

Making with the Community - the case of the Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca, in the rural interior of Portugal

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Abstract

Inspired by the experience of the Lisbon Community Groups (Ferreira & Amaro, 2021 and Amaro & Ferreira, 2024), the Community Forum of the Parish of Canelas and Espiunca, in the municipality of Arouca (Portugal), was created on 16 September 2022. It is an informal platform or group, open to the participation of anyone from the local community, which meets once a month, also inviting public institutions and services involved in the area to jointly present and discuss local problems and needs (Participatory Diagnosis - Marchioni, 1999; Ander-Egg, 2005; Ferreira & Amaro, 2021; and Amaro & Ferreira, 2024) and to demand, build and/or organise community responses and solutions.

Although the municipality of Arouca is part of the Aveiro district and the Oporto Metropolitan Area, Canelas and Espiunca is near the Viseu district and is a rural mountain area that suffers from the usual problems of these areas, such as demographic devitalisation, double ageing, senior isolation, loss of economic activity, lack of public transport and geographical marginalisation. These challenges contribute to the reproduction of the social inequalities of the people who live there (Bourdieu, 2010), which reinforces the relevance of the existence of participatory spaces, such as the Community Forum, which contribute to a fairer redistribution of more or less symbolic powers (of capital, status and/or influence (Bourdieu, 2021).

This communication thus aims to present this Community Forum as an open space for Participatory and Deliberative Democracy, which has introduced an innovative dynamic of Shared and Participatory Local Governance (Fung & Wright, 2003, Fung, 2006, Ferreira & Amaro, 2021 and Amaro & Ferreira, 2024). To this end, the aim is to showcase initiatives that have already been developed, including support for young people and teenagers, intergenerational dialogue and interaction, support for isolated elderly people, support and encouragement for the informal local economy by holding two street markets to promote and sell local products, and the creation of a Community Solidarity Shop to exchange and sell second-hand clothes and other objects.

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In the future, the Forum will tend to encompass other areas of Community Welfare, such as Social Support, Culture, Education, Employment, Health and Mental Health, as a result of its greater involvement, together with the other living beings and abiotic elements of the territory, in the co-construction ("Sympoiesis" - Haraway, 2016) of Life in Common, while also reinforcing its role in fertilising the formal processes of Representative Democracy and maintaining respect for the plurality of actors involved (Lahire, 2002).

Keywords: Community Groups, Community Forum, Participatory Diagnosis, Participatory Democracy and Shared and Participatory Local Governance.

1. Introduction

The aim of this text is to present the experience of the Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca, in its characteristics and achievements, as an open space for Participatory and Deliberative Democracy, an experience inspired by the concept and principles of Community Development, which has introduced an innovative dynamic of Shared and Participatory Local Governance, in regulating the problems and challenges of the Community, and becoming, in fact, a Common.

The Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum is an example of good practice in the fields of Community Development and the Social and Solidarity Economy. Although there are six community fora in the municipality of Arouca, this is one of the oldest and most active. Considering the specific characteristics of the territory, we believe it could serve as a paradigmatic example of how community groups/fora can contribute to the development of local territories.

Although the municipality of Arouca is part of the Aveiro district and the Oporto Metropolitan Area, Canelas and Espiunca is near the Viseu district and is a rural mountain area that suffers from the usual problems of these areas, such as demographic devitalisation, double ageing, senior isolation, loss of economic activity, lack of public transport and geographical marginalisation. These challenges contribute to the reproduction of the social inequalities of the people who live there (Bourdieu, 2010), which reinforces the relevance of the existence of participatory spaces, such as the Community Forum, which contribute to a fairer redistribution of more or less symbolic powers (of capital, status and/or influence - Bourdieu, 2021).

The Community Forum of the Parish of Canelas and Espiunca, in the municipality of Arouca (Portugal), was created on 16 September 2022. In the more than two years it has been in existence, it has already developed various activities and created community dynamics, with a view to the well-being and good living of the community, always bearing in mind the principles of participation, integrated vision and partnership, as we will see in point 3.

