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Food Networks As Urban Commons: Case Study of a Portuguese “Prosumers” Group

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

In many parts of the world, people are coming together to experiment with ways to collectively take care of their livelihoods and create practical solutions to their needs. Guided by principles of solidarity, these grassroots initiatives represent rich contexts for research on the urban commons: what qualifies them as commons, and how do they emerge, develop, sustain and dissolve – or transform over time? This research dissects the commons character of a food network which emerged from Porto’s solidarity economy movement in a post-crisis context. Following an action-research approach and methodological triangulation, we develop a qualitative analysis of a “prosumers” group, where both production and distribution were performed weekly by consumers themselves. We first analyze how the initiative emerged and then look at how its principles and democratic qualities relate to commons theories and frameworks. We then delve into the main dilemmas of its commoning practices and reflect about its transformative character and liminal role as a temporary urban commons. Despite ceasing its activities, there was a lived-experience and a knowledge commons which allowed it to be appropriated in new terms, and thus food networks as urban commons persist.

1. Introduction

Commons modes of production - as collectively self-governed providers of resources and needs - predated capitalism and are present globally (Bollier, 2002). In times of crisis, communities experiment with ways to collectively take responsibility for their livelihoods and create practical solutions to their needs (Conill et al., 2012; Bollier and Helrich, 2019). In the last decade, anti-austerity “outrage” shifted into “networks of hope” (Castells, 2012), giving rise to emerging cooperatives, local currencies, and other bottom-up initiatives to provide food, education, housing, and healthcare (Castells et al., 2017) which are “inherently political, as they are concerned with ownership, participation, and social change” (Kawano et al., 2009; Sbeih, 2014). With a new cycle of crisis brought about by the covid-19 pandemic, what can we learn from past experiences of commons-based alternative production networks that arose from similar contexts?

Even though commons have been present throughout history and might last over time (Wall, 2014), most of the previous analysis has focused on the characterization of specific moments, either in stages of stable development (Ostrom, 1990) or in the early stages of their emergence. In contrast, this paper\textsuperscript{1} will address the longitudinal dimension of commons, by analyzing how they emerge, evolve and, in some cases, dissolve over time.

Food provision is often at the core of alternative economic practices which can be considered a commons (Sumner, 2011). Claiming “solidarity economy is Utopian unless we secure food sovereignty first” (Solikon, 2015), people and movements reclaim food as a commons (Vivero-Pol, 2017; Vivero-Pol et al., 2018) with the aim to take “control over the means of subsistence for the ends of maximizing life and social justice — not profits, nor the pursuit of money as an end in itself” (Johnston, 2003: cited in Sumner, 2011). Agroecological consumer groups (Espelt et al., 2018), community-supported agriculture schemes and other collective socio-economic structures for food provision represent a type of resource systems that can be characterized as a commons, once certain principles (Ostrom, 1990) and democratic qualities (Fuster Morell et al., 2018; Fuster Morell and Espelt, 2019) are put in place, such as providing mechanisms for members participation, collective decision-making and promoting economic transparency. The growing debate on food as a commons is quite recent and has seen a quantitative and qualitative leap with Vivero-Pol et al.’s (2018)

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Handbook of Food as a Commons which gathers a wealth of theoretical and empirical research between and within disciplines, covering different cultures, “niches of resistance” and organizational scales.

Whereas alternative socioeconomic initiatives seem to emerge and grow more in some places than others (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2017), Portugal is often left out of the international debate on the rise of bottom-up solidarity economies (Hespanha et al., 2015; Parente, 2017). Perceived as a country with a “low degree of alternative forms of resilience” (Baumgarten, 2017), little is known about the counter-hegemonic initiatives that are developing away from the umbrella of State-sponsored “social innovation” or without privately-held support (Baumgarten, 2013).

The paper contributes towards filling these gaps with a longitudinal analysis of a solidarity food system and the commons in Portugal. The research is based on the case of a Portuguese “prosumers” group that emerged from Porto’s solidarity movement in a post-austerity context (Gutiérrez, 2014) to collectively organize the self-provision of essential goods. The main question of research is how an urban food commons emerges, develops, sustains and dissolves - or transforms in the long run.

In order to address this question, the article begins with a brief introduction to the theoretical framework and concepts that guide the analysis: from the classic design principles for governing a commons (Ostrom, 1990) to more recent literature on the urban commons, social movements (Harvey, 2013; de Angelis, 2012), and the qualities of commons-based initiatives (Fuster Morell et al., 2018; Fuster Morell and Espelt, 2019). The following section outlines the adopted methodology to retrospectively develop the case, drawing upon an action-research design and triangulation methods, including ethnography, participant-observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The results section is divided into four parts, each of which addressing a key point of the main question. We first explain the context and conditions under which the initiative emerged. Then we develop an analysis of what characterizes the food network as a commons. In this regard, we explore how the principles and democratic qualities of the experience match with well known commons principles (Ostrom, 1990) and qualities (Fuster Morell et al., 2018). We then look at the main dilemmas of its communing practices, reflecting on the factors that eventually prevented the group from sustaining the commons. Finally, we explore its transformative character and liminal role as an urban commons during its existence. There was a knowledge and communication commons which allowed it to be appropriated by others in new terms after ceasing its activities, and thus the quest for food networks as urban commons continues.

