

Application Form submitted by the initiative to participate in the Transformative Cities People's Choice Award

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Location:	Barcelona – Catalunya – Spain
Title of the Transformative Initiative:	Barcelona en Comú: A movement-organization to win the city
Name of organization:	Barcelona en Comú
Type of organization:	Barcelona en Comú is a citizen platform standing as a convergence candidacy, seeking the majority vote to win Barcelona and return it to its citizens.
Website:	https://barcelonaencomu.cat/
Category and Edition:	HOUSING. Transformative Cities Award 1st edition (2018).
STORYTELLING	
Context and problem definition	
<p>In June 2014 a group of activists in the city of Barcelona launched a manifesto to take back the city. Barcelona is a city of about 1.5 million people in the north-east of Spain in southern Europe. It has a strong tradition of community organization and activism. At the time, the City Council was run by a centre-right nationalist and conservative party, which sold the city to business interests in a constant battle with social movements.</p> <p>We proposed a municipalist, citizen-based candidacy to win the city and thus be able to guarantee basic rights and a dignified life for everyone, centred on three fundamental rights: good quality health care, unsegregated public education, reversing the privatization of recent years, and improved access to decent housing, giving priority to social housing, rented accommodation, and housing cooperatives with occupancy rights.</p> <p>We also proposed to boost the economy based on social and environmental justice, doing away with the heavily speculative nature of most of the economy, changing the tourism model and pledging to return public goods like water to municipal government control. Finally, we proposed to democratize institutions (with audits, direct participation, transparency...) and make an ethical commitment to citizens (with our own ethical code and no debts to financial institutions).</p>	

Design and Initiation

In June 2014, citizen groups and political organizations came together and created a citizen platform, and in September 30,000 people signed and validated the manifesto “Guanyem Barcelona” (“Let’s Win Barcelona”). Once it was validated, in coordination with groups and movements who were already working in the neighbourhoods and knew their reality, meetings were organized with the residents of Barcelona’s neighbourhoods to present the platform’s principles and basic commitments, share our assessment of the situation, answer questions, gather suggestions and ask ourselves together: What do we need to do to win the neighbourhood for its residents?

The next step was to discuss the code of ethics as the framework for our way of working, which represents a new social contract between citizens and those in government. A series of different events were organized to discuss thematic areas, involving people who have been working on sectoral issues for a long time. They spent months organizing meetings to discuss proposals, sharing and exchanging knowledge using participatory, shared-accountability tools, to build a Barcelona for everyone from the bottom up.

The convergence candidacy put forward by Guanyem Barcelona was presented in February 2015, having reached an agreement with ICV-EUiA, Podemos Barcelona, Proceso Constituyente and Equo to stand for the municipal elections together under the name ‘Barcelona en común’. Open primaries were held in March 2015 through the Participa platform. For the first time, people registered with the platform elected the person who would stand as the councillor for their district, prioritized the manifesto proposals and chose one person to head the list of candidates for the municipal elections in May. The manifesto “Un Programa En Común” was presented in April. It is a product of collective intelligence, as it was drawn up by means of a unique participatory process. It is not a manifesto written in a party office or the result of shady agreements with interest groups. The election campaign took place in May and we won the support of people in the street.

As the code of ethics stipulates, the whole process was conducted without funding from banks. A crowdfunding project was launched, activists provided micro-loans, and donations were received up to a set maximum amount. Once we had won, the organizational structure and current way of working of Barcelona en Comú is the result of an open, participatory process that began in March 2015 and ended with its approval in a plenary session in July 2015.

Implementation

Although we are applying as the overall movement, in this section we will focus on describing the housing, water and energy programmes we are taking forward in the municipal government, in order to stick to the specific objectives of the award.

With regard to WATER, our understanding is that the City Council should guarantee universal access and management should be guided by social and environmental criteria. However, water in Barcelona is managed privately, and the award of the concession to a company controlled by Agbar in 2012 was an opaque process. As an alternative to this situation, we proposed to: Conduct an in-depth review of the process of privatizing the water supply and sanitation service; Make use of the means available to the City Council to bring water back under municipal government control; Define social and environmental policies in a transparent, participatory way with citizen oversight. In the meantime, we proposed to intervene in the metropolitan area to guarantee the water supply to everyone and to get water rates properly regulated, making sure that stated costs were justified. We also proposed improvements to the tariff structure to make it cheaper for basic consumers and penalize high levels of water use, progressing towards rates that reflect social and ecological reality.

As far as ENERGY is concerned, the city's current model is highly dependent on large companies, major energy infrastructure and imports of oil and nuclear fuel. We proposed to: Push for the creation of a green energy utility, whose main objectives would be to promote energy savings, actively promote the use of renewable energies and for the public sector to buy renewable energy from small local producers; Draw up a plan for energy saving and investment in renewables in all municipal buildings, and a municipal plan to advise individuals and companies; Promote the creation of microgrids that combine generation, distribution and use; Obtain funding through this utility under good conditions for public, private and/or community investments; Set up an electricity marketing operation with a guarantee of renewable origin; Audit the main distribution network currently operating.

In HOUSING, where there are major problems, we proposed to: Mediate with home owners to promote affordable rents; Mediate with owners of properties in blocks of flats to promote the cooperative system; Reserve social housing for rent in new buildings and major refurbishments in existing built-up areas of the city and in new housing developments.

Results achieved and Evaluation

In Water, sufficient political support needs to be garnered to bring water back under public management. This is now endorsed by many of the political forces in the municipal government (Barcelona en Comú, PSC, ERC, CiU and CUP), but although they agree on the aim, they differ on how to go about it. It is now unthinkable that a company could be awarded the concession for more than a century, with no contract or competition, as happened with the company that currently runs the service (Agbar).

