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Seeds for socio-spatial justice and equitable mobility for all: The "Bus Map Project" as "Riders' Rights" in Beirut

Abstract

The present article discusses the possibilities and limitations of transport-related innovative initiatives in Beirut, Lebanon, through a socio-spatial institutionalist perspective, within a socially divided neoliberal context splintered by sectarianism and political turmoil. The article examines the reach of the grassroots initiative "Bus Map Project", which in 2019 became the NGO "Riders Rights" (BMP–RR), in achieving socio-spatial justice and equitable mobility by recreating and reshaping the debate on Beirut's informal transit system. The latter has various ambivalent features, and an often negative connotation, since it operates in mixed traffic with other vehicles, with no fixed stops, and is not considered as formal transit. However, it is a private–public–civil hybrid system. The empirical data is built on participatory action research (PAR) with BMP–RR since 2018, socio-spatial and ethnographic analysis of the informal transit system, and in-depth interviews with various transport-related agencies. The conclusion emphasizes that the radical ambitions of socially innovative arrangements are possible even in so unstable and divided contexts as Beirut. However, they are limited by the structural problems of a consociational government, which are deeply rooted in the Lebanese history and cannot be easily overcome *by* such initiatives.

Keywords: Beirut informal transit, mobility injustice, participatory action research, social innovation

1 Introduction

After the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) came to a halt (Salamey & Tabbar, 2008; Nucho, 2016), political divides affected several urban aspects such as the development of urban infrastructure, including users' mobility in certain circuits and circulations entangled within each community's sectarian geography. In other words, the aspects of daily life in Beirut had become the central domain of contest across 18 ethno-religious sects (Mady & Chettiparamb, 2017), and generated a spatio-sectarian mosaic along with politico-sectarian organizations, governments, and profit-seeking developers. The failure of finding a consensual democratic model and a common ground that could embody the country's political cleavages and social divergence gave rise to "authoritarian inner-state entities" (Salamey & Tabbar, 2008: 240). This has resulted in producing an oligarchic political system, which caters to the needs of the various communities (Cammett, 2011). In the context of Lebanon, "community is translated as sect" (Nucho, 2016: 7) that (re)produces sectarian publics. Therefore, the everyday practice of mobility in Beirut cannot be taken for granted, as it depends on Beirut's sectarian territoriality and political differences (Monroe, 2010; Nucho, 2016) embedded in transport infrastructure. The reality of urban transport politics and economy of a dysfunctional elitist post-civil war government is not equally available to all, as it varies according to the socio-economic classes and spatial positionalities (Buhr & McGarrigle, 2017). Injustices were produced and reproduced due to ignoring the different interests of the public, leading to major gaps encountered at the level of public transport service provision. Tammam Nakkash, a transport expert and founder of Managing Partner at TEAM International, explains that "there was no

political will to (re)establish and (re)invest in public transport after the war, even though Beirut was known for its glorious mobility past. The transport problem in Beirut goes beyond the subject itself; it is multifaceted and not easy to solve. Particularly the state failed to adopt wise and long-term strategies for transport policies" (interview, 1 Mar. 2018). In the wake of the destruction of Beirut, the state failed to see a possibility to reinstate public transport. Such decisions eventually resulted in the insurgence of an informal transit system.

The informal transit has become a gap-filler, a self-managed practice to provide socio-spatial justice (Cervero et al., 2017; Sheller, 2018) after a wartime divided city (Cammett, 2011) and to show resilience (Scott, 1989; Bayat 1997) to the apparent chaos in transport and the absence of adequate public transit (Baaj, 2008) within a "laisser-faire" milieu. However, "the politics of everyday mobility have trapped this system as quasi-inaccessible, unsafe, and irregular for non-habituated riders and non-transparent for riders and operators" (Nakkash, interview, 1 Mar. 2018). Within such a fractious politico-sectarian milieu, fuelled by informal practices, civil societies found strategies from below to achieve (mobility) justice in the contested city of Beirut. "Riders' Rights" (RR) grew from a grassroots *initiative* known as the "Bus Map Project" (BMP), with the aim to achieve a better mobility plan by bringing to light through documentation the availability of the Beirut informal transit system, unknown to many, and to achieve bottom-linked governance transformations. The latter implies restructuring the middle ground for new forms of democratic governance collaboratively built between socially innovative initiatives, their scalar dynamic networks, institutions, and agencies (Moulaert & McCallum, 2019). Such a form of governance is helpful to understand and reshape the historic genesis for more inclusiveness at the local level.