2. Theoretical Framework

In recent years, the commons have become a field of study and experimentation on the dynamics of communities around shared and open resources which go beyond the State and the market economy. This field covers a diversity of practices, from the traditional commons, mostly concerned with natural resource systems (Ostrom, 1990), to the knowledge and cultural commons (Benkler, 2006; Fuster Morell, 2010; Hess and Ostrom, 2011) which have gained momentum with the advent of the networked society. In addition, urban commons bring important political perspectives on the struggles and collective action against neoliberal enclosures (de Angelis, 2012; Harvey, 2013).

The work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) is seminal in this field, as it lays out the design principles that seem to allow the conditions of good governance of the commons. Her rebutting of “The Tragedy of the Commons” (Hardin, 1968) explains the misconceptions of the influential essay that dismissed the commons as a failed system of governance and resource management. Ostrom confirmed the possibility of the commons by distinguishing them from plain open access regimes, stressing missing key factors in Hardin’s narrative which are crucial to understanding how the commons can be effectively (re)produced and sustained. These principles include: 1) defining clear group boundaries; 2) creating rules adapted to local needs and conditions; 3) participation of members in modifying the rules; 4) monitoring of members’ behavior; 5) application of sanctions to rule violators; 6) low-cost local arenas for dispute resolution; 7) recognition of the self-determination of the community by higher-level authorities; and 8) as nested resource systems form, they organize in multiple layers of the entire interconnected system (Ostrom, 1990). Such principles help explain how communities have managed to sustain the governance of shared resources throughout history.

In addition to Ostrom’s and Hardin’s “institutionalist” approach, other contemporary scholars conceive the commons as an arena for political struggle, collective action and social emancipation (de Angelis, 2012; Harvey, 2013). In addition, the digital revolution has resulted in an increase of commons practices, by reducing the costs of collective action (Benkler, 2002), and connecting with urban social movements and network effects, thereby increasing collaborative dynamics supported by digital platforms, particularly in cities (Fuster Morell et al., 2018).

Focusing on social movements-based practices and crises contexts, some authors recognize the “liminal” character of the commons (Varvarousis, 2018) as “spaces of possibility (...) of collective action to create something radically different” (Harvey, 2013), even if not long-enduring as Ostrom’s commons aimed to be. They are paving the way “for a more just communal way of life based on collective responsibility and cooperation among earthly beings” (Velicu, 2019), often in conflict with current policies, existing law and the authorities. This idea of conflict is also supported by de Angelis (2012) when contrasting movements with classical commons theories. Whereas Ostrom points to the recognition by higher level authorities of the right of commoners to organize as one of the principles for sustaining the commons, de Angelis adds that “the work of history of course shows us that this recognition is often won through struggle”.

More than linear processes of collective action that last in time with relative stability once certain principles are met, commons can thus be understood as “small acts of everyday revolution” (Gibson-Graham, 2014) which are “catalytic for the take-off of new commons” (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2017). They emerge from necessity and develop through action as “commoning”, which Bollier and Helfrich (2019) define as “what common people decide for themselves in their specific circumstances if they want to get along with each other and produce as much wealth for everyone as possible.” The commons are not only about the resources but also and most importantly, about the social practices of self-governance that allow its reproduction – hence the famous quote by Linebaugh (2008), “there is no commons without commoning”. In this regard, a longitudinal approach to the commons is relevant.

Furthermore, the spread and adoption of new technologies by these experiences enables the generation of a ‘memory track’, which favors a derivative evolution. As such, a framework that also considers the knowledge dimension in commoning practices allows us to deepen the longitudinal analysis of commons initiatives.

Fuster Morell (2018) proposes an analytical framework which helps assess to what level emerging economic practices can be considered a commons. Depending on a set of common qualities, which consider a plurality of dimensions (including knowledge), the framework enables
a more complete balance in order to understand and follow the evolutionary character of the cases. She argues for a holistic assessment of the sustainability and pro-democratization qualities of collaborative economy initiatives – which by definition are based on digital platforms. The categories of observation can be applied to any economic initiative to “provide insight into the sustainability of their design”.

Fuster Morell’s “commons balance” is based on six dimensions of analysis: governance design, economical strategy, technological base, knowledge policies, social responsibility and impact. In this way, it contributes to the institutional commons approach – which has mostly focused on governance aspects – by adding layers of analysis that cannot be overlooked when reflecting on the conditions under which contemporary socio-economic practices occur.

The framework incorporates cyberscholars’ conceptions of the commons (Benkler, 2002; Lessig, 2004; Rose, 1986) referring to their open access condition (Fuster Morell, 2010) as revealing of their commons character. The framework has been developed into an empirical tool and used in the analysis of diverse cases in the city of Barcelona (Fuster Morell and Espelt, 2019), including platform cooperatives for food consumption (Espelt and Moreira, 2019). By looking at the type of organizations, adopted mechanisms for participation, economic goals, transparency, technological tools, knowledge licenses and social and environmental roles, the framework helps to determine the levels of accomplishment of commons principles and solidarity economy values.

As well as expanding the dimensions of analysis to characterize a commons, it also makes sense to expand the contexts in which commons are performed. Solidarity economy and food sovereignty movements inspire new practices of urban commoning that have multiplied in recent years, aiming at social, political, environmental and sustainability transformations in societies (Pelenc et al., 2019). Focusing on alternative food systems, Huddart Kennedy et al. (2016) argue that those who have “experienced the lived realities of economic marginalization” – as the victims of austerity policies have – “demonstrate a thick democratic imagination in the prognostic frames for food system change”. This imagination often materializes in alternative food networks and community-supported agriculture schemes with great emancipatory potential (Sahakian, 2017), depending on their democratization qualities (Prost et al., 2018) and collectivist motivations (Schrank and Running, 2016).

