Civil Society Organisations role and adaptation in the Multi-level Governance EU’s System during COVID-19

Marc Flores Soler

Supervisor: Johan Nordensvärd
Examiner: Khalid Khayati
Abstract

This thesis examined how Covid-19 affected the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system and how these CSOs adapted to the new challenges that appeared during the crisis to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on civil society in the EU. Moreover, it also used two case studies, Barcelona and Stockholm, that by focusing on the role of their CSOs during Covid-19 helped understand better how was the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system and allowed to give some normative recommendations on what lessons can be taken to the EU from CSOs of these two case studies, to improve the EU action across the different levels of governance when another crisis occurs.

The method of analysis used in this research is thematic literature review because it allowed me to have a thematic combination of sources that were used to come up with a current summary of empirical and theoretical findings of the CSOs role and adaptation in the MLG EU’s system and from the two case studies, Barcelona and Stockholm.

The analysis concludes that CSOs during the pandemic suffered a reduction of their civic space, but they were considered essential actors in the MLG EU’s system with a more relevant role than before Covid-19 because they showed their importance in reducing the social gap during the pandemic when the EU and EUMS could not handle society's needs alone. Moreover, CSOs showed how they can be very resilient when a crisis such as Covid-19 hit, they could adapt rapidly their vital services by switching their activities to digital mode among other initiatives to meet these challenges. It also showed, with the academic normative discussion on the EU and the two case studies, that the EU need to include CSOs, especially CSOs at the local level, in the participation for the agenda-setting as their knowledge and important role can contribute to making a more effective EU action plan for the different levels of governance when another crisis occurs helping reduce the lack of coordination that the EU experienced during Covid-19.

Keywords: Covid-19, Civil Society Organisations, EU, Multi-level Governance

Wordcount: 23,618
Abbreviations

CSOs – Civil Society Organisations
ECB – European Central Bank
EESC - European Economic and Social Committee
EP – European Parliament
EU – European Union
EUMS – European Member States
FEBA - European Food Banks Federation
IR – International Relations
MFF - Multiannual Financial Framework
MLG – Multi-level Governance
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisations
VCOs – Voluntary Community Organisations
WCK - World Central Kitchen
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1. Introduction

According to Eugenio Salvati (2020, p. 1 - 2), the Covid-19 pandemic has put enormous pressure on the EU’s strength to provide a well-coordinated response to mitigate the social and economic impact on the EU member states. In this context, it can be recognised how the EU’s supranational institutions and their models of action have been put under pressure in a way that the EU has never faced before. The EU, as Marks & Hooghe (2004, p. 6) argue, because of its Multi-level Governance (MLG) system, which was first described as a system of constant dialogue and negotiation between nested governments at regional, national, and supranational territorial levels in the structural policy of the EU. But its application has been extended to other policy areas and regimes and involves the participation of non-state actors such as Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), in addition to governments, in authoritative decision-making. It is a supranational actor that as CSOs take part in the EU issues, it is very interesting to study how CSOs’ role has been affected in this MLG EU’s system during Covid-19 in dealing with civil society needs, as it was an exceptional situation of crisis that the EU, European Member States (EUMS), EU cities and CSOs have never experienced before.

As explained by Baglioni (2015, p. 163 – 166), civil society in the decision-policy making is an essential step to connect the different levels of government (local, national, and the European level), as well as the various institutional bodies, and it is considered to be an established element of the EU policymaking. CSOs in MLG can contribute to the improvement of the European level policies as well as enhance the EU rule legitimacy. CSOs contribute to and support the European intervention on employment and social policies for example, that are very important in times of crisis. CSOs were designated with a crucial and central role in the EU policy framework because, with their participation, policy-making and EU affairs towards civil society would be more comprehensible and inclusive. Thus, CSOs are considered a necessary actor in the MLG EU’s logic because CSOs ease the connection required between the different levels of governance. Thus, CSOs are one of the most important actors in safeguarding the European values and they are essential in dealing with civil society. Without CSOs, the EU cannot fulfil all societal needs that appear in the region, especially when a crisis occurs (RARE, 2020, p. 1). Therefore, due to their importance in the MLG EU system, CSOs are very interesting to study during the pandemic in the EU because their role is
considered central in the EU, and it is important to understand how the role of these CSOs in the MLGs EU system was affected during the pandemic and how CSOs adapted to the new situation of crisis. It will allow me to confirm if the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system was even more important than before Covid-19 and confirm if CSOs could adapt their services to cope with the increasing social demand in the EU during the pandemic.

Therefore, MLG in the EU can be described as the ideal channel as it allows the participation of non-state actors in dealing with EU issues simultaneously, such as the Covid-19 crisis. According to Hooghe & Marks (2021, p. 19), MLG with its diffusion of authority across levels, brings the thought that governments are too small and too big to manage the issues that societies face, such as the Covid-19 crisis. Governance developed into multi-level as states within the EU and regions within states have become self-governing and authority has been combined and delegated to international organisations, such as CSOs. However, the most difficult and challenging issues require coordination at various levels, such as what Covid-19 generated. Thus, as the Commission (2020, p. 1) explains in its Multiannual Indicative Programme 2021-2027, CSOs in the EU are of great importance because of their ability to the achievement of human rights, liberal democracy, peace, conflict prevention, stability and resilience of the EU Member States and key on designing and implementing programmes and policies that meets people needs and helps reduce inequalities. However, during the pandemic, the capacity of action of these CSOs of the EU has been decreasing because of the unceasing degradation of the circumstances.

Furthermore, as N. Simpson (2022, p. 68) explains, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an intensification of policymaking in which local governance, civil society stakeholders and public health were entrusted with the implementation of new directives that suggested citizens stay at home or obligated them in some regions, evade social interaction and wear a mask. Therefore, Covid-19 has shown how the local level of governance in the MLG EU’s system is also important in such health emergencies. As explained earlier, civil society in the decision-policy making is an essential step to connect the different levels of government (local, national, and the European level), which the national and European levels will be examined with the main aim of the study explained earlier. It is important to also complement the study by investigating the local level to understand how CSOs operated and adapted at that level of MLG. As it is very important to confirm if the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system was even more important than before Covid-19.
Therefore, this study of CSOs’ role in the MLG EU’s system during Covid-19 cannot be accomplished without examining with a normative academic approach the importance of the local level in these MLG EU’s system and understanding what kind of lessons can be taken to the EU from CSO role at the local level, because at the local level are found CSOs that are working for EU citizens needs in the streets where the consequences of a crisis such as Covid-19 are first noticed. CSOs at the local level are interesting to examine because CSOs of the different cities of the EUMS had to work and adapt their services in different urban environments as each city of the EUMS had different situations of emergency with different Covid-19 responses. Therefore, to accomplish that, it is interesting to add as a complementary to this analysis of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system, a normative academic analysis of two case studies about the local level in two cities of different EUMS that had distinct Covid-19 responses to understand what lessons can be taken to the EU from CSO in these two case studies. In this case, the cities selected will be Barcelona (Spain) characterized by a high lockdown and Stockholm (Sweden) characterized by an open society that did not have restrictions during the pandemic. By examining CSOs’ work and adaptation at the local level in these two European cities with very different Covid-19 responses, it allows me to fully understand how CSOs work at a different level of the MLG system of the EU when addressing civil society needs when a crisis occurs, and if even with different Covid-19 responses at the local level, some similarities between CSOs in both cities can be found that confirm the importance of the local level in the MLG EU’s system and that CSOs had a more relevant role in the MLG EU’s system than before Covid-19, and making it possible to understand what lessons can be taken to the EU from their role. It will help understand how important it could be to extend the term MLG to the local level, the more accurate role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system during a crisis, and the importance of scaling up essential knowledge from the local level to the other levels through the work of CSOs in dealing with the needs of civil society at the local level in a very different urban environment that was affected by Covid-19. Where if it results that even with different environments both CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm were important in addressing social needs during the pandemic, it will be clear how important are CSOs at different MLG levels, in this case, the local level. Showing how in an MLG EU’s system, it is not just important CSOs at the European level and national level, but also at the local level as they also have an important role to play in Europe. Meaning that CSOs at the local level are important as the CSOs at the national and EU level and they deserve to be heard because they can provide very
interesting knowledge and information because they know better what European society needs because they work on the ground and understand better and faster the needs of the European vulnerable people in each city of the EU. CSOs’ involvement in policymaking and dialogue is always essential in bringing knowledge from the ground and formulating policies according to the need of the people (Commission, 2020, p. 2). Perhaps, if it is confirmed, it can help the EU to use this information to fully understand the emergency situation of the vulnerable people in each city of Europe, so it helps understand each EUMS emergency situation, providing a clear emergency map of the EU. This could facilitate more efficient EU emergency policies when another crisis occurs.

1.1. Aim and Research Question

The main aim of this research is to understand how the role that CSOs had in the MLG system in the EU has been affected by Covid-19 and how these CSOs adapted to the new challenges to cope with civil society during the pandemic in the EU. It will help understand the new situation that CSOs encountered in the EU, what changes have been experienced in their role in the MLG EU’S system, and how they adapted their activities to the new challenges that appeared during the pandemic. On the other hand, this study has a supplementary aim that is focused on a normative academic approach to understanding what lessons can be taken to the EU from CSOs in the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm by examining if there are any similarities in CSOs’ work and adaptation at the local level of the two EU cities, Barcelona and Stockholm, that had different Covid-19 responses that can help provide some academic lessons to the EU for a future crisis.

To find answers to the aim of this research, the following research questions will be:

- How has Covid-19 affected the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system?
- How have the main CSOs in the EU adapted to the challenges brought by the pandemic of Covid-19 in the EU?
- What lessons can be taken to the EU from CSOs in the two different case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19?
1.2. Research Relevance and Gap

This thesis is relevant to IR because it will analyse CSOs’ role in the MLG EU system during the pandemic, as their role was considered central in the EU before Covid-19, and their adaptation when facing Covid-19 challenges. Therefore, the EU Crisis Management with the aim of coordination between the EU and EUMS, among others will also be emphasized in this study. Also, because it will complement the study by examining the similarities of CSOs’ work in dealing with civil society during the pandemic at the local level with the comparison of two case studies of EU cities (Barcelona and Stockholm) that had different responses to Covid-19.

The research gap this thesis has found is that there is no assessment of the role that CSOs have played in the EU’s MLG system during Covid-19 in dealing with civil society with an analysis of their adaptation to the challenges of Covid-19, along with a complementary study of a comparison between CSOs' work an adaptation of two different EU cities (local level), Barcelona and Stockholm, with different Covid-19 responses.

Therefore, the structure of this thesis begins with a literature review. Later, the theoretical framework will be presented with the theory of MLG with also a focus on the EU MLG and then the role of CSOs in the EU before Covid-19 will be explained to understand the importance of these CSOs in Europe. Subsequently, the methodological framework will be explained in which a case study approach with thematic literature review will be used. Followed by the analysis section in which the issue will be examined. Finally, the discussion and conclusion will be presented.
2. Literature Review

In this section, the already existing literature will help motivate the research on this topic of Covid-19 in the EU and the importance of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system during such a crisis. Previous literature on three divided themes will be explained to fully understand why this research is being done. They will be; first, the Covid-19 repercussion worldwide and how made governments and society change their way of doing things to understand the big impact Covid-19 had on our society, second the importance of Europe as a region to fully understand why it is important to talk about Covid-19 in the EU, and third the importance of CSOs or third sector in the world to understand why it is important to study them when a crisis occurs, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

For the first theme, as Á. Kövér (2021, p. 1 – 4) describes, it is clear that the Covid-19 crisis affected the society and economy worldwide. Covid-19 generated an unprecedented social situation with governments struggling to alleviate the damaging consequences of this crisis. Thus, it is clear how governments for the first time, were in a very difficult situation of emergency where they had to act as soon as possible but without understanding all the consequences and characteristics of this pandemic. Therefore, countries because of the rapid and dangerous transmission of Covid-19 between neighbours, were in a completely new situation of isolation from each other while trying to find viable solutions and strategies. It can be understood how Covid-19 was a big challenge to governments worldwide as it isolated them and to overcome those challenges they had to reinvent with different strategies and solutions. Thus, this period of crisis emergency in which governments were caught unaware of the whole crisis situation, was very significant in the lives of people and governments because difficult times act as a test for different public systems structured in nature. During this time, the government's capacity to cope with the crisis emergency successfully, the inclusiveness and stability of the political system, the resilience of society and their capacity for cooperation and solidarity, as well as the government’s disposition to protect human rights and democratic values, were challenged during this crisis. According to J. Singh & Singh (2020, p. 168 - 171), this new situation generated by Covid-19 brought unique restrictive measures to contain the virus, with the isolation and the social distancing interaction, that produced a big challenge on the social and community interactions, generating a huge impact to the social relations. This can lead to start thinking about if these new Covid-19 containment measures led to social distancing and stopped community interactions, and how the most
vulnerable people in society that were dependent on the social services of governments and voluntary organisations before Covid-19 were affected by this. Also, if governments during the crisis management of Covid-19 and CSOs were taking into consideration these people in difficult situations and the role of both actors. ‘’We need to recognise that the scale and complexity of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic is unprecedented, encompassing the whole world and almost every aspect of human life.’’ (Barneveld et al., 2020, p. 148). It is clear how the Covid-19 pandemic critically impacted governments, individuals’ life and many other actors because this crisis situation made that indirectly or directly all actors faced the serious consequences of this virus. Therefore, as van Barneveld et al. (2020, p. 135) argue, the virus did not know about national borders, and the pandemic apart from being a disruption, the crisis indicated a critical need to reconstruct health, social, economic, industrial, and other sectors. Perhaps the Covid-19 crisis made governments realise the important role that CSOs, both in the social and other sectors, play in mitigating the impact of an emergency crisis on civil society.

