

EXPERIMENTATION AND POLICY MOBILITIES: PILOTING BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS IN SOUTHERN EUROPEAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT – Research on policy mobilities has focused much of its attention on studying how policies-from-elsewhere are learned, mediated and translated into different contexts, either focusing on early (*a priori*) and late (*a posteriori*) stages of policymaking processes without encompassing their full scope. In conceptualising policymaking as inherently indeterminate, open-ended and processual, this article introduces the ways in which pilot policy experiments mediate the intersections between *a priori* and *a posteriori* phases of policymaking processes. Drawing on the case of three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) policy programmes in Greater Barcelona (Spain) and Greater Lisbon (Portugal), we discuss the importance of pilot policy experimentation through four key practices: Concept testing, generative learning and knowledge exchange, stakeholder engagement and policy translation. While not always comprehensive, teleological or hermetically separate, these practices serve as a heuristic framework to illustrate how policy experimentation shapes the learning, mediation and translation of urban policies across different policymaking stages. In so doing, we invite policy mobilities scholars to explore further the experimentation with urban policies as arenas in which policies-from-elsewhere are locally constituted and reconstituted across the diverse stages and temporalities of policymaking.

Keywords: Policy mobilities; Experimental policies; Urban policy experimentation; Urban policies; Business improvement districts.

RESUMO – EXPERIMENTAÇÃO E MOBILIDADE DE POLÍTICAS: PROVAS-PILOTO DE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS EM CIDADES DA EUROPA DO SUL. A investigação em mobilidades de políticas tem-se concentrado em estudar como políticas oriundas de outros contextos são aprendidas, mediadas e traduzidas em diferentes contextos, frequentemente focando-se nas fases iniciais (*a priori*) e finais (*a posteriori*) dos processos de formulação de políticas, sem abranger todo o seu âmbito. Ao conceptualizar a formulação de políticas como sendo inerentemente indeterminada, aberta e processual, este artigo introduz as formas pelas quais as experiências-piloto em políticas medeiam as intersecções entre as fases *a priori* e *a posteriori* dos processos de formulação de políticas. A partir do caso de três programas de *Business Improvement Districts* (BIDs) na Grande Barcelona (Espanha) e na Grande Lisboa (Portugal), discutimos a importância da experimentação com políticas-piloto através de quatro práticas-chave: teste de conceito, aprendizagem generativa e troca de conhecimentos, envolvimento de partes interessadas e tradução de políticas. Embora nem sempre sejam compreensivas, teleológicas ou hermeticamente separadas, estas práticas servem como um quadro heurístico para ilustrar como a experimentação com políticas molda a aprendizagem, a mediação e a tradução de políticas urbanas ao longo das diferentes etapas de formulação de políticas. Deste modo, convidamos os académicos em mobilidade de políticas a explorar mais aprofundadamente a experimentação com políticas urbanas como arenas onde políticas oriundas de outros contextos são localmente constituídas e reconstituídas ao longo das diversas etapas e temporalidades da formulação de políticas.

Palavras-chave: Mobilidade de políticas; políticas experimentais; experimentação de políticas urbanas; políticas urbanas; *business improvement districts*.

RESUMEN – EXPERIMENTACIÓN Y MOVILIDAD DE POLÍTICAS: PROYECTOS PILOTO DE BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS EN CIUDADES DEL SUR DE EUROPA. La investigación sobre las movilidades de políticas se ha centrado principalmente en estudiar cómo las políticas provenientes de otros contextos son aprendidas, mediadas y traducidas en diferentes escenarios, enfocándose generalmente en las fases iniciales (*a priori*) y finales (*a posteriori*) de los procesos de formulación de políticas, sin abarcar todo su alcance. Al conceptualizar la formulación de políticas como inherentemente indeterminada, abierta y procesual, este artículo introduce las formas en que los experimentos piloto de políticas median las intersecciones entre las fases *a priori* y *a posteriori* de los procesos de formulación de

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políticas. A partir del caso de tres programas de *Business Improvement Districts* (BIDs) en la Gran Barcelona (España) y la Gran Lisboa (Portugal), discutimos la importancia de la experimentación piloto de políticas a través de cuatro prácticas clave: Pruebas de concepto, aprendizaje generativo e intercambio de conocimientos, implicación de las partes interesadas y traducción de políticas. Aunque no siempre son comprensivas, teleológicas o herméticamente separadas, estas prácticas sirven como un marco heurístico para ilustrar cómo la experimentación con políticas moldea el aprendizaje, la mediación y la traducción de políticas urbanas a lo largo de las diferentes etapas de la formulación de políticas. De este modo, invitamos a los estudiosos de las movilidades de políticas a explorar más profundamente la experimentación con políticas urbanas como espacios en los que las políticas provenientes de otros contextos son localmente constituidas y reconstituidas a lo largo de las diversas etapas y temporalidades de la formulación de políticas.

Palabras clave: Movilidad de políticas; políticas experimentales; experimentación de políticas urbanas; políticas urbanas; *business improvement districts*.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Argues that policy mobilities studies have either focused on early or late policymaking stages
- Discusses the role of pilot experiments in the circulation of policy futures
- Identifies four practices through which pilot schemes are used to experiment with policies
- Illustrates such features with formal and informal pilot schemes in Southern Europe
- Highlights the role of academics as policy mobilisers

I. INTRODUCTION

Borough by borough, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, this pilot programme is expanding so that we can continue to learn how sealed waste containers perform in a variety of settings. New Yorkers want cleaner sidewalks and cleaner curbs ... We will be looking [at] ... what works to enable us to take our streetscape back from mountains of black bags (New York City Sanitation Commissioner, 26 July 2022)

In April 2022, the New York City (NYC) Mayor, Eric Adams, and the NYC Department of Sanitation introduced the city's first containerised waste bins in Times Square. This initiative brings together public agencies and businesses to clean up the streets, modernise waste collection and reclaim public spaces by replacing sidewalk piles of trash bags with sealed, rodent-resistant bins (Mahdawi, 2024). Originally targeting business districts and recently expanding to residential neighbourhoods, some view this waste containerisation programme as a public policy to boost urban competitiveness, the premise being cleaner streets would enhance the city's visual appearance and business climate and attract more visitors. While that might be the case, this programme also serves as an experimental approach to test its effectiveness *before* potential city-wide implementation. Times Square has become the epicentre of this experiment, as it has for previous rounds of redevelopment, and its success has made it a model for other city boroughs (Gupta, 2023). Moreover, given NYC's position in various global-urban policymaking networks, it is more than likely that other US cities, and perhaps those further afield, might look to learn from the city's approach.

This vignette speaks to the broad aim of this article, which discusses the critical role of policy pilot programmes in the making-up of policy futures. This article aligns with the growing debates in the approach of urban policy mobilities examining how policies are potentially disembedded from, and translated into, different contexts (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Temenos *et al.*, 2019). However, it goes further by arguing for the need to rethink some taken-for-granted heuristics in the studying of policymaking. This article brings attention to an absent conversation in urban policy mobilities studies by examining how policy pilot programmes reveal the 'black box' of the power-laden processes behind policy learning, mediation and adoption.