In summary, the paper contributes to a longitudinal analysis of the commons and to an emerging debate on the transformative character of the urban commons when compared with classical theories for sustaining long-enduring collective actions. To do so, the article extends the application of Ostrom principles and Fuster Morell’s framework to an urban food commons in an unexplored geographical context (Porto, Portugal). Whereas literature on the natural commons in Portugal can be easily found – particularly on the common lands in rural areas known as “baldios” (Nieto-Romero et al., 2019) – literature on the Portuguese urban commons is still scarce. This research constitutes an innovative contribution, bringing evidence of food-based commoning practices in a geographical region which has often been overlooked in commons literature.

3. Methods

The present research lies on an action research approach (Lewin, 1946; Chen et al., 2018) and focuses on a case study of a lived-experience with the solidarity economy movement and other collectives from Porto. Based on a qualitative analysis, the case study analyzes an alternative “prosumption” group which emerged from Porto’s solidarity economy movement to organize the exchange of food and other essential goods using a local currency.

Associação Pela Manutenção da Economia de Proximidade (AMEP, Association for the Preservation of the Local Economy) was launched in November 2014 by a non-profit association, Moving Cause, in collaboration with the local solidarity economy movement, ECOSOL. AMEP provided a framework to collectively organize the production, consumption and distribution of primary goods, and adopted a complementary virtual currency which had been put into circulation in May.

Table 1

| Documents collected during fieldwork (2014–2016). |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Documents that support the analysis            |
| 1. Charter of Principles: AMEP                |
| 2. AMEP: Practical Guide                      |
| 3. List of coordination tasks                  |
| 4. Transparency reports                        |
| 5. Order sheets and distribution maps          |
| 6. Online content published by Moving Cause and ECOSOL |
| 7. Photographic records                        |
| 10. AMEP’s zine                                |

Fig. 1. How does an urban food commons emerge, develop, sustain and dissolve - or transform in the long run? The case develops through a complete action-research cycle, where each step addresses different questions, theoretical frameworks and goals of the research.
Fig. 2. AMEP Practical Guide: "proposta for the proper functioning and organization of distribution rounds" (screen capture of AMEP’s zine).
AMEP’s starting hypothesis was that (a) by systematically introducing food and other essential goods into the ECOSOL network, and (b) by collectively organizing a structure and a physical meeting point for conviviality and exchange, the local solidarity economy movement would scale and thrive.

The research is based on methodological triangulation (Della Porta, and Keating, M. (Eds.)., 2008) combining ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation, document analysis, semi-structured interviews and a focus group.

3.1. Data Collection

Ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation were conducted between July 2014 and March 2016 – from planning the food exchange group to putting it into practice for nine distribution rounds, until activities ceased. As an “insider research”, access to empirical material naturally took place during the course of the action – “not only through the detached observational role but through the subjectively immersed role as well” (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007, p. 66).

The research results from the analysis of data collected in two different moments, “as a journey from nearness to distance” (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007): first through participation, and later as a researcher.

A set of documents were collected through participation during the experience (see Table 1), which support the analysis. As some documents of the project had been lost over time, the current research contributed to their recovery and systematization into an online archive for future reference.3 (See Figs. 1–7.)

Finally, semi-structured interviews and a focus group with former participants after activities ceased were fundamental to enrich the analysis. In January 2020 we sent a request to AMEP’s contact list (n = 40) for a final reflection. Ten former members shared their thoughts about the experience. The interviews addressed two main questions: one about the transformative nature of AMEP, both at the individual and collective level, and the other about the reasons that led to its ending. A focus group with six former members allowed us to deepen this reflection with a collective discussion which departed from the same questions of the interviews.

3.2. Data Analysis

The case develops through a full loop of the “spiral of steps” that characterizes the action-research methodology (Robson, 2002): iterative cycles of planning, action and observation, and critical reflection about the results of the action, eventually leading to new iterations that build upon the learnings from previous experiments. This case can be considered the first iteration of an ongoing research on urban commons and other food networks that have meanwhile appropriated some of the knowledge and communication commons from this experience.

Data was systematized by applying an adaptation of Fuster’s (2018) commons framework. She proposes six dimensions to assess the

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3 The archive can be found at https://movingcause.org/arquivo/amep-2014-2016/
commons qualities of economic initiatives: governance design, economic strategy, knowledge policies, technological base, social responsibility and impact. The present case study dissects these dimensions through an exercise of process tracing (Vanhala, 2017) in order to identify the group’s commons practices and principles (see Table 2).

The retrospective longitudinal study also considers AMEP’s governing principles compared to Ostrom’s (1990) classical list of principles to govern a commons. The analysis of the commons qualities and principles follows an inductive approach and is based on participant-observation and document analysis. Documents provide supplementary data, as a way of triangulating data that was sourced from fieldwork with documentary evidence of the indicators associated with each of the dimensions of analysis. This method of analysis entailed a first-pass document review, through which passages with evidence of commons principles and qualities of the initiative were identified, and later grouped into categories that refer to the dimensions of analysis in the light of new and old commons theories.

Reflection after the activities ceased is based on brief semi-structured interviews and a focus group with former participants. The audio recordings were transcribed and coded using NVivo. The testimonies of

Fig. 4. Excerpt from the food sovereignty declaration (Solikon, 2015) published in AMEP’s zine.
the participants were grouped into categories of analysis concerned with the dilemmas of commoning practices, and the transformative character of the initiative.

The combination of methods sets an original analysis that represents useful knowledge for those interested in the intersection between the urban commons, solidarity economy, food networks and social movements.

