PROMISE
promoting youth involvement and
social engagement

PROMISE: Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement:
Opportunities and challenges for conflicted young people across Europe

WP6: From Conflict to Innovation: Ethnographic Case Studies

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Self-building, alternative accommodation and public space uses
Spain

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Executive summary:

In recent years, a growing number of young Spaniards have wanted to participate directly in providing for their own futures, and see tangible results in the short, medium and long term. They try more or less collective and non-hierarchical ways of working, they often learn main skills informally, non-formally or are self-taught and they try to avoid bureaucratic constraints. Among these, in our case study we include the following aspects: the self-building of collective or private places; the *masovería urbana* (rent arrangements that include maintenance and restoration work as a partial or total substitute for paid rent); and the involvement in new uses of collective spaces the public/private character of which is unclear.

It is difficult to speculate, at the collective level, the extent to which these initiatives will be able to question, substitute or coexist with other more traditional options. At the individual level, it is difficult to estimate the most relevant effects of these young people's actions. It has always taken decades to translate minority, atypical or conflicting views into concrete actions, influencing political actors in government positions to implement social change. A key question that remains open is how these participatory, bottom-up, atypical and micro-local initiatives can gain further momentum, be articulated into sustainable proposals and enter into the central political arenas. However, it is already possible to identify in these distrusting, resistant, critical and alternative behaviours, some elements that can contribute to complementing, replacing or revitalizing the usual practices.

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1   Introduction

Several factors led us to the choice of our case study, specifically youth involved in self-building, alternative forms of accommodation and new uses of public spaces. In recent years, a growing number of young Spaniards have found solutions to their vital needs outside traditional educational and labour inertia; they have pursued alternatives to conventional political participation when it comes to expressing their demands and they question proactively the usual inter-mediation chains in the satisfaction of basic needs, such as housing, access to public spaces, and even clothing and food. In this context, many of them are committed to participate directly in the satisfaction of their needs, with tangible results in the short, medium and long term, in more or less collective and non-hierarchical ways, whilst trying to avoid bureaucratic constraints.

Among these initiatives, we can situate those that are our object of study: the self-construction of collective or private equipment; the *masovería urbana* (rent arrangements that include maintenance and restoration work as a partial or total substitute for paid rent); the implication in new uses of collective spaces the public/private character of which is often found in a kind of legal limbo that can last for years. In most of these, we find several of the following features: they try to respond to specific needs; they do so in the company of others, through open, spontaneous coordination, with flexible assignment of roles and little hierarchy; they use their own available skills and abilities, while they also learn from others according to specific objectives; they often learn informally, non-formally or through self-taught modes; they try to make the most of scarce resources, including the recycling of a large part of materials; there is the frequent assumption of political intentions that question established practices but try to avoid usual labels; often, they make wide use of spaces and realities between the legal, the *alegal* (with unclear regulatory gaps) and the illegal.

We wanted to work with young people who carried out some of these activities. In most of the cases that came to our knowledge, the number of young people really involved in the design and execution of these activities rarely exceeded a dozen – we often speak of only 5 or 6. Therefore, given the variety of localised activities, instead of focusing our case study on a single initiative, we preferred to identify several activities that shared the greatest number of traits described above. Thus, we ended up working with 23 young people from 6 different collectives: 2 self-construction initiatives for collective equipment; a *masovería* group that has carried out the restoration of an urban dwelling while also participating in the development of an urban garden and another *masovería* group focused on restoration objectives in a rural environment; a group of young female architects involved in alternative forms of construction that include a wide range of techniques, from bio-construction to the recovery of several craft practices.

When considering the activities of these young people in depth, through ethnographies, participatory research and interviews, we have focused our attention on several points that we will detail in the following sections. Among these are the following: the content and nature of their efforts; the ways in which young people organise themselves when dealing with the issues in which they are involved, the distribution of roles and the greater or lesser disagreement with the institutions that interact with them; their experience of being young at this particular historical moment; intergenerational relations; the types of benefits or satisfied needs they gain from these activities, for both themselves and their immediate surroundings and society as a whole.

Assessing the impact and efficiency of these activities on the young people themselves and on their environments may undoubtedly require several years, given their minority status,

unconventional nature and scarcity of resources. It is too soon to speculate the extent to which they will be able to question, substitute or coexist with other more traditional options at the collective level, or to estimate the most relevant and lasting effects of their exploration of new personal routes in the labour, educational, political and affective realms at the individual level. Some authors (e.g. Benedicto 2016; Feixa et al. 2016) advocate optimistic patience, comparing discontent and attempts at social change among current youth with the effects of the protest youth movements in the 1960s in terms of how they contributed to consolidating new perspectives in the debates on ecological, feminist or personal rights. Afterwards, it took decades to translate these new views into concrete political actions among those in government positions, in order to implement social change.

In the immediate future, it is not easy to separate the tangible results from the intangible, to distinguish between the satisfaction of instrumental needs (accommodation, collective space, acquisition of a skill, etc.) and that of fundamental expressive needs (belonging, self-confidence, relatedness, etc.) enabling people to give meaning and purpose to their lives. Above all, in this context, verifiable precariousness (low wages, few social benefits, falling spending on education, social protection or public equipment, rental bubble, temporality, unemployment, 30% of young people at risk of poverty) threatens young people with lasting impacts on their lives – the scar effect (Felgueroso and Jansen 2015: 130) – which could lock many young people into a culture of uncertainty and frustration and undermine their confidence in their own abilities.

In many cases, the crisis and precariousness have tested the autonomy, resilience and tremendous capacity for innovation shown by many of the young people we have met, managing to continue pursuit of their aspirations while living on less than €8,000 per year (<60% median Spanish income). Sometimes, there are efforts to turn temporariness, unemployment and flexibility into a situation that allows a higher control of their time, according to one of them, '…the truth, I do not see myself working the whole week for a salary'. But to what extent? At some point, precariousness could limit the sustainability, generalisability and scalability of several of the practices we have considered. Indeed, many of the young people who have found unusual answers to such precariousness come from non-precarious environments (30–40% of the population suffering the least from the financial crisis), without having lived under the threat of having their day-to-day basic needs at stake.

In this situation, one particular question that remains open is how participatory, bottom-up, atypical and micro-local initiatives can add further momentum and be articulated in durable proposals. If minority and autonomous efforts fail to enter into the central political arenas and remain on the side-lines, they risk, albeit involuntarily, contributing to weakening those arenas that today are still perhaps the only alternatives to the hegemony of market forces and technocratic arguments. In other words, the only environments in which to propose options not reducible to cost–benefit logics. A fundamental aspect is to be able to identify in these distrust, resistance, criticism and alternative behaviours of young people, elements of which can contribute to complementing, replacing or revitalizing what already exists.

2   Methods

The fieldwork included: 23 semi-structured in-depth interviews –averaging a duration of about 85', recorded, transcribed and analysed in NVivo; interviews conducted among the young people themselves as part of a participatory research strategy; several days of participant observation; numerous informal conversations, both during the days of participant observation and in other meetings; written, audio-visual and photographic material of the different activities; the collection of various documentary sources, such as websites, internal documents and media articles. At the time of arranging the interviews, we were interested in talking with young people in the initial (15-17), intermediate (18-24) and final phases of their youth (24-30) and including those from different social classes, with special attention on having several of them from disadvantaged contexts, as well as making every effort to interview at least the same number of women as men.

