Interrogating social change in alternative economies and emerging sustainable urban imaginaries: A case study of Madboks and El Intercambiador

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Master thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Urban Studies (VUB) and Master of Science in Geography, general orientation, track ‘Urban Studies’ (ULB)

Date of submission: 13 August 2021
ABSTRACT

The emergence of local alternatives to capitalism can be linked to the system’s culture of intense competition and individualism, as well as to its ills and externalities. In this context, most of the literature on alterity has focussed on assessing these initiatives in relation to the capitalist system, often failing to adequately analyse the internal aspects that guide, celebrate and expand alternatives themselves. As a result, this lack of a critical inward-looking approach on alternative initiatives might be obscuring important foundations about their role and capacities, risking to perpetuate current power structures and imbalances. As a result, the present paper combines a critical outwards and inwards looking approach to alternatives, as a way to re-politicize the subject of ‘alterity’ and further understand the type and scope of transformation such alternatives promote. More specifically, this paper seeks to contextualize the theoretical underpinnings of alterity against an empirical investigation regarding two specific alternatives, namely, clothes swapping in Madrid and food sharing in Copenhagen.
DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby confirm that the present thesis on: *Interrogating social change in alternative economies and emerging sustainable urban imaginaries: A case study of Madboks and El Intercambiador*, is solely my own work and that if any text passages or diagrams from books, papers, the Web or other sources have been copied or in any other way used, all references – including those found in electronic media – have been acknowledged and fully cited.

Marta Lekue, 12th of August 2021

Signature:
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There were four main pillars of support and inspiration that helped me develop this thesis. One has been my family, even though they have no idea what this thesis is about and, due to the language barrier, will probably never read it. The values and ways of doing things have influenced me even before the start of this master programme, and have proved especially relevant during the process of writing this paper.

Another key and constant source of support has been Dillon, my partner, who has been next to me during this last year full of ups and downs. He has not only made these times better through his patience, love and sense of humour, but he has also enriched the content of this work through his many contributions and ideas, despite having his own academic duties.

Finally, my supervisor Benjamin Wayens has been an important element for writing this thesis. Always keeping a smile -which was highly appreciated during these times- Benjamin provided me with good mentorship, advice and encouragement not only to improve the result of the work, yet also to learn from the process.
POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

In order to attend to the ethics of the research process, ensure the validity of my research stance and facilitate its comprehension, it is crucial, on the one hand, to explain what this thesis is and what is not about, and, on the other hand, to question, reflect on and convey my own positionality.

As much as this thesis revolves around the concept of alterity, it also revolves around hope. And hence I used this thesis as an opportunity to put my little grain in the sand. An opportunity not only to give light to some of the multiple existing practices that counter the mono culture of capitalism, but also to bring awareness of the diverse ways of understanding alterity itself. And, ultimately to critically and closely analyse that hope that is moving people to advance and engage in alterities. Nevertheless, the critical approach to alternatives in this thesis does in no way attempt to discourage nor underestimate them. Rather the opposite. It tries to fill an existing gap in literature, in order to eventually contribute to both advancing more just alternatives and moving us in the direction of those alternatives. Furthermore, this thesis should be understood relative to its limits of scope, since it is carried out and based on Europe, and uniquely explores two selected alternatives. Hence, it is not the aim of this paper to assume any sort of universality nor to claim to know the ‘one best way’ to organize and understand alternatives. This thesis is no more than an exploratory study intended to lay the groundwork for a more complete research study in the future. However, it might hopefully encourage debate about ideas that are different to those presented in this paper.

Finally, as a white, European and middle-class person I acknowledge that I have a position of power and privilege that has enabled me to enter the field of social sciences. A field where the people around me- those who teach me and those with whom I study- look like me. The acknowledgment, and perhaps uneasy feeling that I benefit from a racist white supremacist system that perpetuates environmental racism and inequities has undoubtedly been one of the main reasons for me to adopt a critical stand on alternatives. Additionally, I am aware that my gender, nationality, race, age, education and personal experiences have somehow influenced all the aspects of this thesis: from the choice of the topic and case studies, to the positionality and the interpretation of the outcomes. Nevertheless, I am also cognizant that my values and positionality might change in the future, making this thesis time and context specific.
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INTRODUCTION

The solidarity-based universal welfare systems of Europe have - for almost a century now - increasingly been replaced by neoliberal forces - such as an entrepreneurial culture of competition and an individualised notion of responsibility, often coupled with the implementation of austerity urbanism. Some might even argue that we have got to the point where this hegemonic socio-economic system has occupied the limits of the thinkable, and thus the limits of the possible, increasingly perpetuating the feeling that ‘there is no alternative’. However, the social, environmental and economic externalities of capitalism have at the same time both forced and motivated people to look for and create a large variety of alternatives to this hegemonic system.

Recognizing and explaining alternative modes of social and economic organisation around the globe has become increasingly common within academia, even to an extent where one might feel as though talking about alternatives to capitalism has itself become ‘mainstream’. However, since the academic literature covering different understandings and perspectives on alternatives is diverse, this paper narrows down the topic of alterity conceptually, by focusing only on those practices that employ (quasi) non-monetary exchange systems, as it is the case of sharing, swapping or donating. To contextualise this understanding of alterity, this research uses two selective examples of initiatives based on alternative exchange systems from Denmark and Spain, namely, Madboks - a food sharing initiative and El Intercambiador - a clothing swap initiative, respectively. Alternatives as such are generally driven by motivations related to waste reduction, fair distribution of goods and the rejection of mainstream consumption. For this reason, alternatives are understood as spaces of intention.

Furthermore, as it will be argued, the uncritical celebration and consequent expansion of alternative initiatives might be obscuring important foundations about its role and capacities, risking to perpetuate current power structures and imbalances (Argüelles, 2018, 173). Therefore, the process of imagining and creating alternatives must also be understood as a complex and contested one. In this vein, as an attempt to highlight some of the possible ethical and practical ambiguities and limits to sustainable consumption, this thesis employs a critical approach to alternatives. Concretely, it explores both internal and external environmental factors of alternatives with the aim of better understanding the meaning of alterity as well as the type and scope of transformation these initiatives promote.
Regarding external environmental influences, this paper investigates how the complex positionality of alternatives in relation to the capitalist system - as either opposed to, embedded within or dependent on - pulls and pushes, nudges and redirects the bearings and trajectories of alternatives. For instance, the creation of sustainability-oriented alternative initiatives has been denounced for covering the ‘care’ factor that once belonged to the state. Besides, the increasing de-politicization and commodification of alternatives as well as their embeddedness within the capitalist system raise questions on the capacity of these initiatives to challenge the hegemonic system. Furthermore, several scholars point to capitalism’s creative capacity to recover and strengthen from its own crisis, and thus, smartly circumventing any opposition alternatives might pose. The internal, inwards-looking approach takes a different perspective and explores alternatives as they are imagined and practiced by different actors involved within them. Indeed, it explores concerns such as how and by whom alterity is imagined, represented and consolidated, who participates and who does not, what people’s underlying motivations to engage in such practices are as well as what their perceived roles as agents of change are. Here, notions of power and privilege affecting - either by advancing or limiting - alternative’s transformational capacity/character are considered.

Lastly, the significance of this paper stems from its contribution towards the growing critical literature on collective alternative action in the domain of sustainability and environmental and social justice. In doing so, one of the main aspirations is that this work provides actors, cities, movements and organizations that employ alternative exchange systems with insights on both the potential and limitations of their work to promote alternative, radically democratic, socially just and sustainable forms of urbanism.
LITERATURE REVIEW

THE CITY AS A CAPITALIST CONSTRUCTION

The very concept of ‘alterity’ implies that there is a mainstream economy against which this is imagined, defined and practiced. Thus, before discussing such alternatives (Chapter 2), it is worthwhile to first address their presumed opposite: the capitalist socio-economic system. Although this is not the central part of the present research, this first chapter one is dedicated to introducing a brief analysis of the current hegemonic system as it will certainly help uncover the origins of such alternative practices as well as understand why they emerge in the first place. This is not an easy task since, as Leyshon et al. have argued, capitalism is difficult to define “not only because it has taken and continues to take many different forms, but also because it is not really a thing that one can point to, but more a set of social and economic relations” (2014, 3). Employing a Marxist perspective, capitalism is understood as a social and economic system based on the division between, on the one hand, the owners of the means of production, whose main objective is to produce profit, and on the other hand the workers, who, not having access to means of production, must sell their labour as a commodity on the market to ensure their livelihood (Harvey, 1978). Thus, capital and labour are marked by a hierarchical relationship and hence by conflict and power inequality. This means that when most of the wealth is concentrated on a small fraction of the population, the system is simply operating as it is designed to do. Under this principle of wealth accumulation, goods and services are produced for their ability to be exchanged for a profit, rather than attending to their intrinsic value or the needs of the population (Harvey, 2011).

In this light, the current levels of consumption present in the ‘advanced’ capitalist economies can no longer be explained by our basic human needs, but rather, by capitalism’s unfettered obsession of endless growth. This imperative of growth has indeed become “the fetish of capitalism”, and is tightly connected with the promise not only to deliver increased profit for capitalist firms, but also jobs, prosperity, and better lives for all” (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 9). According to Wright, consumerism and imperatives for growth within capitalism are not merely cultural facts, but “a central imperative of a stable capitalist economy, for it is only through people buying things in the market that capitalist firms create jobs and only through jobs that most people can acquire income (Wright, 2012, 8). In this vein, combined with spatial expansion, finding new markets has been central to the growth and preservation
of capitalism. As Leyshon et al. explain, the system also requires constantly finding more things to sell or transforming goods that were outside market relations into commodities that can be sold for a profit (2014, 8). “This commodification has extended beyond simply consuming more goods and services; whole areas of our lives can be valued and then traded in the marketplace. Beyond the basic things that we require for a decent life, our public services, resources, land and even our air and water, now carry a price tag” (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 336). As a matter of fact, GDP, often used as a measurement of socio-economic development, is considered as the holy grail of economic policy by most national and international institutions such as the World Bank and the European Central Bank (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 9). Thus, economic growth itself and its unit of measure have been largely criticized for failing to measure people’s quality of life or the degree to which their human needs are being met, not to mention the well-being of the planet and non-human species.

Now, if capitalism has been, from its earliest expressions, a social and economic mode of capital accumulation, neoliberalism can be considered as the latest political extension of capitalism. Propagated in the 1980s and 1990s by Margaret Thatcher (UK) and Ronald Reagan (US), neoliberalism has become the rule book for a set of highly interested public policies that have aimed to remove all barriers to the private accumulation of wealth, thereby vastly enriching the holders of capital while leading to increasing inequality, insecurity, loss of public services, among many others (Argüelles, 2018, 46). According to Argüelles, neoliberalism stands for “a complex assemblage of ideologies, discourses and practices related to social, political and economic organization (...) whose key elements include a valorisation of private enterprise and ‘withdrawal’ of the state, along with free market fetishism” (2018, 46) However, despite the system of nation-states as we knew it dissolved with the globalization process of neoliberalism, the presumed non-intervention of the state has been widely disproved. In fact, far from being natural or spontaneous, the laissez-faire markets that emerged with the arrival of neoliberalism were planned, prepared and developed by government actions. Thus, when we can speak of “de-statalization” it is not so much that we are seeing a disappearance of the State, but rather what we are witnessing is institutional restructuring oriented in a way that favours international capital (Berrocal, 2020). This has two implications - one structural/political and the other subjective

Firstly, one key strategy employed by the neoliberal government is the progressive removal of municipal bureaucracies "by professionalized quasi-public agencies empowered and responsible for promoting economic development, privatizing urban services, and
catalysing competition among public agencies” (Leitner et al., 2007, 4). This trend has been conceptualized under the term ‘austerity urbanism’. It refers to the shift away from traditional welfare forms -through which the state has long abdicated its redistributive function and the protection of the environment- towards processes of expanding deregulation, liberalization, privatization and austerity. In this vein, decisions are increasingly driven by cost–benefit calculations rather than missions of service, equity, and social welfare” (Leitner et al., 2007, 4).

Secondly, neoliberal capitalism not only signals a great transformation in the mode of production and governance, but also in individuals’ subjectivity (Parker et al. 2013, 9). The limitless expansion of capital and the colonization of previously non-commodified spheres sparks the current stage in our evolutionary cycle as we evolve from ‘homo-sapiens’ to ‘homo-economicus’ (Berrocal, 2020). In other words, capitalism has become so powerful that it has “colonised our imagination, leading to a monoculture where capitalism appears as the only realistic option” (Leyshon et. al. 2014, 15). In fact, scholars have argued that the top-down neoliberalization regime is inseparably linked to the production of neoliberal ‘mentalities of rule’ (Argüelles, 2018) through the normalization of “the logics of individualism and entrepreneurialism, equating individual freedom with self-interested choices, making individuals responsible for their own well-being, and redefining citizens as consumers and clients (Leitner et al., 2007, 2). In other words, under neoliberalism, as Margaret Thatcher famously proclaimed, ‘there is no such thing as society’. This freedom to become what we want constitutes, according to Leyshon et. al, one of the greatest appeals of capitalism (2014, 9), ahead of any collective identity. In this way, citizens are made responsible for their own successes and failures, while simultaneously being expected to contribute to the collective economic welfare alongside their hard-working fellow citizens (Leitner et al., 2007, 4). In line with this argument, critiques towards neoliberalism have denounced the increasing externalization of state services towards the third sector, including environmental protection, social well-being, green mobility, provision of affordable energy or beautification of public space among others. This neoliberal tendency of shifting the duty to ensure well-being and social justice away from the state to civilians is referred to as ‘responsibilization’. As Argüelles claims, “this strategy elides and eclipses long-standing social movement attempts to promote state-mandated protections for labour, the environment, and the rights and needs of the most disadvantaged populations” (2018, 51)What is clear is that the alleged promises of wealth, freedom, and choice have come at a huge cost: environmental degradation, socio-
economic inequality, problems of social reproduction including housing, transportation, health or education, violence, anxiety and insecurity among many others.

It is already widely known that environmental damage constitutes one of the dominant externalities of capitalism (Figure 1). The imperatives of material consumption and endless growth are simply not compatible with the long-term sustainability of the environment, making capitalism inherently a threat to nature, non-human species and ourselves. In the same way, cities, as key spatial nodes of capital accumulation, are by definition, environmentally unsustainable. Besides, another major externality -not to say condition- of capitalism is its association with economic and social inequality. Considering that wealth is to a big extent accumulated through dispossession, it is unsurprising that global capitalism has led to increased inequality, concentrating wealth in the hands of a few. In this vein, according to Wright, economic instabilities and crises particularly harm the lives of masses of people; deepening inequalities, economic polarization, and job insecurity (Wright, 2012, 2). Thus, these systemic inconsistencies within neoliberal capitalism have not only progressively weakened its alleged solidity but also has awakened the pressing need for change. The feelings and imaginations provoked, for example, by the helplessness felt when walking past homeless people, the boredom felt by unemployed youth, the fears provoked by rising rents, the creativity sparked by vacant spaces lying idle, or the exhilaration or annoyance of street demonstrations (Bialski et al., 2015, 1) have, as it will be explored in the following section, motivated different collective practices of organising as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power.

ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES AND PRACTICES

Crisis is a concept often strung with many negative connotations. However, any moment of dislocation also bears, according to Zanoni et. al. potentiality and hope for new social imaginaries and new subjectivities to emerge, which can prefigure autonomous, non-
hierarchical, and emancipatory organizational practices (2017, 576). As the etymology of the word ‘crisis’ in Greek -separate, judge- reminds us, “a crisis carries with it and demands a decision and a judgment, a call to decide where we stand and how we respond to the opening that such crisis engenders. It is at this historical moment that we issue a plea for a better balance between subjecting the present to critique and imagining human communities that do not yet exist” (Zanoni et. al., 2017, 578). One of the most recent examples would be the current narrative to build-back-better after Covid-19 pandemic.

Attempting to move beyond neoliberal capitalism may sound naive. But over the past two decades, and mainly against the backdrop of the recent crises, some remarkable progress has already been made. There is clearly an increasing array of alternative social and spatial imaginaries and forms of subject formation that are giving birth to new economic and social practices of contestation and innovative alliances across multiple axes of social difference (Leitner et al., 2007, 11). Alternatives imaginaries or utopias can be described as collective understandings that facilitate future action, which encode collective visions of the good society and hence whose role in the construction and institutionalization of alternatives emerges as fundamental (Argüelles, 2018, 62). These new utopias, Leitner et al. adds, “promote collective over individual interest; collaboration rather than competition; recognition and respect for diversity rather than commodification of individual identity; and care for the environment over productivity/growth/exploitation” (Leitner et al., 2007, 12). This is why, the authors argue, they bring about the possibility to develop and enhance the capacity of all citizens to share power and hence collaboratively govern themselves in all spheres of life and work (Leitner et al., 2007, 12).

The ecosystem of alternative imaginaries is defined by a wide spectrum of different lines of thoughts, movements or practices such as feminism, post-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-racism, degrowth, sharing, alternative currencies, commoning, alternative food systems, or DIY urbanism among many others. However, although this bricolage of theories and movements are fragmentary “they tend to share basic values and goals: production for household needs, not market profit; decision-making that is bottom-up, consensual, and decentralized; and stewardship of shared wealth for the long term. They reject the standard ideals of economic development and a return on shareholder investment, emphasizing instead community self-determination and the mutualisation of benefits” (Bollier, 2017). Yet alternative utopias responding to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism’s hegemony have taken and are still taking heterogeneous forms, which poses
complex challenges for empirical analysis. This is because normative understandings of “justice” or “democracy” emerge from particular contexts, histories and spatialities and through individuals’ everyday experiences, past and present, framing contestation in particular ways (Leitner et al., 2007, 13).

