

Towards a Social Transformation of Food Assistance Models: Possibilities and Challenges of Alternative Practices in Barcelona and Its Metropolitan Area

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Based on the preliminary results of an exploratory study carried out with «alternative» Third Sector organizations in the city of Barcelona and its Metropolitan Area, this paper analyses the possibilities and challenges confronting such entities to transform the practices included in the actual model of food assistance, in a political and economic context where the provision of food is becoming an issue. The article is based on the outcomes of an ongoing qualitative study on alternative practices and other related interventions for the social-communitarian transformation of food vulnerabilities in Barcelona. Four semi-structured interviews were held, and a debate forum was organized with professionals in the field and participants in projects managed by Third Sector organizations. Firstly, we deal with the European context of multi-crisis, particularly in Spain and Barcelona, its impacts on food precarization, and the food assistance model. The results are analysed in connection with three axes: participation; partnership and funding; and the questioning of the food assistance model. The article is part of the ongoing discussion on possible changes in the system of food assistance, on food precarity, and on local, alternative responses to it in the context of eco-social transition.

Keywords: Food Precarization, Alternative Food-assistance Practices, Third Sector, Eco-social Transition, Barcelona.

1. Introduction

The possibilities and challenges linked to the promotion of social transformation in the field of inequality, especially in relation to food precari-

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ousness, have a relevant place in social research today, which can be observed in recently produced theoretical and empirical studies.

In the last 20 years, in the European and – especially– Spanish contexts, food precariousness has emerged as an object of study in academia from the perspective of different disciplines (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2020; Loopstra 2020; López-Ejeda *et al.* 2020; Molinero Gerbeau and Muñoz Rico 2022). In the context of wealthy societies (Riches 1999; 2018), the global North or Europe (Riches 2014; Penne and Goedemé 2021), the mere acknowledgment that «domestic hunger» exists sets off all the alarms and makes people connect the right to food with charity or food assistance programmes (Riches 2011; 2018). The issue of whose responsibility this is and whether the welfare state is actually performing its duty is a recent field of study (Riches 2018; Inza-Bartolomé and San-Epifanio 2020), while such diverse concepts as those of «insecurity», «vulnerability», «precariousness» or «domestic hunger» show the growing concern to document the impact of the successive economic and sanitary crises and rising inequality on the lives of people in situations of vulnerability (Egbe and Montserrat-Mas 2014; López-Ejeda *et al.* 2020; Campanera *et al.* 2021; Durán *et al.* 2021; Gracia-Arnaiz 2022a; 2022b; Gracia-Arnaiz *et al.* 2022; Molinero Gerbeau and Muñoz Rico 2022).

Nevertheless, most of these studies focus on people who have been drawn into situations of vulnerability and the pernicious effects of an economic and/or sanitary context where the logic of market and the lack of social protection of impoverished people prevail in urban areas (Gracia-Arnaiz 2022b; Gracia-Arnaiz *et al.* 2022). Another field of research is the role of food assistance and related organizations (Sales and Lafuente 2014; Llobet *et al.* 2022), the possibilities of transformation of people's situations of vulnerability through the participation of such organizations (Pomar León and Tendero Acin 2016), and the circumstances of food emergency arising in situations of crisis.

Despite the vast amount of literature documenting the impact of crises and the ways in which the European model of welfare state, the «responsible» organizations and the citizenry have tried to deal with growing food precarization, few studies document the challenges confronting alternative organizations (Serrano Pascual *et al.* 2022). Hence, in this paper we deal with the possibilities and the challenges facing alternative participatory food experiences (Apfe, from now on), generally managed by Third Sector organizations in Barcelona and its Metropolitan Area (Spain). This is an exploratory study, and it enquires about the possibilities of generating new ways of doing and thinking regarding the model of food-assistance programmes and the food system through self-management and empowering processes, by using food as an axis for citizen mobilization for social transformation.

The article begins briefly describing the Spanish context of poverty and precariousness. Subsequently, the theoretical framework of reference for the analysis of results is presented, and the methodology used, and the characteristics of our fieldwork are explained. After this, the analysis of the results is presented. Finally, it draws the conclusions and proposes a few open questions to continue with the reflection on the subject.

2. The Spanish context of poverty and food precarization

In the last decades, Spain has been characterized by relatively high levels of risk of monetary poverty, quite stable over time but with a slight trend to increase. The data provided by the Eurostat's Eu-Silc survey¹ shows that the proportion of households at risk of monetary poverty (below 60% of the country's median income) is among the highest five or six in the European Union, with levels similar to those of Bulgaria and Romania, slightly over that of Italy and much higher than those of France or Belgium. In 2015², the rate of households at risk of monetary poverty in Spain was 22.1%, while in Belgium it was 14.9%, in France 13.5%, and in Italy 19.9%. Rates between 20% and 22% have been the rule in Spain since the 1990s, both in years of strong economic growth and employment and in years of crisis and recession. In any case, from the 2008 Great Recession on, the rate of population at risk of monetary poverty has slightly increased, and the proportion of households with incomes below 40% of the median has risen.

However, this stable rate of risk of monetary poverty – with a slight upward trend – conceals important changes in the populations affected by this problem. Monetary poverty has decreased in the case of people over 65, despite a recent minor rise, while it has grown significantly among households formed by young adults, especially those with children.

In Spain, there are no reliable statistics regarding the impact of monetary poverty on the food supply of households over a period. The only information available is the answers to the question in the Eu-Silc survey on the difficulty to eat protein every two days. The value for this indicator is extremely low in the Spanish case, and it has remained stable between 2 and 5%, while nearby countries with lower levels of monetary poverty have much higher values for such an indicator of food problems. For example, in 2015, the rate of monetary poverty was 22.1% in Spain, and the proportion of households who couldn't afford a high-protein meal every two days was 2.6%. France, with a lower monetary poverty rate (13.5%), had an indicator of feeding problems which almost tripled that of Spain (7.3%). In the case of Italy, which had a somewhat lower monetary poverty rate (19.9%), the value of its indicator of food problems was five times higher than the Spanish one (11.8%).