4. The Case of a Portuguese “Prosumers” Group

Our analysis shows how a community of “prosumers” came together and performed an urban food commons during its existence. There was a socio-economic context that favoured the birth of the initiative, which was based on a concrete proposal of collective organization for the exchange of food and other essential goods. The way the group organized and developed brings evidence of commons-oriented qualities and principles, such as the adoption of mechanisms for democratic participation and economic transparency. The analysis also reveals the main dilemmas of the commoning practices which eventually led to the dissolution of the food network. These dilemmas concern the resilience of the social fabric and the dimension of care in sustaining a commons, as well as the ability to meet the real needs and livelihoods of all involved. The study however recognizes the transformative character of the lived experience which opened space for new food commons to emerge.

4.1. The Birth of an Urban Food Commons

In late 2014 three collectives from Porto joined forces to launch a solidarity food network: the solidarity economy movement, ECOSOL, and two local associations, Moving Cause and Espaço Compasso.

By that time, austerity marked the socio-economic context in Portugal: between 2010 and 2013, the country saw the highest unemployment rates in decades and unprecedented emigration levels (Pires, 2019). As in other South European countries, which were also suffering the effects of the sovereign debt crisis, grassroots initiatives started to emerge looking for alternative ways to address people’s needs.

In Porto, ECOSOL was formed in late 2013 “to reflect on and practice solidarity economy” (EcoSol Porto, 2014). The informal collective – which described itself both as a movement and a network – was based on principles of cooperation, self-management, participation, transparency, decentralization, reciprocity and self-sufficiency. Through weekly meetings and events around topics on the alternative economies in different community spaces of the city, ECOSOL was a meeting point and a platform for knowledge exchange.

Fig. 5. Collective gardening day of AMEP members at Horta da Partilha (April 2015).

Fig. 6. ECOSOL assembly at Quinta do Mitra (March 2015) Photo by Irene Serafino.
Some of its members had been previously involved in the organization of “exchange markets” (Feira de Trocas das Virtudes), where direct exchange was encouraged rather than the use of money. These markets were fruitful in terms of social relations, bringing people and collectives closer together, but felt short in terms of real economic practices.

In May 2014 ECOSOL released a virtual social currency to facilitate multi-reciprocal economic exchange. Using a free online platform (Cyclos 4 Communities), ECOSOL members could announce products and services, offer or needs, and manage an alternative banking account based on the ECOSOL currency. During the first few months of its existence, there was little activity. On the one hand, it was a matter of
supply and demand: most of the products and services initially available were secondary (such as second-hand clothes, books, yoga and language classes, etc.), while basic products and essential goods, such as food, were seldom found within the solidarity economy network. On the other, the digital platform per se was proving insufficient for the de facto solidarity economy practices to develop. The lack of physical moments of socialization seemed to be hindering exchange.

In response to this, members of a local non-profit association, Moving Cause, brought forward the hypothesis that (a) by systematically introducing food and other essential goods into the ECSOSEL network, and (b) by collectively organizing a structure and a physical meeting point for conviviality and exchange, the local solidarity economy movement would scale and thrive. This hypothesis was tested with the design and implementation of AMEP.

AMEP derives from the French community-supported agriculture (CSA) model known as AMAP (Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne), where a group of consumers pays in advance for the growing season of one or more farmers and periodically receives baskets of organic produce. AMEP broadened the scope of AMAP by introducing multi-reciprocal relationships and the use of a local currency. Its acronym thus refers to the “Economía de Proximidad” rather than Peasant Agriculture.

AMEP was also influenced by a field visit to Catalonia in July 2014 to learn about the practical use of social currencies and the organization of alternative consumer groups. In the months that followed, Moving Cause members designed a framework for a “prosumers” group using a social currency. The framework adapted some of the original procedures of AMAP to meet AMEP’s specific conditions and needs, although the main characteristics remained: both are based on a long term bidding agreement between consumers and producers; members meet every week in a common delivery point; members participate in the decisions and the organization of the group.

Moving Cause presented AMEP’s proposal in the first ECSOSEL assembly in October 2014. ECSOSEL made its network and complementary currency available to test the framework and Espaco Compasso offered to host the weekly meetings.

In November 2014, the three collectives launched a call for proposals of products and producers to integrate the pilot-project AMEP. Fifteen people answered the call and the multi-reciprocal exchange began after a preparatory meeting where “prosumers” placed their orders, and a distribution plan was set for the following four weeks. Nine different products were available throughout the first round, including homemade yogurt and marmalade, take-away meals, mushrooms, cookies, kombucha and hygiene products. In the first communication to the group after the beginning of the first distribution round, the decoxarxes stand out:

“Space opens up to everything that can randomly arise when we are confronted with our own uselessness. AMEP is a provocation to the passive individuals. AMEP wants to spread the seed of the “prosumer” (…) and invites every consumer to be an active, productive, fertile node of this resilience network. AMEP promotes the performative function of food as an engine for the mobilization of a concrete utopia. The desire is just to build a society of frugal abundance.”

4Fieldwork included attending the fifth meeting of eco-networks and free currencies in Tarragona, where different social currency communities from throughout the Spanish State came together to discuss their practices. https://web.archive.org/web/20140811142004/https://ecoxarxes.cat/v-trobada-decoxarxes-19-20-juliol/ (last retrieved on March 21, 2019).