The second theme will emphasize the importance of Europe as a region because it will help the research to motivate why it is important to talk about Covid-19 in the EU. To understand Europe’s importance as a region in the world, it is first essential to examine, as Chaban & Holland (2014, p. 1 – 4 & 45) explain, the EU’s external image. It will help to recognise the practices and expectations regarding the EU as a global actor, and the EU’s own vision regarding its international leadership role. The external views of the EU to a certain degree shape the role and the international identity of the EU. In the aftermath of 9/11, the world saw the end of US ‘soft’ power and an increasing consciousness of the ineffectiveness of the ‘unipolar’ world. This led the EU to present itself as a possible counterweight to US unipolarity. Thus, an interesting image of the EU emerged, and international public opinion accepted that the EU plays a significant role in preserving stability and peace in the world. Many policy and decision-makers in different countries and regions agreed on the emerging leadership role of the EU in matters such as social standards and welfare of living, regional integration, among others. An important characteristic of the literature on EU leadership, at the global, regional and local, is the acknowledgement that regularly the EU is a leader ‘by example’. Therefore, it is understandable that when Covid-19 appeared, as the EU has a relevant role in the world, the EU’s actions, ideas and position in the world regarding the pandemic were very important for other governments and international actors. It is therefore relevant in this
research to talk about Covid-19 in the EU. With the application of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, the EU adopted a new period of international diplomacy that allowed the EU to develop into a leading actor in international affairs. However, as Bretherton & Vogler (2013, p. 376) explain, it is important to highlight that in the same year until 2010 the financial crisis that hit the Eurozone, drew attention to the internal issues of the EUMS and exposed the cohesion of the EU and its existence. According to Wunderlich & Bailey (2011, p. 31), Europe as an international actor is more than all the policies of the EU in all the sectors and more than the foreign policy of the EU. The EU with just its existence has a big impact throughout the world. Therefore, the powerful presence of the EU has indicated more capability to act because as the EU is aware of its presence, the EU can use it to attain raised levels of actorness. Thus, it is clear how the importance of Europe as a global actor makes this region, the institutions of the EU, and EUMS very interesting to study in times of Covid-19. ‘‘As the EU grows as an institutionalized polity, its presence in the world naturally increases’’ (Wunderlich & Bailey, 2011, p. 31). Moreover, as Hill et al. (2017, p. 7 & 184) state, the decisions, positions and actions of the EU in the world are formed as a consequence of the complexity of the interactions in a multi-level system, with the EUMS and the EU institutions. Therefore, it is interesting to understand the MLG system of the EU in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. In conclusion, it is important to highlight the EU will continue with its development as a global actor, shaping the global environment as well as Europe’s regional future.

The third theme, in which the importance of the third sector and CSOs in the world will be explained as it will help the research to motivate the relevance of these key actors when a crisis occurs to later examine these CSOs during Covid-19 in the EU. According to Brandsen & Pestoff (2006, p. 494 - 497), in 2006, public management research paid more attention to the third sector, particularly in its role as a provider of public services. The third sector can also have other names, such as the voluntary sector, civil society, private non-profit sector, the social economy, and more. They all have a high degree of overlap and to some extent different features. The importance of the third sector resides in the term co-production, which has three potential manifestations, co-production, co-management, and co-governance, that are assigned to a category of cooperation with a direct influence on the nature of the service by the third sector. Co-production mentions that there is an arrangement in which citizens generate their own services, co-management explains that there is an arrangement in which organizations of the third sector generate
services together with the state, and co-governance refers to an arrangement in which third sectors take part with the design and delivery of public services. Therefore, it can be understood that the third sector in which CSOs are located is well connected to the needs of society, as it is working together with the different states for the provision of public services. Thus, the role of the third sector and CSOs can explain their importance in dealing with civil society when a crisis occurs. However, as Anheier (2017, p. 1 - 4) argues, the role of CSOs has become more complicated, particularly in the circumstances of changing relations with the international community and states. The relationship between CSOs and states has aggravated and experts have debated about the shrinking space for CSOs at the international and national level. CSOs have gone through many changes in the last decades, from a time of rapid expansion in scope and size to a more complex and challenging time for CSOs. Therefore, some questions may arise regarding the situation of CSOs during the pandemic. As it was already becoming a complex situation for CSOs before Covid-19, what situation did they find themselves in when the pandemic hit the world, especially in the EU? But one thing is clear, CSOs are a very varied group of many distinct organizations that vary from big international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to small community organizations. This group of CSOs is powerful enough to counter-balance countries and prevent them from controlling and dominating society. Therefore, CSOs’ political and social role is very relevant in dealing with civil society. In conclusion, due to their essential role in society, CSOs are very interesting to study when a crisis occurs because the social needs of society increase. In this case, the research needs to examine the role of CSOs and their adaptation in addressing civil society needs when Covid-19 hit the EU.
3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Multi-level Governance

According to Benz et al. (2021, p. 1), MLG over the past decades has driven interesting research about the changing nature of political authority. The term ‘governance’, as Hooghe et al. (2010, p. 2–4) argue, can be used generically to allude to the number of regulations derived by actors, structures and processes and justified concerning a public issue. First, governance encompasses the number of regulations along with programs, policies, and decisions that are planned to countermeasure a public issue through a collective course of action. Second, an issue is public when the actors involved have to claim to intervene on behalf of a collective interest or the common good. It is important to note that this definition does not exclude private solutions to public problems. Third, governance covers the processes and actors that shape a collective course of action, which includes coalition building, lobbying, persuasion, political negotiations, and threats that go along with the process of policymaking and its implementation procedure. Therefore, any collective actor, private or public, can be part of these processes, such as CSOs. It is expected public actors be frequently present and usually dominant. Finally, governance covers structures, this includes the comparatively steady socio-economic, institutional, and ideational parameters and the historically embedded actor circumstances that configure policy processes in a given context. Thus, the multi-level condition can be identified as the main specification of the nature of governance structures. In which the essential criterion for understanding what constitutes the term ‘level’ is the existence of autonomy. Meaning that the legitimate decision of one level cannot be overturned by other levels without generating an institutional, political or constitutional crisis. Therefore, a significant level must be legitimized and able of governing, with a certain degree of autonomy in one or additional policy areas.

Autonomy, as Enderlein et al. (2010, p. 3–4) explain does not just encompass nation-state levels, it goes beyond that. It covers all the policies that can be shaped by supranational organizations or conventions such as dispute resolution bodies and usually, it includes private bodies. To be a recognizable level, the international organ or body has to be able to have certain autonomy that compels individual nation-states to comply with the institutional norm. In general, nations lack the institutionalized legitimacy to ignore
or veto a decision. Apart from the decision autonomy, a given level requires a certain grade of organizational identification by those who are governing a given level.

Once, it has been clarified each term of MLG, then it is possible to define what this concept means. MLG can be defined ‘as a set of general-purpose or functional jurisdictions that enjoy some degree of autonomy within a common governance arrangement and whose actors claim to engage in an enduring interaction in pursuit of a common good’ (Enderlein et al., 2010, p. 4). In short, as Benz et al. (2021, p. 2 - 4) explain, the concept describes the coordination and differentiation of political authority across scales of jurisdiction. MLG takes the processes and structures of governing. These structures are distinguished by a division of power between different levels of territorial units, such as global, continental, national, regional, and local. To react to the interdependence of policy challenges such as climate change, conflicts or a pandemic, the governance processes are aimed to coordinate political decisions at different levels. Nevertheless, configurations of MLG differ not only in terms of the division of power, but also in terms of their persistence, their modes of coordination, the degree of institutionalization, and the actors they include. In terms of the actors they encompass, as MLG entails the exercise of political authority, it can rely on executives representing different jurisdictions of territory. Therefore, often stakeholders and actors such as judges, corporations, and CSOs for example NGOs also play a role. ‘‘When it comes to politics beyond the nation-state, they usually include executives from international organizations and nation-states. Here, we also witness a rise in the participation of global as well as local non-state actors (e.g. private firms, NGOs, civil society representatives).’’ (Benz et al., 2021, p. 4 – 5). According to Enderlein et al. (2010, p. 4), this governance plan does not need to be constitutionally established. It can be a dynamic order immersed in a flexible process. Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between the arrangements built of general-purpose jurisdiction, known as a multi-level polity and those built of ‘overlapping’ functional jurisdiction, known as a multi-level regime. Therefore, as Hooghe & Marks (2003, 2004, as cited in Enderlein et al., 2010, p. 4) explain, it can be distinguished into two types of MLG arrangement. Type 1 illustrates a general-purpose governance arrangement with a restricted amount of non-overlapping jurisdictional boundaries at a restricted number of levels and Type 2 describes a dynamic and complex mélange of countless, overlapping, and practical specialized jurisdictions. This type of governance is not constitutionalized because is task specific.
Type 1 of MLG

According to Enderlein et al. (2010, p. 18 - 19), federalism is the intellectual foundation for Type I of governance, which deals with the power-sharing between general-purpose governments operating at a few levels. In this type, the individual government is the unit of analysis, in which the essential characteristics are that the functions are clustered, the number of levels of government is limited, the membership is non-intersecting, and the framework is system-wide. The first characteristic known as general-purpose jurisdictions, explains that the decision-making powers are grouped in a small number of packages but dispersed across jurisdictions. In Europe, this concern is especially strong because the local government often employs a broad range of functions. Secondly, the limited number of governments or jurisdictional levels, explains that this Type I arranges jurisdictions at a few levels. Intergovernmental relations scholars differentiate three levels, the central, intermediate, and the local level. However, the number of levels can vary. For example, in Europe, it differs between two general-purpose governmental levels such as Luxembourg, Iceland or Malta to five like France or six for Germany. Third, the non-intersecting membership, explains that membership can also be communal, as in the consociational polities, apart from usually being territorial, as in nation states, regional, and local government. Lastly, the system-wide framework, argues that it is not possible to have all the other characteristics mentioned without having a systemic framework. The systemic institutional choice is written into all Type I governance.

Type 2 of MLG

In Type II of governance, as Enderlein et al. (2010, p. 19 - 21) explain, jurisdictions are task-specific, jurisdictions are not aligned with just a few levels, memberships are intersecting, and jurisdictions are planned to be flexible instead of long-lasting. This alternative form of MLG is prevailing in public choice theorists and the neoclassical political economists’ community. It outlines the ideas of many scholars of local government, federalism, European studies and international relations. The first characteristic, task-specific jurisdictions, means that independent and multiple jurisdictions fulfil different functions, in which each citizen is not served by the government, but is served by a variety of distinct public service industries. Secondly, the many jurisdictional levels, in which governance is organized in this Type II. Public choice scholars argue that rather than assuming authority accurately defined in international, national, regional, and local layers, they argue that each public service or good should be
administered by the jurisdiction that adequately internalized its costs and benefits. It therefore results in jurisdictions at different scales. Many scholars emphasize the expansion of Type II in the international context, task-specific governments or institutions addressing transnational issues. Third, the intersecting memberships, emphasize the importance of not containing smaller jurisdictions within the borders of larger jurisdictions. Therefore, borders will be intersected, and the jurisdictions will be in part overlapped. Lastly, the characteristic of jurisdictions is planned to have flexible design instead of long-lasting, because they are intended to react flexibly to changing citizen preferences and functional needs. This idea is grounded in Charles Tiebout who highlighted that the mobility of the inhabitants between multiple competing jurisdictions produces a functional equivalent to market competition. Therefore, in Type II governance, the ability to make collective decisions, and to make and enforce them, is disseminated among a broad diversity of actors.

3.1.1. Multi-level Governance in the EU

According to Bache I, (2012, p. 1 – 3), the term MLG in the EU appeared in 1986 because it was an important year of a refreshed push for integration with the single market program that was manifested by the Single European Act of 1986. This push generated an enlargement of the competencies of the EU and produced a revision of the decision-making plan of action, for example, to remove the veto of member states in different areas to ease quick integration. The result of this single market agenda and the EU's nature as a political system gave rise to a new movement of theories that challenged the predominant debate of intergovernmental-supranational. As the competencies of the EU enlarged, similarities between the national political system and the EU were substantially increasing. Therefore, the MLG concept was inspired by both old and new contributions to debates on the EU. Gary Marks in 1992 was one of the first scholars who used this concept to describe the evolution of the EU cohesion policy. The cohesion policy is the governing principle of different funding mechanisms to handle economic and social inequalities in the EU. A structural funds reform in 1988 implemented new governing principles which were fundamental to the emergence of MLG, such as the principles of additionality and partnership. This partnership principle required that most of the Structural Funds be managed through partnerships based in each aided region. These
partnerships were to be made up of national, regional or local and supranational actors. Therefore, this new implementation gave regional and local actors for the first time an important role in the policy-making EU process. In the following years, the Commission pushed for a strengthened role for non-state actors such as Voluntary Sector Organisations (VCOs), trade unions, and CSOs, among others, and succeeded in reaching an agreement. The increasing role of non-state actors in the EU policy-making cannot be overlooked, as without this dimension it would be meaningless to use the term MLG, instead, the term multi-level government should be used. This reinforced the dimension of governance of MLG because it demonstrated a better cross-sectoral dimension to the EU governing system. Since it attempted to capture the dynamics of cohesion policy, MLG has been widely used to represent the EU policy system as a whole.

