A 'fertile soil' for sustainability-related community initiatives: A new analytical framework

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Abstract
One of the unique and emerging responses to the current ecological, social, political and economic crises has been the emergence of community initiatives in a range of formulas and geographical contexts. We explore their emergence and evolution beyond the analysis of a single fixed set of factors that are expected to contribute to their initiation and growth. Upon reviewing the trajectories of various initiatives in the region of Barcelona (Spain), we argue that the metaphor of the fertile soil provides a useful framework to describe or explain the messy process of emergence and evolution of grassroots and community projects. Fertile soil is understood here as a particular quality of the social texture, characterized by richness, diversity, unknowns but also – by multiple tensions and contradictions. Yet it is not only the diversity of factors but the quality of their mutual relatedness that 'makes' the soil fertile for the emergence of new groups and the continuation of existing ones. Importantly, the seemingly messy social base in which community initiatives emerge is nourished by their inner and outer contradictions. Likewise, the space opened by dealing with conflicting rationalities creates the conditions for new and more resilient strategies and structures to emerge. As community initiatives get established, the 'fertile dilemmas' they frequently face become a key driver of their evolutionary context, contributing to the emergence of new social imaginaries and ways of producing social change.

1. Introduction

"Clearly places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal differences and conflicts" (Massey 2005)

Community-based initiatives are increasingly seen as key actors in the manufacturing of a sustainable, convivial and low-throughput society (D'Alisa et al. 2014, Devine-Wright and Bouke Wiersma 2013, Bergman et al. 2010, Burch 2010, Moloney et al. 2010, Geels et al 2008, Henderson 1996). On their own, technological innovation and top-down policy have been incapable to spark a transition toward an ecological and socially-sustainable society (Bergman et al. 2010, Burch 2010, Geels et al 2008, Moloney et al. 2010). Despite the seemingly marginal fraction of the population they engage, CBIs for sustainability have started to prototype and replicate some practical steps towards achieving a more ecologically and socially just societies, or degrowth (D'Alisa et al. 2014). Shielded from the foci of mainstream media, community initiatives have mushroomed in a wide spectrum of areas, seemingly in response to the economic crisis stalking Southern Europe and North America ever since 2007. Some authors describe them as novel, efficient and sustainable solution to a social problem, for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole (Phills et

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al. 2008). Alternatively community-based initiatives (CBIs) are also being framed as particular type of grass-root innovations that offer novel bottom-up solutions to local and global environmental, social, economic or political problems (Seyfang and Smith 2007). Likewise, Aiken (2015) provides a very useful break down of community-based initiatives, differentiating them from social, or grass-root innovation. Undertaken by people in given geographic area (a community of place) or by individuals united around a particular idea (a community of project) CBIs can take a multiplicity of forms (Aiken 2012). Social enterprises engaged in furniture recycling, low-impact housing developments, organic food and renewable energy cooperatives, urban gardens, bicycle repair workshops, are just a few of the myriads of collective projects dedicated to sustainability. CBIs are also seen as communities with new shared rules and practices, aiming at adding-up new choices among the existing ones or/and transforming the entire (market) system (Hargreaves et al 2013, Geels and Raven 2006; Raven et al 2008, Hoogma et al 2002). Others, however, argue that understanding community projects only as a niche-innovation within an existing market structure provides an incomplete and geographically naïve picture of their nature (Aiken 2015).

Rather than searching for a strict correct definition of community initiatives, here we draw on a broad common understanding of CBIs as coordinated bottom-up actions and groups that respond to local community needs while trying to address ecological, social, economic and political problems of global resonance. Although the field of grass-root sustainability transitions has been on the research spotlight for some time, its theoretical underpinning is still in the search, or at the very least, debate on the its origins, contribution and further evolution is far from saturated. Identifying a complete list of conditions behind the emergence of CBIs, for example, seems virtually impossible. Nor can we argue that the factors driving their establishment, survival and growth in diverse environments, and contested contexts, are all known, fixed and unambiguous. Often grassroots initiatives in the field of sustainability expand following their own unique logic, which can neither draw on the behavior of social enterprises, innovation studies, nor on cultural approaches alone (Aiken 2015, Devine, Wright and Bouke Wiersma 2013, Smith 2013, Beckie et al. 2012, Conelly et al. 2011, Friedmann 2007, North 2005, Johnston and Baker 2005).

While filling these gaps through a single, robust method of analysis is beyond the goal of this paper, here we bring forth one more analytical tool that could help situate the emergence and evolution of community-based initiatives in the field of sustainability. In this paper, we argue that CBIs' emergence, evolution and dissemination can be seen and understood through the metaphor of 'soil fertility'. The fertile soil can be perceived as a particular assemblage, or as a holding space, characterized by a diversity of factors and a particular quality of processes. For example, places with high soil fertility give rise to multiple and large initiatives and can hold or sustain groups for a longer time. On the other hand community initiatives emerging in contexts of lower soil fertility tend to be less numerous and less abundant even if more enduring in time and space. Rather than natural and static, the fertile soil shall be perceived as a dynamic social container that continuously changes influenced by the emergence and accumulation of social organizational experiences. In our views, the fertile soil is an extended metaphor that contributes to the construction of social theory. Ecological metaphors allow for a more grounded description of socio-political processes by bringing to light the set of complex relationships that shape social change, conflict, and stability in cities (Wahl-jorgensen, 2016).

We perceive CBIs' emergence and establishment as taking place thanks to the existence of a fertile soil, characterized (among the rest) by: a shared history of social organizing, protest, and activism; diversity; values of cooperation and trust; concern with justice and sustainability; presence of counter-cultures; actors' agency and self-

empowerment; social networking; non-restrictive external regime; and availability of physical space/s. These factors need not be all present; they can furthermore enforce, or rather clash with, each other. Rather than listing a complete, neat or linear set of single factors, we would delve at some of the key conditions that generate fertility for the emergence and diffusion of groups aiming at socio-ecological transformation. Importantly, it is not only the diversity of factors but the quality of their mutual connectedness, or relatedness, that 'prepares' the soil for the emergence of new groups and the continuation of existing ones. It is the type of relations and processes between these factors that produce fertility, and contribute to groups' resilience (Martin-Breen and Anderies 2011).