AMEP members committed to participate throughout distribution rounds of up to six weeks. Although “ciclos” (cycles) was the term used by the practitioners to refer to these periods of commitment, we chose to call them “distribution round” in this paper for the sake of clarity in order to disambiguate from the methodological action-research cycle.

4.2. Commoning Food: Principles and Democratic Qualities

Both the application of Fuster’s commons balance framework to AMEP (Table 3) and the analysis of its governance model against Ostrom’s principles reveal an overall open commons approach by the “prosumers” group.

4.2.1. Democratic Qualities

AMEP was a self-managed solidarity food network which was neither publicly funded nor legally formed or privately held. It created a series of rules and principles to organize a resource system away from the conventional market (and currency). It was collectively organized by its members, for both individual and collective benefits.

Although far from the digital commons perspective (which favors Free/Libre Open Source Software), the adoption of Google proprietary tools aimed at enabling basic collaboration in a simple way, while facilitating the sharing of information and tasks among “prosumers”. It was useful to transparently organize the food exchange network, while allowing members to directly place and check their orders and balances. To facilitate payments, the group adopted ECSOSEL’s community currency platform Cyclos 4 Communities (also proprietary, despite “free” for communities), which had a mobile application and a web interface where members could wire their transfers as well as announce their offers and needs, products or services.

4.2.2. Commons Principles

Although the case was not originally conceived in academic terms, the “prosumers” group empirically developed a framework to perform solidarity economy which instinctively followed most of Ostrom’s classic design principles for governing a commons (Ostrom, 1990, p. 90). Inductive reasoning corroborates to some extent Ostrom’s law that “resource arrangement that works in practice can work in theory” (Fennell, 2011). The paragraphs that follow contrast Ostrom’s commons principles for governing a commons with AMEP’s commoning practices.

Principle 1: Define clear group boundaries.

Within the broader solidarity economy movement, AMEP focused exclusively on the exchange of food and other primary goods between a group of “prosumers” who committed to participate throughout a given period, during a well-defined distribution round. This commitment marked the boundaries of the group and was defined in the Charter of Principles as a “contrato”, or agreement:

“The contract is established between the producers and the members of the consumers group, or the association that represents them. The duration of the contract refers to the duration of the supply commitment established between the parties.”

Whereas the food network as a commons was open for new members before a distribution round began, after the “prosumption” plan was set and orders were closed, new “prosumers” had to wait for the next round to be able to join the exchange.
Principle 2: Creating rules adapted to local needs and conditions.

AMEP’s philosophy, guiding principles and general procedures were defined in a Charter of Principles which was adapted from original documents of the French AMAPs. AMEP broadened the scope of AMAP for its own purposes by introducing multi-reciprocal relationships and the use of a local currency. Besides the Charter of Principles, AMEP also developed a Practical Guide, based on learnings from the lived-experience, which aimed at facilitating self-management among “prosumers”.

Principle 3: Participation of members in modifying the rules.

“The active participation of each member of AMEP is essential to sustain the network and allow its democratic functioning,” the Charter of Principles reads. Regular meetings with different purposes (from preparation to celebration), were fundamental to sustain the process, allowing everyone to have a say on practical aspects of AMEP, and put their feedback, wishes, worries, and needs in common, openly speaking about the evolution of the local food exchange group. Open processes for collective decision-making were important to nourish trust within the group. Special co-design sessions based on the World Café method (Aldred, 2011), helped to collectively decide on important issues concerned with the ethics and procedures of the group, such as how to fairly reward coordination work, rules on the proportionality of social-conventional currencies in the price of products, and whether to publicize AMEP in different media and if so, how.

Principle 4: Monitoring of members’ behavior.

The coordination team provided transparency reports for each distribution round, and made them publicly available on the association’s website. These reports included economic information, such as the volume of transactions, the monetary ratio of social and conventional currency, and each member’s balance. The report also served as a basis for collective discussions on ways to promote the currency’s circulation. How could those with a greater accumulation of the social currency meet their needs through the solidarity economy network? How could individuals with less currency provide useful services or products, and thus earn ECOSOL? This exercise of solidarity and reciprocity was debated in AMEP whenever imbalances were identified within the group.

Principle 5: Application of sanctions to rule violators.

The most common fault was failure to fulfill a delivery agreement. Each prosumer was responsible for taking responsibility and finding a way to fairly compensate consumers; otherwise conflicts would be discussed at the group meetings. If a fault persisted (for instance, repeatedly reneging on commitments or nominating an intermediary for deliveries instead of being present), the ultimate sanction would be exclusion from the group (something which never happened).

Principle 6: Low-cost local arenas for dispute resolution.

Disputes were also discussed at the group meetings, for instance if more than one “prosumer” offered the same type of product, or when someone didn’t agree on a price. Each “prosumer” proposed a cost for their own products and the assembly could discuss the fairness and equity of the agreement, sometimes leading to either an increase or decrease of the final price.

Principle 7: Recognition of self-determination by higher-level authorities.

As an informal initiative that worked on the edges of legality, AMEP had a fragile position towards authorities and law enforcement bodies responsible for food safety and economic surveillance in Portugal. Members often raised this concern, afraid to be “caught” for participating in somewhat “underground” economic practices – food exchange without invoices, receipts, stamps or packaging complying with the official regulations. The underlying risks of the informal character of AMEP may have dissuaded potential new “prosumers” to join. However, they can also be seen as a condition for emancipation: the freedom to perform an alternative economy, away from the State and the market – as a commons – while challenging the rules of authorities concerning the right to organize.

Principle 8: As nested resource systems form, they organize in multiple layers to the entire interconnected system.