The intricacy of European multi-level politics, as Enderlein et al. (2010, p. 66, 205 & 214) explain, is not well represented by competing single-level theoretical concepts of the supranationalist and intergovernmentalist approaches. On the contrary, empirical research addressing multi-level interactions looks after emphasizing the singularity of its objects or producing new concepts. The EU and its EUMS have developed into a system of MLG indicating the interconnection between the subnational, national, and European levels, in which its characteristics are not well understood in public debates. Thus, it does not exist a real comprehension of the limitations and extent of the institutional legitimacy and capacity of the European political system. However, one thing is clear; ‘’Whereas a state has legislative power and the power to implement its laws in its jurisdiction, most policies of the EU can only be made by joint or coordinated decisions of European and national institutions.’’ (Enderlein et al., 2010, p. 214). The European MLG system varies considerably from typical international structures of MLG. While in the international context, the multi-level systems are generally Type II systems, the European system of MLG is very near to the Type I system with important components of Type II. ‘’The European Union illustrates that the normative basis of cooperation is dynamic rather than fixed.’’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2021, p. 26). Therefore, as Bache I, (2012, p. 4 - 5) describes, these two types of MLG can co-exist. Type I consists of EU entities such as the Council of Ministers, the EP, and the Commission and operates to a logic of appropriateness, while Type II includes many partnerships, agencies, and non-governmental organizations among others and operates to a problem-solving logic. Four relationships can be identified between the Type I and the Type II entities in this European system of MLG.
The first type of relationship is called ‘Parallel’ where the nature of the relations is informal, but Type II entities such as the regional partnership bodies for EU cohesion policy, regularly report to Type I bodies, the EU and national levels. The second type is ‘Complementary’, being also informal in its relations but Type II entities such as the European Central Bank, report straight to EU institutions. In the third type, ‘Incorporated’, the nature of the relations is formal and accountable to EU institutions, the characteristic of Type II entities is that they are a government formal extension such as the European Aviation Safety Agency. Finally, the fourth type, ‘Oppositional’, with informal and occasionally formal relations such as corporatist arrangements. The Type II entities encountered here are entities such as the European Trade Union Confederation that advocates for specific interests and challenges the government.

In conclusion, as Bache I, (2012, p. 5 - 13) explains, in general Type, I entities bear more responsibility for the direction of current governance and Type II entities are doing most of the rowing. The perspective of MLG on EU developments identifies a combination of sectors involved in this rowing, such as the voluntary, private and public sectors, but also a steering that takes place at different territorial levels such as the national and supranational levels. The concept of MLG has provided important insights into the nature of governance in the EU because it focuses on the growingly complex relationships between actors from different sectors established at distinct territorial levels and originates significant questions about the strategies, tactics, and tools used to make decisions in the current politics.

3.2. Civil Society Organizations in Europe

The civil society term, as V. Tageo et al. (2021, p. V - 2) explain, encompasses the wide range of informal and formal organisations that are independent of the market and the state. It includes VCOs, social movements, NGOs, voluntary organisations, religious groups, and citizens and communities operating jointly or individually. The World Bank defines civil society as the broad set of non-profit and non-governmental organizations to express the values and interests of their members and others, based on cultural, ethical, political, religious and scientific deliberations. On the basis of this civil society concept, the EESC defines CSOs as the total sum of organisation structures in which its associates
have general interest responsibilities and goals and operate as mediators between citizens and public authorities. Therefore, their success depends essentially on the willingness of their actors to contribute to consensus through democratic and public debate and to recognize the results and consequences of a democratic policy-making process. The EESC divided CSOs in Europe into six categories with Associational Life, Consumers and Environment, Farmers, Liberal Professions, SMEs crafts and family business, and Social Economy. CSOs, as the EESC (2022, p. 1) describes, are one of the three main groups that constitute the EESC. This Committee set up as an advisory body to the European Commission, the Council, and the European Parliament under the 1957 Treaty of Rome, provides a formal platform for representatives of CSOs to communicate their views on EU issues and to take part in the decision-making process of the EU. CSOs are a stimulant for social innovation, their work helps to plan and design welfare systems that led to new structures, policies, services, products and working techniques. Civil society participation is now more necessary than ever because real social innovations occur when CSOs are implicated.

According to Pazderski et al. (2022, p. 7), CSOs in the EU are a fundamental pillar of the rule of law, social justice and democracy in the European territory, but also worldwide. In the EU, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU enables the civic space for CSOs, recognising its fundamental freedom such as the right to association, expression, and peaceful assembly. CSOs, as RARE (2022, p. 1 - 3) states, are the most powerful protectors of European values and are essential for European citizens. CSOs mobilise communities and educate, advocate for the interest of others, provide services, collect data and information, make sure that the people's rights and policies are well enforced, and demand accountability from the authorities. Therefore, the Fundamental Rights Agency accepted its role in protecting human rights at the regional, national and local levels. “European CSOs operate in a multi-level system, composed of different tiers of governance.” (R. Salgado, 2017, p. 513). They are important because, through these CSOs, European citizens can substantially participate in the cultural, social, economic and political environment, in which they can make use of their rights to communicate themselves, collaborate, and mobilize. Therefore, the EU without CSOs would operate completely differently as a community of values and legal order because the initiatives provided by these CSOs and their civic courage would not exist. CSOs effectively supported the limitation of pollutant and gas emissions in cities in Europe. They worked
with EUMS to develop democracy, the rule of law, equality, and government accountability. They detected corruption, discrimination, injustice, and human rights abuse that was undiscovered by the EU. They also played a significant role in safeguarding refugees' and vulnerable groups' rights. Thus, it is clear that CSOs provide an essential contribution to the EU, providing a key role in protecting human rights at the regional, national and local levels, advocating for the rights and values of the EU’s DNA, and being indispensable for the EU policies implementation.

The last economic crisis before Covid-19, as R. Salgado (2017, p. 511 – 512) argues, made CSOs realise that if at the national level, the political opportunities are curtailed, they can turn to the European level. However, the economic crisis created a situation of vulnerability for CSOs because they lacked the organizational capability to seek funding and a decision-making framework that would provide the best future to them through the different levels of governance. However, as Keijzer & Bossuyt (2020, p. 784 - 785) argue, the importance of CSOs in Europe progressively shifted EU development policy from a focus on EU NGOs to a focus on CSOs. With the introduction in December 2019 of von der Leyen as the President of the Commission, new instructions to the new Commissioner on International Partnerships were sent to give priority to support CSOs in EU’s cooperation matters. Therefore, the importance of CSOs in the EU made increased their funding compared to the previous years to make CSOs have a better action role for civil society in the implementation and design of EU development policy. In conclusion, the involvement and contribution of CSOs in the management of development projects, and policy design and being a fundamental pillar of social justice, rule of law, and democracy in the EU with the utilization of EU funding, made that EU law defines them as “an organisational structure whose members serve the general interest through a democratic process, and which plays the role of mediator between public authorities and citizens” (Keijzer & Bossuyt, 2020, p. 785).
4. Research Design and Method

4.1. Epistemology and Ontology

According to Lamont (2015, p. 24), methodological debates in IR have been at the centre of the theoretical controversy as students and scholars in this field try to describe trends and events in politics and understand their world. Therefore, the process by which this study obtains knowledge is related to the concepts of epistemology and ontology. As Marsh & Furlong (2010, p. 18 - 19) explain, ontology questions are argued first because they review the nature of ‘being’, which reflects my views about the nature of this world. On the other hand, the epistemological question deals with my understanding and knowledge of the world.

This study, due to the research questions and aim focused on understanding how the role that CSOs had in the MLG EU’s system has been affected by Covid-19 and how these CSOs adapted to the new challenges to cope with civil society in the EU, and on understanding what the EU can learn from CSOs in the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm. Therefore, different Covid-19 responses from different social actors, such as EU institutions, EUMS and civil society actors, and their social interaction during this time will be key for the analysis of this study. Then, as Bryman (2012, p. 27 - 34) argues, the ontological position of this study is based on constructionism because it is important to understand that the social phenomena, their interpretation, and definition are continuously being produced by these social actors. Which, these categories and social phenomena are not only achieved through this social interaction but are also in a continuous state of revision. The epistemological position is interpretivism because my research has probably been influenced by my intellectual traditions. My point of view will be essential because the sources selected talk about the social interaction between the different actors against Covid-19, it will draw in an intended way, an interpretative understanding of the social action to later come up with a causal explanation of its development and effects. Therefore, as Marsh & Furlong (2010, p. 26) explain, my study refuses the idea that the world exists separately from our knowledge of it since the world is discursively and socially constructed.
4.2. Methodological Framework

This inductive qualitative research design will apply a case study of CSOs in the EU and the CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19. The research will use a qualitative approach because it allows me to further investigate specific places, events, and organizations. In this case, it will allow me to examine deeper into the EU Covid-19 crisis management, its institutions, organizations, the CSOs’ role and adaptation during the pandemic in the EU, and the CSOs’ operation and adaptation similarities in the cities of Barcelona and Stockholm (Lamont, 2015, p. 21). Moreover, to provide some lessons to the EU from CSOs with the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm, it is important to confirm that this case study will apply a normative academic approach. As Porta & Keating (2008, p. 8 - 14) explain, in social science normative questions are inevitable because the concepts that will be analysed in this study are normatively charged, especially because the study will deal with providing some lessons to the EU and because the supplementary aim of this research is based on investigating normative issues and explanations of the EU and the CSOs modus operandi in both cities during Covid-19.

According to Lamont (2015, p. 128 - 129), a case study allows me to do a detailed examination of individual actors, relationships, and events. Thus, case studies can help me to produce knowledge that may be important beyond this particular case in this study. As explained by Porta & Keating (2008, p. 227), it is possible for me to use this case study as a mix of descriptive and interpretative, because the descriptive part allows for describing the phenomena in the analysis of the Covid-19 and the CSOs in the EU at EU level and local level with no intention of using theory, but with the interpretative part, it allows me to use the MLG EU’s system concept to give an efficient and expanded explanation of these specific cases that will help the study to interpret the results and evaluate them. Therefore, this research will apply a descriptive and interpretative case study because it is focused on explaining and expanding the understanding of CSOs’ role and adaptation in the MLG EU’s system and on CSOs’ work and adaptation of Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19.

Once, the research has confirmed that a descriptive and interpretative case study will be the method selected. It is time to determine that the key analysis strategy for this qualitative method will be a thematic literature review.
4.3. Conducting Thematic Literature Review

4.3.1. Material and Data Collection Method

To begin with data collection method, it is important to understand, as explained earlier, that this research will be applying a qualitative research design with descriptive and interpretative case studies as a research method. Nowadays, the data such as documents, reports, and books, among others, as Lamont (2015, p. 21, 79 & 80) explains, is quickly increasing and broadly available. Therefore, the main strategies used by IR scholars for collecting all the necessary qualitative data include internet-based research, document-based research, interviews, and focus groups. This research will use document-based and internet-based research for the whole analysis.

On one hand, document-based research will be essential for this research because any pursuit to study international issues requires engaging with documents. According to Lamont (2015, p. 80 – 81), this strategy will allow the research to gather books, official reports from the pandemic situation, policy documents from the Commission and the City Government of Barcelona, media reports, articles and personnel files made by scholars, governments and institutions on this topic to acknowledge how Covid-19 affected the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system in dealing with civil society during the pandemic, to understand the main challenges and adaptation of these CSOs in the EU during the pandemic, and to understand what the EU can learn from CSOs in the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm.

The data aimed to gather come in two different styles, from primary source documents and secondary source documents. The primary source documents will help the research to collect the original documents done by individuals that directly experienced the pandemic or individuals who had direct access to the information that they are describing. However, understanding the difficulties that this can imply, secondary sources will be considered as they are essential because look into the primary sources.

On the other hand, as Lamont (2015, p. 87 – 88) explains, internet-based research will be used to make use of the internet to get access to scholarly material that is easier to find online, such as scholarly books and articles, truthful webpages, and online newspapers. The objective is to use the internet to collect information on the topic of this research about specific events that will be addressed in the study. It will also allow me to get access
to government websites to obtain official documents and statements or even press interview transcripts.

4.3.2. Data Analysis Technique: Thematic Literature Review

According to Cisco (2014, p. 42 - 43), there are multiple definitions and discussions on how literature review should be defined. In this study, the literature review will be understood as a data analysis technique that uses a mix of analysis, synthesis, and summary. More specifically, it is understood as a thematic combination of sources that will be used for me to come up with a current summary of empirical and theoretical findings of the CSOs’ role and adaptation in the MLG EU’s system and the CSOs’ work and adaptation in Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19. Moreover, there is also a discussion on how the literature review should be structured. “Many scholars recommend that themes become headings in the paper to provide writers with a structure and readers with organizational cues” (Galvan, 1999; Pan, 2008; Ridley, 2008 as cited in Cisco, 2014, p. 43). Therefore, this study will structure the analysis in themes and sub-themes, as it is acknowledging the importance of using themes for this topic because they help me to stay on topic. They are essential because they will help have a well-organized structure in the analysis that will facilitate me to write the analysis in different sections that are important to consider. Thus, easing to take the key results later that will help write the discussion to answer the research questions. This thematic structure is more efficient for synthesizing what has been learnt from the sources and how these sources relate to themes.

Therefore, as Lamont (2015, p. 90) explains, as this qualitative research design is approached inductively, the themes and sub-themes will be generated by diving directly into the topic and identifying them during the reading. The first step, as Cisco (2014, p. 45) describes, will consist of reading through the different reports, articles, and books among others to apply open potential themes and sub-themes. The second step is when it is essential to reread the sources used many times to redefine those themes and sub-themes. Finally, the third step will consist of looking for support and constructive comments from the thesis supervisor to improve my themes and sub-themes. It is important to mention that to use this analysis technique effectively all my sources will be read before writing the thematic literature review, will use a good number of relevant
sources, and will have special care on the structure that will be done according to the aim and research questions and actors involved in this topic.