To explore these relations we look at specific leverage points in the life of organizations. These are the moments characterized by confusion, tension, dilemmas or even conflict. Dilemmas or tensions are a regular ingredient of community initiatives' realities, having pronounced impacts on their histories and geographies. On many occasions inner and outer tensions could preclude the smooth and continued existence of community-based initiatives. Yet, we would also argue that dilemmas are fundamental for the success of community initiatives, and eventually – for soil fertility. If dilemmas and conflicts are unpacked or simply given the space, they can serve as a source of change and creativity making initiatives transform and amplify their socio-political impact.

In light of the fertile soil lens, this paper also explores the extent to which dealing with tensions helps community initiatives transform and grow. We furthermore look at how the 'moments of difficulty, or crises' for community groups impact the milieu, or the 'soil', in which they emerge, thrive and replicate. The empirical base from which we embark upon these questions are series of in-depth interviews with members of diverse community-based initiatives in the region of Barcelona, Spain conducted in 2014 in the context of the TESS European FP7 research project.

2. Approaches to studying community-based initiatives in the literature

Different theoretical and conceptual frameworks for studying the motives behind the emergence of community initiatives have been put forward. The multi-level perspective (MLP) is among the ones most frequently cited. It considers the change in the interactions between wider technological, economic, social and cultural systems as the major stimulus for new transition structures and pathways (Geels 2011). Here, shifts in the 'socio-technical regimes' represent pressures exerted by community innovations and landscape factors, thus creating "windows of opportunity" (Geels and Schot 2007). Some studies, on the other hand, consider this approach descriptive and missing on the structural processes underlying responses to changes (Farla et al. 2012). Similarly, Aiken (2015) deems the multi-level perspective short on considerations of space, place, scale or environment.

In contrast, other studies find that the key drivers for the emergence of community action are linked to concerns with distributional and procedural justice in the social, economic and environmental field and quests for autonomy (as well as sustainability) (Eames and Hunt 2013). For instance, concerns over the just distribution of benefits can explain the formation of food or energy cooperatives helping historically marginalized groups achieve better access to fresh food or affordable alternative energy (Cox and Johnson 2010, p.130; Cowell et al. 2012, Bell and Rowe 2012). Additionally, opposition to economic growth as a measure of progress and development and concerns with reaching planetary thresholds has triggered the development of a distinct culture that seeks alternative notions of well-being (Schneider et al. 2011, Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). As a result, new social movements emerge that oppose prevalent energy/capital-intensive industrial production methods and envision a more integrated relationship between land use, natural resources and consumption

based on the economics of care, conviviality, gift and degrowth as a general framework (Demaria et al. 2013, Halfacree 2007).

The emergence of community initiatives can also be perceived as culturally determined, or driven by changes in values, expectations and visions. For instance, changing relations with the land and traditional food production and distribution systems drives the creation of community gardens and networks for organic food production, which may eventually influence the dynamic of sustainability transitions (Neal 2013, Budde et al. 2012, Halfacree 2007). The presence of shared visions of low carbon/impact, self-sufficient societies, concerned with bottom up, localized and community-centered politics is also one of the essential factors for the emergence of CBIs in multiple areas (Neal 2013, Farla et al. 2012, Budde et al. 2012, Konrad et al. 2012, Markard and Truffer 2012). Alternative food initiatives, for example, are often embedded in a particular context where explicit linkages to value-based commitments of approaches to social (anti- or post-capitalist) economy are made (Conelly et al. 2011).

Apart from analytical frameworks, numerous single factors have been mentioned as catalyzing the emergence of community initiatives. To briefly list a few, these can be: individuals with organizational and mediation skills (While and Stirling 2013); enthusiasm, intrinsic values and/or indignation with the incumbent regime by community members (Hopkins 2008); presence of networks of relationships among people and groups with a shared set of expectations (Middlemiss and Parrish 2010, Seyfang 2006). To date the main limitation of the existing literature on community initiatives working towards sustainability, if a limitation at all, is that it provides insights on the importance of various single or fixed bulks of factors on the emergence of initiatives - but not much on their conjunct influence and mutual relatedness. Yet, CBIs tend to feature messy evolutionary processes and conflicting rationalities. As demonstrated by Nicolosi and Feola (2016) for a Transition Salt Lake (Utah, US) group contradictions are a normal feature of CBI's landscape. The authors find that the dilemmas between adopting generalized action models versus working within a locally specific contexts; or between being place-dependent versus actively and internationally networked can be transcended by choosing the ingredients that work well in place, while leaving aside those that do not. On a similar note, Barr and Pollard (2016) describe transition initiatives as a spatially complex outworking of environmental activism exemplifying a tension between often competing priorities and imaginaries of the future. In what follows we bring the idea of dilemmas one step further: by dealing with seemingly conflicting rationalities community initiatives find a unique path to sustain, grow or disseminate themselves creating a fertile environment for carving responses to looming environmental and social crises.

3. Conceptualizing the fertile soil to examine the trajectory of community-based initiatives

CBIs' emergence and evolution can be seen as a messy process, often framed between multiple tensions and contradictory processes. One way to situate and understand community-based initiatives, embracing the non-linear paths of their emergence and trajectories, is through the 'fertile soil' metaphor proposed here. At first sight, the application of the fertile soil metaphor to community-based initiatives may hint at the existing of fixed, unchanging and deterministic set of conditions needed for social organizing, thus – at naturalizing certain complex social processes. While the fertile soil narrative draws inspiration from a 'natural' phenomenon for its illustrative capacity, it embraces wider layers of meaning than what is implied by these terms in a string biophysical sense, hence including the agency of what emerges though complex social interactions and relations. The fertile soil

metaphor of community organizing shall not be read as a mechanistic listing of factors and processes but rather as a field of continuous transformation, where community initiatives are actors and reactors.