It is difficult to interpret the relationship between monetary poverty and food problems in the Spanish case, especially when compared to the rest of countries in its immediate surroundings. As we have seen, the available data are problematic, and they may lead to explanations based on cultural aspects of food or on the greater accessibility of certain high-protein foods. In any case, the relationship between poverty and food problems

¹ The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (Eu-Silc) is produced by Eurostat based on standardized national surveys in all Eu countries. For more information, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions>.

² Year 2015 represents a middle point between the hardest years of the Great Recession and the subsequent recovery. The last available year (2021, with income data from 2020) corresponds to the Covid-19 pandemic.

has found some echo in the media since 2008 (Gracia-Arnaiz *et al.* 2021), with the «hunger queues» in display before the country's public opinion during the crisis brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and, nowadays, in the situation of high inflation and rise in the prices of food because of the Ukrainian war. Food banks and the Red Cross, which have historically been the institutions channelling emergency food aid and enjoying social legitimacy, have shown to the public opinion the rise in the number of people demanding food assistance.

In an initial and exploratory effort to produce reliable statistics measuring food insecurity and visualizing the problem in Spain, a survey was carried out showing that, between July 2020 and July 2021, 13.3% of households suffered food insecurity after the pandemic (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022). This is to say that almost 2.5 million households are affected by some degree (minor, moderate or serious) of food insecurity, which amounts to around 6,235.900 people. Such data show that food insecurity in Spain has grown from 11.9% to 13.3% as a consequence of Covid-19 and that the problems of Spanish households to access food are not only caused by temporary factors, but has a structural character (Gracia 2022a; 2022b; Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022).

«Food precarization» refers to a complex phenomenon affecting all the different dimensions of personal well-being; at the same time, it is a dynamic process that can be reverted and, therefore, does not determine the social categorization of the individuals who are affected by it, as it implies social mobility (Llobet *et al.* 2020). With this definition, it is easy to understand the importance of qualitative research gathering the experiences of people in this kind of situations. For example, some of these experiences show that some of the feeding strategies developed by such people consist of the changing of patterns, interlocutors and contexts. Eating less, recycling the leftovers, cooking simple dishes or resourcing to food-assistance programmes are some of the practices that people and households in a situation of food precariousness develop to confront their circumstances from the 2008 crisis (Llobet *et al.* 2020; Gracia-Arnaiz 2022b; Gracia-Arnaiz *et al.* 2022).

Also, a structural context made up of multiple and successive crises – the 2008 one, the pandemic, and the Ukrainian war – and their impact on inflation and the rise of food prices have affected people and households, and positioned food in a central and multidimensional place in their lives (Loopstra *et al.* 2015; Zaçe *et al.* 2020; Penne and Goedemé 2021; Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022). At the same time, they have reconfigured the setting on which the relationships between supranational, national and local institutions and entities are established, coordinated or come into contradiction (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2020). The boom in food-aid organizations in the last years has shown that something is not working properly and tests the welfare state (Inza-Bartolomé and San-Epifanio 2020). As Inza-Bartolomé (2022) points out, we are recently witnessing a reconfiguration of the collaboration between public institutions, and some of their duties are being delegated to the Third Sector, which has resources for «charity» at its disposal and, thus, tends to those in a vulnerable

situation. Despite the emergency leading to an economy of charity (Riches 2020), now it is being called into question who should be responsible for guaranteeing the minimum conditions for vulnerable people or groups to have an income and achieve well-being. Some authors hold that the Third Sector should not be charged with guaranteeing the right to food (Inza-Bartolomé and San-Epifanio 2020; Inza-Bartolomé 2022).

This calling into question is not only restricted to determining whose responsibility it is, but it involves a reflection on the types of responses that exist, the impact they have on people's well-being and the place that food has in these reconfiguration processes if we do not want to lose sight of the cycles in the processes of transformation (Llobet *et al.* 2022).

The most widespread response to people's lack of enough income consists of a set of benefits ranging from pensions and contributory benefits (based on the «insurance» principle) to a complex and varied set of minimum pensions, non-contributory pensions, unemployment subsidies, minimum income and, since 2020, the so-called Minimum Vital Income. This set of benefits is not directly connected to food, but they allow many households to meet their needs in this respect. As a system of benefits, it has undisputable impact, but it also has some shortages and blind spots (Ayala *et al.* 2020; Aguilar-Hendrickson and Arriba González de Durana 2020). In line with these blind spots, a report by Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González (2022) shows that some of these benefits (monetary or in-kind aid) play an important role in Spanish households. More than 62 percent of interviewed households receive monetary assistance, with over 86.5 percent of them affected by food insecurity. The authors highlight that the benefits granted by public administration are distributed throughout the types of households included in the sample (both affected and non-affected by food insecurity).

As far as food is concerned, we find that some responses are coordinated through policies directly implemented by public institutions, especially local ones; others depend on actions by private organizations, voluntary (Third Sector) groups, and still others constitute alternative initiatives. Llobet *et al.* (2019) and Duran *et al.* (2021) proposed a classification of responses in three types: traditional, innovative and alternative ones.

Within the «traditional» type of responses, food banks³ and soup kitchens stand out. Food is conceived of in its biological dimension and the response to food problems takes the form of a temporary, interim emergency. The second type of responses, the so-called «new» ones, emerges in the context of the 2008 crisis and intends to transform some critical aspects of «traditional practices», in particular the decision power of recipients of food assistance, without calling the whole model into question. Among

³ In Spain, 54 food banks are members of the Spanish Federation of Food Banks (Fesbal). Collaborating companies supply food to centres of the Associated Distribution Organizations (Oad), which in turn distribute it to the Associated Delivery Organizations (Oar) and deliver food directly to its final recipients. Historically, food banks have been part of the hegemonic relief-assistance model and have had an outstanding role in the response to food problems.

them, voucher and cards⁴ stand out particularly; they increase people's purchasing power and choice power with respect to food. These types of practices contemplate food from a wider perspective, including its social and cultural character, besides its biological dimension.