A new nested layer arose within the broader AMEP-ECOSOL network, when a group of “prosumers” got together first to plant a vacant land lot that belonged to one of the members, and later to take care of a community garden in need of people and work. These collective actions enabled the amateur farmers to earn an extra income by selling their vegetables in local currency to the “prosumers” group, which they could use to buy other essential goods from AMEP. The group provided information about the respective evolution of their farming activities, while making the results of their production available to the broader layers. Major decisions were made at the garden’s monthly assemblies, where the group planned the work for the following month, reported on the production and sales, and discussed other governance issues, which were later reported to the “prosumers” group.

4.3. Dilemmas of Collective Action in the Evolution of Food Commons

The complex context and social dynamics at work faced many challenges and were hard to sustain. The main dilemmas concerned social aspects, dealing with concepts of resilience and care, and economic issues, mostly related to the ability to address real needs and the generation of sustainable livelihoods.

4.3.1. On Resilience and Care

In networks theory, resilience refers to the ability of a system to continue working in the face of faults or changes to normal operation. One example is how a network reacts when certain nodes are disconnected from the system. In the case of AMEP, there is evidence of a low resilience in this sense, as the group struggled to cope with changes in membership and coordination. As an initiative whose vitality depended on the appropriators of the commons, when certain commoners left, the active process of commoning became impossible.

Emigration has been pointed out as one of the reasons for the slowdown of activities. Several particularly pro-active individuals, who played important roles in organizing both the “prosumers” group and the solidarity economy network, left the country during the experience for different reasons, such as L., one of the group’s yogurt producers:

«I left AMEP for practical reasons, because I went to America for one year. I had just finished my studies, I spent a year doing research, I couldn’t find a job, and I was tired of architecture. I went traveling... However, the habit continued there, the exchange, the awareness about consumption.»

Z., a craft brewer who was part of ECOSOL’s economic commission, moved to South America “in need for a change of course at both personal and professional levels”:

«Sometimes I look back and I get the feeling that (ok, I didn’t see it finish because I left before, but I get the feeling that) [AMEP/ECOSOL] ended because the people who started it left, but it is normal for people who start to leave... what we probably didn’t manage was to extend it to a larger group of people who continued the work.»

The issue of scale was also addressed by R., a former mushroom producer, who believes the problem was “the lack of critical mass”. To which P. replied:

«It is not only about critical mass, it’s about action, people doing things. Because each one of us has her own thing, right? When you are in a project, you give the way you know, and you keep doing it... Doing is what gives the impulse. Action moves and then you start...»

6 Horta da Partilha (Garden of Sharing), “a place to work in collective where people share knowledge and essentially practice natural farming, not being allowed to use pesticides nor GMOs”.

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being inspired because you keep doing it.... and there we had several motivated people, who were available and so it made sense for their lives.

The lack of action-oriented types prevented the group from emancipating from those few responsible for coordination. In line with Ostrom’s free-riders dilemma, participants would often lean down on the coordination team to solve individual issues (such as confirming their personal orders), which eventually became exhausting and frustrating for the volunteers. G., who moved to Italy after activities ceased, believes:

“It faded because it needed a lot of energy, patience, availability, and skills. We didn’t have at least a sufficient number of people with enough of those qualities. So we didn’t see practical advances that were motivating. Although enjoyable, it was also very demanding for the people, without motivation, it fades out.”

When coordination responsibilities shifted to different members (by the end of 2015), the new team dedicated itself to the technical operations (organizing the distribution, placing orders, preparing distribution maps, accounting, etc) without giving as much attention to less tangible, but nonetheless fundamental aspects, such as internal communication, outreach and hospitality.

On this matter, C., who provided the group with homemade soap and lotions, said:

“It ended because there was a change in the dynamics of the group: there was no longer that familiar environment with sharing of meals or snacks during the social gathering that was often guided by ambient music, flowers on the tables, etc. At the same time, with the change of the coordination group, who were less present and less dynamic, the sense of community was lost. I think in summary: AMEP “started ending” as it gradually stopped being a pleasant moment of sharing and conviviality.”

The sense of community relied upon caring, which was vital to sustaining the communing process. How to make it long-lasting? C. believes it depends on need,

“When I say need, I don’t mean I need this for living. Sometimes need is food, but it can be only philosophical, like, I feel this is a common good. But there should be a very strong necessity in everyone’s mind, otherwise the compromise vanishes. […] Basically, it is about the relationship. How to keep it alive?”

4.3.2. Needs and Livelihood

The “prosumers” group provided participants with some (modest) income and/or savings, however, the real impact on livelihood was still incipient. According to P.:

“Behind the idea of AMEP there was this dream I think everyone had: to be able to sustain ourselves from what we like to do, at least in part. In reality, in the system we live in and being in the city, it was impossible. And at the time I was so inspired, so motivated that I often forgot that I had to pay bills and that was something that was always pulling me into reality. Ok, I can dedicate time to the commons, but I need to pay my bills, otherwise I can’t, I need to find ways. And that was another point, the fact that people also understood that “yes, I can take something from this, I have the social encounters, I have the experience…” , but then the other side is lacking: to achieve economic sustainability through the project.”

There was also a perceived sense of mistrust in the local currency. As a new tool, the lack of experience often led to doubts about its use, value and the way it operated. J., who only participated in AMEP for a short period of time, said:

“Although we were enough participating, we were still few and afraid to go… into the unknown… I think there was little public, that is, it was a visionary project but premature for the time.”

