



Commoning (in) the neighborhood, Righting the city: The role of Participatory Budgeting in enacting the Right to the City through commoning in Lisbon.

Androniki Pappa  and Alexandra Paio 

Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon, Lisbon 1649-026, Portugal
androniki.pappa@iscte-iul.pt; alexandra.paio@iscte-iul.pt;

Abstract. The pursuit of the Right to the City (R2C) calls for prioritizing the most affected by its absence [1]. Operationally, this denotes a two-way dynamic between the impact of bottom-up emancipatory practices on transforming institutional norms and the ability of top-down resources to reach and activate socially and spatially marginalized populations. This paper portrays the R2C within the pragmatical context of the participatory budget of BIP/ZIP in Lisbon, depicting it as a network of institutionally aided commoning activities performed in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. Towards this goal, the study initially develops a framework for analyzing the R2C through commoning practices by aligning a taxonomy of activities in the BIP/ZIP projects with Susser and Tonnelat’s [2] rights to everyday urban life; encounter; and creative activity. The devised commoning framework encompasses activities that 1. prioritize the most disadvantaged, 2. promote social development, 3. have a strong spatial character, 4. practice togetherness and solidarity, 5. enhance the value of the neighborhood and 6. expand neighborhood boundaries. Subsequently, this framework is employed to analyze the BIP/ZIP projects and portray the pursuance of the R2C within the program by pinpointing emerging and under-addressed rights in BIP/ZIP neighborhoods. To accomplish these objectives, the study employs a mixed-method approach integrating theoretical exploration of urban commons and R2C, data collection and organization. This involves mapping a dataset of projects into attributes, qualitative coding cycles to categorize project activities into a commoning taxonomy, and subsequently utilization of this model for statistical data analysis.

Keywords: Right to the City, Commoning, Participatory Budgeting, Data Analysis, Qualitative Coding.

1 Introduction

The first formulation of the R2C dates to 1968 Henry Lefebvre’s *Le Droit à La Ville* in which he criticized the exclusion of citizens in the production of urban spaces. Suggesting the idea that inhabitants become active citizens that participate in the production of the city, he looked beyond the physical construction to social practices and representations that define it. He theorized the R2C as “*the right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habitat and to inhabit. The right to the oeuvre, to participation and appropriation (clearly distinct from the right to property)*” [3].

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Since 1968, the R2C has been studied by numerous scholars, such as Harvey [4], Purcell [5], Souza [6] that discuss the social production of space and embraced by several movements that oppose to the power structures embedded in traditional city planning but claim equitable access to urban resources and participatory planning. Expressing a wide spectrum of emancipatory ideas, the notion has been used from banners of bottom-up demonstrations that defend public spaces, such as the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey [7]; to framing goals of advocacy groups such as the R2C Alliance in the US [8]; to objectives for international policies for sustainability, such as “The Right to the City and Cities for All”, part of the Habitat III Policy Units [9]; even as piece of national legislation in Brazil [10].

Naturally, these multiple interpretations of the R2C as a result of its wide popularity has been interpreted in scholarly discourses as a contestation that led to a diffusion of the conceptual precision of the term. This is reflected as a loss of radicality and critical potential of the term, being characterized from an “umbrella” [11] or “vague” [12] concept to an “empty signifier” [13], or a “catchphrase” [5], all expressing how it has become so broad of a concept that any urban issue can fit under its themes [6]. Given these realities, two prevailing critical narratives on the practical applications of the R2C suggest that it is either deployed for fragmented and localized movements or co-opted into dominant policy discourses [14], leading some scholars to the conclusion that the R2C can no longer offer a useful frame for understanding socially transformative urban politics.

This study upholds that the notion of the R2C has yet an unrealized power, experienced on the everyday urban life, in instances of cooperation, solidarity, co-production and active citizenship. Drawing on this supposition, the R2C can attain an action-driven definition through revisiting Lefebvre’s ideas on active citizenship in the production of the city in a contemporary context. To do so, the study adopts an analysis through the prism of urban commons, in social processes of collective action and management of urban spaces and services through community engagement, trust, solidarity and shared responsibility, namely processes of *commoning* [15].

