

Food for Alternative Thoughts

An investigation into the practices and challenges of alternative food initiatives



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Abstract

In the capitalist system, there is a need to envision alternatives that advocate for a more just and sustainable world. Alternative scholarships, such as degrowth, aim to counter the hegemonic narrative of food commodification by promoting practices that put social and environmental well-being at the forefront. This ethnographic research outlines the alternative strategies of tackling food waste and surplus. Namely, in investigating the practices of and challenges experienced by alternative food initiatives in the Öresund region. Contributing to the alternative organising landscape, the initiatives distinguish themselves by favouring bottom-up inclusion, creating spaces of solidarity and care and/or directly criticising capitalism. They do so through decommodification practices of labour (i.e. non-monetised work) and resources (i.e. food rescue and distribution). However, these examples have also portrayed that they cannot be completely divorced from the capitalist context. Overproduction, caused by capitalism, instigates the increased amount of excess food that these initiatives need to exist. Nevertheless, alternative practices are required to demonstrate that there are other and sustainable-just ways of organising food: to view food as a basic necessity and not as a commodity.

Keywords: alternative organising, degrowth, labour decommodification, resource decommodification, ethnography, alternative food initiatives

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Cover illustrations representing the different case initiatives created by author.

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Introduction

We live in a world driven by capitalism rooted in competition, accumulation and growth. Capitalism has woven its web into every nook and cranny of society, causing increased inequalities in the distribution of resources. Food is one such resource that is contested, even though it is a necessity for all creatures inhabiting this Earth. We see, taste and smell food everywhere. We plan our days around it, we see it in advertisements around towns and in our favourite movies. We sense the need for it when we feel hunger. It inhabits our very being and is “a foundational pillar of culture and civilisations” (Vivero Pol 2013, 2). Food, in itself, is a needed resource that moves in a system with the intention to be eaten by someone (Price and Lalonde 2023).

Within the modes of capitalist accumulation, the production of food has been industrialised, commodified and marketised. It has become a resource that is no longer seen as a common but a monetised consumption item. People are seen as mere consumers and not subjects that need this substance for their survival (Marx 1990; Vivero Pol 2013). Consumption is an important part of our daily lives, whether that is consuming in the practices of eating or buying (Warde 2005). It is the process in which “agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion” (ibid., 137). The production of goods is situated in capitalism as a practice for desires and the consumption of goods is a compensation for the hard work people must do to stay afloat in this system. Additionally, in its disposal or post-consumption, food has become a disconnected object. Up to half of the food being produced worldwide will never be consumed and will end up in landfills (Hickel 2020; Price and Lalonde 2023). A consumerist lifestyle and disposal are among the causes for many socio-ecological issues and injustices, for instance over-working, an increase in poor mental and physical health, and increasing global carbon emissions due to the overproduction of resources (Soper 2023; Price and Lalonde 2023).

Therefore, a society where the well-being of humans is at the centre and a reduction in consumption and waste is required. There is an urgency for sustainable alternatives where the needs as well as the excitement and satisfaction of life are met (Kallis,

Demaria, and D’Alisa 2015; Soper 2023). Degrowth scholarship disputes the unsustainable and unjust nature of capitalism and envisions alternatives. Degrowth advocates for the downscaling of production and consumption to create an equitable world (Kallis, Demaria, and D’Alisa 2015). Degrowth and the study of food go hand in hand, and their overlap aids in understanding practices to counter hegemonic food systems. How can a degrowth perspective shift the unsustainable practices and thoughts around food production and consumption? (Nelson and Edwards 2020).

Envisioning alternatives as proposed by degrowth can be exemplified by organisations that aim to shift the hegemonic narrative around food consumption and waste towards alternative and more sustainable ones (Nelson and Edwards 2020; Guerrero Lara et al. 2023). There has been plenty of research conducted on the strategies in which alternative food organisations are adopting degrowth principles in building alternatives on a local level (Nelson and Edwards 2020). However, apart from some notable exceptions (e.g. Hepp 2020; Szakál and Balázs 2020), there is not that much research on alternative strategies towards tackling food waste, and more specifically about the practices and the experiences within, of people working in these alternative sectors. As Edwards and Nelson (2020) outline in their suggestions for further research on food for degrowth, there needs to be more visibility of initiatives that aim to degrow food. Therefore, this thesis aims to do that by researching alternative food initiatives in the Öresund region. It is guided by the following overarching research question: *How are food rescue and distribution practised in alternative food initiatives?* The following sub-questions will aid in the investigation: *How are the case initiatives alternative? How is food as a commodity challenged by the practices of alternative food initiatives? And how do they navigate the challenges arising from being situated in a capitalist system?*

To answer these research questions, first a deeper literature exploration on the commodification of food and food waste (e.g. Marx 1990; Appadurai 1986; Evans 2019), and food and degrowth (e.g. Nelson and Edwards 2020) will be outlined. Then, a conceptual presentation of *alternative organising* will depict that there are different and non-hegemonic ways of organising, not just the capitalist way (e.g. Parker et al. 2014; Alakavuklar 2023). Followed by an introduction of *decommodification* which is

a practice advocated for in degrowth and alternative organising scholarships to counter commodification practices (e.g. Williams 2014; Fournier 2013; Vivero Pol 2013; Helfrich and Bollier 2015). These concepts will be the groundings for the results section supported by ethnographic data collected on initiatives that practise alternative ways of organising food and its waste.

Literature Review

Commodification of food and food waste

Commodities have become objects of political and social potential, and in the market they are viewed for their use and exchange value (Appadurai 1986; Warde 2005). Use value is the usefulness and quality of an object in its consumption based on physical properties and the amount of labour undertaken, and how that satisfies our needs (Marx 1990; Alakavuklar 2023). The commodity becomes a material of commercial knowledge and how it is perceived in society is important for its exchange value. The exchange value is the transactive relation between commodities within the market from their use value in which they become validated for example through the monetary means of price (ibid.). Commodities are always intended to be exchanged with the purpose of serving a use value (Appadurai 1986). Therefore, the consumption of commodities is characterised by different interventions. Firstly, how the commodities are exchanged, accessed and distributed. Secondly, how the goods are acquired and appropriated. Thirdly, how people derive satisfaction from the goods they have consumed. And lastly how commodities may be abandoned through devaluation, detachment and disposal in its post-consumption (Evans 2019).

By understanding commodities in relation to consumption, how food is commodified in our society can be outlined. The food system is a set of activities, such as the production and consumption of food, that address social and environmental security and the interactions between humans and the natural environment (Ericksen 2008). Food inherently has use value as it is classified as a basic human need and right (Vivero Pol 2013). Whereas the exchange value is created in capitalism where the food system revolves around “food prices, monetary transactions, profit calculations, accumulation [and] competition” (Alakavuklar 2023, 10). Because of its commodification, food and “its production, distribution and consumption are increasingly divorced from the social context” (Luetchford 2016, 388) in a way that the consumer is not aware of how and in what conditions their food is produced and distributed. Due to the privatisation and monetisation of food in the capitalist economy, Vivero Pol (2013, 3) asserts that this is “the failure of the global food system”. Although the modes of production of food is in excess, the system is incapable of

distributing and guaranteeing equal access to food for everyone, increasing inequalities and violating social and environmental sustainability practices (ibid.).

Additionally, the argument by Luetchford (2016) misses an important element: the disposal of food, too, is disconnected from the social context. As Reno (2016, 5) examines, “how is it that we have become disconnected from our waste, such that we bear no responsibility for what becomes of it”? Waste is a product at the end of its life, an unwanted side effect, a hazard and a matter out of place (Douglas 2002; Evans, Campbell, and Murcott 2013; Eriksen and Schober 2017). This definition is key to understanding why waste is so contested, even though it is an innate part of our everyday lives. Waste is viewed as structurally bounded, socially constructed, an agent in creating social relations, and as invisible and devalued (Thompson 2017; Eriksen and Schober 2017; Alexander and O’Hare 2023). However, waste can also be revalued depending on cultural shifts in value creation (ibid.). Food waste is viewed as a non-food or a post-consumption material as in the eyes of society it is seen as no longer fit for consumption, losing both its use and exchange value. This is due to the food visibly being inedible due to mould or having reached its expiry date according to food hygiene standards (Price and Lalonde 2023; Gustavsson, Jenny, Cederberg, and Sonesson 2011).

Food in the current economic system is validated as a commodity through its exchange value. This instigates the question of how food can become less of a commodity and more distributed equally to fulfil its role as a necessity for all. Namely, how can food and the practices around it be situated more sustainably? And what does it mean for food to be wasted and to become useless? These inquiries can be answered with the support of degrowth literature.

Food in degrowth research

Degrowth scholarship advocates for a post-capitalist world where the downscaling of practices is viewed to ensure a society and economic system based on the well-being and care of human beings and nature alike. It does not aim to reduce the gross domestic product of countries but advocates for an economy in which the creation and reclaiming of common resources, such as food, is realised through grassroots economic practices

(Kallis, Demaria, and D’Alisa 2015; Hickel 2020). Degrowth can play a crucial role in the socio-ecological understanding of food due to its advocacy for putting the well-being of people at the centre of the economy through for instance providing accessible basic needs (Schulken et al. 2022; Plank et al. 2022).

