

Towards collective forms of dwelling:

Analysis of the characteristics of the emerging grant-of-use housing cooperatives in Catalonia

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Abstract

The cooperative housing model that has emerged in Catalonia since 2015, has received interest as an alternative form of housing, originating from grassroots initiatives and placing the emphasis on community. Cooperative housing appears during periods when prevailing housing markets fail to provide adequate solutions. Groups are engaging in self-organisation, and collective decision-making, to assess their needs, negotiate resources, and co-create alternative housing options. While affordable housing access remains a core objective, cooperative housing goes beyond that, challenging individualistic living norms and emphasizing community relationships. Based on the analysis, it is observed that Catalonia's cooperative housing model has been evolving towards greater diversity, offering new possibilities for dwelling and fostering community-oriented housing. This evolution is evident in both the spatial characteristics of the houses and their social organisation. However, despite efforts from the cooperative housing groups and non-profit organisations in the sector to address challenges related to inclusion, long consolidation processes and financial barriers, there is still room for improvement.

Keywords: collective housing, affordable housing, community, participation, communal living

Background

The housing crisis in Spain has resulted in a rising number of evictions and challenges in accessing affordable housing. This has sparked a debate surrounding "the right to housing and the city" (García-Lamarca, 2017) and the current state of housing conditions (Miralles Buil, 2019). Current studies diagnose problems stemming from the growth model, the commodification and financialisation of housing, and their impact on urban spaces, such as the gentrification or the touristification of neighbourhoods (Mendoza Ayala, 2019). Additionally, they address the shortcomings of existing housing policies (Hoekstra et al., 2010). In response, many studies have explored alternative forms of property and tenure, such as cooperative housing (Etxezarreta et al., 2018). Housing cooperatives appear at different periods as solutions to the following issues. Firstly, market-provided housing, which is the dominant mechanism in place, is failing to provide adequate and affordable solutions for many households. In response, groups engage in self-organisation to pursue non-speculative alternatives, emphasising the right to long-term and secure housing use over ownership and profit-making (Ehlenz, 2018; Ferreri & Vidal, 2021). Secondly, market or state-provided housing often fails to create dwellings that meet the needs of inhabitants, as they follow top-down processes without the active involvement of future residents. In community-led housing, we observe a diversification of apartment typologies and shared spaces, facilitating the inclusion of various households and accommodating different lifestyles (Jarvis, 2015). Finally, individualistic dwelling practices contribute to a "crisis of care", and uneven distribution of reproductive and caregiving responsibilities, primarily burdening women (Jupp et al., 2019). In community-oriented ways of dwelling, there is an intention to socialise reproductive work, by collectivising sharing domestic activities, reducing reliance on private domestic space, and incorporating communal spaces (Power & Mee, 2019). Community-led housing can have multiple positive impacts within communities, such as reducing housing costs, providing more affordable solutions, prioritizing care as a central aspect of co-living, enhancing sustainability, and promoting mutual support and communal living among residents.

Methodology

In this article, data from the Observatory of Cooperative Housing of Catalonia is being used, to analyse a sample of 50 cases, that are in progress or completed. Also, data from the National Institute of Statistics of Spain as well as from the database of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, are used to compare with the existing state of housing in Catalonia. The cases are also geolocalised, using QGIS software. The data were analysed statistically and with the use of graphs, to explore trends and patterns.