These debates are well-established in the fields of public administration/management (Criado *et al.*, 2021; Hartley, 2005; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011) and political science (Lee & Ma, 2020; McGann *et al.*, 2018). They have recently gained traction in geographical studies on environmental and urban governance (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2016; McGuirk *et al.*, 2015, 2022). However, urban policy mobilities

studies have yet to fully explore the role of policy pilot programmes in policymaking processes. Under these circumstances, we have seen some academics criticizing the approach for focusing predominantly on the “ways in which policies are adopted and translated in different national contexts *after* they have been imported from elsewhere” (Valli *et al.*, 2024). While we acknowledge this critique, it seems to view policymaking as a linear process. This perspective partly overlooks the social-constructionist lens structuring the approach, which emphasises the discursive and material practices through which policies are learned and mediated *before* arriving at different places (Andersson & Cook, 2019; Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Cook & Ward, 2012). This article, however, takes a different perspective. Echoing and extending Lovell *et al.*’s (2023) work, its central argument is that the dichotomy between early (*a priori*) and late (*a posteriori*) stages of policymaking shaping policy mobilities studies obscures the inherently non-linear and overlapping rhythms of policymaking processes. By focusing on policy experiments as mechanisms that connect multiple policymaking stages, we situate how such experiments mediate the intersections between pre- and post-institutionalisation phases.

Situated within these wider intellectual debates, this article makes two arguments. First, it argues that policy experiments are integral to policymaking processes, which start long before, and may extend beyond, formal policy adoption and institutionalisation. We thus suggest that policy experiments shape the learning, mediation and translation of policies into different contexts. This approach enables policy mobilities scholars to uncover the intricate webs of experiments and their potential resonances in policy mobility and translation processes across different temporalities (Lovell *et al.*, 2023; Temenos, 2024; Wood, 2015). Second, it suggests that policy experiments are policymaking instruments that can either undermine or legitimize the making-up of policies in different economic, socio-spatial and political-institutional settings. Viewing policy experiments through this lens invites us to rethink the processes and practices through which policies circulate and become localized (Robinson, 2015, 2018; Valli *et al.*, 2024).

To substantiate these arguments, we draw on a qualitative research strategy that combines in-depth semi-structured interviews and the analysis of secondary materials. Specifically, we examine three Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) policy experimentation programmes in Southern European cities. The case of Greater Barcelona (Spain) illustrates how such programmes have been used both *a priori* and *a posteriori* policy adoption. The case of Greater Lisbon (Portugal) showcases their role *a priori* to BID policy adoption. Comparing these instances provides complementary insights into the multifaceted nature of policy pilot initiatives within different stages of policymaking. This qualitative approach involved over 30 semi-structured interviews (lasting between 50 and 175 minutes) with a diverse array of senior and non-elite actors, including elected politicians, government officials, ‘middling’ technocrats, business elites, policy consultants and academics. These interviews were supplemented by the analysis of policy briefs, national and regional policy documents, BID reports and consultant presentations. Together, these data sources inform our exploration of four overarching practices: Concept testing, generative learning and knowledge exchange, stakeholder engagement and policy translation. Together, these practices serve as a heuristic framework to examine how policy experimentation influences the learning, mediation and translation of urban policies across different policymaking stages.

Following the introduction, the next section reviews existing work on urban policy mobilities and engages with the fields of political science/public administration and geographical perspectives on environmental governance to argue that policy experimentation processes have been overlooked in policy mobilities studies. We then introduce four overarching practices – concept testing, generative learning and knowledge exchange, stakeholder engagement and policy translation – to illustrate how policy experiments interconnect multiple stages of policymaking processes. These practices are substantiated through three BID policy experiment programmes in two Southern European contexts. The final section discusses the importance of incorporating policy experiments into policy mobilities studies to better conceptualise the practices and resources of policy learning, mediation and translation across the different stages of policymaking processes.

II. LEARNING, MEDIATING AND TRANSLATING POLICY IDEAS: POLICY MOBILITIES, EXPERIMENTATION AND THE REINVENTION OF POLICY FUTURES

Over recent decades, policymakers have faced pressure to address various global-local issues, including climate change (Meerow, 2017), economic development (Ward, 2007) or public health (McCann & Temenos, 2015). In response, they have scanned the wider policy landscape and engaged

in benchmarking practices that compare city rankings and indices (Acuto *et al.*, 2021; McCann, 2004). These have been facilitated by a quantitative comparative infrastructure of urban public life, in the form of graphs, numbers, pictures or digital simulations, as a way “to create equivalence between different places, making policy transfer ... possible” (Prince, 2011, 199). These comparative gestures are, of course, not new. Writing three decades ago, Harvey (Harvey, 1989) noted a “general consensus ... that positive benefits are to be had by cities [and policymakers] taking an entrepreneurial stance”. Within these broader practices, specific attention has been placed on the ways through which particular policies and places have been socially constructed as ‘best practices’ due to their successes and potential replicability in other contexts (Papanastasiou, 2024; Whitney, 2022).

The approach of urban policy mobilities has examined the processes, practices and resources through which these ‘best practices’ have been potentially selected, learned, mediated and translated by a range of social actors to rethink the existing policy status quo (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Temenos *et al.*, 2019). While certainly not a coherent paradigm, the approach has key theoretical orientations. One is a relational-territorial perspective to the study of cities and policies. In particular, policy mobilities studies conceptualise policymaking as a simultaneously interconnected and context-specific process, examining how it is both shaped by socio-spatial and power-laden struggles, and the global-urban circulation of ‘best practices’ (Papanastasiou, 2024; Temenos & McCann, 2013). In this sense, policy mobilities studies have argued that “there is nothing natural about which policies are constructed as succeeding and those that are regarded as having failed” (Ward, 2006, p. 70).

Building upon these features, the approach has spurred studies examining how power and politics intertwine and the practices through which uneven social actors and networks discursively and materially frame expertise and truth claims. Particularly well-documented is the social labour of consultants, policy elites and other global economic forces in circulating specific policy repertoires through persuasive informational infrastructures (Prince, 2011; Rapoport & Hult, 2017; Whitney, 2022). For instance, in the 1990s, senior figures from US BIDs and their corporate interests became ‘international talk-shops’, advocating the replicability of their perceived successes elsewhere (Cook, 2008; Cook & Ward, 2012; Michel & Stein, 2015). While generative, more recent scholarship has highlighted the increasing power of media, spanning blogs, news articles and increasingly digital platforms, in the construction of what constitutes ‘best’ and ‘worst’ practices. By mediating and accelerating the ‘fast circulation’ of policy narratives, these platforms frame certain policies as models to emulate while sidelining others (McCann, 2004; Montero, 2016; Ward, 2024). Of course, such practices and resources are rarely neutral, as media narratives often align with specific agendas or ideologies, perhaps amplifying controversies or downplaying failures to reinforce dominant discourses.