The idea was seconded by Z.:

“The currency was “a tool for”. One of the objectives was precisely to create ECOSOL to ensure that wealth does not leave the community and to promote a circular economy, resources, and ethics behind the people who are part of the community, etc. But now if we think about it, there was not really an active exchange community at the time. We started the other way around. We should have started by creating the community, by creating the processes.”

Other participants, like R., believed the currency “created a certain barrier to the curious people who didn’t really understand what ECOSOL was”:

“Of never thought this would only work with the alternative currency. I always thought the other way around: if this works, then the alternative currency will work. (…) It can even be in euro, and then beans, and then ECOSOL. It is just a tool. The problem is to reach that cohesion of people in sharing and saying…” “Ok, I still go to the supermarket, but I am going to start doing this because I even like doing this, I don’t do much but there are people who like it so I am going to start doing it.”

4.4. How Commons Last or Dissolve: On Transformation and Liminality

Despite its dilemmas and dissolution, this case can be considered an example of what scholars have called the ‘liminal commons’, “transitional forms of commons that do not aspire to endure for long but to facilitate transitions” (Varvarousis, 2018). AMEP’s disappearance after activities ceased does not necessarily mean an ending, but a transformation into new forms of commonging practices.

The innovation of turning a classical consumers group into a “prosumers” one is quite unique and opens new perspectives on ways to organize food systems as a commons. Its legacy lives on in new consumer groups that have meanwhile been created, such as AMAP groups in Porto and Gaia which still continue today. These groups were formed in 2016 and initially adopted some of the tools developed by AMEP, such as its management system to organize the operations. This means there was a knowledge and communication commons that allowed it to be appropriated by others in new terms.

Participants confirmed the transformative character of the initiative both at the individual and collective levels. For the individual, the experience impacted upon consumption habits and opened new doors on “how to become more autonomous and resilient concerning food” (Z.). AMEP also changed the way participants saw the act of buying/selling:

“The currency was memorable…it was transformative for me because it showed me that other ways of exchange are possible. (…) it gave products a sentimental value for those who produced them and for those who bought them, because we knew we were close, you knew it belonged to someone and it would serve someone else.”

C., who joined the community garden during AMEP and still farms there every week, said:

“It changed my way of thinking about the economy, the passive consumer attitude I no longer have. I started to take a more active and conscious role in the choices I make every day. I started to produce more food and to transform products in a homemade way and to think much more about the immense possibilities of some self-sufficiency.”

P., who moved back to Portugal in 2019 after a couple of years working in the United Kingdom, said:

“I was on a path... from that awakening moment to an alternative society, or at least to an alternative way of being, after realizing that I could not save the world, I had to start with the inner
transformation. The experience leveraged the transformation process ... AMEP was the icing on the cake, it was the realization of the whole.»

She is now taking the first steps for the creation of a consumer co-operative in the Minho region, and using AMEP’s archives for references on how to help the group launch a new food commons.

«At AMEP I was able to visualize a system (more closed, more open) that was able to become increasingly sustainable and which only depended on us, on us having the ability to produce, on making a commitment to be on that network, and then we have that idea, then the project is so beautiful, it has to go everywhere. no! you can stay in a proximity network. That's what brings us together after all, right? We see each other, we contact each other, we realize (for a year and a half, I was away and didn't spend so much time with people), but I return and little by little, we are talking and gaining new trust, and that only happens when we are together. So, if we create moments when we are together, there is always that possibility. To get organized and create something.»

Beyond the knowledge of a lived-experience, the network itself was perhaps the most transformative aspect of AMEP. It connected people and collectives from the city (and beyond) willing to transform imaginaries and realities. It emerged from a much more complex context, which involved a pre-existing ecosystem of community initiatives. Some of them have disappeared, others still persist or have transformed as prefigurative urban commons in an ever liminal stage of transition.

5. Synthesis and Concluding Thoughts

This article set out to examine the qualities of an urban food network as a commons and its evolution over time. It critically dissects the complete life cycle of a Portuguese “prosumers” group in relation to commons theories and frameworks and analyzes the conditions under which the experience emerged, developed, sustained and dissolved – or transformed over time. Based on a longitudinal and retrospective analysis, our findings reveal that first of all the group emerged from a pre-existing ecosystem of local collectives, inspired by social movements, affected by a context of economic crisis, and guided by human agency. It developed and sustained at the margins of the State and the Market during its existence demonstrating principles and practices that characterize it as a commons, such as community and democratic forms, the refusal to treat food exclusively as a commodity, and the openness and sharing of resources, including knowledge. It dissolved due to a series of dilemmas encountered by those who lived the experience, concerning resilience, care, needs and livelihood, but it also brought lasting effects and transformations, both individually and collectively, with new food networks which emerged taking on knowledge from this experience.

5.1. A Framework of Commons Qualities in Urban Contexts

The first contribution of the paper to the state of the art is a framework of analysis that combines classical commons theory (Ostrom, 1990) with a recent conceptual model to assess commons qualities of economic initiatives (Fuster Morell et al., 2018). By contrasting the initiative’s governance model with Ostrom’s (1990) principles for sustaining a commons – and by looking at its governance design, economic strategy, technological base, knowledge policies, and social responsibility, we incorporate dimensions of analysis which are essential to understand the contemporary commons-oriented phenomena, namely the knowledge dimension, which concerns the content generated by these experiences, as well as the technological base that provides tools for their operations. Both these dimensions were less present in traditional commons, but demonstrate implications in the evolution and lasting of the cases. With the spread of the adoption of digital technologies which enable the generation of a ‘memory track’, the knowledge generated by these experiences becomes a commons itself, facilitating external appropriation and the appearance of new initiatives. As a token that goes from hand to hand, adapted by each community, the knowledge of the lived experience can be considered a legacy commons that remains after commoning.