Data analysis

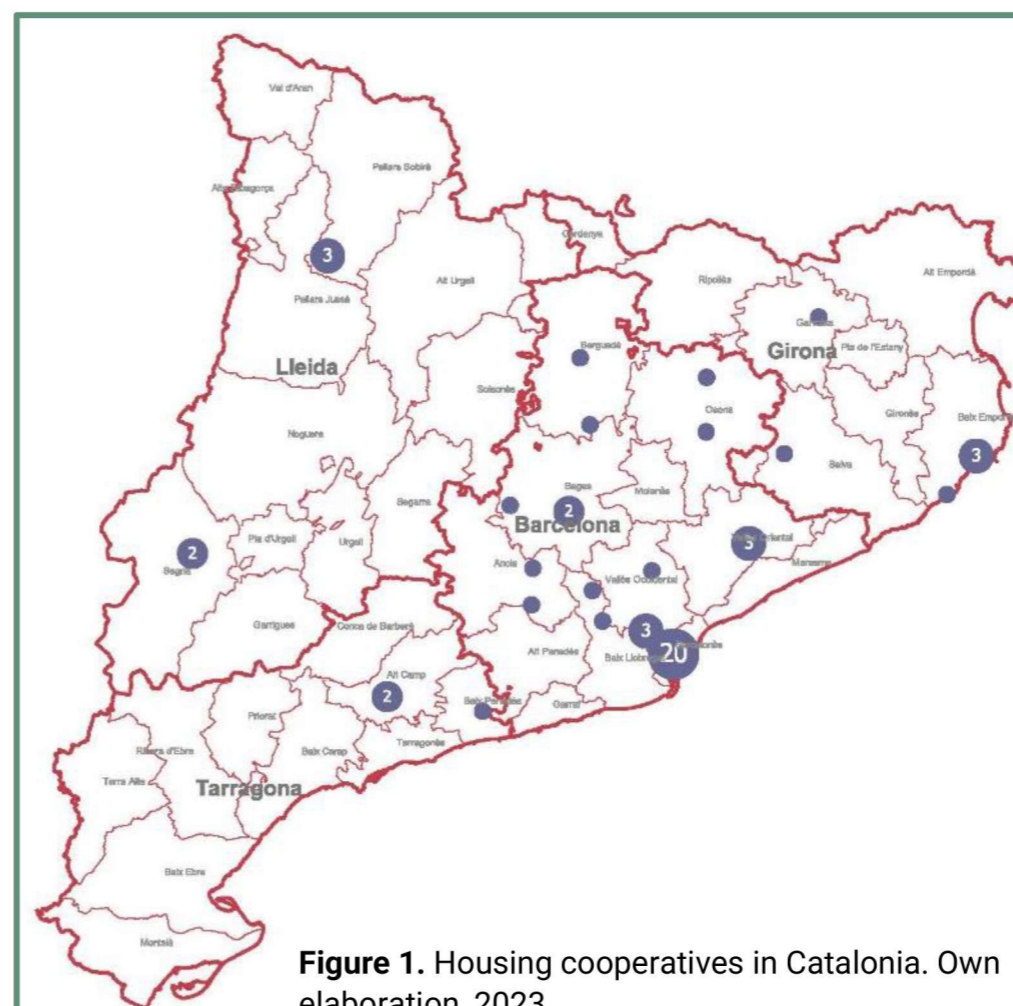


Figure 1. Housing cooperatives in Catalonia. Own elaboration, 2023.

Category	Attribute
Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Urban/ rural location Address
Constitutive characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of housing units Construction type Land access
Process of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Year of initiation of the group Year of initiation of construction Year of moving in Type of group's initiation
Economic characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contribution to enter the coop Monthly fee
Communal living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total surface of construction Average size of apartments Surface of community spaces Identity of the group

Table 1. List of categories and attributes of the housing cooperatives. Own elaboration, 2023.

The selected data are categorised into five groups: location, constitutive characteristics, process of participation, economic characteristics and communal living. Each category is analysed by comparing different attributes. The first category explores the geographic concentration of the cooperatives in Barcelona and other parts of Catalonia. The second category focuses on the evolution of the constitutive characteristics of the model, such as the number of inhabitants, the size of the units, the type of construction, and the access to land. The third category examines the type and duration of the participatory process to identify potential barriers for the participants. The fourth category investigates the affordability of the model and the relationship between the initial contribution and monthly fee. Finally, the fifth category investigates the connection between the size of the common areas and the type of community, to understand group preferences. Through this analysis, we gain insights into the characteristics of the current grant-of-use cooperative model in Catalonia, as well as its evolution in recent years, thereby recognising the defining features of this alternative form of dwelling.