Access to the groups of young people finally integrated in this case study was relatively easy as many of them were interested in disseminating their activities and understood the relevance of participating in a European research project. However, initially we were interested in several groups of young people involved in similar activities who refused to participate on the grounds of lack of time, privacy issues and sometimes suspicions of a university environment, which they understood to be part of the establishment. In addition, some youth groups claimed to be overexposed to academic research and lamented the lack of greater reciprocity between their possible openness to social science researchers and what they ended up receiving in return. Of course, in light of our experience, much discussion is still pending in the social sciences in terms of how to attenuate the asymmetry in the interactions between researchers and the groups investigated: who decides what, how, when, how much and in exchange for what? In this regard, in the context of qualitative and ethnographic research, the issue of how to better reconcile the necessary trust between researchers and interviewees is yet to be resolved, given the isolated and exceptional *one-off* nature of most of the encounters (even if they last for weeks), often without past or future continuity. However, since the first considerations about this case study, I reflected about my own positionality as an adult university researcher interviewing young people involved in non-conventional practices, and I kept reflective throughout the whole process. In every step, I have been transparent about the motivations for doing the fieldwork and PROMISE's main objectives, providing any requested details about the research, and stressing our interest in developing peer research.

Among the groups contacted, once involvement in the research was agreed upon, the reception to our participant observation was in most cases open and generous, imposing hardly any restrictions, beyond wanting to safeguard the confidentiality of some internal meetings. In three of the five groups visited, the first contact with one of the members with more active participation in the group – through emails, telephone conversations and informal meetings – was decisive when it came to gaining access to the group and an open reception. Among the elements that they valued most when deciding on their participation were: the relevance and nature of the project – described in detail in the documents and presentation conversations – the European nature of the work and the participation of the UAB, the commitment to facilitating publications and the emphasis on dissemination of the results. The fact that the dissemination of activities is important for some groups must be taken into account when considering issues of anonymity.

The days of participant observation were key in facilitating the generation of trust with several members of the group. They offered many indications about the nature of their activities and the dynamics of the internal organisation when making certain decisions or distributing tasks. In

addition, they allowed us numerous meetings, both bilaterally and in groups of more than two members, in which to discuss specific topics concerning the activity, various aspects related to the general situation of young people in the present and individual issues experienced by some young people in their relationship with the activity, or about other labour, educational or political concerns. All this contributed to enriching the detail of aspects raised in the interviews and carrying them out in a climate of trust.

The initial availability of the interviewees presented different levels of receptivity, according to personal idiosyncrasies, more or less sympathy with the academic research and also – as we have said – more or less closeness to the researchers on some of the days of participant observation. The age difference between researchers and interviewees was also an element to be borne in mind in the initial contacts. In any case, shortly after the interviews began, practically all the young people showed great interest in the topics discussed, they were generous when it came to delving into their main concerns and implications and except for external reasons, almost all the interviews lasted longer than expected.

Some of the interviewees, in contrast, took time to confirm, mainly citing tight agendas and alleging lack of time to carry them out. In these cases (4 of the 23 interviews), in which it took weeks to confirm, there were doubts about whether the reluctance was due to lack of time, or other types of problems. Problems such as not having generated sufficient confidence to bridge social differences between the researcher and interviewee, not having transmitted the relevance of the project, distrust towards the university context or European institutions, or lack of tangible individual incentives for the interviewees.

In terms of ethics, all participants received detailed information concerning the nature and purposes of the project, the main topics of the interviews and the need to have their consent, which was obtained verbally.

We analysed the data using the NVivo 11 program within a multi-grounded theory approach. This allowed us, in a first inductive phase, to codify, categorise and contextualise the reflections and approaches of the young people with whom we had spoken and interviewed. This supported us in generating level 1 and 2 nodes and the memos that constituted the fundamental ingredients of this report and successive analyses. Then, we followed a process of theoretical matching to incorporate contemporary theoretical developments in the interpretation of the data and generate level 3 nodes serving to identify the main findings of the research.

Table 1. Interviews and Participant observation

	Interviews	Participant observation (days)
Self-building 1	6	4
Self-building 2	4	6
Masovería Urban Gardens	7	4
Alternative Architecture	3	3
Alternative Accommodation	3	3

3 Key Findings

3.1 Empowerment

Some needs, activities or capacities are so essential to those who carry them out that it is not easy to understand their practice within a rational analysis that enquires about the purposes, the reasons or efficiency issues. In a certain way, they cannot be reduced to instrumental judgments.

Among the topics discussed most often in our interviews and field work – especially those that arise when young people are not limited by the narrow margins of restricted questions and are able to explore different interests –, there are issues that mix several objectives, whether educational, professional, or associative. Sometimes, it is even difficult to determine if the predominant nature of an activity or experience is cultural, political or social:

> It is a complex project in every way. All the fields that it activates ... I do not know, I find it strange to speak only of the [removed] as a building, at the level of results, [removed] is a building and it is an experience. So, there have been many more results; there have been much more results, as new projects are planned in the school. (EC2)

On the other hand, as difficult as it is to operationalise concepts and link them in causal reasoning, these activities, situations, relationships and experiences have effects on the participants' lives and often improve them, both according to their own judgments and from other more objective or inter-subjective perspectives for which we will try to provide support. It makes sense to ask how these activities improve the participants' lives and the extent to which their practices are more or less advisable than other alternative options and if those courses of action serve as a reference for other people in similar situations. But from what logic should we orient such assessments?

One of the recurring themes is the idea of empowerment. Empowerment is an ambiguous, broad, fashionable concept and is therefore also prone to confusion. Nonetheless, many of the contemporary arguments about power, participation and youth revolve around this idea (Martínez et al. 2016). The different translations of the term in different languages, for example in Spanish or French, offer clear reflections of its multiple dimensions: *potenciación* (strengthening), *participación social* (social participation), *refuerzo de capacidades* (reinforcement of capabilities); *attribution de pouvoir*, *obtention de pouvoir*, *emergence du processus d'appropriation du pouvoir*, *autonomisation*, *renforcement du pouvoir d'action*, *capacitation* and/or *habilitation* (Zambrano 2007, cited in Martínez et al. 2016: 3–4; Luttrell et al. 2009).

> So, I think that line is very important. One of the most interesting capabilities I find is to know that it is possible, that is, by pouring energy into a project you know that you can take it forward. [removed] have a certain autonomy, certain security in which things are possible, that is, maybe now in school they would not be talking about many things that they are talking about if it were not for the [name of the initiative], because the learning I think has not only been for the students, but has been for the educational community in all regards, from the management team to the students, I think it has been a global learning for anyone involved, there have been times when the principal, or a teacher, or a student have been at the same level. (EC2)

The former quote contains several of the dimensions mentioned before: autonomy, reinforcement of capabilities, associationism. Martínez et al. (2016), in their detailed reading of contemporary debates on empowerment in various academic disciplines, highlight elements such as: the ability

of people, groups or communities to exercise control over their lives and contexts; the possibility of changing them; the acquisition of power or capabilities that can contribute to the desired changes; the ways of acquiring such power; the participatory and collective nature of several of the processes involved; the fit within broader sociocultural contexts, with which they interact in dynamic negotiations. In line with our research, several of the terms more present in these arguments constitute many of the second and first level nodes of our analyses: personal and community resources; poverty; agency ('capacity that people have to act on their surroundings' [Martínez et al. 2016: 5]); acquisition of knowledge and skills; awareness; feeling competent and self-confident; access to decision-making processes; self-esteem, supportive relationships and resilience.

