at the different sites, and that it can generate not only physical, but also social and economic connections (Adams & Sutherland, 2018).

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 project's progress in order to maintain support and interest.

In July 2017, the PCL vision showed its vulnerability, as it was threatened by a planning application for a mixed scheme by Bluecroft Development on a small site along the route. The PCL team discovered this proposal for the 'Old Stables Yard' at the last minute, which – if developed – would jeopardize the

park and the work of local communities. With only five days before the public consultation period closed, the PCL team had to act fast to protect a public route through the site. Initially, discussions between local groups and local actors seemed to influence this development leading to revised plans. However, at the time of writing, following the sale of the site by 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'.

Reflections on the Peckham Coal Line Project

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 it has grown over the years. 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.

Growing a Community Network

Like any form 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 is inscribed

and diffused through fluctuating connections and relationships. One of the notable aspects of the Peckham Coal Line project is the way it empowered local communities and the way that it managed to develop and mobilize 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 tends 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 organizers 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 point around which shifting networks of actors, ideas and resources clustered. It started out with a small group of local activists who publicized their ideas through social media channels, as well as by handing out leaflets (and cakes) and organizing workshops. In this context PCL started out as an autonomous project (the third category discussed above), initiated by a small group who then began reaching out to other residents, organizations 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 organizers 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 organizers 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 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 organizations – 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 backstreets. [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 move easily through it. In this context PCL offered not only a simple vision of a park, 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 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 organizers 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 responses 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 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 organizations could assemble and become entrenched.

Collaborating and Working with the Public Organizations

Earlier in this paper, we discussed typologies

of community/state relationships, in this section we discuss how such relationships 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 organizations (the regulatory/implementation typology). Thus, despite the topographical, non-hierarchical organization 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 organized 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 so publicly led to more backing by the ‘crowd’. Notably, in the context of this particular case, the collaboration was very successful. Representatives from the Mayor’s Office and organizers 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 involvement of a powerful governmental body might straight-jacket a community vision that was still in the process of developing. However, this did not occur. It could be argued that the risk of 'the state' exerting too much influence 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 of GLA officers to the dynamics and importance of local activism and that PCL was one of the first crowdfunding projects supported by the Mayor's programme, played a positive role. In this early project the GLA was still relatively flexible in its support, 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 crowdfunding community projects, might be less open ended. In addition, the funding process will need to be more formalized and, mainly in terms of governance, is likely to become more complex. The challenge would then be how to retain the enthusiasm and spontaneity associated with local activism, creating a framework within which local energy can be harnessed while 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, it 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 is 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 organizers: *'now the funding has stopped, it's the boring stuff'*. While those who work quite closely on the project are still involved at this stage, it becomes difficult to communicate such practices in a way that engages 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?'* (Interview, Peckham Coal Line, 2018).

To keep the energy and sustain the wider community networks, those involved closely with developing the next steps have organized public-facing events, keeping volunteers and backers informed. PCL organizers stress the importance of pre-existing community platforms that can support such efforts. And in this case, as well as producing newsletters, activists organized events during the Peckham Festival and published updates in the *Peckham Peculiar* (a crowdfunded and self-defined 'hyper-local' newspaper). As well as sustaining community interest and support, another challenge is retaining local activists and volunteers working on the project over a longer period. 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 six months, longer is difficult to sustain as circumstances change and 'people move away' or 'have families'. Even those who have worked closely on the project from the beginning have found giving it enough attention difficult. This was quite poignantly described as the 'Peckham Coal Line guilt spiral':

For those involved in the core, something interesting and troubling is 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 Coal Line, 2018).

Conclusions

By looking at the case of PCL, this paper has focused on the emergence 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 socio-economic conditions (austerity), longer-term political agendas aimed towards the decentralization and redistribution of power and ongoing, partially problematic narratives of community empowerment. If on the one hand civic crowdfunding campaigns have galvanized enthusiasm, creativity and energy of local communities, on the other hand they have raised a number of questions about their 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 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 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. From this perspective the project shows that there is indeed a creative role 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 is not

always successful and while communities can, and in some cases wish to, act and plan autonomously, they will still require state support in terms of resources and implementation. In other words, while 'active citizenship' does have something to offer, it cannot also be a money-saving mechanism.

For the PCL project, a number of 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 organizations, Peckham brought together financial resources (through a crowdfunding campaign), human resources (professionals and architects able to plan campaigns and create architectural visualizations), 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 formalized demands (regarding outcomes and vision) were not 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 above, 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 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, it requires more sophisticated capacities on both parts. Civic or community groups need to understand when it is useful to start an autonomous path and with what objectives it is appropriate to test a cooperative interface (in this case, through the crowdfunding initiative). Local authorities, on the other hand, when the 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 is crucial when public resources (both financial and human) are part of the game. As we have seen in the Mayor of London initiative, this may trigger a more rigid and bureaucratic attitude, which does not enable the potential of civic and community initiatives to be exploited fully.

Second, a relevant consideration concerns the digital, internet-based dimension of this interface. The combination of online and offline activities does not exclusively respond to an organizational need, aimed at maximizing 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, the ability to widen the range of tools that enable different forms of citizenship, as Isin and Ruppert (2015) discuss, and, specifically, the ability

of civic crowdfunding experiences to deliver on promises of extended citizen participation (Davies, 2015) should be more closely scrutinized.

In Peckham what we might call 'its spark' came from its 'autonomy', the fact that it was originated and developed by local residents 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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