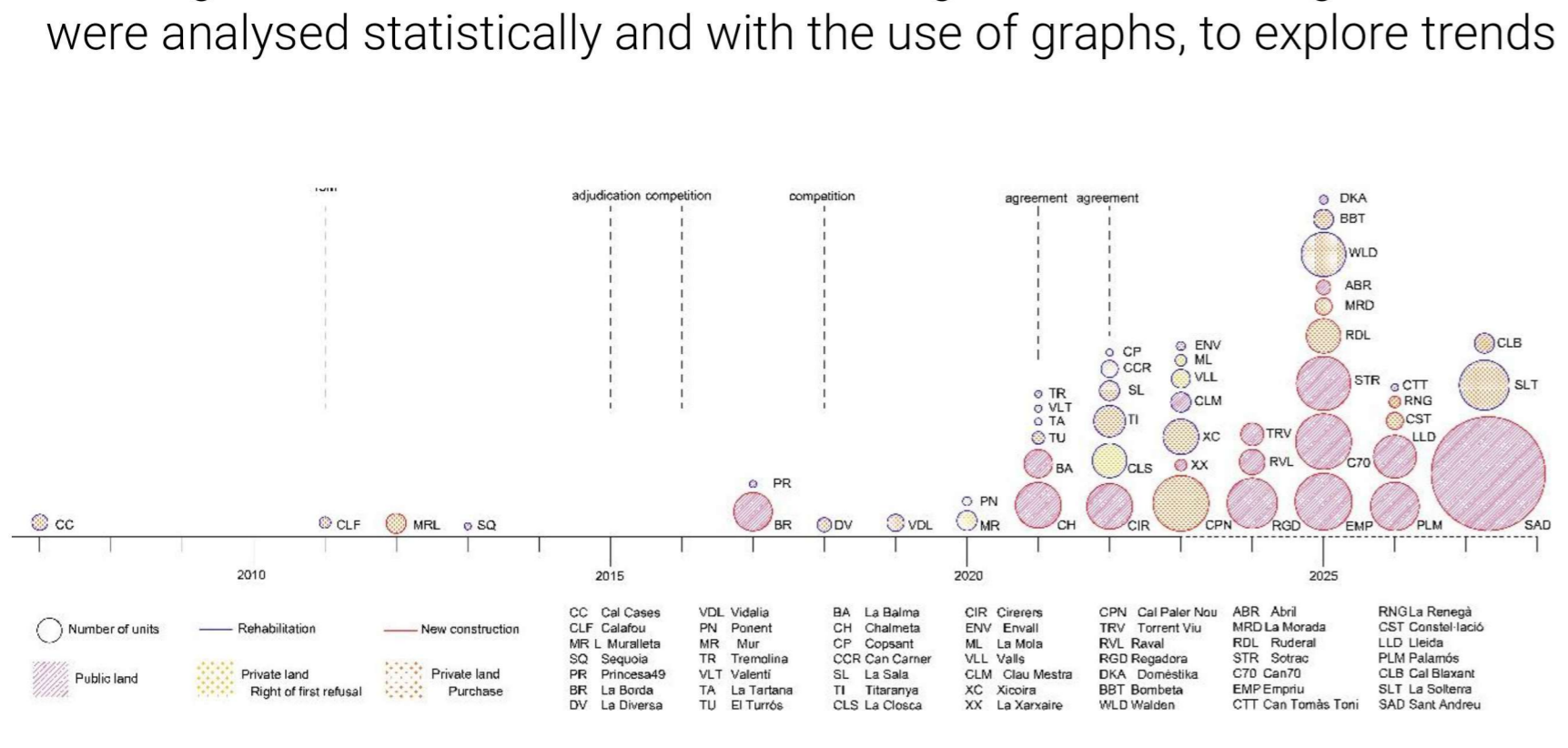


Figure 2. Evolution of the housing cooperatives in Catalonia, about the number of units, construction type and land access. Own elaboration, 2023.