The third type of responses, «alternative» ones, is the object of this article. They emerge out of citizen self-organization or in collaboration with social-action organizations, and they adopt a critical perspective concerning the effects generated by the hegemonic food aid model and the dependency it creates in people. They propose a more structural response and question the present forms of production, distribution and/or consumption of food. They emphasize the importance of quality of food and its health benefits; they side up with the paradigm of social and solidarity economy; they strive for food sovereignty; and defend a different kind of food circuits, connected with local farming, reduction of environmental impact, and access to quality products at affordable prices. Kitchens, communitarian gardens and food distribution services belong to this kind of response, where food is seen as a human right (De Schutter 2008) connected with dignity and respect to individual autonomy (Llobet *et al.* 2019).

3. Community experiences and food as tools for transformation

Within the framework of this article, it is interesting to reflect on the transformation capacity that alternative practices can have on food as a mobilizing axis. In this sense, an experience is considered to be transformative when it places people at its centre; its actions are governed by a solidarity principle; its practices are intended to engage people and achieve social and community development; its actions agree with a logic of rights without compensation; and the effects of its actions foster agency, establishment of community bonds and critical awareness on the part of its subjects (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022).

This article adopts a global, non-reductionist perspective of needs which understands food as a basic need that has to be satisfied, a source of pleasure at both the individual and social levels, a space which is conducive to the implementation of new forms of social and community organization, a right to be guaranteed, and a structured axis for global economy and its interrelationship to the planet and climate change (Muñoz *et al.* 2021). The notion of social and community participation brings to the fore the theoretical debate on the increasing importance of cooperation, solidarity and self-management as strategies to generate social welfare, in contrast with the excluding dynamics of the market and the limitations of traditional forms of public intervention, in particular of those derived from the prevailing model of social protection (Blanco 2018; Inza-Bartolomé and San-Epifanio 2020; Riches 2020). The notion of social participation in the «in-

⁴ In Anglo-Saxon literature, we see concepts such as «electronic benefits», «transfer card» or «social card».

tervention», proposed by Blanco (2018), makes it possible to analyse alternative practices, not only as devices or projects to «improve the situation of the targeted group», but as initiatives which see social and community participation from a perspective of explicit defence of cooperation, solidarity and self-management as the foundations of welfare and social-justice promotion.

The link between the alternative practices carried out by Third Sector organizations and public institutions is rather complex: while there exists collaboration between them, the former try not to have their goals and operation determined or conditioned by such collaboration, preventing any dependence which endangers a project's sustainability as well as that of the involved community (*Ibidem*). Thus, one of the main paradoxes of this kind of processes is that, while they emerge in reaction to a crisis with a strong institutional component and try to organize social responses that constitute an alternative to those offered by the dominant public institutions, the emergence, extension and consolidation of this kind of social innovation requires the support of those same public institutions, which may become an area of tension and contradiction (Martínez *et al.* 2019).

In the specific case of food movements, there are several studies concerning their capacity for agency and their relationships to governmental actions in particular countries (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck 2011; Grauerholz and Owens 2015). This is the case of Food Councils, born as the result of the implementation of participatory processes in the United Kingdom and France (Schiff 2007; Coulson and Milbourne 2021). These experiences articulate the actions of public and political institutions, universities and food movements, to create mechanisms for food governance capable of monitoring governmental actions (or inaction) and guarantee people's rights. They concentrate on the analysis of the interrelations between the parties and the possibilities of coordination by means of organizations established and managed by the multiplicity of involved actors, created in the course of citizen claiming, and where the several actors engage in the creation, designing, implementation, analysis and follow-up of their mechanisms (Schiff 2007; Grauerholz and Owens 2015; Coulson and Milbourne 2021). Agro-ecological food movements work constantly towards implementing the necessary structural changes in order to make sustainable, equitable and democratic food-provision systems the rule and not an exception (Holt-Gimenez 2010).

Despite the lessons offered by grass-roots food movements, the challenge is for public institutions and the Third Sector to cope with the immediate problems of hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity and environmental degradation (Serrano Pascual *et al.* 2022). Hence the relevance of this kind of community experiences, which produce what has been termed «collectivization of the food fact»⁵ and which imply the sharing of experiences

⁵ The notion arises in the frame of the research's epistemological reflection, which had an impact on the generation of knowledge and the transformation of a traditional kind of investigation into a more participatory kind (Muñoz *et al.* 2021). It is a useful term for this paper because it describes the same process that occurs in the experiences of social intervention promoted by alternative practices.

concerning precarization and food assistance (Muñoz *et al.* 2021). These processes give us a chance to find out about the real world and bring about a break in individual experiences of food precariousness to conceive of it as a collective issue, through exchanges of knowledge and feelings that have an impact on the individual and collective building of agency (*Ibidem*). This idea of «collectivization» allows to understand participation as shared reflection and diagnosis, and as the daily practices of people engaged in projects or spaces of transformative initiatives (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022). Sharing means acknowledging the subjective knowledge and experience of individuals as the basis for their participation, from their diversity of experiences, in the epistemic co-production of food (Anadón and Couture 2007). It implies the recognition of the relevance of individuals and their participation in the construction of meanings concerning their shared collective realities (Anadón 2006), their capacity for agency and the importance of promoting the design of actions which are conducive to social change (Muñoz *et al.* 2021). Therefore, this process of collectivization involves the creation of a «collective *us*» through participant action research and, at the same time, through a kind of social intervention which is at the service of people and people's well-being, which acknowledges the subjective dimension of experience and, simultaneously, leaves room for the necessary exchanges to recognize the group in which individuals can re-configure their experiences as collective ones. In this sense, we can say that food is understood from a comprehensive perspective (Durán *et al.* 2021; Muñoz *et al.* 2021).

Based on this theoretical approach, in the next section of this paper we deal with the possibility that APFEs manage to break through the existing hegemonic food aid model and the global food system, and the challenges they face in their daily actions to generate new ways of doing and thinking about the collective and community processes towards social transformation and food precarization.