Regarding youth empowerment, Martínez et al. (2016) stress the following dimensions: development and personal well-being, starting with the satisfaction of basic needs (Luttrel et al. 2009) and paying special attention to the following: situations of adversity that call for resilience (Travis and Bowman 2012); relational and interactive aspects among young people and among young people and adults; educational and participatory aspects; political elements around decision making; influence in institutions, or questioning power hierarchies; contribution to social change (Wagaman 2011). With regard to these dimensions, there is the favouring of bridges between critical thinking and interventions with specific purposes; indeed, for Wagaman 'empowerment is the process by which adolescents develop the consciousness and skills necessary to envision social change and understand their role in that change' (2011: 284). There is also the acquisition of skills and abilities when facing demanding situations and finally the emancipatory aspects that underline the capacity of young people to make decisions themselves and carry them out themselves.

Several of these issues are essential in our case study. The young people's activities focus on how social and individual needs are satisfied better or worse, and what is the role for young people in these processes. Two initiatives deal with accommodation, especially how accommodation for young people has been neglected in the housing bubble financial crisis context; other two want to improve access to collective equipment and public places; ant the one led by the young female architects group confronts both individual accommodation and collective spaces.

Most of the young people met showed an explicit interest in having a greater say in the solutions to their unmet demands

> Yes, it's like ... take more responsibility, or I do not know if to say responsibility, but to do more with your hands, have more ... well, I do not know! Get more involved in most things in your life, think about how you dress, how you eat, where you live... (HQ3)

> And then, in this regard, I like to be able to convey this, the ability to transform with the tools you have and with which you are more comfortable, too, right? ... A bit like the use of the cane is an excuse because the cane is not a material to build super-resistance, but it is easy to grasp, it is easy to handle, it is very handmade ... and to recover this artisanal concept and take this approach to other parts of the architecture. (V1)

A direct consequence of this greater involvement young people aim at, is that, since the initial steps of their activities, there is the intention of advancing in finding tangible solutions to their

needs, what translates into a hands-on approach, openly revealed, for example, in their willingness to acquire new skills, often through informal peer and self-learning.

> ... Even with the orchard, I have been very motivated, I am learning a lot about how to plant, how to prepare the soil, how to compost ... I already have my composter at home, you know? (HQ4)

Moreover, these pragmatic concerns are not pursued just for their own purpose, but within agendas where collective action, associationism and political assessments of young people's context are main components of their strategies.

> We want to work for ourselves, we like to be able to self-manage our lives in many ways and therefore generate our jobs, right? And work with friends and be able to provide a different vision of the profession and not just be working for money… (V1)

> But the same thing happens again, that is, coexistence generates a state that engages. And if you have a good time and enjoy yourself and if you do something that you see that really grows, that is very important, that is, the visual and the material also generates an emotion... (EC2)

For some of them, actually, raising the political visibility of their concerns and engaging in the political debates around them, are consubstantial with their more material interventions, be it a new community centre or a new urban garden that also works as an outdoor cinema and as a site where different recycling processes take place

> The issue of recycling material and then to a great extent also the political issue, a bit of the political context that always gets into our works of self-construction, of vindication, empowerment of space, of the space of the city, the coexistence that is made around the people who self-build. (EC3)

This presence at the same time of concrete objectives, political engagement and the collective nature of their actions; makes them often ponder about what their contribution to social change might be

> I suppose that all this learning will somehow have to infiltrate, no matter how formal I want to be in the future, that is, just for the sake of saying "No, I do not accept this" or "This can be done differently", or asking "Why don't we do something that I've seen that has worked?" (EC1)

> Of course it surprises me, because in the end a complex process is opened up, because it is not an easy project but a complex one and it is started, is carried out and it seemed quite interesting to me that [removed] with its own resources, was able to take decisions that were protest on the one hand, and that were practical on the other, that is, formally we built a space on the one hand, but on the other we made visible a lack of space that the administration did not fill, because in the end we are following studies that have some requirements that the administration was supposed to take care of. (EC2)

But whereas they are prudent, even sceptical on several occasions, about what their actual contribution to social change might be; many of them are more confident about what they have got from their participation in these initiatives

> Since I was 21, or so, a couple of years ago, not that long, but I feel I am a person much more capable than most youth my age I know, right? Also with critical thinking, which is important... Not to settle for the idea that before it was worse… But to find an alternative, no? (HQ2)

> Confront yourself and say: I am where I want, I am strong ... and knowing and feeling good already makes you focus your whole life in another way. (HQ1)
> Yes, but not only my house... As soon as you realize that you can do things with your hands and that it is a very entertaining process, you are already looking at other things. My house in the future, of course, but you're already looking at things like: "I need this!" Because "I'll do it!" (EC1)

3.2 First steps (pivotal moment or slow turning?)

In terms of the introductory steps that led the young people interviewed into their chosen activities and concerns, some spoke of personal evolution over the years, resulting from several factors, experiences and environments. Many of them emphasized the usual contexts, such as universities, workplaces, or groups of friends with certain affinities. Others, though, identified specific events, such as knowing someone in particular who discovered and suggested a new possibility, or they spoke of concrete experiences, such as participating in training workshops (from a weekend to a couple of weeks), or making a trip that, for several of them, could be crucial in letting them know other ways of living and that made them rethink their own choices. These pieces of evidence point to the importance of exposure to a plurality of places, institutional environments, activities, countries and people in the biography of young people.

Several of them explained how crucial was meeting a friend or acquaintance, who let them know about a certain activity that might be of their interest, and even encouraged them to at least try a testing occasion

> [Subject 2] told me "we are going to [removed] it is really worth knowing how these things move in our area"; and since then I became interested in the subject, and as soon as I had the opportunity and this project took a little bit of shape, I said "I have to stick my head in there and find out how this is done from the very outset". (EC2)

> With the project I joined [...] with my cousin's contact, then ... well, I had been telling her for a while, she insisted, and in the end I told her that I was going with her on a Saturday and I got hooked! We were there 2 or 3 years... (T22)

In the group of specific events as catalysers to explore new options, together with friends and acquaintances, and travels – that we will address in the next section; there were various references to how influential for them had been participating in some workshops

> Yes, one of the principles of bioconstruction is self-building. In fact, I did a course in Cáceres, in a town in Cáceres, on bioconstruction, which was two intense weeks living with people in a house donated by the town hall and it became a prototype of housing with adobe and it was very nice. (EC2)

The possibility of spending two intense weeks, just one, or even a long weekend, deeply immersed in some new experience or context (activity, place or work), favours receptivity, knowledge and consideration of new alternatives. Besides, in their view, workshops facilitated intense social exchanges with both other people who shared their affinities and experiences, and also with others with maybe a few interests in common but coming from very different backgrounds.

3.3   Main motivations, chosen/unchosen

An important group of reasons for trying new ways of doing things included dissatisfaction with employment, education, traditional forms of politics and consumerism. Often, the participants did not speak of dissatisfaction as a lack or scarcity, but as a criticism of the established ways of satisfying certain needs: the precarious working conditions and the alienating nature of many jobs; formal education and the limited role for young people in the design of it; the passivity and dependence with which certain patterns of consumption are accepted and assumed as inevitable – from housing to food and from how leisure is understood to the multiple uses of public spaces. In each of these areas, they expressed regret at not participating more in elaborating, choosing and controlling the various dimensions.