With regard to Energy, a municipal electricity company will be launched in about six months' time to take charge of generation and sales. This project will supply energy for municipal equipment and the city's street lights, and will provide electricity to about 20,000 residents. Earlier, an attempt was made to include a clause to oblige the winner of the new contract for street lighting to adopt concrete measures to combat energy poverty, but the arbitration tribunal accepted the complaints made by Endesa and Gas Natural. The municipality wants to achieve energy self-sufficiency by installing solar panels on the roofs of publicly-owned buildings, such as libraries, markets and civic centres.

With regard to anti-gentrification measures in housing, a team of 40 people has been hired to monitor illegal tourist flats, and more than 2,000 of them have been closed down. As far as public housing is concerned, the Municipal Housing Institute has been set up as envisaged in the approved plan, and the number of publicly owned flats in the city is planned to increase from 11,000 today to 29,500 by 2025. The European Investment Bank has approved a loan of 125 million euros to finance half of the project to build 23 blocks of social housing. In addition, 7 plots of public land have been allocated to build 530 rented homes. The UCER (Anti-residential exclusion unit) has been set up to combat evictions (which have been reduced by 8%). The unit has 18 professionals who have dealt with 1574 cases in a year and a total of 446 flats have been bought to cope with social emergencies. Furthermore, 268 empty flats owned by financial institutions have been identified and the banks concerned have been fined.

Political Strategies

With regard to Water management, there was very strong opposition from the right-wing parties, who defend the private-sector management of water as one of the ideological cornerstones of privatization. Furthermore, to take our programme forward it will be essential to have the support of social movements. In the water sector, although they are modest in size, they are very well organized. Specifically, there is a very strong movement in Catalunya called “Aigua és vida” (water is life), and several people from this movement have joined the Barcelona en Comú initiative, bringing their knowledge and experience. Another strategy used is networking with several sister cities for change which are also municipalist initiatives, and some of them have already been able to start their municipalisation process (such as Terrassa en Comú).

With regard to Energy, in stark contrast to the water sector, there has been no political opposition, either to the municipal electricity operator or to the plan to promote renewables. Even the corporate electricity lobby has not put up resistance (or rather they did, but it was when an attempt was made to change public contracting arrangements to promote renewables and combat energy poverty). So, the fight against energy poverty had the support of strong movements such as the “Alliance against energy poverty”.

With regard to Housing, the housing plan for the city was drawn up (see attachment) but it has been difficult to build alliances, even with other left-wing parties who opposed it for electoral reasons. Despite this, the achievements are as follows: a limit on the number of licences for apartments to be used for tourists; fines for owners of multiple properties who leave them empty; reform of municipal buildings in the city centre to create public housing (#VidaLaietana); authorization for municipal land in the city centre to be used by housing co-operatives; City Council purchases of housing affected by speculation and vulture funds, under the tenant’s preferential right or option to purchase arrangement (@Lancaster7911 or @SomLeiva37). In housing, the building of networks in the city (PAH Barcelona, organized neighbourhoods...) has been essential for drawing up the plan and for defending the spaces won. Despite all this, housing is still one of the city’s major problems, and municipal government powers are weak.

Related legislations

In both the Water and Energy sectors, the municipal policy initiative is going forward despite the existing legislation, which is very favourable to the free market and places huge obstacles (administrative and labour-related) in the way of returning them to public management. Steps have been taken with a view to making this possible, such as legal or technical reports or supramunicipal strategies (for the municipalization of water, for example, an association of 7 municipalities with a total population of 2.5 million has been set up for the public management of water).

The situation is similar in housing. The main stumbling block is the national LAU (Urban Rental Law) passed in 2013, which reduces rental contracts from 5 to 3 years and deprives tenants of the power to negotiate with the landlord, etc. In addition, as a result of the crisis there are increasing numbers of banks involved in housing and rented accommodation (63% of evictions were from rented property). As in other major cities, a battle is also being waged against online rental platforms such as Airbnb. Barcelona has managed to crack down on illegally rented flats, but it is a complex problem that needs to be addressed comprehensively.

Lessons learned

The development of the BComú project has been a constant learning process. The difficulties in the municipal government have undoubtedly been the use of party-political tactics over and above proposals, which we have experienced at first hand, and governing with 11 of the 41 councillors, with the need to reach agreements and the workload that this implies. The last few years have been devoted to consolidating the organization, following the established phases (we are currently in Phase D), and an organizational strengthening plan was drawn up (see attachment). Probably the greatest challenge has been to keep the space alive and active (with around 1,500 activists and 10,000 registered in the census), and as a lesson the difficulty of turning this space into an organization-movement linked to the city's activist community, building alliances with them and positioning the need for an active street that puts forward proposals, criticises as it sees fit and demands measures.

With regard to water and energy, we have seen for ourselves how extraordinarily difficult it is to return those sectors that have been deregulated and privatized to public management.

But there is also an emerging positive assessment of public management that is opening the way forward to achieve this objective.

With regard to housing, we have seen how enormously difficult it is to manage an issue that has always been treated not as a right but as a supposedly legitimate way to speculate, in a city that has a negligible amount of public housing and is also experiencing a gentrification process that is bleeding it dry and pushing its residents out. We have come up against the constraints imposed by national laws in key areas such as rent regulation or the fight against evictions.

EXTRA INFO

Supporting documents

<https://barcelonaencomu.cat/es>
<https://escoladelcomu.cat/ca>
<http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/es/>