The fertile soil is an extended metaphor that contributes to the construction of theory, and is intentionally unfinished or left open, for further elaboration, contributions, completion and critique from colleagues and researchers. Rather than providing a static theory, which structures reality according to a pre-established set of visions or laws, we propose using the fertile soil metaphor as a platform that suggests further avenues for building new research and theory. The metaphor embraces a diversity of rationalities (actors, frameworks, and institutions), which can also be framed as fertility factors. These are both known and unknown, both manifested and in the process of emergence. They influence each other, evolve and co-evolve, continuously recreating and creating new meanings and realities.

We argue here that much of the lasting social grass-root innovation occurs after the so-called 'fertile soil' has been formed under the pressure or influence of multiple simultaneous drivers that complement or oppose each other. 'Soil' is here metaphorically meant as a mixture of the social, psychological, cultural, political and environmental conditions in which social organizing tends to take place. The exact mixture or configuration of elements which contribute to the fertile social base is never uniform, nor is it a linear function of predetermined unknowns. The ingredients which contribute to the fertility of the social fabric are complex, changing, and hence continuously producing unknowns. Initiatives' emergence can thus be explained not only as a result of a particular trigger, such as the availability of particular space, but as a function of the fertility of the social base. This approach does not negate the frameworks presented above, but rather interprets them as factors that contribute to the making of a fertile soil.

The fertile soil can be also thought of as a 'space-beyond-space', or as the constellations of relations articulated at a particular locus (Massey 2005) that facilitates the emergence of community-based initiatives. The way fertile soil is conceptualized here touches base with (and is inspired by) the idea of Massey (2005) of space as the co-presence of non-static social interactions, interventions, relations, processes, experiences and understandings, the large part of which are constructed on a larger scale than the boundaries of the particular physical location.

To illustrate that point, our work with and within[1] community-based initiatives in Barcelona shows that the availability of physical space contributes to initiatives' emergence when social interaction there takes place with a higher assiduity and intensity than elsewhere. For example, occupied or/and autonomously organized social centers, such as Can Masdeu and Can Battló in Barcelona, are spaces with fertile soil for social organizing since they bring together a diversity of social and political actors, groups and collectives, members of the public administration, as well single individuals not connected to any particular group. There, interaction takes place at multiple scales and is characterized by high degrees of innovation and creativity. These spaces have multiple social functions and multiple levels and ways of relatedness to the external world. There, the 'corridor talks' or moments for greeting each other and exchanging the latest news (such as the location of the next event on agro-ecology, a story about a new project emerging or about a common friend engaged with community currencies) are instrumental for strengthening connections and creating new ones. Through this process, an alternative identity is being developed, which we could tentatively call an 'identity of social transformation'. This shall not be confounded with a single or closed

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[1] Two of the authors of this article have been participating in food cooperatives, urban gardens, swap-markets and various social centers with strong community and agro-ecological focus in Barcelona, Spain over the last seven years.

identity, associated with a particular territory. It is one of the multiple identities participants continuously engage with, and represents a system of beliefs and ideologies which are being transmitted through personal channels at various social encounters. The social transformation identity reinforces itself by rolling from one person to another in multiple fertile spaces. If one looks for a magic sparkle which leads to the creation of new connections, ideas and projects, such fertile spaces offer one of its the most probable answers. Yet, while we do know that such processes take place, it is virtually impossible to predict their emergence and trajectory. We only argue that there is something beyond diversity or social interaction which makes community initiatives appear and evolve.

Overall, the emergence and continued existence of community-based initiatives appears chaotic, a real-time, real-life experiment, combining learning and growing together in different places and cultures (Shawki 2013; Hardt 2013; Power 2012). To make sense of this process through the fertile soil concept, we first outline a number of factors that "co-produce" the soil, as extracted from the literature and our empirical work. To this aim *Table 1* provides a classification of those elements of the 'soil' (or base in which community initiatives emerge and thrive) that we have identified. These are not exhaustive, nor are they meant to be. They shall be interpreted as branches that can continue splitting-up into finer categories.

Table 1: Factors of the 'fertile soil' for community initiatives

A shared history of social-political mobilization; place-based heritage of activism and protest	Accumulation of social organizing experiences and practices; a history of community organization and social movements (Barr and Pollard 2016, Aiken 2014, Middlemiss and Parrish 2010)
Diversity	Diversity of critical views w.r.t. the status quo (Holman 2010, 2007); A diversity of actors, visions and networks (While and Stirling 2013, Feola and Nunes 2013, Seyfang 2009)
Social values of cooperation and trust	Trust in others, willingness to cooperate, desire to be part of something bigger (Hardt 2013, Holman 2007)
	Alternative spiritualities (Longhurst 2013)
Concern with justice and sustainability	Concern with social and environmental justice and sustainability in general (Thatcher 2013, Holman 2007)
	Disillusionment combined with a desire for a social change (Hopkins 2008)
Presence of counter-cultures	Counter/alter cultures, or challenge to the values and goals of capitalism, consumerism, and techno-fixed solutions. (Longhurst 2013)
	Utopian politics (Roszak 1970)
	Presence of an 'alternative' milieu (Longhurst 2013)

	Co-constructing and transmitting an identity of social transformation (Conill et al. 2012)
Actors' agency and self-empowerment	Presence of motivated individuals with leadership skills, enthusiasm, intrinsic values, organizational and facilitation abilities. (Barr and Pollard 2016, While and Stirling 2013, Feola and Nunes 2013, Seyfang 2009)
	Belief in one's capacity to provoke social change (Hopkins 2008)
Social networking	Moments of collective reflection on learning (Holman 2007)
	Experience-sharing (Hopkins 2010, Magis 2010)
	Establishment of diverse networks with shared set of visions and expectations (Hopkins 2010, Magis 2010)
Non-restrictive external regime and the role of the state	Non-restrictive administrative and institutional set-up (Feola and Nunes 2013, Conelly et al. 2011)
Physical infrastructure/space	Availability of physical spaces for social encounter and interaction (Conill et al. 2012)
	Inspirational (practical) examples (Hopkins 2010, Magis 2010)