Beginning with education and learning, a considerable number of the interviewees, in contrast to their dissatisfaction with their formal education, highlighted the opportunities to learn new knowledge and skills in the activities they had chosen outside regular systems. Many regretted that in the context of formal education, as it now takes place, or at least as they experienced it, it was difficult to satisfy either their personal interests, or to find formative paths that would put them on productive or meaningful trajectories. Others saw the formal education system as disconnected from the practical materialisation of the knowledge offered – 'we spent the five years of our career without visiting a building site' (V3) – and failing to guarantee foreseeable itineraries of emancipation – 'you finish your studies and you see yourself beginning from scratch again' (V2). These disconnections with conventional educational channels increase the risk for this young people of finding themselves in vulnerable situations, since they follow irregular trajectories and education-employment transitions, with several periods in their lives with no clear status as in employment or in education. During these periods they can be labelled as NEETS, what may have long-term stigmatizing effects, given the assumptions of current social policies or human resources management procedures, where the lack of enough time for detailed assessment of individual trajectories may favour prejudiced lines of action.

In contrast, in the activities of self-building or restoring the houses or public spaces in which we interviewed them, the young people appreciated that in the same month, sometimes weeks, that they learned a skill or knowledge, they had the opportunity to put this into practice and see the impact. Thus, the generation of value and tangible benefits is not postponed to an indefinite and uncertain future. On the contrary, learning, putting it into practice and benefiting from it (economic benefits or not) are better synchronised within the same temporal unit: 'you benefit from what you are learning while you are learning it' (EC4). Together with this, we must add that they valued: a much wider margin of choice in the content of what they learned, in line with their interests; a more participatory nature, with less hierarchical communication modes; access without high tuition costs. With regard to quality checks or how to evaluate the results of their efforts with some verifiable transparency, they assumed that there was still a long way to go, but that in several cases they had already accepted quality controls linked to universal standards and some of their activities had passed the current official inspections.

- Criticism of formal education

> We also found ourselves with some tension in the course, because we started as a small group to organise ourselves and say: look, this part of the Master's, instead of making television we use it as a laboratory and since we are here, we do things as they come and as we like and we experienced a little. (HQ1)

> Everyone was going to do a degree and I did not know what I wanted to do, because I had done the scientific baccalaureate and I had seen that I did not like it and it was in a way that "I know what I do not want to be!" And it's like that ... I got quite unmotivated and thinking. (HQ3)

> It's a group of friends who work together. I guess we imagined ... what they taught us at the university did not just fit us. (V2)

Faced with this disenchantment, in the exercise of the activities they had chosen to carry out, they especially valued both the learning of specific skills and the knowledge of areas that until then had been unknown to them:

> Since I've been participating here, I've learned a lot about construction, at the political level as well, including the legislative aspect, regulations, because there are many problems with licensing issues; and then also on a personal level. (EC3)

> Oh, yes, I have learned a lot of things at a technical level, from fixing a window that is destroyed, starting from scratch... How to compost food and ... how to run a vegetable garden, well, I have improved my techniques for different tasks, right? Ah ... also to work as a member of a big group and ... fix my bicycle! (HQ2)

> Or a reformation of a house that we were doing, that the customers came to look at, and then we considered Low Energy Architecture, houses that spend less energy because they are built of wood and such and we had some basic knowledge, but one of the girls who was responsible for it, she was like a month reading and looking for more information about it. I would love to be able to do a course on this subject. (V1)

The questioning of traditional practices was also central to assessing their work experiences and how to fit their jobs into their biographies. This involved important concessions and commitments, including accepting a wide variety of temporary and low-paid part-time jobs. Often, temporality and part-time are obligatory. Sometimes, however, they chose these options to evade a full-time salaried discipline in order to maintain sufficient autonomy to devote to their own initiatives or have time to explore other alternatives. They were aware of the risk and precariousness that this implies, but the relationship of these young people with precariousness is far from dichotomous, accepting or rejecting it as an irrefutable fate. Several of them tried, in some way, to take advantage of this context of generalized instability to the extent that it could offer margins for manoeuvre or autonomy:

> And if you take it badly, or you do not have ... I realize now I am lucky to feel good in this sort of precariousness, because it is a positive aspect of youth, because you say: for God's sake! Do not put me in a permanent job! Do not put me ... because this precariousness is a luxury! But... (HQ1)

(He completely subscribed to the Smiths' song lyrics "I was looking for a job, and then I found a job and heaven knows I'm miserable now…")

I'm working right now, I'm working in a bar, 30 hours on weekends. Then, this gives me four whole days to be here during the week and do what I want... In the bar I am 10 hours on Friday, 10 hours on Saturday and 10 hours on Sunday ... in the evening ... I actually asked at the bar to have the most concentrated working time, to have intervals of 4 days off for me... (EC3)

Many reported avoiding full-time salaried work. They do not necessarily try to avoid full-time employment because of the nature of the work itself, but sometimes they reject the subordinating conditions of salaried employment and tried to limit them to the minimum necessary. For example, a young man had reduced his contract as a bicycle mechanic in a large sports store to 25 hours a week – 'I do not need more' – while two afternoons a week he volunteered at a bicycle repair workshop in a peripheral neighbourhood of Barcelona. This case also contradicts views of young people as too prone to all-or-nothing responses in dealing with discontent, which may go together with stigmatizing judgements about some young people having little endurance for non-desired circumstances. When different alternatives are available, and young people feel they have some real bargaining voice in the final arrangements, there may be room for exploring different commitments.

Still, one of the fundamental features of the work experience of several young people interviewed was precariousness, many times regardless of their socioeconomic background. And, yes, they were aware of the double side of this flexibility when precariousness was completely unchosen:

Work that never ends up being enough to ... you're always half-hearted, right? Half here, half there ... half work, half do not know what ... it's a lot ... much precariousness in this sense! And for a long time ... I do not know! The worst can be ... well, the worst thing is to have such a generalized precariousness, in all aspects, because there are so many changes. (HQ1)

Very long waiting periods have been created and this affects everything, that we cannot become independent, that we must be enslaved working in jobs that increasingly pay less... Mmmm... I started studying the career and the baccalaureate in full crisis, right? And then, there is the feeling that there is no future... Yes, yes, yes … not having a job means not being able to become independent. (HQ2)

A 29-year-old young man, who had completed a degree in architecture, said:

Right now, like most of my friends, we are all in a very precarious situation, none of them today, that I think, that is, in simple thought, there is no-one who has a home of their own, still… (EC3)

A 30-year-old female architect reported:

Yes, sure! And in the end there are three people who can live on this and that's great! But, well, I guess it depends on how you look at it. It is a bit precarious ... but anyway, I worked outside in an office, I also worked in a bar belonging to some friends and to this day I have received more income working as a waitress than as an architect, always! But well, you never know... (V2)

The double face of flexibility and uncertainty – with the implications of freedom and openness on the one hand and vulnerability on the other – has more obvious causes and consequences in labour market practices, but it also conditions major life decisions in several areas. It is not always easy to distinguish the extent to which certain choices are autonomous, whether the options of residential coexistence or family formation, or the reasons behind a trip. For example, when traveling to other countries:

> There are a lot of people with specific training of something that do not have a job, or their professional ambition cannot be solved here... I have many colleagues who have gone out to work. (V3)

> My school friends living abroad, I see them as very alone! They have not found a job and have had to leave (Spain) and many want to come back and they cannot! The situation is lonely, no? (V2)

Travelling, voluntary or not, has always been an important option for youth, but it has never been such a key aspect in the biography of so many young people as in the last two decades, with the generalization of cheap flights, the opening of borders and the different exchange programmes. For several of those interviewed, travelling had been a critical experience that had led them to crucial decisions and to learning that they often cited as vital references. Together with the availability of more facilities to travel, cross-national mobility was also linked to the greater flexibility and the different temporalities of their lives. When indefinite and interrupted employment was expected once education had been completed and travel was expensive, contemplating travel as an alternative to explore other realities, or to reflect on personal choices, was usually limited to an exceptional moment in the biography of a privileged minority. Now, in another manifestation of that double face of freedom or vulnerability, given the flexibility in increasing numbers of young people's lives, the temporary nature of many contracts and occupational trajectories puts many young people, every time a job ends, in a situation to rethink what to do with their lives. Thus, travelling, as a hybrid between formative experience and labour immigration, re-emerges as an alternative.