Opposition to capitalism has come from various political and philosophical approaches, including anarchist, socialist, religious and nationalist viewpoints. However, today most of the ideologies that once claimed to be capable of substituting capitalism no longer hold much credibility. Rather than proposing a substitutive socio-economic system, emerging alternative imaginaries have taken the shape of a mosaic of smaller-scale practices and projects (Figure 2). As Leyshon et al. rightfully claimed, “It is by looking at the cracks and gaps within capitalism that we begin to see that alternatives already exist, and that many of the resources and ideas we need are already available to us” (2014, 15).

For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be narrowed down to those initiatives employing alternative exchange systems, e.g. non-monetary mediums of exchange. Examples of these include but are not limited to swapping, time banking, sharing, second hand shopping or donating. These practices share the common feature of rejecting mainstream consumption - either in terms of quantity or quality - as well as completely or partially removing money from their exchanges. Moreover, another characteristic of these alternative exchange practices is their purpose of reducing waste by giving a second or a longer ‘life’ to items. This aspect is particularly relevant within the two case studies employed in this paper, namely Madboks (mitigating food wastage) and El Intercambiador (mitigating textile wastage), since their manufacturing and marketing are defined by artificial standards of desirability and cosmetic perfection, and produce vast amounts of waste. To eat discarded food and wear second hand clothes is thus according to Ferrell “to confront this system through direct action, and to demonstrate the inequities of its waste” (2014, 303). Importantly, it is also to invent a direct, unauthorized, and decentralized process for getting food and clothes to those most affected by these inequities (Ferrell, 2014, 303). This is why,
these alternative practices tend to organise differently, “often striving to create an urban environment that relies on more self-organised, local, autonomous, and resource efficient forms of organisation, which in turn somehow changes the political, economic, and social setting in cities” (Bialski et al., 2015, 2). Indeed, despite the great diversity that defines them, these initiatives and movements are commonly locally-operated and quasi-self-sufficient, mostly set up by people, communities and organisations in order to facilitate the local circulation of goods, and services (Jonas, 2013, 24). Thus, despite many critics questioning the capacity of small-scale interventions to challenge the hegemony of the global system, proponents of locality believe that small scale may be one of the most effective ways to bring about macro-change (Bollier, 2017). Starting with the supposition that macro-level policy initiatives are too slow, ineffective and too vague to deal with the multiple crises of capitalism (Ganesh & Zoller, 2014, 237), a great deal of initiatives worldwide stand up for a mode of organizing that advocates locality where economic decisions are made by local communities who possess place-based knowledge and a greater power to transform communities through bottom-up, democratic organizing (Ganesh & Zoller, 2014, 236).

This stand, however, seems to resonate with the previously discussed post-individualistic and entrepreneurial ethic, characteristic of the shift of responsibilization from the state towards citizens. In fact, following Bialski et al., local civic initiatives are often “discursively linked to the economic reality of austerity politics, an impending threat of resource, scarcity and demographic change in large cities of contemporary welfare societies, which seem to prompt many people to develop innovative, alternative or entrepreneurial ways of coping with the challenges of the order of the day” (2015, 1) This, the authors conclude, shows that the lack of trust in large socio-economic systems is also a large motivator to engage in such practices (Bialski et al., 2015, 5). In other words, alternatives seem to be both, alternatives to the market economy but also to a ‘weak state’. Following this argument, one might question to what extent alternative initiatives might actually be contributing to the externalization of state services as well as the shift of responsibility towards civilians.

It is also important to make reference to the high concentration of local alternatives in urban settings. Indeed, cities are usually characterised with notions of density, population, size and heterogeneity; being at the same time centres of economic power and wealth, but also where the most vulnerable in society, particularly the young, the old and the poor are concentrated (Bialski et al., 2015, 4). As such, as Brenner et al. claim,
“capitalist cities have long served as spaces for envisioning, and indeed mobilizing towards, alternatives to capitalism itself, its associated process of profit-driven urbanization and its relentless commodification and re-commodification of urban spaces” (2009, 176). These practices of urban dwellers show a re-evaluation of the notion of scarcity, waste and consumption, a collective way of organising on a low budget and an appreciation of slower, simpler, self-organised and local ways of producing and consuming (Bialski et al., 2005, 1). Additionally, these practices have been revived with new forms of technologies, such as internet sharing platforms or specifically developed apps, such as Too Good To Go or Couchsurfing, which have been key to fostering social and material organisation, and quickly gather a critical mass to spread various modes of knowledge and participation (Bialski et al., 2015, 5). Thus, with alternatives on the rise in urban settings, a similar rise has been witnessed within academia. Here the topic of positionality has been on the radar, and thus, the next chapter explores this topic by assessing how alternatives are to be conceptualised, perceived and understood. Is it naive to think that alternatives can ever oppose capitalism? Is it even possible to speak of opposition to when alternatives are in fact embedded within capitalism? Are alternatives susceptible to capitalist commodification? And, how have debates around alterity been de- and re-politicised? These are some of the questions that shall be explored in the following chapter.

MAIN APPROACHES AND DEBATES ON ALTERITY

EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to gain further insights on the topic of alterity and assess the real capacity of alternatives to promote real change, it is vital to explore the different stances and perspectives within academic literature regarding how the conventional -the capitalistic system- and the alternative relate to one another, as well as which are the main debates and challenges that emerge during their implementation. Some scholars have pointed to an emerging rift between believers of alterity and radical sceptics (Jonas, 2013, 24). The origins of this theoretical debate dates back to the time of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, an approach mainly concerned with the question of whether local alternative economies, practices and spaces are able to challenge the dominance of the capitalist system. As Zademach and Hillebrand explain, “ever since Marx and Engels produced their famous critique of what they called ‘utopian’, as opposed to ‘scientific’ socialism, orthodox Marxist
treatments of economic alterity have been concerned that such experiments are doomed to failure” (2013, 43). In other words, for Marxism, community-led alternatives might be interesting, but were overly romanticized and naive. As Bollier states, most of these movements are in fact considered too small, local, unorthodox, or little-known to be consequential (2017). Under this perspective, alternatives represent nothing more than little and temporal islands, with rather limited potential for upscaling and broader structural change. In this light, many would legitimately ask: “Doesn’t there have to be a global alternative to challenge the global domination of supra-national, multilateral institutions like the IMF, World Bank, WTO, various free trade agreements, etc.? doesn’t the scale of resistance need to match the scale of the problem?” (Leyshon et al., 2014, 363). However, larger-scale institutional arrangements that have come to be associated with alternatives during the last century have also largely proven to be incapable of delivering on their promises (Wright, 2012, 2), thus excluding the possibility of substituting capitalism with any alternative global system and helping setting a hegemonic vision of capitalism.

In this light, his pessimistic stand focuses on the variety of limitations that any attempt of alterity would be doomed to face. For instance, as Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2015) note, those engaged in and benefiting from the current social structure have an interest in ensuring that the current status quo may be extended and sustained. Besides, Marx and Engels argued that ordinary people “do not have the resources to ‘opt out’ of capitalist economies for long periods, and if large numbers of people did attempt it, then the forces of the state would stop them” (Zademach & Hillebrand, 2013,43) For example, the possibility for alternative action is indeed constrained by factors such as “the potent force of the corporate media, the daily, routinized language of politics (...) the propaganda of market fundamentalism, the induced appeal of mass consumerism, the technically instrumentalized educational system, the oppressive weight of bureaucracy and, through it all, the overwhelming force of dominant ideologies of exclusion and supremacy -for instance, nationalism, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, heteronormativity, speciesism and so forth.” (Brenner et al. 2009, 181). Being this the scenario, the weight of neoliberal capitalism appears so heavy that if any social power would attempt to threaten its dominance, it would be relentlessly attacked and undermined. Margaret Thatcher’s well-known “There Is No Alternative” (TINA) was a clear telling manifestation of this view. So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we often even recognise it as a neutral force; a kind of biological, natural law, like Darwin’s theory of evolution. As Leyshon et al argue, we seem to have
reached a stage where it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 3). However, many critics of localism tend to argue that the retreat into localism implies a rejection of large-scale society, which is unrealistic and abandons the larger struggle against corporate globalization and capitalism in general (Ganesh & Zoller, 2014, 237-238).

However, instead of taking capitalism and alternatives as oppositional and static processes, there is an increasing body of literature that rejects this binary and oppositional thinking of alternatives and capitalism, and has recently called for a better understanding of the everyday interaction between these two processes. Besides, it holds that the boundaries between these two worlds (as imagined and practised) are unstable, shifting and even mutually constitutive and/or co-dependent. Indeed, descriptions based on opposition and staticism might lead to oversimplified analyses about alternatives’ material and immaterial realities and their potential for social transformation (Argüelles, 2018, 15). In this light, paying attention to the embedded relationship between the mainstream and the alternative opens up new possibilities not only for theoretical analysis, but also for the practical advancement of the imaginaries (i.e., ideals, norms, discourses, ethics) as well as the practices of contestation. When considering the relationships between the conventional system and the alternative initiatives that seek to contest it, the material and non-material dependency from the latter towards the former is often in question (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 364). In fact, it is argued that many alternatives rely heavily on existing, capitalist institutions and their supporting political frameworks such as global and local markets; established networks of communication and information; different levels of institutional financial support; accumulated capital and even the excesses and waste of the contemporary consumer (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 364). Thus, “a more critical posture about the role played by alternatives increasingly recognizes that their attempts to challenge entrenched power relations in production-consumption systems seem to depend in some way on the existence of mainstream economic and social relations” (Holloway et al., 2010). Besides, the rise of local alternatives have been widely connected with capitalism’s culture of individual responsibilization (see Argüelles, Bialski et al., Bóhm, Leyshon et al., Sonnino & Marsden etc.). Responsibilization, as a key neoliberal feature of governmentality, is in fact believed to both have provoked and facilitated the construction of alternative strategies. As Bialski et al. add, these practices are popping up not only because of an increasing access to do-
it-yourself knowledge, but also because of a widespread ‘do-it-yourself-better’ belief (Bialski et al., 2015, 5).

In addition to this, we find Luc Boltanski’s “The New Spirit of Capitalism” (1999). Here, he addresses the relationship between capitalism and alterity, by making reference to the survival and adaptation of the capitalist system. This adaptation takes place in the context of society’s changing collective identities, ethics and demands and is based on the interaction with and development of alternatives or contestations to capitalism. Indeed, in a review of ‘The New Spirit of Capitalism’, Budgen mentions that “capitalism has always relied on critiques of the status quo to alert it to dangers (...) and to discover the antidotes required to neutralize opposition to the system and increase the level of profitability within it” (2000). In this context, when critiques are powerful enough to affect the key mechanisms keeping the capitalism train running, it switches tracks. In other words, it re-adapts itself by reformulating its ‘spirit’ to incorporate or neutralise these challenges, in ways compatible with accumulation (Budgen, 2000). It is precisely the distinctive nature of alternatives, of their oppositional nature, that constitutes their appeal to the capitalist system and enables it to brand and sell alternatives as ‘distinctive’ and extract a rent value out of them (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 366). This is most regularly seen by the use of ‘progressive concepts’ such as empowerment, diversity, inclusion, corporate social responsibility and sustainability (Zanoni et. al., 2017, 577); organizational practices as for instance flexible labour systems, sub-contracting, multi-tasking and multi-skilling, ‘flat’ management (Bugden, 2000) as well as public participation, green consumption, voluntary work, etc. (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 364).

This ethos of the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ has not only been captured by the private sector; but has also been translated into new governance models. In fact, the state has progressively adopted originally anti-capitalistic notions such as partnership, participation, voluntarism and good governance to a large extent in order to transfer welfare responsibilities to the third sector (Arguelles, 2018, 51). However, at the same time “non-commodified labour working in third sector organizations are increasingly being driven by the motive of surplus or profit because of the withdrawal of state funding” (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 107). As a result, instead of engaging in oppositional forms of resistance and social activism, alternatives are often, through processes of institutionalisation, actively “building relationships with mainstream organisations and institutions that privilege partnership, consensus and agreement over debate, disagreement, dissensus and resistance” (Arguelles, 2018, 49). In other words, alternatives, through being increasingly
institutionalized and absorbed by the public administration have, to some extent, lost the political and resistance-oriented nature that defined them. Therefore, it could be argued that, when institutionalized and commodified, much of contemporary social and environmental action has become increasingly de-politicized. This rather pessimistic scenario raises the question of whether, under the current commodification of ethical values, alternative imaginaries and economies are a countermovement or an innovation of the capitalist system.

However, a different perspective about the embeddedness between capitalism and its alternatives starts from the recognition that the survival of the hegemonic system also necessitates the constant existence of a certain non-capitalist fabric. Actually, contradicting the belief that capitalism commodifies and captures everything, as Leyshon et. al, point out that capitalism can never afford to close non-capitalist forms of social reproduction down; it relies on their continuing existence, it cannot destroy them (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 364). This encompasses a big part of the economic-activity outside the for-profit sector: the unpaid care sector, domestic labour, volunteering, unpaid internships, etc. Besides, and as mentioned before, the neoliberal state relies considerably on the shift in the provision of services from the state to either the private or non-profit sectors (Bóhm et al. 2010, 25). Without these ‘free’ labourers capitalism as it is does not exist, and yet these labourers are a product of non-commodified processes of social reproduction (Leyshon et al., 2014, 22). Moreover, it is important to note that alternative social movements have also and in diverse ways shaped neoliberalism itself, for instance, by increasingly imposing more strict environmental regulations (Arguelles, 2018, 60). This is why Bóhm et al. assert that any hegemonic regime should always be thought of as always imperfect, incomplete, and contested, since it will always be characterized by the existence of manifold resistances and counter-hegemonic forces (2010, 24). One of the main results of this more ‘optimistic’ view is that it de-centres capitalism from political or economic analysis, recognizing that it is “partial, fragmented, and has always existed alongside, or even dependent upon, non-capitalist alternatives, as, for example, in the unpaid domestic labour of women supporting men who earn a family wage” (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 19). Likewise, the same approach considers the various actors involved in the formation of alternatives not as passive recipients of neoliberal policies and market signals but as “social actors who actively construct alternatives through new discourses ‘of authentic social, economic and ecological relationships” (Sonnino & Marsden, 2005, 193).
In yet another critique of the prevailing binary thinking about alternatives, feminist economic geographers Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson (also known as J.K. Gibson-Graham) produced what was for many, one of the most innovative and startling re-interpretations of the economy in the last decade: “The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)”, published 1996 (Zademach & Hillebrand, 2013, 16). Followed by a second book, “A Postcapitalist Politics” in 2006, these two bodies of work constitute the basis of the so-called ‘diverse economies research programme’. Their theoretical work attempts not only to change views of ‘the economy’ in order to highlight the importance of alternative spaces, but also to support the emergence of such spaces and reinforce their radical practices as a step towards a post-capitalist future (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2015). Gibson and Graham insist that another main problem of relating any economic knowledge and discourse to capitalism is that it can dampen and discourage the imagination and emergence of new transformative initiatives (2008, 615). Aimed to face these challenges, the diverse economy approach has been described as a “theoretical proposition that economies are intrinsically heterogeneous spaces composed of multiple class processes, mechanisms of exchange, forms of labour and remuneration, finance, and ownership” (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2015). In this context, this framework is used as a strategy towards a post-capitalism consciousness, in which other forms of economic relations are highlighted against the overstated predominance of capitalist relations in discourse and epistemology (Gibson & Graham, 2006). Under this picture, the authors employ the ‘iceberg metaphor’ (Figure 3) to show how the visible and prevailing capitalist relations are nothing but a small portion of the diverse economic relationships that are already present within the economic landscape, yet remain ‘under water’ for our eyes (Gibson & Graham, 2006). In other words, this post-structuralist approach is excited by difference instead of feeling defeated by domination (Dixon, 2010, 32) and aims at creating possibilities by encouraging, strengthening and proliferating alternative spaces (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2015). This reading complements the notion that these new economic spaces are not simply alternatives to capitalism, as the two cannot be easily detached, but rather they are ‘counter to the mono-culture of capitalism (Gibson & Graham, 2008, 623).
In order to break away from this mono-culture and capture and visibilize the heterogeneity of the economy, the diverse economies approach has a double task. The first task is semantic, as it entails developing a more inclusive economic language. As Gibson and Graham point out, “our language politics is aimed at fostering conditions under which images and enactments of economic diversity (including non-capitalism) might stop circulating around capitalism, stop being evaluated with respect to capitalism, and stop being seen as deviant or exotic or eccentric departures from the norm” (Gibson & Graham, 2006, 56). It is in this context in which the role of academia remains crucial, since approaching alterity through binary lens can, despite being unintentional, reproduce hegemonic representations of capitalism. ‘Reframing’ is a practice, the two authors explain, of making room for the other in non-normative ways, at a time in history in which the problem is not so much the inconsistency of economic concepts, it is argued, but rather their scarcity, and that the politics of recognition is ‘already also a politics of redistribution’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, 8). A language of economic difference requires transforming our shared understanding of the economy by naming, acknowledging, mapping, documenting, and theorizing the diversity of non-capitalist practices, desires, and subjectivities that already exist (Zanoni et. al., 2017, 578). A language of economic difference, Jonas adds, is open and empowering, one of flows, relations and political possibilities (2013, 29).