With these aims in mind, the text is organised into four more points, in addition to this Introduction. The second section will present the theoretical and methodological bases of the Forum and of these reflections. In the third section, as already mentioned, the activities, dynamics and results of the Forum's two years of existence will be presented. The third point also analyses the type of resources mobilised by the Forum. Finally, in the last section, some concluding thoughts will be shared, proposing a reading of the Forum as a New Common.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

As already mentioned, the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum is, in practice, an experiment in Community Development⁴. The practices associated with Community Development date back to the first half of the 19th century, namely the experiments promoted by the so-called Utopian Socialists, such as Charles Fourier, Robert Owen and Étienne Cabet, for example, and then continued in the second half of the 19th century, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas of the United States, under the name of "Community Organizing" (Amaro, 2022: 196-208). But the definition of what Community Development is was only consolidated after the Second World War, in particular after a proposal by the UN, which defined it in 1955 as "A process aimed at creating conditions for economic and social progress for the whole community with the active participation of its population and based on their initiative" (Silva, 1962: 32).

Several authors have followed Community Development practices and worked on the concept, leaving us with very important contributions, such as Ezequiel Ander-Egg (2003), James Christenson and Jerry Robinson (1989), Marco Marchioni (1999 and 2002) and Tomás Villasante (1984 and 2001).

For example, Ezequiel Ander-Egg defines Community Development, in a succinct and practical way, as the "Term to designate those processes whereby the efforts of a population join with those of its government to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, integrate them into the life of the country and enable them to contribute fully to the national process. It is a process to awaken functional groups of citizens capable of becoming active and responsible agents of their own progress, using as means the common investigation of local problems, the planning and execution by themselves of solutions previously agreed upon and the voluntary coordination with the other groups and with the official authorities, so that the total welfare of the community is obtained." (Ander-Egg - undated: 23).

In this process, the combination of three main protagonists is important: "The process always has three protagonists (who are the protagonists of the organised life of a democratic system) who are directly involved in the issues of community intervention: the administrations and, first of all, the local administration; the technical and professional resources that operate in/with that community (public, private non-profit and voluntary) and the population. All three actors must be properly involved in the process, each playing their role and respecting and assuming the role of the others." (Marchioni, 2002: 456-457)⁵. But the role of the community is essential because "each community will see where and how it can improve its situation and which aspects, issues or problems are the most important priorities." (Marchioni, 1999: 9).

Trying to combine some of the most pertinent and applicable contributions to the realities in which we wanted to intervene, we proposed the following definition of Community Development, crossing an inductive perspective with a more deductive concern:

"It is a process of change; centred in a community (of human scale and proximity); it aims, by responding to unmet basic needs, to increase well-being and well-living; starting, preferably from endogenous capacities and resources. This implies a methodology and pedagogy of participation and empowerment, with exogenous resources fertilising endogenous ones, in an integrated and multidimensional perspective. It also requires a logic of partnership, that is articulation among institutions and services, with a tendency to impact on the whole community. Finally it accomodates

⁴ Here we take the concept of Community Development to mean essentially the same thing as Local Development, as explained in Amaro (2022: 196-208).

⁵ Cf. also Marchioni (1999: 9)

diverse rhythms, logics, processes and results, reflecting the specific characteristics and specificities of each community.” (Amaro and Ferreira, 2024: 198)⁶.

This definition has ten methodological implications for its practical application, all of which are present, with varying emphases, in the Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca (Amaro, 2018: 23 and Ferreira and Amaro, 2021: 70):

- Territorialisation - being grounded in the community, which implies being from the community or being recognised and accepted by it;
- Participation of the community;
- *Empowerment* - or autonomisation of the community;
- Integrated Approach - adoption of a cross-sectional perspective of problems and responses;
- Cooperation or Partnership - implying articulation between the institutions and services present in the community;
- Flexibility - adaptation to the evolution of reality, in the actions and paths to be taken;
- Action Planning with Improvisation, whenever necessary;
- Permanent Evaluation - for correction and flexibility, whenever necessary;
- Adoption of a continuous Action-Research perspective - reflecting and acting interactively, on an ongoing basis, and a process of mutual dialogue and learning between different topos of knowledge and expertise (popular and “technical”);
- Combining ethical competences (reference values), and relational and technical skills.