Yet, it is not by accident that the idea of 'fertility' is central here. Fertility is not only understood as diversity of factors but as specific *quality of processes*, as the mutual connectedness between known and unknown factors. A soil with multiple stimulants (i.e. interactions, events), but no *transformative relatedness* between them would not be fertile. Fertility is, hence, bigger than the sum of its factors, and rather depends on the quality of the relations between them. Below, we zoom-in at some of the processes that contribute to soil fertility, arguing that a particular type of relatedness, namely - relatedness in opposition, is especially relevant for soil fertility. Our guess is that it is the creative force of certain dilemmas (and dealing with dilemmas) that increases soil fertility; or that the 'space' opened by dealing with conflicting rationalities is fertile in the sense of creating conditions for the emerging of something new. Stated otherwise, dilemmas can be fertile in helping organizations transcend or replicate into format of social organization that are more resilient to socio-economic and environmental challenges (Martin-Breen and Anderies 2011) if given a safe space to unfold.

On a final note, the elements from *Table 1* need not be all relevant for the emergence or existence of a community initiative. Moreover, the type of factors and processes required for emergence might differ from the ones that allow for sustaining a group or an initiative over time, or in contexts of challenged or contested realities. The main idea here is that the list of factors in *Table 1* 'produce' the soil that holds groups together, but its fertility mostly stems from the quality of the interactions and processes generated between these elements. In this relay we are particularly interested in exploring the role of tensions, dilemmas and

conflicts as a springboard for the generation of new formats of community resistance, subsistence, and responses to sustainability challenges.

4. Method and data

The analytical framework for understanding the emergence and evolution of community-based initiatives proposed here is before all a fruit of the experiences and reflections from the participants-based observation by two of the authors. Yet, the empirical data comes from a qualitative study based on direct in-depth and semi structured interviews with six community-based initiatives in the region of Barcelona. Interviews were conducted between 2014 and 2015 (n=23) with two local ecological farming projects (n=6), an organic food cooperative (n=4), a renewable energy consumer cooperative (n=10), a peri-urban community with ample social center and agriculture terrains (n=1) and a rural community house dedicated to degrowth (n=1). The choice of these initiatives has been based on identifying the self-organized groups in the field of sustainable production that have been attracting attention and participants' interest in Barcelona over the last years. Another ingredient to this decision has been their link with social movements in town, or the political, or even utopian, flavor that some of their members are giving to the initiatives' outlook. In particular, members of all initiatives have been actively involved in the civil/political movement for deepening democracy under the slogan of "May 15th" in Spain, the precursor of the Occupy movement. While our interviews did not aim at exploring the impact of the May 15th social mobilizations, the experiences from participation in the movement did accrue as a factor that contributed to the future trajectory of the initiatives.

Once the first interviewee in an initiative was identified, the next member was found though snow-ball sampling. Interviews have been transcribed and coded using NVivo. Analysis is largely based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2000), where key notions were first identified, and then developed into coding categories. The empirical base of this article draws on the quotes derived from this analytical direction. One of the concepts that emerged from the data was indeed the presence (and dealing with) tensions, conflicts and dilemmas.

4. Facing and addressing dilemmas

We argued above that the diversity of factors might not be enough to produce a fertile social fabric, but their *connectedness and/or opposition*. The fertile soil can be thought of as an assemblage or holding space for the factors conductive to the spur, sustaining and diffusing of CBIs, characterized, by richness and diversity and particular type of relatedness. Below we look at some of the dilemmas that commonly occur in community-based organizations and the way these are handled. Our basic assumption is that tensions represent a moment where deep concerns and new ideas are brought to the surface and if properly and collectively unpacked these can be instrumental for the evolution of community initiatives and for socio-ecological transition in general (Escorihuela 'Ulises'2010, Cornelius and Faire 1995). These dilemmas are often perceived as clashes between two mutually exclusive strategies or realities. Yet, innovation and transformation can take place when a transversal solution, beyond a dualistic perception of two conflicting sides is eventually constructed. The underlying hypothesis here is that tensions contain the seeds, or codes, to finding resilient and sustainable responses and paths to sustainability and social justice. In the next paragraphs we explore four types of tensions frequently experienced by community initiatives in designing and implementing their organizational, political, social and economic strategies.

Openness to new entries and approaches versus maintaining established structures and roles

The agency of key actors, both as independent players and community leaders who mobilize resources and develop action strategies, has been identified as one of the building blocks of community initiatives at any stage of their life-cycle (Farla 2012). The pre-existing interpersonal channels, communication networks and strong ties that these key agents have are instrumental for initiatives' persistence, especially when it comes to outreach to the larger community (Shawki 2013). Individuals with a certain level of community or grass-root project engagement and an appeal to the notion of community frequently act as symbolic 'agents of change' for intrinsic value dissemination, inspiration, and for gathering the support of more passive members. That said the skills and mind-sets required for starting community initiatives are sometimes at odds with those needed for CBIs' adaptation to the changing conditions, or for their diffusion (Mulgan, 2006). A recent study by Feola and Him (2016), for example, shows that transition initiatives expanded rapidly to over 43 countries and 1100 locations since their start in 2006, but their rate of increase started to slow down over time, especially in the UK.

The tension lived through at the level of the food cooperatives in our sample provide an interesting account of this tension. One of the cooperatives, located in a central district of Barcelona unites individuals concerned with the transition towards fair and ecological food production and distribution, who commit to regularly purchase with local agroecological producers. The cooperative was set-up as a self-organized collective based on voluntary work of approximately 21 hours per week distributed between 20 to 30 family units. This time account, furthermore, does not include the active participation of the cooperative in various social events at the level of the wider local community. Yet, overtime the departure of old members and entry of people with different priorities gave the cooperative another twist, lowering the commitment of newcomers to the common work-load. Initially this tendency created a tension between the 'old, engaged and overworked' and the 'fresh, apolitical and disinterested' members. The conflict carried on unnoticed for more than a year, coupled with increasing tension and frequent rotation of new members, until the issue was raised loudly by one of the new entrees.