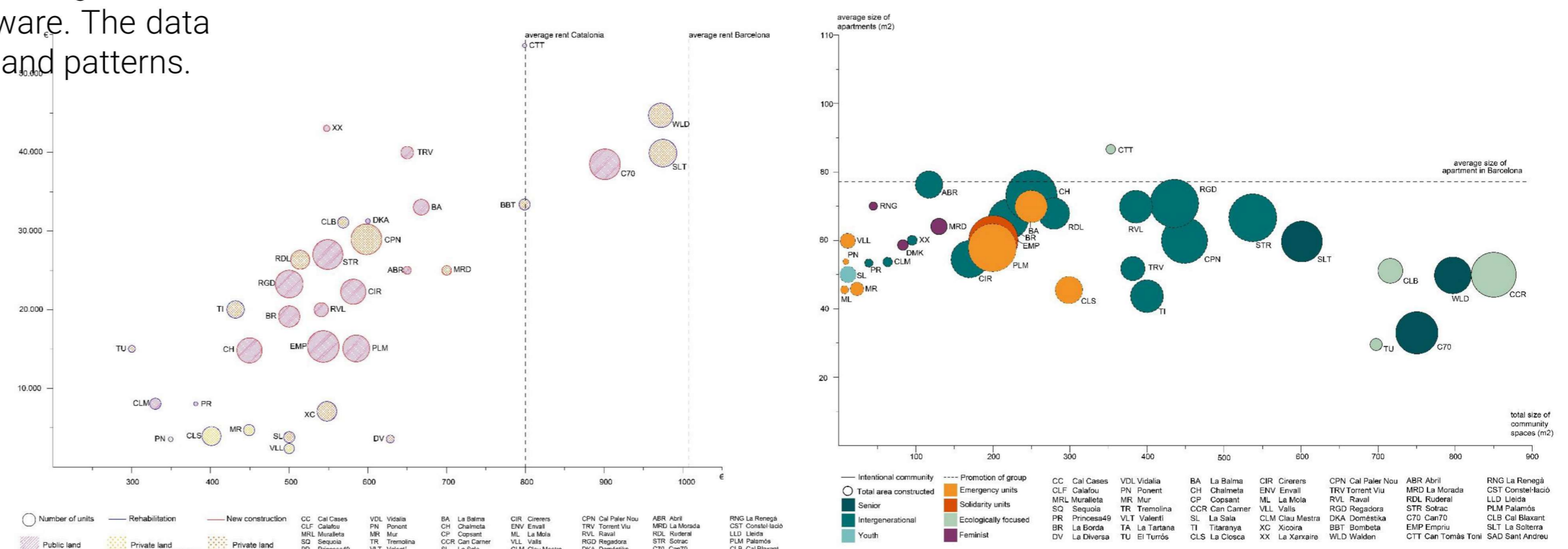


Figure 3. Initial contribution and monthly rent: own elaboration, 2023.