In order to reach an ecological and socially just society, there is a need to “slow down the mad pace of extraction, production and waste, and slow down the mad pace of our lives” (Hickel 2020, 204). There has been a wide range of research done on various food practices in the realm of degrowth, particularly in understanding the production of food and how degrowth can play a role in addressing the diversity of the food system (Koretskaya and Feola 2020; Plank et al. 2022). The book *Food for Degrowth: Perspectives and Practices* (2020) edited by Nelson and Edwards exemplifies how many global food practices connect to the principle of degrowth. For instance, Alternative Food Networks advocate for socio-ecological actions based on community engagement and local food celebrations disconnecting oneself from the current system (Edwards and Mercer 2012; Vivero Pol 2013). This includes groups who engage in activities such as dumpster diving: retrieving discarded food from the bins of restaurants and supermarkets; freeganism: limiting participation in conventional economic activities and reducing consumption; and foraging (Edwards and Mercer 2012; Nelson and Edwards 2020). These practices are inherently anti-capitalist by advocating for direct participation, autonomy and collaborative cooking and eating, amongst others (Nelson and Edwards 2020). To name some, the book outlines research about self-provisioning and care discourses (Pungas 2020), community gardening and community supported agriculture (CSAs) (Daněk and Jehlička 2020), community food initiatives (Szakál and Balázs 2020), and discourses around food waste and food surplus (Hepp 2020). The latter two examples portray how alternative food provisioning community-led initiatives are implementing an alternative to the industrial global food system with a focus on alternative ways of tackling production and disposal (Nelson and Edwards 2020).

Szakál and Balázs (2020) studied community food initiatives, namely community supported agriculture (CSAs), food self-provisioning (FSPs) and seed exchange networks (SENs), in Budapest, Hungary. They outline CSAs which practise food

activism and experimentation in the growth of local food and celebrate the preparation and cooperation of food between producers and consumers. FSPs hold collective value in which family traditions are followed to provide health and economic benefits, and SENs practise the material exchange of seeds with the goal of autonomy. Szakál and Balázs (2020)'s research analyses how alternative transformations of nutrition and food security are created in the Budapest region. Although these initiatives are primarily focused on the production, distribution and consumption of food, they also emphasise the transformative potential in initiatives that address food waste. Namely, addressing the focus on the reduction of food waste and how redistribution can be set in place. They argue that such initiatives are degrowth-oriented in their dedication to achieve positive change through “freedom, solidarity, openness, transparency, simplicity and accountability” (Szakál and Balázs 2020, 120). By countering hegemonic structures and seeing food as a common, these bottom-up initiatives are creating a space of empowerment, agency and experimentation (ibid.).

Moreover, Hepp's (2020) research compares the discourses around food waste and surplus as outlined in documents by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and by volunteers in the food-rescue initiative Rude Food Malmö, in Sweden. She finds that the FAO defines food waste as a commodity as understood in capitalism. Alternatively, the volunteers at Rude Food Malmö rather see the value of food waste. She states, “activists see food waste not as the rotten orange on the cover of the FAO document but instead as both an opportunity and a duty to be picked up and considered for its value: to be eaten and shared” (Hepp 2020, 194). The initiative describes the waste as surplus which repurposes the value of discarded food and enacts alternative and anti-capitalist values. How food waste is viewed and dealt with in this organisation is in line with degrowth principles in creating a pathway that decommodifies food and its waste, accomplished through social practices (ibid.).

Food waste generates a high ecological cost, where a significant amount of space, water and energy increases the amount of emissions released each year, which also affects well-being. Therefore, studies of degrowth exemplify the importance of investigating this topic in addressing alternative practices and how these counter capitalist structures (Hickel 2020; Guerrero Lara et al. 2023). These examples illustrate

the many alternative food initiatives that have adopted degrowth principles in their organisational strategies, and therefore are interesting entities to study (Nelson and Edwards 2020). However, what is lacking in the work on food and degrowth so far is a deeper dive into what alternativity means, its relation to the capitalist system, and the practices and experiences of the people who work particularly in alternative food rescue initiatives like Rude Food Malmö. To understand how alternative strategies are practised, it can be questioned what alternative ways of organising mean. Therefore, in the next section I introduce the concept of alternative organising. It aids in understanding how alternative food initiatives arrange themselves according to various values and practices. Here I do not stray away from degrowth, but rather use it as a red thread in outlining alternative organising.

Theoretical Framework

Alternative organising within and beyond capitalism

Alternative organising breaks mainstream organisational patterns and creates new ones by rejecting the current socio-economic order (Dahlman et al. 2022, 1963). Although this aims to be different it does not necessarily stray outside of capitalism, as capitalism is also dependent on non-capitalist forms of organising. For instance, domestic labour is inherently non-capitalistic but in the current system also instigates further capital accumulation (Parker et al. 2014; Alakavuklar 2023). Other alternative ways of organising tend to strongly oppose this hegemonic structure due to their discontent with how capitalism deals with economic practices in creating increased inequalities, violating democratic decision-making and threatening the quality of life for future generations and the environment (Wright 2013; Parker et al. 2014). They rather desire resilient forms of human agency that are more participative as an encouragement to infiltrate the current system with alternative ways of doing things. The general argument is to decentralise capitalism by recognising the positive outcome of plurality and the existence of non-capitalist forms. Imagining alternatives is not a new or uncontroversial concept and its end goal is not to create a utopia. Scholars instead advocate for different ways of doing things, as “we must never assume that ‘there is no alternative’ because of certain immutable laws of markets or organising” (Parker et al. 2014, 32).

Alternative moral values

As the degrowth scholarship recognises, the climate crisis, social injustices and key values associated with capitalism, such as consumerism and accumulation, restrict human flourishing (Hickel 2020). Therefore, there needs to be a shift to values that advocate for a more sustainable, just and equitable world. Apart from breaking mainstream organisational practices, alternative organising is also constituted by alternative moral values (Wright 2013; Parker et al. 2014; Schiller-Merkens 2022). The core moral values are *equality*, *solidarity*, *democracy*, *autonomy*, *responsibility* and *sustainability* (ibid.). These values align closely with degrowth characteristics which

also aim to realise sustainability, equality and participation (Froese et al. 2023). While these concepts can be defined separately, they also work alongside one another.

Equality is when material and social resources are distributed equally amongst society with the goal of creating a life focused on the well-being, welfare and happiness of everyone alike (Wright 2013). This entails having equal access and opportunities to economic resources and social conditions, such as trust, community and solidarity (ibid.). The last condition also concerns cooperation and community with the view that alone we humans are powerless. In a collective, we become a capable source of creating a world filled with care (Parker et al. 2014; Paulson 2020). This aligns with democracy which is a means of giving equal access to all people to participate in a society with full decision-making rights. Underlying this value is self-determination and autonomy, in which people are given full control over their choices and freedom in decision-making (Wright 2013; Dahlman et al. 2022). There is an emphasis on individual autonomy, but it does not have to be a synonym of independence. Rather it is about recognising a sense of self that can be exercised in a conscious and collective manner. The need for co-participants is important in making a democratic decision (Wright 2013; Deriu 2015; Parker et al. 2014). The practice of direct democracy and action allow for horizontal decision-making. Horizontality refers to a practice that is less hierarchical and aims to create less inequalities within the organisation (Maeckelbergh 2014; Dahlman et al. 2022). Some actions are out of our control, but we all have some responsibility to ourselves and others in the personal choices we make and therefore in creating a future that is a rich space for all (Wright 2013; Parker et al. 2014). As Wright (2013, 5) argues for sustainability, “future generations should have access to the social and material conditions to live flourishing lives at least at the same level as the present generation”. In closing, these values can be used to understand existing social structures, alternatives and transformations (ibid.).

Forms of alternative organising

The general consensus of alternative organising is that hegemonic forms of organising must be rejected as they harm the alternative moral values. There is increased research on the relation between key actors involved in, the transformative potential of, and the

processes and struggles of alternative organising (Alakavuklar 2023). In order to understand these themes, Alakavuklar (2023) outlines three kinds of alternative organisations. Firstly, *alternative additional organisations* align with capitalist principles as they participate in mainstream markets and exchange relationships. They are alternative in their prioritisation of the values of responsibility, autonomy and cooperation, and may adopt an ownership model that is alternative. Secondly, organisations that are more radical are called *oppositional alternative organisations*. They challenge the mainstream, aim to be autonomous from the state, and may decide not to engage in market practices. For instance, organisations that oppose capitalism by advocating for the repoliticisation of spaces, in criticising the status quo and aiming for community inclusivity in their ambition for social transformations (ibid.; Schiller-Merkens 2022). *Alternative substitute organisations*, the last kind, also focus on bottom-up and community-oriented approaches. However, they are less radical in the sense that they may not strive to be completely alternative to the dominant practices. In his example, a free food store, these types of organisations may interact with local businesses to retrieve food whilst not engaging in any market exchange value or creating an exchange value (Alakavuklar 2023).

Decommodification

De Angelis and Harvie (2014) recognise the failure of capitalism as the cause for creating the many crises we face today that threaten social necessities such as food. Therefore, they advocate for the commoning of resources. Alternative forms of organising food are advocated for, to counter the commodification of services and goods (Parker et al. 2014). Alternative economic practices view food and its waste as something for use value not exchange value (Hepp 2020). Indeed, alternative practices allow for the circulation, commoning and sharing of resources, and for the decommodification of labour and goods (Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa 2015). In the literature on alternative organising, capitalist means of commodification are highly contested. However, as degrowth advocates, there needs to be a stronger argument for decommodification, especially in understanding unwanted commodification of food as a resource (Kallis, Demaria and D’Alisa 2015; Plank et al. 2022).

Decommodification of labour

In the current system, labourers are viewed as economic participants in capital accumulation. However, to increase the well-being of individuals and communities, there needs to be a rethinking of what labour is and means, as is advocated for in the alternative organising scholarship (Parker et al. 2014; Saave and Muraca 2021; Alakavuklar 2023). Figure 1, according to alternative organising scholar Williams (2014), exemplifies ten forms of labour practices in which some are more commodified and monetised than others.