4.4. Validity and Reliability

In political science, and social research, as Bryman (2012, p. 45 - 47) states, there are two important criteria to evaluate this qualitative study, they are validity and reliability. Validity is one of the most important criteria because it is focused on the integrity of the conclusions produced from the research work. Therefore, the importance of the measurement of validity lies in whether the conceived measure of an idea or concept actually follows the concept it is expected to represent. To confirm the validity of this study, it is important to use external and internal validity. On one hand, external validity wants to confirm if the research results can be generalized beyond the determined context of the research. In this case, because the study focuses on the EU and the European cities of Barcelona and Stockholm, the relationship that will be described between the EU and the EUMS, as well as that of both European cities, is unique. Firstly, it can be understood that the external validity will be low because it will not be possible to generalise the research results further. It is true that Covid-19 affected all regions in the world, but the relationship between governments, the countries, the number of people affected, and the political situation, among others, was different in the EU from other regions of the world. But as the essential actor to be analysed are the CSOs, it is certain that, even with different civic environments and spaces, some of the strategies and adaptations of these CSOs could be extrapolated to other regions. Therefore, the external validity will be medium-low. On the other hand, internal validity refers to the causal relationship established between two variables in the study. Therefore, it is important to confirm whether Covid-19 and the way the EU managed the crisis in Europe really affected CSOs in Europe where they needed to adapt to the new situation generated by this pandemic. In this case, internal validity can be confirmed because the theoretical and empirical ideas developed in the analysis are extracted from primary and secondary sources. Also, thanks to the theoretical framework based on already existing literature, the type of MLG in the EU and entities are understood, as well as the importance of CSOs in Europe, knowledge is deepened to then understand the possibility of how Covid-19 affected CSOs in the MLG EU’s system.
Lastly, reliability refers to the question of whether the results of the research are consistent enough to be meaningful for the area of specialization and future research, and if the measures used are consistent. This research may be important for understanding how the EU should manage a future crisis and what role CSOs should play, with this research being relevant to the field. Furthermore, by studying CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm, this research can bring an interesting comparison to the field between these two European cities, to which other European cities may feel related, and future studies can shed more insight on the local level of more European cities and its CSOs and other characteristics that were not covered in the analysis. Also, this research is reliable because the measures used are consistent because they are based on previous literature.

4.5. Limitations

When applying a qualitative research design with a case study, collecting data with document-based and internet-based research, and using the data analysis technique of thematic literature review, some limitations can be encountered. First, when implementing a qualitative research design, as described by Collier & Mahoney (1996, p. 56), it is important to highlight that selection bias may undermine the research if my study just follows my ideals without addressing them. It is true that my values, tradition and ideals cannot be hidden, but the study is contemplating this possibility of selection bias and this research will work to reduce it and increase objectivity by verifying the information with more data sources, with co-reader and supervisor reading through the whole research as it will help to find gaps in the explanations, interpretations and arguments that need to be resolved, etc (Campuslabs, 2020). Second, as Lamont (2015, p. 132) argues, it is important to know that a case study is a good method for this study, but it can produce a selection bias on my part which it also makes difficult to generalise the results beyond the limited number of cases that my research selected. Therefore, to reduce selection bias and challenge preconceived beliefs about the topic, it has been thought critically about the criteria for the selection of the case and for the research design of the case study. Moreover, when collecting the data with document-based and internet-based research, it shows some limitations because documents sometimes do not give enough information or detail to find an answer to the research question because documents are made for some other aim rather than design for research. Moreover, if the
study does not provide enough documents for the research, it can fall again into biased selectivity because the documents selected may have been chosen concerning my principles, traditions, thoughts, political ideas, etc. Therefore, the study has used several sources to reduce selection bias. Also, the study can find denied access documents that could be essential for the research, producing low retrievability because it is not possible to access all documents that are important to answer the research question. Another limitation that can be encountered, as Lamont (2015, p. 82 - 88) explains, is that documents can have a repercussion on my research because while doing the study many characteristics of social interaction are imperceptible for the investigator. Third, when using a thematic literature review, as Snyder (2019, p. 338) argues, researchers often fail in providing details on how their analysis was conducted. Therefore, a section on research operationalisation will be provided to understand and motivate how the analysis with the selection of themes and sub-themes has been accomplished during the analysis.

Finally, it is important to note that in analysing the EU’s management of the Covid-19 crisis, the EU, its CSOs, some EUMS, and the European cities of Barcelona and Stockholm. This research may fail in its limited scope because it is not analysing every EUMS to get an accurate picture of the crisis situation generated during the pandemic, and it is not examining every EU institution that may have contributed during Covid-19.

4.6. Research Operationalisation

The analysis section of this research is using, as explained earlier, an inductive qualitative research design with the qualitative analysis technique of thematic literature review to find the essential information to answer the research questions of this study. When conducting a thematic literature review, it is possible to highlight the key concepts for the analysis, theme and sub-theme and take notes that help me to be more accurate and precise with the information gathered that will be used in the analysis.

As this research is focused on understanding how Covid-19 affected the role of CSOs in the MLG EU's system and how they adapted to the challenges brought by the pandemic and as the study is also focused on examining CSOs in the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm to understand what lessons can be taken to the EU from them. Reading inductively through the sources, as seen in Figure 1, it has created the following three themes with eight sub-themes in total.
The first theme created, ‘MLG in EU Covid-19 Crisis Management’, is relevant because it helps understand how the EU and its EUMS reacted to Covid-19 and how the coordination and management was between them, while relating to MLG theory with the national and European level. Two sub-themes were created in this theme, the first one is ‘Lack of Coordination between EU and National Levels (National Level)’, which gives a picture of the difficult situation of the EU and its EUMS during the first phases of the pandemic, emphasizing the reaction of EUMS and showing how the EU and its EUMS were facing the challenge of lack of coordination between them and how this was affecting the EU. This sub-theme is helping to provide key information and an essential basis for further analysis of CSOs in the EU during this crisis situation. The second sub-theme, ‘EU Covid-19 Crisis Management (EU Level)’, must be added because all the information gathered was relating to how was the EU crisis management during Covid-19, in which the EU institutions will be emphasized to understand their role and work during that time. This sub-theme is essential for the analysis of CSOs because, without it, many gaps will be found when analysing CSOs in the EU during the pandemic, it is a must to first understand and provide a picture of the EU institution's management and role
during the crisis of Covid-19. Therefore, this theme generated in the analysis will help me with the two first research questions, especially the first one.

The second theme, ‘CSOs in EU during Covid-19’, is one of the most important themes for this research because it is specifically focused on understanding CSOs’ role, challenges, and adaptation during the pandemic. Therefore, three sub-themes were created due to the amount of data found that was clearly divided into the role, the challenges, and the adaptation. The first sub-theme, ‘CSOs’ Role in EU during Covid-19’, is very relevant because it helps situate the importance of CSOs in the EU during Covid-19 in providing assistance and shows the difficulty they had due to the constraints found to keep providing its services. The second sub-theme, ‘CSOs Main Challenges in the EU during Covid-19’, is also very important for this research because it explains in detail what were the challenges that CSOs in the EU encountered during the pandemic, helping the reader to have a clear picture of what Covid-19 represent to these CSOs in the EU. The third sub-theme, ‘CSOs Adaptation in EU during Covid-19’, is one of the most important in this theme due to the research questions of this study. Thanks to the solid knowledge provided with the CSOs’ role and challenges, this code provides enough material to understand how they adapted to these challenges while being in a very difficult position as the social demand was increasing and they did not have the best environment and civic space to operate. Therefore, it is clear how this second theme is one of the most relevant to this research because, thanks to the knowledge of the EU Covid-19 crisis provided in the first theme, this second theme helps answer adequately the two first research questions.

Finally, the third theme that helps answer the last research question is ‘CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19’. This theme is important because it focuses on how CSOs operated and adapted in both cities to understand how the crisis situation was in two European cities with different Covid-19 responses to then find similarities. The first sub-theme, ‘The importance of the Local Level in the MLG EU’s system’, is essential because it makes visible the dependence on these local actors, especially CSOs, during Covid-19 and explains one of the major weaknesses of the EU during the crisis. The second sub-theme, ‘Impact and Covid-19 responses in Barcelona and Stockholm’, will help me to analyse the real impact and responses of Covid-19 in both cities as it will show the similarities and differences in these cities, that it is essential information to then understand how CSOs operate and adapted in these two different situations. Finally, the third sub-theme, ‘CSOs operation and adaptation in Barcelona and Stockholm’, is one of
the most important codes in this theme. It is true that the first two are also relevant because if not it would not be possible to use this code, but this third code provides essential material to understand if there are any similarities between CSOs’ work and adaptation in both cities, helping to find, with the help of the other code, an answer to the third research question.
5. Analysis

5.1. Multi-level Governance in EU Covid-19 Crisis Management

5.1.1. Lack of Coordination between the EU and National Levels (National Level)

The World Health Organization, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 20) explain, on the 11th of March 2020 announced the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, states around the world have approached Covid-19 responses very differently to cope with the pandemic. According to Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 51 - 52), in the EU, member states have also followed this trend in which all of them applied border measures due to a risk to public health. However, the Covid-19 response at the national level adopted by each EU member state was different in terms of the length, type and seriousness of the pandemic restrictions, as well as the country list whose citizens were for a period of time banned, and as in terms of pace. Therefore, the Covid-19 national response of each member state in the EU was based on non-medical measures, which impacted different areas such as the right to travel known as freedom of movement. Many restrictions were implemented, varying from travel restrictions and lockdowns to bans on large gatherings and school closures. These different Covid-19 responses to cope with the pandemic, showed a picture of a deep discoordination between the member states of the EU. “Although the new coronavirus was not initially considered by the EU as an acceptable justification to halt the Schengen Agreement, on 13 March 2020 three member states (Malta, Slovakia and Czech Republic) unilaterally closed borders to Italian citizens and citizens from some other EU member states as a strategy to stop the spread of the disease.” (Maior & Camisão, 2022, p. 51).

Also, during the initial period of the Covid-19 crisis, another cause of this lack of coordination was the manifestation of ‘rhetorical disputes’ similar to the confrontations of the eurozone crisis, in which controversial public statements by the EU leaders contributed to increasing the picture of discoordination, lack of solidarity and disunity. It could be observed how the initial responses of member states did not focus on solidarity, which at the EU level is a value that is assumed to be an established EU value. This impression of disunity was well summarized with the statement of a member of the European People’s Party group Esteban González Pons: “faced with a single problem, the European member states have given 27 different responses, as if the virus stopped at
each border’’ (Rios 2020 cited in Maior & Camisão, 2022, p. 52). With this declaration, it became clear how the lack of coordination and solidarity was very much present in the EU during the initial stage of Covid-19.

Moreover, the action of some member states showed intense competition, which in the first instance obstructed and slowed down the ability of the EU to respond to Covid-19 showing how in times of crisis the national level can have a big impact on the EU-level actions. According to Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 52 - 53), the competition among member states for medicines, test kits, and equipment to deal with the pandemic was detrimental. In addition, vaccine nationalism emphasized the danger of national selfishness for the European Union, as well as for each member state’s capability to safeguard its citizens. ‘’Larger Member States such as France, Spain and Germany began to engage in independent talks with vaccine manufacturers. In June 2020, France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands announced the creation of the Inclusive Vaccine Alliance.’’ (N. Simpson, 2020, p. 42). However, even with a declaration about the Vaccine Alliance was working out to provide vaccine doses for all member states, many small EU countries saw it as a threat. Despite the fact that the lack of solidarity among European Member States in the initial period of the pandemic was deeply rooted in the citizens of the European Union, as Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 54 - 67) explain, the reality is more distinctive because there was a strong network of cooperation across Europe and action by EU institution at EU level would start early. Furthermore, a lack of coordination with the Covid-19 containment measures put in place by EU member states was also notable during the second and third Covid-19 waves of the pandemic, during the first Covid-19 wave this disunity between EU member states was more related to the lack of coordination and communication, while during the second and third Covid-19 waves, it was more related to the differences in the number of deaths and the onset of these waves in each EU member state. ‘’Coordination at various levels of decision-making (national, regional, local) was perceived differently in the countries’’ (N. Simpson, 2020, p. 32). According to N. Simpson (2020, p. 32), one of the most visible and repetitive information about this perception of lack of coordination between the European and national levels was the difference in dimension and characteristics in the Covid-19 waves throughout EU member states during the last two years of the pandemic.

In conclusion, as Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 163 - 168) explain, during the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, since the health crisis was impacting all EU Member States
and the Covid-19 crisis was in nature symmetric, all the situation was optimal for joint crisis management in the EU. However, as it could be seen, rather than developing cooperation or authorizing the supranational EU institutions at the EU level to play a major role in the plan of action to cope with the pandemic, EU member states at the national level developed unilateral solutions and rejected to implement a joint decision-making procedure focused at dealing with the effects of the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, isolation was the first action EU member states decided to do. However, due to the impact of Covid-19 during the first waves in which the lack of coordination between EU Member States was visible, the recognition that a permanent join strategy was necessarily made EU member states finally comprehend that it was time for cooperation in the EU.