Travelling as learning and considering other ways of living was articulated as follows:

> And then there was a Basque kid, who had already made this constructive system in Mongolia and as humanitarian aid… (EC3)

> And I think ... that there is a bit of a feeling of widespread hostility towards youth, huh? I compare it to when I lived in Vienna, that people become independent at 18 or 20 years without problems with work, accommodation... (HQ2)

> And it was cool, because there (foreign country), there was a time when I focused a lot on myself, I said, let it go! Let's think from scratch what I would like to do. (HQ3)

> From what I understand of what architecture can be or ... in the end, when I lived in Uruguay, people did not need that much, they went, tried and built a part of their house and when they saw that they did not know how to go on, they asked for advice from someone else who knew more ... Yes … there was a lot of experience with people who were buying land and building their space and I really liked it! (V1)

The double face of flexibility as freedom or vulnerability has been a feature linked to youth throughout history, but the way in which it has been accentuated in recent decades, with developments in different areas, is seen by many theorists as an element that identifies the era. We have already mentioned how the evolution of the labour market has been fundamental in this regard. However, along with work, in many other crucial spheres of life, from the most personal affective relations to the more public ones, such as political participation, we can identify allusions to the complicated relationships between strong aspirations for greater personal autonomy and freedom on the one hand and the awareness of an environment with uncertainties and insecurities in various life circumstances on the other. The complex balances involved are reflected, for example, in the explicit and implicit negotiations that characterize the search for collective solutions to these uncertainties. We saw commitments that involve different types of negotiations with respect to the individual autonomy that they valued so much. These three aspects: autonomy, uncertainty and association or collaboration, offer various types of equilibria and combinations, with expressions such as the tendency to pursue forms of activism that are difficult to label. While this complicates the life cycles of certain initiatives, it may also increase the scope for young people with different backgrounds to mix in:

> Mmm ... well, I do not know if it's a youth problem, or sometimes people say generations are lost, or that they do not have a future. Maybe that idea of creating a family, finding a job, children, right? What I was saying about the generation of my parents, maybe now there are so many opportunities, or so they say, I do not know if I believe that… young people are more lost, they do not know how to focus, no? (V2)

> I could not find my place, I could not find people, I could not find ... well, security, no? ... I see it also in concrete aspects of my life, in affective relationships and in my life as a couple, the referents are changing so fast, as in aspects of information and technology… Well, there are no stable things ... there are no secure bases, right? And this makes everything precarious. And if you have it bad, or you do not have... (HQ1)

This uncertainty also generates strong feelings of insecurity:

> There is a total loss of models. Before, it was much easier. You just studied, worked or studied to end up in a job for the rest of your life. And now ... well if you can be a cashier in Caprabo (retail business), do you know? I ... or you went to another country … and they are stealing us and ... Well! … They (previous generations) had models to follow and we no longer have anything... They had established paths, right? (HQ2)

> Every time there is a bit of everything, right? There is always some time to want to send everything to shit, it depends on how it goes ... but that has happened to me all my life, I am on a bit of a roller coaster and it will always be like that for me! (V2)

3.4 Political participation

In the present day, any social participation on the part of Spanish young people is framed within a reality of economic and employment hardship. As previously noted, unemployment and precarious jobs translate into average incomes around poverty levels, late emancipation and serious threats to autonomous lifestyles. This situation, though, can provide a misleading picture that overlooks precisely the experiences we are studying in the case studies. The growing number of young people whose main interests have little to do with formal employment, formal education

or formal politics constitute a mix of different minorities with little visibility and who are not that well represented in the main official statistics. In this context, it is difficult to know the quantitative relevance of social developments of a different qualitative nature to usual practices. Nor do we know much about the thresholds above which small quantitative dynamics become significant for substantial social change. Non-formal and informal experiences (learning, working, politics) and social and communication skills that allow adaptation to different cultural and social contexts gain relevance. Here, we need wider notions of human and social capital to include the social relations that favour resources enabling actors to pursue their interests (Coleman 1990; Eseverri Mayer 2015).

Quantitative studies point to important changes in the ways in which young people participate in politics, with an activism that is moving away from traditional parties and institutions (Anduiza et al. 2014; European Commission 2016). Given the nature of our case studies with young activists in alternative fields to conventional politics, we must be aware of the risk of bias in any evidence in this regard due to the selection on the dependent variable and the validity must be viewed with caution.

The reflections on the political implications of the actions carried out by many interviewees are consistent with the general trends shown by quantitative studies in relation to avoiding conventional labels and not being at ease when having to position themselves on long-established dichotomous scales: left/right, materialist/post-materialist, or modernist/postmodernist.

In our case study, most show greater proximity to leftist positions and in fact some are militants in traditional left parties (minority and majority), but as a whole they appear reluctant to link their initiatives to specific political parties or forces. Besides, they show a great distrust of the bureaucratic implications and inertia that – in their opinion – is involved in the exercise of most policies linked to state institutions. Perhaps their strongest and most radical aspiration is to ensure that the democratic nature of their initiatives goes beyond decision making and becomes imbued in day-to-day practice, in details such as the distribution of specific tasks:

> One of the great things about this project is that it is a participatory process, totally, not only self-construction, but participatory. So, any idea, any design that you want to incorporate, any modification … is open. The group, for example, which is dedicated to closing a gap in a wall has freedom on how to close it. (EC3)

> Or the [removed] space, which is a community space and works on a regular basis, where there are no detailed rules, there are very minimal agreements, but it has been created and is inclusive, right? Because it is not a space that is mine and you cannot enter, no, no, it is a place where you can fit too and tell your ideas. (HQ2)

Another issue that caught our attention, from the earliest stages in the interviews, was the different emphasis among most of the young people when it came to link the support they received from specific actors on the one hand and the tendency to identify obstacles with systemic inertias on the other. Thus, they would usually name concrete actors favouring their initiatives: a certain institution, relatives, friends and frequently other activists. In contrast, when we addressed obstacles and restrictions, attention was not drawn to certain actors (individual, group or institutional), but often to systemic inertias or logics: consumerism, housing speculation, job insecurity, the bureaucratization of the education-employment transition and lack of political representation.

This different perspective when identifying obstacles and contexts of support did not prevent them from mentioning more structural facilitating contexts, such as the development of new technologies, or an increasing tolerance towards diverse life options. They also mentioned concrete obstacles, such as speculators or the specific negligence of a local administration. Yet, in their efforts to differentiate themselves from the more established practices, they did not usually oppose certain institutions head on, but sometimes maintained dialogues with them to agree on spaces in which to try new solutions. At other times, they tried to operate completely free from any form of institutional supervision or commitment, seeking an autonomy that could also involve the risks of isolationism.