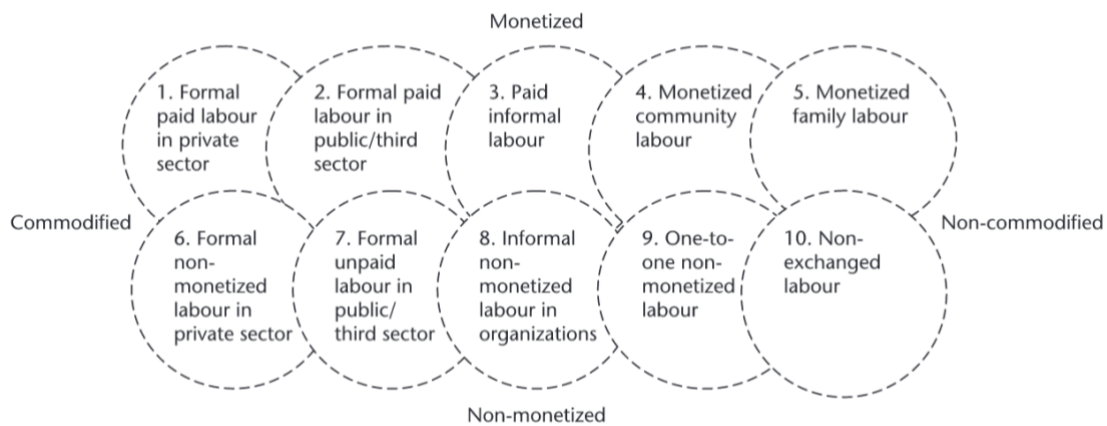


Figure 1. Multiplex diagram of labour practices (Williams 2014, 108)

To understand what is meant by the decommodification of labour, there is a need to outline what different forms of labour entail. In the private and public/third sector, the more commodified forms of labour are exemplified (Williams 2014). Third sector organisations consist of non-profit and non-governmental entities (Potucek 1999). First, earning a taxed wage for instance working as a cook in a private restaurant or in a publicly/third sector-run canteen is called formal paid labour. Second, non-monetised/unpaid labour entails a (limited) period of work without payment such as an unpaid internship in all sectors (Williams 2014). Paid informal labour is unregistered and therefore hidden from tax, such as a ‘cash-in-hand’ job. Informal non-monetised labour differs from the formal form because lawful formalities are not fulfilled, such as voluntarily distributing food at a location without a licence to sell (ibid).

Furthermore, degrowth scholarship advocates for the recognition of work that goes unpaid, as “paid labour is only a fraction of all activities and processes that facilitate

human and non-human life on this planet” (Saave and Muraca 2021, 758). This kind of labour is also known as non-commodified labour. It is practised on a voluntary basis without involving a profit motive. Social experiments and self-organised projects that are based on care, solidarity and collectivity are examples of this (Parker et al. 2014; Williams 2014; Saave and Muraca 2021). The forms that lean closer to being non-commodified are that of monetised community labour or paid favours within a community, one-to-one-non-monetised labour such as preparing dinner for friends, monetised family labour like receiving pocket money for chores, and non-exchange labour such as care work of all household members.

Williams (2014) concurs that non-commodified labour cannot be divorced from commodified labour, and therefore also not from capitalist structures as both can be embedded in social-economic relations. The multiple forms of labour can be seen as continually existing and cutting across this assumed dichotomy. Therefore, there needs to be increased recognition for non-commodified practices that embody daily life to uncover “a future to alternative ways of organising and organisation beyond capitalist hegemony” (ibid., 117).

Decommodification of resources

Furthermore, the practices of commoning food influences how as a resource it can become decommodified. As Fournier (2013, 9) argues, commoning resources is “a viable alternative mode of social organisation to market or state management”. It also is a social activity of creating relations within a society where resources are beneficial and shared amongst a given community (ibid.; Vivero Pol 2013). Rather than seeing commons as something to be monetised and valued in its exchange, decommodification is about self-governance and provisioning (Helfrich and Bollier 2015). Arguing for the commoning of resources is a form of capitalist critique, where goods and services are shared by a collective group of producers and consumers through horizontal and democratic governance (Fournier 2013; De Angelis and Harvie 2014). There is an element of care in these practices as well where the needs of people and the planet are put at the centre of economic and political systems (D’Alisa, Deriu, and Demaria 2015).

There is a demand for the decommodification of food as a resource, where food is more accessible and considers well-being rather than it being privatised and for a profit-incentive (Vivero Pol 2013). Food as a common should be localised, used and distributed in a collaborative way (Helfrich and Bollier 2015). In alternative approaches, such as degrowth, ways to diverge from capitalist commodification of food are offered through practices of reclaiming, sharing, and through values of care, conviviality and solidarity (Hepp 2020). There is some research on how this is realised for food in its production and consumption phases, but degrowth scholar Hepp (2020) and alternative organising scholar Ferrell (2014) also stress the importance of the decommodification of food when it is devalued at its disposal. The reclamation of discarded food as an alternative practice allows for the restoration of its use value (Ferrell 2014). Additionally, the concept of food surplus is a form of food decommodification. It is an example of food waste in which food is still safe for human consumption but has been removed from the supply chain because too much has been produced than can be eaten. The food is revalued for its use value through the practices of sharing and eating and therefore, becomes an ex-commodity as something to be repurposed. In turn, it instigates anti-capitalist practices through collaborative and community-led action (Hepp 2020; Midgley 2020). The reclamation of food waste and food surplus can be described as food rescue: “the practice of gathering rescuable food and redirecting it for human consumption” (Hecht and Neff 2019, 1)

Approaching Alternativity in Practice

In summary, to counter hegemonic structures, food must be seen as a social necessity and a common. Food initiatives, for instance, that adopt degrowth strategies can go beyond these structures to “create an empowering arena of experimentation, self-expression and agency” (Szakál and Balázs 2020, 125). The literature on degrowth and alternative organising have much overlap in the way that they advocate for alternativity and the building of alternatives (Dahlman et al. 2022; Schulken et al. 2022). While degrowth literature outlines this endorsement explicitly, the discussion on alternative organising is useful in understanding how collective practices of alternative moral values and decommodification in the realm of food are realised in the capitalist system.

Figure 2 demonstrates an assembly of the concepts outlined to answer the overarching research question via the three sub-questions. These sub-questions are based on the conceptual themes elaborated in this section. The visualisation of the approach will aid in streamlining the analysis later.

The first sub-question probes why and how the food initiatives used as case studies are alternative, situating them in Alakavuklar's (2023) framework. The second sub-question explores how such initiatives, in their alternativity, may challenge the commodification of food and act upon the alternative moral values to practise the decommodification of labour and resources. The third sub-question investigates the situatedness of the alternative food initiatives and their practices. This falls under the overarching concept of alternative organising which argues that alternative forms are situated within the current capitalist system and its organisation. This introduces challenges for the initiatives's alternative practices, and therefore this question explores how these are navigated. With this approach in mind, the landscape of alternative organising practices of food rescue and distribution by alternative food initiatives are presented. Before diving into the analysis, I outline the methodology which introduces the alternative food initiatives picked as case studies for this thesis.