5.1.2. EU Covid-19 Crisis Management (EU Level)

According to Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 54), regardless of the picture of lack of coordination and the perception of disunity among EU member states and at the EU level explained in the previous section. The intervention of the EU institutions, mainly the Commission, during the Covid-19 crisis management began in the early phases of the pandemic crisis. As Salvati (2020, p. 10) explains, the reaction of EU institutions to the Covid-19 pandemic could be explained as remarkably differentiated in the first four months of the crisis. It consisted of a fragmented Covid-19 response at various levels and encompassed multiple actors. Initially, EU member states declined to accept the role of the Commission as the individual national strategies coordinator. Thus, it could be seen, as Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 47) explain, how the intricacy of the EU’s MLG alters its role as a crisis manager, in which the EU can only take actions within the limits of competencies that the EU member states have given in the treaties reflected in the Treaty on the European Union, Article 5. These limits of the competencies of the EU are administered by the conferral principle. ‘’This lack of power and authority translates into the inability to directly use its own resources to respond to the pandemic crisis in a timely and effective manner.’’ (Salvati, 2020, p. 11)

However, as Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 57) explain, while it is clear that health policy is designated at the national level, the strategic texts, the Treaties, and the strengthening of the EU's capacity in crisis management facilitated a significant role for EU institutions in this context. ‘’While member states are often reluctant to transfer more authority to the
supranational level, they normally call for additional EU capacities to coordinate, link or integrate their response capacities after a large-scale crisis or disaster’’ (Maior & Camisão, 2022, p. 55). Therefore, the Commission was the first EU institution to take an important role during this crisis. It went from taking a discrete action at the beginning of the pandemic to playing a relevant role as central coordinator in driving the EU’s handling of the Covid-19 crisis to the political level. ‘‘The stepping up of the Commission was a response to member states’ unilateral action.’’ (Maior & Camisao, 2022, p. 57). The most timely significant move, as Salvati (2020, p. 10) explains, was taken by the European Central Bank (ECB). It was the unique supranational EU institution that could give a quick Covid-19 response and share the crisis risks. The ECB set out its Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme, a transitory measure planned to guarantee helpful financing for all the economic sectors. This key action was done at the same time as the decision of the Commission to authorize adjustability of state aid rules that limit the capacity of individual governments to support corporations and to cease for a time the Stability and Growth Pact. According to Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 58 - 59), the Commission statements persistently repeated the necessity for an essential and urgent plan based on a coordinated plan of action and solidarity. The clearer the gravity and the complexity of the Covid-19 crisis became, the clearer the thought of a coordinated Covid-19 response became. Moreover, it is important to highlight that a particular characteristic of crisis contexts, such as the Covid-19 crisis, that affects the EU is that the political decision-making is more centralised in the European Council. Thus, it increases the centrality and visibility of this European institution in the system of governance of the EU. The European Council, during the first year of the Covid-19 crisis, carried out many extraordinary meetings concerning this crisis. However, these meetings did not have the effect expected by the European Council and EU member states put the Commission centre stage by demanding that it step up its response against Covid-19 and start coordinating the actions of the EU member states. In any case, this regularity of the European Council meetings meant that EU member states kept track of the Commission’s work closely.

According to Maior & Camisao (2022, p. 59 - 61), the Commission’s response to this monitoring by the European Council and the EU member states was deploying several proposals to cope with the economic and social impact of the pandemic which was approved by all the other actors. However, one of the most important proposals to cope
with the impact of Covid-19, the European Recovery Plan, faced the most resistance from some EU member states. While most EU countries, such as Germany and France, supported this proposal, some other EU member states strongly disagreed on the subsidies part that appeared in this EU Recovery Plan. The Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Austria were highly critical of this increase in the EU budget and demanded an EU recovery plan focused on switching from grants to loans to EU member states that need them in order to have a more practical level of spending. Thus, the shadow of the initial perception of a lack of solidarity gained strength. To overcome the blocking of these European leaders, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, step in with the presentation of a revised version of the European Recovery Plan and the European Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). Finally, inside the European Council, a political agreement was reached on 21 July 2020. "The European Parliament has been even more marginalised during this phase, thus confirming its peripheral role during major crises. Its only action has consisted in approving a non-binding resolution in favour of a recovery plan included within the MFF" (Salvati, 2020, p. 11). As Maior & Camisao (2022, p. 68) describe, a notable absence from the interaction of the EU institutions was the European Parliament (EP). The EP work was seriously constrained by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, as Maior & Camisão (2022, p. 71, 72 & 230) describe, multiple factors can explain absenteeism at the supranational level at the beginning of the EU Covid-19 crisis. As explained earlier, one of the most important factors is that the EU institutions have restricted competencies in public health policy. Also, another factor was that at the beginning of the crisis, there was not enough knowledge about this virus and the information about the outbreak and its implications was under the control of the Chinese government. Therefore, this early soft Covid-19 response from the EU supranational level was representative of the weakness of the EU’s crisis management capability. However, as could be seen, the Commission finally made progress by taking the role of the national efforts coordinator to cope with the impact of the pandemic. EU member states, with the quick spread of Covid-19, finally released that a coordinated pandemic response was necessary at the EU level and decided to accept a replacement of unilateral and uncoordinated actions with an EU-coordinated plan.
5.2. CSOs in the European Union during Covid-19

5.2.1. CSOs Role during Covid-19

According to N. Simpson (2020, p. 86 - 98), in the chaotic early period of the Covid-19 crisis, CSOs found themselves in a very difficult position, although their input was vital, regional, and national levels of governance all of a sudden faced shifting priorities and they had to take essential decisions without much scientific evidence. However, CSOs had always played an important role in the EU MLG structure by supporting and enhancing public sector actions to defend the rights of the most vulnerable and safeguard civic participation. Therefore, during Covid-19, this role was no different, as its contribution was essential for the European, national and local levels of EU member states. In the context of national and local levels, the President of the Diversity European Group Séamus Boland stated that “CSOs around Europe ‘have acted as a bulwark at the local and community levels, providing incalculable assistance, notably in the provision of essential health and social care services.’” (N. Simpson, 2020, p. 87). Therefore, it could be seen how CSOs and communities played an essential role in bridging the gap between official services and community necessities, mainly in the most vulnerable groups. In the case of the EU level, as the Commission (2020, p. 1) with its Thematic Programme for CSOs 2021 - 2027 indicates, the EU has long been a global advocate for civil society as a development player in its own right and underpins its participation in contributing to democratic procedures and achieving greater development results. Therefore, the Commission’s regular and expanded attention to CSOs support is reflected in the Mission letter for Commissioner Urpilainen, which highlights the significance of a committed focus on CSOs support in the EU and globally and emphasises that the EU will work to guarantee that they play a much substantial role in the design and implementation of European programmes, projects, and policies. Since Covid-19 hit, the importance of CSOs in Europe has been very outstanding. “EU institutions only have few effective instruments at hand to protect civil society and counter negative trends.” (RARE, 2022, p. 2). Therefore, the Thematic Programme for CSOs 2021-2027 has aimed to reinforce CSOs as independent players of development and good governance. Moreover, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. V - 10) explain, during the first phase of the pandemic CSOs were the first to support organisations and populations in the EU. However, they were and continued to be affected during all phases of the pandemic by
the subsequent restrictive Covid-19 measures that were adopted in many EU countries. Government restrictions complicated the work for CSOs to maintain their normal activities, which has had a significant impact on the groups and vulnerable individuals with whom they work.

The CSOs in Europe, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 15, 18, 36 & 46) describe, are organized in categories per each of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) activity areas. Therefore, the most important categories to this study are Associational Life and Social Economy because they work more closely with the most vulnerable groups in the different EU countries where the need for food, shelter, equality and right of EU citizens, and the purpose of creating social impact rather than profit, are the main goal. The category of Associational Life is composed of EU, national and local-level VCOs and constitute associations, foundations, NGOs and other forms of organisations that are focused on stimulating the free movement of people, the rule of law and on safeguarding human rights and civil liberties. Therefore, they work to promote the common good, fight for freedom, opportunities, and equality of rights as well as the essential values of respect. This category had a key role during the pandemic because they had the capacity to congregate very motivated volunteers and committed employees around a variety of activities in terms of effective civic participation that enhances values such as social cohesion and solidarity, both fundamental European values. On the other hand, the Social Economy category is composed of non-profit organizations and associations, foundations, social enterprises, mutual societies and cooperatives being the best instrument for social innovation. They are focused on creating a social impact and their objectives range from sheltered workshops and employment provision to baking and agriculture. This category has played a vital role during the Covid-19 crisis because they were very important in mitigating and addressing the effects of the pandemic on society and the economy by promoting sustainable and inclusive economic models. Therefore, these two categories of CSOs in the EU were very important during the Covid-19 crisis because they already anticipated an enormous rise in inequalities, in particular those caused by poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, which would make one of the main roles of CSOs as the protectors of social progress and the common good. These CSOs had an essential role during the pandemic in alleviating and responding to the impact of the Covid-19 crisis, complementing government planning and public services in a flexible and innovative manner. “They were effective precisely because they
combined different responses, such as providing essential goods and services to communities, sharing information and advocating towards states for rights, and in connecting these responses, they used a variety of tactics.” (V. Tageo et al., 2020, p. 51).

In conclusion, as (RARE, 2022, p. 1 - 2) explains, the CSOs’ role in protecting human rights at the EU, national, and local levels was recognised by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights. Protecting CSOs and the civic space where they operate, apart from being very important for EU citizens, also enhances the legitimacy of the EU and protects public confidence. The EU supranational institutions are not able to apply specific policies and protect the values and norms of the EU without the help of CSOs. They need CSOs’ support to face significant challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, economic crises, and migration, among others.

5.2.2. CSOs Main Challenges in the EU during Covid-19

According to V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 10 - 11), the crucial points raised by CSOs in the EU about the main ways the Covid-19 pandemic has affected their activities were related to difficulty in establishing and adapting to the new methods of service’s delivery and work, the reduced in-person interactions and, the reduction or cancellation of its operations. One of the critical points and main challenges was the loss of funding that CSOs experienced during the pandemic. Therefore, CSOs spending during this time increased due to the increment in demand for the services they provide and the need for CSOs to invest in new technology and physical equipment to adapt their services to the new situation that Covid-19 generated in EU countries. CSOs that could not switch their activities to the online modality had to invest more in material to adapt their actions to the new measures. ‘’The EC regularly highlights CSOs’ important contribution in the monitoring of the state of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights, yet CSOs face challenges that remain unrecognised and unresolved.’’ (RARE, 2022, p. 3). Many CSOs around Europe attracted the attention of European supranational institutions because of the financing adversity they were experiencing during the pandemic while trying to achieve their mission. This issue was related to the EU-level network that obtains a significant proportion of its funding from the EU through various EU programmes.
Before the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought economic, social, and health crises, as argued by V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 2), CSOs were already experiencing several difficulties that prevented them from achieving their goals and fulfilling their role as protectors of civil society, because decision-makers were sometimes resisting to become involved with civil society. However, the situation was aggravated with the pandemic (economic, social, and health crisis) where it is also important to highlight that these decreased funding options and the reduced financing from public and private contributors made CSO also the ones affected by the deficiency and inequality of the EU system as they suffered a reduction in their civic space to operate. ‘‘Reports on the shrinking of civic space in a number of EUMS have made headlines in recent years’’ (RARE, 2022, p. 1). CSOs cannot cope with this situation by themselves, let alone in a EUMS tangled in a crisis of the rule of law. Therefore, CSOs need the support of EU institutions because they are well-positioned to protect them and are simultaneously able to use financial and political leverage and pressure on national governments that limit CSOs’ civic space. According to the Commission (2020, p. 5) in its Thematic Programme for CSOs 2021 – 2027, one of the main challenges for CSOs and for the EU cooperation with CSOs was this reduction of its civic space and the continuing deterioration of well-conditioned environment for CSOs. CSOs had been confronted with limited capacities against the risk posed by the closure of spaces. CSOs have also faced obstacles to their capabilities varying from constraints in fundraising, leadership skills, and technical management, to performance management and internal governance issues. Especially in CSOs at the local level because the environment where they operate deteriorated the ability of these CSOs to operate openly as agents of good governance and development in their own right decreases. The capacity to operate is a fundamental goal for the EU’s intentions to assist CSOs, otherwise, it risks weakening all priorities and objectives in all areas of EU cooperation and in the field of democracy, peace and human rights, where CSOs are an essential partner in the implementation, monitoring, and dialogue of interventions.

Therefore, the main EESC CSOs categories mentioned earlier that are important to this study, Associational Life and Social Economy, faced significant challenges during Covid-19 that affected them in different ways. On one hand, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 19 - 21) explain, Associational Life confronted an escalation of domestic violence during the lockdown in EUMS such as Greece, Latvia, France, and Belgium. CSOs encountered significant problems related to this issue, such as looking for accommodation for children
and women in shelters due to the absence of proper facilities and not sufficient emergency equipment for them. Moreover, many pensioners and elderly person’s organizations suddenly needed to move their normal activities to online mode. This shift was even more challenging for them because of the reduced level of online literacy in elderly people. This could be seen in CSOs of EUMS such as Spain, Slovenia, France, Portugal, and Belgium. In relation to this challenge, CSOs emphasized the low funding for purchasing essential skills and equipment, the shortage of human resources in elderly organisations as well as the shortage of volunteers to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic. Another challenge faced by this category of CSOs is the aggravated conditions of people with mental, physical, learning, and intellectual disabilities. The isolation and growing need for emotional and psychological aid for this vulnerable group, together with the inability of social services and the educational system, is one of the main challenges that these CSOs were helping to address. Also, another challenge was the incrementation of vulnerable people in social and economic situations because of losing their job. This problem exacerbated poverty and inequalities among the most urban vulnerable groups, becoming one of the main social challenges brought about by the Covid-19 crisis. Organizations in this category of CSOs have constantly drawn media and government attention because the third sector is suffering from excessive responsibility for disease and death during the pandemic, due to the increased health risks to which workers and volunteers were being exposed. Especially in the activities of food supply, emergency relief, and assistance to the most vulnerable people, as well as the lack of the provision of health equipment for these workers. These voluntary associations in charge of mitigating the impact of Covid-19 in the EUMS reported that they faced a double challenge. On the one hand, the need to increment the resources due to the growing need for their services and, on the other hand, the lack of income from which they used to fund such activities.