The present article aims to investigate whether and how the status of BMP–RR as NGO has produced innovative societal responses with respect to resolving the socio-spatial and political problems in the transport sector, recreating a solidarity-based transit community, and producing changes in social and power relations by bridging different organizations and their collaborative mechanisms. As a methodology with which to combine various strands and explore details about the initiative's work, the researchers have deployed a reflective participatory action research (PAR). PAR allowed the first and second author to participate in experiencing the work of BMP at a grassroots level, through mapping the informal transit, and, with BMP having become an NGO, in challenging Beirut's politico-sectarian divisions while creating partnerships in the city. Given that social innovations possess inherent force towards such change, the article sets the ground for PAR by cross-fertilizing literature of social innovation (SI) by Moulaert et al., addressing social and human needs, solidarity and building participatory governance, with socio-spatial transport and mobility studies. Based on this, the article then discusses the PAR process in different stages regarding BMP–RR's upscaling trajectory. The article concludes by arguing that the radical ambitions of socially innovative arrangements are not utopian or geopolitically marked (Moulaert & MacCallum, 2019), and yet they remain limited in unstable contexts such as Beirut.

2 Combining social innovation and mobility injustice in a framework for building heterogeneous transit communities

Social innovation (SI) is defined in relation to human development and social emancipation. It is characterized by three interconnected features: the satisfaction of human needs that are not answered in the current state of affairs; the capacity to change established social and power relations among the civil society, state, and market actors; and the empowerment of excluded groups via collective (re)construction of identities, capabilities, and cultural emancipation

(Moulaert et al., 2013). Hence, local capabilities and social cohesion are enhanced through bottom-up approaches.

According to Moulaert et al. (2013), working at the community scale provides the nexus between the redefinition of everyday social life in the community and the broader struggle for democracy and rights. Therefore, SI at the local level is an entry point, a window of opportunity into a broader multi-scalar context. However, the possibilities of structural change can only be conceptualized through dialectic processes between community and society building as *so*lidarity-based community-building and the transforming institutional configurations through the redefinition of state–civil society relations. It will be well to recall that the process of SI at the local level is networked and institutionalized, and is not only the outcome of collective actions (Swyngedouw, 2005). SI research "has to be seen as a deeply institutional endeavour" (De Blust & Van den Broeck, 2019: 100), using a multi-actor approach that integrates the possible multiplicity of engagement to build a shared collective ontology (ibid). Such perspective opens up potentialities for SI and multi-actors, perceived as agents of innovative actions (Van den Broeck, 2011), to join transformative practices that (re)shape history while assessing how socio-territorial innovation capacities are differentially embedded in institutional frames and mobilized. Such structural change is created when the actors involved start coproducing innovative solutions which could reinstate socio-spatial justices (Albrechts, 2005: 2012). Bridging different groups is fundamental to the knowledge coproduction process, and they can be reached through a transdisciplinary approach (Moulaert & McCallum, 2019; Van Dyck et al., 2019).

What then does social innovation contribute to mobility justice? In some ways, it seems like a sedentary idea, tying people to place-based communities and finding alternatives for mobility injustice situations. SI revolves around transforming and (re)creating social relations (Moulaert & McCallum; Van den Broeck et al., 2019), and provides a lens to analyse counter-actions in the transport field and ways in which these empower dispossessed public transit users. According to Sheller (2018), the word mobility has been used to simply replace the word transport (i.e. mobility services and alike), but it goes beyond the existing transport and spatial justices to develop epistemic alternatives, as both did not develop a mobile ontology. It could be understood through practice and experience in reference to the "mobilities turn or paradigm" (see Cresswell, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Adey et al., 2018). In that sense, mobility is not synonymous with transport, as it implies access to necessary healthy lifestyles and generates context-dependent experiences of "socialities, affinities and knowledge" (Buhr & McGarrigle, 2017: 227–228), which users learn by practice and according to circumstances. Mobility is having equal access to transit options with good quality time, affordability, and safety (see Banister, 2017; Sheller, 2018). Without mobility, transport is meaningless. Therefore, transport is the basic infrastructure that provides mobility, which revolves around transforming and (re)creating social relations and cultures within a space. Accordingly, (re)instating a social turn by putting social innovation at the heart of the transport paradigm implies questioning socio-spatial injustices produced by various actors and paving the way to profound socio-political transitions in cities that affect users' mobilities. This perspective places transport planning in a field of actors and institutions, dialectically expressed in terms of each other. It analyses how institutions as social patterns affect the structural dynamics and mechanisms of actors (Toro et al., 2020). Accordingly, the socio-spatial injustices produced by the politics of transport have the ability to (re)create (in)justices depending on users' capabilities to access transport services (Pereira et al., 2017).