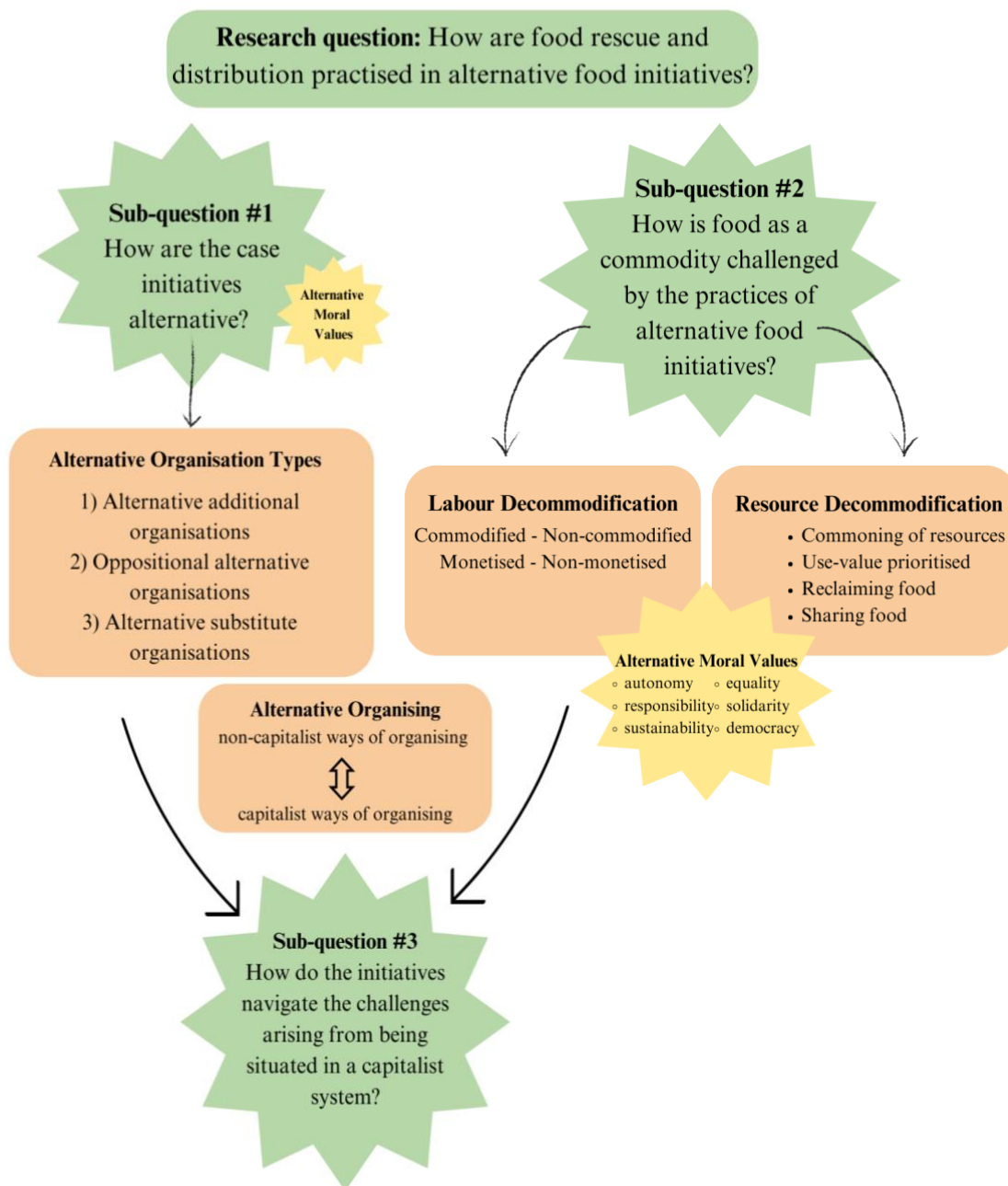


Figure 2. Visualising the analytical approach

Methodology

Social scientists have recognised that the food system, including the nature of food, how we consume it, and how we may devalue it once it becomes rubbish is important to study. This recognition not only aids in understanding human experiences, but it can also help us understand broader political economies and ecological issues. Further insights can be gained on the cultural, symbolic and emotional value of food, how it has been politicised and may cause practices of resistance (Miller and Deutsch 2009; Eriksen and Schober 2017; Aktaş-Polat and Polat 2020). To answer the research question, I draw on ethnographic research to effectively explore these insights.

Ethnographic research

Ethnography is a qualitative research procedure where knowledge is produced and understood through the everyday experiences of participants. The researcher observes, interacts and speaks with their participants in a manner where knowledge is shared and exchanged. The portrayal of the observations and experiences are then connected to a wider cultural framework and narrativised through written ethnography (Watson 2012; Pink 2015; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019).

In order to understand the underlying social incentives of people working alternatively in particular organisational entities, I also draw specifically on organisational ethnography. This method advocates for the importance of studying organisations through a qualitative, and sociological/anthropological lens (Gaggiotti, Kostera and Krzyworzeka 2017). Organisations are often defined as bureaucratically structured, but as Watson (2012) concurs the social sciences see them as entities embedded in society. This is more in line with the case examples chosen as they are created through bottom-up and community-run practices (ibid.). To take it a step further, such establishments can also be called social initiatives which focus particularly on social and environmental justice by aiming to improve opportunities for marginalised groups, increase the well-being of humans and nature alike, and focus on sustainability. Examples include non-governmental, non-profit and community-oriented organisations (Shekhar 2018). The examples chosen for this thesis can be justified as organisations according to Watson's (2012) definition, however, I rather

use the vocabulary of ‘initiative’, as introduced by Shekhar (2018), because the organisations chosen are situated more in their practices of social and environmental concern. Furthermore, the analysis of day-to-day activities can aid in understanding how they are situated in society gaining “a fuller, more grounded, practice-based understanding of organisational life” (Ybema et al. 2009, 2).

It is common to conduct multi-sited research within organisational ethnography which entails understanding different contexts by following the actors involved and their actions. Therefore, this research investigates multiple initiatives to depict the landscape of alternative food organising. Gaggiotti, Kostera and Krzyworzeka (2017) argue for an expansion of ethnographic research beyond being a mere method but also situating the problems, knowledge and practices of local situations in broader social contexts. For instance, more critical organisational ethnographies attempt to expand the consciousness of social problems, “thus enabling active participation in the creation of a more just society” (ibid., 327). This positions how the initiatives are situated locally but also within the broader capitalist context.

Research location and cases

The choice for this research, its location and participants come from my own involvement in alternative food initiatives. Some of the initiatives I am and have been involved with are also case examples for this thesis. Due to my residency in south Sweden, I decided to focus on initiatives in the town where I am residing (Lund) and selected cities 20 to 60 minutes away (Malmö and Copenhagen). These cities can be grouped and classified as the Öresund region which consists of the Copenhagen area and southern Sweden bordering the Öresund strait (Prologis n.d.; Britannica n.d.). I contacted twelve initiatives in total in this region of which I ended up researching six. The initiatives are Fællesskabet i København - Free Fridge Copenhagen, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen, Folkets Skaffereri (Malmö), Rude Food Malmö, Food Saving Lund and Folkets Kök - People’s Kitchen (Lund). Table 1 condenses the initiatives researched, their location, which methods I used to collect my data, the date of research conduction and the participants (anonymised) involved.

	Initiative	Location	Data collection	Date	Participants (pseudonyms)
Case 1	Rude Food Malmö	Malmö, Sweden	Interview (60 minutes)	March 8	Participant #1: Eve
Case 2	Food Saving Lund	Lund, Sweden	Interview (60 minutes)	March 18	Participant #2: Carolina
Case 3	Folkets Skaffereri	Malmö, Sweden	Interview (30 minutes) and Fieldwork	March 22	(Interview) participant #3: Elina (Field) participant #4: Jon (Field) participant #5: Teresa (Field) participant #6: Henrik
Case 4	Food Not Bombs Copenhagen	Copenhagen, Denmark	Interview (50 minutes) and Fieldwork	March 28 and March 16	(Interview) participant #7: Lana (Field) participant #8: Danielle (Field) participant #9: Joshua
Case 5	Folkets Kök - People's Kitchen	Lund, Sweden	Group interview (50 minutes) and Fieldwork	March 25 and March 21	(Interview) participant #10: Andrea (Interview) participant #11: Leia (Interview) participant #12: Sam (Interview) participant #13: Hilda
Case 6	Fællesskabet i København - Free Fridge Copenhagen	Copenhagen, Denmark	Interview (60 minutes)	March 5	Participant #14: Marta

Table 1. Research cases and participants

Research methods, data collection and analysis

There are various methods in ethnographic research that can be used to answer the research question (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). The methods used in this research are participant observation and interviews. In the location where one does research, the researcher aims to scrutinise what their participants are doing and experiencing. Participant observation allows for an immersion of the researcher into the research setting to gain a deeper understanding of the everyday lived experiences of their participants. Interviews, whether informal or semi-structured, can provide more in-depth information in general or complement observations. Informal interviews entail a lack of structure where conversations may occur more naturally. Semi-structured interviews are more organised where an interview guide (appendix A.) is used consisting of topics and questions. The guide allows for opinions and questions arising outside of the structure to be deemed relevant but within more control where the questions asked are directed towards answering the research question. The data is recorded through written and/or audio recording (Bernard 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). In their research, ethnographers interpret the lived realities and situations created by the participants they engage with and investigate this through interactions. As a researcher, I did not position myself as an outsider but as a co-creator in meaning-making of the organisational situations, understanding and participating with the actors involved through the methods mentioned above but also as an active participant myself (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Schwandt 1998; Yanow, Ybema and van Hulst 2012). Therefore, I also draw on auto-ethnography, a method used by some researchers to exemplify their personal experiences within their research to fabricate academic knowledge. Taking such an approach means reflecting on their embodied experiences and how that contributes to ethnographic understanding (Pink 2015).

Over the month of March 2024, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with nine representatives from the initiatives mentioned in Table 1, of which one interview was carried out in a group setting. Four of the interviews were conducted online and two were done in person. Five interviews were audio-recorded, and one was recorded through written notes. My aim was to gain more insight into the organisational

structures and practices, and the experiences of active members working for these initiatives. Additionally, to further understand how these initiatives work in real life, I volunteered with three of the organisations. Here participant observation, auto-ethnographic reflections, and informal interviews with five additional field participants were conducted. These accounts were recorded through written means during the fieldwork and further reflected on afterwards.

Moreover, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue, in any qualitative research participants should gain accurate details about the research being conducted, should consent either through written or oral means to being researched, and should be given the option to withdraw from the study whenever they see fit. Therefore, before conducting the interviews, I asked participants to sign an informed consent form (appendix B.) to give permission for using the data collected, for audio-recording and with the choice for anonymity. With the participants that I engaged with during the field days I asked for oral consent. All participants agreed to having the initiatives publicly known, but some wished for their personal name to be anonymised. For consistency and following the no harm principle, I decided to anonymise all participants and use pseudonyms instead. After the data was collected, I transcribed all the audio-recorded interviews using Microsoft Word and digitalised my fieldnotes. For confidentiality, the informed consent forms and data collected (interview transcriptions and fieldnotes) were saved securely on the drive of Lund University.

Using NVivo 14, the documents were analysed through themes retrieved from the literature and new themes that emerged from the data. Three main sections were deduced from the conceptual understanding and research question: 1) alternative, 2) practices and 3) experiences. The first set of codes were based on the literature on use and exchange value (Marx 1990; Alakavuklar 2023), alternative organising (Parker et al. 2014; Alakavuklar 2023) and the alternative moral values (Wright 2013; Parker et al. 2014; Schiller-Merkens 2022). Second, the practices were split according to practices of care and as outlined in the conceptual framework, the decommodification of labour and resources. Last, the experiences, namely the motivations, challenges, successes and future plans that are important in understanding the practices, emerged from the data. After the coding process, the practices of decommodifying labour and

resources emerged as the main themes to which the other codes could be ascribed, with further common themes emerging. Table 2 outlines how the various codes and themes were condensed to aid in answering the research question and sub-questions.