It is interesting to note that this formulation intersects with the concept of “community economy” proposed by Gibson-Graham (2006 and 1996), as a “fertile concept” (Miller, 2013: 519) and a “counter-hegemonic project” (Miller, 2013: 528), while also opening the door to a “radically democratic” experience (Miller, 2013: 519)⁷. We found elements of these two perspectives in the experiences of the Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca.

It is within this framework that a Community Forum or Community Group is defined (Amaro, 2018: 18, Ferreira and Amaro, 2021: 69 and Amaro and Ferreira, 2024: 192)⁸ as “informal platforms and dynamics that combine the following concepts and practices:

- Participation: Active involvement of communities (residents, as individual and/or collectively, through both informal or formal groups) (Nunes et al., 2017: 70-75);
- Partnership: Genuine cooperation (and not mere “collaboration”) between services and institutions, public and/or private, active in the territory (ibid.);
- in order to share, in a participative and integrated way, the diagnosis of the problems and needs of the Community;
- to claim and/or build together the *responses* and *dreams* to face them;
- and thus achieve the *development, welfare and well-living of the community*.”

⁶ Cf. also Amaro (2018: 21-22) and Ferreira and Amaro (2021: 69-70).

⁷ Cf. also Fung and Wright (2003), Fung and Cohen (2004), Fung (2006), Hickey and Mohan (2004), Villasante (1984) and Villasante, Serrano y Gutiérrez (2001).

⁸ Cf. also Marchioni (1999: 8-12) and Marchioni (2002: 456-473).

In fact, the Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca (as others Fora of the municipality of Arouca) was inspired by the experiences of Community Groups of Lisbon, which began in 1993⁹.

The Community Groups/Community Fora are very interesting experiences of SPLG - Shared and Participatory Local Governance, defined as (Amaro and Ferreira, 2024: 199 and Ferreira and Amaro, 2021: 94-95)¹⁰ “an new model of political regulation through active cooperation between communities and institutions, based on four key principles:

- Neighbourhood-scale of local: effective proximity, life and identity;
- *Shared*: committed partnership of institutions (public and private, including companies) and public services, active in the neighbourhood;
- *Participatory*: an active involvement of local communities;
- *Governance*: Co-responsibility for management of social problems and challenges, and therefore of the common good.”

From a methodological point of view, this text is the result of a Critical Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Kemmis et al., 2014) process, since the three authors are part of the Community Forum and are permanently involved in action and reflection. In order to produce this text, we used our permanent participant observation and written records of the Forum's meetings and activities.

Given the characteristics of this experience and the active involvement of its authors in it, it can be said that the action-research question of this reflection consists of discussing how a Community Development dynamic can also become a Solidarity Economy process and a New Commons. In this sense, it can be said that the aim is to contribute to strengthening this practical and theoretical articulation, which has not always been established and taken into account by the examples and literature in these fields.

3. Dynamics and achievements of the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum

As a Community Group, the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum has the dynamism that people want, through deliberative democratic processes. The Forum began because the Department of Social Action of the Municipality of Arouca wanted to promote an experience similar to those of the Community Groups of Lisbon (cf. Amaro, 2024 and Ferreira and Amaro, 2021), which in turn had already influenced the creation of Parish Social Fora in the neighbouring municipality of Santa Maria da Feira. Initially, to set up the Forum, the community had the support of the Parish Council of the Union of Parishes of Canelas and Espiunca, with the backing of the Town Council and of a regional development association called ADRIMAG - Associação de Desenvolvimento Rural Integrado das Serras de Montemuro, Arada e Gralheira (Association for Integrated Rural Development of the Mountains of Montemuro, Arada and Gralheira).