1.1 Portraying the R2C through urban commons: spatial and social implications

The relationship between commoning and the R2C is not a new conception but has been explored by several scholars and organisations [7,16–28] grounded on the collective action and affirmation of citizenship that underpin both concepts. Susser and Tonnelat [2] have contributed to this discussion by outlining three specific components of the R2C that are served in commons practices: the rights to (i) urban everyday life, which revolves around issues of use, production and consumption of everyday services; (ii) simultaneity and encounters, which connects to public spaces collectively used and claimed; and (iii) creative activity that refers to creativity and collective visions of citizens.

Framing the R2C through the notion of urban commons offers the opportunity to discuss the city both as a physical form and as the social relationships and practices that interrelate with it, which requires further clarifications on the standpoint of this

study. First, considering the physical aspect, the “urban” is conceptualized as a polycentric structure examined through the multiple localities that define its various interconnection points. From this perspective, the scale of analysis introduced is the neighborhood, which being between the city and the building, offers a sample of urban reality that allows citizens to relate to, and at the same time is the minimum scale of operating urbanization [29]. Therefore, the commoning practices examined are ones implemented at a neighborhood level, as well as ones that expand the boundaries of the local and create networks in the city. Second, to analyze the social processes that are connected to the conceptualization of the R2C through commoning, it is necessary to position this study on the debate on the role of the existing system of state and market upon these social processes. Many urban commons scholars, also referred to as *alterglobalizationists* [24,30] support that since urban commons represent collective bottom-up struggles of communities to reclaim their R2C [31] they must remain outside or “Beyond State and Market” [22], as an emancipatory alternative to the capitalist system and the oppressive state [31–34]. Others argue that such analysis of urban commons, although offering radical political visions are still inadequate in describing the operationalization of urban commons in concrete terms, pointing out that enclosure *from* the state would paradoxically require interface *with* the state [16]. Following this view, a second stream of scholars referred to as *institutionalists* [24,30], examine the urban commons as not necessarily antithetical to the state, exploring ways in which they reform existing systems and introduce new types of institutions [35]. Stemming from this latter point of view and acknowledging the risks of co-optation entailed when exploring urban commons from an institutional perspective [36], or the risk of limiting the radical potential of commoning activities through their classification [31] this study argues that the elevation of their significance in cities today is undoubtedly urgent and hence must be seen as a new sphere in existing systems to negotiate mutually beneficial relationships with government and market [37], all at an instance, neighborhood and city level.

2 Participatory budgets as a ground for commoning

Stemming from the above, the aim of the study is to explore the R2C through the processes of commoning that (re)produce the city, within the boundaries of an existing system, and specifically one that allows or even promotes the facilitation of commoning practices by citizens, rather than simply tolerates them. Such enabling systems are expressed through multiple institutional forms that unravel in instances of partnerships between the public and the civic and social domains that aim at the democratization of public resources and services, either by sharing their ownership and management, such as in the case of community land trusts and public-civic partnerships, or by democratizing the decision-making on the allocation of public -municipal or state- resources, as in the case of participatory budgets. Focusing on this latter case, the study is centered on the context of Lisbon and specifically the participatory budget of BIP/ZIP.

2.1 The BIP/ZIP Program

The BIP/ZIP Local Partnerships Program in Lisbon is a participatory budget for urban regeneration also serving as an instrument of public policy at a municipal level. Initiated in 2011 by the Department of Housing and Local Development of the Municipality of Lisbon, the program aims to promote quality of life and territorial cohesion in priority neighborhoods by annually funding projects guided by local partnerships.

As of its 2021 edition, the program has funded 426 interventions in 67 areas to address local issues of poverty and deprivation, unemployment, illiteracy and social exclusion through investments in infrastructure, housing, community services and employment. The formation of the partnerships between local stakeholders including social and civil organizations, community groups and associations, NGOs, educational institutions, and public organizations promote a collaborative culture in the priority areas, while allowing for targeted solutions driven by bottom-up initiatives. The projects' overarching goals include improvement of the neighborhood life, prevention and inclusion, promotion of citizenship, spatial requalification of spaces, development of skills and entrepreneurship [38]. From this perspective, the BIP/ZIP both at a programmatic and at a project level introduces urban commons to achieve the empowerment of disadvantaged communities and their activation in reclaiming shared ownership of their neighborhood spaces and services.

2.2 The R2C in BIP/ZIP

The R2C in the context of a participatory budget can be conceived as a negotiation between the bottom-up practices of commoning and the top-down institutional strategies. These negotiations take place during the annual call for applications, in which local partnerships request funding through describing, among others, the activities to be performed within their proposals. Stretching this idea further, it could be argued that it is in the successful project applications that lies the mutually defined R2C, as the result of the negotiation between the bottom-up and top-down actors (Fig.1).