The second task is to encourage forms of subjectivity and collective agency that are open to trying new economic practices: a politics of the subject. “Alternatives therefore rest on the ability to cultivate and develop subjectivities other than employee, business owner, consumer, property owner, and investor, in a process of ‘resubjectivation’ through the transformation of desires” (Zanoni et. al., 2017, 580). Then, Gritzas and Kavoulakos argue, this new politics of the subject could lead to performative collective actions, based on new
or neglected, tangible and intangible resources, such as alternative exchange networks, food networks and cooperatives (2015). By this means, research on diverse economies is not only capable of releasing positive effects of hope and possibility, but also generating alternative discourses and increasing the viability of experiments to imagine and create different futures (Zademach & Hillebrand, 2013, 19). It also breaks away from the firstly addressed sceptic approach to alterity by showing how personal efforts might play a powerful role in demonstrating the possibility of alternative economic futures (Zademach & Hillebrand, 2013, 18).

Nevertheless, Gibson and Graham’s diverse economies have also been subject to criticism. Many of the contradictions attributed to this approach correspond to the previously discussed arguments that sustain the more pessimistic stands on alternatives: the perception of alternatives as outsourcing local state responsibilities (Rosol, 2012), the ‘political naïveté’ of assuming that any alternative to capitalism will be less exploitative (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2015), flexible capitalism’s unquestionable capacity to absorb non-capitalist and anti-capitalist initiatives (Dixon 2010, 32), the continuing ability of capitalist value systems to colonize our mindset (North, 2005, 222) as well as the acknowledgement of people’s unequal capacity to participate in and hence change the economy (Jonas, 2013, 23) among others. Yet the authors’ focus is on the ‘possible’ rather than on the ‘probable’, which, by encouraging hope, they believe, is the first step for change (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2015). In fact, in light of such criticism, the authors have proceeded to call their own theory a ‘weak theory’ which, in contrast to a “strong theory”, “refuses to predetermine the outcomes of alternative spaces so as to leave an open space for novelty and surprise and, thus, to offer the opportunity to face the difficulties, the limitations and the problems in the development of alternative spaces as issues of struggle and not as reasons for resignation” (Gritzas & Kavoulakos, 2015). Thus, as it has been stressed in this chapter, alterity and capitalism share a complex relationship, whereby different perceptions cast either hope or doubt regarding alternatives’ potential for change. However, although alternatives are somewhat restricted and limited by the forces of capitalism, a rather under researched perspective on alternatives forced the research into an inward-looking perspective. In other words, instead of looking at the relationship between the dominant system and alternatives, this approach looks into the internal aspects affecting alternatives’ scope and potential for change.
INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

As explored in the previous section, there is an evident lack of consensus within academic literature regarding the relationship between alternatives and the broader capitalist system. However, in recent years, a renewed debate has shifted this perspective inwards. As a result, many scholars have pointed to the need to move beyond analyses of alternatives in relation to the mainstream; to rather investigate and reveal “the tensions and contradictions underpinning the emergence, growth and proliferation of alternative economic and political spaces” themselves (Fuller et al., 2010). Indeed, whereas debates on inequality and oppression stemming from capitalism and the limitations they impose on alternatives had hitherto largely been the focus among critically oriented scholars (Zanoni et. al., 2017, 578), the study on otherness has often overlooked the invisible dynamics that favour exclusivity and the reproduction of unequal social structures within alternatives themselves. Thus, in order to further understand the real transformational capacity of alternatives, we are urged to, first and foremost, explore who is included and excluded from the imagination and advancement of such initiatives, and secondly, investigate both the reasons for people’s engagement in alternatives as well as their perceived role as agents of change. It is only from an exploration into these dynamics that it becomes possible to understand how the internal aspects define the potential scope and type of change such initiatives promote.

In this context, and given that most of the alternatives are driven by environmental concerns, it is helpful to borrow an approach from Environmental Justice (EJ) scholars, who complement an inwards-looking perspective by uncovering the scope and manifestations of environmental inequities (either in terms of access to environmental goods and amenities and/or exposure to environmental hazards) (Park & Pellow, 2011, 5). This idea of environmental privilege is defined by Park and Pellow as “the experience of being a part of a social group that benefits from inequality” (2011, 204) and whose economic, political and cultural power enables them exclusive access to coveted environmental amenities (Park & Pellow, 2011, 4). Typical advantages given by environmental privilege, Argüelles argues, include organic and pesticide-free foods, neighbourhoods with healthier air quality and greater amounts of green spaces, energy-efficient buildings and amenities, and other products siphoned from the living environments of other peoples (2018, 53). However, environmental advantages are just some examples of the wide array of advantages that
can be acquired through participation in alternative practices, including but not limited to those related to health, culture and education. All these advantages are allocated along lines of systematic inequality shaped by the categories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other markers of difference. However, critical approaches like environmental privilege pay attention not only to the privilege embedded in the access to alternative amenities and services, but also in the framing of environmental, social or economic crises, in their solutions as well as in the imaginaries and knowledge that legitimizes such solutions. For example, Burnham et al. stresses that power is also embedded in the capacity of being able to advance certain alternatives based on specific ideas on how the world should look like, as well as their accompanying technological infrastructural and political interventions, (2017, 67).

Thus, two issues seem to be commonly addressed under this inwards-looking approach, which entail both the origins and outcomes of alternatives’. Concerning their origins, the first recurrent concern brought up by critical scholars refers to the imagination and the ethics that sustain and give rise to these initiatives. “Imaginaries produce hierarchies and impose visions, providing the languages, norms and meanings for constructing and expressing social change” (Argüelles, 2018, 171). In other words, imagination influences both what is desirable and what is possible. This stresses the importance of an intersectional approach to alternative imaginaries, in order to stress the key role that categories like gender, age, ethnicity or socio-economic class play in shaping people’s environmental experience and practices (Argüelles, 2018, 55). What this tells us is that imaginaries, far from being universal, are place, time and context specific, and hence partial and incomplete (2018, 60). As a result, Argüelles explains, politics of imaginaries are inherently political and involve power relations, often producing winners and losers and not always being emancipatory or just (2018, 61). Indeed, it is believed that the “orientation towards environmental sustainability of alternatives is often an indication of the milieus behind them: progressive white educated middle classes, who project and reinforce their environmental subjectivities through these practices” (Argüelles, 2018, 7). In this light, attending to the increasingly ‘bourgeois’ socio-spatial origins of local alternative initiatives, Sonnino and Marsden claim that there is evidence that shows how alternatives destined to have limited ‘multiplier effects’ on rural areas, low-income groups or non-dominant genders or cultures (2005, 191). For a long time now, environment-related professional and institutional settings have mirrored the environmental injustices that prevail in the society,
ironically, silencing the very people who suffer most from the environmental externalities of capitalism. As Bortfield points out, “we have made this “green” space white”, to the point that most of the current environmental research agendas and interventions still portray a focus solely on environmental conservation and not on social justice issues (2020) and environmentalism has increasingly been equated to consumer elitism and conspicuous consumption as is the case with green products or electric cars (Argüelles, 2018, 59).

So, why do these dominant groups prevail in most celebrated alternatives, failing to attract people beyond the “usual suspects”? On the one hand, as explained above, privileged and prevailing imaginaries on sustainability are entangled with the socio-economic and political structures that support the alternatives development and expansion, for example, through funding or media support (Argüelles, 2018, 170). Furthermore,” the argument about the state retreat - which relies on individuals’ capacities to self-organize and commit to the self-provision of certain goods and services- seems to favour the privileged, who are able to exclude themselves from the public sphere and move into a private existence in which they put their efforts on improving their quality of life and protecting their ecological enclaves” (Argüelles, 2018, 98). In this context, Argüelles explains how an increasing individualization of alternative movements has “raised concerns about the danger of creating another “creative class bubble”; one that reinforces neoliberal mechanisms of individual survival rather than exploiting the organizational potential of community experiences to ensure redistributive access and broader societal benefits (2018, 79). Indeed, members of alternative initiatives often fail to recognize their own privileges and the entanglements that make these initiatives thrive, “which are much related to dominant power structures such as a social/racial hierarchization” (Argüelles, 2018, 173).

On the other hand, according to Bortfield, even before people from non-dominant socio-economic groups have the opportunity to enter the academic or professional sphere that give rise to alternatives, they often experience multiple barriers: starting from a lower access to the natural world or social welfare services to a long history of racial and gendered wealth gap as well as labour market discrimination (2020). Racism experienced daily, Bortfield believes, “makes focusing on environmental issues arduous when one’s life and the lives of their community members are threatened” (2020), making joining or initiating alternatives of secondary or even no importance. On top of that, as Argüelles explains “the capacities needed to start and sustain these sorts of initiatives, including the capacity to volunteer or personal capacities such as individual leadership point alternatives-building as
a quite challenging and resource-demanding task, which might be detrimental for certain social groups in particular” (Argüelles, 2018, 14). This is why, Argüelles highlights, the “uncritical celebration and consequent expansion of the alternative-provisioning strategy might miss important underpinnings about its role and capacities, risking to perpetuate current power structures and imbalances” (2018, 145). And the sad reality is that “even among progressive milieus, the mistreatment of / denial of access to resources to the majority of the world's population is accepted or at least assumed as something immovable” (Argüelles, 2018, 58). At the same time, “under the banner of difference and accompanied with discourses around sustainability, community or social embeddedness, precarity, oppression and dominance might look less apparent (Argüelles, 2018, 173). Thus, according to Argüelles, alternative, as other keywords in environmental discourse such as community, diversity or democracy, runs the risk of turning favoured merely on the basis of its metaphorical appeal, their suggestiveness, rather than on its ability to promote a pragmatic course of action” (2018, 173).

This brings up the next point. Indeed, a common but overlooked aspect of these politics relates to the multitude of reasons that motivate people to engage in such alternative practices. As Argüelles argues, most of scholarly attention is focused on the voluntary restraining practices and their embedded morality, while sharing and saving practices that are born out of material or financial need remain largely ignored by the activist and academic community (2018, 15). In other words, there is a widespread assumption that people who engage in these practices do so for sustainability or other political reasons, instead of economic reasons. This gap in literature thus poses a danger of simplifying motivations for engaging in these alternative initiatives. Indeed, as mentioned before, it is often the same type of privileged subjects who gain access to these practices and have the capacity to choose to ‘opt out the system’ and find “safety, comfort and even hedonistic pleasure in the different, beneficial practices of alternative initiatives” (Argüelles, 2018, 13). This is largely because engaging with low-budget practices more times than not requires material and non-material resources such as digital literacy, internet access, time, education, transportation and/or physical-abilities. But, what about all those people whose lives are so embedded- and at stake- in the current dominant system that can simply not afford to build their lives around a political and ethical choice to ‘opt out of the system’? (Argüelles, 2018, 173). Especially, for those who during the last periods of economic downturn, have been forced to live on an income that has been reduced through either
wage cuts, unemployment or as result of austerity politics. The reality is that low budget alternatives secure many people’s livelihoods and provide practical and immediate solutions for those more vulnerable to the challenges posed by the capitalist economic system (Figure 4).

This is an important point because it brings us back to the relevant concerns on social change and the transformational potential of alternative exchange practices, regarding power and privilege. What is the purpose of such alternatives? Whose transformation are we speaking about? What is the role that these practices should perform? Should they be inspired and propagated through the desire of difference -from the mainstream- or a desire of having another possibility apart from the mainstream? Should alternatives be spaces where conscious, educated and change oriented individuals can fulfil their desired lifestyle while simultaneously stimulating a broader social, environmental and economic change? Or should they be spaces of ‘compensation’, catered for the needs of those most affected by the current economic system? In other words, are low-budget alternatives spaces to ‘save the city’ or to ‘save in the city’? This question is particularly relevant because, despite one arguing that ideally alternatives should meet both type of desires -the ethical and the economic-, the reality is that different organizational characteristics such as time, location, language, rules for participation, measures of value etc. will attract certain people from certain social or cultural backgrounds, while discouraging others from joining, either intentionally or unintentionally. Indeed, despite most of the alternatives claiming to be open to everyone, it is convenient to remember that equal opportunity or right doesn’t necessarily imply equal access. In this light, and motivated by the duality of roles that alternatives play as agents of transformation, the following chapters analyse two empirical low-budget alternative practices, food sharing (MADBOKS in Copenhagen) and clothing swap (El Intercambiador in Madrid), in order to contextualise and empirically ground the previously exposed debate.
METHODOLOGY

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The transformation potential, form, and direction of alternatives are influenced by both external and internal factors. Externally, alternatives are pushed and pulled by notions of embeddedness within the capitalist system, whereas internally, alternatives become the new medium of thought and action directed by specific individuals, where notions of inclusion and exclusion are defined by particular visions and goals as well as engagement within such alternatives. Although ‘transformation’ is widely discussed within academic literature in relation to the external perspective of ‘alterity’, most literature on ‘alterity’ fails to look inwards and thus lacks a holistic approach to the study of transformation. In other words, most of academia praise alternatives for their assumed social and environmental sustainability as a solution to the over criticised capitalistic system and all its implications, ills and externalities. However, looking inwards allows for alternatives themselves to be critically analysed in terms of their social and environmental outcomes, thus repolitisising the subject of ‘alterity’. Additionally, academic writings this far have failed to adequately address the imaginaries of change and the reasons behind people's willingness to engage in alternative exchange practices. Addressing this gap can thus improve our understanding of what sort of transformation these initiatives are trying to achieve, how they seek to achieve it, and what the intended and unintended consequences of those efforts might be. To contextualise these aspects empirically, this paper employs two case studies, namely, Madboks and El Intercambiador. Thus, this research attempts to contribute to the current discourse on ‘alterity’, by closing these research gaps.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The proposed study seeks to understand how the internal and external environments of Madboks and El Intercambiador impact their transformational character.

More specifically, the research aims to answer the following secondary research objectives:

A.) How does the external environment of these initiatives (i.e. their connection with capitalism) impact their transformative capacity/character?
By external environment, these initiatives are viewed in terms of their positionality within the larger capitalistic system, as they are caught in a kind of ‘in-betweenness’ being both ‘dependent on’, as well as an ‘alternative to’ certain aspects of the capitalist system.

B.) How does the internal environment of these initiatives (i.e. engagement with and organisation of) impact their transformative capacity/character”?

The internal environment refers to those aspects both guiding and enabling the development of these initiatives as well as, on the opposite end, those actors participating (and not participating) in these initiatives. Whereas the former deals with aspects related to organisational structure - the spatial, material, digital and cultural resources employed as well as their mission, vision, strategies and objective, the latter deals more with those motives and profiles behind people’s engagement/participation in these initiatives, their perceived role as agents of change as well as the way they imagine and define ‘transformation’. Ultimately this perspective questions how aspects of power and privilege are to be understood in relation to alternative practices.
INTRODUCTION

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE CITY AS A CAPITALIST CONSTRUCTION
ALTERNATIVE IMAGINARIES AND PRACTICES
MAIN APPROACHES AND DEBATES ON ALTERITY

OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH QUESTION

A) Analyze the external environment of alternatives
B) Analyze the internal environment of alternatives

How do the internal and external environments of alternative exchange practices impact their transformational character?

METHODODOLOGY

Participatory Ethnography
In depth interviews
Surveys
Online content analysis

DISCUSSION

MADBOKS

External environment
Internal environment

EL INTERCAMBIADOR

External environment
Internal environment

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

CONCLUSION
METHODS

The following methods were designed to answer the research question.

Method 1

Method 1 seeks to address sub-question (A) of the research question: How does the external environment of these initiatives (i.e. their connection with capitalism) impact their transformative capacity/character? This method entailed qualitative interviews with the organisers of both El Intercambiador and Madboks, as well as social media/website analysis. The interview recordings were then further transcribed and thematically analysed.

**El Intercambiador:** two interviews were conducted with Natalia Castellanos (Appendix B) & Zaloa Basaldua (Appendix C), two organizers of El Intercambiador. An interview with Natalia was conducted via phone call, while an interview with Zaloa was conducted in person at their shop in Móstoles. Both interviews were conducted in March and April 2021 respectively, and structured to understand the organization structure, guiding values, strategies and objectives of the initiative, as well as the initiatives Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT).

**Madboks:** One interview was conducted via Zoom with Roxanne Gabriela Zlate (Appendix D), the organiser of Madboks. The interview was conducted in July 2021, and structured to understand the mission, vision, strategies, objectives and organisation structure of the initiative. Additionally, the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) were also discussed.

**Social media/website analysis:** Instagram and Facebook accounts as well as the official websites of both, Madboks and El Intercambiador, were analysed in order to explore the visual and written content employed to inform the public about and promote these initiatives.

Method 2:

Method 2 seeks to address sub-question (B) of the research question: How does the internal environment of these initiatives (i.e. engagement with and organisation of) impact their transformative capacity/character? This method entailed interviewing food collectors and volunteers from Madboks, while - due to certain limitations defined in the
limitation section - an online survey conducted by El Intercambiador was utilised in which to gather data from participants of the initiative.

**Madboks food collectors:** Convenience sampling was used when collecting data from Madboks participants, due to physical surveys being handed out at one of the Madboks events, during which participants came to fetch their food parcels (Appendix A). A total of 34 physical surveys were conducted. Additionally, 15 online surveys were conducted to both increase the number of surveys conducted as well as to reach out to those participants not present on the day the research was conducted. Thus, a total of 49 surveys were compiled, and structured to understand the profile and motivations for participation. The data was then computed and thematically and quantitatively analysed with Excel to reveal certain patterns and themes, as well as to better visualise the data (compiling mostly graphs).