The first meeting, held on 16 September 2022 in Canelas, focused on how to involve young people in the community and how to minimise the isolation of the elderly. In August 2023, the Forum elected a secretariat, with people representing the various localities and age and gender diversity and

⁹ To find out more about the experiences of the Community Groups of Lisbon, see Ferreira and Amaro (2021), Amaro (2022: 234-238 and 250-268) and Amaro and Ferreira (2024).

¹⁰ Cf. also the concept of Empowered Participatory Governance, presented by Fung and Wright (2003) and Fung (2006).

then the Forum created an email and a facebook page and began communicating directly with the community. Once the Forum had a secretariat, it became easier to prepare meetings and organise everyone's information and ideas. The email and Facebook¹¹ page were created in November 2023 by decision of the secretariat and with the support of the Forum.

We can say that the election of the secretariat was an important moment for the people to realise that the Community Forum is independent of political powers and that it is not a project of the Union of Parishes or the City Council.

After the first few months of setting up the Community Forum, people defined its main objectives as: contributing to the social cohesion of the Union of Parishes; helping to find answers to the problems and needs of the community presented at the meetings; bringing public institutions and services (health, social security, education, etc.) together to discuss the real problems of the population; and being a meeting place for people and institutions. The group decided to start with the area of health, not only because of the links the Forum has with some people in this sector, but also because it was understood that this is a very important issue for older people, whose isolation was identified as one of the problems to be addressed by the Forum.

The first initiatives that were developed included support for young people and teenagers (they themselves organised a young party in order to socialising, as opposed to daily life around smartphones and screens), intergenerational dialogue and interaction and support for isolated elderly people: groups of children visited elderly people and talked with them, keeping them company for a few moments at Christmas (2022 and 2023) and Easter (2022).

After these first realisations, the Community Forum went through a few moments when some people became more discouraged with the project, perhaps because they thought the Community Forum should be something bigger with a different impact. But then, with the creation of the secretariat and the emergence of new ideas, the Forum grew.

The next phase of the Community Forum's dynamic included supporting and encouraging the local informal economy, by organising three street fairs to promote and sell local products, and setting up a Community Solidarity Shop, to exchange and sell second-hand clothes and other items.

Firstly, in December 2023, the Community Forum organised a Community Christmas Street Fair in Canelas. Anyone could take part in this fair, by registering in advance and selling agricultural products, handicrafts and other products from associations and informal groups. For example, a folklore association (Rancho Folclórico "As Lavradeiras de Canelas") took part with an old-fashioned soup. At the Community Street Fairs you can also eat and drink, socialise, take part in competitions and watch local groups perform.

After the success of the Community Christmas Fair, in 2023, the community expressed the wish to also organise another Community Fair, so the Forum organised a Community Spring Street Fair, in another part of parish, in Espiunca (in a place called Vila Viçosa), in May 2024. The results were so interesting and so valued by the community, that they are now an important part of the Community Forum's annual activities. During the Spring Community Fair, the Forum started working in the area of health and organised health screenings and the Fair programme also included a parade of donated clothes to promote another important community project, the Community Solidarity Shop.

Meanwhile, in the area of health, another activity organised by the Community Forum was an information session on personalised medicine, in July 2024, with a guest pharmacist. It was a session on the right medicines, at the right dose and at the right time. This session was also aimed at isolated and the elderly people.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/forumcomunitariodecanelasespiunca>

When the Community Forum celebrated its two-year anniversary, a special meeting was organised and some quantitative data on its activities was presented and analysed, showing some important results. During these two years, 18 meetings have been held, not counting secretariat meetings, and more than a hundred different people have attended the Forum's meetings, with the data showing between nine and 41 participants at each meeting, but a total of 115 different people. The meetings were also attended by 11 local organisations and associations, including three Private Social Solidarity Institutions (IPSS - Instituições Particulares de Solidariedade Social), four public organisations and five private companies. The meetings were also attended by a university, the ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon.