4. Methodology

This article is based on the outcomes of the exploratory qualitative research entitled «Food from a participatory perspective: a proposal of collective efforts by social actors in the city of Barcelona»⁶. The geographical area of study is the city of Barcelona and its Metropolitan Area. Within the city of Barcelona, are analysed four APFEs implemented in Roquetes, Vall d'Hebron and Teixonera, Besòs and Maresme neighbourhoods. In the Metropolitan Area, the project in El Prat de Llobregat was analysed (see

⁶ This investigation was carried out by the Research Team «Food in Vulnerable Contexts», in the Ufr Social Work School at the University of Barcelona, funded by the Barcelona City Council (Code FBG: 312038). It is part of a long-term project which started out in 2015 as research on food security in the frame of an international team in collaboration with the Centre de Recherche de Montreal sur les inégalités sociales, les discriminations et les pratiques alternatives de citoyenneté (Cremis), the Università di Siena in Italy, the École Supérieure de Praxis Sociale de Mulhouse France, and the Fédération des services sociaux de Bruxelles in Belgium.

Tab. 1. *Universe of our study*

No.	Neighbourhood	Project	Managing entity(ies)	Interlocutors
1	Roquetes	<i>Més amb Menys: Espai d'aprofitament de cuina</i> ¹ [More with less: make the most out of cooking]	Initiator Group <i>Agencia de Salut Pública de Barcelona</i> [Barcelona's Public Health Agency] Social Services in Roquetes, Trinitat Nova and Canyelles. Phc centre in Roquetes neighbours	1 Community plan expert
2	Vall d'Hebron and Teixonera	<i>Hort del Mercat</i> ² [The market garden]	Cooperative for Sustainable Projects <i>Tarpuna</i>	1 Cooperative's director
3	Besòs and Maresme	<i>Cuinem barri: alimentació saludable a nuestro alcance</i> ³ [Let's cook neighbouring': healthy food at hand]	<i>Asociación Antígona procesos participativos</i> [Antígona Association for participatory processes]	1 Person in charge of the project
4	El Prat de Llobregat	<i>La Botiga: alimenta, cuida y transforma</i> ⁴ [The Grocer's: feed, takes care and transform]	<i>ABD Asociación Bienestar y Desarrollo</i> [Well-Being and Development Association]	1 Project promoter

¹ In 2011, began a reflection on social and solidarity economy in the area, and in 2013 this cooking project emerges, together with the couture workshop.

² In the year 2020, the project is put out to tender, and in 2021 began operations with certain sanitary restrictions in the period of de-escalation of lockdown measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

³ The project is the outcome of three stages of development. The first stage took place in the frame of a community investigation on food in the years 2019-2020. The second one consisted of a campaign for healthy, local food (hence its name: «Let's cook neighbouring») implemented during the pandemic. The third stage was made up of three specific actions carried out in 2021-2022.

⁴ The point of departure of the project developed from a food distribution spot run by Cáritas and Red Cross in the period 2012-2017. From 2017 to 2020, there was deliberation on the possibilities of establishing a mechanism which was not so «welfare-like». The Municipal Actions Plan 2020-2023 of El Prat de Llobregat included the project *La Botiga* [The Grocer's], with a 10-year concession agreement with the organizations running it.

table 1). All these APFEs share participatory, alternative, community approach for food assistance, from which they generate community processes oriented to self-management and participation by taking food as the axis around which their actions revolve (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022).

During the exploratory stage, we worked with four professionals responsible for project management and dynamization. All four shared the following traits: they were part of Third Sector organizations hired to implement projects; they had a community approach to food and feeding; they took a stance of food sovereignty and justice; they adopted a comprehensive perspective on needs, according to which the participation of vulnerable people in processes of social transformation is one of the mainstays for the sustainability of projects. That is to say that the social commitment of the involved professionals and their «activism» are essential elements of the initiatives.

During our ethnographic fieldwork, we used the following information-gathering techniques:

- four semi-structured interviews with professionals: October to November 2022;
- visits to the project sites: October 2022;
- informal phone calls: November 2022 to January 2023;
- one discussion-group participated by professionals (members of the selected projects) and researchers from the University of Barcelona: January 2023.

All four interviews and the meeting were recorded and transcribed after obtaining the informed consent of the participants and in agreement with them. The quotations included in this paper indicate, in brackets, in an abbreviated form, the kind of information-gathering technique [I for interview and DG for discussion-group], the project that the participant belongs to, and the year it was recorded.

In the meeting, the potentialities, limitations, challenges and opportunities confronting each one of the projects under study were analysed. The techniques approach employed were all characterized by being open, horizontal dialogues, with the aim of stimulating processes of collective reflection about the studied practices and discerning new ways of doing and thinking about the challenges facing the participants in the present situation. The preliminary data analysis pays special attention to the community and socio-political processes generated by the alternative practices implemented. Therefore, the analysis of transcripts allowed to identify three thematic axes cutting through all the APFEs included in the study: participation; partnership and funding; and questioning of the existing food aid model.

5. Potentialities and challenges of APFEs

At the beginning of this article, it was reviewed some of the recent studies documenting the impacts of successive crises on the well-being of people in a situation of food precariousness. The reconfiguration of the relationships between public institutions and the Third Sector (Inza-Bartolomé 2022) can also be seen in the case of Barcelona. During the lockdown period and throughout 2020, the social services at the Barcelona City Council reported a rise in the number of people in situations of poverty and extreme poverty, as well as a constant increase in the proportion of people with unsatisfied food needs⁷. This imposed a change in the responses of public administrations and social entities, which were forced to diversify and adapt their traditional models and forms of action, improve their knowledge of the existing circumstances, and provide cover to people in emergency situations. At the same time, both at the national and regional level, several actors proposed specific actions (policies, projects and

⁷ The social services aided more than 111,564 people, i.e., 69% more (2,965,069 meals and 28,213 prepaid cards were distributed during the lockdown period) (Xarxa pel Dret a una Alimentació Adequada 2021).

collective practices) in order to achieve a sustainable and decent system of food provision for everyone⁸.

