

50X20

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In a public meeting held in Ciutat Meridiana in 2009, neighbours from various parts of Nou Barris Nord decided to carry out a new initiative to address the social emergency that the area was increasingly witnessing. Fifty neighbours decided to pay €20 each month in order to combat the social problems that public administrations was proving unable to solve. 50x20 was, therefore, an informal initiative conceived of as a self-managed and self-organized act of resilience in the face of collective problems. At the same time, however, it was an act of contestation demonstrating that neighbours were being forced to act to address a responsibility that public authorities were failing to fulfil.

Fifty people collecting €20 per person each month inspired the name of the new informal organization: 50x20. The initiative draws inspiration from both the evidence that the crisis was producing terrible effects in these neighbourhoods, and upon the evidence that neighbourhood associations and community based organizations, rather than public bodies, are the ones who are dealing with effects of the crisis in Nou Barris Nord.

The main objective of the initiative is to supply a *Caja de Resistencia* [emergency hardship fund] that serves to give financial support to needs identified by various actors working in the area. Different kinds of initiatives and organizations contribute to the identification of need of financial assistance, from schools to neighbourhood associations, which share the fact that they have daily contact with the effects of the social emergency facing the community. Thus, rather than develop the community through housing, business or social programs, 50x20 uses a community building approach, which emphasizes relationships, consensus building and voluntary action. In short, it aims to mobilize community assets.

In this context, 50x20 is committed to collecting, managing and giving a purpose to the money it gathers. All the money is deposited in a bank account from where it is delivered to neighbourhood social organizations depending on the needs identified regarding families and people that live in the area. The organizational idea behind the initiative is that the money it can offer to rapidly address family and/or individual needs is always managed by a social organization which first receives the money, meets the demand, and ensures the money is used correctly. In return for the money that is provided, each entity is encouraged to get some sort of socio-educational return from its beneficiaries.

There is always some citizen organization in between. The money is not paid directly to the person; it is paid to the dentist, the speech therapist... We have paid bills for the use of utilities, some rent, some doctor's fees. With the schools, through the AMPA,¹ we paid for summer camps and something is asked of them in return. There are many African women in this area that speak English very well and, for example, the summer camps of their children are paid for and in return they are asked to give an English course. They participate in the AMPA through giving English lessons. This is edifying for a person; my son does not go to the camps for no reason, but because there is a kind of deal, an exchange (50x20, activist).

The organization of the initiative is led by a five person board, most of them social workers and professionals engaged with the community. Thus, it is a self-organized and self-funded initiative carried out by volunteers with high levels of education and professional skills. Even though the initiative is managed in a very horizontal and transparent way, there is a small

group of engaged people who lead the initiative. As they distribute money to social organizations, they strengthen links among them, bridging differences at a community level.

As we have said, transparency and accountability are two of their main principles. In order to preserve accountability, the management of the money is always done through bank transfers, never through cash transactions. In a blog, the organization publishes a record of all the assistance offered and analyses the destinations of its money by areas of use.

The area in which 50x20 has offered most support is school activities. During the first five years of the initiative, school dinner scholarships represented more than 60 per cent of the total budget. The school dinner scholarships provided by public authorities do not cover the total price of the dinners. As a consequence, many children left school during lunch hours because their families could not afford to pay the extra. Scholarships to attend summer camps have also represented a large part of the money donated by the entity to the schools of the area. Recently, following demonstrations regarding the social difficulties in the neighbourhood, the City Council has assumed the total costs of school dinner scholarships and scholarships for summer camps and sporting activities.

Regarding the relationship between the initiative and public authorities, it might be said that it is characterized by complexity and perplexity. From the side of the 50x20 initiative, it is believed that some actors from the City Council have felt themselves attacked by the role assumed by the association. The fact that 50x20 acts as an emergency hardship fund for the network of neighbourhood associations is perceived as evidence of public policy failure. However, it is not fair to accuse the initiative of promoting a negative vision of public policies; in fact, the role played by 50x20 remains low profile, and its members refuse to appear in the media. Their priority is to provide resources to the network of associations of the territory, reflecting a cooperative and collective leadership that aims to produce some kind of social transformation in the area.

Another of the related reactions developed by the District administration regarding the initiative is the recognition of 50x20 as an accredited interlocutor. Actually, the District has approached 50x20 to ask it to provide a diagnostic of the social problems in the area, and has even shown its availability to act following a dictation of the initiative's requests. This proposal has been also refused by 50x20.

The District Councillor has even offered that we, ourselves, do a holistic project. But she doesn't know what we are [already] doing. [Nou Barris Nord] needs a holistic response, I agree, but we cannot do this project. Firstly because we don't work on projects. (...) The first reaction of the public administration was, 'this is not possible, all this is paid for', but no, it isn't all paid for. In a second meeting the District Councillor said to us: I have an unlimited budget for whatever is asked of me in [Nou Barris Nord] (50x20, Activist).

50x20 does not renounce expressing opinions regarding how local policies could be better applied in the area. For example, regarding the Fab-lab project, set-up in Ciutat Meridiana in 2014, 50x20 has criticized the chosen location and advocates a more accessible and functional project which would be particularly focused on promoting socially innovative dynamics with the local high-school (IES Picasso) and fostering its specialization in the field of robotics. Another example relates to funds for school dinners; when the public administration

suggested that scholarships were being paid for, 50x20 provided evidence that a funding need was still outstanding. In any case, as their representatives suggest, 50x20 does not aim to replace public responsibilities; on the contrary it aims to stress the leading role that public authorities ought to assume regarding the area's challenges. Hence, they are highly pragmatic because they directly solve neighbours' social needs but at the same time are reframing the public discourse, pushing for comprehensive responses and for the administration to take responsibility.

The initiative has had a very limited material impact as the grants delivered could not be highly financially significant. The annual budget does not exceed €14 000 and 50x20 addressed around 130 cases in 2014 and 80 cases in 2015. However, if we look at more qualitative or intangible impacts, 50x20 representatives highlight that the most important aspect of their initiative is not the money delivered but the responsibilities assumed by those who receive the money. In this vein, the initiative is also a tool for social workers in the area to achieve some goals. The emergency hardship fund allows them to achieve specific objectives, such as parents ensuring their children's homework is completed, or going to school meetings because they have signed an agreement with the parents association to receive the money provided by 50x20.

Although the social impact of 50x20 is not huge, it has achieved some changes in neighbourhood social relations. For instance, some of the schools in the area have changed their perception of the initiative and are now using it to achieve significant results.

They found it very strange that there could be people giving money in an anonymous manner in order to help meet the concrete needs of people they didn't even know, and neither did they really know what work would be done [with the money], apart from the agreement that was made with the school; and they thought it was an odd group. In some cases we have not managed to change their point of view, for whatever reason. But many professionals have also become members of the initiative, which is also an extraordinary thing... (50x20, Activist).

In short, 50x20 offers new, alternative and community-managed solutions to basic social needs in Nou Barris Nord, changing social relations and building community networks. The initiative is small and, rather than working together with the public administrations, it acts as a resistance project, showing that public bodies are not doing all they should in the area. It has not expanded and it has limited effects, as the problems it faces are so big compared to its scarce resources. However, rather than be a permanent part of the solution, they are claiming for the need for more resources invested in the area and the taking of responsibility by the public administrations.

Notes

1 Parents' association.