This proposition is essentially metaphorical, as the creation of the assessment criteria and the final selection of the successful projects are defined by the municipal body and hence the power relationships remain in the normative structure. However, the interface between bottom-up and top-down resources are dependent upon a two-way dynamic of how on the one hand bottom-up initiatives can have enough resolution to transform institutions and on the other hand how top-down resources can reach disadvantaged sites and populations to transform their normative ideas of civic infrastructure and trigger the transformative intelligence embedded in these sites [39]. This implies that as this study focuses on socially and spatially priority neighborhoods, community leaders and local authorities are, operationally, placed at the centre of initiating the enhancement of the social capital of such disadvantaged areas [40]. Therefore, the role of the state for the case of BIP/ZIP is not only to enable the commoning processes and R2C, but principally to initiate, promote and facilitate them.

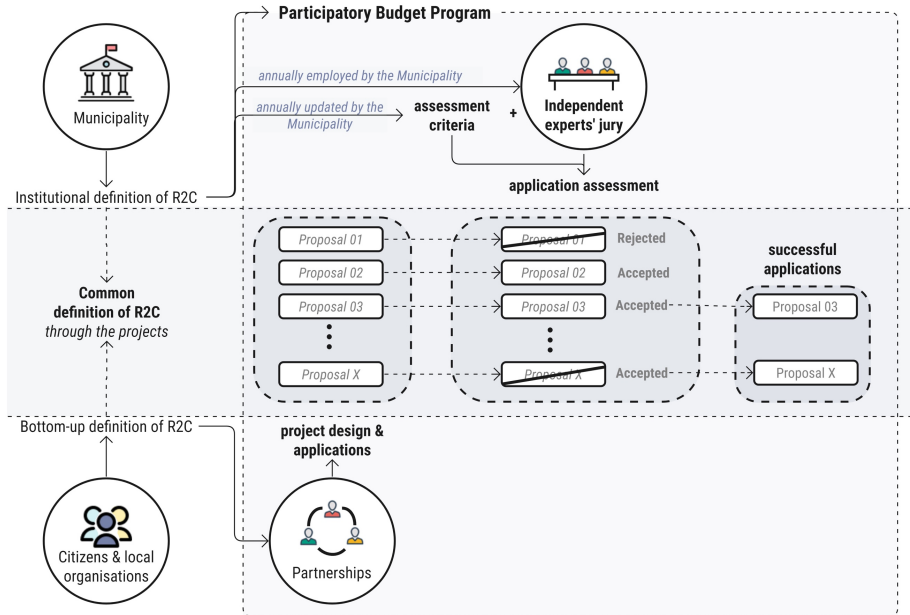


Fig. 1. Hypothesis that successful applications within the participatory budget program reflect the commonly defined R2C, where top-down and bottom-up incentives meet. Source: author.

3 Methodology

The definition of the R2C in the context of BIP/ZIP is approached in two steps: first, the development of an analytical framework for understanding the R2C through commoning; and second, the analysis of the BIP/ZIP projects under this framework to portray the specific qualities of the R2C in the case of BIP/ZIP (Fig.2).

3.1 Analytical framework to frame the R2C through commoning

The development of the analytical framework is based on a correlation of urban commons theory and in particular Susser and Tonnelat’s [2] organisation of urban commons according to the rights to everyday urban life; encounter; and creative activity, with a taxonomy of commoning activities that take place in the BIP/ZIP projects.

This taxonomy is developed following a data-driven approach that begins with the creation of a dataset for the program’s 416 funded projects (2011-2021), based on the publicly available projects’ applications [41]. The dataset consists of manually collected data, organized into attributes for indexing the projects, such as their name, year of implementation and location(s), and for organizing them into commoning processes, such as their theme, activities, tools and target groups (Table 2). The dataset is further subject to a process of qualitative coding cycles [42] to first retrieve and then categorise the activities according to their socio-spatial foci.