**Madboks volunteers:** Again, convenience sampling was used to conduct interviews with volunteers due contact being made via email and only those who responded being included into the data sample (Appendix E). In-depth interviews were then conducted and structured to understand the profile and motivations for participation in the initiative, as well as the perceived role of participants as agents of change. A total of 10 interviews were conducted. Furthermore, all interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed.

**El Intercambiador participants:** Due to the limitations defined in the limitation section, a survey conducted by El Intercambiador with participants was utilised (Appendix F). This survey was structured to understand extent, motivations and conditions of participation and thus provided adequate data in line with the research objective. Furthermore, this data was also thematically and quantitatively analysed.

**Ethnography:** Participant observation was conducted at both Madboks and El Intercambiador. I personally participated in El Intercambiador by swapping clothes 5 times, spending roughly 30-40 minutes in the shop each time. Besides, I voluntarily helped the organization holding a free DIY workshop at the shop. I also personally engaged with Madboks as a food collector as well as a volunteer once a week for 4 months, (from January to May). On all occasions, I did not make my position as a researcher public, in an explicit attempt to gather objective data (not including my own subjective biases).
CASE STUDIES

Two case studies/initiatives based on alternative exchange systems are represented here, namely Madboks (Copenhagen) and El Intercambiador (Madrid). While examples of these sort of local initiatives are not limited to only these two case studies or even two cities, they both however represent cases within two of the most polluting industries in the world: the textile and food industries. An estimated 1.3 billion tonnes of food is wasted globally each year (one third of all food produced for human consumption), whereas globally we produce 13 million tons of textile waste each year, 95% of which could be reused or recycled (The World Counts & The Pretty Planeter). Additionally, these case studies were chosen due to my personal participation in them. I engaged in these two initiatives both internally (as a volunteer) as well as externally (as a food collector and swapping clothes). Thus, the case studies present both objective (two of the most relevant and significant cases regarding industry wastage) and subjective (I lived in these two cities during the time of writing my thesis) reasons for them being chosen.

EL INTERCAMBIADOR (“The exchanger”)

El Intercambiador is a permanent space for clothes swapping that is based on a point system. After donating clothes, participants get a specific number of points that they can freely exchange for other clothing items at El Intercambiador, a local cooperative/social initiative that works with the objective of combining responsible consumption and sustainable fashion, while promoting creative textile reuse through training and awareness activities. The space for permanent exchange is located in Móstoles - a municipality located 18 km southwest of the city centre of Madrid, and has been possible through the collaboration of Altrapo Lab and Carmila - a company created by Carrefour - a French multinational distribution chain - which has financed El Intercambiador as part of its corporate responsibility programme.

MADBOKS

Madboks is a self-sustained, volunteer-driven initiative that builds local communities by hosting food distribution sessions that provide weekly foodstuff to the community. The initiative is hosted in the Amagar neighbourhood, and its primary aim is to redistribute excess produce from local supermarkets and supermarket chains, thereby reducing food waste. It is supported by Nordic Community - a non-profit organization of
independent entrepreneurs, environmental and social activists, managers and event organizers, that focuses on finding and implementing community-based solutions for cultural, social and environmental challenges in Copenhagen.

Although these ‘alternatives’ are analysed separately from one another in this paper, they however possess many similarities. Both initiatives are born out of an imperative to combat or mitigate the unsustainability of capitalist industries (textiles and foodstuff). Thus, they are both premised on providing an alternative way of organising economic distributions, and supported only through volunteering. In this sense they both act as non-profit and non-monetary exchange systems - where El Intercambiador works with a point system for clothing exchanges, and Madboks with ‘voluntary donations’ in exchange for a box of food.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:**

As with all research papers, several limitations have affected the present work - some avoidable and some not. However, what is important is that these factors are recognised to understand how certain results and outcomes might be biased (either due to limitations affecting the results of the fieldwork, or the methodology of the fieldwork). Below are some limitations faced throughout the conduction of this paper.

**COVID-19:** The global pandemic obviously had an impact on almost all activities around the world, including my two case studies. The Madboks initiative changed in several ways to accommodate the increasing social distancing restrictions, including: a halt of all special events, the need to book time slots for food pickups as well as only allowing one food collector in at a time. Moreover, upon further Covid-19 restriction, all Madboks activities closed down temporarily for the month of December 2020, thus preventing any further fieldwork from taking place. Similarly, El Intercambiador initiative also felt the impacts of Covid-19 restrictions, since, as the organizers from El Intercambiador informed me, they went through a notable decrease in the number of attendants to the shop as well as the intake of clothes to be swapped with the arrival of the pandemic.

Furthermore, not only did Covid-19 affect the ability to conduct research, but it also had an impact on the behaviours of participants during ethnography as well as during several interviews. Unfortunately, this posed a higher risk to the skewing of data than what might have been the case had the research been conducted under ‘normal’ conditions. For example, interviews regarding people’s motivations for engaging in food sharing or clothes swapping could have been affected by the economic strains caused by the pandemic, which would not have been the case had the pandemic not occurred.
SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS: Unlike the Madboks initiative, which is very active in social media, El intercambiador does not have its own social media page, therefore reducing the ability to conduct content and discourse analysis only via Altrapo Lab's website. Additionally, the fact that El Intercambiador did not have a social media account together with the low number of attendants to the shop hindered the identification and possibility of contacting participants (an important point of data collection necessary for completing method 2).

CLOSURE OF EL INTERCAMBIADOR: Adding to these limitations is the fact that El Intercambiador closed down before the fieldwork was fully conducted. This made matters increasingly more difficult regarding method 2, since it unexpectedly denied the possibility of physically interviewing participants and carrying out further ethnography.
DISCUSSION

In order to gain empirical knowledge on the previously discussed perspectives and debates around alterity, this research uses two selective examples of initiatives based on alternative exchange systems from Denmark and Spain, namely, Madboks and El Intercambiador. The following discussion begins by briefly outlining an ethnographic analysis of both initiatives before moving on to critically analyse both the external and internal perspective of each initiative.

ETHNOGRAPHY

In order to gain empirical knowledge on the previously discussed perspectives and debates around alterity, this research uses two selective examples of initiatives based on alternative exchange systems from Denmark and Spain, namely, Madboks and El Intercambiador. As previously explained, one of the main reasons to select these two case studies was the fact that I had the opportunity to personally engage in them as a volunteer. This participation allowed me to further understand the daily work of these initiatives as well as meet the people engaged in them. Additionally, this participatory ethnographic approach allowed for an in-situ deep and holistic analysis into the initiatives’ shared culture, behaviours, conventions, and social dynamics - a level of analysis often not attainable through interviews or secondary research. Immersing myself into ethnographic research at the beginning of my research proved vital in gaining hands-on experience and insider knowledge - which later served to guide and structure the methodology (e.g. actors, actants, data collection methods), ultimately directing the advancement of this paper.

Regarding Madboks, the organization of events entailed several duties and tasks that needed to be fulfilled, namely, collecting surplus food (food that under ‘normal’ circumstances, would have been wastage) from different supermarkets and bakeries across the city of Copenhagen, registering the data related to the donated food - i.e. product, quantity and origin-, sorting the food out (Figures 5 & 6), distributing it to the community as well as setting up, packing up and cleaning after the events. For this reason, volunteers were divided by different tasks, each assigned to a different time of the week or the day. Additionally, although the initiative marked a strong democratic rationale regarding the assignment of tasks and duties, the decision-making power ultimately relied on the main organiser (Roxana Zlate). It was mostly her vision, management and decisions which directed the initiatives continuation. However,
regarding certain aspects (such as the times and days of events), many volunteers were included within the decision-making process.

Food redistribution events were held twice a week (on Mondays and Fridays), at a locally owned and freely landed centre in the neighbourhood of Amagar. The outside area of the centre was also a common place of gathering for homeless people, who used to remain in proximity to those participants queuing to get their box full of groceries. Paradoxically, throughout the months I volunteered (October to December 2020), none of the homeless people ever approached the event requesting any food and, when inquiring into this issue with Madboks staff, they pointed out the fact that most of the food we had would be of no use for people who would not have a place to cook it.

Despite this uneasy feeling of redistributing food next to people who likely needed it more than those coming to pick up the food parcels (mostly students), Madboks events had rather positive vibes along with a strong sense of community. Music was always playing in the background and the young team of volunteers showed a high level of energy and commitment. Besides, the positive vibe steaming from the team of volunteers only added to what was already a rewarding experience for the food collectors, since they could not only get a generous box of free food but also, and simultaneously, contribute to reducing food waste. Furthermore, within and among this food-sharing community, the codes of conduct always emphasized respect for other food collectors and volunteers. For instance, volunteers -who could also take a free box of groceries with the foodstuff they wanted- actively tried, on the one hand, to be mindful of the food reserves (as to not deny others of items that were few or limited) and, on the other hand, to create fairly distributed food boxes for everyone, in terms of quantity and type. This showed that the sharing of food and the commitment to reduce waste represented something greater than just another means of material acquisition.
However, it was not only food that was circulated and shared through the work of Madboks, advice, information and skills were also a crucial element. As they mention in their Facebook page, “Many factors contribute to food waste. Learning about these factors and understanding them helps create solutions” (30th of June 2021, Madboks Facebook). Indeed, the organization was very active in educating its followers on social media on how to change their food consumption patterns. Through channels such as Instagram and Facebook, Madboks provided numerous recipe ideas to make with the ‘rescued’ food, tips to make food last longer as well as information on the fun facts and nutritional benefits of different vegetables (Figures 7, 8 & 9). In fact, the survey conducted with the food sharing attendants confirmed Madbok’s role as a source of learning and behavioural change, since 68% of the attendants alleged having gained food-saving skills after their participation in this initiative (Appendix A).

Moving to El Intercambiador, this cloth-swapping space was born as an experiment based on AltrapoLab’s experience in hosting temporary cloth-swapping events in the capital of Madrid. As Natalia Castellanos, one of the 4 managers of the organization, explained, the team was offered the opportunity to set up a fully funded permanent space as part of the corporate social responsibility programme of Carmila, the enterprise managing the shopping centres of the French supermarket chain Carrefour (Appendix B). The shop, located in the municipality of Móstoles (region of Madrid), was open 3 days a week, was run by the 4 managers of Altrapo Lab, who worked there on a rotatory basis. The medium of exchange was organised according to a point system, as opposed to a monetary system, meaning that each type of item brought by the attendants would be exchanged for a specific number of points -i.e. trousers 5 points, t-shirts 3 points, dresses 5 points etc.-, that could in turn be exchanged for other clothing items available at the shop.
At first sight, the aesthetics of El Intercambiador did not look much different to a regular clothing store. It was clean and aesthetically pleasant, the clothes were hung and arranged according to colour, there were mannequins showcasing some of the clothes and the space had mirrors, a counter and a changing room (Figures 10 & 11). However, when looking closer, there were many details that made El Intercambiador unique. It had a mural with a world map where clothing labels were sorted out according to their place of manufacture. There were also many messages dedicated to promoting second hand clothing, for example ‘second hand doesn’t mean second best’. Additionally, the store had some books available to the public to read, dedicated to showing multiple ideas for upcycling old clothes, and the staff were always ready to engage in conversations with the clients about topics related to clothing waste and its concerning externalities.

Furthermore, one could also witness how the managers of El Intercambiador were very knowledgeable regarding all the clothes they had and placed a longer-term value on them than what fast fashion would, often making personal comments on them regarding their precedence, material state and future possibilities. Yet, what I personally found most different at El Intercambiador compared to a traditional clothing shop (especially to those belonging to big chains) was the ‘slow’ temporality that prevailed during the process of swapping clothes. Unlike the prevailing pressurised, quick and impersonal shopping experience, people at El Intercambiador took their time to look around the shop, try clothes on and chat. This way, through a combination of an alternative exchange system and targeted knowledge dissemination, the team of Altrapo Lab simultaneously made El Intercambiador an ethical and political space.
EXTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

On the one hand there is little confidence that an emancipatory alternative to capitalism is politically achievable. However, on the other hand, it is also undisputed that capitalism is not a sustainable system for the future of mankind. Thus, the question is where do alternatives stand in relation to this contradiction? And, how does this positionality impact alternatives? Taking a positionality perspective of Madboks' and El Intercambiador’s relation to the capitalist system invites a type of critical outlook whereby the transformational capacity of these alternative initiative can be viewed both in terms of how these practices challenge the hegemonic capitalist system, and how the hegemonic system, in turn, challenges the transformation nature of these initiatives. Thus, this bi-directional approach displays how the antagonistic relationship between the mainstream and alternative is both complex and intertwined - displaying a multi-faceted relationship where alternatives are oppositional to, dependent on, and embedded within' the dominant capitalist system.

MADBOKS

In an interview with the main organiser of Madboks, Roxana Zlate (Appendix D), she described Madboks' positionality as, of course, "still exist[ing] within a capitalistic system; because if there wasn’t a capitalistic system that produced all of this waste, there would be no Madboks either". However, dependence is not to be confused with compliance here, as there are still narratives which can be considered as not strictly oppositional to the capitalist system, but at least contestational. For example, Roxana mentioned how “we try to promote this mentality that food isn’t only good if it's perfect...we don’t need perfect items for them to be nutritious and good in our diets" (Appendix D). In this way, a shift in mindset can be said to create benefits beyond only the saving of food via the initiative, but cross-over into minimising wastage at home as well. But how far does this go in terms of addressing one of the most unsustainable industries of wastage?

It is quite unlikely that initiatives like Madboks - at their current scale - will have any impact in mitigating the creation of food surplus and its associated environmental externalities. In other words, by collecting the food surplus and re-distributing it, they do not tackle those larger structural processes that lead to wastage, namely the over-production and oversupply of food beyond human nutritional needs. Hence, their activities can be noted as plaster band solutions, as they do not engage with the root causes that lead to food surplus, nor do they address the hegemonic power relations
that perpetuate such processes. Wright (2017) refers to this as ‘taming’ capitalism, as opposed to overcoming it. Here, the idea of taming capitalism does not eliminate the underlying tendency for capitalism to generate harm, but simply counteracts its effects. In this way, Madboks proposes a softer or more abstract mode of contestation, namely, by creating a perception of food not only as a commodity, but as a commons. In this way, it justifies the redistribution of food according to notions of equity, helping to mitigate food insecurity and promote non-capitalistic behaviour towards food-sharing among Madboks participants and volunteers. In fact, according to Write (2017), “sometimes this is good enough”

Another important aspect to consider is volunteerism. Madboks constantly struggles to find volunteers, most noticeably in the duties of driving and food collection - reflecting a constant challenge for every event. Evidence of this can be seen through social media analysis, where several postings reflect the challenges of relying on volunteerism, ultimately affecting the smooth continuation of Madboks. Evidence of this is reflected by social media comments such as “Foodsharing Amager simply does not happen without our little community. The collection team is essential to the smooth running of the event. Without drivers we simply cannot save the mountains of food thrown out on a weekly basis in the Amager area” and “Dear food saver, due to the lack of volunteers signed up for tomorrow’s food distribution event, we are forced to cancel it. We do this with heavy hearts, unfortunately we need volunteers to get the food collected, sorted and packed into your boxes. Without volunteers we cannot do our work” (24th of June 2021, Madboks Facebook). More concerning is the fact that the main organiser Roxana, will be leaving Copenhagen soon. Here Roxana stated that “I’m leaving for a long-term internship in another country. So, my biggest challenge is to get team leaders that can actually keep the project sustainable without having me as a central point of the organisation. Also, because I don’t get paid either. Although I have spent a full-time job with Madboks, I cannot convince a lot of people to do the same. It would be mental” (Appendix D). What these aspects of volunteerism demonstrate is the difficulty of unpaid work and thus it represents, arguably, one of the main challenges to the problem of embeddedness within a capitalist system, where one’s livelihood directly depends on one’s ability to earn an income.

However, Roxana did also stress the importance of volunteerism as means of contestation, as she mentioned, “part of what puts us a little bit in opposition to the capitalist system is volunteerism as a means of organising these projects. We need to change the idea that our work is only valuable if we get paid for it. I think we really need to change that. Because there are a lot of rewards that you can get out of volunteering
that have nothing to do with money. And I think that if we want to change this capitalist overview perspective, we have to adapt to those ideals. Doing things for other rewards that are not financial” (Appendix D). However, although this does resemble a domain foreign to or at least outside of the capitalist system, the question of opposition is an interesting one. One only needs to ask the extent to which the concept of volunteerism does push against the capitalist rationale. Adopting a critical perspective, it has already been noted that capitalism can never afford to close non-capitalist forms of social reproduction down; it relies on their continuing existence (Leyshon et. al, 2014, 364). Largely because the neoliberal state relies considerably on the shift in the provision of services from the state to either the private or non-profit sectors (Böhm et al. 2010, 25).

One of the most prevalent examples of this can be seen in figure 12 posted in the Instagram page of Madboks, where the food waste advertisement states ‘it starts and ends with you’ - showcasing a uniquely the weight of responsibilisation on the individual as opposed to those actors most responsible for the food surpluses Madboks collects. However, such a stance(s) assumes that if food savers change their behaviour accordingly, they can actively help fight food wastage. While food sharing initiatives like Madboks do, through their practices, rescue increasing amounts of food surplus every year, these are however rather small quantities (Ciaghi and Villafiorita, 2016), almost negligible to the mass amounts of wastage occurring in Copenhagen alone. Thus, this assumption needs to be approached with caution as it firstly might negate the structural and systemic problems with food wastage and secondly overestimate the agency and responsibilization of individuals.