The question then is whether and how socially innovative initiatives are mobilized to negotiate socio-spatial and institutional dynamics of mobility (in)justice and create an inclusive transit

system. Mobility justice seems to be advocated by bottom-up (collective) initiatives as "informal or formal arrangements engaging in the act of governing outside, and beyond-the-state" (Swyngedouw, 2005: 1991–1992), foregrounded by citizens separate from ruling technocrats and formal planning institutions, characterized as self-managed, as activists, or as social entrepreneurs. Such initiatives appear to show in a dramatic fashion how the socio-spatial transit (in)justice tenet needs to be (re)thought in more dynamic and creative manners (Sheller, 2018). Thus, the transition from static "command-and-control systems" (Swyngedouw, 2005: 2002) to horizontal networked forms requires bottom-up, decentralized, and self-organized structures that scale-up into participatory governance or hybrid governance (Parés et al., 2017). Governance hence becomes a constant coordination, negotiation, and dispute of social relationships, characterized by complexities and reciprocal dependencies (see Swyngedouw & Jessop, 2006), between organizations including the state, self-organized networks that are committed to each other, and initiatives that create solidarity. The study of participation in governance practices, configurations, and processes also pays attention to multi-scalar and power structures (Moulaert & McCallum, 2019; Van den Broeck, 2019). This highlights how the input from civil society in decision-making could be an opportunity for multi-level governance. It relates to which actor configurations manifest themselves within the social and power structures involved in various types and patterns of collective decision-making in a broad sense and in all diversity, and how they organize society through it (Moulaert et al., 2013; Van den Broeck, 2019). This approach allows these initiatives to scale-up *in* diverse ways, to interact and operate in duality between their social efficiency, ethics of respect, and solidarity (Manganelli, 2019).

To mobilize this socio-spatial institutional perspective, the sections following examine the epistemological and methodological approach taken, and inform the reflexive process about the efforts of BMP–RR as NGO in producing innovative responses that enhance the informal transit system while challenging Beirut's mobility narratives amidst a highly contentious politico-sectarian environment.

3 Methodological approach: Dialectical relationship between theory and practice

PAR is not merely a descriptive methodology, since it not only documents social realities, but rather contextualizes that reality and works towards changing it. This section elaborates on the literature that has guided PAR researchers to reflect on their different works and experiences with BMP–RR's upscaling trajectory. In this sense, the participatory process is used to express the political commitment of the researchers to the transit community. In terms of data gathering techniques for PAR, the article begins with the descriptive stage where certain events are described empirically through qualitative, participatory, and mapping methods conducted by the first author between 2018 and 2021. They are based on coding in-depth interviews transcripts with transport-related stakeholders, including 7 community activists, 10 transit planners, 8 RR volunteers, and 5 state agencies, and nearly 200 informal interviews with different drivers, operators, riders and non-riders in this 4-year timespan, who generously took time to explain the issues related to the transport sector. Other data were collected in socio-spatial and ethnographic analysis of the transit system conducted in the two main transport hubs in Beirut, Cola and Dora. Overall, the collected data present a reading of the current differentiated mobility experiences in Beirut, its socio-spatial segregations, and transformations triggered by recent socially innovative initiatives regarding current mobility patterns.