On the other hand, in the category of Social Economy, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 37 - 38) describe, CSOs working in this category have also experienced a very negative impact of the pandemic. CSOs providing services in Social Economy reported the loss of a large number of euros and the risk of insolvency. Moreover, the accumulation of social debt was one of the main challenges that these CSOs had to solve because the pandemic brought the limitation of social interaction causing isolation and solitude, many people lost their monthly income and they could not get health and social services when they
needed, the most vulnerable urban groups could not possibly use the digital services which resulted in them not being able to get essential information about Covid-19 and pandemic measures. Therefore, this growing social debt became one of the most important challenges for these CSOs because the future funding of health and social CSOs was unclear. Many CSOs had a fundamental mission to focus their activities on social care and other organizations had also started working to assist the vulnerable urban groups that did not have any form of social protection. In this category, online and telephone assistance to vulnerable families and individuals was essential, as several social and health services were disrupted during the lockdown. Another challenge faced by CSOs was the saturation they experienced with the huge increase in needs due to the daily service closure for the mentally impaired, elderly, and disabled. In addition, one of the main challenges that affected the Associational Life category also affected the Social Economy category. It was the increase of people in a situation of social and economic vulnerability due to the loss of employment, which increased poverty and inequalities of the most vulnerable urban groups and, as explained above, represented one of the most important challenges that Covid-19 brought to Europe. Another challenge was the children and the youth because CSOs had to respond to the increasing psychological and emotional discomfort. This emotional repercussion was also associated with the most vulnerable urban groups. The increase in discrimination, inequality and racism was also affecting communities and it represented a challenge for CSOs during the pandemic. Health, social and food assistance was also one of the major basic needs that CSOs had to address. Therefore, CSOs had to provide all these services while facing a number of constraints caused by the contextual factors of the crisis.

5.2.3. CSOs Adaptation in the EU during Covid-19

According to N. Simpson (2020, p. 87), CSOs during Covid-19 had to apply their adaptability, creativity and strength to find new solutions for the common good, mostly while working with or in support of local governments. "The overall effort put in place by the voluntary sector has been tremendous" (V. Tageo et al., 2021, p. 21), in which the actions of CSOs to respond to the emergency necessities such as hygiene products, medicine, food, and infant care have been crucial. Before mentioning what activities or strategies CSOs in the EU used to adapt to Covid-19, it is important to note, as described
by the Commission (2020, p. 1) in its Thematic Programme for CSOs 2021 – 2027, that the capacity of CSOs to act and use strategies or methods to adapt their services to the new situation was decreasing due to the continuous worsening of the environment in which they work. During Covid-19, this negative tendency was intensified due to the restrictive measures imposed by different EU governments. Even with the increasing demand for CSOs services from vulnerable groups, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 3) explain, most CSOs had to adapt their offerings and, in some cases, reduce or terminate their programs and activities. However, several CSOs made material and human resources accessible to address the Covid-19 crisis and began offering new services while launching public advocacy and support campaigns.

In the second wave of the pandemic, as argued by V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 10 - 14), even though CSOs had faced multiple constraints on their capacity to do their work, such as social distancing, lockdowns and quarantine restrictions. CSOs had been able to continue operating while coming up with innovative, adapted, and resilient solutions to maintain their fundamental mission to help the most vulnerable urban groups. In this context, international networks and organizations pushed to make CSOs’ voices and the societal sectors they represent to be heard in a quickly changing environment where several authorities are making centralised decisions to deal with the pandemic crisis. During the Covid-19 crisis, CSOs adopted different strategies to rapidly adapt and reconvert their activities and strategies to maximise the effectiveness of the new services and initiatives put in place. Most of them kept providing their usual services but adapted their provision modalities to the new measures. Many of them also reinforced their usual services, while others revealed that they converted their activities and services to online mode. It is clear, therefore, that the CSOs’ first and foremost objective was to find ways to continue to provide the services that are at the core of their fundamental mission and whose pursuit was in some way exposed by the Covid-19 crisis and its measures. In addition, it is important to highlight that some CSOs were capable to go further and come up with new responses to the new needs. These CSOs decided, during the pandemic, to launch entirely new or personalized services and to expand their service portfolio to target new and different groups from their usual users, demonstrating the rapid adaptability of CSOs and their keen awareness of emerging societal needs as they arise.

Therefore, specific groups of EESC CSOs, such as the categories of Associational Life and Social Economy, which are taken into account in this study, also had to adapt their
services to the new situation. On the one hand, as explained by V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 21 - 23), Associational Life had to adapt its strategies and services to respond to the main challenges that Covid-19 generated and, in some cases, aggravated. The first adaptation strategy related to domestic violence, the difficult situation of pensioners, older and young people, led many organizations working to defend women’s rights, and older and youth people’s rights and promote their inclusion, employability, and their participation to report that they had to switch their services to the digital mode to meet with these challenges. For example, in Ireland, the launch of the Youth Information Online chat service, set up by Crosscare, SpunOut and Youth Work Ireland, helped support young people during the confinement of the pandemic with the help of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. In Spain, innovative methods of reaching out to the younger part of citizens and providing them with transparent, detailed, and reliable information have been also reported with the JUVEUCAN organization and its well-organized online events streamed with other organizations. Many CSOs in Europe that have social care as their core mission and other associative entities having different statutory aims have started to assist the most vulnerable people lacking any form of social support and protection by unveiling new civic activism plans and emerging solidarity circles. For example, a volunteer organisation in Germany launched a solidarity movement in which it gathered 1,400 inhabitants willing to volunteer during the Covid-19 crisis. These volunteers were assigned to the most vulnerable inhabitants to help them with driving, keeping in touch, shopping and making regular phone calls. In the case of the impact on people with disabilities, many CSOs in Europe contributed to raising awareness of this impact, and their rights, and drawing attention to good practices and essential actions for states and other actors. For example, the Spanish Confederation of Families of Deaf People focused on the lack of reachable public communication and information, reachable distance learning, and adapted equipment and methods for teaching and evaluation procedures for deaf students at school. In addition, many courses were created due to the increasing need for digitalisation experienced by CSOs during this crisis, to decrease the online literacy gap and make it more accessible to the elderly, as it was important for them to know how to use the online system in a useful way. Finally, it is important to note that many CSOs supported and promoted extensive surveys and studies to collect information to better understand the Covid-19 situation, the key the challenges and needs in Europe and identify them and find effective solutions.
On the other hand, as V. Tageo et al., (2021, p. 38 - 40) explain, the Social Economy category, which played a very important role during the pandemic, also adapted its services and strategies to face the challenges of the pandemic. The increasing social debt faced by CSOs during the Covid-19 crisis prompted them to undertake new solidarity initiatives to address the main challenges in this category. For example, to prevent food waste, ensure good redistribution of food to those most in need and cope with the increased demand for food, the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA) launched a European Covid-19 Social Emergency Fund to protect the activities and actions of all European Food Banks. They, therefore, called on foundations, organizations, corporations, and private inhabitants to join their forces to support these European Food Banks during the pandemic. Moreover, to support vulnerable families with economic difficulties in the EU, for example, Cáritas Coimbra launched two campaigns. One, with Máscara Solidária, consisted of manufacturing and selling non-surgical social masks and then using the profits to buy fresh food for the most vulnerable families. The second, with Somos Família, consisted of putting families in contact with vulnerable families to start sending them food baskets with basic products every month. In addition, to address the increased psychological distress of people during the pandemic, CSOs such as the Lithuanian Association of Emotional Support Services, noticing an increasing demand for support requests and level of anxiety, started to provide emotional support by telephone and used this challenge as an opportunity to improve their service provision. A CSO in Bergamo adapted three hotels to be used as accommodation for people who did not have places in hospitals, hosting more than 500 people in 9 weeks. Moreover, a CSO in Athens, PRAKSIS, helped to house 120 homeless, provided them with sufficient staff to care for these vulnerable people, shared and applied tools and protocols, and supported social admissions.

In conclusion, it could be observed how many CSOs were engaged in providing support to those without other forms of social protection, but also look for alternative financial mechanisms to contribute to the continuity of social economy initiatives. Therefore, digitalisation was key in this adaptation process, as several CSOs used it to help deliver services and develop strategies and initiatives. Therefore, most of the activities that were traditionally carried out physically could be successfully transferred to the online format and adapted to its virtual services and methods. Likewise, advocacy for the promotion and safeguarding of the most vulnerable people was one of the main actions of these
CSOs in responding to the pandemic to increase and maintain the social agenda as the key priority. They did that by stimulating awareness-raising campaigns to build broad public support and by guaranteeing that the necessary channels are created to reach policymakers. One of the most important features of CSOs’ adaptive actions during the pandemic was their rapid ability to shift priorities and adapt their services to the rapidly deteriorating situation of the Covid-19 crisis. These CSOs were able to offer different services that were not part of their traditional portfolio of initiatives before the pandemic.

5.3. CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19

5.3.1. The importance of the Local Level in the MLG EU’s system

According to N. Simpson (2020, p. 68 & 93), the Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of the local level of governance. At this level, it involves public health organisations, municipal bodies and CSOs. The pandemic has made visible the dependence on these local actors, especially CSOs as they were key actors helping in closing the gap between society's needs and statutory services. However, the EU has shown some weaknesses in the coordination between the different levels of governance, especially at the local level. It is clear because, as Rode et al. (2021, p. 5) explain, 71% of the 300 EU cities and regions examined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the European Committee of the Regions explained that a lack of coordination was noticeable with the other levels of government. Therefore, it was one of the major challenges they experienced during the pandemic. It can be acknowledged that two obstacles were responsible for bringing this lack of coordination. First, information gaps, as it could be understood how the EU did not have the full capacity to have and grant access to the same quality or quantity of information for all levels of governance in the EU. Second, policy gaps, as could be also understood a lack of cross-sectoral approaches to policy development and implementation. These challenges set the difficult ground on which MLG EU’s system during a crisis has to operate.

Therefore, it is very interesting to examine the two case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm to fully understand the importance of the local level and its CSOs in the MLG EU’s system. It will allow me to confirm if the CSOs role in the MLG EU’s system is
more relevant than before Covid-19 and will help to find answers on what the EU can learn from the following case studies, Barcelona and Stockholm.

5.3.2. Impact and Covid-19 responses of City Governments in Barcelona and Stockholm to deal with the social consequences

In the case of Barcelona, as Ajuntament of Barcelona (2021, p. 62, 96 & 242) explains, in 2020 they were extensively affected by Covid-19, with devastating effects on health and public health. Barcelona went into a hard lockdown and a total of 78,412 confirmed cases were registered in the city. The pandemic challenged the city of Barcelona in almost all areas and sectors, and apart from public health, it had a particular impact on social care services, especially in the increasing food needs of the most vulnerable citizens. The health crisis was compounded by an economic and social crisis that continued over months, and it caused a tightening of the working, socio-economic, and personal conditions of families and individuals, and added new vulnerabilities to the inhabitants. Moreover, the pandemic had a direct impact on hiring, employment, and productive fabric. The Covid-19 outbreak and the containment measures applied in the city ruined the trajectory of improvement and led to a sharp drop in social security enrolment, active companies, employment, and contracts signed, with a substantial increase in unemployment. According to PAM (2022, p. 5), the Covid-19 disruption modified the governance scenario and added a huge uncertainty and complexity to the day-to-day management of public affairs in Barcelona. Therefore, the need to address the Covid-19 social and economic emergency in the neighbourhoods was an unprecedented challenge for the local government because the pandemic had a direct impact on the well-being and health of its citizens. In Barcelona, to respond to the emergency caused by Covid-19 a shock plan of 90€ million was approved by the Plenary of the Municipal Council. According to Ajuntament of Barcelona (2020), this Covid-19 fund was executed to deal with the social, economic and health emergency caused by the pandemic. Inside this shock plan, 35€ million were directed to cover the social needs of the most vulnerable urban groups of Barcelona. The Covid-19 response by the Barcelona city government, as Ajuntament of Barcelona (2021, p. 96 & 436) describes, was primarily aimed at strengthening the social promotion and social care services by allowing them to reinvent themselves, finding new channels and systems to cope with the effect of Covid-19. Thus, the social services centres of the city government increased substantially the volume of
attended people. This increase in social care generated a significant increase in the number of extraordinary aids and their overall amount, multiplying direct emergency accommodation and food aid. Services from the city government that were already operating before the pandemic, increased in their social care substantially, such as meals in company, home-delivered meals, and soup kitchens. The elderly received special attention in 2020 with services such as Radars, Teleassistance, and VinclesBCN adapted to reach all these elderly people and cover their basic needs and psychological support. The services aimed at the care of children and young people were also adapted to new ways of providing and attending to services such as the digitalisation of procedures. Services for women in situations of gender-based violence were strengthened, as well as the follow-up of women assisted. The Barcelona City Council closed the 2020 financial year marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and with the creation of a Covid Fund to meet socio-economic needs with a deficit of 49.2 million euros. According to XDAA (2021, p. 5 - 12), the Barcelona City Council’s Social Services through their subsidies received from third parties and own programmes, referred to the people they consider. During 2020, 1.85 million euros were allocated as an extraordinary fund for the delivery of 430,520 meals to 3,420 people. Therefore, there has been an increase in aid compared to 2019. In 2020, the provision of wallet cards to the most vulnerable experienced a substantial increase with a total of 28,213 deliveries compared to 7,733 deliveries in 2019. Moreover, 19 subsidies were approved in 2020 to the third sector entities for an amount of 799,788 euros helping 68,506 vulnerable people. One of the most important social campaigns called ‘Cistella contra la Covid-19’ delivered 220t of food to the most vulnerable people in the city during the confinement. In conclusion, as will be examined in the next section, due to the Barcelona City Council was not able to cope with the increasing social demand, especially in food needs, of the pandemic alone, the main CSOs of Barcelona had to intervene to help to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