Another example illustrating this, is how Madboks provides a channel for businesses to manage their waste. Here, Madboks solves a rather problematic issue for such businesses; not to mention saving them huge sums of money with regards transportation of waste and wastage. In fact, according to Roxana, “part of why supermarkets are happy to collaborate with organisations such as Madboks is because by not throwing out food, they save money. Because they actually have to pay a fee for all of the food they throw out” (Appendix D). However, even though alternatives can be
seen as a beneficial cause for the capitalist system’s continuation, they are also constantly challenged and contested by it. Here Roxana describes how the idea of running the initiative completely outside of capitalism’s logic is utopian, because “we have to pay for things. We have to pay for vans, we have to pay for transporting the food, we have to pay for cleaning supplies” (Appendix D). However, instead of commodifying the exchange system, the decision was made to rather ask for donations. Roxana states that “The recommended donation at the moment is 25 dkk. 25 dkk from around 25 people is what we need in order to pay for van costs – which is usually about 80% of the expenses of an event [even though van costs are subsidised by one of their supporting partners ‘letgo.dk - a van rental enterprise], and then gloves masks, bin bags, cleaning supplies etc. So, in order for us to be able to just cover our costs, that's what we need to get during an event...One thing that I've never agreed with... is that all of this can be done without money. It cannot. We still do exist in a capitalistic system” (Appendix D).

**EL INTERCAMBIADOR**

Much in the same way as Madboks, El intercambiador also functions within the limits or boundaries of capitalism. Addressing the positionality approach, the first evidence of dependence stemmed from the fact that El intercambiador, was completely economically dependent on the French supermarket chain Carrefour - who financed the initiative (rent, maintenance, electricity, cleaning, the space, etc.). According to an interview with Natalia Castellanos, (Appendix B), “El Intercambiador is something that by itself is not sustainable, it is not economically viable, as it is based on exchange...right now we do not see an easy way to make it economically viable without being dependent on private financing”. This statement points to the limitations imposed on alternatives by the often inescapable logic of capitalism, of which El intercambiador is no exception. According to Natalia “El intercambiador was looking at letting it “be run by volunteers” (Appendix B). However, an internal survey

![Figure 13: Would you see yourself as a collaborating partner dedicating hours voluntarily, serving the public, putting clothes on, supporting organization tasks? (Source: Appendix F).](image)
conducted by the organization exposed the limitations of this idea (Appendix F). The survey asked its social media followers if they would see themselves dedicating their time as volunteers (attending people, sorting the clothes and supporting Altrapo Lab’s organizational tasks). However, the results showed that 49.32% stated that they would, but only on an occasional basis, 29.73% stated that they would not, and 15.54% stated that they would be ready to volunteer from 4 to 16 hours a month (Figure 13). These statistics reflect a lack of a commitment to volunteerism as a viable option to sustain the initiative, forcing the initiative to adopt employee relationships of paid work - an impossible reality without external funding, since the initiative itself does not generate any income. Besides, despite volunteerism’s potential to address the economic difficulties in part, it would also, as mentioned before, symbolise a shifting responsibilisation to the individual.

Additionally, Natalia also stated that El intercambiador was “therefore looking at the possibility of changing the system and implementing a system of partners of membership” (Appendix B), where members would be charged an annual or monthly fee to engage within the initiative. Natalia adds that “another option is to pay for the clothes. We are thinking of somehow monetizing it because in the end it has to be economically sustainable… We also have to make people see that an initiative like this has many costs behind it and that these costs must be covered somehow” (Appendix B). However, when asking participants about their willingness to pay a monthly fee to ensure the viability of El Intercambiador, a survey conducted by Altrapo Lab showed how the majority of respondents were not intrigued by the idea (Figure 14). Furthermore, when asking about the fee they would be
ready to pay to all those people who said they would become paying members, 77.53% of the respondents choose the lowest fee (Figure 15).

Moreover, it has already been mentioned that the capitalist system has to a large extent occupied the limits of the thinkable, a kind of ‘colonisation of the mind’ (Leyshon et. al., 2014), or as Argüelles calls it, “the production of neoliberal mentalities of rule” (2018, 77). This narrative is exemplified in the monetary aspect of exchanges, where value is only seen through a price tag. In this light, Natalia states that “we have also realized that when goods are monetized, even if it is through a small fee or donation, people give more value to participating. When something is 100% free it works in some cases but in many others it does not. Since it costs one nothing to get goods, these end up not being taken care of. Monetizing the process really creates a filter to truly give the clothes the value they have” (Appendix B). Thus, the challenge of embeddedness not only pertains to the economic dependence of El Intercambiador on Carrefour, but much more i.e. the psychological neoliberal mind-set or perception of how people attach meaning and value to things.

In the same vein, the peripheral location of El Intercambiador played a key limitation to this initiative. As explained before, Altrapo Lab had always worked in the city centre of Madrid, where their previous clothing swapping events were highly successful. Nevertheless, in a survey conducted by Altrapo Lab through their social media channels (Appendix F), 49.01% of the respondents indicated that they had never attended El Intercambiador because of the long distance of its location, while 15.89% mentioned that they didn’t even know about its existence. Indeed, this connects to the previously mentioned argument that alternatives -and hence alternative cultures and subjectivities- are mainly concentrated in city centres. In fact, Zaloa, another member of the Altrapo Lab team, mentioned that within the population of Móstoles the second-hand culture was lower, and hence people could be a bit more hesitant to swap as opposed to buying new clothes (Appendix B). Besides, she also added that “the public that comes here is very different from the one we are used to in the centre of Madrid. For example, when we do specific events in the centre of Madrid we notice that the quality of clothing is much better. The quality of clothing is now much worse” (Appendix B).

Thus, in concluding El Intercambiador’s positionality, it can be argued that it is still not a radical solution, as it does not solve the basic flaw in contemporary consumption-driven capitalism. Although El intercambiador is motivated by a desire to escape the exploitation and unsustainability of the capitalist system and create an alternative clothing system less dependent on market exchange, it however is limited in
its ability to escape these forces. On the one hand, the very existence of the shop depends on the surplus of clothes bought by people, since it is the sum of those clothes we have in our wardrobe but no longer use which serves as the 'currency' to get new items. In this sense, it could be argued that clothing swap could be merely prolonging the consumption cycle of clothes, rather than posing a direct challenge to the fast fashion industry. According to Goodman & Bryant (2013, 109), such re-circulation of clothes “may simply reinforce wasteful consumption, as [they] help 'marginal' and/or bargain-hungry consumers to partake in a high consumption lifestyle” (Goodman & Bryant, 2013, 109). In fact, as Zaloa Basaldúa explained, “there are people who come every day that we open, and bring and (...) often return to us things that they took from the exchanger the day before. It scares us because it seems that we are generating consumer monsters” (Appendix C).

However, it must also be pointed out that El Intercambiador does challenge capitalism in some ways. Although second hand consumption is still miniscule compared to overall mainstream consumption patterns, the recycling of used clothing could be partially disincentivizing the purchasing of new clothing, thus having, although limited, an impact further down the production chain. Furthermore, one of the main contributions of El Intercambiador might have been the promotion of second hand culture within the community of Móstoles. Unfortunately, given that the entire initiative was only a pilot project that lasted only three to four months and that the project failed to materialise in the population of the municipality, no more funding was given for the project's continuation and El intercambiador had to close down. Natalia explained that the experimental nature of El Intercambiador left “too little margin to see if such an innovative initiative materializes” (Appendix B). Additionally, Covid-19 restrictions and the subsequent closure played against the potential success of the project.

INTERNAL PERSPECTIVE

To recap, the internal environment refers to those aspects both guiding and enabling the development of these initiatives. Therefore, this necessitates an investigation into the aspects related to organisational structure of Madboks and El Intercambiador, such as the location, day of the week and time of the day in which they take place, their mission, vision and objectives as well as the necessary technical, digital and cultural skills required to engage. The examination of these variables provides a critical inwards-looking approach in which to understand the interplay between organisational decisions and the impact they have in defining participation as well as
the type and scope of their transformation. Thus, the second focus analyses the participation -either as organizers, volunteers or attendants-, in terms of age, nationality, gender, occupation and educational background. This in turn, reflects notions of inclusivity and exclusivity shaped by the categories of race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc., whether directly, indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. Once having analysed these two internal aspects, the last section will explore the imaginaries of change that imprint Madboks and El Intercambiador, by analysing the motives behind people’s engagement in these initiatives as well as their perceived role as agents of change. Indeed, how the organizations describe themselves, what they consider important, their goals, motivations and contributions are all considered important factors influencing the scope and type of transformation.

**MADBOKS**

Although organisational, engagement and imaginaries of change aspects are discussed separately here, it is important to note that they remain intertwined and susceptible to changes within the other.

**Organizational**

Regarding location, it is essential to understand that it encompasses both aspects of place and space. Space here refers simply to physical location; however, place refers to certain attachments to that space. Thus, because different socio-economic groups are stratified geographically, the choice of where Madboks locates itself is more than just a matter of available space, but can rather be seen as political. Indeed, because of issues related to proximity and mobility, this spatial component dictates different levels of accessibility to engage in such activities. In the case of Madboks, events were originally held in Amager, the neighbourhood that hosts Copenhagen University, and perhaps the reason why the majority of people who engaged in the initiative were students (51% of attendants and 60% of volunteers). However, Roxana mentioned opening another food sharing event in Norrebro “because of the higher percentage of the population there that lives on a lower income in the neighbourhood” (Appendix D). The reality is that the neighbourhood of Norrebro has one of the highest poverty rates in Copenhagen (Hornemann & Eim, 2015), and thus signals a location where the social transformative goals may have a bigger impact.

In addition, the times and days of Madboks events are generally intersected with either work hours or class times, which is likely to impact the type of people who are able
to engage in the initiative. Madboks events were held on Mondays and Fridays - with volunteer shifts from 08h30 am to 18h00 pm, and pick up times between 15h00 pm and 17h00 pm. According to Roxana, “the pick-up times work fine for people that come and pick up the boxes. If it doesn’t work for them they usually message me and ask if they can come a little bit later and that’s fine. This has not really been a problem. However, the volunteer shifts have been a little harder to fill up lately because a lot of people are saying that because it is during a work day, it is a little bit harder to volunteer there, and thus, a lot of people would prefer it if it were on a weekend day” (Appendix D. In confirmation of this, one volunteer stated that “the shifts [don’t] easily fit around classes at university, they usually clash” (Appendix E), while another stated that events usually took place in the “productive” part of the day (Appendix E).

Moving to the skills and education, as Argüelles explains “the capacities needed to start and sustain these sorts of initiatives, including the capacity to volunteer or personal capacities such as individual leadership point alternatives-building as a quite challenging and resource-demanding task, which might be detrimental for certain social groups in particular” (Argüelles, 2018, 14). In this context, the fact that dominant socio economic groups are more likely than non-dominant groups to acquire the knowledge and skills often required to engage at alternatives, might be a barrier to make these spaces inclusive. In fact, regarding Madboks, Roxana mentioned that “for me I think what was very beneficial was that I worked in the restaurant industry for a really long time in management positions. I think this helped me strengthen my people, communication, and time management skills, which came to be very effective at Madboks. because (...) you need to have certain people skills to get people involved, show up and work for free and to participate with the community that we are trying to build here. And although fighting food waste is a great motivator, it's not enough to make people come back week after week after week” (Appendix D). Thus, it is evident that the coordination work carried out by Roxana necessitates a certain kind of knowledge and skills, such as managerial, organizational and leadership skills, as well as knowledge on the food sector.

Concerning the volunteers, they needed to have some basic level of English - giving that this was the language of communication-, basic digital skills -in order to register as volunteers and sign up for shifts- as well as, in the case of the drivers, be in possession of a driving license. Besides, as reflected by Madboks’ social media page, skills such as social media, photography and social media skills are emphasized as important and highly appreciated. However, given that the majority of volunteers were young students, these aspects did not pose any challenge or limitation. Finally, and
moving to the attendants of Madboks events, the only relevant skill necessitated a somewhat basic level of IT (information technology), as booking a time slot to get a food parcel with Madboks required access to the internet as well as the ability to navigate social media where the events are advertised. However, when investigating the limitations of making a booking imposed by the digital divide (the ‘have’ and ‘have-nots’ of an internet connection), Roxana answered that access to the internet was not a problem in the case of Denmark, and that digital means of organization proved essential to the type of work Madboks was doing (Appendix D).

When it comes to the way Madboks describes and promotes itself, it’s official website states that it is ‘a self-sustainable, lean, volunteer driven project that builds local community, provides weekly nutrition and education/training in socially disadvantaged areas of Greater Copenhagen’ (Nordic Community website), with the aim to ‘reducing food waste at a local level by partnering up with local food businesses to distribute their food surplus to those attending our events’ (Madboks Amagar Facebook). Thus, all three pillars of sustainability are touched upon, namely, environmental (reducing food waste), social (fostering community and providing free nutrition in socially disadvantaged areas of Greater Copenhagen), as well economic (through a voluntary donation exchange system). However, to what extent each pillar is emphasised is a matter of critical reflection. Indeed, as seen in figure 16, a deeper and more critical analysis of the social media page exposed how Madboks emphasizes the environmental aspect of the initiative to a much larger extent than the social justice component. Indeed, an interview with Roxana revealed that the environmental focus of the initiative was indeed the primary goal, with the social aspect being secondary. Here Roxana mentioned “saving food wastage would be first. Because we promote ourselves as an anti-food waste project. It’s the first thing that people know about us. It’s all over our social media. So, it’s the one thing that is the most visible” (Appendix D). More evidence of this is the fact that Madboks does not cater for homeless people. Here Roxana explained that “we are

![Figure 16: Preventing food loss and waste are critically important (Source: Facebook page Madboks, 14th July. https://www.facebook.com/Madboks/)](https://www.facebook.com/Madboks/)
also not social workers, we do not have social working backgrounds, and we decided to approach low-income families instead of homeless people because there are already a lot of organisations that deal with homelessness and we just didn’t have the means to do so” (Appendix D). In this way, the self-representation of Madboks seeks to attract those attendants who join Madboks driven by ethical and sustainable reasons, over those affected by the inequalities of capitalism and hence in most need of the help provided by these alternatives.

**Engagement**

Empirical research revealed that the average ages of Madboks volunteers and attendants were 26.3 and 27.65 respectively. According to Roxana, there are very few volunteers over the age of 40 (Appendix D). In this vein, it is important to note that most volunteers and attendants of Madboks are students, and thus, very few are full-time employed (figures 17 & 18). Additionally, according to Roxana, “a lot of [volunteers] come from a climate change or sustainability field of study background”, emphasising the fact that certain educational backgrounds are a key determinant of who engages with these types of initiatives” (Appendix D).

![Figure 17: Occupation of Madboks attendants (Source: Appendix A).](image)

![Figure 18: Occupation of Madboks volunteers. (Source: Appendix E).](image)

Regarding gender, whereas a relatively even gender distribution was seen among attendants of Madboks (Figure 19), the distribution among volunteers was rather uneven, with female participation greatly outweighing that of male participation (Figure 20).

![Figure 19: Gender distribution of Madboks attendants (Source: Appendix A).](image)
Concerning this uneven balance, Roxana remarked that “my own assumption is because men are not thought to be as willing to take on volunteerism [because] helping people from a non-financial point of view is not very masculine. It’s very female energy all over. It just has to do with patriarchal notions of what work looks like… We have this understanding that work is only valuable if we get aid for it. I feel men have this perspective more than women do” (Appendix D).

Additionally, the profile picture of the official website of Madboks (Figure 21), shows only women participants. This links to debates around how practices of solidarity, communality and sharing are gendered, generally embedded in women’s social networks, leading to further questions regarding how gender is reinforced and reproduced through the imaginaries and practices of such alternatives.

Regarding the level of participation of immigrants vs Danes among food collectors (Figure 22), the majority of attendants were immigrants (73%), showcasing that Danish citizens were not the most common users of the Madboks initiative. One plausible explanation regarding this finding is that the majority of young Danish people are either employed or receive government subsidies during and after their studies, thus putting them in an economic position where initiatives such as Madboks would not be an economic necessity (albeit a sustainable one). Indeed, the percentage of Danes with no registered income is only
10 to 15%, whereas the corresponding figure for young immigrants is around 50% (Homemann & Elm, 2015).

The findings were similar among volunteers where only 10% were of Danish nationality. Roxana gives one plausible reason for this, stating that “I think Danes aren’t as interested in being volunteers as international people are because international people look to these places as spaces in which they can make friends and network. While Danes maybe don’t need that as much”. Indeed, Roxana remarks that “one of the challenges we have in Copenhagen as well, is maybe involving Danish people a little bit more” (Appendix D).

Besides, another important point to consider is that Madboks does not cater for the homeless. Here Roxana stated that “It is very hard to involve homeless people because they rarely have access to a laptop or whatever in which to make a booking”. However, she added “that would not matter anyway. The people from around there are either alcoholics or drug addicts, a lot of them are actively selling or recovering from drugs, a lot of them won’t even remember that they have a booking and a lot of them don’t even have enough structure and organisation in their lives that would allow them to book this week and then come next week and pick up their boxes. [Additionally,] there are already a lot of organisations that deal with homelessness and we just didn’t have the means to do so” (Appendix D). However, Roxana did state to occasionally having given food to homeless people after an event, but that this was only upon the occurrence of there being leftovers that did not require to be cooked or stored in a fridge (Appendix D).