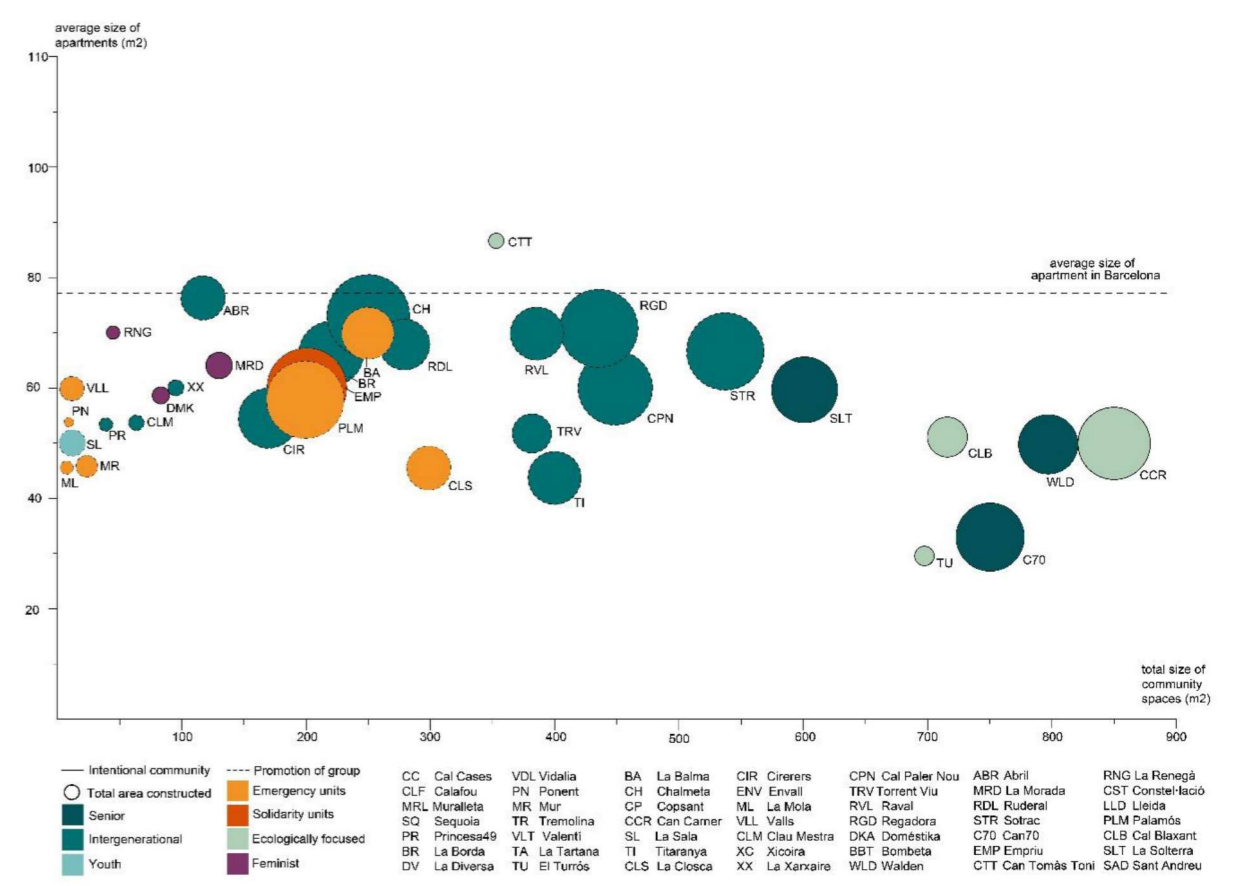


Figure 4. Private and community spaces about the type of community. Own elaboration, 2023.

Summary of conclusions:

- Resident Involvement:** Grant-of-use cooperatives actively involve residents in all stages, from vision creation to self-management, fostering strong communities and redefining the social fabric of housing.
- Growth and Diversity:** Despite being relatively new, cooperative housing is experiencing significant growth and diversification. It's expanding geographically, introducing different spatial distributions, and involving a wider range of social groups.
- Geographic Distribution:** Most cooperatives are in Barcelona due to high land prices, leading to more new constructions there. Rural areas focus on rehabilitating existing buildings.
- Potential Risks:** While non-profit organizations acquiring buildings can provide more affordable housing quickly, there's a risk of reduced group engagement and compromised communal aspects as the model becomes institutionalized.

- Time-Consuming Process:** Cooperative housing creation requires substantial time, especially during the initial phase of defining the project, finding land, and securing financing. Professionalization is reducing this timeline.
- Communal Spaces:** Cooperative buildings tend to have more communal areas and smaller private spaces, promoting shared reproductive and care work, strengthening support networks, and increasing well-being.
- Inclusion and Diversity:** Cooperatives aim to include diverse social, cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds by incorporating apartments for specific social groups, including vulnerable households.
- Affordability:** Monthly rents in cooperative housing are generally lower than the average apartment rent in Barcelona and Catalonia. However, the initial contribution can be a financial challenge for households. Surplus funds may eliminate this requirement in the future.
- Role of Federations and Public Support:** Alliances are crucial for affordable housing development, and public administrations must provide resources, services, and policies to help individuals with limited resources access cooperative housing.