Practices (main themes)	Common themes	Connection to other codes
LABOUR DECOMMODIFICATION		Care (practice) Use value (value) Equality (value)
Informal non-monetised exchange	Volunteer work Donation-based	Autonomy (value) Responsibility (value) Challenges (experience) Successes (experience)
Formal non-monetised exchange	Volunteer work Donation-based Not-for-profit	Autonomy (value) Responsibility (value) Challenges (experience) Successes (experience)
Horizontal organising and decision making	Non-hierarchical core team	Democracy (value) Equality (value) Autonomy (value) Responsibility (value) Challenges (experience) Successes (experience)
RESOURCE DECOMMODIFICATION		Care (practice) Use value (value) Sustainability (value)
Perceptions of food	Cultural Political Personal Academic	Solidarity (value) Equality (value) Motivations (experience)
Food rescue	Reclaiming food	Sustainability (value) Challenges (experience) Successes (experience)
Food distribution	Sharing food	Equality (value) Solidarity (value) Autonomy (value) Challenges (experience) Successes (experience)

Table 2. Themes and codes

Methodological reflection

Ethnographers should not ignore that they too have opinions and knowledge acquired by being part of society. Therefore, it is important to reflect on one's positionality in academic research and the ethical implications (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). First and foremost, I believe it is important to note that this research comes from a place of privilege embedded in Western academia. Therefore, the stance of this thesis is particularly targeted towards this setting through a critical understanding of Western society and grasping the Westernised alternative landscape.

Furthermore, the choice for this topic comes from my own interest in food, participation with Food Saving Lund and Rude Food Malmö, and current active engagement with Folkets Kök. As Watson (2012, 21) emphasises, sometimes it is important for "ethnographers to consider the possibility of treating their own life situation as a research site which can generate insights and information relevant to their focal research organisation". Food, as for everyone, is important in my everyday life both in its sustenance but also in how I think about sustainability and the world around me. This involvement has made me critically question the way food consumption and waste are handled within the capitalist system. This thesis research was the perfect opportunity to explore this further.

When collecting my data, I aimed to give back to the community by volunteering at some initiatives making me an equal participant. Being an active board member of Folkets Kök, I often found myself relating to the people I was talking to. Therefore, I deemed any insights that I provided during the data collection process also as important to not place myself as an outsider but as an active participant as well. Additionally, for transparency and continuous involvement, I updated my participants during the thesis writing process by sending them the first draft of my analysis with a request for any changes if required. For some, I also requested some clarifications for the analysis and cite these insights as personal communication.

A big shortcoming in the research was the language barrier. I suspect that some initiatives did not respond because I do not speak fluent Swedish or Danish. Therefore, I understand the landscape in the Öresund region from a foreigner's perspective and could have potentially attributed more in-depth knowledge had I spoken the languages.

With that said, the participants I interacted with all spoke English, some even being foreigners themselves, and therefore the data I collected is relevant. Furthermore, the data collection was conducted over one month, which is short for what ethnographies usually aim for and is a big limitation in my methodology. Indeed, a longer research time frame would have aided in gaining an even deeper understanding of the alternative landscape in which I could have also spent more time with certain initiatives to gain more insight. However, with my preconceived knowledge and active participation in the alternative food landscape, I see the data collected as highly useful in answering the research question as will be presented in the next sections.

Alternative Food Initiatives in the Öresund Region

Returning to Alakavuklar's (2023) types of alternative organisations, the cases outlined above can be introduced and situated in this framework to describe their alternativity. To start, Rude Food Malmö, Food Saving Lund and Folkets Skafferi can be arranged within the alternative substitute organisations category. All three collaborate with mainstream local actors, such as local supermarkets and bakeries, bigger distribution centres, and/or funders, but without an expected market exchange.



Rude Food Malmö started in 2015 as part of a research project on creating a collective kitchen. The initiative was established as a non-profit and the first food surplus catering service in Sweden (Rude Food Malmö, n.d.). They deem collaboration with local retailers and restaurants, other initiatives like Folkets Skafferi, interested interns and volunteers, and 'eaters' as very important (interview 8 March 2024).

Figure 3. Rude Food Malmö Logo (Rude Food Malmö n.d.)



Food Saving Lund, in Sweden, started in 2014 and aims to fight food waste. Almost every day people can sign up to pick up leftover food from retailers. Sign-ups are organised through the free open-source platform called Karrot, "for grassroots initiatives and groups of people that want to coordinate face-to-face activities on a local, autonomous and voluntary basis" (Karrot, n.d.). Food Saving Lund advocates for tackling food waste through localised practices by involving a local supermarket, bakery and residents (interview 18 March 2024).

Figure 4. Food Saving Lund Logo (Food Saving Lund 2022)



Folkets Skafferi, meaning people's pantry, is a non-profit food bank in Malmö, Sweden. They collect food surplus from local retailers and donors to be distributed three times a week to people in need, and to anyone who wants to reduce their food waste (Folkets Skafferi Malmö, n.d.; interview 22 March 2024). The initiative was a continuation of a community centre and shelter, the first registered food bank in Sweden, that was active from 2010 to 2020. When they closed, Folkets Skafferi came to exist and moved their location to a local church (fieldnotes 22 March 2024).

Figure 5. Folkets Skafferi Logo (Folkets Skafferi Malmö, n.d.)

Furthermore, all three initiatives recognise the importance of creating an environment of bottom-up inclusion and change. More specifically, Folkets Skafferi and Rude Food Malmö also deem collaborations with governance authorities as important. The former for instance is in touch with the Swedish company IKEA to retrieve wasted and surplus food and are in the process of applying for funding from Malmö Stad as well as a foundation in Denmark. As Eve (pseudonym) stated about the structure of Rude Food Malmö, “working away from the margins and being in the norm, but still questioning the norm” (interview 8 March 2024) justifies how these initiatives fall within this category.

The other three initiatives, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen, Folkets Kök, and Fællesskabet i København, fall in the category of oppositional alternative organisations. They criticise the increased social inequalities caused by the commodification of food as ascribed in the capitalist market and more directly confront capitalist practices.



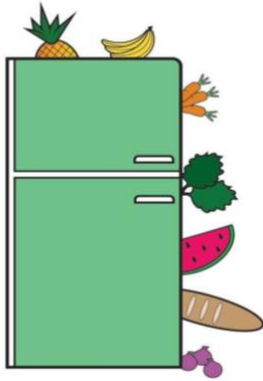
Food Not Bombs is a global anarchist movement that started in the 1980s in the United States. They address the issues of food insecurity, hunger, poverty, war and environmental destruction (Food Not Bombs, n.d.). One of the branches is the Danish initiative Food Not Bombs Copenhagen located at a volunteer-run cultural centre. They cook meals and deliver them to unhoused people twice a month on Saturdays (interview 28 March 2024). The volunteers involved are not necessarily anarchists themselves but may also be activists who practise anarchist ideas of anti-capitalism and anti-poverty (ibid.; Cloke, May, and Williams 2017).

Figure 6. Food Not Bombs Logo (Food Not Bombs Copenhagen 2014)



Folkets Kök or People's Kitchen is a student-run initiative that started in 2021 in Lund. They cook free vegan meals every Thursday made with ingredients saved through dumpster diving. In Sweden, there are no strict laws against dumpster diving. Consequences only apply when a person destroys the property or takes products that still hold value to the store (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). The volunteers consider this and only dumpster dive in places where bins are easily accessible, not locked, and leave the area cleaner than it was found (Vaughan 2018; interview 25 March 2024). Other food, like bread, they collect from retailers in collaboration with Food Saving Lund or are purchased. They host the dinners for students and anyone in need of a warm meal in the space of an activist association (interview 25 March 2024). The initiative is rooted in ecosocialist practices advocating for the balance of social and environmental needs (ibid.; Löwy 2005).

Figure 7. Folkets Kök Logo (own archive)



Fællesskabet i København or Free Fridge Copenhagen, in Denmark, was a food sharing project that started at the end of 2020. At the same cultural centre where Food Not Bombs Copenhagen is located, community fridges were set up for people to drop off and pick up leftover food. With the support of the cultural centre, who provided electricity to power the fridges, the initiative created a space for the existing community. The project started out of a general discontent with how the current system deals with food production and they rather advocated for food sovereignty. The initiative was successful for almost 3 years but was discontinued in July 2023 (interview 5 March 2024).

Figure 8. Fællesskabet i København Logo (Fællesskabet i København- Free Fridge CPH 2022)

Further exemplified in their categorisation, these initiatives address the societal and environmental issues around food by re-politicising spaces and criticising the market through their practices. Food Not Bombs Copenhagen, aligning with anarchist thought, expresses their discontent with how mainstream entities do not provide the basic need of food for homeless people. Fællesskabet i København challenges the issue of waste that exists due to capitalism by aiming to save “a few tonnes of food” (interview 5 March 2024) through community involvement. Folkets Kök criticises how within capitalism food is seen as a commodity, something that needs to be paid for, and as something profitable: “It’s kind of the same as selling water” (interview 25 March 2024). Therefore, they provide meals for free and reinstate that food is a human right.

As exemplified the initiatives picked for the investigation of this thesis are alternative according to Alakavuklar’s (2023) categories. None of these initiatives are classified as alternative additional organisations due to their anti-capitalist tendencies for which some the critiques are more prominent than for others. The next sections will further outline how the food initiatives in the Öresund region are alternative in accordance with the alternative moral values, exemplifying food rescue and distribution practices through different kinds of decommodification.

“None of us earn a living out of it”¹

The decommodification of labour

In their practice of decommodifying labour, the alternative food initiatives have exemplified the direct involvement of actors in the forms of formal unpaid labour and informal non-monetised labour (Williams 2014). Both forms and what the initiatives stand for are to aid others and the environment. According to Williams’s (2014) framework, all initiatives practise labour that fall between commodified and non-commodified labour and are completely non-monetised. They are volunteer run, not profit oriented and situated in the third sector (ibid.; Parker et al. 2014).