Yet, this intellectual focus on elite-driven and media-amplified ‘successes’ highlights a critical gap in the study of policy mobilities: the tendency to privilege successful policy mobilisations while overlooking alternative outcomes. Indeed, ‘success/presence’ represents just one of many possible trajectories in policymaking (Lovell, 2019; Temenos & Lauermann, 2020). Responding to this gap, Temenos (2024) calls for a broader exploration of discursive and material policy failures. Her study of harm reduction drug policy in post-socialist Budapest illustrates discursive failure as arising from how policies are framed and understood, often leading to misunderstandings or outright rejection. Material failure, meanwhile, refers to the selective adoption or non-adoption of specific policy features. Given the inherent complexities of policy adoption, understanding how policies are made, re-made, embraced or rejected requires attention to their unfolding across multiple temporalities. This interconnected view of discursive and material success/failure deepens our grasp of the learning, mediating and translating of public policies. Such a nuanced approach aligns with Peck and Theodore’s (2012, p. 22) call to engage with the “complex webs of experiments, failures and alternatives” as essential to understanding the “wider patterning of [potential] policy transformation”, adoption and institutionalisation over time.

While policy mobilities studies have excelled at unpacking the social, material and discursive practices through which policy best practices are learned, mediated and translated, the approach has not always been explicit about the stages of the policymaking process it addresses. Here, Lovell *et al.* (2023) note that much of the existing research tends to examine either the early stages of policymaking, *a priori* to policy implementation, or in later stages, *a posteriori* formal adoption. This dichotomy highlights an idiosyncrasy within an approach that emphasises policymaking as an inherently indeterminate, multilateral and open-ended process (Temenos, 2024; Wood, 2015). We do not suggest that focusing on these discrete policymaking stages is unsuitable for studying the making-up of policies, nor do we advocate abandoning these two strands of inquiry. Instead, we suggest that policymaking processes often resist linear categorisation into distinct stages, as they are inherently

messy and shaped by overlapping rhythms and tempos. Recognising this nuanced aspect provides opportunities to explore mechanisms like policy experiments as pivotal instances for understanding how policymaking unfolds. Policy experiments, as mechanisms that transverse multiple policymaking stages, can shed light on the intersections between pre- and post-institutionalisation phases of policymaking processes (Bailey *et al.*, 2017; McGuirk *et al.*, 2022; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). We thus echo Temenos's (2024, p. 527) call to consider the "longer histories of experimentation" to argue for a deeper engagement with policy experiments if we are to grasp the full scope of policymaking processes.

Over the last two decades, several interrelated strands of work have explored the role of policy experiments in shaping policy futures, ranging from political science/public administration to geographical studies on environmental/urban governance. Despite differing ontological and epistemological foundations, these fields can enrich policy mobilities studies. In political science/public administration, policy experiments are test-bed instances that often emerge as part of normative-prescriptive policymaking frameworks to evaluate 'what works' before policies are institutionalised or scaled up nationwide (Hartley, 2005; Vreugdenhil *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, political science/public administration studies have examined how public sector innovation laboratories function as arenas for testing, demonstrating and iterating new policy ideas in the early stages of policymaking processes (Criado *et al.*, 2021; McGann *et al.*, 2018). However, some of these studies question whether these laboratories effectively influence the making-up of public policies (Ferreira & Botero, 2020). Conversely, others have been far more positive, such as Vreugdenhil *et al.*'s (2012) study of a South African coastal management pilot program that achieved nationwide policy diffusion and Lee and Ma's (2020) findings on innovation laboratories in the UK, Denmark and Singapore, which were instrumental in experimenting with and potentially transferring policy ideas.

Geographers and urban scholars have recently engaged in similar debates on how policy experiments can transform environmental and urban policy futures (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2016; McGuirk *et al.*, 2015, 2022; Scholl & de Kraker, 2021). Central to these studies are urban laboratories – locally embedded, open and collaborative arenas for learning and testing new practices – as experimental instances that can drive "social and technical changes aimed at transforming urban governance" (Voytenko *et al.*, 2016, p. 47) through policy innovation and reform (Evans *et al.*, 2021; Schreiber *et al.*, 2023). For instance, Eneqvist & Karvonen (2021) found that experimental governance in Stockholm's sustainability transitions improved urban policymaking and informed long-term policies, while Hodson *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that experimental cycling initiatives in Manchester's Oxford Road elevated cycling to a strategic priority at the city-region level. These examples illustrate how urban policy experiments, whether successful or not, are valuable arenas for cities and policymakers to learn from.

Though internally differentiated, strands of work in political science/public administration and geography/urban studies share key commonalities in examining policy experiments. Both fields recognise that policy experimentation, whether successful or not, fosters policy innovation and learning, potentially leading to new or revised policy futures. Collectively, they agree that policy experiments are essential to regular policymaking, particularly in its early stages, serving as 'test beds' that inform agenda setting and the formulation of policy ideas prior to their formal adoption. While these insights are generative, we contend that policy experiments are not limited to these early stages of policymaking but instead transverse and connect multiple stages of policymaking, spanning both pre- and post-institutionalisation phases. This nuanced perspective underscores the need to address how policy mobilities studies have largely overlooked the ethos of policy pilot programmes in shaping policy futures across different policymaking phases and temporalities (Montero *et al.*, 2023). To bridge this gap, the following discussion examines a well-known policy best practice to explore how the wider politics of experimentation (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2016) and their resonances in the politics of learning and policymaking (Evans *et al.*, 2021) across multiple temporalities can deepen our understanding of policymaking as inherently indeterminate, open-ended and processual.

III. EXPERIMENTAL URBAN POLICIES: PILOTING BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS IN SOUTHERN EUROPEAN CITIES

Recent decades have seen BIDs becoming a prominent economic development policy circulating in multiple trans-urban policymaking circuits (Silva *et al.*, 2022; Ward, 2007). They are business-led public-private partnerships where property and business owners in a designated area of a town, city, commercial, industrial or tourism district collectively fund services to enhance the vitality and viability

of these areas. Despite their wide adoption in various places, BID governance schemes vary significantly in form and function. For instance, in the US and Germany, contributions are compulsory for all property owners, while in England funding is sourced from business occupiers. These examples of BID trans-local adoption clearly emphasise the neoliberal turn in urban policymaking, wherein businesses increasingly influence urban politics (Michel & Stein, 2015; Ward, 2007).