In the case of Stockholm during Covid-19, as Ohrling et al. (2020, p. 1) explain, it is important to highlight that Sweden was characterized because they adopted a ‘no-lockdown’ public health method against Covid-19. Stockholm with its unified community-health and public primary services focused on serving 2.3 million citizens started to make different changes when Covid-19 hit. For example, following the local government emergency, they decided to start coordinating non-acute private health services. According to Oberhammer (2020, p. 2 - 3), the pandemic in 2020 had a serious
impact on the nursing home population because of high mortality rates. The government has never established a lockdown and they just presented a few government restrictions. The region of Stockholm accounted for 45.5% of deaths in Sweden, with the majority of these deaths occurring in the nursing home population. According to Calderón-Larrañaga et al. (2020, p. 2 – 4), Stockholm was one of the areas most affected by the Covid-19 crisis in Sweden. For example, in the region of Stockholm, the severe impact of Covid-19 hit more adults and people living in vulnerable socio-economic areas with a high portion of young people. During this time, as Nordensvärd et al. (2023, p. 27) describe, Stockholm experienced a big increase in the need for food aid, which was felt most acutely by the VCOs. As described by Nordensvärd et al. (2022, p. 3 – 4), the pandemic restricted food supply to the most vulnerable groups in Stockholm and produced food shortages for the new emerging vulnerable groups. Moreover, three groups emerged as new vulnerable groups because they were at risk, consisting of young adults, unemployed and low-income families. Therefore, from these newly emerged vulnerable groups, a large increase in food demand was observed, resulting in food insecurity. The Swedish government’s main strategy against Covid-19 that impacted Stockholm, as explained by Nordensvärd et al. (2023, p. 26), was introduced in April 2020 with the aim of limiting the economic and social consequences of the crisis and consisted of maintaining critical activities. The Covid-19 response relied mostly on individual responsibility because most of the pandemic measures were self-imposed by citizens. Covid-19, as Alessandrinì et al. (2021, p. 80 & 116) describe, had a strong impact on employment in Stockholm and since April 2020 many employees received support for lay-offs. Moreover, as Baral et al. (2020, p. 23) explain, financial assistance was provided to citizens in multigenerational households.

5.3.3. CSOs operation and adaptation in Barcelona and Stockholm

According to Torre Jussana (2020, p. 2 - 5), the city of Barcelona has a large and solid network of CSOs such as non-profit organisations and VCOs that are committed to the city and its citizens. Therefore, it is important to understand their main concerns, operation, and adaptation in dealing with civil society during Covid-19. The high lockdown and the prohibition of face-to-face meetings had a significant reduction in their ordinary activity for the vast majority of these organisations. Therefore, the majority of
these organisations reduced by 38% or even stopped their activity during the pandemic. However, it should be noted that 12.5% of the organisations experienced an increase in their work, as since the beginning of the pandemic they have seen an increase in their work, especially in supporting citizens in vulnerable citizens. Thus, as XDAA (2021, p. 2 - 4) explains, during the pandemic the Network for the Right to Adequate Food, made up of 15 social organisations, other agents and the Social Services Barcelona City Council, was one of the most important during this time, especially the social organisations because they were addressing the increasing food need that the city of Barcelona was experiencing. Here, the most important social entities during the pandemic that will be examined can be found; the Foodbank of Barcelona, the Red Cross, and Càritas Diocesana of Barcelona. The interplay between the public administration and social organisations to cover social needs is complex. As explained by Torre Jussana (2020, p. 8 - 12), it is important to highlight that the greatest concerns of these social organisations during Covid-19 were the organization’s income, the functioning of the organization in the long term but also short term, the development of grant-related procedures, and the structural cost, which also many organizations showed concern about the pandemic situation because of the lack of knowledge about the evolution of the virus and the containment measures and how and when it will be possible to start working with the ordinary activities. The organisations that experienced an increase in their work, such as the social entities of the Network for the Right to Adequate Food, modified significantly the activities that they were carrying out and adapted their activities to the new situation. Most of them developed new activities that were not previously carried out. Many of them that are focused on home care, Tele assistance service, and care for the homeless, had also to adapt to the pandemic and had to rely on additional resources to safeguard the most vulnerable citizens (XDAA, 2021, p. 11). Therefore, it showed the great ability social organizations have for creativity and adaptation to carry out projects and activities adapted to the reality of the high lockdown imposed in Barcelona. According to XDAA (2021, p. 7 - 13), Barcelona experienced a big increase in social demand especially in food needs during the pandemic. Therefore, the Foodbank of Barcelona to cope with this high food demand began a collaboration with the World Central Kitchen (WCK) for the distribution of cooked meals for the most vulnerable citizens. In 2020, the Foodbank of Barcelona had to cover 28.6% of annual food needs, collecting 33% more kilos of food than in 2019. It represented a big food increase for them and they had to reinvent themselves with initiatives such as the one with WCK and
increase their activities to try to cope with the food demand. The Red Cross received 15,116 requests during the pandemic, which is 3.281% more than in 2019. They had to adapt by increasing food deliveries with an increase of 189% compared to 2019. Moreover, as food demand increased and sometimes there was not enough food available, they adapted their services with the provision of wallet cards that allowed vulnerable citizens to buy fresh food in supermarkets. Their assistance increased by 1.253% more than in 2019. The case of Càritas Diocesana was also overwhelmed by the high increase in food demand. They doubled their food deliveries in comparison with 2019, helping 42,285 in need during 2020. This meant a big effort for them and complemented their activities with also the wallet cards. In conclusion, 2020 was particularly a difficult year for social organizations as well because of the high increase in social demand received. Despite the efforts made by social organizations, it was not enough and the social vulnerability especially in food continued to increase making it harder to reduce the social gap in Barcelona. However, it is clear that the role of these social organisations was essential in Barcelona during the pandemic because of their capacity to cover most of the social demands and basic needs of vulnerable citizens that the City Government was not able to cover. Therefore, it is possible to explain that without these social organizations, the Barcelona City Government would not be able to reach the most vulnerable citizens during Covid-19 and cope with most of the high social demand, especially in food. Many of these responses have been only possible thanks to the networking of public-private partnerships, especially thanks to the social organizations that cope with the higher volume of social needs.

In Stockholm, as Nordensvärd et al. (2023, p. 27 – 28) explain, CSOs during the pandemic experienced a severe increase in food aid needs. One social organisation revealed that they experienced 250% in social demand during that time. These social organizations took action separately from the statutory welfare in matters of food aid due to the lack of coordination, funding and dialogue between the social organisations and the municipal government. CSOs in Stockholm emerged as essential welfare providers because their assistance was aimed at vulnerable citizens who were not reached by statutory welfare. Therefore, CSOs acted as a complement to the guaranteed state welfare. As Nordensvärd et al. (2022, p. 2 - 6) describe, because of the big increase in food needs in Stockholm, CSOs played a key role in food aid. Food insecurity was a big concern for the CSOs that were working in the fight against poverty in the city. Three main CSOs were very active
in food aid and other social services during the Covid-19 crisis in Stockholm, they were Stadsmissionen, the Salvation Army and St Klara’s Church. CSOs served food to all those in need by helping the most vulnerable citizens buy cheap groceries and through soup kitchens. These CSOs also helped vulnerable people get in touch with social services to create more continuous and long-term support. They also aimed at the homeless, marginalized ethnic groups, the elderly, illegal migrants, and asylum applicants that could not get statutory welfare. Thus, they dispensed food aid through community actions. Moreover, CSOs, due to this sharp increase in food demand during the pandemic, had to adapt themselves by expanding food aid programs and initiatives, and by indirectly supplying social services that could help vulnerable citizens avoid poverty. Instead of looking for financial aid from the government, CSOs’ proactivity and ambition led them to rely on volunteers, donations from organizations, and community actions among local companies and citizens. St. Klara Church focused on providing food and emergency shelter and specialized in emergency interventions. They also enlarged their food services, such as soup kitchens or the provision of grocery bags, to respond to the new emerging vulnerable groups that appeared during the pandemic. Stadmissionen during the first year of the Covid-19 crisis in Stockholm had to increase their food assistance by 50% in all their distribution centres. In terms of food aid when a crisis such as Covid-19 appears, these three CSOs among others have two specific aims. First, it consists of providing for some time food aid through soup kitchens and distributing food bags to citizens in food need. Second, it consists of a system of long-term food aid for vulnerable individuals such as social grocery shops of Stadmissionen. These three social organisations have a comparable funding system for their food aid programmes and initiatives. All of them supply food usually within their budget and with donations from local food providers. This time, however, state subsidies were needed to fight poverty during the pandemic. According to Nordensvård et al. (2023, p. 28), in conclusion, during the pandemic, the Stockholm CSOs functioned as an interim measure before eligibility for statutory social assistance and enabled vulnerable people who were not formally eligible for compulsory social assistance to obtain food aid. As Nordensvård et al. (2022, p. 5) explain, thanks to the financial independence CSOs had enabled them to openly initiate and adapt their initiatives and programs to emerging needs. Local food security during the pandemic was depending on the community. As concluded by Nordensvård et al. (2022, p. 6 – 7), in terms of food aid CSOs made limited or did not make contact with the local government, but CSOs indeed used to cooperate with the local government in
other social services such as social employment and emergency shelters. CSOs in Stockholm admitted that their programmes, initiatives and activities can fill the gaps in the social welfare system, addressing the most basic needs of the vulnerable people who fall outside the reach of statutory social assistance. Therefore, the role of CSOs in Stockholm is essential because they do what the government is not able to do.
6. Discussion

This section will discuss the key results of the findings that this study has encountered with the thematic literature review technique in the analysis section that helps answer the three research questions. The first two themes, ‘MLG in the EU Covid-19 Crisis Management’ and ‘CSOs in the EU during Covid-19’ are key to answering and discussing the first two research questions. The last theme, ‘CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19’, is essential for providing a normative discussion and an answer to the third research question.

The results found for the first research question, ‘How has Covid-19 affected the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system?’, indicate that CSOs during the pandemic of Covid-19 were found in a very difficult position because although their support was essential, the regional and national levels of governance suddenly faced shifting priorities and had to take key decisions without much scientific evidence showing a picture of deep discoordination and lack of solidarity between the EUMS. The pandemic of Covid-19, which brought economic, social and health crises, aggravated the situation of CSOs in the EU as they experienced a decrease in funding options and a reduction of financing from private and public donors. Therefore, this made CSOs one of the most affected by the deficiency and inequality of the MLG EU’s system because they experienced a reduction in their civic space. However, the crisis of Covid-19 has demonstrated that CSOs are very important in the MLG EU’s system because the EU supranational institutions and EUMS needed CSOs’ support to face the unprecedented challenges that brought Covid-19 to the EU. This study does support the concept of MLG in the EU’s system that explains that it consists of a system of constant dialogue and negotiation between governments at regional, national, and supranational territorial levels, which this term has been extended to other policy areas that involve the participation of CSOs. The involvement of CSOs is a must because they take part in the issues of the EU in dealing with civil society needs. Therefore, this concept of MLG EU’s system argued that civil society in the decision-making is a key step to connect the different levels of government, such as local, national and the EU level, and to connect other institutional organizations. It was also explained that CSOs in the MLG EU contribute to enhancing the improvement of European-level policies and support the EU intervention in social policies. Therefore, CSOs in this concept of MLG in the EU were considered essential actors because they ease the
connection required between the different levels of governance being essential actors in safeguarding European values and in dealing with civil society in the EU. During that time, they were considered a stimulant for social innovation in which their work helped to plan and design a welfare system that led to new structures, policies, and services. Their role allowed them to mobilise communities, educate, advocate for the interests of others, collect data, provide services and make sure that the people’s rights and policies were well enforced while demanding accountability from the authorities. Because of their importance CSOs in the EU operated in this MLG that is composed of different levels (local, national, and European), and this allowed European citizens to participate in the social, economic, cultural, and political environment making use of their rights to communicate themselves, mobilise, and collaborate. Therefore, before Covid-19 the role of CSOs was essential and considered key to protect human rights at the local, national, and European levels. The findings of this study confirm that the essential role and perception of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system was even more relevant during Covid-19 because CSOs showed their importance in reducing the social gap during the pandemic when the EU and EUMS could not handle society's needs alone. CSOs were the first ones on supporting vulnerable people and organisations at the beginning of the pandemic in the EU. Their role during the pandemic was vital because their contribution to the different levels of governance in the EU made them play a very important role in the MLG EU’s system by supporting and strengthening the public sector action to safeguard the right of the most vulnerable and defend civic participation. Therefore, as explained, their role was no different from the role and perception they had before Covid-19, it could be argued that it was even more relevant because the EU institutions during Covid-19 only have a few effective tools to protect civil society and counteracting negative trends.