The Community Forum continued its work in the field of health, organising a session on oncology with a renowned doctor, Manuel Sobrinho Simões, who has his roots in Arouca. The meeting also paid tribute to Manuel Valério, founder of the Canelas Trilobite Museum. The museum is located in Canelas and houses some of the largest trilobites in the world, preserved by Manuel Valério, owner of the quarry where the fossils were found¹². The aim of the meeting was to provide the community with more information about cancer and to increase the tools available to deal with these situations, from which no one can consider themselves free. At the same time, the event was a tribute to Manuel Valério, with testimonies from workers and friends who lived with him and contributed to the construction of the museum and the preservation of its heritage.

In 2024, the Community Forum organised the second Community Christmas Street Fair and on the same day (15 December) the Community Solidarity Shop of the Forum was inaugurated. This Community Fair was attended by people from outside Canelas and Espiunca (selling handicrafts and also singing), demonstrating the event's potential and how Community Fairs transcend local geographical boundaries.

The Community Solidarity Shop is located in a space that the Union of Parishes of Canelas and Espiunca has given to the Community Forum for one year. The Solidarity Shop will be open to the community two of three times a month, with people volunteering, who can also sell their own products, in the same place and within the same logic of the informal economy as the Community Street Fairs.

Both the Community Street Fairs and the Community Solidarity Shop are creations of the Community Forum, which has taken on a Solidarity Economy logic in these initiatives.

The Community Solidarity Shop is an initiative of social, environmental and economic interest, which consists of collecting used clothes, shoes and other items, still in good condition, which are then put up for sale (after being washed, ironed and, if necessary, subjected to minor sewing repairs) at a solidarity price. The project thus has three main impacts: an environmental impact through reuse; a social impact by meeting possible basic needs at a low price; and an economic impact by creating the conditions for future economic activity, within the logic of the Solidarity Economy. A survey carried out at the Forum, just a month after the shop opened in its physical space, shows that the population has participated significantly, either by donating clothes and objects, or by taking advantage of the opportunity to buy new items at very affordable prices, which demonstrates the success of this project. The Solidarity Shop is also a space for socialising and interaction, and has already hosted a talk on "Life Stories", by a local elderly man with many stories to tell.

The Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca is also collaborating in the organisation of an interforuns meeting, involving the other foruns of the municipality of Arouca, an activity in 2025. This

¹² It is possible to get more information about what a trilobite is and the importance of the museum that is located in Canelas, Arouca, through the link of the official page of the museum: <https://museudastrilobites.pt/en/fossils/>

year, the Forum intends to develop new activities in the Community Solidarity Shop and plans to maintain its monthly meetings, organise another Community Spring Street Fair and other activities of community interest and deliberation.

In the future, the Forum will tend to encompass other areas of Community Welfare, such as Social Support, Culture, Education, Employment, Mental Health, as a result of its greater involvement, together with the other living beings and abiotic elements of the territory, in the co-construction ("Sympoiesis" - Haraway, 2016) of Life in Common, while also reinforcing its role in fertilising the formal processes of Representative Democracy and in maintaining respect for the plurality of actors involved (Lahire, 2002).

3.1 The Resources of the Community Forum

All projects need resources to be real. It is resources that make ideas and dreams possible (in fact, ideas and dreams are already resources). Human resources are the Community Forum's main resource. But it is important to say that they produce new resources, such as ideas, gastronomy, crafts, etc. And the Canelas and Espiunca Forum also shares resources such as skills and talents. As Amaro (2018: 105) said, a "Community Group can be self-sufficient and not need funding" and the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum has demonstrated this. The first realisations didn't need money, just the presence of people (children, teenagers, adults and the elderly) and their time and dedication to other people and empathy.

In this logic, the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum is an example of Lipovestky & Serroy's (2010) "culture of the world" theory, about how people want to participate even in a disorientated and individualised society. "The idea of a passive citizen and a growing retreat into the private sphere is unfounded" (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2010: 180) and today people want new forms of participation and new forms of collective solidarity and new forms of denouncing and questioning the installed powers (Lipovestky & Serroy, 2010: 181).