Rude Food Malmö and Folkets Skafferi practise formal unpaid labour. As non-profit associations they are lawfully registered in Sweden. They have received approval from the Swedish food monitoring authorities to practise their way of distribution (interview 8 March 2024; personal communication Folkets Skafferi 20 June 2024). The conditions entail: to conduct activities that are publicly beneficial through solidarity, to be open to anyone who wants to become a member, and to operate on a decentralised economic model (Verksam 2024; personal communication Rude Food Malmö 17 June 2024). Rude Food Malmö rely on some monetary contributions for their (catering) services which provide an income stream to fuel their activities and for renting shared kitchen spaces. They have received initial funding from Malmö Stad for communication purposes. Folkets Skafferi operate without earning money from their practices and rely on monetary donations for cleaning supplies and transportation but are also applying to receive funding from elsewhere.

¹ Quote by Eve. Interview 8 March 2024.



Figure 9. Announcement of meal served at Folkets Kök with suggested donation amount (own photo 21 March 2024)

The other initiatives take similar approaches without being officially registered. They practise informal non-monetised labour, namely operating without any lawful formalities (Williams 2014). Fællesskabet i København, Folkets Kök, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen and Food Saving Lund are initiatives that run on donation-based contributions, and/or are free of charge. Food Not Bombs Copenhagen offers catering services to leftist groups and organisations to earn funds to buy ingredients. Folkets Kök hosts free dinners but asks the people who come to eat to donate what they can without the expectation that everyone can and will donate. As Figure 9 shows they suggest a donation amount. They rely on this structure to be able to buy ingredients that they cannot receive through food rescue. Fællesskabet i København and Food Saving Lund both mentioned that they had received monetary donations which were and are mainly used for transportation purposes but expressed that they could do without: “we basically could have done without, we just had money for eventualities”

(interview 5 March 2024). Therefore, all initiatives rely on some monetary means in one way or another, and some need more money than others.

The non-monetised/unpaid exchange occurs through voluntary labour, where volunteers are compensated with meals or material goods and with appreciation (Alakavuklar 2023). The people involved have taken the responsibility and an autonomous decision to volunteer at these initiatives. In turn, there is no incentive for the initiatives to grow and people can put as much time and energy into it as they want (fieldnotes 22 March 2024). However, this also comes with its flaws as without a monetary exchange incentive it causes uncertainty of and a fluctuation in the number of volunteers over the years. Fællesskabet i København, for instance, was discontinued due to a lack of a volunteer network after the founders left Denmark. Nevertheless, the other initiatives have also expressed that although this may be a challenge, they always tend to find solutions. For example, by reducing efforts at times and by recruiting new interested people to keep the initiative running (interview 18 March 2024).

Additionally, having a strong core structure that is based on horizontality, as a practice of alternative organising (Maeckelbergh 2014), has impacted these initiatives positively with most of them existing for several years. Particularly in reference to the more active volunteers who have a coordinating role in these initiatives for a longer period of time. The core team in each initiative is structured in a non-hierarchical way (Dahlman et al. 2022). For instance, in anarchist thought, as Lana (pseudonym) from Food Not Bombs Copenhagen explained, “there’s no hierarchy. No one is more responsible or important than anyone else” (interview 28 March 2024). Marta (pseudonym) from Fællesskabet i København expressed the importance of not having a “very structured way of organising” as something that allows for an easier redistribution of surplus food that is not reliant on a monetary exchange (interview 5 March 2024). Rather it is about strengthening skills, increasing democratic decision-making, creating shared responsibility and increasing autonomy (Maeckelberg 2014; Parker et al. 2014). As Eve stated about the responsibility and autonomy taken by the core team of Rude Food Malmö in the experimentation of their practices: “We were like, we have to shoot ourselves in the foot. That’s when we check with whoever is on the board: where do you see where this goes now but still within our framework?”

(interview 8 March 2024). In line with Maeckelbergh (2014), the perks of having a horizontal decision-making structure based on equality amongst the members of an organisation creates “shares and contributions in a way that works so naturally” (interview 25 March 2024). Although horizontality is an idealised structure within alternative organising, it can also be challenging in some situations where some may still need to take more responsibility for instance in fixing other people’s mistakes (fieldnotes 22 March 2024). Nevertheless, despite the experience of some obstacles, these initiatives have displayed the importance of working without hierarchy and through unpaid labour conforming to the decommodification of labour (Parker et al. 2014; Williams 2014).

These initiatives create spaces of solidarity and care through their labour practices. All initiatives aim to be inclusive, where collective needs and necessities are put at the forefront, by welcoming volunteers where they can practise their skills, and by providing easy and affordable access to food for anyone who wants or needs it. For instance, Rude Food Malmö relies on volunteers to arrive with certain knowledge and interests. Eve referred to my role as a temporary unpaid intern in late 2023 when I created posters for two events that they were hosting: “You as an intern come in with your identified area and then we try to find contexts and projects or initiatives in which to bring your efforts together” (interview 8 March 2024). I also encountered a similar sense of community and care with Folkets Skafferi: “A volunteer left me a little note with my name on the yoghurt she had put aside for me. She wanted to make sure that I would take it home” (fieldnotes 22 March 2024). Furthermore, I gained compensation through a strong sense of gratitude, appreciation and motivation in doing something a little good for the world while volunteering at some of these initiatives (Alakavuklar 2023). For instance, cooking saved ingredients, according to Andrea (pseudonym) from Folkets Kök, “is so satisfying”. And although you may feel stressed while volunteering, it can also be worth it. As Teresa (pseudonym) from Folkets Skafferi expressed, “the adrenaline and stress is so high while you’re handing stuff out, but it’s so fulfilling when you do it” (fieldnotes 22 March 2024). The practising of volunteer work reduces high performance pressure and accumulation as is rooted within capitalism, and rather creates feelings of fulfilment (ibid.).

Concurring with Saave and Muraca (2021, 761), “horizontal and autonomous networks of solidarity” are created in the labour practices of these alternative food initiatives. Through the decommodification of labour, the initiatives practise ways of organising that counter profit-driven strategies and thus challenge the commodification of food. By practising non-monetised labour based on volunteering, food is viewed as a basic necessity for its use value and not for its monetary exchange.

“Bring the excess food, share it and eat it together”²

The decommodification of resources

The use value of food in these initiatives is created through a “secondary market” (interview 5 March 2024) where forms of labour are practised in which the commodity regains value by giving it a second life (Hepp 2020). But why were these initiatives started in the first place? Why do people decide to work for free and how does this influence their perceptions of and alternative practices around food?

The individuals working in alternative food initiatives strongly practise care within their motivations (D’Alisa, Deriu, and Demaria 2015). In particular towards themselves, people in their close vicinity, marginalised groups and/or the environment. This thus instigates heavy emotional connections to food itself and encourages practices of resource decommodification. For instance, Carolina (pseudonym) from Food Saving Lund emphasised the love she has for food and the pain she feels when she sees food being wasted. Her upbringing played an important role in her motivation to become active in an alternative food initiative. Additionally, Andrea expressed the importance of “being sustainable for yourself and then feeling more self-efficient and hopeful” (interview 25 March 2024) as a strong motivation. For some there is also an academic motivation to put theory into practice. Namely for Folkets Kök which was started and is continued mainly by human ecology students and Fællesskabet i København which was a part of Marta’s thesis research. Moreover, Eve from Rude Food Malmö sees the importance of discursive and knowledge creation around food as a driving force combined with her perceptions around food changing when she became a mother.

Furthermore, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen’s primary incentive is addressing the issue around homelessness. For Lana this is a strong motivation: “so people don’t fall through the cracks as much and it feels like my agency is doing something to help people” (interview 28 March 2024). Here, I sympathise with Guerrero et al. (2023) who argue for the fundamental need of viewing the provisioning of food as an essential practice of care, not just for oneself but also the people around you. The cultural

² Quote by Eve. Interview 8 March 2024.

element is rooted in the importance of communality, social relations, comfort and conviviality (Hepp 2020). As Lana summarised,

people have always had a strong culture around food, there have always been people gathering to cook and eat together, whether it's Food Not Bombs or a high-end restaurant or an ethnic community, there's definitely a lot of emotion and culture connected to food (interview 28 March 2024).

As aforementioned, the initiatives were picked according to their practices of food rescue and distribution. Food rescue inherently has a strong value retention for social and environmental sustainability (Hepp 2020). In all initiatives, the need to feed people through reclamation and addressing the ecological concern of overproduction and overconsumption that leads to increased food waste are central arguments for their existence and practices (Ferrell 2014; Nelson and Edwards 2020). For some of the initiatives concern for the environment motivates their practices of food rescue. Centring environmental sustainability, they recognise the importance of commoning the use of food as a resource challenging "traditional notions of ownership" (Fournier 2013, 16). In turn, they criticise overproduction that instigates increased food waste and emissions and aim to save resources by playing a small part in addressing and helping the climate as was exclaimed by Carolina and the members of Folkets Kök. Food rescue is practised through donations from volunteers or retailers. For instance, Fællesskabet i København relied on the donations of leftover food from volunteers and the local community and Rude Food Malmö rescues their ingredients from local suppliers by bicycle. For Folkets Kök, food rescue is also practised through retrieving food from dumpsters. Saving items from a bin that they deem fit for human consumption is "a form of consumer resistance against the dominant industrial food system" (Vaughan 2018). For the volunteers, dumpster diving is a practice of activism in which "trashed and lost ingredients are cooked" (interview 25 March 2024), as I experienced in the following account (fieldnotes 21 March 2024):

I opened the fridge to find piles and piles of saved ingredients that three other volunteers had dumpster dived the evening before. Bags of lettuce, plenty of cucumbers, spring onions, yellow onions and leeks. Avocados, “the best I’ve ever seen”, one volunteer had said while shaking his head in disbelief, “why did those end up in the dumpster?”. I questioned that too with most of the ingredients. Tomatoes, red paprika, beets, a few pieces of cauliflower, lots of carrots, and a few green beans. Potatoes, parsnips, celeriac, celery, broccoli and radishes. Ingredients for a curry and a green salad. A lot of apples and bananas as always, pears, rhubarb (a treat!) and packets of blueberries were all good for a dessert. An additional number of bananas were lying in the freezer from a previous time, perfect for banana-cinnamon ice cream.