Furthermore, being aware of the fact that most of the attendees were students, Roxana did mention trying to expand the reach of the initiative more towards low-income families (Appendix D). Evidence of this can be seen by how Madboks is looking to open up another food sharing event in Norrebro (one of the lowest income group neighbourhoods) and by doing this, actively trying to target lower income demographics. Here Roxana mentioned that “I have had some collaborations with the Danish refugee council. So, I do try and ensure that some of our events get promoted in the right spaces. I have also had a meeting with some of the people at the commune that work with low-income citizens and families, to reach specifically low-income people that would benefit from it more. When you live on a lower income a lot of these things are not necessarily prioritised. So being able to provide this to people that aren’t usually able to get it – it’s part of the initiative” (Appendix D). Finally, Roxana also mentioned an attempt to include people of an older demographic e.g. pensioners as volunteers. This is because
pensioners “have a lot of time on their hands. It wouldn’t matter to them if the events were on weekdays or weekends because they don’t really have much to do. And they would like to give back to the community. There are a lot of these people. But we do have a Danish language barrier and something that we are working on with the people that work at the commune in Amar is to approach and access those demographics a little bit more” (Appendix D).

**Imaginaries of change**

In order to understand how participants in Madboks understand their perceived role as agents of change - i.e. their moral obligation, capabilities, knowledge and positionality regarding the provision of solutions to socio-environmental problems -, it is necessary to understand the reasons and intentions behind people’s engagement. While it is clear that reducing food waste maintains the strongest motivation in the case of both attendants and volunteers, Madboks also provides a considerable incentive to save money for both groups, as reflected in the 2nd and 3rd reason to engage (Figures 23 and 24).

Furthermore, stressing the importance of saving money, one attendant commented on the Madboks Facebook page that “thanks for yet a huge amount of delicious food for just a small donation. It’s a huge help for me financially to be able to attend all your events as a regular, as I have a very tight budget, while at the same time it allows for me to feel that I do a
little bit to reduce food waste, even though I unfortunately don't have the resources to volunteer” (21/03/21 Facebook Madboks). In addition, less than half of Madboks food collectors stated that they would still attend Madboks events if they had to pay for the food parcels (Figure 25). This points to economic concerns being somewhat a dominant motivator behind food sharing events. As one respondent stated, “especially with the cost of living so high in Copenhagen, participating in foodsharing was helpful for keeping both a balanced diet and balanced finances while living here”. In a similar vein, figure 26 reflects the level of dependence on the Madboks initiative, where 53% of respondents stated that they relied on Madboks weekly events for their food resources, with only 24% stating that they did not. Indeed, Roxana explained how they “have people that come every single week and they talk about how this is their only grocery source. It is their only space where they get their food from because it is a more sustainable and cheap way to get their weekly groceries” (Appendix D).

From a volunteer perspective, this trend is slightly less exaggerated. As seen in figure 27, 70% of participants stated they would still volunteer with Madboks, even if there were no personal rewards (in this case - free food). This demonstrates that there are deeper perceptions of how volunteers view their participation with Madboks that go beyond merely saving money or getting free food. According to Roxana, when considering the main motivations of volunteers, she stated that “saving food wastage would be first...The second thing would be that people come because of the sense of community. A lot of people come because they are new to Copenhagen or because they want to grow their network, they want to make new friends. They want to meet people that have a sustainable mindset, [and] the third thing would be that you get a box of...
free food every time you volunteer. So there is also an incentive in that sense” (Appendix D). It is worthy to note here that different motivations and expectations behind individuals participating in Madboks also runs the risk of leading to tensions e.g. those who see their participation as an expression of certain sets of principles (ethically and morality) and others that mainly pursue individual benefit (free food).

The reality is that for a large majority, engagement is Madboks is political, an act of intervention whereby participants are viewed as agents of change. According to Roxana, this responsibility falls on the individual as much as it falls on the state. On this point she explains that “the state is doing some things. Certainly they can be doing more. I don’t disagree with that. But what we need to do is kind of stop waiting for someone else to do this for us. As citizens we have the responsibility to do these things ourselves. It is all of our responsibility. The state isn’t the one that creates the demand for perfect food in supermarkets. It’s also people who refuse to buy anything that does not look perfect. So we also have to take responsibility for that and we have to do it from the bottom up” (Appendix D). This self-perception as agents of change is also echoed by volunteers who acknowledged the importance of their work. For example, Matthew, Madboks’ food collection manager, claimed that “it is our responsibility, as consumers, to demand and contribute to a more equitable and sustainable food system. Sometimes change has to occur from the bottom up, and Madboks provides an avenue for consumers to facilitate that change. For the 9 months that I have been volunteering with Madboks, I feel that I have played an active and important role in this process.” (16/04/21, Madboks Instagram). Additionally, there are some volunteers who also view their role as creating awareness, over and above mitigating food wastage. Here two respondents stated that “I think [Madboks] has a positive impact because it motivates others to do the same and help and also things can be done faster and better” and that “It makes people more aware about how much food is waste in supermarkets and they become more aware about the big problem that food waste is” (Appendix E).

EL INTERCAMBIADOR

The analysis here follows the same approach as Madboks i.e. that although each aspect (organisational, engagement and imaginaries of change) is discussed separately, they are not mutually exclusive.

Organisational

As mentioned before, El Intercambiador was located in the Carrefour shopping mall of Mostoles, a town situated in the outskirts of Madrid. However, the coordinators of
Altrapo Lab pointed to the possibility of the location being one of the main reasons why El Intercambiador had to close down. As Natalia mentioned, “we came from doing events in central Madrid, which is where things happen. And the general perception is that nothing happens outside the city centre. (Appendix B). This comment refers back to the previously discussed argument that alternative imaginaries, initiatives and cultures tend to be concentrated in urban settings, and thus its popularity or success is directly related to its location. Besides, although Natalia did mention that they managed to attract some of their usual participants from the city centre, this was on a much less frequent basis. Another factor that limited the materialization and acceptance of the clothes-swapping store in Móstoles might have been that the space was only open 3 days a week -2 of them being weekdays -making it more difficult to access for the working class. However, despite it heavily influencing the outcomes of the initiative, it must be pointed out that the location of El Intercambiador was not an internal decision made by the team of Altrapo Lab, but the only available option provided by the funding enterprise Carmila. This shows that, on many occasions, external and internal aspects of alternative initiatives can be intertwined, affecting the transformational scope and type of each initiative in a complex way.

Furthermore, in the case of Altrapo Lab, a certain level of education and skills were also required to organise the project, such as a certain understanding of fashion, coordination and management skills as well as good command of social media channels - requiring some level of digital literacy. Indeed, all four coordinators had educational backgrounds in either fine arts, audio-visual communication and/or fashion design. Thus, as with Madboks, there is a certain profile and socio-economic class through which these types of projects are managed, visualised and sought. Furthermore, although El Intercambiador was run merely by the 4 workers of Altrapo Lab, the organization contemplated the possibility of incorporating volunteers or employing people who come from job placement services. In the event of that happening, Natalia (Appendix B) mentioned the need of providing them prior training, yet she ensured that it would not require a very high qualification, hence reducing the risk of education and skills being parameters of exclusion to be part of El Intercambiador. Lastly, unlike the case of Madboks, El Intercambiador did not require an internet connection to gain access to the alternative space, since engaging only required one to be physically present in the shop.

Certain aspects such as the goals, visions and objectives of El intercambiador are key in determining the scope and type of transformation the initiative promotes. According to Natalia (Appendix B) “The idea of El Intercambiador arises from the goal of
our cooperative to offer practical and accessible alternatives to the public, not only to accompany the awareness work that we have been doing all this time but also to directly prevent waste. What motivated us to use an economic alternative was the possibility to offer a practical alternative to the conventional system. Awareness starts being raised through habits. In other words, our goal was to do this awareness-raising work from practice”. This awareness work is indeed reflected in many of their social media posts, as is the case of figures 28 and 29, podcasting messages such as ‘consume bravely’, ‘all you need is less’ ‘quality textiles’ or ‘dress for the world you want’. However, the team of Altrapo Lab was aware that El intercambiador initiative stretches beyond only an environmental imperative for those who attend. In fact, according to Natalia, “El Intercambiador is giving an opportunity to people who may have fewer resources to participate in something that is more economically viable” (Appendix B).

Figure 28: Consume bravely (Source: Altrapo Lab Twitter, 19/11/2020 https://twitter.com/altrapolab)

Figure 29: Dress for the world you want (Source: Altrapo Lab Twitter, 27/11/2020 https://twitter.com/altrapolab)

However, the social aspect seemed to be secondary in the way the team Altrapo Lab portrayed the shop. Indeed, the coordinators mentioned that they would like people to bring good quality clothes from good brands, items that people really liked but that they no longer used, instead of bad quality and used things. As Natalia complained, “people don’t bring clothes saying ‘this garment is very cool, but I don’t wear it anymore” (Appendix B). This concern with the aesthetics and quality was also reflected in the concern expressed by Zaloa about the decrease of quality of the clothes since they located themselves in Móstoles (Appendix C), a municipality of lower-socio economic status than Madrid. Thus, it became apparent that the team viewed the initiative as a space where people could have quite an ‘exclusive’ clothes-swapping experience, while simultaneously contributing to a sustainable cause. This aspect was perhaps what made El Intercambiador different from other low-cost second-hand shops in Madrid such as
the store chain Humana, where the quality of the clothes or the aesthetics of the shop did not seem to be a concern when re-distributing second-hand clothes. On the one hand, making the store have a certain up-scaled character could, as Natalia mentioned, result successful in convincing people to engage in second-hand shopping, yet on the other hand it could limit the attendendance of population groups of lower economic status, since they would be less likely to bring clothes that could meet the desired standards of quality.

**Engagement**

The age group attending the El Intercambiador shop varies depending on the day of the week. During the week, there are more older women, whereas on the weekends, there are more younger people (most likely due to the absence of work or studies), mostly between the ages of 14 and 25. Natalia states that this is because “young people are more aware, they have much more assumed the concept of second hand. Be it for fashions, because they have travelled abroad and have seen that second-hand stores are much more popular” (Appendix B).

Regarding the gender distribution, women represent the majority, both from the organisation side (three women and one man (Figure 30)), as well as from the consumers side (roughly 90%) (Appendix B). It thus comes as no surprise that 90% of the clothing is also for women, as this factor is both produced by and a result of the large female presence. According to Natalia, this goes beyond women’s preference for clothes shopping, but is rather political. Here, Natalia notes that “the ‘slaves of fashion have always been us, that’s a fact. And then there is the issue of women and care roles. Indeed, many women come to Móstoles and take men’s clothes for their husbands. The husband doesn’t come, she comes since she is in charge of taking care of both of their wardrobes. Clothing is socially linked to women” (Appendix B). As touched upon by Roxana as well, Natalia mentioned how motivations for specifically women’s engagement with El intercambiador related to forms circularity and sustainability in fashion, where men tend to be less motivated by aspects as such.
Similarly to the case of Madboks, the organizers of El Intercambiador were aware that their initiative left some people behind, and also reflected on how this could be improved to include a wider audience. Firstly, Natalia noted that “we are also seeing the potential to reach further socio economically excluded people now that we are located in Móstoles” (Appendix B). Another social aspect that El intercambiador was trying to bring up with the Madrid City Council was to introduce a coupon like system whereby “people with fewer resources have a way to get clothes that can be ‘à la carte’”. In fact, Natalia mentioned that “people derived from social services could put 20 points in the system, for example, so that they could come and choose their own clothes” (Appendix B). In this way, these people have more agency to choose which items they would want to wear, instead of through receiving donations, where this agency of choice is denied to them. Natalia states that “we believe they should have the autonomy to select the clothes they are taking and wearing” and that “they live the experience of going to a store like other people” (Appendix B).

*Imaginaries of change*

The organisers of El intercambiador mostly expressed their contribution to a more sustainable textile industry, through creating awareness regarding the unsustainability of aspects such as fast fashion - arguably the biggest contribution to textile wastage. Here Natalia stated that the Altrapo Lab team wanted to “offer a practical alternative to the conventional system. Awareness starts being raised through habits. Changing those habits starts from revising our closets and reflecting on what clothes we actually do wear, and how many we never don't. In fact, on average we only use 20% of our clothes. Many of the users of El Intercambiador have realized how many clothes they have, yet don't wear. In other words, our goal was to do this awareness-raising work from practice” (Appendix B). This shows that the team of Altrapo lab, rather than as passive recipients of neoliberal rules, perceived themselves as “social actors who actively construct alternatives through new discourses of social, economic and ecological relationships” (Sonnino & Marsden, 2005, 193). However, Natalia expressed that although this initiative was seen to be more sustainable, there are also some downsides to this exchange system. “Here are people who come every day that we open, and bring and wear the maximum 30 points each time. These people often return to us things that they took from the exchanger the day before”. In other words, Natalia expressed fears that the shop was producing “consumer monsters” (Appendix B).

Regarding the attendants, Natalia stated that “for sustainability I think that only a couple of people have shown me that concern”, implying that most of the attendants came for other reasons. However, and even though saving money was the second
reason at the survey conducted by Altrapo Lab with users of El Intercambiador, most users (29%) opted for the option ‘I like supporting sustainability and responsible consumerism’ (Appendix F).

**INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS**

The prevalence of alternatives such as Madboks and El Intercambiador reveals one of contemporary capitalism’s fundamental dichotomies: both its successes and failures produce mass amounts of wastage, and the scrounering of waste at its margins, respectively. In other words, the explored initiatives can be perceived as an ameliorative solution to the problems of waste stemming from a ‘successful’ consumer capitalism, while, on the other hand, they can be perceived as a solution to ‘failed capitalism’, whereby cheap food sources are available for capitalism’s growing army of dispossessed people desperately trying to survive economically. In this way, capitalism produces both the material resources for alternatives as well as the economic necessity thereof. It also produces “a world in which the successes and failures of capitalism itself are intertwined, and increasingly indistinguishable” (Ferrell, 2014, 305). This paradox, together with other multiple ways in which Madboks and El Intercambiador are embedded within the capitalist system, present a kind of ‘in-betweenness’ among these domains - a complex and similarly entangled relationship. Thus, it has been argued that the capacity of these initiatives to address the larger structural unsustainability of the clothing and food industries is, at least for now, rather limited.

However, the results of the present study suggest that the analysed initiatives could have a certain capability to have a positive long-term impact with regards to the awareness and changes in the overall consumer mindset of the communities where they operate. Nevertheless, the results suggest that their capability to serve as a tool of redistribution of wealth and social justice possess certain limitations. Indeed, results showed that most participants of both initiatives belonged to a relatively homogenous socio-economic group in the society of well educated, middle-class, young women, particularly students, indicating that Madboks and El Intercambiador could somehow be niche activities. In this context, it could be argued that the way Madboks and El Intercambiador are organized (together with some other external forces such as the gendered character of care and solidarity) has considerably affected the profile of those who engage in such alternatives, either as participants, volunteers or managers. In fact, the results suggest that the organizational structure of these initiatives would mostly be contributing to the satisfaction of the needs of a relatively limited group of people from a
particular socio-economic background, even though the initiatives were *de facto* free of charge and open to everyone. It must however be pointed out that the organizers of these waste-redistribution initiatives are well aware of this participatory limitation, and acknowledge the fact that reaching the most needed would imply a completely different organizational structure and profile of the initiative. A plausible explanation to this limitation can be said to stem from the fact that both initiatives prioritised an environmental imperative over a social one, with regards to the goals and visions of the alternatives. Nevertheless, there is some degree of inconsistency between the values that guide these two initiatives and the behaviour and motivation that participants show. Indeed, even though attendants and volunteers do indicate that sustainability is the main reason why they engage, the study showed on many occasions that the economic side was a big component behind the participation in these initiatives. Finally, regarding the imaginaries of change of the participants, it can be argued that there is a widespread belief among respondents that one’s individual actions, despite limited in scope, do contribute to larger socio-environmental change. Besides, results reflected how there is a considerable perception of responsibility among its participants to ‘do something’ to counterbalance the externalities of capitalism.
CONCLUSION

Despite this paper evolving around the notion of alterity, it’s theoretical starting point has been capitalism. We simply cannot move towards a more sustainable and just system without first identifying what is wrong with the current one. In this light, a brief discussion on the main features of the neoliberal development of capitalism highlighted, on the one hand the replacement of the welfare systems of European states with a culture of responsibilization, individual accountability and competitiveness, and, on the other hand, the development of a politics of austerity. Adding to this, the continuously evolving urban space serves simultaneously as the arena and the medium of ongoing struggles regarding capitalism, where increasing inequalities, a rapidly changing climate and cuts to public services add up to a fairly bleak picture of the coming years. Despite there being a widespread recognition of these problems, “the idea of a viable alternative to capitalism that would avoid these harms and make life genuinely better seems quite far-fetched to most people” (Wright, 2017).

However, while it is true that much of the time capitalism seems unassailable, it is also a deeply contradictory system, prone to disruptions and crises, which make the system as a whole fragile, vulnerable to change (Wright, 2017). Indeed, as it has been argued throughout this paper, capitalism is neither omnipotent, nor uniform. As Leyshon et. al. argue, there always remains some space, some level of choice we can exercise within the cracks of capitalism, where alternatives remain essential laboratories for post/non-/modified capitalist practices (2014, 365). In this context, a growing number of academic approaches to alterity, such as the Diverse Economies approach, propose a vision of the economy that focuses on the already existing set of alternative and transformational economic approaches away from the growth paradigm. In this light, despite the idea of a revolutionary rupture with capitalism no longer constitutes a coherent strategy of any significant political force (Wright, 2017), local collective action is giving rise to a growing number of alternative initiatives that seek to challenge capitalism. The present paper narrowed down its focus to waste redistribution initiatives that employ non-monetary exchange systems, since these are playing an increasingly important role in trying to provide alternative ways to manage waste and have already been translated into a wide range of local initiatives (Kailo, 2008).