In each case, human resources are supported by other resources. For example, public support is important for logistical needs, such as making infrastructure available and helping to set up the fairground. Other private support is also important, such as the furniture for the solidarity shop donated by a Santa Maria da Feira co-operative, Casa dos Choupos. ADRIMAG's support in some logistical matters, such as transport, providing snacks or some contacts, is also very important.

Now, the clothes, shoes, crockery and other items donated are also a resource for the Community Forum. And the Forum is starting to have some money because of the solidarity sales. But it is important to emphasise the dynamics and projects that were possible before the Forum had money, because it is an example of the importance of each resource. People could do activities without money, but money couldn't do activities without people to think, to have the ideas, to talk and reflect together and to implement the ideas. Another important resource available to the Community Forum, which is important for things like writing articles like this one or presenting the Forum in different contexts, is documentary resources. There is statistical data and photographs, for example. Documentary resources are also relevant if group members want to reflect on certain aspects of the community project and the impact of their achievements.

The Community Forum also has a communication strategy that produces other resources, such as posters and newspaper reports. The meetings are also publicised on the Facebook page, through emails to local associations and groups, posters in the streets and a "word of mouth" strategy. The word-of-mouth strategy consists of talking about the meetings in public places or phoning certain people to invite them to the meetings, which are held in different locations in Canelas and Espiunca,

so as to be accessible to everyone. If a person couldn't go to the meetings in Canelas, perhaps they could go to some meetings in Espiunca. It is usually the members of the secretariat who do this, but anyone can pass on the message. When the Forum organises activities other than the usual meetings, the secretariat writes press releases and sends them to local and regional newspapers and radio stations. It has also written press releases on the Forum's second year and on the participation of Forum members in international academic events, such as the International Conference on Social and Solidarity Economy and the Commons.

In conclusion, in terms of resources, it can be said that human resources are the main resource of the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum, and that human resources generate other resources necessary for the development of activities. Logistical resources (support from public and private organisations) are very important and financial resources (or the lack of them) have not been an obstacle to carrying out activities. We find this very interesting because it seems that the Forum has basically been understood. No idea has failed to be realised for lack of money.

In this sense, we believe that what matters is what people, as individuals, transform into collective action. The Community Forum works with public and private goods. The Forum creates New Commons, such as the Community Fair and the Community Solidarity Shop. The Fair and the Shop are Commons because they have public and private support but are developed, used and managed by the community, they are made available to the community. And the concept of Commons here does not mean that there is common ownership (although there may be), but rather that there is common use and/or management, even if the ownership is private or public. In this context, the concept of Commons we are considering is more related to the concept of co-activity - activity proposed and carried out jointly by the community, which can involve other actors, public or private (Dardot and Laval, 2014).

The Community Forum is therefore an immaterial Commons, just like the Fair and the Community Solidarity Shop (in this case a material Commons, owned by the Canelas and Espiunca Parish Council, in terms of physical space, but also immaterial in its operating logic).

4. Conclusion – the Forum as a Commons

The Community Forum of Canelas and Espiunca was born out of the experiences of Community Groups, which were created in Lisbon in 1993 (Amaro, 2024 and Ferreira and Amaro, 2021). This is why it is now part of a Network of Lusophone Community Groups, bearing in mind that this model of community dynamics currently exists in 27 neighbourhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area (Amaro, 2024 and Ferreira and Amaro, 2021), but also in several parishes in the municipality of Santa Maria da Feira, in six parishes in the municipality of Arouca, in two areas of São Tomé and Príncipe, in two areas of Angola and one is being created in Mozambique. All of them were and are inspired by the experiences of Lisbon and the concept of Community Development, defined in point 1 (Amaro, 2018, in particular).

As has been mentioned, the Canelas and Espiunca Community Forum was originally created as a result of an initiative and with the support of the local authorities, making Marco Marchioni right when he wrote: "For this process to take place, someone will have to take the initiative, as it does not happen spontaneously, and provide the minimum means for it to take place spontaneously, and provide the minimum means for it to be carried out: we mean that one of the three protagonists will have to assume the initial leading role. Given the current conditions and context, it is most likely, and even desirable, that the initiative should be taken by the local administration, which should be the first interested party in promoting this improvement process, involving the population more decisively in

it and making more appropriate use of the numerous and qualified existing technical and professional resources.” (Marchioni, 1999: 10).