Figures 10 and 11. Dumpster dived fruits and vegetables at Folkets Kök (own photos 21 March 2024)



Figure 12. Preparing banana-cinnamon ice cream at Folkets K k (own photo 21 March 2024)

The first step was to further sort out all the stuff by checking for things that were mouldy and what parts of the fruits and vegetables that looked bruised or were a bit mouldy could be salvaged and cut off. Then all the ingredients had to be washed thoroughly with hot water, sieved and washed again. Even though everything we saved looked relatively good, the food had laid in a dirty dumpster and we did not want to get anyone ill. After three hours of spontaneously coming up with a meal for the evening, sorting the ingredients by washing and throwing away some but salvaging most, and cooking a three-course meal, we served 76 portions.

This experience is a good example of how the commodification of food was challenged and resource decommodification was put into practice. Namely, how the foods that were already viewed as waste gained use value through dumpster diving, thorough sorting and cooked into a meal to serve many people. In the preparation, care is practised in how the ingredients were revalued and in making sure that the ingredients were consumable.

In line with sustainability, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen and Folkets K k also put a lot of thought into how the food is prepared. All their meals are vegan for both social

and environmental reasons. As Lana stated, “I guess it’s in line with the leftist view, let’s not kill animals.” (interview 28 March 2024). Furthermore, it allows for easy recipes, makes it easier to adapt to people’s dietary needs and creates easy nutritional value. While I volunteered at Food Not Bombs Copenhagen, I was impressed by the way they were thinking about the types of ingredients, textures and flavours to adapt to the people they were feeding: “You want to balance the fattiness with a little bit of acidity, and you want to add a little bit of sweet because some people need or like the sweetness which is helpful for them” (interview 28 March 2024). How the food is rescued and prepared fuels the ways in which the food is then distributed.

The food distributions span from handing out on the streets (Food Not Bombs Copenhagen), to allocation within closed spaces either through autonomous pickups (Food Saving Lund), directly distributing saved foods (Folkets Skafferri and Fællesskabet i København) or cooking with saved ingredients (Folkets Kök and Rude Food Malmö). With an emphasis on “feeding [unhoused people] on their terms” (fieldnotes 16 March 2024), Danielle (pseudonym) from Food Not Bombs Copenhagen explained that their practice is about bringing food to people and giving them autonomy in if they want to eat it or not. They have two to three main distribution routes that they take to feed people along the way and usually end up at a shelter to give them the remaining food. Their goal is to share all the food with as many unhoused people as they can. One account for instance was a clear example of how the distribution occurs without any prejudice (fieldnotes 16 March 2024):

At the end of our shift, we had assembled 30 wraps filled with a chickpea-pickle salad, red paprika, onions and lettuce, ready to be handed out to unhoused people. Joshua (pseudonym) said, “There is always this Polish guy standing outside the cultural centre wanting food. I’ll throw a burrito at him.” He opened the window and shouted down, “Hey! Can you catch it?”, dropping the aluminium wrapped burrito into the hands of the man waiting below.

The same goes for the other initiatives where solidarity for the community and providing equal access to the resource of food are fulfilled (Parker et al. 2014). Namely, Folkets Skafferi opens their food bank to everyone without checking their financial background. Folkets Kök acknowledges that some people may not be able to afford to eat out or have little money to spend and therefore do not expect everyone to donate. Through recognising the importance of equal access, Food Saving Lund provides a platform where people can easily sign up to pick up surplus and Fællesskabet i København provided an unmanaged fridge space that was accessible to all.

Furthermore, the distribution of food for these initiatives is about the care practice of sharing in which the commodification is disputed and rather the common is reclaimed (Hepp 2020). For instance, the slogan of Rude Food Malmö suggests: “Food belongs in bellies not bins” (Rude Food Malmö, n.d.). There is an emphasis on comfort, satisfaction, a “convivial arrangement” (interview 8 March 2024) that food provides that should be shared and eaten without any restrictions. For Food Not Bombs Copenhagen and Folkets Kök the underlying political ideas influence elements of sharing and decommodification. For the former, the practice of mutual aid builds social relationships based on solidarity and responsibility for shared needs (Heynen 2010; Spade 2020). Folkets Kök also emphasises the need for viewing food as “sharing is caring” (interview 25 March 2024).

The motivations of the core volunteers with a strong incentive to share, to create community and in their horizontal and democratic structures, causes these initiatives to transform food into its common form instigating its use value while deeming its exchange value and commodification as unimportant (Fournier 2013; De Angelis and Harvie 2014). At the core of these initiatives is the addressing of the problem around food waste and surplus. Through their practices and experiences of food rescue and distribution, further revaluing food’s use value. The saved resources are decommodified through equal accessibility in commoning the food and the reclamation of food after its disposal (Fournier 2013; Hepp 2020). I found that for all initiatives the rescuing, preparation and distribution of food is dealt with diligence and care, creating alternative spaces of social inclusion embedded in the local communities (Koretskaya and Feola 2020; Schiller-Merkens 2022).

“A bandaid cannot fix this”³

Navigating capitalism

The alternative organising scholarship has shown how capitalist and non-capitalist ways of organising exist in overlap (Parker et al. 2014). The initiatives researched have exemplified their situatedness in capitalism which poses many challenges to their alternative or anti-capitalist tendencies that need to be navigated. As Marta stated, “surplus for distribution is not a solution to the food waste issue. It might in fact worsen the problem because it’s giving supermarkets a reason to keep wasting and is giving the system a reason to keep existing” (interview 5 March 2024). Therefore, these initiatives have to rely on a capitalist market in their retrieval of food that either is abandoned or still needs to be purchased.

At Folkets Skafferri, I experienced how the increased donations of surplus food no longer sold on the market posed frustrations (fieldnotes 22 March 2024):

There was a lot of bread and today even more was going to arrive. We had already sorted out the bread that was there, putting them into bags for easier distribution. But then another truckload came in. It was so much! We had to fit the boxes in every corner of the space, stacking them in a Tetris-like manner. The basement of the church was not that big. Elina (pseudonym) showed me around. There was one back room filled to the brim with boxes of tortilla chips, coconut milk, energy drinks and ready to eat curry packages. In the freezer, boxes of frozen vegetarian minced meat. Just to name a few. In the main distribution area, a bookshelf was filled with various kinds of sauces and pastes like dozens of bottles of barbeque sauce, ketchup manis and gochujang. Other shelves filled with cans of spinach, lemonade bottles, candy packets, lentil chips and flour. And most notably, they had three shopping carts full of Hellman’s mayonnaise. “We don’t know how to get rid of this, we have been handing them out for weeks now,” Elina said.

³ Quote by Danielle. Fieldnotes 16 March 2024.



Figures 13., 14. and 15. Food surplus for distribution at Folkets Skafferi (own photos 22 March 2024)

The initiatives have expressed their general discontent with how capitalism deals with the social and environmental problems of the food system present today by putting a bandaid over it without fixing the problems at hand as Danielle described it (fieldnotes 16 March 2024). In the example presented and displayed in the figures above, it was shocking to encounter so much food that was deemed no longer fit for the capitalist market due to being in excess, near its expiration date or already over that date, while in the hands of Folkets Skafferi it is fit for distribution. Therefore, the volunteers were trying to get rid of as much food as they could and many people who came to pick up food left with multiple bags filled with various kinds of foods. But even then, a lot of food was left over. This is a prime example of how the capitalist market places the problem elsewhere for these initiatives to deal with. For instance, as Danielle explained, in Denmark homeless shelters are only open during the week meaning that food can be inaccessible for unhoused people during the weekends (fieldnotes 16 March 2024). Food Not Bombs's slogan "Food is a right, not a privilege" (Food Not Bombs, n.d.) addresses general criticisms of the current system. As Lana stated, "none of us should have to make sure that other people have food as it's a fundamental human need" (interview 28 March 2024). However, with the lack of responsibility taken by the system itself, these volunteers recognise the importance of trying to tackle the problem even when it is something these individuals cannot systematically solve.

Furthermore, even though the global movement is very adamant on using only rescued ingredients, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen cannot rely on food rescue and donations anymore: "In the past we were able to get hold of more no longer loved food and repurpose it, which was really cool. But it's not really as feasible anymore" (interview 28 March 2024). Since their main goal is to feed unhoused people, Food Not Bombs Copenhagen decided to no longer rely on food donations but rather on their catering services to generate an income to buy ingredients. This example portrays that food rescue requires a lot of planning and coordination which goes unpaid and may not always work for equal distribution. My experience cooking for Folkets K k exposed constant concern around whether we had enough dumpster dived ingredients that could feed everyone. Every week it is a gamble whether it will be enough. On top of that, they cannot just rely on rescued food and therefore need monetary donations to buy

certain ingredients. The same accounts for Rude Food Malmö where about sixty per cent of their ingredients are rescued while the rest has to be purchased. Hence, food rescue practices, such as dumpster diving and food donations, are not always reliable. The initiatives have to refer to some capitalist ways where the exchange value, monetisation and commodification of food is necessary to feed the people they are targeting.