Despite the responses of public administrations, social organizations and other social actors in the face of the eventualities created by the pandemic, it is clear that these were insufficient and the right to food was not properly guaranteed by traditional responses to food problems (Moragues-Faus and Magaña-González 2022). This was the case of *Alterbanc*, an initiative born out of the mutual support network woven during the lockdown period in order to satisfy basic needs, generate alternatives within the capitalist economy and organize the fight for a sustainable and decent life (Solé Martín 2020). This was a project which produced an alternative response at the community and local levels in view of the collapse of the social-service system in the Porta neighbourhood.

This paper deals with few APFEs developed within Third Sector organizations and public entities and offering participatory food alternatives in the framework of the existing food aid model. As it is shown in table 2, all these initiatives include community interventions and give prominence in their projects to people's well-being and try to impact the area of implementation. Three of them are oriented to «food assistance» from a comprehensive perspective on food (see the «Objectives» section in table 2). Notions such as «healthy», «to make the most», «at hand», «right to» or «diversity of food initiatives» show their broader perspective around food.

Additionally, each one of these four initiatives might be seen as a part of the food process: procurement, distribution and consumption of food. However, their comprehensive and alternative perspective can be seen in the fact that no stages as such are considered, but these are defined as social spaces, i.e., the kitchen, the garden, the neighbourhood, and/or the point of access to food, to foster social interaction, where people at risk may get together and live their respective lives beyond their precarious conditions. Thus, they do not supply «food in kind like a gift», but they provide spaces where actions belonging to some stage in the food process take place and people are part of the project, sharing know-how, initiatives and experiences. In other words, they open new possibilities for food collectivization (Muñoz *et al.* 2021).

Nevertheless, despite their similarity regarding their character of community interventions, the APFEs in this study differ in their geographical and socioeconomic contexts, their background, their partnership-building strategies, the links between the project's professionals-managers and the neighbours, their timespan, and the kinds of organizations managing the projects. Therefore, each one of them brings about different reflections on the possibilities or challenges they face. As some point out, we are dealing with initiatives that «don't fit» in the traditional conception of food

⁸ The approach to food policies by the Barcelona City Council appears in the framework of its «Strategy for Sustainable Food Barcelona 2030: Towards the transformation of the food-provision system». This involves local social agents and invites them to take part in several actions proposed like city challenges to promote healthy diets, to foster sustainable local economies and combat the climate emergency (Ayuntament de Barcelona 2022a; 2022b).

TAB. 2. APFEs: Objective(s), kind of intervention, person's place and food conception

	Objective(s)	Person's place
<p><i>Cuina Més amb Menys</i> [Cook More with Less: Make the Most out of Cooking]</p> <p>«Kitchens» as spaces for active participation and exchange of knowledge related to food. With an impact on its territory.</p>	<p>To alleviate the economic burden of feeding the household members.</p> <p><i>Kind of intervention</i></p> <p>Community intervention Socio-political approach to social intervention, meeting places for knowledge exchange, where it is possible to create bonds and initiate learning and empowering processes.</p>	<p>At the centre of the project.</p> <p><i>Food conception</i></p> <p>Healthy and based on making the most out of available food in the best possible way and in a creative fashion.</p>
<p><i>Hort del Mercat</i> [The Market's Garden]</p> <p>«Social farming» as a tool for social integration. With an impact on its territory.</p>	<p>To boost environmental awareness and sustainability, by promoting therapeutic and educational actions, actions for social and occupational integration of participants, and improvement of their life standards and health, with particular attention to vulnerable social groups.</p> <p><i>Kind of intervention</i></p> <p>Community and therapeutic intervention Based on three principles: environmental justice; social inclusion and justice; and participatory democracy.</p>	<p>At the centre of the project - social inclusion The garden is open to the participation of citizens, organizations and social groups at risk of exclusion.</p> <p><i>Food conception</i></p> <p>It is of secondary importance to the project.</p>
<p><i>Cuinem barri</i> [Let's Cook Neighbouring: Healthy Food at Hand]</p> <p>«Community food: local healthy products» With an impact on its territory.</p>	<p>Healthy eating without spending more and buying at the local grocer's; focused on recipients of food benefits.</p> <p><i>Kind of intervention</i></p> <p>Community intervention through 3 actions Voucher system Face-to-face cooking workshops Teaching materials on healthy and thorough use of received food assistance, diet planning, recipes...</p>	<p>At the centre of the project.</p> <p><i>Food conception</i></p> <p>Food system perspective: distribution, processing and consumption. «The transition towards healthier, more sustainable and resilient food models must necessarily take into account the diversity of food experiences occurring on the fringes.»</p>
<p><i>La Botiga: alimenta, cuida y transforma</i> [The Grocer's: Feed, Takes Care and Transform]</p> <p>«Comprehensive service» of food provision, with an impact on a person's living standards. Eco-social response-strategy in the face of food deficiency. With an impact on its local area.</p>	<p>To guarantee the fundamental right to healthy food to households in situation of vulnerability in <i>El Prat de Llobregat</i> and, as a last resort, to the town's general population.</p> <p><i>Kind of intervention</i></p> <p>Community intervention. Based on 3 principles: food sovereignty, sustainability and social and solidarity economy.</p>	<p>At the centre of the project.</p> <p><i>Food conception</i></p> <p>Food as a right that must be guaranteed based on criteria of quality food with positive social impact and low environmental impact.</p>

Source: Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, Drets socials (2023), Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, Distrito de Horta-Guinardó (2022), Antígona (2022) and Ajuntament del Prat de Llobregat, *La Botiga* (2022).

aid and, on challenging such conception, are bound to give rise to constant self-reflection and self-observation processes.

Next, it shall present the possibilities and challenges of APFEs regarding their experimentation with new ways of doing and conceiving of collective and community processes as they emerge from daily practice. Thus, the results analysis is presented in three sections: participation; partnership and funding; and ability to call into question the existing models of food assistance.