However, the community quickly took centre stage in the Forum’s dynamics, becoming the main protagonist. This happened above all with the election of the Secretariat, made up of ten people from four localities, seven from the community, one representing the Parish Council (but also a resident), another representing the regional development association (ADRMAG) and another representing the university (ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon), seven women and three men.

As a result, the Forum has taken on an effective democratic and participatory character, being an expression of Direct and Deliberative Community Democracy (Fung and Wright, 2003; Fung and Cohen, 2004; Fung, 2006; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Villasante, 1984; and Villasante, Serrano y Gutiérrez, 2001), confirming Marco Marchioni’s emphasis on Participation: “The community process is a participatory process. Without participation there is no process, there is no real change, or rather, change will always be the product of the decisions of others and we will be mere recipients of the consequences of these decisions.” (Marchioni, 1999: 16). Or else: “Participation is therefore the “star” of the process. It is clear that if there is no participation (...), there is no process. There are things, there are activities, there are projects, but everything will be provisional, punctual, immediate; without a process of construction of the community, of its future and of its capacity to confront the situations that arise and that affect it directly or indirectly. They will be dependent communities: on the mayor, on the administrations, on technicians or on someone from outside, and they will be incapable of facing endogenous changes, nor will they know how to develop their own potential resources, nor will they know how to face the external processes that will condition them.” (Marchioni, 2002: 457).

Clearly asserting itself as an effectively participatory process, in which the community has the main ideas and assumes their organization (the activities already carried out prove this, especially the Community Fairs and the Community Solidarity Shop), the Forum has already taken significant steps towards the practice of a Shared and Participatory Local Governance (Amaro and Ferreira, 2024: 199 and Ferreira and Amaro, 2021: 94-95) and of an Empowered Participatory Governance (Fung and Wright, 2003 and Fung, 2006).

This centrality assumed by the community, in its ideas, decisions and achievements, makes the Forum an exemplary process of the “return of the Community” to regulation and power in society, after its “expulsion” following the “great transformation” (Polanyi, 2001) of the 18th and 19th centuries, first by the market and then by the state. The community, or at least some of its elements, are empowered and acquire autonomy, which is one of the essential characteristics of the concept and practices of the Commons (De Angelis, 2017: 223-262), especially when it translates into “auto-production” (“*Autopoeisis*”), commoning being a “generative force of autopoeisis” (De Angelis, 2017: 236).

With this central role for the community, the conditions are created for the so-called “return of the Commons”, well expressed, from a theoretical point of view, by the seminal work of Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom, 1990), whose criteria of “commoning” (the “eight key ‘design principles’ for successful commons” – Bollier, 2015: 6) are well represented in this Forum, especially in the way the Forum is governing itself and, in particular, in the way it organizes, manages and uses the Community Fairs and the Community Solidarity Shop.

In this sense, the Forum and its creations can be considered “New Commons” (Bollier, 2014), and the Community Fairs and the Community Solidarity Shop are, in a way, embryos of a “community economy” (Gibson-Graham, 2006 and Miller, 2013), proposing “alternative economic practices” or “alternative spaces” (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

In particular, the Community Solidarity Shop, since it could become a co-operative, could become a Common connected to the principles of “solidarity economies” (Vathakou, 2015 and Eynaud and Laville, 2017), or to the politics of solidarity (Healy et al., 2018).

In general, it can be said that the Forum develops co-activities (Dardot et Laval, 2014), in a logic of “commoning projects” (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2017), co-construction (“*Sympoiesis*” – Haraway, 2016) of Life in Common, with “common action” (“*agir commun*”) rather than “acting in common” (“*agir en commun*”) (Dardot et Laval, 2014: 137-188, 276-284).

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