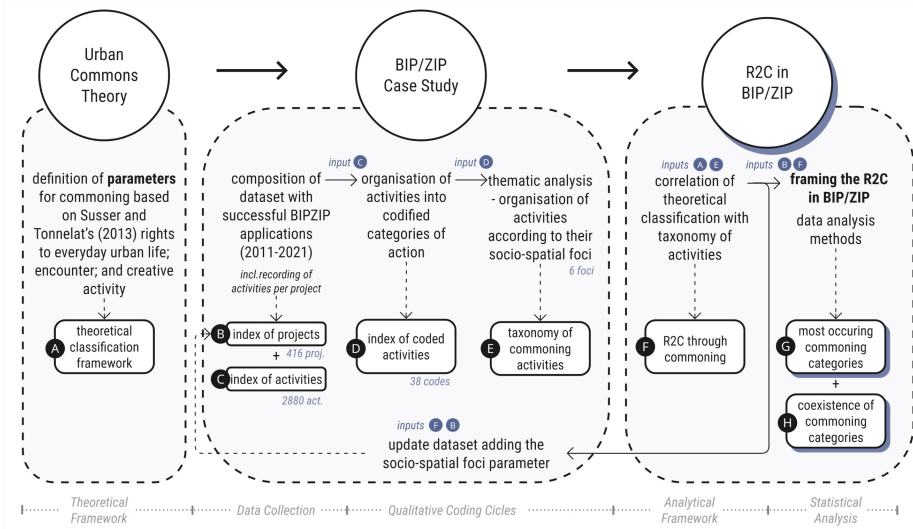


Fig. 2. Methodology Diagram. Source: author.

3.2 Framing the R2C in BIP/ZIP

After the analytical framework of the R2C through commoning is developed, it is used to further frame the R2C in BIP/ZIP. To do so, a new qualitative coding process is applied to enrich the initial dataset by adding the parameter of the socio-spatial focus, named and described by one of the six defined “commoning categories”. The interconnections and frequently blurred boundaries in the objectives of the commoning activities, make it possible for the projects to be related to more than one focus. However, to constrain the dimensionality of the output, the maximum number of the allocated foci is limited to two per project.

Finally, the definition of the R2C in BIP/ZIP is investigated through data analysis on the updated dataset to detect the occurrence of the commoning categories in the projects and hence the degree in which each of the rights to urban life is performed.

4 Results

4.1 R2C through Commoning

In the 416 projects mapped, 2880 activities are recorded, summarised in more than 1360 distinct actions, such as community space creation, support services provision, community events organising, workshops and training activities, solidarity actions and environmental awareness campaigns to name a few. The list of 1360 actions are translated in 38 activity codes further correlated to six categories of socio-spatial foci that compose the taxonomy of commoning activities. The analytical presentation of this taxonomy along with the coding processes that led to its construction is beyond the limits of this paper, which only presents a summary in a visual diagram (Fig. 3).

The final R2C framework includes a correlation of the socio-spatial foci to the rights to everyday urban life; encounter; and creative activity and is summarized in Table 1.

4.2 Framing the R2C in BIP/ZIP

The preliminary analysis (Fig.4) on the BIP/ZIP updated dataset (Table 2) identifies that the most addressed practices are those of togetherness and solidarity, followed by those that promote social development. At the same time, the practices that seek to expand the boundaries of the neighbourhoods through entailing activities of cross-neighbourhood connection and networking are least tackled by the BIP/ZIP projects.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the methodology section, based on the themes, activities, tools and target groups, each project is assigned to one principal and potentially a secondary commoning focus. Therefore, beyond the most occurring activities, a key exploration to understand the dynamic relationship among the reclaimed rights relates to the correlations among commoning foci within the same projects. This analysis (Fig.5) shows a strong connection among practices of solidarity and those with a strong spatial character, which denotes the importance of the right to simultaneity and encounter for the projects of BIP/ZIP both as a social and a spatial right. In the same graph, it is again evident, that processes of expanding the boundaries and connecting to other neighbourhoods are least connected with other commoning categories.

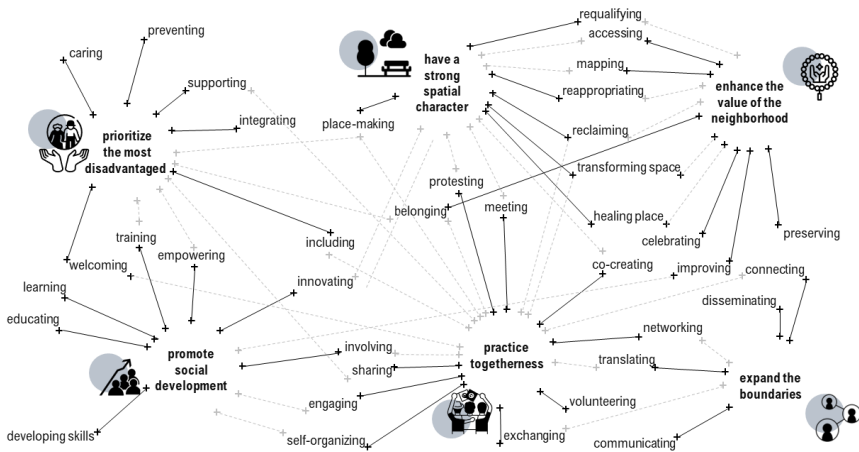


Fig. 3. Mapping the commoning activities. Source: author.