As Covid-19 was an unprecedented challenge where many EU institutions and EUMS did not have all the knowledge of the virus it caused a lack of coordination and solidarity between these actors, which meant that CSOs were even more important because in this situation that none of the actors has faced before, CSOs had the task to deal with societal needs that the EU institutions and the EUMS were not able to do alone. This meant that all the tasks to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 that CSOs were doing through the different levels of governance, were in a very unusual and difficult situation that made them even more important to the EU, EUMS, and civil society than before. It is true that at the beginning of the pandemic because EUMS approached Covid-19 responses very
differently by applying border measures and other measures made that the picture of the EU was of a division of opinions on how to approach Covid-19. This brought a deep discoordination between the EUMS with disputes and controversial public statements showing how coordination at the different levels of decision-making (national, regional, local) was perceived very differently in the countries. Therefore, in the MLG EU’s system, the initial responses of the EUMS did not focus on solidarity, which was opposing, at the EU level, to the fundamental EU values that were assumed before the pandemic. Therefore, this action of EUMS showed an intense competition which affected the ability of the EU to respond quickly to Covid-19 and showed how in times of crisis the national level can have a very big impact on the EU-level action. The different national level Covid-19 responses that showed how can affect the EU level action can be explained by understanding the EU and its EUMS have developed into an MLG system which indicates an interconnection between the local/regional, national and European levels. However, even with this interconnection, it is important to understand that while a state has legislative power and the power to implement laws in its territorial jurisdiction, most policies of the EU can only be made by coordinated decisions of the European institutions and EUMS that it also translate to that it does not exist a real comprehension of the limitation and extent of the institutional legitimacy and capability of the European political system. Thanks that the MLG EU’s system is a combination of Type I and Type II systems of governance, it allows the European Union to have a normative basis of cooperation dynamic rather than fixed. This was very clear during Covid-19 because this allows the perspective of MLG on EU development to combine sectors to work together to for example mitigate the impact of Covid-19, such as CSOs, private sector and public sector, but also it allows a steering that takes places at different levels such as the supranational level and national level.

Returning to the lack of coordination and solidarity between the EUMS during Covid-19 that affected the relationship between the EUMS and the EU, because EUMS decided at the beginning to not to develop cooperation and authorize EU supranational institutions at the EU level to play a relevant role in the emergency plan against Covid-19. These unilateral solutions of the EUMS and rejection of the implementation of a coordinated decision-making procedure in which the EUMS declined to accept the role of the Commission as the individual national strategies coordination showed how the intricacy of the MLG EU’s system alters its role as a crisis manager because the EU can only take
actions in the limits of the competencies that the EUMS have given in the treaties. Therefore, this lack of authority and power is translated into the inability to directly use its own resources to respond to Covid-19 in an effective and timely manner. This caused that at the beginning, due to EUMS’s different Covid-19 responses, CSOs experienced a reduction of their civic space to operate and the continuing deterioration of a well-conditioned environment. Therefore, CSOs needed the support of the EU institutions to make their role relevant and effective, especially of the Commission because their Mission letter for Commissioner Urpilainen, it is highlighted a committed focus on CSOs' support in the EU in which the EU will work to guarantee that they play a greater role. Thus, the Commission stepped up as a response to the unilateral action of the EUMS and took an important role during the pandemic and reinforced CSOs as independent players of development and good governance.

The results found for the second research question, ‘How have main CSOs in the EU adapted to the challenges brought by the pandemic of Covid-19 in the EU?’, indicate that even with CSOs’ vital role during the pandemic in the EU MLG’s system, this study has shown how the government restrictions and other consequences of Covid-19 complicated the work for CSOs to keep their normal activities, which made them face unprecedented challenges and adapt their services to cope with the pandemic and mitigate the impact on the most vulnerable groups in the EU. The findings confirm that two main groups of CSOs organized per each of the EESC activity areas, the Associational Life and Social Economy, were the most important categories for this study to understand how they adapt their services in the MLG EU’s system during Covid-19. Both categories’ actions in adapting their services to cope with the new challenges showed CSOs had the ability to rapidly adapt their activities and understand better the civil society needs in the EU. With their work, it was clear how without these CSOs during the pandemic the EU supranational institutions would not be able to apply specific policies and protect the values and norms of the EU. CSOs experienced difficulty in establishing and adapting the new methods of service delivery and work, the reduction or cancellation of their in-person operations, the fewer funding, reduce financing from donors, the reduction of their civic space, the increase in the social demand and debt in terms of food, domestic violence, elderly in a vulnerable situation, as well as vulnerable families, youth and disabled among others. Therefore, it was seen how CSOs had to spend more money to cope with the increase in the social demand for their services and invest in new technology and physical
equipment to adapt their services because their contribution to civil society in the EU was essential. These two categories of CSOs showed how they can be very resilient when a crisis such as Covid-19 hit, they could adapt their vital services by switching their activities to the digital mode to meet these challenges, raising awareness of the impact on the most vulnerable, creating new civic activism plans and emerging solidarity circles, as well as undertaking new solidarity initiatives and plans such as the European Covid-19 Social Emergency Plan launched by FEBA that help prevent food waste and the good distribution of food to the most vulnerable. CSOs demonstrated that they can adapt in the most difficult circumstances and without all the support from the EUMS in a very difficult situation of crisis and look for an alternative financial mechanism to keep contributing to social initiatives to cope with Covid-19. Therefore, this illustrated how many CSOs were engaged in providing support to vulnerable people without any other form of social protection and how digitalisation was the key to the adaptation process because many CSOs used it to deliver their services and to develop new initiatives and strategies. Therefore, most of the activities that were traditionally carried out physically could be efficiently transferred to the digital format and adapted to its virtual services. Thus, it is clear how CSOs are one of the most important actors in protecting civil society needs, in which without them the EU could not fulfil all societal needs that were brought by the pandemic. Therefore, their central and essential role during the Covid-19 can be confirmed and the adaptation of CSOs to the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic can be confirmed as well-adapted because they could demonstrate how one of the most important aspects of CSOs' adaptive actions in a crisis, such as Covid-19, is their rapid ability to shift priorities and adapt their services to the rapidly deteriorating situation of the pandemic. These CSOs could offer different services that before the pandemic were not in their regular portfolio of initiatives.

The results found for the third research question, ‘What lessons can be taken to the EU from CSOs in the two different case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm during Covid-19?’, can be answered thanks to the normative academic approach adapted to investigate this research question. At the beginning of this study, it was explained that the Covid-19 crisis led to an intensification of policymaking in which local governance, civil society actors and public health were entrusted with the implementation of new directives to the citizens to mitigate the impact of Covid-19. It shows how the local level of governance in the MLG EU’s system is also very important in health emergencies such as the Covid-
19 pandemic. It was argued that CSOs at the local level were interesting to study because, with the normative academic approach applied, they can provide some lessons to improve the EU strategy during a future crisis. Thus, by understanding one of the major challenges of the EU at the different levels during Covid-19, especially the local level, and comparing CSOs’ work and adaptation of two different cities of EUMS that had very different Covid-19 responses and urban environments, Barcelona with hard lockdown and Stockholm with an open society, and examining if even with such different Covid-19 responses some similarities within CSOs work and adaptation of both cities can be found. This can help me to understand how CSOs work at the local level of the MLG EU’s system and most importantly to extract some normative academic lessons to the EU on one of its main challenges, which consisted of reducing the lack of coordination between the different levels of governance with the information and policy gaps as main obstacles, especially at the local level, that were identified in the EU during Covid-19. It can lead to acknowledging how important it could be to extend the term MLG to the local level and the importance of scaling up essential emergency knowledge from the local level to the other levels through the work of CSOs in dealing with civil society needs at the local level in a very different environment affected by Covid-19.

The main characteristics found in the CSOs of the two case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm that will help to extract some lessons for the EU can be seen in Table 1:

**Table 1 - Results Case Study of Barcelona and Stockholm**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barcelona</th>
<th>Stockholm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Hard Lockdown</td>
<td>- Open Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Big increase in food demand</td>
<td>- Big increase in food demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CSOs: Network for the Right to Adequate Food.</td>
<td>- CSOs: Stadsmissionen, the Salvation Army and St Klara’s Church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CSOs increased food assistance and wallet cards.</td>
<td>- CSOs acted as essential welfare providers by expanding food assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- CSOs essential role: covered most of the food demand and filled the gaps in the City Government.</td>
<td>- CSOs essential role: filled the gaps in the social welfare system and the City Government.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Therefore, the findings confirm that some academic lessons can be given to the EU to reduce the lack of coordination and decrease information and policy gaps. The case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm were essential in arriving at the recommendations and conclusions because they showed that, even with different Covid-19 responses and urban environments, similarities can be found in Barcelona and Stockholm in the work and adaptation of CSOs to address civil society needs during the Covid-19 crisis. Both cities experienced an increase in social demand, but especially in food demand which was very common in the EU. CSOs in Barcelona and Stockholm had to increase their food assistance to cope with the high food demand. These findings explain that both city governments would not be able to reach the most vulnerable citizens and cope with the highly increasing social demand without the help of CSOs. CSOs in both cities emerged as essential welfare providers because they reached the vulnerable people that the statutory welfare was not able to reach and demonstrated how rapidly they can adapt their services to the increasing social needs. Therefore, both CSOs were essential at the local level because they could fill the gaps in the social welfare system and do what the city government was not able to do. Thus, these findings confirm how important the local level is in the MLG EU’s system because CSOs at the local level with even different Covid-19 responses and urban environments have the capacity to understand the needs of the most vulnerable urban people and address those needs. It also shows how Covid-19 had a similar effect on the most vulnerable in different urban environments. CSOs were able to realise the effects of Covid-19 in these two different urban contexts and address the social needs of the most vulnerable in the cities. Therefore, it is clear how CSOs at the local level in the EU can understand faster and better the needs of its citizens, have the essential emergency information about EU citizens’ needs and have a clear picture of the reality of the Covid-19 crisis than the EUMS and EU institutions. Thus, it can be confirmed, as argued at the beginning of the study, that it is not just important CSOs at the EU or national level, CSOs at the local level of the MLG EU’s system are very important because they demonstrated that they could play an important role in Europe during a crisis.

Therefore, in this normative academic discussion, the lessons that can be extracted to the EU from these two case studies that can help to reduce the information and policy gaps to have better-coordinated action are that they must recognise the important role that CSOs have at the local level in filling the gaps during times of crisis and the essential
information they have that can help avoid this major challenge during a crisis. Therefore, CSOs must participate in policymaking as it is essential for agenda-setting due to the complex dynamics of society. CSOs at the local level demonstrated their capacity on addressing civil society needs faster and better than any other actor as they see first the consequences of Covid-19, having privileged information about Covid-19 and understanding better what is needed to be done to enhance the social crisis situation. Therefore, to reduce the lack of coordination between the local and the other levels, the EU should learn how to develop an effective coordinated action for the governments to produce local, regional, and national level emergency management plans that are participatory, comprehensive, and include the representative of CSOs. Therefore, it is clear then that the EU needs to include apart from CSOs at the other levels, they need to include CSOs at the local level because it is essential that they participate in policymaking for agenda-setting as their knowledge and important role can contribute to making a more effective EU action plan for the different levels of governance when another crisis occurs (Altinay et al., 2020).

A crisis such as Covid-19 has demonstrated that it is important to constantly update on the situation, and it is clear that CSOs at the local level can better know what is happening because they are working daily on the streets. Therefore, in this normative academic discussion, it can be concluded that it is important that CSOs at the local level are heard by the other levels, especially at the EU level because CSOs’ involvement in policymaking and dialogue in the EU is always essential in providing knowledge from the ground and formulating a more effective EU emergency action plan according to the actual needs of the European citizens. The scaling up of essential information and knowledge from CSOs at the local level of each city in the EU to the EU level could help understand each EUMS emergency situation making it possible to have a clear emergency map of the EU that could facilitate a more efficient EU emergency action plan when another crisis appears.
7. Conclusion

Through the analysis of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system during Covid-19 and the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm, one can conclude that the role of CSOs in the MLG EU’s system during the pandemic was essential and even more relevant than before Covid-19. CSOs demonstrated that they have a vital role in times of crisis in the EU, and that they are key in the MLG EU’s system because they were very important in reducing the social gap during the pandemic when the EU and the EUMS could not handle society needs alone and because of their essential contribution to the different levels of governance in the EU during Covid-19. Also, it has been demonstrated that during a crisis such as what Covid-19 generated, main CSOs in the EU can adapt rapidly and understand civil society needs better than many other actors in the different levels of the MLG of the EU with the adoption of new mechanisms to cope with the pandemic challenges, showing how important and resilient they are in times of crisis. The key factor of CSOs' adaptation in the EU has been that they could adapt their essential services by switching their activities to the digital format, demonstrating that even with the challenges that have brought Covid-19, CSOs always find mechanisms to overcome them. Moreover, it is possible to provide some policy lessons to the EU based on the academic normative discussion of the case studies of Barcelona and Stockholm and the similarities found. The lessons that the EU can take are to acknowledge that the importance of CSOs at the local level is essential to the EU because they can provide essential on-the-ground knowledge of the actual needs of citizens during a crisis because CSOs in both cities have shown how they adapted and understood better and faster citizens social needs to cope with the pandemic than the city government. Therefore, it can be concluded that the EU should include CSOs, especially the CSOs at the local level, in the policymaking for the agenda-setting to develop a better-coordinated EU action plan for the different levels of governance when another crisis occurs because these CSOs demonstrated that important role and essential information they have on understanding civil society needs and on filling the gaps of the government when a crisis occurs. CSOs’ inclusion can contribute to reducing the lack of coordination that the EU faced during Covid-19.

In terms of future research, this study considers it is so interesting to do further research through the concept of MLG in the EU on the national level to examine the different EUMS and their national policies that affected the EU and the work of CSOs in the EU.
during the pandemic. Moreover, it is very interesting to base future research on whether it may be feasible the scaling up essential emergency information and knowledge about the social needs of EU citizens from CSOs at the local level of each European city to the EU level to have a clear map of the EU emergency situation, and to examine whether with this information it is possible for the EU to design its emergency plan based on those actual needs making more accurate EU action during a crisis.
8. List of References


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