In the face of an increasing private sector involvement in urban politics, policy mobilities studies have suggested that policy circulation often occurs between places with similar politico-institutional infrastructures. BIDs are a prime example of this, as they have traditionally emerged in countries at the forefront of neoliberal reforms (Silva *et al.*, 2022; Ward, 2007). However, we should not assume that policy circulation is restricted to more neoliberal contexts. For instance, BIDs have been recently explored in countries with more moderate or centralised politico-institutional frameworks, such as Sweden, Denmark, Spain and Portugal (Richner & Olesen, 2019; Silva *et al.*, 2024; Valli *et al.*, 2024). This raises questions about whether the BID policy, originally created in more neoliberal contexts like the US, is fully suitable for environments with strong, influential welfare states.

These instances provide fertile grounds for enriching the theorisation of how neoliberal policy futures circulate and arrive at more centralised, less liberal, contexts. In these contexts, policy experiments tend to emerge as productive, evidence-based ‘pathfinders’ to test particular policies-from-elsewhere and their potential translation into particular ‘local’ contexts (Donaghy *et al.*, 2013). Drawing on recent policy mobilities scholarship, this article examines three BID pilot programmes as case studies: one conducted in 2017 in Barcelona before formal policy adoption, another initiated in 2022 in Greater Barcelona after policy adoption, and a nationwide programme launched in Portugal in 2022 before formal adoption. These cases are used “to explore how the genetic interconnectedness of urban processes and outcomes can be mobilized ... to critique and extend concepts in urban theory” (Robinson, 2018, p. 221). In particular, we make two arguments. First, policy experiments play a crucial role in shaping policy learning, mediation and translation across multiple stages of the policymaking process. Second, these experiments serve as significant policymaking instruments, particularly when policies rooted in specific ideological stocks are constructed and potentially introduced into singular political-institutional and socio-spatial contexts.

To support our arguments, we draw on *a posteriori* comparisons (Montero & Baiocchi, 2022) to examine the resonances of three BID pilot programmes in a city-region in Spain (Greater Barcelona) and a city-region in Portugal (Greater Lisbon) on policymaking processes over time. By juxtaposing these programmes, we explore the multifaceted nature of policy pilot initiatives, revealing the social, material and discursive practices involved in policy learning, mediation and translation across the various stages of policymaking. In particular, we explore these issues through four overarching practices, emerging out of the relevant academic literature and grounded in the semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis conducted on three distinct BID pilot programmes (Evans *et al.*, 2021; Scholl & de Kraker, 2021; Voytenko *et al.*, 2016): (i) Concept testing, where pilot projects showcase the feasibility and expected effectiveness of new policy ideas; (ii) Generative learning and knowledge exchange, emphasising how policy experiments foster mutual learning and knowledge co-creation among diverse stakeholders; (iii) Stakeholder engagement, which examines how pilot programmes build local support and legitimise policy ideas; and (iv) policy translation, examining how pilot programmes may influence the nature and extension of policy adaptation and implementation within specific ‘local’ contexts.

These practices are, of course, neither teleological nor hermetically separate. Rather, we argue that their assemblage serves as a productive heuristic framework for examining how policy experimentation programmes contribute to the ‘making-up’ of policies in particular ‘local’ contexts over the various stages of policymaking processes.

1. Experimenting with BIDs in Greater Barcelona, Spain

Case background. In December 2020, the Government of Catalonia institutionalised the BID policy in Greater Barcelona, marking it as the first city-region in Southern Europe to formally adopt this economic development programme. This decision concluded over two decades of multiple “starts-and-stops” in the learning, mediation and translation of BIDs to the region. Initial attempts to translate them mirrored the experiences of other countries, with regional and local policymakers and business elites undertaking study tours to US cities such as New York, Philadelphia and Washington in the early 2000s (Cook, 2008; Michel & Stein, 2015). These tours, part of a broader set of informational infrastructures, allowed delegates to observe BID operations firsthand and “strongly influence would-

be tourists' mental maps ... from which positive lessons might be drawn" (Baker & McGuirk, 2019, p. 565). However, the bottom-up nature of the US BID 'model' was rendered immobile as it overtly conflicted with the centralised politico-institutional regime found in Southern European contexts. Indeed, many acknowledged that adopting such a private-led approach in Greater Barcelona would require intensive and time-consuming adaptation. Yet, rather than abandoning the BID concept, policymakers from Barcelona decided to redraw their learning routes by expanding their functional and formal references to include BIDs in England and, more recently, Germany (Silva *et al.*, 2024).

As with any policy, the formal adoption of BIDs in Greater Barcelona did not occur in isolation. It reflected a longstanding policy demand to safeguard the Catalan business model (small, independently-run businesses) from the growing challenges posed by out-of-town and online shopping (Carreras *et al.*, 2021). This demand side is evident in earlier measures, such as the 2000 tax on large commercial establishments, urban planning restrictions on medium and large retail units, and the recent 'Amazon Tax,' which imposes levies on major e-commerce companies operating in Barcelona (Culpepper & Thelen, 2019). However, perhaps more importantly, the adoption of BIDs also emerged to address the well-documented drawbacks of previous public-private partnership initiatives, particularly the public-led and voluntary-based funding structure of Town Centre Management (TCMs) schemes (Cook, 2008; Frechoso-Remiro & Villarejo-Galende, 2011; Ward, 2006).

Concept testing. The BID programme was socially constructed as 'successful' and 'transferable' among regional policymakers and local business elites through various informational infrastructures, such as international study tours and BID conferences. However, these actors soon acknowledged that their reference points (the BID 'models' from elsewhere) were far removed from the 'local' realities of Greater Barcelona. They believed, for instance, that the private-led approach of BID 'models' required significant political labour to translate and embed within a more state-centric politico-institutional context (Silva *et al.*, 2024). For these reasons, the introduction of BIDs in Greater Barcelona did not start or stop with the passing of the enabling legislation. Instead, it involved a series of policy experiments that shaped the learning, mediation and eventual translation of the BID programme to the local context. This process began in November 2016, when the Barcelona City Council commissioned the University of Girona to conduct a public-sponsored BID pilot programme in two neighbourhoods (Born and Sant Andreu) to generate socio-technical knowledge before drafting BID legislation (Pareja, 2017). Of course, the selection of these two districts in Barcelona was deliberate, reflecting a consensus between local authorities and two city-wide business associations, *Barcelona Oberta* and *Barcelona Comerç*. By selecting Born, a tourism hub, and Sant Andreu, a residential neighbourhood, this pilot programme explored the permeable and adaptable nature of the BID policy in distinct local contexts. At the same time, it aimed to demonstrate that BIDs could be tailored to meet the unique needs of diverse neighbourhoods within Barcelona and beyond (Pardo, 2017). This overarching practice echoes similar BID pilot programmes in England (Cook, 2008; Ward, 2006) and Scotland (Donaghy *et al.*, 2013; Peel & Lloyd, 2005), where pilots were selected to test the policy concept across different locations and then assist central governments in crafting BID regulations. Indeed, as the then President of *Barcelona Oberta* stated in an interview:

The pilot experiments [in Born and Sant Andreu] will last about two years, which is the remaining time of the current legislature in Barcelona, and the idea is to pressure the State to legislate in favour of these management tools to [formally] implement them later (Pareja, 2017)

Generative learning and knowledge exchange. In translating such a policy concept to a more centralised setting, this policy experimentation programme also served as a critical platform for learning, knowledge sharing and building stakeholder support. In particular, and echoing some studies on experimental governance (McGuirk *et al.*, 2015, 2016), these policy experiments functioned as powerful public-private forums (or 'talking-shops') and learning mechanisms, educating local, regional and even national stakeholders about the BID concept, alongside its formal and functional implications. Learning and knowledge-sharing initiatives included presentations, round-tables and workshops in which, in addition to 'best practices' from BIDs elsewhere, public and private stakeholders were exposed through hands-on experiential learning to particular policy ideas (Asociación Española para la Gerencia de los Centros Urbanos [AGECU], 2017). In particular, local stakeholders in Born and Sant Andreu were brought together to identify issues facing their shopping districts, prioritise place-making actions through the assembling of a local business plan and estimate its implementation costs. For example, executive figures from the Sant Andreu business association actively championed BIDs as 'meccas' to declining public and private sector funding and as ways to promote the local 'business climate' (Interview #12). However, throughout these informational

infrastructures, some local stakeholders raised concerns about the socio-legal viability of certain formal aspects of the BID policy, particularly the introduction of an ‘additional tax’ over business rates. This raised generative discussions that the local state, rather than private businesses, should be the primary stakeholder in enhancing the vitality of shopping districts. As such, these experiments provided ‘hands-on’ pedagogical opportunities for those locally involved in, or perhaps those observing, the policy experiments to build explicit and tacit knowledge. They also produced new understandings of the fundamentals of the BID policy in Barcelona and beyond, while in some cases resisting established notions (AGECU, 2017; Landau, 2021):

When we [consultants] started to introduce the topic of a mandatory levy for the designated area, fears arose. But once they [retailers] understood what it could be used for, they went from sceptics to evangelists! (Interview #8, BID consultant)

Stakeholder engagement. This quotation also implicitly underscores the foundational role of introducing ‘local’ experiments prior to BID policy adoption as a platform to rethink entrenched power-laden geometries and institutional arrangements governing shopping districts. Perhaps attempting to emulate the learning outcomes of BID policy experiments in England, the experimentation with BIDs in Barcelona in the early stages of policymaking provided a critical ground for reimagining public-private partnerships and fostering previously uncommon forms of collaboration in urban governance (Cook, 2008; Ward, 2006). In the Southern European context, where businesses often see the local state as the most relevant stakeholder in urban politics, these efforts represented a significant point of departure. As in England and Scotland, these pilot experiments mobilised and created social capital by building networks of trust and shared purpose among public and private stakeholders (Donaghy *et al.*, 2013; Montero, 2016; Ward, 2006). This collaborative approach not only raised awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing shopping districts but also laid the groundwork for introducing BIDs as institutional mechanisms to channel private sector involvement towards the solution of public issues. By bringing diverse stakeholders together, the policy experimentation programme was used to outline the relevance of collective action and the value of public-private partnerships in tackling shared urban challenges. Ultimately, these pilot efforts were indicative of the potential for social capital development as ways to redefine the geometries of public-private collaboration in urban governance and, of course, provide a roadmap for embedding entrepreneurial policies within more centralised politico-institutional contexts (Pardo, 2017; Silva *et al.*, 2024).

Policy translation. Unsurprisingly, then, the experiences of BID pilot schemes in Barcelona during the early stages of policymaking played a pivotal role in the re-embedding of the BID policy. This pilot programme, which did not fully adhere to formal aspects such as mandatory levies, assisted the Government of Catalonia in drafting and refining BID regulations in subsequent years, as it did in many other countries (Cook, 2008; Donaghy *et al.*, 2013; Peel & Lloyd, 2005; Ward, 2006). Drawing on this ‘hands-on’ experiential learning, working groups and consultative committees were established. These groups brought together regional and national public and private sector stakeholders, BID consultants, retail experts and academics. As one participant in these working groups explained:

This was the working group that organised the pilots. Then, to ensure all stakeholders and sectors that might have an interest were informed and to gather their opinions and sense reactions, we formed a larger consultative group and met regularly ... All of this was to ensure that all stakeholders were considered and to understand their reactions and collectively find a way to adapt the BID ‘model’ to our reality.

Their task was to discuss how the relationally constructed BID policy could be re-embedded into Barcelona’s socio-spatial and politico-institutional context and beyond. This comprehensive and collaborative approach underscored the value of policy experiments as productive foundations for reflecting upon how the BID policy could be reconstituted. Of course, this process was neither linear nor neutral. Instead, it was inherently power-laden and selective, with certain discourses, practices and stakeholders being amplified while others were sidelined (Montero, 2016; Papanastasiou, 2024). In this context, for example, some food distribution chains involved in the committees exerted significant influence over the wording of the formula that was ultimately used to calculate the mandatory BID levy.

While insightful and generative, the experimentation with the BID policy in Greater Barcelona further provides interesting insights into the “longer histories of experimentation” (Temenos, 2024, p. 527) and the multiple stages and temporalities of policymaking. In particular, it demonstrates that policy experiments are mechanisms not confined to the early stages of policymaking but that they transverse multiple stages of policymaking, spanning both pre- and post-institutionalisation phases

(Bailey *et al.*, 2017; Lovell *et al.*, 2023; Montero *et al.*, 2023). Under these circumstances, and after many 'starts-and-stops', the formal adoption of the BID policy took place in December 2020 and catalysed the creation of government-funded pilot schemes across the city-region in the following years (Silva *et al.*, 2024). It is to these programmes and their broader implications that we now turn.

Concept testing. While some might have expected policy institutionalisation to mark the final stage of policymaking, it instead became a fertile ground for experimenting with the BID policy within the framework of 'actually-existing' regulations. This ensured a structured and regulated approach to its further implementation across the city-region. Following the establishment of a regional BID framework, two state-led BID pilot programmes were introduced, with financial and technical, consultant-based support provided to selected shopping and industrial districts (Subsidies for Trade, Services, Handicrafts and Fashion Entities and Businesses: 2022 Call [CCAM], 2022; Diputació de Barcelona [DIBA], 2022). Taking stock of such financial support, a range of consultancies and corporate interests have emerged, recognising the profitable opportunity to package and promote BIDs as scalable and desirable solutions. These actors offer 'ballot-ready' services to facilitate the local roll-out of the BID policy across many locations. However, rather than acting as neutral policymaking instances, the selection of these pilot schemes was, of course, highly calculative and political. Echoing the practices from elsewhere, selected pilot BID schemes and their re-embedding mechanisms were deemed to be on-the-ground 'concept demonstrators' for further scaling-up the BID policy (Cook, 2008; Donaghy *et al.*, 2013; Valli *et al.*, 2024). Put simply, they were politically constructed and promoted as 'referencescapes', sources of pride, spectacle and legitimacy, from which others in Greater Barcelona and perhaps further afield could learn. As one international BID consultant explained:

When identifying these pilots [schemes], we need to be blunt and determine which areas are truly going to work. The last thing we want is to run a pilot in an area where it won't succeed, as this would create a bad image and reputation for the BID model.