However, one of the key points to emerge from this research is that considerable practical and ethical ambiguity surrounds the emergence, imagination and advancement of alternative economic geographies, which might be obscuring important foundations about their role and capacities, thus risking to perpetuate current power structures and
imbalances. In this light, the question guiding the present research has been how do the internal and external environments of Madboks and El Intercambiador initiatives impact their transformational character. The analysis of the external environments of Madboks and El Intercambiador showed how these initiatives are linked in multiple ways to the neoliberal premise of individual responsibilization, whereby social organizations and volunteers -usually women- replace public services and welfare provision. This notion of individual responsibility was indeed reflected in the effort done by these initiatives to stress the role and duty of citizens in the ‘fight’ against waste. Moreover, both case studies demonstrated relying on existing capitalist institutions and mechanisms to acquire financial support, materials and the excesses of waste necessary for their own existence. Thereby reflecting a ‘taming’ of capitalism, rather than a significant threat.

With regards to the internal environment, investigating the strategies of Madboks and El Intercambiador as well as how the actors involved saw their role in challenging and reshaping the food and clothing systems proved to be an essential step for understanding the nature of these initiatives and the type of change they wanted to bring. In this vein, research results showed how the way Madboks and El Intercambiador are organized, imagined and represented has a considerable impact in the participatory profile of the initiatives, and thus in their outcomes. Indeed, despite Madboks and El Intercambiador being ‘open to everyone’, and despite their efforts to also attract people beyond the usual suspects, the inclusion of historically marginalized groups remains a challenge. Thus, it has been found that several organizational aspects might be creating invisible restricting dynamics, simultaneously turning these services into privileges for those individuals that can access them. In a way, this issue points towards what Guthman considers ‘the ostensible paradox embedded in the alternative strategy for social change’: “even if alternatives are in seemingly opposition to what is bad, they work against broader transformation (...) because the creation of alternatives simultaneously produces place and people that for various reasons cannot be served by an alternative and therefore are put beyond consideration” (2011, 6).

In this light, as Argüelles states, individuals’ rationales and imaginaries of change contribute to that paradox, sustaining meta-privileges and notions of self-entitlement to provide solutions to environmental problems (Argüelles, 2018, 171). Regarding Madboks and El Intercambiador, the analysis of the internal perspective pointed to the fact that participants -especially those involved in the organization of the initiatives -largely view these alternatives as means to resist capitalism and adopt more ethical and sustainable consumption systems and habits. However, results showed that for some actors -mainly attendants- these initiatives also signified practical means to neutralize the harms of
capitalism and to secure their livelihoods, by providing them a way to save money. This shows how different motivations and expectations behind individuals’ participation in Madboks -together with the concerning organizational strategies- run the risk of leading to tensions and dissensus around the type of transformation alternatives should bring. This is not to say that one type of transformation is unambiguously good, and the rest are (other) unambiguously bad. The alternative-provisioning strategy is more complex than that. Rather, the key issue is that all forms of organizing and viewing change are ‘political’, which is another way of saying that they are contested (guided by specific intentions for specific population groups). In fact, the act of either aiming to resist, escape or completely erode capitalism is a reflection of the imaginaries of change of those who have the power and capacity to engage in and advance alternatives. Thus, what this paper aimed to do was to repoliticise the subject of alterity by enhancing the awareness of the possible -intentional and unintentional- consequences of particular forms of organizing and imagining alterity, and to always understand that there could be other ways of practicing and envisioning change. In any case, it is important to continue the exploration and experimentation of different strategies to manage resources in a more democratic, socially just and sustainable way. The key, Wright argues, is to be ‘pragmatic idealists’ (2012, 9), to keep a reasonable degree of criticism and realism, yet not to resign to a ‘nothing else is possible’.
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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Survey Copenhagen Attendants December 2020

- Age
- Gender
  - Male
  - Female
  - Other
- Nationality
  - Denmark
  - Other
- Occupation
  - Student
  - Employed
  - Half-employed
  - Unemployed
  - Pensioner
- Main Reason to Attend Foodsharing (arrange)
  - I want to reduce food waste
  - It helps me save money
  - I want to support this initiative
  - I try not to buy at big supermarket chains
  - I enjoy engaging with the community
- Rate the following statements (Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree)
  - Since I engage in Foodsharing, I throw away less food
  - Since I engage in Foodsharing, I eat more vegetables and fruits
  - Since I engage in Foodsharing, I go less times to the supermarket
  - My food resources depend on the food acquired from Foodsharing
  - I would still come to Foodsharing if I would have to pay for the food besides the donations given to cover the management costs.
- I share the food from Food Sharing with other people
- Foodsharing Amager represents a community to me
- I enjoy the interaction with other people at Foodsharing events
- I enjoy the atmosphere in Foodsharing more than the one in supermarkets
- I think Foodsharing promotes solidarity and care within communities
- I have considered to volunteer with Foodsharing or other similar initiatives

(Optional) Has the main reason to attend Foodsharing changed over time for you? If so, how?

APPENDIX B: Interview with Natalia Castellanos in March 2021

Marta: Could you tell me a bit about Altrapo Lab?

Natalia: The project started in 2013, but in 2017 Atrapo Lab went from being an association to a cooperative (company) of social initiative. This was done in order to be part of the Social Market and REAS networks, and because it was the business formula that best suited us with our principles and our mission / vision. Currently we are 4 working partners, 3 girls and 1 boy, but we have had more workers. Now we are based in a co-working space called La Quinta del Sordo, and we are very happy there.

We work around recycling and textile reuse from a creative approach, working both with design and from the point of view of consumers. So far we have hosted workshops and events, created awareness campaigns, training, etc. Atrapo Lab also used to coordinate a sustainable consumption project with the Madrid city council, but with the change of government (now from the right) this project was closed.

Marta: and what context and motivations gave rise to El Intercambiador?

Natalia: The idea of El Intercambiador arises from the goal of our cooperative to offer practical and accessible alternatives to the public, not only to accompany the awareness work that we have been doing all this time but also to directly prevent waste. Clothing Swap began as ephemeral events of 1-2 days in collaboration with other bigger entities, until we took the challenge of organizing a swapping event on our own in 2019, in the coworking space where we are based. Indeed, this event was very well received by the public.

What motivated us to use an economic alternative was the possibility to offer a practical alternative to the conventional system. Awareness starts being raised through habits. Changing those habits starts from revising our closets and reflecting on what clothes we actually do wear, and how many we never do. In fact, on average we only use 20% of
our clothes. Many of the users of El Intercambiador have realized how many clothes they have, yet don't wear. In other words, our goal was to do this awareness-raising work from practice.

We were also motivated to respond to the pressing problem of textile waste. We are talking about 900 tons of clothing. And the answer is not being given as quickly as necessary, because it is a waste that is growing exponentially. Hence, making this residue visible and raising awareness is something we have to implement.

Besides, its management depends on the municipality. I know that in Catalonia, Aragon, Navarre and Basque Country, the management is better and more transparent, but, in Madrid, the management of textile waste is a very dark matter. Actually, we are also working on that line. We are proposing the municipality of Móstoles to incorporate alternatives such as El Intercambiador within its waste management plan. Exchanging, second hand or upcycling should be the first steps before clothes are sent to the landfill or for sale to countries in Africa, or Eastern Europe. Why don't we do something at the local level first?

**Marta:** You spoke about economic and environmental aspects, but what can you tell me about the social aspects?

**Natalia:** The social objective of the exchanger is very transversal also because, first, El Intercambiador is giving an opportunity to people who may have fewer resources to participate in something that is more economically viable. Also, fast fashion first hand clothes are very cheap here because other people are paying for them. And then, another social aspect of textile reuse and this management has to do with its expandability, for instance, regarding self-employment. In fact, one of the things that we are evaluating is that El Intercambiador as such could be an initiative to employ people who come from job placement services. One of the ideas that we consider among so many is that the people who are working on the initiative are people to whom we give prior training and enter as workers. It doesn’t require a very high qualification.

**Marta:** How is El Intercambiador funded?

**Natalia:** Well, more or less at the same time, we got the opportunity to open a more permanent space. This is part of the social responsibility project of an entity called Carmila (Spain), which is actually a subsidiary of the French supermarket chain Carrefour. Carmila is the real estate agency that runs the shopping centres. They were very interested in our work, probably due to the fact that in France they are way more advanced than us in terms of second hand goods, repairing and recycling. So, we were
given the big challenge of opening a permanent space, which, ironically, entailed opening a clothing exchange space in a shopping centre.

Carmila provides us with the space for free and finances the full project. It is within their Corporate Social Responsibility program, so the maintenance costs, the workers, the order of the clothes, the collection, the cleaning, the dissemination and communication ... they finance it all.

**Marta:** And I see that the location they provided you with is in Móstoles

**Natalia:** Yes, Actually, adding to that challenge, it was the issue of the location, Móstoles, which was a town with which we had never worked before. We came from doing events in central Madrid, which is where things happen. And the general perception is that nothing happens outside the city centre. It is true that we have dragged people from the centre because they like the initiative, but of course, on an occasional basis.

**Marta:** For how long has El Intercambiador been running?

**Natalia:** This opportunity arised before the pandemic began and then, after being stopped, in September 2020 they called us to take it back, and we opened the store in October. But it is true that this was a pilot test, and at the beginning we were only given about four months, But with the pandemic it has taken a little longer. For pilot projects, 3 or 4 months -and more in these times- this leaves too little margin to see if such an innovative initiative materializes within the population of the municipality of Mostoles. So we had to extend it to 6 months. Now the objective is to seek financing, and we are working on it.

**Marta:** What is the type of user that attends El Intercambiador?

**Natalia:** The type of user varies depending on space, and time of the week or day. But regarding the vast majority of the users, I would tell you that 90% are women, and in fact 90% of clothes are women's. It is true that there is a space for men’s’ clothing and little by little more men pop by, but come on, it is clear that the profile is feminine. We try to fight it but it is difficult. The ‘slaves of fashion have always been us, that's a fact. And then there is the issue of women and care roles. Indeed, many women come to Móstoles and take men's clothes for their husbands. The husband doesn't come, she comes since she is in charge of taking care of both of their wardrobes. Clothing is socially linked to women.
Regarding age, in the mornings there are more older women and on weekends younger people are encouraged, due to availability. That is why 2 of our 3 weekly opening days are on the weekend. We do notice that the average age has dropped since we started with the exchange events. Here we speak about ages between 14 and 25. Young people are more aware, they have much more assumed the concept of second hand. Be it for fashions, because they have travelled abroad and have seen that second-hand stores are much more popular, for all the mobile applications at their fingertips ... Wallapop for example, 90% of its sales are in clothes.

But, to be honest most of the profile is made up of people who already follow us and are already aware.

We are also seeing the potential to reach further socio economically excluded people now that we are located in Móstoles, which is a district on the outskirts of Madrid. In fact, this is another aspect we are trying to bring up at the Madrid city hall. That people with fewer resources have a way to get clothes that can be ‘à la carte’, that they can have a coupon with points and can choose their clothes. It does not have to be through donation that they receive clothes. A donation of "this is what is left over and this is what comes to you". Because, in the end, often in social donations the use capacity of the items is very short. We believe they should have the autonomy to select the clothes they are taking and wearing.

**Marta:** How do you foresee the sustainability and viability of El Intercambiador in the future?

**Natalia:** El Intercambiador is something that by itself is not sustainable, it is not economically viable, as it is based in exchange. In previous events we have always had external funding, either from Greenpeace, or from larger entities that supported the initiative and paid for the service.

Now we are giving it time, trying to make a strategy to make it sustainable without the need of always having external financing. We will still need it, but it must be complementary to other types of financing. We are therefore looking at the possibility of changing the system and implementing a system of partners, of membership. As a member of El Intercambiador, with your annual or monthly fee you pay the service. Another option is to pay for the clothes. We are thinking of somehow monetizing it because in the end it has to be economically sustainable.

And we have also realized that when goods are monetized, even if it is through a small fee or donation, people give more value to participating in something like this. When
something is 100% free it works in some cases but in many others it does not. Since it costs one nothing to get goods, these end up not being taken care of. Monetizing the process really creates a filter to truly give the clothes the value they have. We also have to make people see that an initiative like this has many costs behind it and that these costs must be covered somehow.

Another option we are also contemplating is to follow the model of charity shops and let El Intercambiador be run by volunteers. We made an online survey and many people have expressed their readiness to volunteer with us.

**Marta:** Which are then the main challenges faced by El Intercambiador?

**Natalia:** I would say that the main challenges are first to make this initiative an integral part of the waste management system in Madrid. A first step that can naturally be in that circular route.

Second, a big challenge remains reaching different layers of society, increasing the profile of users. Those people who are not necessarily aware, nor already part of the initiative, nor have the need to exchange clothes. That the rest of the people also try to exchange to see its advantages.

And finally, as explained before, making the initiative more economically sustainable and independent, perhaps through a partner system that also provides access to different services such as courses.

**APPENDIX C:** Interview with Zaloa Basaldúa in April 2021

**Marta:** Why are you going to close?

**Zaloa:** In the end the financing was finished, we have tried to extend it a little more but it has not been possible. We are now looking at different options, either getting parallel funding or establishing a partner system. If not, we will have to do specific events again.

There are a lot of grants but when you explain them the idea they don’t really understand. They don't really understand the project.

**Marta:** Well, I imagine that the strategy they will adopt will depend on the type of users you want to attract.

**Zaloa:** Of course, one of the objectives of this project was also to reach an audience that we would not have reached otherwise. Because in the end it is a project in a shopping centre, and in Móstoles. And it is true that the public that comes here is very different
from the one we are used to in the centre of Madrid. For example, when we do specific events in the centre of Madrid we notice that the quality of clothing is much better. The quality of clothing is now much worse.

**Marta:** What would you say is the main reason why users go to the Móstoles interchange?

**Zaloa:** There are many people who come because it amuses them, it seems like a good initiative, but for sustainability I think that only a couple of people have shown me that concern. Here are people who come every day that we open, and bring and wear the maximum 30 points each time. These people often return to us things that they took from the exchanger the day before. It scares us because it seems that we are generating consumer monsters.

And out of necessity people don't usually come either. Also because people in need live it is very stigmatized. It's like they'd rather spend 3 euros at Primark than pick up donated clothes. They are proudest when they can afford what they buy.

**Marta:** Have you taken into account the users with whom they may have a need for clothes in the strategy of the exchanger? Or are you mainly trying to cause a change in the way you consume?

**Zaloa:** Both of them. At first we got in touch with the social services of the Móstoles city council to think about how we can work with vulnerable people and remove the stigma of donating from them. That they live the experience of going to a store like other people.

In fact, we have considered that if it is a matter of necessity, people derived from social services can be put 20 points in the system, for example, so that they can come and choose their own clothes.

**APPENDIX D: Interview with Roxana Zlate June 2021**

**Marta:** So the name is now Madboks?

**Roxana:** Yes, it was Foodsharing Ama

**Marta:** Why the change of name?

**Roxana:** Well because we opened up one in Norrebro as well, so instead of calling each by the neighbourhood, we decided to change the name altogether to differentiate ourselves from the other initiative that’s called foodsharing copenhagen – which is a
whole different organisation. And people were confusing us with them quite a lot and we just thought it would be easier to just have a more unique name.

Marta: Ok and why are you opening up another one in Norrebro?

Roxana: We had some people that we knew from the commune that we made contact with and asked if they have any availability for us to use one of the cultural houses that we knew of in norrebro. And they were super open to the idea so they allowed us to use the culture house there. So it kind of just organically grew that way.

Marta: Did you specifically focus on norrebro as opposed to another neighbourhood?

Roxana: Yes we did. We initially wanted to open the second location in the inner city where we had contacts at another culture house, however we decided to go to norrebro because of the higher percentage of the population there that lives on a lower income in the neighbourhood.

Marta: What was or what is the envisioning idea that started this initiative, and has it developed over time?

Roxana: Initially when I started foodsharing Amar, which is now Madboks. I started off on the board of foodsharing Copenhagen, and initially I just wanted to expand to open more locations in the multiple neighborhoods, to incorporate more partnerships and more food donors and to just grow it because there is so much food waste in Copenhagen. It's absolutely insane. And I have a lot of friends that dumpster dive all over the city so I knew there is so much food waste. And it was really hard to grow anything as food sharing in Copenhagen because I think it had reached its limit. Being a flat democratic bla bla bla – you know whatever. Everything has to go through the old volunteers, there has to be elections for people to get voted onto the board. And it got to a point where everyone got super political about it, people were campaigning and it just got a little too much. So I wanted a more simplistic way of doing that and some of my ideas were not necessarily well liked in the foodsharing Copenhagen community either. For instance I wanted to have a recommended donation, which everyone disagreed with. Because they wanted some utopian idea of like no money involved whatsoever. However, we had to pay for things. Volunteers for example had to pay for their own t-shirts because there was no money. We had to pay for vans, we had to pay for transporting the food, we had to pay for cleaning supplies. All of those things. If we wanted to have a volunteer get-together, people had to pay out of their own pocket. Which I personally believe – although I do support the idea of free food for poor people – I also don’t support the idea of having the volunteers for having already put in so much work into it, having to also bring cash
into the mix. Because a lot of us didn’t have the cash to do all of that. Like it was a big expense for me to buy a food sharing Copenhagen t-shirt just so that I can be part of the volunteer community. Because it was like 200 dkk for a t-shirt. It's a lot you know. It became this thing where volunteers just had to do more and more, and put money into it as well. Because a lot of people behind it were very against asking the people that would come and pick up the food to donate a specific amount. So there was a lot of back and forth about that. There was also a lot of talk about getting new partners, and no one really wanted to deal with the logistics of it. So I just decided to put it behind me and just start my own project.