Table 1. R2C through commoning framework. Source: author.

Socio-spatial focus (commoning category)	Description of activities	Connection to R2C (i) everyday urban life (ii) encounter (iii) creative activity
prioritize the most disadvantaged	Processes that aim to empower and integrate various disadvantaged or marginalized social groups. They further include the prevention of discrimination, risk-behavior and violence and the provision of equal access and opportunities.	(i) (ii) (iii)
promote social development	Practices that promote the development of personal and collective skills through specialized training and integration, employability and new skills such as technological tools, promotion of entrepreneurial citizenship with a focus on local economy, education, empowerment and awareness on social and environmental issues with a greater aim to improve the quality of life.	(i) (ii) (iii)
have a strong spatial impact	Activities that highlight the spatial dimension as a means to target the rights to encounters and to creative activity. These include interventions in the public sphere that focus on the requalification and reappropriation of neighborhood spaces, including public spaces and local facilities to make them more attractive, safe, accessible and beneficial for the communities, to the creation or adaptation of spaces to host community practices, needs and services, as well as practices of protest and negotiation that reclaim collectively owned community spaces.	(i) (ii) (iii)
practice togetherness and solidarity	Practices of engagement citizens in activities for the common benefit and social cohesion, such as social support, sharing and exchanging across different groups of the community, self-organization, solidarity practices and volunteering, practices that promote intercultural and intergenerational coexistence, as well as practices of co-creation and innovation.	(i) (ii) (iii)
expand the boundaries of the neighborhood	Expansion of the geographical and social boundaries of the neighbourhood. Dissemination to- and learning from other contexts, connection and communication across neighbourhoods to create networks in the urban scale through local and trans-local actions such as digital platforms.	(ii)
enhance the value of the neighborhood	Practices that enhance the value of the neighbourhood, from the improvement of community services to respond to existing or emerging problems, to the improvement of the image of the neighborhood to overcome social prejudices. This can include the preservation of the heritage and culture or even the local branding and promotion of a local identity that provides a sense of belonging, co-responsibility and equal accessibility to local services.	(iii) (i)

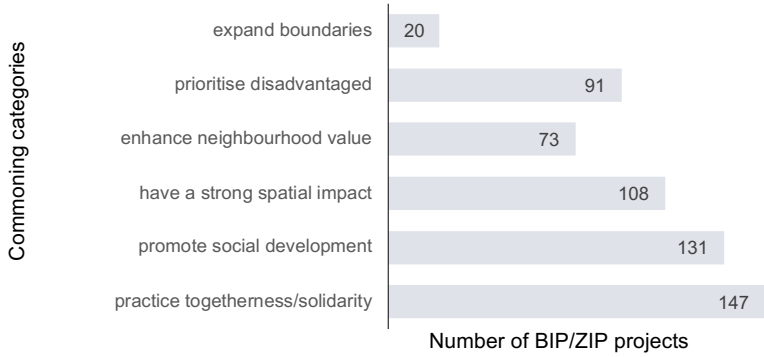


Fig. 4. Distribution of commoning categories within the BIP/ZIP projects. Source: author.