Among the references to sources of support, we find: the action of specific administrations or specific actors within those administrations, emphasising the importance of face-to-face interactions; family and friends in several cases; collaboration and coordination with other activists in sectors close to their area of interest. With the latter, they reported exchanging information, knowledge and certain material resources. They shared the use of equipment and spaces, which could possibly be identified as the 'ecology of support' (Christens and Peterson 2012:626), or perhaps arguably 'incubator' environments. There were also transfers of young people between different initiatives.

As we have already said, together with the emphasis on more particular supportive actors, they also had in mind structural facilitating elements, above all new technologies, social networks and the growing tolerance towards a diversity of lifestyles. This plurality of lifestyles, some chosen and others resulting from adaptations to various degrees of precariousness, has expanded the repertoire of what is acceptable. Some groups of young people even manage to instrumentalise adaptations to living with little money for their own benefit, deactivating the potential stigmatising effects of precariousness in several ways – notably by articulating arguments that support their options, including their options in broader agendas, or simply through the awareness of being part of a group, although a minority the number could be sufficient to achieve critical mass.

Regarding the major obstacles and restrictions they suffer, they repeatedly insisted on how certain structural drifts make it increasingly difficult for young people to lead autonomous lives. Issues such as housing speculation and job insecurity shape a socioeconomic environment with elements that some perceive as a systemic hostility against young people. Hence, in our case study, the chosen activities are understood as liberation exercises in spaces in which precisely the restrictive effects of such structural logics affect the most personal experiences. According to the debates raised by authors such as Habermas (1981/1984) and Touraine (1992/1995), the initiatives of the young people we have met above all aim to resist and oppose the growing pressure of dominant social logics when it comes to restricting the ways and means of satisfying basic needs. Together with this resistance, young people seek to affirm, within their particular circumstances, their desire for autonomy. And they do so by taking an active role in satisfying those needs, proposing alternative ways of satisfying them.

3.5 Social participation

The activities we have considered try to combine associationism with the pursuit of certain objectives and do so through decision-making processes and the distribution of tasks aimed at showing a radical exemplarity of democratic practices (transparency in terms of the reasons, knowledge or experiences behind the decisions). These combinations between associationism (relatedness/affiliation), certain objectives or needs and the ways in which they may be satisfied

appear so intertwined that at times it is not easy to recognise the causal sequences that make them up, or even if it makes sense to distinguish between them. Sometimes it is unclear if young people seek other young people with something in common in order to try to change certain things, or if they try to change certain things or perform certain activities to meet other young people with some affinities.

The young people we have met want social environments in which they can participate with more prominence than in any of their other usual contexts. They do not forget the concrete objectives and the needs that they want to satisfy, but their political expression combines cause-and-effect arguments with a clear interest to engage within democratising experiences. These links between political expression intentions, wanting a shared experience and obtaining tangible results allow us to understand, for example, their preference for activities with visible impacts and a certain exemplary character, such as ecological commitments to intensive recycling or limiting conspicuous consumerism.

The relational element, associationism – awareness of not being alone or isolated – makes it possible to confront the distrust and vulnerability with which many young people live:

> Perhaps one of the ways is through participation. Why? Because participation has been the key piece of the [removed] and it has been seen how it works and it has been seen that it is a process that can be carried out in many more areas. (EC2)

> Man, in our concrete case, I do not know very well what the neighbourhood was like before, it has lived through years of isolation and at the moment that [removed] has started to be a collective heritage, many things have been generated and to this day all very positive... I have the feeling that outside it has been perceived as something important, not so much for the subject of "*masovería*" itself, but for what it has led to, the type of life, what it has allowed... (HQ1)

> It's a good question! Ah... Well, I suppose, now, as everything is so individualistic, then let's do something with a collective. I think that if I were not in [removed] I would do it in some other way because I would feel bad, I think it's important ... for no ... forgetting individuality a little bit, that social tendency… Home, work, being a couple ... a little out of this is what I like the most. And ... well, thinking things together too and I suppose also the part of the construction. (V2)

In this line, young people stressed the need to achieve tangible objectives and meet specific needs; but, at the same time, they wanted to transcend the imperatives of merely instrumental logics, to escape from debates in which only technical solutions are confronted. Approaches of this nature are very present when considering the efficiency and benefits of the activities carried out, their greatest achievements and the obstacles they face. And they crystallise in a particular way in the two groups (activists and architects) in which there are no clear lines of separation between fully voluntary activists and those who combine voluntary activism and professional activism (paid). How to distinguish the voluntary from the paid, how to compare the efficiency of different proposals or courses of action and based on which criteria are themes that come up again and again when referring to the democratic demands assumed.

3.6 Innovation?

The willingness to change or improve something, to do something differently appears in almost all the interviews with the young people: to move beyond the ordinary or what is expected of them and to have the ability to provide reasons to explain their initiatives. In this regard, it can be said that they tried to find new or less common answers.

Do they innovate? One of the liveliest debates in contemporary social sciences concerns clarification of what social innovation is, how to measure its impact and how to differentiate it from other more technological innovations – without forgetting the social content of any technology (Boelman et al. 2014). New software is a technological innovation and can be a social innovation. There are also many other forms of social innovation: testing new forms of exchange, trade, sharing, or facilitating access to a good or service (meeting basic needs, such as accommodation or leisure, informal learning and providing access to knowledge, to public spaces, to political participation, or to more autonomous uses of time). The young people we have spoken face certain needs – theirs and those of others. In their efforts to satisfy these, when they go after them actively, whether individually or collectively, with a certain systematisation of practices and using the knowledge, tools and technologies of their time, they experience those pursuits as part of something new. Undoubtedly, many elements and longings of their initiatives are not new (democratic, participatory, redistributive, collaborative or personal autonomy aspirations), but these elements are configured in new historical contexts, with knowledge and circumstances that were not present ten years ago. Therefore, to the extent that the concrete and historical materialisation of these responses to specific needs, individual or social, constitute alternatives to established practices, we may perhaps speak of social innovation (Murray et al. 2010; Godin 2012). *New*, *innovative* or *evolutionary* are difficult concepts to grasp in social terms. Indeed, keeping Levi-Strauss in mind, 'There are neither "primitive nor evolved" civilizations; there are only different responses to fundamental and identical problems' (in Sorman 1991: 89).

In our field work and interviews, we have found evidence of some of the three fundamental aspects according to which several authors (Moulaert et al. 2013; Pares et al. 2017) characterize social innovation: the satisfaction of inadequately met needs; the concern to transform certain inertias in social relationships; the empowerment of citizens through bottom-up participation processes that train young people as individuals and groups. In addition, the evidence gathered shows that several of the activities considered pursue these objectives in a conscious way and achieve positive and testable effects in the three aspects mentioned, both among those who carry them out and also in their local contexts. However, given the nature and circumstances of the cases, made up of small groups of young people taking their first steps in areas still incipient in many ways, it is much more difficult to speculate about the long-term impact of their initiatives, the extent to which they may last and evolve over time, so that they can be articulated with other similar initiatives and in broader institutional contexts to gain generalisability and scalability ('out and up') and thus produce relevant political and social change.

These alternative ways of doing things do not just affect the conceptualisation of the needs young people face, the ways of satisfying them and the indicators for evaluating their satisfaction; above all, they stand out when it comes to linking several needs between them and thus also interlinking the activities aimed at satisfying them. In the initiatives of self-construction or alternative uses of collective sites that we have studied, there are tangible objectives for the creation of spaces and facilities, with criteria of verifiable efficiency to evaluate the results of their efforts. They go beyond the expressive functions they also fulfil. Still, since their first design and implementation,

these activities incorporate in their nature a way of understanding personal autonomy, social relations in collective action and political participation.