"People were all the time saying – there is a problem, there is a problem. And I was OK, lets talk to the new people right away, let's get them excited, let's get them empowered, let's get them responsibilities, and you know – be nice to them! ...I would see so many new people coming nervous and intimidated, not talking, just taking their baskets and leaving." E.I., member of the food cooperative.

Eventually the tension associated with the low levels of commitment of the new members was brought up at several of the bi-monthly assemblies, opening a space for reflection and dialogue on the general functioning of the cooperative, including on the need to change the distribution of roles and tasks and the way these are being executed. As a result several members of the group started rethinking the approaches to introducing new members. Ultimately, the duality of the tension started to dissolve by acknowledging the heterogeneity of motivations present in the group. Through the process of sharing and recognizing where everyone's position and motivation is coming from (socially, politically and personally), members enhanced their commitment to the cooperative. What was earlier seen as a group weakness and conflictive point was eventually recognized as a group's strength. Eventually some of the long-term members started to change their attitude and be more appreciative for 'difference', which eventually made new entrees more engaged.

"That shifted the attitude of the people who have been there for longer. They started being much more open to the new people and making an effort." E.I., member of the food co-operative.

"We have been sensitive to the effects and roles that have been emerging (in this conflict), ... a special commission was dedicated to looking at these ... that is to say, we have not been alien to the good and bad group dynamics that we have been generating over time." M.O., member of the food cooperative

The tension between openness to new approaches and keeping momentum can be either devastating, or creative. The former is associated with a binary resolution, where only one of the strategies prevails or 'wins'; the latter with finding a new way of functioning which eventually makes the group more apt to embrace external and internal challenges. Some authors argue that scaling-up social innovation happens when the environmental conditions are favorable and founders do not 'cling on' for too long, and that stakeholders impose necessary changes (Bergman 2010). We argue here that the longevity of an initiative seems to greatly depend on the process of reworking the conflict between the strategies needed for keeping momentum and continuity with these encouraging new entries, approaches and skills. This very much requires a transfer of skills held tacitly by core individuals to new entries, or leaders. The key notion here is that the deeper understanding of the processes that emerge within a (community) groups when tensions are reworked contributes to the fertility of the soil in which they are immersed and eventually - to the fulfillment of their wider societal mission.

Embracing a diversity of members versus focusing on cohesion and efficiency
The tension between the efficiency (as stemming from cohesiveness and rootedness) and diversity (resulting from inclusion) has been manifested in all projects in our sample in one way or another. It is similar to the earlier tension, though based on issues of class, race, and ethnicity.
Some authors suggest that diversity of various kinds is an intrinsically more prominent feature in community initiatives than in more structured and mutually aligned public sector or commercial domains (White and Stirling 2013). Nevertheless, a common trap in which initiatives often get entangled is the homogeneity of members or sticking with a circle of like-minded activists (Bergman et al 2010). For example, recruiting new members only through personal channels I straightforward and easy but can undermine societal representativeness and socio-cultural diversity (Seyfang 2009b). A number of studies discuss the homogeneity within Transition Towns (TT) groups, for example, which seem to be frequently represented by "well-educated middle-class people" (Hopkins 2010, Seyfang 2009b, O'Rourke 2008). Indeed, the lack of inclusivity and diversity in terms of members and discourses has been reported as a feature that several TT-inspired projects are struggling with (Nicolosi and Feola 2016, Grossmann and Creamer 2016, Mason and Whitehead 2012, TRAPESE 2008). On the other hand, when transition groups succeed at diversifying their membership base, including a perspective of justice they have been able to provide responses to gentrification pressures in urban areas (Thatcher 2013). Beyond TT experiences, alliances with local residents who are often vulnerable to increases in real estate price can be very valuable to help them remain in the neighborhoods and benefit from new environmental amenities such as green spaces, playgrounds, ecological corridors, or community gardens (Anguelovski 2016; Pearsall and Anguelovski 2016).

Empirically, the dilemma between inclusivity and efficiency was manifested, though dormant, in all surveyed initiatives. Many responders claimed that the diversity of members requires a diversity of communication styles, languages as well as additional effort, which are both time- and energy demanding for volunteers and coordinators. Members of the food and energy cooperatives, for example, claimed that achieving a broad and diverse demographic base requires energy and resources which have to be redirected or subtracted from self-organization of daily operations of the initiative.

"There has always been the debate about what type of people can afford the vegetable baskets. ... To whom is this type of consumption directed? Do we want to be elitist? How to reach the people with little resources? With this cooperative model there are people who are eventually excluded…and this is something that bothers, it is a contradiction…" E.M., member of a food cooperative.

Yet, in the crust between the desire to be socially inclusive and to fulfill their sustainability missions, some of the initiatives opened a space for a debate where new ideas, concepts and practices have emerged and keep emerging. One example is the slogan of "open localism", coined in one of the rural initiatives studied here amidst a period of discussions on the strategy of complete openness and inclusivity and the efficient, or effective management of the project. The concept of open localism denounces closure as a process of drawing boundaries, constructing identities and building communities in order to monopolize scarce resources for the survival of a single group. Simultaneously, the concept stands for reducing material consumption/throughput, and pressure on natural resources and the commons. Open localism thus means having a level of consumption that allows for sharing and cooperation by creating living, open-sources models that are easily replicable.

"Closure is challenged at individual (eg closed properties), local, regional (closed commons), national scales (closed borders) in favour of an inter-scale, and inter-dimensional dialogue and action. Localisation is then not about defining an inside and an outside, but about avoiding frustration and social comparison with dramatic consequences." B.S, a member of a rural project dedicated to degrowth.