3.1 The basics of participatory action research (PAR)

SI research studies practices that improve human conviviality in a broad sense, support collective agency to address unsatisfied needs, and facilitate emancipatory bottom-up initiatives (Jessop et al., 2013; Moulaert et al., 2013; Van den Broeck et al., 2019). To relate the theory and practice of SI, actions and reflections need to be intertwined (Van Dyck, et al., 2019). Jessop et al. (2013) argue that SI researchers should enter SI dynamics reflexively, and not as "anthropophobic consultants. In this way, the researchers should be capable of developing a meta-theoretical framework to analyse SI in accordance with its own nature and ethics, and to expand their networks of knowledge through initiating partnerships and experimenting with other agents of SI within their societal settings. Moulaert et al. (2015) argue that reflexivity in SI research is inherently transdisciplinary, which establishes methods in theory-building as a component of action. Transdisciplinary research valorizes complexities, and allows researchers in actions to perceive contradictions and to grasp multiple perspectives and opposing interests. Through this pragmatist approach, the researchers are encouraged to be open to experimentation and innovation, which includes a more activist approach to research activities (Silva et al., 2015). Such an approach helps the researcher to build meta-frames that are not fixed but open, adaptable, and dynamic rather than static. Hence, the reciprocal relation between the scholar and practitioners in decision-making could build scientific data that feed into collective actions (Jessop et al., 2013). Examining the reach of BMP–RR in transdisciplinary research means mobilizing researchers to move from practising fixed scientific procedures (such as performing surveys, conducting interviews, and analysing documents) to collaborative learning processes. Knowledge coproduction and sharing resources between different agencies have the potential to initiate discussions about the socio-political transport-related issues in Beirut. To note, the agency dimension of SI is "spatially negotiated between agents and institutions with strong territorial affiliations" (Moulaert, 2009: 12; Jessop et al., 2013). Therefore, the collaborative process created with BMP–RR coproduced space for co-constructing knowledge, mutual learning, and joint action between academics and practitioners from diverse disciplines and societal fields, while understanding and inducing transformations for problem-solving and the development of new scientific insights (Albrechts, 2012). As a consequence, placing SI initiatives within a meta-theoretical framework allows understating SI's structural frameworks, which are spatially and institutionally embedded (Van den Broeck, 2011; Jessop et al., 2013). In this way, researchers have the opportunity to get closer to practice, through deploying a reflective PAR methodology or performative research, as also advocated by Gibson-Graham (2018). Participating in social experiments strives to embody a democratic commitment to breaking the monopoly of whoever holds knowledge and for whom social research should be undertaken (Kindon et al., 2007; McIntyre, 2008), by explicitly coproducing knowledge through a collaborative process (Popa et al., 2014; Van Dyck et al., 2019). Doing "hybrid research collectively" (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 626) means working together with people who are already involved in making new societies, without abandoning academia. Rather, the researchers could attempt to bridge the imagined divided world between academia and community (by becoming activists in the traditional sense) to become agents of change (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2008; Jessop et al., 2013). The research steps in this case are explained in the following sections.

3.2 Performing PAR with BMP–RR

Through PAR, SI research is praxis-oriented and aims to facilitate knowledge coproduction through a non-linear process between different actors. When immersing in SI processes, the first and second author illustrate their roles as active actors by democratically contributing to

knowledge co-creation with BMP–RR and vice versa. The role of researchers as documenters and analysts of the SI reality is always different from that of practitioners or other stakeholders.

The collaboration between the first author and BMP–RR avoided a hit-and-run research strategy. It started from a personal interest, which triggered the researcher to find ways to be part of this community through building trust and negotiating the research, creating networks with various stakeholders, and becoming an agent of change herself. As a scholar-activist-practitioner and community resident, the researcher's work was enriched through the collaborative process with BMP–RR. In late 2017, the researcher contacted BMP with the aim of conducting an interview about their work. After following-up their work, in mid-2018 the researcher decided to get involved with the initiative. At the beginning, the researcher helped the team in distributing maps and conducting interviews with local transport-related stakeholders, informal transit service providers, riders, and non-riders. After working with the team for more than a year, the researcher decided to become a fully committed member of the NGO in the summer of 2019, along with other volunteers who were initially involved in BMP's work. Accordingly, her role was hybrid, first as an academic linked to research practice, then as part of collective actions, nourished by the socio-cultural, political, and economic context. To frame the work of BMP–RR, the researcher has led a process of building collectively with the initiative a meta-framework on mobility (in)justice. This meta-framework has supported her hybrid position and allowed her to participate in experimenting with the work of BMP–RR from an active participatory perspective rather than merely assessing the initiative's social innovation capacity (Jessop et al., 2013; Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2008). In this manner, BMP–RR was not an object to be studied or to be interviewed, but it became an ongoing process.

Through PAR paths, the researcher's insider status enabled her to participate in two of the three committee groups: funding and social media, while leaving out awareness and outreach group. Her contribution to the initiative's work was not limited only to sharing expertise on transport but extended to employing several professional skills. As part of being a scholar-activist, she was involved, among others, in designing processes, negotiating and advocating agendas, coordinating research, preparing workshops and writing, funding proposals and blogs. The second author's approach was to engage her students from the Bachelor of Architecture programme at Notre Dame University–Louaize (NDU) with real issues by having the opportunity to work on various projects with the NGO. At first, BMP was invited in 2018 to give a public presentation on their work at NDU. Then, BMP–RR began to take part in the Urbanism course in every semester since 2019; in exchange, students groups built a transport database for the initiative and generated ideas for disseminating knowledge on mobility in Lebanon. The first author stepped in to liaise between academia and practice by assisting BMP–RR in mentoring students. In the same spirit, the first author is currently developing a module about corruption in the transport sector with the third author for a course owned by the "Youth Against Corruption" (YAC) NGO. Education has a potential in building capacities for citizens by making them conscious about the forces that shape their lives. Believing in cultivating a substantive democratic culture, her commitment is rooted in the idea that there is a realm in which, through sharing knowledge, individuals can become more discerning about the common good, attain membership in the community, and participate in civic life. In this way, the initiative benefits from sharing stories with different audiences. Accordingly, the researcher is playing the role of a (backstage) facilitator, shadowing the (frontstage) practitioners' work.