Marta: That's quite ambitious

Roxana: Yea, its kind of easy when you’re already in the scene because you do realise that there is so much food waste, all you need to do is be a little pushy and convince some of the shop managers to give you and not someone else the food.

Marta: So this brings me to my next question. Obviously this takes a lot of organisation skills. What are the necessary skills or education that is needed to do your job? Or needed to become a coordinator or a volunteer.

Roxana: I would say that there is a couple. For me I think what was very beneficial was that I worked in the restaurant industry for a really long time. And I've worked in management positions within that and I think this helped me strengthen my people skills, communication skills, time management. And that came to be very effective at Madboks because when you start a project from the ground up, especially when you want to involve volunteers, you have to be a good motivator as well. You need to have certain people skills to get people involved. Because they need to have some kind of motivation to get involved, show up and work for free and to participate with the community that we are trying to build here. And although fighting food waste is a great motivator, it's not enough to make people come back week after week after week. So I think part of what is needed the most when dealing with volunteers is using a lot of your time to connect with people, bring them together and create community. Which requires a lot of time and a lot of patience.

Marta: So would you say that your strategy to keep volunteers coming back is because of a sense of community?

Roxana: yes, because the point of Madboks was not only to save food waste but also to create community. I wanted it to become this hub in the local neighbourhood where we use food to bring people together. We use food to help poor people. We use food to also
help the students, but in Copenhagen students are not really considered to be part of the low-income population, however, as a student I know how it is to live off 5000 dkk a month. So personally I thought that the best way to include students was to create a space for them in which they can volunteer and practice their management skills, practice team leading, practice good communication, learn how to work in multicultural environments. It just became this project that doesn’t only provide free food, but it also helps people develop their personal skills.

Marta: Have you ever thought of commodifying the exchange system, so instead of sharing the food and asking for donations, switching to a conventional monetary system in which you pay for boxes.

Roxana: No, I always wanted to keep it at donations. I think that already asking for a recommended donation is as far as I would go. Putting a price on it would be fine, as long as it does not go above what we ask for it at the moment. The recommended donation at the moment is 25 dkk. 25 dkk from around 25 people is what we need in order to pay for van costs – which is usually about 80% of the expenses of an event, and then gloves, masks, bin bags, cleaning supplies etc. So in order for us to be able to just cover our costs that’s what we need to get during an event. Sometimes we get more boxes so we get a little bit more, but then that money kind of gets funnelled back into, for instance, larger expenses like the boxes which we put the food in, or t-shirts for the volunteers, or a volunteer picnic that we do every now and then. So it keeps on getting funnelled back into the community. And I don’t think we would ever need to ask for more money because that is enough. This is still a non-profit. No one actually gets paid. No one gets anything out of it, except for food and community.

Marta: Where would you say Madboks fits in the relation of the wider capitalistic system. Is its contribution to be oppositional to the capitalistic system? Maybe just talk a little bit about its positioning within the larger system?

Roxana: I think we still exist within a capitalistic system because if there wasn’t a capitalistic system that produces all of this waste there would be no Madboks either. So we kind of depend on the fact that there is that food surplus. So we are kind of working to put ourselves out of business to a certain extent. Because we encourage people to eat items even if they seem a little old or getting a little wolten. We try to promote this mentality that food isn’t only good if it's perfect. Food can also look this way or that way. Like if a cucumber starts to look shitty you just cut off that piece and eat the rest. Just this mentality that we don’t need perfect items for them to be nutritious and good in our diets. However, I also think that part of what puts us a little bit in opposition to the
capitalist system is volunteerism as a means of organising these projects. This to me is what attracted me from the beginning. In Romania, where I am from. There is no such thing as volunteering. Not like in Copenhagen where it's all over the place. It's a lot harder to even find volunteer projects. When I moved to Copenhagen I found out how many volunteer programs there were around. It took me a couple of years before I got into contact with volunteer projects because it just wasn't on my radar. I was not aware of volunteering as a way of doing things outside of the capitalist system. So I think for me it is really interesting and something that we need to encourage people to do more moving forward. We need to change the idea that our work is only valuable if we get paid for it. I think we really need to change that. Because there are a lot of rewards that you can get out of volunteering that has nothing to do with money. And I think that if we want to change this capitalist overview perspective, we have to adapt to those ideals. Doing things for other rewards that are not financial.

Marta: So a successful Madboks would be a situation where there is no Madboks

Roxana: I think this is also why we cannot go for profit. Because then we would be encouraging businesses to create more waste so that we could get more money. Of course, that being said, we have been applying for different funds as well. Mostly because we need some sort of funding to allow us to grow because one thing that I've never agreed with from food sharing Copenhagen is that all of this can be done without money. It cannot. We still do exist in a capitalistic system, we still have to pay for van transportation. We also have people that give a lot of their time. So maybe being able to encourage people to take on team leading. Maybe paying some people to train others to become leaders. Workshops for example. Funding will definitely be a help. Although it could be done without money, I do think there's a certain benefit to being able to access some funds to help us grow a bit faster because it definitely speeds up processes a lot.

Marta: Do you agree that this should be a state responsibility? Reducing food wastage has kind of been pushed onto the shoulders of citizens.

Roxana: I think the state already has a bunch of initiatives that aim to reduce food waste. Even the fact that the state has provided each apartment with an organic bin so they encourage people to separate their waste. There are steps taken towards that. This summer there is a project that is also changing the whole garbage system to be more divided and encourage people to recycle more. So whatever we throw into the bin does get recycled. As opposed to everything getting thrown into a bin and then we burn everything. So there are things that are being done. There is also, at a business level, there are sanctions for food waste. Part of why supermarkets are happy to collaborate
with organisations such as Madboks is because by not throwing out food, they save money. Because they actually have to pay a fee for all of the food they throw out.

Marta: Ok so there’s an economic incentive

Roxana: Yes, so the state is doing some things. Certainly they can be doing more. I don’t disagree with that. But what we need to do is kind of stop waiting for someone else to do this for us. As citizens we have the responsibility to do these things ourselves. It is all of our responsibility. The state isn’t the one that creates the demand for perfect food in supermarkets. Its also people who refuse to buy anything that does not look perfect. So we also have to take responsibility for that and we have to do it from the bottom up.

Marta: What would you say is the main motivation for people participating in Madboks, including volunteers and the people who come to pick up food parcels.

Roxana: So the main motivation for people volunteering. Saving food wastage would be first. Because we promote ourselves as an anti-food waste project. It’s the first thing that people know about us. It’s all over our social media. So it’s the one thing that is the most visible. The second thing would be that people come because of the sense of community. A lot of people come because they are new to Copenhagen or because they want to grow their network, they want to make new friends. They want to meet people that have a sustainable mindset. There has also been a lot of friendships formed through Madboks. The third thing would be that you get a box of free food every time you volunteer. So there is also an incentive in that sense.

Marta: Alright. And for people that come to pick up food parcels.

Roxana: We have started keeping track of people’s backgrounds. So do they come from a position of unemployment, low economic status, are they students, do they have a refugee background – that sort of thing. So those are some of the driving factors of most people because it is pretty much free food. Well with donations. So its accessible to everyone. We have people that come every single week and they talk about how this is their only grocery source. It is their only space where they get their food from because it is a more sustainable and cheap way to get their weekly groceries. And a lot of the people that come are also vegan and it’s easier because we don’t distribute meat and dairy items. It’s a lot easier to also work within that space.

Marta: Would you say that the Madboks initiative targets any selective group?

Roxana: Yes, I have been very aware of trying to target specific demographics, and I have had some collaborations with the Danish refugee council. So I do try and ensure
that some of our events get promoted in the right spaces. I have also had a meeting with some of the people at the commune that work with low-income citizens and families, to reach specifically low-income people that would benefit from it more. Because part of the point of this project is not just free or cheap food. It is also to provide nutritious food to people that wouldn’t necessarily go for it. A lot of poor families chose to buy meat with the little money that they have. A lot of them do not go for fruit and vegetables because they see them as luxury items. They go for more bulky items. When you live on a lower income a lot of these things are not necessarily prioritised. So being able to provide this to people that aren’t usually able to get it – it’s part of the initiative.

**Marta:** Would you say that the initiative leans primarily towards reducing food waste and secondly towards the social imperative?

**Roxana:** Yes

**Marta:** What is the gender, age and nationality composition of the volunteers generally?

**Roxana:** That’s very hard to tell, but I would say that generally people are between 20 and 30 years old. There are very few people that are over 40. So the majority of the volunteer demographic is students or recent graduates. So like people right after they finished their Masters or people that are still studying. A lot of people that come from a climate change or sustainability field of study background. So people that have more of an understanding of the impacts of food waste on the sustainability of the planet. Then, gender wise, 90% are female.

**Marta:** Why do you think that is?

**Roxana:** I haven’t looked too much into it, but my own assumption is because men are not thought to be as willing to take on volunteerism. Helping people from a non-financial point of view is not very masculine. It's very female energy all over. It just has to do with patriarchal notions of what work looks like. Which brings me back to my point earlier. We have this understanding that work is only valuable if we get aid for it. I feel men have this perspective more than women do.

**Marta:** And what about the nationality?

**Roxana:** It's so hard to say there are more people from here or there. Last year there were a lot of Argentinians for instance. This year that’s not the case anymore. There’s literally people from all over the place. There are more Danes for example, which is very nice. Which really hasn’t been the case because I think Danes aren’t as interested in being volunteers as international people are because international people look to these
places as spaces in which they can make friends and network. While Danes maybe don’t need that as much.

Marta: And the people that come to collect parcels, how many of them are Danish?

Roxana: I would say that more recently maybe half.

Marta: Ok so let’s move onto challenges. What are the main challenges that Madboks faces in keeping the organisation running?

Roxana: At the moment, and this is something I’m really struggling with, because I’m leaving for a long-term internship in another country. SO my biggest challenge is to get team leaders that can actually keep the project sustainable without having me as a central point of the organisation. I’ve always wanted to remove myself from being the face of the project because I think that for the project to be actually sustainable. Also because I don’t get paid either. I don’t mind that, and again I think we should nurture this idea. I also need to be able to live. So I need to have a side-job. I’m also a student and I need to do my internship. So there's a lot of other things that are happening on the side for me. Although I spend the time of a full time job with Madboks, I cannot convince a lot of people to do the same. It would be mental. SO a challenge would be to get some more reliable team leaders who can actually carry on the project. So finding team leaders that would be interested in being more involved. Because a lot of people want to become part of the project but not a lot of people want to take on a commitment where they actually have to show up.

Marta: Is there consistency in these team leaders in terms of showing up? Or is it a type of floating population that changes every year?

Roxana: There Is consistency, but we are also only one year old so its hard to tell how that really changes over years right. But there have definitely been some team leaders that are more consistent than others. This takes a lot of time to build because it takes a lot of nurture and one on one time. And I need to focus on one-on-one time, it becomes kind of hard to grow the numbers.

Marta: Can you list one or two ways in which you think Madboks can be improved?

Roxana: I think one of the improvements would be to decentralise it. I think Madboks has moved faster than food sharing Copenhagen has for instance because it is centralised with just me. I make the decisions, I implement the decisions, everyone is kind of happy with it. I do this because I have already worked with this type of project for five years. So I don’t make these decisions to my benefit or anyone else’s benefit. They
are decisions that benefit everyone. However, I do think it is not as transparent and easy for other people to get involved because they don’t necessarily see what is happening behind the scenes. So two improvements would be more transparency and more decentralisation of admin. That would definitely benefit in helping in having people more involved in running the project which is needed because it is a volunteer project.

Marta: Is there a concern regarding the digital divide (regarding those people with and without access to the internet). Since bookings to collect parcels must be made online, does the digital divide exclude certain people?

Roxana: This is not a problem in Copenhagen

Marta: So there is no need to use non-digital sources to reach out to other people?

Roxana: No. I would say that is because for instance, we do not cater for homeless people. And this was a decision I made, knowingly from the start. In the events in Amar, we actually work within a homeless community. And there I have tried to access the homeless community through other means. Through giving our food supplies after the events to the café and then they can give it to the homeless people. Or by just going out to them and asking them if they want some of the stuff that we have. It is very hard to involve homeless people because they rarely have access to a laptop or whatever in which to make a booking. However, that would not matter anyway. The people from around there are either alcoholics or drug addicts, a lot of them are actively selling or recovering from drugs, a lot of them won’t even remember that they have a booking and a lot of them don’t even have enough structure and organisation in their lives that would allow them to book this week and then come next week and pick up their boxes. So knowing that we are also not social workers, we do not have social working backgrounds, we have to be aware of how we can actually exist in this space or not. And we decided to approach low-income families instead of homeless people because there are already a lot of organisations that deal with homelessness and we just didn’t have the means to do so.

Marta: Ok and then the last question is regarding the days and times of the events. How did you decide on these specific times and days of the events?

Roxana: Yes, this is kind of a problem that we have at the moment and something that we are working to improve on or to change because our events are at the moment on Mondays and Fridays. And there are volunteer shifts from 08h30 in the morning until 18h00 in the afternoon. And then there are pick up times for the people that come and pick up boxes between 15h00 and 17h00. The pick-up times work fine for people that
come and pick up the boxes. If it doesn’t work for them they usually message me and ask if they can come a little bit later and that’s fine. This has not really been a problem. However, the volunteer shifts have been a little harder to fill up lately because a lot of people are saying that because it is during a work day, it is a little bit harder to volunteer there, and thus, a lot of people would prefer it if it were on a weekend day.

**Marta:** And how is it a problem for people that volunteer there, but not for people that come and pick up the boxes.

**Roxana:** Not so much. Because usually people can take off 10 minutes from work to come and pick up a box.

**Marta:** Ok so now are you planning to move the shifts to the weekend.

**Roxana:** I am planning to move it to the weekends now. I’m thinking of moving the events on Friday to Saturday and the Monday event to Tuesday. So we have a weekday and a weekend day.

**Marta:** Do you have anything to add?

**Roxana:** I would say that one of the challenges we have in Copenhagen as well, is maybe involving Danish people a little bit more. One of the problems with international people makes it a little bit difficult to communicate all these things in Danish and we have been talking about the fact that there is a lot of people around the neighbourhood that we wanted to involve in the project as well, be it as volunteers or in other capacities, such as old pensionists that for instance, have a lot of time on their hands. It wouldn’t matter to them if the events were on weekdays or weekends because they don’t really have much to do. And they would like to give back to the community. There are a lot of these people. But we do have a Danish language barrier and something that we are working on with the people that work at the commune in Amar is to approach and access those demographics a little bit more. So that is something that I am actively working on at the moment and it's a little bit of a challenge because I don’t speak Danish and a lot of the volunteers don’t speak Danish. So sometimes that can be quite problematic.

**APPENDIX E: Survey Copenhagen Volunteers July 2021**

1. Age
2. Gender
3. Nationality
4. Employment status

5. Academic background?

6. List your 3 main motivations (in order) for being a volunteer at Madboks (choose 3 from below and list in order of most applicable to you)
   
   a.) to reduce food waste
   
   b.) to save money
   
   c.) to meet people with similar values
   
   d.) to be part of a community
   
   e.) to add volunteerism to your cv
   
   f.) to acquire management or team-leading skills
   
   g.) other.......please specify

7. Have these motivations to volunteer changed with time? If so, how and why?

8. How do you view your work as a volunteer? In other words, how does your work benefit or change the greater community? (your personal opinion)

9. How likely would it be that you still volunteer with Madboks if you wouldn't be able to get free food? Please rate on a scale from (1 - Highly unlikely, 2 - Unlikely, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Likely, 5 - Highly Likely). Feel free to elaborate on your choice

10. Which are the main challenges for being a volunteer at Madboks? (Examples can include: transport to get there and back, time required, dates, the fact that it is unpaid, language barriers etc.)

APPENDIX F: Survey to El Intercabiador attendants conducted by Altrapo Lab May 2021

1. Have you ever participated in the Móstoles Interchange?
   
   Yes
   
   No it’s too far for me
   
   No, I had not heard of its opening
   
   Other
2. Can you tell us what you would highlight from the experience?
   There are a variety of garments
   There is not much variety of garments but I like to participate as a sustainable option
   Operation is simple and accessible
   I usually find clothes that I like and use them
   Good atmosphere
   I don't usually find what I'm looking for but I like to support sustainable fashion
   The garments are in good condition
   It helps me empty the closet, I don't take clothes
   I like to support sustainability and responsible consumption
   Other (specify)

3. One option for El Intercambiador to be sustainable is through an affiliation system. Would you become a member of El Intercambiador paying a periodic fee or other type of consideration?
   Yes
   No

4. If yes, what fee seems reasonable to you to participate in a fixed space that is open several days a week? (Like the one in Móstoles)
   € 3 / month
   € 5 / month
   € 10 / month

5. Some participants have offered to support us. Would you see yourself as a partner / collaborating partner dedicating a few hours voluntarily, serving the public, putting on clothes, supporting organization tasks?
   No
   Yes, I could commit to doing between 4 and 16h per month
   Yes, as occasional support
   Other (specify)