This theoretical and practical proposal intended to transcend the tension between closure, homogeneity and efficiency on one hand and diversity, openness and resource-shortage on the other. Born in this particular context, the idea of open localism has been rolling in different spaces, groups, platforms and regions ever since (Schneider and Sekulova 2014). In open-localism identities are perceived as negotiable, based on a dialogue; they are rhizomes-relational. The idea resembles the call for progressive localism, based on creating positive affinities between places and social groups in negotiating and appreciating their global relations (Featherstone et al. 2012). Open localism, in this sense, embraces to the idea of relationality and multiple-identities of places and people stemming from progressive localism, adding a layer of sufficiency and concern with positional consumption to it.
This said progressive or open-localism agendas are not particularly easy to articulate and enact at municipal or regional scales, especially in contexts of neoliberal austerity pressures, coupled with the rise of the reactionary pressures. Moreover, localism can be easily coopted. The rebranding of local food systems or energy generation schemes is becoming increasingly attractive and marketed. When large corporations benefit from tax breaks for buying local organic food and then sell them in urban supermarkets, they can undermine the work of local cooperatives and farm-to-table community projects, for instance. In other words, localism

faces the dilemma of scaling up while not being incorporated or rebranded into neoliberal market-based consumption practices.

Horizontal versus managerial forms of decision-making
Another point of tension within community-based initiatives concerns distribution of leadership and decision-making. Feola and Nunes (2013) mention group ability to manage internal activities in a non-hierarchical and democratically manner as one of the features of successful TT initiatives. The authors find leadership equally important for the internal growth and for the establishment of the TT groups, where leaders are understood as coordinators, facilitators, or individuals committed to an exceptional level in comparison with others in the group. At the same time the TT movement has been criticized for having an appointed founder, a prescriptive manifesto and an undemocratic management structure (Connors and McDonald 2011). Frequently the role of catalysts, and people with the capacity to carry a project further in the context of grassroots organizing could simultaneously be an impetus and a constraint for initiatives continuity. The later recurs when leaders crowd out the potential involvement of a broader range of individuals (Mulgan 2006). Yet, over time, organizations that rely entirely on volunteers tend to struggle for recruiting new members and sustaining participation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Hoffman and High-Pippert, 2010; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010, Nicolosi and Feola 2016). As a result, groups often find themselves in the search for a 'proper' mix between strong leadership and members' empowerment.

Appeal to horizontality in the organizational culture of the Barcelona-based community initiatives we studied is strong, and tensions often entail recognizing, acknowledging and dealing with invisible or hidden power distribution. All initiatives were experiencing, or had experienced, a tension associated with decision-making processes. The energy cooperative, for example has an organizational structure where decisions can be taken by a board of directors, and administrative/technical office, in consultation with local groups. Over time, with the cooperative's growth in members, external demand or pressure for faster and efficient decision-making modes of operation increased. When a particular local group together with the administrative office took a decision which was contested by another local group, conflicts frequently emerged. One of the tensions can be illustrated by the following three quotes, first two by members of the local groups of the cooperative and the third one by a municipality official.

"The technical group, which are also the founders, promote a lot on the idea of co-ownership: "the cooperative is yours, you have the right to receive information, to decide, to vote, ...but obviously their role and ours are different"...N.B., local group member of an energy cooperative.

"I did not like that we were not given much time to react. ...The processes of decision-making of local groups, and democracy in general, takes time..." Q.E., local group member of an energy cooperative.
..."Two years ago we sent them a project to review and still we do not know anything. We told them – no need to approve it, we just want to hear from you. Does it interest you, or not?" P.I., Municipality official.

The tensions associated with the speed of decision-making and "who shall have the power to decide" in groups striving for horizontality in decision-making are common and continuously being (re)worked out. Yet, this type of dilemma has been particularly fertile for

the cooperative for two reasons. Firstly, more attention has been paid to the difference in values and strategies between the different stakeholders, acknowledging the potential contribution and needs of either one. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the conflict was not settled in a dualistic mode: the cooperative neither adopted a vertical mode of organization, nor did it opt for a horizontality which completely stumbles efficiency. Conversely, thanks to this conflict, and in multiple steps of back and forth, the cooperative is now deliberating and co-designing an operational or organizational structure, which aspires to be both participative/democratic, and efficient, or providing a high quality service.

Overall, the dilemmas between members' homogeneity and openness, between diversity and efficiency, or between horizontality and punctual leadership should not be understood as a fight between clear cut categories. For example, the majority of CBIs are never entirely horizontal, nor entirely vertical; their decision-making approach is located on a continuum between these two extremes whose temporary equilibrium is a function of the group objectives and milieu at each particular moment. Moreover, we do not claim that tensions can be always beneficial, neither resolved. What our evidence however unveils is that establishing, or making use of a safe space (or format) where tensions/ conflicts can be reflected upon and addressed in a non-violent manner could serve as a creative force that stimulates organizational improvement and hence help groups to better fulfill their socio-political objectives.

Growing and mainstreaming versus right-sizing and sticking to ethics
How and whether to expand CBIs activities and impacts is a recurring dilemma for community initiatives working on sustainability. For Smith et al. (2011), the largest problem of "doing Transition" has been that of scale because what works well for a small town has not always scaled up well elsewhere. If CBIs opt for up-scaling, this often means growth in members, incomes and projects. Growth could require an expansion through mainstreaming and eventually collide with the initial (radical) vision of the group.