The process of coproducing knowledge between the scholars and practitioners was challenging. For instance, conducting qualitative research under lockdown due to the global pandemic was an opportunity for the researcher to be more committed to BMP–RR work through organizing

webinars, investigating, and gathering information related to their activities through video-calls or text-based messaging. Accountability and reciprocity were two other fundamental challenges, providing the criteria for establishing connections, assessing how the individual scholar could be self-perceived as a practitioner and activist, how the collaborative partners perceived the latter, and what kind of relationships were built. Even though the work is voluntary, the scholar-activist-practitioner is evaluated by the team based on the amount and type of work produced during this collaboration. The purpose of having such a position is to be embedded in a web of relationships, which demanded a high level of accountability. This required the researcher to take part in the community struggle rather than being an academic who occasionally dropped in. The co-founder of BMP–RR expressed this issue during an informal discussion with the first author, saying that "one problem with academics is that they are sometimes not sufficiently rooted in the community problems; they privilege their own agendas and work. We do not mind helping them without expecting anything in return because we want to share knowledge and build connections." This is understandable, as academia is mostly geared towards an individual's research, teaching service, evaluation, and promotion. However, reciprocity requires a mutual give and take, which is something that the researcher was attentive to. For instance, BMP–RR team members, especially the co-founders, have assisted the researcher in fieldwork and in building connections with transport-related stakeholders. Eventually, the democratic process has taught her that the innovators' small-scale projects could be the embryos of challenges to the hegemonic politico-sectarian system. The value of being involved in such work is to build a transit community that coproduces knowledge accessible to all.

4 Results: Reconstructing the trajectory of BMP–RR

This section discusses the trajectory of BMP–RR in improving the accessibility of the informal transit networks to various users and co-creating pathways that generate seeds for mobility justice through collective participatory processes. A triangulation of information was achieved through combining primary and secondary sources.

4.1 From BMP to RR: Perspectives on the upscaling process

When observing Beirut's streets, one can notice the heavy traffic congestion dominated by private vehicles, and the scarcity of pedestrians and public transport, amidst a highly securitized politico-sectarian context, circumscribed by setting up security installations (e.g. concrete blocks or checkpoints) and re-routing of traffic flows (Fawaz, 2009; Mady, 2020). Accordingly, Beirut's mobility varies according to socio-economic classes, since the car has become not only the dominant mode of transport available but also a reflection of social status (Monroe, 2010; Mady, 2020).

BMP emerged in the summer of 2015 as a collective mapping grassroots initiative to palliate the lack of data (maps, timetables, stops, etc.), which made the informal transit system quasi-inaccessible for non-riders and non-transparent for riders and operators. So far, BMP produced the first two maps of Beirut's informal transit network in 2016 and 2018 (see http://busmap.me/#downloads). BMP became an opportunity to try and embody *certain* principles grounded in several annoyances concerning the ways in which activism or even politics are understood and practiced in Lebanon. *A*ccording to BMP–RR (2018), "the first map was a manifesto to acknowledge the informal transit system". It is noteworthy that BMP was founded by two bus-riders with backgrounds in Media Studies, Human Geography, and Computer Engineering, who had understood that collective mapping can initiate collaborative

processes that capture imagination and catalyse participation. "In the first few years, the team had few volunteers, so the tasks at hand were gargantuan. This made the progress slow. Since the summer of 2018, the team has grown to a solid core group, which helped BMP–RR to get a lot more done with little funding," expressed Jad Baaklini, the co-founder of BMP–RR during a team meeting in 2020. However, BMP is still a modest initiative without pretending to be authoritative or definitive. Since mobility is contextually dependent, BMP follows a piecemeal rather than a comprehensive approach to change.