Generative learning, knowledge exchange, and stakeholder engagement. Like the 2017 pilot programme before policy institutionalisation, the 'actually-existing' BID experiments in Greater Barcelona have also acted as generative learning instances for educating and exposing the local stakeholders to the formal and, particularly, functional implications of the BID policy. Local business groups were encouraged to work directly with local authorities, involving a structured approach to comparative learning and experimentation with the BID policy (Valli *et al.*, 2024). This process progressed from introductory understanding to hands-on management and consultancy support, helping local stakeholders to decode socio-legal and operational frameworks. This approach was crucial in addressing resistance and contradictions from particular stakeholders while positioning the BID concept as dependent on support among a committed group of local stakeholders (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2016; Scholl & de Kraker, 2021). Local stakeholders transitioned from theoretical knowledge to practical management skills, sharing knowledge to validate the BID concept and foster stronger commitment and advocacy for its broader implementation. Recurring formative training sessions and consultancy assistance aimed to clarify operational aspects and potential benefits. Echoing trajectories from elsewhere, these efforts were meant to make pilot schemes 'ballot-ready' and ultimately feature them in good-practice guides (Cook, 2008; Donaghy *et al.*, 2013). Notably, these underscore the dynamics of learning, education and experimentation, demonstrating how power dynamics, ideological influences and negotiation processes influence policy knowledge production.

Policy translation. As we have seen, the process of translating BIDs into Greater Barcelona did not stop with the construction and wording of BID regulations in the early stages of policymaking processes. Instead, and echoing contributions emerging from experimental environment governance studies, ongoing policy experiments have provided opportunities to evaluate these policies and ultimately reflect upon the need to conduct further mutations to the form and content of already-institutionalised policies (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Temenos *et al.*, 2019). Apparently, the formal experimentation of the BID policy in Greater Barcelona has illuminated practical issues and policy features requiring additional refinement, which may not have been apparent in earlier policymaking stages or pilot experiments before policy institutionalisation. This underscores that policies are not static, 'ready-made' products, even after formal institutionalisation. Rather, they are complex, iterative and mutable apparatuses, continuously evolving to respond to new insights and changing conditions. Such practices illustrate the inherently indeterminate, open-ended and processual nature of policymaking, as they highlight the fluid and evolving nature of how policies are continuously made and re-made over time (Montero *et al.*, 2023; Temenos, 2024; Wood, 2015). As one interviewee noted:

The [enabling] legislation was passed with everyone's consensus, meaning that the private sector didn't object much ... The important thing was to have a law. Later, we

can make the necessary modifications for it to thrive, because I think everyone is aware that the law has problems After these pilots, we will see some [policy] changes.

2. Experimenting with BIDs in Greater Lisbon, Portugal

Case background. Whilst BIDs have been formally experimented with and institutionalised in Greater Barcelona, their introduction in Portugal is more recent, informal and open-ended. The 'demand side' mirrors the histories found in other contexts (Cook, 2008; Frechoso-Remiro & Villarejo-Galende, 2011; Silva *et al.*, 2024). It stemmed from Portuguese government programmes like SIMC (Incentive System for Commerce Modernisation, 1991), PROCOM (Support Programme for Commerce Modernisation, 1994) and URBCOM (Incentive System for Commercial Urban Planning Projects, 2004) assembled to revitalise shopping districts following the liberalization of out-of-town retail. Apparently, these programmes were largely ineffective in delivering long-term benefits (Fernandes, 2023; Guimarães, 2016). Academic research also highlighted that public-private partnerships, including many TCM schemes, heavily relied on public funding and voluntary private donations, which hindered their wider revitalisation ambitions (Guimarães, 2018).

In response, an alternative mechanism was necessary to provide sustainable, long-term funding for TCM schemes, leading to the idea of introducing BIDs in Portugal. Interestingly, the policy idea first emerged as a policy recommendation in the 2014-2020 Urban Regeneration Strategy Action Plan for Vila Franca de Xira, which was commissioned by a group of urban academics (Câmara Municipal de Vila Franca de Xira, 2015). Here, academics discursively constructed BIDs as a trans-local mobile policy worth emulating to foster urban revitalisation and ensure collaborative, sustainable management of shopping districts through public-private partnerships. While the local authority supported this initiative through financial and technical assistance, its material roll-out failed due to the absence of legal frameworks to enforce mandatory BID levy contributions. However, rather than abandoning the BID concept, this material failure further highlighted the pivotal role of academics as policy mobilisers. In particular, they initiated a series of funded research projects to explore the feasibility of alternative urban governance models, transforming some shopping districts in Greater Lisbon into experimental policy laboratories. Among these projects, the PHOENIX project (Retail-led Urban Regeneration and New Forms of Governance) at the University of Lisbon stands out as a milestone in policymaking processes. Here, triple helix collaborations emerged, with public (central and local government), private (businesses) and academic sectors collaborating to explore how governance innovations could be translated into local shopping districts.

Under these circumstances, the Portuguese experience underscores the role of universities in mobilising policy ideas and knowledge, despite initial setbacks. Their involvement in policy tourism initiatives has been noteworthy (Andersson & Cook, 2019; Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Montero, 2016). In particular, academics participated in study tours to English and Scottish towns and cities in 2019 and 2022, observing BIDs firsthand and learning directly from those involved in their management. These visits were mediated by well-known academics working with BIDs, whose role was to select 'local' BIDs that could showcase to their Portuguese peers what works and what does not. These initiatives included study tours hosted by BID directors, and conferences/meetings with academics and practice-led national organisations, such as the Institute of Place Management and Scotland's Town Partnership. Collectively, these policy tourism initiatives served as powerful forms of experiential learning, providing academics with examples and narratives that acted as benchmarks and legitimisers back home.

Academics then circulated such evidence-based knowledge with those participating in the research project. They also leveraged their intellectual networks and organised seminars where other academics shared their explicit and tacit knowledge. For instance, in February 2020, Barcelona's 2017 BID pilot programme coordinators were invited to Lisbon to discuss the formal and functional aspects of BIDs and their potential translation to Spain with academics, policymakers and private stakeholders (Centre of Geographical Studies, 2020). Their PowerPoint presentations, which assembled experiences generated from elsewhere, extended beyond the conference room and were circulated further through uploads and downloads via digital-mediated platforms (Cook & Ward, 2012; Ward, 2024). Apparently, this cross-pollination of knowledge created a persuasive informational infrastructure that resonated with the social and political construction of the BID policy nationwide. As one interviewee noted:

The role of those [Barcelona's 2017 BID pilot programme coordinators] was to enable me to send the PowerPoint to the Secretary of State [for Retail, Services and Consumer Defence], and I said to him, "Look, they are already doing this [BIDs] in Spain". And he

said, “This is very interesting. Let’s do it”. I also sent him the PHOENIX project ... Those were the two documents I sent him.