5.1. *Social participation, autonomy and/or self-management?*

People's participation is a key aspect in processes of social transformation. APFEs take on an approach centred on proximity and local areas, and this makes it possible for them to create synergies between actors, with everyone involved putting their experience and expertise at the service of the project. In this sense, the professionals in charge of the projects, dynamization point out that, in some neighbourhoods:

All the projects are implemented by neighbours; they're local non-profit entities. (DG. More with Less, 2023)

They emphasize the importance of dialogue and of working with the associative network present in the area to build local bonds and engage people also at the decision-making level:

What we did was we got to the neighbourhood and started talking to entities dealing with the issue in collaboration with the neighbours, with technical staff to find out what the situation was like at that moment. What did they understand by «healthy»? What did they understand by «sustainable»? Then, starting from this, we set to work. (DG. Let's Cook Neighbouring, 2023)

We have our food-policy circles, where we discuss what food to buy and not to buy [...] because we have a certain amount of money we do use to buy [...] this is a job. (DG. The Grocer's, 2023)

Managing the diversity of participants, outlooks, perspectives and levels of commitment is a challenge if they wish to keep the project in operation. It requires active listening, permanent horizontal dialogue and deep knowledge of the characteristics of the local area and people.

One of the most significant challenges in this field is that of retaining participation over time by generating new ways of doing properly adjusted to the participants, possibilities, needs and preferences. In this sense, the projects take into account the variability of the cycles of participation, as well as its intermittent character and the several degrees of commitment it may adopt: participation in activities within the projects, scope, in decision-making concerning the design and implementation of proposals, and in the collective reflection oriented to the definition of goals and the general evolution of projects. The participating professionals point out these challenges:

Our initial idea was that food-providing entities, most of which are churches, may use some of our production, but creating a bond between the people and the garden, or having the people coming to the garden. Initially, we thought that, instead of giving out lettuces, we would give out vouchers, and the people had to come and grow their lettuces, didn't they? They had to come to the market and root them up from the ground and take them home freshly cut. And this creates something, but it is not working. Why isn't it working? Because there is a kind of habit and inertia, you know? (DG. The Market's Garden, 2023)

We can clearly see the difficulty of questioning and overcoming traditional practices and «habits and inertias» when it comes to a prolonged implementation of projects. The passivity attributed to people in conventional food-distribution models makes it difficult to get their active participation. Here, the need for persistence and tenacity is emphasized:

We are setting up discussion circles at the Grocer's and, if we want to get full attendance, we almost have to drag people there by the ears, [...] I guess this happens to everyone [...] it's hard for us to commit [...] but, well, the question here is to «keep your nose to the grindstone» (DG. The Grocer's, 2023)

Despite such difficulty in achieving participation, the community and local approach adopted by the projects opens up new possibilities of empowerment, appropriation and agency by and in their territories. For example, the spaces where the meetings, activities, debates and decision-making take place are well-rooted in the life of the neighbourhoods where interventions are carried out. The use of public facilities such as recreation centres, libraries, or community centres enables processes of appropriation by people of spaces which were previously unknown to them or they thought they belonged to «others» and, as such, were inaccessible to them. These processes of use and appropriation of public facilities in the neighbourhood have brought about people's empowerment. Entering the community centre amounts to breaking down a symbolic barrier between «us» and «them», like that which can sometimes be observed among migrant people.

We are connecting with community spaces that already exist, there are things already [...] right now, we're visiting the community centre. Then, at the centre they greet them, they explain... they tell them about the place. Often, they didn't even know the place existed, and they say: «Here, what can one ask for?» Of course, I'm still someone who comes here to ask for something. And they say: «No, here there are all kinds of people». (I. Let's Cook Neighbouring, 2022)

The projects evolve and progress according to the participants, availability of time, their possibilities and their voluntary commitment. This means that everyone commits himself to the degree and in the spaces he feels comfortable and secure with. This departs from a linear, static and fixed notion of participation and stands up for an open, changing, variable and fluid notion of it:

For us, within our project, the fact that people, who are prescribed a card by the social services, come to a project where they have their needs fulfilled already [...] Now, come, we are going to speak about other things [...] about the relation-

ship between food and culture, about healthy eating, unhealthy food, etc. Then... this is like a very long process, isn't it? [...] Little by little you create a certain critical awareness, but this is important so that the users, or the neighbours in the area, as the project is open to everyone, and people don't necessarily have to be referred to us [...] they have the community plan as a reference. (DG. More with Less, 2023)

In connection with this, people underline the importance of analysing participation and the evolution of the projects in terms of the quality of their processes, going beyond other perspectives simply focused on result quantification and the setting of unachievable goals in relatively short periods of time:

If you don't achieve greater impact, you understand? And I told them: «Ok, we are not doing well» [...] and the people who collaborate in growing the food are happy with it and they share it [...] Then, there's a motivational side to it [...] when you look at it from a distance, you say: «it's like either we get a more indirect kind of impact, other than kilos of food, an impact in terms of network, social network, well-being» [...] all those more intangible kinds of impact [...] or this makes no sense. (DG. The Market's Garden, 2023)

In the framework of these initiatives, people work with a realistic outlook on social processes. It is understood that processes of citizen participation and activism are slow and complex, as they depend on the vicissitudes of people's daily lives, which are cut through by multiple and diverse social inequalities and injustices (Heck and Socquet-Juglard 2020). Some people are more committed to the initiatives; others take part in a more sporadic or in an intermittent way, but on a more or less permanent base over time. Being able to incorporate all these different forms of participation and find a place for them within the project so that they are all valued and acknowledged is important both for the participants themselves and for the projects, sustainability over time. This is what the following quote explains:

Participants evolve, but new people keep coming in [...] improving at different levels [...] They are changing a bit the perception they have of food, but maybe new people come in who don't, and they clash [...] sometimes we've had conflicts between different profiles, which, in the end, is also a possibility to achieve... but the thing is that sometimes this part delays the process, or they end up giving it up because there are people who are like very far from it, and they no longer feel that it responds to their needs, or you create a new group. (DG. More with Less, 2023)

Beyond people's availability of time and their possibilities of mobilization and participation, or their commitment to the project, there are participation cycles which are characteristic of all social movements. When projects move on to levels of participation related to decision-making processes and management, participatory processes get increasingly complex. Hence, the challenge of changing participants, awareness regarding the meaning of food is taken on as part of the participatory processes. It is the challenge of having them move from a vision of food as a «need» to a conception of it as a right from a perspective of social justice and equality.