The question then is how and to what extent Beirut's informal transit system is empowering the dispossessed to commute across the city and its outskirts within such highly divided milieu. The story of informal transit began with the lack of state endorsement after the civil war, when the public transport network was fully taken over by the private sector. Ziad Nasr, the President and Director General of the Railways and Public Transportation Authority, explained that "the history of Beirut's everyday mobility had to face a completely corrupted, clientelist, and chaotic environment perceived as a form of informal arrangements, which are customized to people's needs and feed the political system" (interview, 8 Mar. 2018). "The failure of the post-war state at implementing long-term solutions for public transport and pursuing an inclusive agenda for drivers from different religious sects" (Nakkash, interview, 7 July 2020; Baaklini, 2020) pushed private operators to gradually take over the formal system (Assaf et al., 2020). Nowadays, the transit system includes 40 badly maintained stated-owned buses, which have stopped operating in August 2021 in the wake of the Beirut explosion (Nasr, 2021). In addition, there are 4000 privately-operated licensed vans (as well as 12,000 illegal ones with duplicated license plates) and 2000 licensed buses (as well as 1500 illegal ones), which often negotiate and compromise to the benefits of various political figures, operating on approximately fifty trajectories (Mohieddine, interview, 9 Mar. 2018; Faraj, interview, 11 Nov. 2020). The ubiquitous informal transit is perceived by many transport-related stakeholders and citizens as serving a homogeneous stereotyped user group rather than multiple users identities (Mady, 2020). Based on the socio-spatial and ethnographic analysis in the transport hubs, one could notice the different religious affiliations reflected in the service providers' dress codes and ornaments. However, riders included passengers of all ages, genders, and ethnicities. Moreover, no matter how chaotic its internal logic appears to outsiders, decoding the informal internal operational system reveals a monopolized, *privately*-operated, incrementally constructed collective transit, which defines and redefines socioeconomic variables while reproducing and reinforcing socio-political hierarchies (Assaf et al., 2020). The analysis revealed *th*at the entire operational system is divided among operators who serve their own communities. A transport hub de facto transfers commuter from point A to B. However, the spatial positionalities of the collective transit stops are dependent on the politico-sectarian mosaic. For example, speaking about routes, some drivers in Cola and Dora expressed their particular party allegiance and choice to drive in "their sectarian territoriality to hunt for their riders since the drivers' duty is to serve their people". Accordingly, "these routes emerged to offer a service to facilitate the movement of their communities living in rural areas to Beirut," explained other drivers. However, the informal transit system has an ambivalent feature, since "it operates just like board-games", as a driver on bus line 2 explained (interview, 5 Mar. 2018). Such conditions (re)produce socio-spatial injustices within the internal transit system. As for some interviewed riders, "it is safer to take the bus that belongs to their community, and our community could profit" (interviews, 4 Feb. 2018 – 25 June 2021). As Nucho (2016) claims, notions of sectarian community are most obviously produced within the material landscape not only through engaging with sectarian institutions but also through the day-to-day exercise of "being" (Nucho, 2016: 7). Each bus and van route (keeping in mind that some routes are shared by more than one provider) is a battlefield between various political parties and sectarian groups. Moreover, the shadow of the

politico-sectarian fabric is portrayed in Beirut's urban mobility not only in the division of informal transit routes but also in the division of the transit drivers unions (El Zein, 2020). BMP–RR, however, considers that "everyone is a rider on the bus, there is no difference. And the system is providing a service even if it is reflecting a divided society" (Faraj, interview, 11 Nov. 2020). BMP–RR recognizes the existence of an urge to (re)shape the perceptions and stereotyping of the system.

To achieve that, BMP's work faces a series of challenges, which are entrenched in the politico-sectarian affiliations of actors and mobility culture, and which cannot be really addressed by such small-scale initiatives. That is why "BMP scaled-up to build-up a community engagement and a network of different actors interested in the transport sector that could challenge such problems deeply rooted in the Lebanese history," said Faraj (interview, 11 Nov. 2020). In 2019, the state recognized Riders' Rights (RR) as an NGO. The latter aims to "protect the rights and raise the voice of the providers and riders of the informal transit service by upgrading and supporting their current services" (Baaklini & Faraj, interview, 16 Feb. 2018). The informal transit service could be supported through implementing low-cost solutions such as the reuse of old smartphones to map and track the buses and vans. That is when Smarter Buses, initiated in 2008 as Lebanon Buses and founded by Chadi Faraj, emerged as a social entrepreneurship in 2018. Smarter Buses is an online platform with the aim of helping and working alongside BMP–RR by sharing all data collected on an app. In this way, said Faraj (interview, 11 Nov. 2020), "the service could be improved by making it more transparent and accessible, and bridges between riders, service providers and local authorities could be built".