In this theme, the work of authors who have organised their arguments around basic needs might be helpful, for example Sen's (2009) and Nussbaum's (2000, 2009) research on capabilities, analysing human development and personal autonomy (individual and collective); or in a different field, but with many elements in common, the development of the good lives model (GLM) by Yates and Prescott (2011) and Chu et al.'s (2014) work, placing the satisfaction of basic needs at the core of rehabilitation interventions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Essential Goods/Capabilities

Strengths-based rehabilitation theory (psychology, criminology), the GLM (Yates and Prescott 2011; Chu et al. 2014)	Human development, justice, agency (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2009)
Goods	**Capabilities**
Life (health)	Life (bodily health, integrity)
Knowledge	Practical reasoning
	Control over one's environment: political (political participation), material (economic autonomy)
Excellence in work and play	Play, leisure
Inner peace (emotional equilibrium)	Emotions
Relatedness (relationships and friendships)	Affiliation: social interactions, associations
Spirituality	
Happiness	
Creativity	Senses, imagination and thought
	Other aspects

Indeed, the young people in the case studies placed as much emphasis on the specific needs they intended to satisfy as in the way of satisfying them. As we have seen, addressing several needs simultaneously is one of the aspects that most moved them away from conventional practices. They questioned the divisibility with which traditional systems tend to rationalise the satisfaction of specific needs, isolating them and emphasising one over the rest. For example, labour market logic would subordinate relational needs, political participation or learning to a specific economic efficiency (Hanna Arendt [1958] was among the first to identify the problems of reconciling the imperatives of economic efficiency and those of a democratic nature).

Moreover, the practices we have studied usually take into account several needs at the same time and consider that the impact of an activity on the satisfaction of a specific need cannot be separated from its impact on other areas. There is an explicit interest in the activities meeting several needs at the same time (instrumental, expressive, participatory, etc.), so that a particular political, economic or cultural objective cannot be conceived in isolation. By virtue of a more efficient economic response, participatory aspects or possible excluding effects cannot be neglected. In this regard, they are very close to Nussbaum (2009), emphasising that all essential capacities need to be satisfied at least above a minimum threshold, so that there can only be interchangeability between them to a certain extent. Below that threshold, they are neither

interchangeable nor reducible to other purposes. That is, for the sake of a political or economic objective, the realisation of emotional, participatory, playful or creative needs cannot be ignored.

In fact, one way of differentiating the proposals we have studied from other conventional practices is their opposition to unchosen systemic rationalities, precisely by raising the thresholds that avoid the interchangeability and reducibility of *non-economic* needs. Our respondents want to limit the sacrifices that can be justified with economic arguments and reinforce the attention on basic needs, especially those less *monetizable*. Moreover, by pursuing the satisfaction of several needs simultaneously, they also look for possible synergies between the different responses.

For example, in the self-construction initiatives studied, several participants learned professional skills while building walls or reinforcing foundations – something close to the 'learning by doing', 'in-job training' and 'earning while you learn' initiatives that are becoming key themes of several educational and labour discourses (in the employability and capabilities literature (Schneider and Otto 2009; Otto et al 2015). In addition, they linked their initiatives to political arguments regarding the unmet needs of many young people. Above all, they made many teamwork and meeting sessions into moments of intense social interaction.

From a conventional perspective, efficiency could be one of the weak points of such initiatives, but when comparing the alternatives, there are numerous details to be taken into account and questions about the possible criteria with which to assess them. In some of the cases we have studied involving qualified young people who claim to lead autonomous lives on an income of €8000 a year – around 50% the country's median salary – the resilience and autonomy they reveal may be the result of efficient trajectories and of course they can also be its constituents.

4   Conclusions

The recurring themes in this case study are as follows:

-   The idea of empowerment, understood as 'a process by which adolescents develop the consciousness and skills necessary to envision social change and understand their role in that change' (Wagaman, 2011:284). We found evidence of this in the following areas: personal development and well-being, relational and social interactions, political and social participation and the acquisition of skills and capabilities.

-   The reasons and motivations behind most young people's activities found in this case study share a deep dissatisfaction with the main forms of employment, education, politics and consumerism. Often, they do not speak of dissatisfaction as a lack or scarcity, but as a criticism of the established ways of satisfying certain needs: alienating jobs; bureaucratised education; unrepresentative politics; unsustainable consumerism. In contrast, in their chosen activities they especially appreciate a better fit between choosing objectives, learning relevant skills, and attaining tangible results, the participatory and non-hierarchical nature of decision making and the distribution of tasks and open access.

-   The answers to these areas of dissatisfaction are far from dichotomous approaches in which precariousness is accepted or rejected as an irrefutable fate. For example, several of them have tried to take advantage of an employment context of generalised instability to gain wider margins of manoeuvre. This involves important concessions and commitments, including the acceptance of a wide variety of temporary and low-paid, part-time jobs. Often, temporality and part-time are involuntary. Sometimes, however, they choose these options to evade full-time

salaried disciplines in order to maintain sufficient autonomy to try their own initiatives, or gain time to explore other alternatives.

- The double face of flexibility and uncertainty – with its implications of freedom and openness on the one hand and vulnerability on the other – has more obvious causes and consequences in labour market practices, but it also conditions major life decisions in several areas: forms of residential sharing, family formation and hybrid migratory/formative/experiential trips.

- When offering political explanations of their contexts and behaviours, there is a different emphasis on the nature of supportive versus inhibiting factors. On the one hand, they rather link the support they receive to specific actors; on the other hand, they tend to identify obstacles with systemic inertias. Thus, they usually name concrete actors favouring their initiatives: a certain institution, relatives, friends and frequently other activists. However, when addressing obstacles and restrictions, attention is not drawn to certain actors (individual, group or institution) but often to systemic inertias or logics: consumerism, housing speculation, job insecurity, bureaucratisation of the education-employment transition and lack of political representation.

- Still, they are aware of some structural trends that favour their options. Together with new technologies and social networks, many young people make strategic use of the wider social tolerance towards a plural diversity of lifestyles. The majority enjoy wider political, national, religious or sexual rights than their parents; but even some of the adaptations to living with little money during and before the crisis have contributed to expanding the repertoire of what is acceptable (i.e. sharing flats, sourcing expired food, acquiring second-hand clothes) and this increases their leeway in terms of money versus autonomy dilemmas.

- In their activities, they combine associationism, political expression and the pursuit of tangible objectives. And they do so in such deeply intertwined ways that it makes it very difficult to isolate the specific goals or needs that they want to satisfy. Indeed, one of their main ambitions is to transcend the imperatives of instrumental logics and to escape debates in which only technical solutions are confronted.

- Therefore, it is not easy to assess the long-term impacts of these initiatives; the extent to which they may last and evolve over time so that they can become articulated with other similar initiatives in broader institutional contexts to gain generalisability and scalability ("out & up") and thus produce relevant political and social change. Their minority and unconventional nature makes it challenging for young people to find ways of extending their efforts in replacing or revitalizing usual practices, but the resilience and autonomy present in many of their trajectories provide clear hints of what different alternatives could look like.