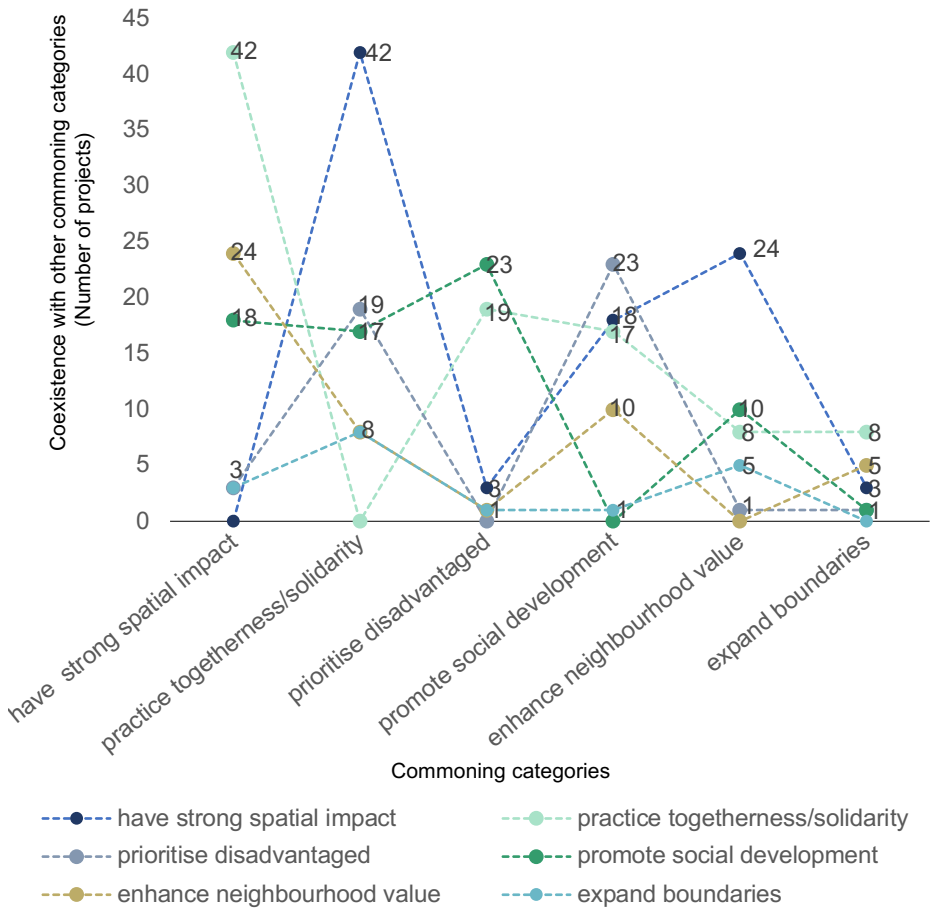


Fig. 5. Relationship among commoning categories in the projects of BIP/ZIP. Source: author.

5 Conclusion

This paper portrays the R2C through commoning within the context of the institutional program of BIP/ZIP, contributing to the discourse on the practical application of the R2C within the context of an existing system, experienced in practices of everyday life. In this regard, the theoretical analysis presents in the example of the BIP/ZIP Program the conceptualization of participatory budgets as grounds for the development of urban commons, denoting the role of the state, embodied in this case by the Municipality of Lisbon, from an enabler to an active promoter of commoning practices and hence as an active partner in the formation of the R2C in the neighborhoods of Lisbon.

The creation of a taxonomy of commoning practices that reflect the R2C in the first stage of the analysis attempts to frame the operationalization of the R2C in the context of everyday experiences. The classification in six categories is by no means intended as a “final” model of categorization, but rather suggested as an open-ended capturing of the interplay between the R2C, commoning and participatory budgeting. Similarly, the results of the preliminary data analysis in the second stage of portraying the R2C into BIP/ZIP, does not intend to limit the contribution of the projects into predefined categories, nor imply the assessment of projects in response to these commoning categories. Instead, the statistical analysis intends to support the theoretical response to the aim of the research with specific observations that seek to highlight trending qualities and unexplored potentials, as well as unravel existing relationships between projects through the activities, tools and methods they use to pursue urban and social change. Specifically, the R2C in BIP/ZIP is significantly conveyed by practices of solidarity and social development, also combined with actions in public space. This indicates a gravity on pursuing the rights to everyday urban life and encounter as pressing issues for the inclusive integration of the priority neighborhoods and populations in the urban fabric of Lisbon. This focus on the socially and spatially local challenges is also reflected by the low priority given to social practices that tackle cross-neighborhood connections, signifying a shortcoming in targeting social change through the creation of city-wide networks.

Finally, beyond these observations, the contribution of this study lies not in proposing another definition of the R2C, but rather in its methodological approach in reconceptualizing the R2C within instances of everyday. In this regard, the constructed taxonomy is offered as a foundational framework, basis for further development and analysis to respond to targeted inquiries concerning the relation between BIP/ZIP and the R2C. Moreover, recontextualised within other institutional programs, it holds the potential to offer insights on their contributions in the pursuance of the R2C.

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