Upscaling of BMP–RR to an NGO aspired to improve connections among the informal transit service providers and riders, and support more inclusive processes of community participation as a means to attain greater control over their own development agenda. The NGO status helped the grassroots initiative to avoid the above-mentioned dangers of political agendas and the lack of accountability faced by public and private bodies. Based on interviews of 8 out of 15 BMP–RR members in July 2020, it appears that when the members introduced themselves to the service providers, city authorities, or even associations as representatives of Riders' Rights NGO, trust was immediately built. "This is quite different than previously, when the team used to present themselves as a 'grassroots initiative'." According to Faraj, "BMP did pave the way for RR to obtain such trust with their achievements before becoming an NGO" (interview, 11 Nov. 2020). Recently, BMP–RR has assumed a horizontal character by decentralizing the decision-making. The NGO is divided into three committees that work collaboratively with each other and meet on a monthly basis. The meetings are usually facilitated by the board members who guide and develop communication between the committees. In meetings, the team attempts to (re)frame the everyday political talks into deliberative exchanges and take decisions collectively. Collective intelligence in democratic participatory process is highly valued. According to the interviewed volunteer*s, "there is no clear leadership, which is understandable, and it is interesting to have every member's vision. In this way, democratic leadership is revealed in the decision-making." Hence, "BMP–RR is building an inner, horizontal organizational system that does not depend on individuals but on collective work," as expressed by another volunteer (interview, 2 Feb. 2021).
This was reflected in the election of the new general board members of the NGO in July 2020. Baaklini did not run for election, which gave an opportunity for other members to take part of the change. Nevertheless, a vertical hierarchy has not been fully eliminated as the democratic process is limited to the availability of certain members. Regarding unsuccessful projects, the team re-evaluates their work to identify their weaknesses and reformulate new strategies. Still missing from BMP–RR's endeavours are strategies to address the modalities of governance in

the informal transit system, which are deeply rooted in the (re)production of politico-sectarian infrastructures. Such strategies, discussed in the next section, are limited by structural problems of a consociational government.

4.2 If it is innovative, why is it limited?

"It is an extraordinarily complex exercise to be innovative in a deeply divided and neoliberal city like Beirut," said Nakkash (interview, 1 Mar. 2018).

The production of a bus map was "an act of legitimizing the status quo of the informal transit system. The map could become a traditional blueprint document," said Baaklini during an interview in 2018. To illustrate, the Ethiopian community *Egna Legna* in Beirut has used the BMP map as the basis to (re)produce an Amharic bus map to facilitate the movement and safe travel of the Ethiopian domestic workers. Abdel Hafiz El-Kayssi, the former General Director of Maritime Transport at the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, stated that "BMP–RR could bring to light the existence of the informal system, but this does not mean that the state will take their work into account" (interview, 4 May 2018). As explained by Nakkash, "the growing frustration of the state agencies lead them to ignore the production of the map because they do not want to acknowledge the existence of the informal transit infrastructure. If they do, the social infrastructure destroyed after the civil war could be reinstated, while the state is benefitting from the politico-sectarian scenario" (interview, 1 Mar. 2018). In fact, the power-sharing scenario was in existence even before the war; it was grounded in the consociational model implemented after the National Pact of 1943 (see Khalaf, 2002; 2006) to engender a governance system that (re)produced different state entities within the state and catered to sectarian patronage networks and loyalties. Clientelism emerged to redirect individual loyalties from public institutions towards their particular politico-sectarian communities (Schenker, 2017).

Mapping the informal transit goes beyond the production of a map. "BMP–RR did not only produce a manuscript on potential ways to stitch and address urban issues found in a highly polarized environment due to the absence of political will. BMP–RR also produced a manifesto to provoke socio-spatial justice within the collective transit. This could only happen when partnerships are built in the city," said Faraj during a BMP–RR team meeting in October 2020. Around this core objective, the team is opening up opportunities to collaborate with various actors and to generate a collective force that can co-create advocacy and build a solidarity-based community to achieve mobility justice. BMP–RR is building coalitions on the local level with, for example, Train–Train NGO, The Chain Effects, Bicycle Mayors Tripoli, Public Works, Lebanese Union for People with Disabilities, academic institutions such as NDU, and internationally with the World Bank and the Transit Union Riders in Seattle.

Although it is acknowledged that these initiatives have their own agendas, "if they unite together, they could achieve good results. If they fail, they will be reproducing the image of a divided state. The floor is theirs, so let them mesmerize us," said El-Kayssi (interview, 4 May 2018). Multi-actor coalitions require negotiations to coproduce processes that can address the socio-political complexities. To achieve their personal agendas, these partners should co-create an integrated transport infrastructure plan that seeks mobility justice. For example, when the Lebanese Government took the decision on 15 March 2020 to stop the operation of the collective transit system as part of COVID-19 measures, severe losses resulted for bus and van drivers who survive on a daily wage. BMP–RR launched a campaign "Bus Lines Heroes" in partnership with Train–Train NGO and Riders' Rights International to fundraise and empower the drivers to support themselves during the lockdown. Moreover, BMP–RR has co-developed a "position paper" with transport-related actors, such as specialists, academics, civil society