A major uneasiness about CBIs up-scaling concerns mainstreaming, or engaging with commercial or market transactions. For some authors, reaching mainstream markets is projected as the most appropriate measure for spreading particular social innovations (Walker 2008 and Hess 2007). Ornetzeder and Rohracher (2013), for example, believe that the successful restructuring of a particular social innovation requires professionalization and profit-oriented activities, entrepreneurial practices, investment in R&D, and lobbying. Other groups question the imperative for continuous organizational growth and opt out of mainstreaming by scaling their impact beyond the 'converted' while keeping a 'right-small' size. Indeed, organizational growth is neither the only, nor the best way to expand the social or transformational impact of community initiatives (Hargreaves et al. 2013, Mulgan 2007). For example, groups which consolidate themselves financially seem to lose their transformational character over time (Hess 2007) and few major social innovations seem to be strongly associated with organizational growth (Feola and Nunes 2013). Moreover, if radical social innovations are widely adopted, only those elements which are compatible with the mainstream get integrated (Bergman et al. 2010). This is particularly relevant when strong interests can adopt the innovation and block new entries (Smith 2011).

The dilemma of achieving economic sustainability or accessibility (through organizational growth and commercialization) versus staying small and reaching out to a small group of beneficiaries (while maintaining principles of horizontality, justice and political ethics) traversed all initiatives in the sample. One way groups have resolved the need to side with only one of these strategies, is through diversified replication. The basic premise here is that an idea with many owners and interpreters may be more powerful that the

particular structures manifesting it. Stated otherwise, up-scaling the outreach of a given idea may be more effective than up-scaling the initiative that promoted it in the first place.

In our sample, the food cooperative established a 'right small' size (of about 30 family units) which allowed for self-organization, management and consensus-based decision-making. Over time the waiting list of individuals willing to join grew contesting its limited accessibility, or size. Eventually, the tension was resolved by inviting everyone in the 'queue' (and beyond) to form a new consumer group, while sharing key organizational tips, blueprints and practices from the 'mother' cooperative. The friction between those on the waiting list and those inside the cooperative was eventually resolved through the emergence of a new initiative.

Another example is the living community on the fringes of Barcelona, having social center, catering and productive agriculture terrains. Given the size of the space/building and its adjacent terrains could not uphold more than 30 people, sister projects were eventually initiated by either members of the 'mother community' or by individuals who had lived and experienced its modus operandi for sufficiently long time.

The differences in the local contexts, from a "fertile soil perspective", however, imply that the exact replication of a single, robust, coherent community initiative is neither possible, nor desirable (Hargreaves 2013, Bunt and Harris 2010, Horst 2008, Raven et al. 2008). Local rootedness is indispensable, in the sense that a community initiative needs to be owned by local actors and adapted to the local circumstances (Bergman et al. 2010). A replication of a project might also not go along with the transfer of key ideas and values (Hielscher et al. 2011). In the context of Barcelona none of the off-spring projects made it into an exact copy of the mother initiative, sometimes leading to a lot of variation in organizational styles.

The tension between growth and ethics was also manifested in the ecological farming projects in our sample. One of these (A.,) found itself in continuous economic hardship due to the relatively small number of baskets they were distributing and more importantly – due to their high dependency on the alternative distribution systems they had developed and defended.

…"Over time we realized we wanted to propose a direct relation between producers and consumers and as we were afraid to perceive ourselves as an enterprise we did not dedicate any attention to the searching of clients….As we did not know how to sell we kept being in a precarious economic situation for more than 10 years… We explained the situation to our consumers (from the food cooperatives)…but some of them did not appreciate what we were doing"…L.A., founder of an ecological farm.

Here the fertility of the dilemma can be seen in acknowledging the need to open- and scale-up including clients outside the range of the cooperatives, or the bubble of socially and politically engaged individuals, and look for new formats of food distribution or relatedness. These need not require mainstreaming (through big, corporate and expensive supermarket chains) which these farming projects aim to subvert in the first place. The process of searching for an alternative via is still ongoing. All community farms in our sample are currently looking for a model where economic sustainability can be achieved without becoming a goal in itself, but rather a medium for the initiatives' continued existence and service.

The dilemma between economic stability (via growth) and the ethics of human-scale self-organization was also elicited in the perceptions of failure. The pioneer community farm project A. experienced some trouble in attempt to be both completely horizontal and economically sustainable. Their 'failures' were however, successes for others. The project

opened the way for new initiatives who entered the scene ever since. System-wise, (or fertile soil-wise), the difficulties, or "mistakes" of A. were useful knowledge for the eco-farmers' community. In that sense the innovative approaches of A. contributed to the fertility of the terrain on which other community initiatives could thrive and persist. In that CBIs socio-political impact may not be based on their up-scaling, mainstreaming or exact replications. It is the group's capacity to transcend the fertile tension between growth (through mainstreaming) and sustaining the transformative vision that drives their continuous evolution and social impact.

Throughout this section we have examined seemingly exclusive or binary choices that community initiatives are confronted with: being open to new leaders and a diversity of members versus focusing on having an established and efficient management team; using entirely horizontal versus more managerial forms of decision-making; growing and mainstreaming versus keeping a "right small size" and established ethics. Many more tensions can be spotted. In the context of transition town initiatives Barr and Pollard (2016), for example talk about the tension between those looking towards 'inner transition' and those looking outwards to the appeal of pragmatism. Our intention is not to spot and list all dilemmas community initiatives could possibly face. We rather argue that groups tend to have good conditions, or fertile soil, to innovate and evolve when facing through and cultivating these tensions. Some dilemmas give rise to new initiatives (new food cooperatives and networks), for example. Furthermore, one of the general reflections from our participant-based observations and series of interviews is that many innovative and path-breaking initiatives happen to be the ones whose emergence and trajectories are marked by a large number of dilemmas, or tensions. The experiences and lessons associated with them are often kept as a latent resource that could be used as a base for founding new initiatives in the future. Dealing with tensions thus helps community initiatives in the field of sustainability transform, innovate and replicate.

5. Concluding remarks
What is the relation between dealing with the dilemmas or conflicts that occur on the level of individual community groups and society at large? We argue here that conflicts taking place within CBIs impact not only community initiatives, but the milieu, or the 'soil', in which they emerge, thrive and replicate. CBAs continuously transform the social context in which they subsist being both the *actors* and *factors* of its 'fertility'. Conflicts could increase the fertility of the social base when approached from a 'third' perspective creating new types of mind-sets and paths that transverse the seemingly binary options. Stated differently, conflicts are often a result of a difference, and can only be worked upon embracing, rather than eliminating it. This difference is often a motor of movement, which needs a container, or a safe space (in the form of a shared proposal, a facilitated meeting or reconnection with nested values) to manifest itself (Escorihuela 'Ulises' 2010).