Yet, as one might expect, the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down (and in some cases stopped) the making-up of BID policy futures. Following COVID-19, however, the idea of introducing BIDs has been cemented through Portugal’s Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR)ⁱ, to which academics contributed. This was substantiated through the development of Digital Retail Neighbourhoods (BCDs), aimed at revitalizing shopping districts by integrating digital technologies, new business models and marketing campaigns for small and medium-sized enterprises (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas [DGAE], 2022). However, rather than replacing brick-and-mortar environments with purely digital ones, BCDs aim to create phygital places, transforming shopping districts into a set of click-and-mortar premises (Paiva & Maia, 2024; Silva & Cachinho, 2021). Academics from the PHOENIX project played a pivotal role, alongside the central government, in framing what BCDs might look like both formally and functionally by assembling experiences and evidence from elsewhere.

Concept testing. Though their remits vary from one location to another, we might think of BCDs as experimental instances initiatives for introducing the BID concept to both local and national stakeholders. They serve to gauge the politico-institutional climate and test whether, and in what ways, the formal and functional features of BIDs can be re-embedded into Portugal’s more centralised politico-institutional context. Unsurprisingly, then, the practice of concept testing and the policy framework guiding the making-up of BCDs mirrors many of the key principles found in BIDs (DGAE, 2022). First, BCDs operate within clearly defined areas where public and private stakeholders collectively identify the challenges facing their districts. Second, while BCDs are initially funded through public mechanisms such as the PRR, they experiment with strategies to attract and sustain private investment, ensuring the continuity of their activities. This is crucial in assessing whether these initiatives can transition into self-financing entities, much like BIDs. Third, BCDs foster institutional experimentation by redrawing conventional power geometries through public-private partnerships and encouraging greater private-sector involvement in urban politics.

These features highlight the intensive social and political labour required to adapt a neoliberal policy to more centralised politico-institutional settings, where the public sector traditionally governs urban matters. As in other contexts, the selection process for BCDs explicitly aimed for geographic diversity, with locations ranging from large metropolitan areas to smaller towns. This is meant to demonstrate the potential permeability and plasticity of the BID concept in diverse local contexts while still aligning with a centrally-prescribed territorial cohesion framework (Cook, 2008; Donaghy *et al.*, 2013; Peel & Lloyd, 2005; Ward, 2006). In this way, BCDs act as experimental instances before policy institutionalisation, offering an ‘on-the-ground’ platform to discuss and showcase alternative institutional arrangements, such as BIDs, that may ensure the long-term sustainability of place-based initiatives.

Generative learning and knowledge exchange. In addition to their role in concept testing, BCDs serve as key arenas of policy learning and knowledge exchange, where public and private stakeholders collaborate within and between shopping districts to better understand the practicalities of potential policy futures and new modes of governance. These socio-technical relations involve assembling people-materials-knowledge through trans-local informational infrastructures that facilitate the exchange of experiences, ideas and knowledge. These include collaborative learning sessions, such as network events, public forums and workshops, where expertise is shared through textual, verbal and visual means. Here, local stakeholders with different expectations discuss local issues and desirable futures, acquire hands-on skills and reflect on their own governance practices (Silva & Cachinho, 2024). These infrastructures impact how implicit, explicit and tacit knowledge is streamlined and circulated among BCD stakeholders and external experts (Andersson & Cook, 2019; Baker & McGuirk, 2019; Cook & Ward, 2012). For example, these informational infrastructures facilitate debates around local issues, disseminate firsthand experiences and potentially legitimize existing/future governance frameworks (fig. 1). Likewise, external experts, including academics and central government representatives, have also encouraged learning-at-distance and networking forums (Ward, 2024), allowing cross-BCD knowledge-sharing. Notably, these sites of encounter and persuasion highlight the complex politics of learning, education and experimentation of public policies, emphasising how power-laden processes, ideological influences and negotiation processes shape the production and circulation of policy knowledge and ultimately inform the institutionalisation of BIDs.



Fig. 1 – Business Plan of the Digital Retail Neighbourhood of Vila Franca de Xira 2024-2025. Note on the future after 2025: “The aim is to evolve into a Business Improvement District (BID), involve all stakeholders, and develop action plans in collaboration with retailers and economic agents”.

Fig. 1 – Plano de ação estratégico do Bairro Comercial Digital de Vila Franca de Xira 2024-2025. Nota sobre o futuro após 2025: “O objetivo é evoluir para um Business Improvement District (BID), envolver todos os stakeholders e desenvolver planos de ação em colaboração com os comerciantes e agentes económicos”.

Source: Câmara Municipal de Vila Franca de Xira, n.d.

Stakeholder engagement. In a related way, BCDs aim to build local coalitions among public authorities, businesses and communities, encouraging institutional experimentation to identify the presence of local policy entrepreneurs and the development of a partnership-working culture within, and between, public and private sectors. By providing a platform for stakeholders to discuss local concerns and solutions, BCDs were politically constructed as instances to promote co-creation as a standard practice through which place-based interventions are articulated and enacted. Indeed, the range of anchor participants (local authorities and business associations) and the governance structure of each BCD serve as gateways to smooth conflicts and reframe power dynamics. This is particularly important as the emergence and experimentation of new policy ideas may create or widen existing conflicts amongst local stakeholders “who coordinate and prioritize different policy objectives, juggling diverging values or expectations as well as unequal material and personnel resources” (Landau, 2021). In contexts marked by centralised decision-making infrastructures and uneven state-market power dynamics, BCDs should function as testing grounds to rethink conventional, hierarchical power geometries traditionally shaping urban policymaking, while experimenting with *new* forms of multi-level governance (Fernandes, 2023; Guimarães, 2016). As one academic argued:

That’s why, in the commercial urbanism projects [PROCOM and URB.COM], the leading figure was always the president of the local authority, and in projects where the president of the local authority didn’t get involved, the retailers didn’t give much credibility. [Their thinking] was simply, “Do we have [access to] the [public] money? When is the [public] money coming?”