organizations, etc., to expose realities of the mobility and transport sector in Lebanon. Working in unison, they can co-create a force to lobby for the Ministry of Public Works and Transport's decisions. According to Nakkash, "if these actors do not get the approval of the 'real state actors', the attempts of these initiatives will remain on hold" (interview, 7 July 2020). Needless to say, processes of constructing these new choreographies to shift from government to a hybrid form of governance or bottom-linked governance are associated with the prominence of new social actors, the consolidation of the present ones, and the exclusion of others (Swyngedouw, 2005). This adds a new layer of macro- and meso-level of governance to SI (see Jessop, 2002; Oosterlynck & Cools, 2020; Paidakaki et al., 2020) and links it to a broader debate about the potential roles of these initiatives in becoming part of (state) administrations. Although BMP–RR operates at the micro level, it still relates to the overall socio-political and economic situation in Lebanon. However, the inability to scale up to the meso- and macro-levels, which engage with the bureaucratic, policy, and institutional settings, would indicate that the dynamics of BMP–RR are limited by the structural problems of the consociational government. BMP–RR as a socially innovative initiative cannot be considered as utopian, not even in an unstable context like that of Beirut. It has proven its relative resilience because there is the will to change despite its meagre funding, all the socio-economic and political meltdowns of the country, and the perseverance of the corrupt oligarchic state. To some extent, BMP–RR could be considered as an alternative that creates awareness about "a sector that has not been prioritized by the state bodies" (Mohieddine, interview, 09 Mar. 2018; Nasr, 2021). It paves the way to bringing to light and reframing debates about (in)justice in informal mobility by encouraging citizens to think about modes of transport alternative to prevailing automobility.

5 Conclusion

The present article has explained how collective transit practices are socially and spatially embedded. The socio-spatial configurations in which SI occurs are crucial in determining its character and capacity, and ultimately in providing the answer to the question posed at the outset: To what extent and how do socially innovative initiatives negotiate transport and mobility (in)justices, and transform power relations in a highly divided and conflictive milieu?

The article has mobilized a socio-spatial institutionalist perspective, social innovation theory, and the concept of mobility and transport (in)justice. These concepts became part of a living process when the researchers decided to join the project of BMP–RR in fighting socio-spatial (in)justices. By instinct and experience, the scholar-activists in collaboration with the community aimed to find alternative answers from below that would generate collective seeds to (re)shape the politico-sectarian scenario found in the transport sector resulting from a dysfunctional elitist state. The project of the researcher through PAR became subject for negotiation and adaptation. Being reflexive within research is not static but rather an exercise that continues throughout the research process. Through such a process, transport was not only a neutral technological artefact but rather an interplay between different actors and their interests within socio-economic and politico-sectarian territorial and cultural differences, which (re)produce concomitant (in)justices. Consolidating the social turn in transport research through SI invited the researcher to comprehend mobility as a complex, often invisible bundle of multi-actors' coalitions deciding whose needs are to be addressed and the socio-political configurations that benefit them. In other words, transport politics are always pursued for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others.

Research on mobility systems should not be isolated from socio-political and physical relations, which materialize the condition of urban existence and the essential capacity for participation in collective life. The notion of (in)justice, enacted by the local initiative BMP–RR, is conceptually rich. Without financial resources, BMP–RR is resisting and seeking redistributive remedies to historic problems, and is unsatisfied with being excluded. Socially innovative initiatives hence appear to empower the dispossessed, while happening in an unstable context filled with practices of differentiation. However, when it comes to the production of a structural reform in the informal transit system itself, BMP–RR faces a securitized politico-sectarian arena with the presence of socio-spatial injustices. The upscaling of BMP into RR NGO helped co-create a network of actors who aim to find innovative alternatives for Beirut. Civil society initiatives are important in so far as they can help transcend divisions and potentially bring together different factions, promote a culture of negotiation and dialogue, and (re)create institutions that can integrate top-down and bottom-up initiatives. However, the act of governing-beyond-the-state apparatus shows that the horizontal figures of SI are merely short-term solutions. The problem is not the lack of projects or initiatives, but the unwillingness of a consociational government to update its planning regulations and invest in an infrastructure that would integrate different modes of transport. Therefore, the impact of the initiatives of these collectives' is limited by a syndrome of structural problems. The optimistic commitment to the potential for socio-political transformations can offer the socially innovative initiatives new pathways for collaborations and solidarities, and channel the sectarian notions of belonging to one community into practices, policies, and feelings of being part of a larger society.

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