We do not mean to argue that all conflicts and tensions produce positive outcomes and resolve differing views on the institutionalization, or expansion of CBIs. Rather, what we say is that internal disagreements – even profound – can be dealt with in a productive way towards the consolidation of CBIs, especially so if the soil of relationships within a CBI is fertile enough to produce continuous reflective debates and allow for open disagreements and in-depth consideration of other perceptions and preferences.

One key result emerging from the interviews in Barcelona is that the very existence and resistance of community-based initiatives amidst hostile structural and economic conditions can be perceived as a success in itself, and hence – as a factor that contributes to the fertility of the social base. Some initiatives emerge *as a result of* tensions (for example

the lack of equitable local and ecological food production system). Others continue existing *despite* tensions, while *trying to work* with tensions (for example a local ecological farm that lost the support of one of its consumer group). Often the dilemmas that CBIs face are sprouts, or projections, of a bigger dilemma, which a single entity cannot resolve on its own, such as the need to change the current food-, or energy-provisioning model. Conflicts experienced at the level of the CBIs are often a result of the social division, exclusion and structural inequalities penetrating the entire society. Internal group tensions also often reflect tensions in the external socio-institutional regimes. In this way conflicts at the level of single entities can be fertile for having the capacity to surface a global tension on local grounds. Intentionally or not, community-based initiatives provide the space for understanding and experiencing tensions and crises that local members are normally alienated from and integrate this learning when designating their future actions. For example members of the energy cooperative in the sample frequently stated they feel unable to change the oligopolistic model of energy provision in Spain on their own. The tensions associated with their inability to act in opposition, for example, was one of the ingredient triggering the emergence of other local energy initiatives, using different strategies such as network building and political pressure.

In this paper, we have sought to track the conditions that favor the emergence and persistence of community initiatives by linking previously identified factors of success into a more complex and complete scheme of analysis. In contrast with previous studies highlighting one or several internal or external factors, we argue that the emergence and trajectories of community initiatives can be explained through the metaphor of a 'fertile soil'. The fertile soil for CBIs is understood as the social fabric of multiple socio-demographic, historic, economic, political, visible and invisible factors which prompt the sprouting and growth of community initiatives engaged with sustainability. It is a holding space, characterized by: a shared history of social mobilization and activism; diversity; values of cooperation and trust; concern with justice and sustainability; presence of counter-cultures; actors' agency and self-empowerment; social networking; non-restrictive external regime; and availability of physical space/s. Nevertheless a complete set of factors that contribute to the fertility of the social base is impossible to derive, or predict, partly due to dynamics which are bound to remain invisible.

Moreover, the diversity of factors alone is not enough to produce a fertile social fabric. Rather, the quality of the relations, or the *connectedness and/in opposition* between these factors needs to be considered. In this paper, we have placed tensions, or conflicts, and their creative addressing, at the core of the fertile soil framework; or as a factor leading to the generation of new ideas, practices and responses to complex socio-economic and environmental realities. To this aim we explored some of the tensions which community-based initiatives in the field of sustainability in Barcelona frequently face, and in particular: openness to new entries and approaches versus maintaining established structures and roles; embracing a ethnic/class diversity of membership versus focusing on cohesion/efficiency; establishing or using horizontal versus managerial forms of decision-making; growing through mainstreaming versus being loyal to established ethics and keeping a 'right-small' size.

Just like the soil requires aeration and moving attending and uncovering these dilemmas have been a powerful mechanism for reworking all reviewed initiatives. As our research has elicited, the tension between the copying strategy of expansion (through mainstreaming) and right-(small)-sizing, for example, can be addressed by the generation of off-springs or replications so that community initiatives keep their transformative features while expanding their impact. Alternatively, acknowledging the conflict between CBIs rootedness in existing local cultures, realities and organizational styles and the need to

embrace a diversity of member profiles or strategies seem to offer the fresh ingredients and mindsets needed for a wider social-economic transformation. Slogans and practices like open localism, for example, which emerge out of this tension or conflict, aim at helping initiatives grow out of their closed circles and upgrade the collective capacity of society at large to respond to emerging economic, environmental or political challenges.

Fertility can also be a result of transformation, after going through, and learning from, tensions and conflicts. That said tensions alone are not portrayed as 'positive' or 'negative' here. An excessive exposure to conflicts, which are not properly facilitated or dealt with, or whose roots are not profoundly addressed, could be detrimental to the survival, persistence or replication of any social group or organization. Moreover, short-lived highly participative projects that boom and bust due to economic or social conflicts or clashes are often called 'failures'. These 'failures' are, however, fundamental for they create the cognitive base from which lessons can be drawn, connections made and opportunities for learning provided. In that sense failures can also be a factor for the fertility of the social fabric. If these experiences are stored within the community memory, new initiatives dispose of richer set of tools and approaches for social change. Indeed, many of the innovative or pioneer projects in our sample experienced a number of internal and external contradictions.

Our proposed analytical framework has several implications. Firstly, in terms of theory, the metaphor of the "fertile soil" situates the emergence and evolution of community-based initiatives in a wider perspective that includes spatial and temporal clashes and feedbacks. Secondly, the framework indicates that the clashes between conflicting visions need and could not be resolved by finding a middle position. Conflicts can only be resolved by transcending of mindsets and static approaches. Third, tensions are at the core of the fertile soil for they contain the seeds, or codes to finding responses and paths to achieving sustainability and social justice. If the deep concerns that they raise are brought to light and properly, and safely, addressed, these could be a source of strength and innovation for CBIs and simultaneously help them contribute in an even more meaningful way to the global socio-political transition.

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