Policy translation. Echoing the 2017 pilot programmes in Barcelona prior to policy institutionalisation, the learning outcomes emerging from BCDs are poised to provide the central government and representatives from business associations with valuable politico-institutional and

technical knowledge that could either animate or thwart the translation of BIDs to Portugal. In this sense, BCDs should be viewed as experimental grounds where policymakers can critically examine what works and what does not, and determine necessary politico-institutional and policy adjustments (Baker & Temenos, 2015; Temenos *et al.*, 2019). For example, as BCD initiatives rely on public funding and are time-bound, their long-term viability and scalability may require the formal institutionalisation of some socio-material arrangements, such as mandatory levies. This has led some BCDs to discursively frame their full-fledged BIDs as part of their future governance strategies (fig. 1). This underscores the foundational role of BCDs in discursively and potentially materially shaping policy mobility and translation processes, particularly in adapting neoliberal policy repertoires to more centralised political-institutional contexts, as it did elsewhere (Cook, 2008; Silva *et al.*, 2024; Valli *et al.*, 2024; Ward, 2006). As one ‘middling’ technocrat put it:

We will be following the ongoing BCDs, and we would expect that this [the BCD initiative in the PRR] would be completed before conducting the overall evaluation and determining if it makes sense, and what kind of sense it would make [to institutionalise BIDs]. For me, this [legal framework] makes perfect sense, even if it’s just something basic and minimal.

IV. CONCLUSION

In concluding, it is useful to revisit the quote with which we began this article. It outlined how NYC’s containerised waste bin experimental programme, initially aimed at cleaning sidewalks in business districts and residential areas, evolved into a formal public policy to enhance urban competitiveness by promoting clearer streets and a more pleasant business climate. This opening vignette is an invitation to rethink some of the theoretical and empirical orientations in urban policy mobilities studies. While such studies have been particularly generative, we argue they have inadequately addressed the full spectrum of processes shaping the multi-temporal, multi-lateral unfolding of the multiple stages of policymaking. By integrating insights from political science/public administration and geographical studies on environmental/urban governance, this article offers a more nuanced approach. It argues for the need to take policy experiments and the politics of experimentation seriously, particularly in terms of their potential impact on policy learning, mediation and translation. Drawing on three BID policy experimentation programmes in two Southern European contexts, we introduced four overarching practices that illustrate how these experiments serve as mechanisms connecting multiple policymaking stages. In particular, they shed light on the intersections between the pre- and post-institutionalisation phases of policymaking processes. These insights provide meaningful contributions to urban policy mobilities studies that argue for a processual, open-ended and non-linear approach to studying policymaking processes.

First, this article highlights the importance of considering the full range of social actors involved in producing, moving and experimenting with policies. While existing literature on urban policy mobilities has overtly focused on elite policy actors, it has often overlooked the pivotal role that academics play in shaping and circulating policy knowledge (Baker *et al.*, 2020; Jacobs & Lees, 2013). This article shows that academics are also social actors in framing and circulating policy knowledge across various contexts. In order to understand the conditions under which policy ideas are potentially learned, mediated and translated, it is useful to consider the social labour and the discursive and material practices that academics engage in. Apparently, their involvement in policymaking is increasingly prominent, particularly with the rise of community geography (Shannon *et al.*, 2020), which emphasises socially relevant, embedded scholarship. This approach facilitates collaborative efforts among academics and other actors, thereby fostering policy innovation and reform in policymaking (Evans *et al.*, 2021; Hodson *et al.*, 2018; Schreiber *et al.*, 2023). As policymaking is inherently political and contingent on specific contexts, academics must remain attuned to the wider calculative agendas and complex networks underpinning policy learning, mobilisation and experimentation. This interaction is not devoid of ethical dilemmas, as scholars must reconcile their roles as researchers, active participants in policymaking, and sometimes independent consultants. Balancing competing agendas, ideologies and the power-laden geometries that influence policy mobilisation requires a high degree of reflexivity and positionality. Critical self-awareness is essential for maintaining research integrity and ensuring that academics’ contributions to policymaking remain ethically sound and socially responsible.



Second, the article invites policy mobilities scholars to conceptualise policy experimentation as an integral part of regular policymaking, not confined to particular stages and temporalities wrapping up policymaking processes. Building on and extending Lovell *et al.*'s (2023) argument, the article critiques the intellectual tendency in policy mobilities studies to focus on discrete policymaking stages, either *a priori* or *a posteriori* policy adoption. It further argues for a more indeterminate, multilateral and open-ended conceptualisation of policymaking processes in situating policy experiments as mechanisms that connect multiple policymaking stages and temporalities (Robinson, 2015; Valli *et al.*, 2024). Bringing the politics of experimentation into view involves understanding how experimentation can fundamentally influence policy learning, mediation and translation over various stages and temporalities (Montero *et al.*, 2023; Wood, 2015). While policy experimentation is often associated with *a priori* policymaking stages, this is not always the case. Indeed, policy experimentation sometimes occurs after policy institutionalisation. This ontological approach to policy experimentation requires scholars to engage with “the longer histories of experimentation” (Temenos, 2024, p. 527) to uncover the intricate webs of experiments, failures and alternatives shaping policy circulation and adoption. The article introduced a heuristic framework comprising four overarching practices: concept testing; generative learning and knowledge exchange; instances of institutional and behavioural change through stakeholder engagement; and laboratories of policy translation. These practices illuminate how policy experimentation contributes to various stages and temporalities of policymaking. Notably, we have seen these practices emerging both before and after policy institutionalisation in Greater Barcelona, while their use in Portuguese city centres on gauging the politico-institutional climate and deciding the rendering mobile or immobile of particular BID policy features.

The final point speaks to the focus of this special issue. Through a conjunctural reading of the experimenting with a mobile economic development policy, this article cautions against linking policy circulation solely to neoliberal contexts. Recently, neoliberal policies have increasingly emerged in traditionally centralised politico-institutional (Richner & Olesen, 2019; Valli *et al.*, 2024). In such settings, transforming policy actors “from skeptics to evangelists”, as one interviewee put it, becomes more complex due to increased uncertainties, resistance and contradictions (Landau, 2021). Clearly, in these more centralised places, the policy work of experimenting with neoliberal policy repertoires becomes particularly valuable, as state-led archetypes and geometries persist in urban policymaking. These places mirror much of the formal and informal experimentation with the BID policy in Southern European cities. In some ways, they invite a rethinking of the role of the national/regional states in *urban* policy mobilities studies, illustrating how these scales remain intertwined in the making of urban policies (Andersson & Cook, 2019; Lorne, 2024; Silva *et al.*, 2024). For instance, we have seen how government-funded pilot programmes, some of which were made possible through European Union funding, have facilitated the learning, mediation and, in the case of Greater Barcelona, the reconstitution of the BID policy. These policy experiments have reframed existing public-private collaboration and demonstrated how policy experiments contribute to the learning and mediation processes involved in the translation and institutionalisation of policies.

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Diogo Gaspar Silva: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing. **Lluís Frago:** Investigation, Resources.

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¹ The Recovery and Resilience Plan is part of the Portugal 2030 Strategy, framed within the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility. Emerging to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a temporary instrument that focuses on promoting sustainability, resilience, and readiness for green and digital transitions. The Portuguese Recovery and Resilience Plan (2022-2026) aims to encourage enterprises' digital transition by creating 75 Digital Retail Neighborhoods under the Component 16.2. (Enterprises 4.0: Digital Transition of Enterprises).