5.2. Challenges to the sustainability of APFES: Partnerships and funding

The building of solid and representative partnerships and the financial maintenance of projects are two basic challenges confronting APFES. As far as partnerships are concerned, the projects are grounded on a scheme of alliances and synergy-building with different actors present in the territory, and they seek to build common visions and strategies. In particular, they work in coordination with different levels of public administration (local, provincial, regional, European), with entities and associations which are present in the territory, and with different services and facilities. In this sense, the possibility of gathering and coordinating the different logics and/or interests of the involved actors/agents constitutes a challenge:

Within the administrations, there are people who believe in what they do [...] but it's true that food projects like the ones we are trying to defend here, with the right strategy, which is that of cards, isn't it? «People passed all cards» to the [supermarket] *Mercadona*. They don't only buy air, which they already do, then, and doesn't transform anything. (DG. The Grocer's, 2023)

One of the aspects of partnership building is the attitude of the professionals responsible for project dynamization, who express the need to have spaces of dialogue and interlocutors allowing them to reflect on their own practices and strategies from a comprehensive perspective, at a distance from daily work issues:

When I go through moments of crisis, or non crisis... I feel that... that something is cracking inside me, or I need something... It's phone calls, you know, I make... Alright, alright... and I get focused again. The sole fact of having to explain it helps me a lot, because it's hard to work on one's own. (I. Let's Cook Neighbouring, 2022)

On the other hand, project funding appears as a challenge with two sides to it. One side is sources of funding and the impact that such funding may have on the direction, the objectives and the forms of operation of APFES. The other side is the fact that the intermittence, interruption or reduction of the different sources of funding and the sociopolitical and economic circumstances affecting the different items in public budgets at a variety of levels (European, national, provincial, municipal) sometimes constitute elements of uncertainty for the continuation of APFES. More specifically, regarding the contract models for hiring employees, it is sometimes difficult to combine the hiring logic of the public institutions financing the projects and the logic of the managing entities, because:

To try to break the logic of public hiring [...] It is the delegated management of all public hiring [...] This is the «wonder» of public hiring, but the idea is to succeed in providing a service, a self-managed space, both with respect to management and government. (DG. The Grocer's, 2023)

5.3. *Questioning of the existing models of food assistance*

The construction of food as a right is a complex process with its own difficulties. One of the most significant ones has to do with cultural constructs demanding effort, sacrifice and merit in order to «get one's bread», and the influence of centuries of welfare and relief models structured around the notion of charity, which puts the good deeds of those who donate or «grant» aid centre stage, and give a passive, less relevant role to those who receive aid. Moving from being a user-client to being a participant-activist involves changing a paradigm which is deeply rooted in socio-political practices and cuts through the daily lives of people.

One of the ways of overcoming such paradigm is by setting up social networks and creating community bonds among participants. Actually, this is one of the central elements leading to people's participation and one of the problems pointed out by some of the initiatives:

It was like... we are going to work on how to plan a healthy diet with what you have and the needs you have [...] We cooked together [...] In the end, it was a community kitchen [...] In between, many things happened; networks started to form, in a very organic way, and a whole lot of things began to happen. (I. Let's Cook Neighbouring, 2022)

It was the participants themselves who commented on the possibility of going on with the project:

We want to continue seeing each other, for this space is very good for us because we feel that, when we go out, we are better than when we came in. (I. Let's Cook Neighbouring, 2022)

One of the challenges of APFEs is to succeed in having the neighbours appropriate the initiatives and breaking the distinction between users and participants:

What we sought was for people who go to the Food Bank and gets a food basket to come over here to pick up vegetables and create bonds between them, to break the welfare route somehow. (I. The Market's Garden, 2022)

This realistic approach to social processes pays special heed to the existing barriers and economic, sociocultural and territorial obstacles to move from a traditional outlook on food assistance to a more sustainable model:

Changing the foundations of the system of food distribution and do it really to achieve an inclusive service open to the citizenry, without distinctions between the person who buys, the donor... with people helping to manage the service... (I. The Grocer's, 2022)

In this sense, there is a need to overcome the hegemonic paradigm, which is centred on the passivity of «recipients» of food assistance, and replace it with a model based on participation and under the leadership of the communities and the organizations present in the area. Such participation is built upon the empowerment of the citizenry, that is, the increase in

their capacity to have a bearing on decision-making processes and communicate fluently with public authorities and economic agents.

An understanding of food, not only as a need, but also as a human right, a social act, a cultural and religious identity, and a political tool for denunciation and social transformation allows all these initiatives to seek the politicization of food and overcome its reduction to a «basic need». At the same time, the notion of need itself undergoes revision with the aim of questioning a long tradition of institutional and professional practices based on the prevailing minimalist discourses which argue that public policies should focus on the minimum biological threshold of survival (Álvarez Leguizamón 2005). On the contrary, these new practices underline the importance of moving beyond a process of necessity building from the outside, and from «emergency», and pay attention to people's perceptions of and perspectives on food:

They really give a lot of weight to the fact of accompanying... creating spaces and accompanying those families who, one way or another, are going to get assistance in relation to food, in a process which is basically one of taking root in the territory [...] working with the recreation centre, the community centre, with other groups connected to cooking and kitchens, that is [...] working this double way [...] Something to do with accompanying people, not just «here's your aid» [...] and, of course, for those who want to take part in it, not as a condition to get aid. (DG. Let's Cook Neighbouring, 2023)