- Is there innovation? The young people with whom we have spoken face certain needs and in their efforts to satisfy these, they engage, whether individually or collectively, in active systematised practices, using the knowledge, tools and technologies of their time. They often experience those pursuits as part of something new. Their aspirations (democratic, participatory, redistributive, collaborative and personal autonomy) are not new, but they follow them in new historical contexts, with knowledge and circumstances that were not present ten years ago. Therefore, to the extent that the concrete and historical materialisation of these responses to essential needs – individual or social – constitute alternatives to established practices, we may perhaps speak of social innovation (Murray et al. 2010; Godin 2012).

5 Future analysis

For the cross-case analysis, the evidence of our case study suggests the following main lines of argument:

- Looking for shared elements in the different clusters concerning possible 'empowering' dynamics, we identify: the acquisition of skills or capabilities; participatory processes within their own groups and negotiations with non-youth actors; practices that involve gaining more control over their lives and contexts, with a special focus on positive examples of resilience in situations of adversity. Some of the activities we have considered favour bridges for many young people to translate critical thinking and conflictive opposition into interventions with specific purposes and an exemplary character.

- Despite the vulnerable socioeconomic circumstances in which many young people live, their discontent is less directed towards any particular shortage or scarcity than to the main logics regulating key social fields: employment, education, housing and political participation.

- In a related way – and as remarked previously – while young people usually identify specific actors or factors as supportive elements, when focusing on obstacles they prefer to mention structural trends. Indeed, in our case study, their main activities and behaviours were often understood as liberation exercises against the restrictive effects of those structural logics on their personal experiences.

- In the activities studied, the combination of associationism, political participation and pursuing tangible objectives, together with the fact that young people tend to try to find answers to several needs at the same time, is at the core of their critical activities. They are opposed to what they consider as the short-sighted, cost–benefit rationalisation present in main societal systems, in which solutions to specific needs (whether employment in the labour market, or distribution in the retail sector) do not usually take into account their impact on other needs or social areas (cultural benefits, personal autonomy, environment, social life or political participation).

Given these main themes, the literature on empowerment, basic or social needs, innovation and the welfare state could orient us in formulating our main hypotheses. For example, in the topic of how young people deal with their needs, we could draw on Sen's (2009) and Nussbaum's (2000, 2009) research on capabilities in social justice debates; and on the development of the GLM by Yates and Prescott (2011), or Chu et al.'s (2014) in rehabilitation interventions. The criticism, conflicts and activities engaged in by the young people we have met could be more or less efficient in satisfying their needs, but they certainly give visibility to what they are missing.

Here, triangulation could help us with quantitative evidence to support points concerning the following:

- Evidence of how conflictive, performative and atypical activities raise the visibility and general awareness of unmet social needs among young people (e.g. one of the groups we considered, through their guerrilla self-building initiative, actually obtained the authorities' commitment to invest in new equipment).

- In the efforts we have studied, young people tend to stress that part of the solution is assuming close links between several needs at the same time. For them, these needs should not be isolated or presented in a too disconnected sequential order, with the postponement of some needs to an indefinite future. In their activities, they aspire to get greater simultaneity and synchronization between their main concerns: identifying objectives, participatory procedures, learning skills, putting them into practice and attaining visible results. The fact that they

themselves provide visible elements of best practice in this regard could be further supported with other examples of best practice backed up with quantitative evidence. This is in line with how certain public policies are trying to substitute sequential approaches with simultaneous ones whenever possible, for example in the areas of employability (Otto et al. 2015), or welfare-state reform (Morel et al. 2012; Hemerijck 2017).

- The welfare state literature and quantitative data on public sector expenditure could also be helpful in other key areas. The qualitative empowerment and innovation literature, by focusing on the resilience and creativity of people in minority contexts, may not pay sufficient attention to the realisation that the more basic needs are guaranteed, the greater the scope for trying new things. Qualitative findings on the resilience and creativity of particular groups can help in discussing total expenditures on social protection up to a point, but they certainly offer key evidence for the better design of specific public policies and getting the most out of any given expenditure.

- The young people interviewed particularly value the control of their own time. Here, we could probably strengthen our points with time use data. Surveys of actual time use and preferences for time use (e.g. perhaps the European Time Use Survey) might consider inter-generational evolution or undertake cross-country comparisons.

- The participants also valued access to equipment and facilities, especially when such access was not constrained within detailed schedules, regulations or as part of demanding employment or education programmes. It would be interesting to know more about how the access of young people to equipment and facilities (cultural, sporting, political, educational) has evolved in recent years, particularly when access is not conditioned on participating in a full-time activity.

- When talking about the first steps and motivations in joining a specific activity or group, some young people spoke of gradually evolving processes within their usual contexts (university, employment, neighbourhood), but a surprising number named specific events – meeting someone new, a trip, a weekend workshop, etc. – as decisive moments in their new choices. Perhaps we could have more discussion and data on the importance for young people of exposure to people with different backgrounds, different places, activities and so on.

- Given the minority and unconventional nature of the activities considered, the possibility of finding other young people with similar interests and concerns to share experiences and projects was also a major issue for many of the young people interviewed. We know that fragmentation, isolation and self-blaming processes prevent persons from agency and political participation (Klein 1984; Pilkington and Pollock 2015). Our cases may have a lot to say about the critical mass and dynamics that enable social agency.

- As the different clusters and cases include very different numbers of participants and different levels of articulation with other initiatives and larger institutions, this could help us to make relevant arguments about what favours the generalisability and scalability (up, out) of different innovations and their chances of contributing to social change.

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7 Appendix: socio-demographic information

AR (Argentine); ES (Spain); IT (Italy); FT (Full-time employment); PT (Part-time employment);

Subject number	Age	Gender	Education	Employment	Residential Status	Family Status	Country of origin
201 (EC1)	26	Male	Completed University	PT	Lives with friends	Single	ES
202 (EC2)	31	Female	Completed University	PT	Lives independently with own partner	Married or living with partner	ES
203 (EC3)	27	Male	Completed University	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
204 (EC4)	31	Male	Completed University	FT	Lives alone	Single	ES
205 (EC5)	22	Female	Currently in 3 Year University education	Economically inactive	Lives at home with parents	Single	ES
206 (EC6)	21	Male	Currently in 2 Year University education	PT	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
207 (HQ1)	29	Male	Completed University	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	IT
208 (HQ2)	23	Female	Completed 2ª education (18)	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
209 (HQ3)	24	Female	Completed University	PT	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
210 (HQ4)	25	Female	Completed University	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
211 (HQ5)	14	Male	Currently in first general academic 2ª education	Economically inactive	Lives at home with parents	Single	ES

212 (HQ6)	15	Male	Currently in first general academic 2ª education	Economically inactive	Lives at home with parents	Single	ES
213 (HQ7)	22	Female	Completed second general academic secondary education	Unemployed	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
214 (T1)	27	Male	Completed university	FT	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
215 (T2)	25	Female	Currently at university	PT	Lives at home with parents	Single	ES
216 (T3)	27	Female	Completed postgraduate education	PT	Lives at home with parents	Married or living with partner	ES
217 (T4)	24	Female	Completed postgraduate education	FT	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
218 (V1)	28	Female	Completed university	Full-time education	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
219 (V2)	29	Female	Completed postgraduate education	FT	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
220 (V3)	27	Female	Completed university	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
221 (UT1)	26	Female	Completed university	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES
222 (UT2)	25	Female	Currently at university	PT	Lives independently with friends	Single	AR
223 (UT3)	29	Male	Completed second general academic secondary education	Other	Lives independently with friends	Single	ES