Although some authors question the applicability of Ostrom’s principles in different contexts from those on which she based her studies (natural vs. urban, large vs. small scale) (Parker and Johansson, 2011), analyzing how her principles matched with this particular case of an urban commons allowed us to identify some of the mechanisms and tools put in place for governing a contemporary urban food commons (open space meetings, fanzines, collaborative documents, etc), as well as some tensions which are inherent to a movements-based commons, such as the non-recognition by higher-level authorities (de Angelis, 2012).

5.2. Insights on Food Commons

Our research brings new insights into a growing food commons debate (Vivero-Pol et al., 2018) by exploring the human agency of “prosumers” for food self-provisioning (Balázs, 2018). The concept of “prosumers” in this context offers novel perspectives on the redefinition of boundaries, meanings and sociality between food consumers and producers as one, at the urban community-level. Our research presents a case of “commoning from below” which also reveals how a community-based commons defined its guiding principles and rights systems. Kent (2018) has addressed this in the Handbook of Food as a Commons with an initial concept paper for the design of a community’s charter of principles “to fulfill the vision of food-as-a-commons”. Our research analyzes a concrete example of a community charter of principles for food self-provisioning through the lens of commons theories and frameworks, revealing how communities empirically define and negotiate their rules to govern a commons.

5.3. Insights from Portugal

This paper also brings new knowledge from a region that has seldom participated in the international academic debate on the urban commons and alternative food systems. Despite being part of a broader geopolitical context where a lot of attention has been put into this field – particularly in Spain, Greece and Italy – in Portugal, the existing commons literature is still mostly dedicated to the natural and rural commons, such as the community lands known as ‘ baldios’. Very few studies link food systems and the urban commons in Portugal, and those who do, mostly focus on urban gardens (Ginn and Ascensão, 2018; Harper and Afonso, 2016). Our research inscribes the phenomenon of food networks as urban commons in Portugal, with a unique case of a community food exchange group governed by “prosumers” and using a social currency. In empirical terms, the study corroborates what other authors have argued about the general lack of resilience of community-based initiatives in Portugal (Baumgarten, 2017). This was one of the main dilemmas we have identified with this study, which deeply affected sustainability over time. One of the factors behind it was emigration, which is a particularity of the country with the highest percentage of emigrant population in the European Union (among countries with over one million inhabitants) (Pires, 2019). When commoners leave the commons disappear.

5.4. Insights on Evolution Over Time

Some commons emerge with a transitional role and soon disappear giving rise to new commons (Varvarousis, 2020). Our research has recognized this “liminal” character in a particular case that had a limited life-span but left lasting transformations both individually and collectively. Part of its knowledge and communication commons allowed it to be appropriated and adapted by new groups that have meanwhile
emerged. Do the new initiatives maintain the same commons-based nature? How do they dialogue with or build upon commons principles and qualities? In looking for more efficient ways to organize, do they keep their community-based practices and/or adapt to the logic of the market? Evolution over time generates certain tensions and requirements that challenge purist visions of the commons: instead of following a set of frozen qualities, communities tend to adopt either more social market elements or State-support to sustain their activities and the people’s involvement in the process. Given the increasing popularity of commons discourse, we agree with the need for critical engagement with the vocabulary and understanding of the commons over time (Chang, 2018). The framework we proposed here might be useful to further investigate and compare the cross-sectional discourse and knowledge (re)produced by food networks over time, helping to reveal the evolution of their pro-commons qualities and transformative character towards post-capitalist futures.

5.5. For a Feminist Conceptualization of the Commons

Finally, the analysis of the case study highlighted a central dimension that is absent from the theoretical framework and conceptual model we used, and which has proven to have implications on the lasting impact of the initiative: care, “both an innate characteristic in human beings and a difficult task that we need to learn and to develop, which is embedded in the core of any emergent commons food regime” (Chang, 2018). Both the Ostrom school and the digital commons tradition (Benkler, Lessig, Rose) have not addressed the relationship between commons production and the reproduction work that sustains it. On the other hand, Silvia Federici argues that “the ‘commoning’ of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created” (Federici and Linebaugh, 2018). This is related to putting people’s realities at the center and sustaining life through commoning processes, more than aiming for certain results and impact as commons outcomes. Our analysis reflects that introducing people’s care into frameworks of analysis is a key element to having a holistic view of the commons.

5.6. Commoning from Crisis to Crisis

By the time this paper was finalized, a new crisis broke out with the covid-19 pandemic, provoking once again the emergence of solidarity responses and bringing people together to collectively take care of their livelihoods and create practical solutions to their needs. Food provision rapidly stood out as an evident need in this new wave of crisis, with widespread demands for alternative ways of organizing local food systems (Galanakis, 2020; Petetin, 2020). As new food networks emerge – and pre-existing ones are strengthened – new possibilities open up for action and research on solidarity food systems and the commons. Beyond immediate responses, monitoring the development of the initiatives over time will certainly reveal improved strategies, mechanisms and tools to perform and sustain food networks as transformative commons. The present study inscribes a concrete experience from which both practitioners and researchers can reflect and build upon when designing and studying commoning food from below, knowing from this experience that beyond basic needs – as food and livelihoods – immaterial and reproductive dimensions, such as care and knowledge, cannot be overlooked when performing a commons that aims to last in time and transform communities, if not yet society.

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