Their calling of traditional models of assistance into question can also be seen in the support all these initiatives provide to fair and proximity trade, showing respect for social and environmental criteria for what constitutes healthy, ecological and quality food. In this respect:

When we buy [...] all at once, of course, we're placing an order on the producers in the *Berguedà* area that they never in their life thought that their hens would have to satisfy [...] That is to say that we are boosting a type of economy, a way of doing, of producing, etc., with environmental standards [...] So, eggs, yoghourts and everything we have been transforming [...] when the recipient buys a chicken, we tell him where it comes from, we spread knowledge [...] about this kind of food [...] then there's the «Lindt little rabbit» [...] well, we post a little sign on it saying it contains sugar [...] we assign it an expensive price [...] it has to be a conscious choice too. (DG. The Grocer's, 2023)

As for the question of breaking with the distinction between «assisted» and «non-assisted» people, all the initiatives are clear when it comes to organizing the joint tasks of neighbours and go beyond such demarcation line:

Our intention is to open it to all the citizens and our job is to have open citizens, that is, to break the logic of the distinction between users and citizens, non-vulnerable and vulnerable people. (DG. The Grocers, 2023)

And, in line with this, food is conceived of as a mobilizing axis which is aligned with several axes of transformation.

Therefore, acknowledging the complex and multidimensional character of the act of eating, simultaneously connected with the five dimensions of

well-being (corporal, temporal, material, relational and decisional) is part of the approach taken by these initiatives, which insists on overcoming the reduction of food to its biological-corporal dimension (Llobet *et al.* 2022). The fact of eating, which becomes collectivized in all these initiatives, constitutes a locus made up of many bonds and ties and, being a place where many decisions are made, it implies seeing food and eating as something which cuts through all the aspects of life and cannot be reduced to one person, private-domestic life (Durán *et al.* 2021).

6. Discussion and conclusions

In the present context of growing inequality, the surge in food assistance organizations has put the welfare state to the test (Inza-Bartolomé and San-Epifanio 2020). It has placed in the centre of debate the importance of transforming it by re-thinking the central position that food should have. The reconfiguration of the collaboration between public institutions, of their delegation of tasks to Third Sector organizations and of the resources destined to «charity» appears as an important challenge for social transformation (Inza-Bartolomé 2022). This paper falls within the framework of such debates on food precarization and the alternative responses to it in the context of an eco-social transition. Thus, it analysed the possibilities and daily challenges related to the chances of maintaining participatory and alternative projects. Based on the narratives of four people responsible for the dynamization of APFEs, it was evident that, even though they belong to the field of food assistance, these initiatives operate from an outlook on food which involves one of more aspects of the food circuit: production, consumption, preparation, etc; they have different kinds of funding, they work with different populations, from a comprehensive perspective.

One of the elements that they all share is the will and the intention of dealing with food from a collective, community, participatory, reflexive, and critical approach. In this sense, these initiatives do not only seek to offer a «response» to the lack of food or to the socially-built processes of «food precarization», but they try to create new ways of doing and conceiving of food and the collective processes linked to it; new ways which question both the format and the values of the prevailing model of food assistance nowadays. This is to say that they set in motion processes of collectivization of the food fact within a framework of community intervention; they appeal to the meaning of its existence and the possibility of transforming people's precariousness (Durán *et al.* 2021; Muñoz *et al.* 2021).

Going beyond the logics and dynamics traditionally associated to «food distribution» and so deeply-rooted in the collective imagination is no easy task. Thus, the APFEs in our analysis have the additional value of belonging to the field of experimentation, creativity and construction of spaces for social transformation by means of collective processes in which people's participation in each territory constitutes a fundamental axis (Pomar León and Tendero Acin 2016). Hence the notion of participation proposed

by Blanco (2018), who suggests using cooperation, solidarity and self-management as strategies to generate well-being in the face of the excluding dynamics of markets and the limitations of the traditional ways of public intervention derived from the social-protection model. Despite the possible contradictions entailed by the emergence of these processes as an answer to a crisis, with an institutional component, which try to offer social responses alternatives to those offered by the prevailing public institutions, Martínez *et al.* (2019) point out that the support of public institutions is, to a large extent, necessary for the emergence, expansion and consolidation of this kind of social innovations, and this is something that may become an area of tension and contradictions.

Giving priority to a logic of processes over a logic of results is a relevant point, especially in a context of successive crises where the construction of the meaning of «urgent» ends up blocking the possibility of thinking and imagining the ways in which they would like to relate to each other, share experiences, generate changes and, all in all, feed ourselves in the complex route to the collectivization of the food fact.

The existence of all these initiatives and their will to remain in place and become stronger through processes oriented towards autonomy and/or self-management informs us of the persistence of a will to find different ways of doing and thinking based on a rights approach, on community participation and empowerment, and on the construction of food from a political perspective that seeks for a social transformation organizing and mobilizing people.

If we move our analysis of these initiatives onto a macro level, we find that their weight in the system of food assistance is small, as there are few of them and they are all quite recent. If they are analysed with respect to their ability to call such system into question, we find several elements that allow us to conclude that these initiatives are proof that other ways of doing, thinking and relating to each other are essential to transform an aid system that reduces people to their biological dimension, treats them like numbers at «hunger queues» and denies them their condition as subjects of rights and social and political actors.

Finally, a few questions arise if we intend to go on thinking of alternative ways of carrying out interventions. What are the chances that this kind of initiatives remains over time and continues growing in a European and a Spanish framework that gives priority to the large-scale management efficiency of food assistance through agreements with large companies devoted to the production and sale of food? To what extent are the people who want to mobilize and get politically activated around such a basic right as that of food able to do it, when there exists a situation of food precariousness? To what extent can the goals of self-management and empowerment be achieved if we consider the relationship of these initiatives to public funding? All these issues are just future questions to be asked in the process of collaborative research regarding the possibilities and challenges of social transformation through APFEs like the ones dealt with in this paper, in the present context.

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