Nevertheless, alternative ways of organising need to be highlighted to address the problems that capitalism puts a bandaid over (Williams 2014). Namely, in reconnecting with and instigating the use value and importance of food in a communal way, and in creating social relationships and convivial places through the sharing of a common resource (Edwards and Nelson 2020). In turn, the continuation of these practices, criticisms and frustrations hopefully will “trigger [the environmental and social concern of] the excess and address the issues around the production society” (interview 22 March 2024). These initiatives are hopeful examples that go against the status quo in their motivations by taking concrete action against larger structures and in creating “a shared surplus resource and economy” (interview 8 March 2024) with easy accessibility and inclusivity as core principles (Schiller-Merkens 2022). Leia (pseudonym) from Folkets Kök stated that “so many social norms influence you and your food choices and that it is important to organise politically” (interview 25 March 2024) in creating awareness around how food is dealt with in capitalism, and therefore highlighting the importance of alternatives. Lana recognised the role of Food Not Bombs Copenhagen as “filling the spaces where other institutions cannot provide” (interview 28 March 2024). By focusing on the sharing of common resources and community building (De Angelis and Harvie 2014; Parker et al. 2014), food becomes less of a commodity as the slogan of Folkets Kök suggests: “Food is community, not a commodity” (Folkets Kök Lund 2023).

Furthermore, in line with Alakavuklar (2023, 12), the use value of food “mediates the variety of individual cultural beliefs and motivations into non-capitalist symbolic relations, practices and meanings that are shared”. For all initiatives, the sharing of food is a core principle for communal conviviality and increasing use value (Edwards and Nelson 2020; Hepp 2020). They see the use value of food as something that creates

social and environmental equality and satisfies the needs of both (Löwy 2005). The initiatives that are continuing in their practices have expressed that they hope to move forth with addressing and raising awareness about the social and environmental problems of food excess and the unjust distribution in the current system. Leia stated that she hopes Folkets Kök can be “an inspiration for people’s kitchens to pop up in other places” (interview 25 March 2024). Therefore, even though these initiatives are situated in capitalism and depend on the capitalist market, in their alternativity they pose threats to the ‘capitalist way’. With that the alternative food initiatives aim for a landscape of increased equality, solidarity, sustainability, democracy, responsibility, autonomy, inclusivity and care. As Marta expressed, “I think the solution to food waste is embedded in a just food system that doesn’t see profit as priority” (interview 5 March 2024).

Conclusion

In contributing to the alternative organising scholarship, this thesis provides specific cases of how an alternative landscape around food is realised in the capitalist system. The conceptual baseline: alternative organising together with degrowth, and the decommodification of labour and food aid in understanding alternative strategies that aim to tackle issues of food waste and surplus. The alternative food initiatives in the Öresund region are good examples of that. To answer the overarching research question – How are food rescue and distribution practised in alternative food initiatives? – the research describes the alternativity of these initiatives, how they challenge the commodification of food and how they navigate in a capitalist system.

The initiatives are described as alternatives in accordance with the categorisation of Alakavuklar (2023). Rude Food Malmö, Folkets Skafferi and Food Saving Lund collaborate with mainstream (local) actors while Folkets Kök, Fællesskabet i København and Food Not Bombs Copenhagen are more radical in their actions of re-politicising spaces and by openly criticising capitalism. All initiatives adopt the alternative moral values in their practices (Wright 2013; Parker et al. 2014; Schiller-Merkens 2022). These are practised through formal and informal non-monetised labour in operating on monetary or food donations. All initiatives are volunteer run, structured horizontally, and aim to create spaces of care and solidarity. They address the socio-ecological issues found in today's society pinpointing how the food system is unjustly situated in the current system. They rather advocate for bottom-up inclusion and change and therefore work against the norm.

In their practices of decommodifying labour and food resources, the initiatives challenge the commodification of food ascribed in capitalism. They repurpose the value of food, view it for its use value and not for its monetary exchange value. Use value is created through the reclamation of food by rescuing food through dumpster diving, food donations and/or food pick-ups from local retailers. Also, the commoning of food by equally distributing the food instigates use value. Namely through the recognition of the importance of feeding people without expecting a monetary exchange such as in practices of cooking, sharing and bringing food to people in need. There is a strong sense of social and environmental sustainability especially in the

practice of food rescue. The initiatives deem food that within capitalism is no longer of value rather as something valuable. They do so by highlighting issues around the overproduction of food as an ecological and social threat and seeing excess food as something that can still be used to feed people who need or want it. In the distribution of food whether that is through cooking, pick-ups or handing out food directly to people, the initiatives recognise that food is a necessity for all. They create spaces of equality and inclusion through the sharing of excess food. In their experiences, the core volunteers have valued the fulfilment of wanting to do something good for the environment and their community by exemplifying practices of care and responsibility. Their choice to work voluntarily is an exercise of autonomic decision-making compensated with non-monetary means. The initiatives have portrayed that food does not have to be a commodity but just as well can be shared and consumed in a decommodified and alternative way.

Despite that, food rescue and distribution do not solve the issue of food overproduction that leads to increased food waste and in turn has a detrimental impact on the environment. Rather how capitalism deals with food waste is a starting point for these initiatives. Without the capitalist way of dealing with food waste, these initiatives would not exist. Rather the research shows that food cannot be completely decommodified for these practices to continue existing. Therefore, they have to navigate the challenges that come alight from being embedded in a capitalist system.

The labour practices of the alternative food initiatives are non-monetised as no one earns a living out of their endeavours. However, it becomes commodified through the reliance on income-generating services and/or monetary donations to stay afloat. Indeed, non-monetised labour that is practised by the initiatives cannot be completely separated from the commodification of resources and labour as is ascribed in capitalist structures (Williams 2014). Concurring with Marta's statement on capitalism continuing its practices due to the existence of these initiatives and Vivero Pol's (2013) argument of the food system within capitalism being a failure, these examples have shown how the rescue and distribution of surplus and/or wasted food are not solutions to the overproduction and overconsumption society that capitalism imposes. It can therefore be argued that to address the unjust and unequal distribution of food, targeting

the production is more important. Further research can be suggested for investigating alternative ways of organising in food initiatives that target production. How can the issue be criticised and solved at the start of the food system?

Nevertheless, there is still a need for alternative forms of organising food waste and surplus to showcase the importance of sharing, community-building and care for others through food provisioning. Above all, to view food at any stage as a common, a necessity for all and not just a mere commodity. The criticisms of the status quo and hegemonic structures by the alternative food initiatives in their practices will hopefully gain some momentum in the solving of social and environmental issues. A mode for a larger socio-ecological transformation in which alternative ways of organising are more widely accepted. More research and possibly over a longer period of time should be conducted on how alternative food initiatives, whether they target food production or waste, can be transformative and how they can be positive examples for policy change. Perhaps this will lead to a more just world wherein socio-ecological issues around food and its commodification no longer exist.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

Introductions

- Introducing myself, the topic and personal interest in this topic
- Asking participant for brief introduction

Interview ethics and formalities

- Informed consent received or not
- Ask about audio-recording
- Ask about whether they personally want to be anonymised or also the organisation + pronouns
- Express that interview also investigates personal opinions and experiences, they can share as much as they feel comfortable with

Interview Questions

1. What is your view on food being dealt with in our society?
 - a. What do you understand about the food system?
2. How would you describe food?
 - a. What is your relationship with/to food?
 - b. How does your initiative define/view food?

About the initiative

3. What is the background story of your initiative?
 - a. How did it start?
 - b. What values and issues were the root cause of creating your initiative?
 - c. How has the initiative developed over the years and/or since you started working there?
 - d. Which organisational form does your initiative have?
4. What is your role in the initiative?
 - a. How long have you been working for them?
 - b. What was your incentive to join the initiative?
 - c. How has the initiative shaped your personal practices and values over the months/years?
5. How do you see the initiative tackling the values and issues addressed?
 - a. What solutions are being brought forward?
 - b. How are the solutions being realised (the practices)?
 - c. What is your target group?
6. How is your initiative structured?
 - a. Are there any challenges you have seen with how the initiative is structured?
 - b. How is your initiative funded?
7. Does your initiative engage with other similar initiatives?
 - a. Which initiative do you collaborate with?
 - b. Where are these initiatives located?
 - c. What does the collaboration look like?

- d. How does this benefit your initiative?

Defining food and food waste/surplus

8. How does your relationship and definition of food influence your day-to-day life/within the initiative?
9. [Dependent on initiative] How would you describe the food that is distributed/cooked/eaten at your initiative?
10. [Dependent on initiative] How would you describe food rescue (food waste or food surplus)?

Personal and organisational ambitions

11. What are your initiative's long-term ambitions?
 - a. What are the opportunities and challenges that come with aiming for these ambitions?
 - b. How do you see your own role in the initiative's long-term ambitions?
12. How do you see yourself in realising these ambitions?
 - a. What are your personal ambitions within your work/in the initiative?

End of interview

- Ask if they have anything more to add
- Ask if they have any questions
- Ask if they would want to stay in touch and see the end results of the thesis

Appendix B. Informed Consent Form

Investigating people working for food-rescue initiatives in the Oresund region (Lund, Malmö, Copenhagen)

I volunteer to participate in the master's thesis research conducted by Vera Visser from Lund University. I have been informed on what the research is about, namely an investigation into food-rescue initiatives, the people who work there and their practices. I understand that:

1. Participation involves being interviewed by a student for her master's thesis in Human Ecology at Lund University which investigates the practices, values and opinions of people involved in food-rescue initiatives in the Öresund region. The interview be around 60 minutes.

2. My personal data will remain secure, and if I wish, I can choose for my initiative and I (or either) to remain anonymous in any reports on the information acquired during the interview. I understand that the data will not be shared with third parties, will be stored securely and will be deleted after completion of the master's thesis.

You can find Lund University's privacy policy at

<https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/about-university/contact-us/privacy-policy>

3. Participation in this study is voluntary and unpaid. I may choose to refuse to answer any of the questions asked or withdraw from the project at any moment.

4. This research has been approved by the student's supervisor. For questions or problems related to this research, please see the contact information.

- I consent to participating in the above-mentioned research.
- I consent to the processing and storage of my personal data as described above.
- I consent to the interview being audio-recorded.
- I wish to have my anonymity protected.

Full Name Signature

Location Date