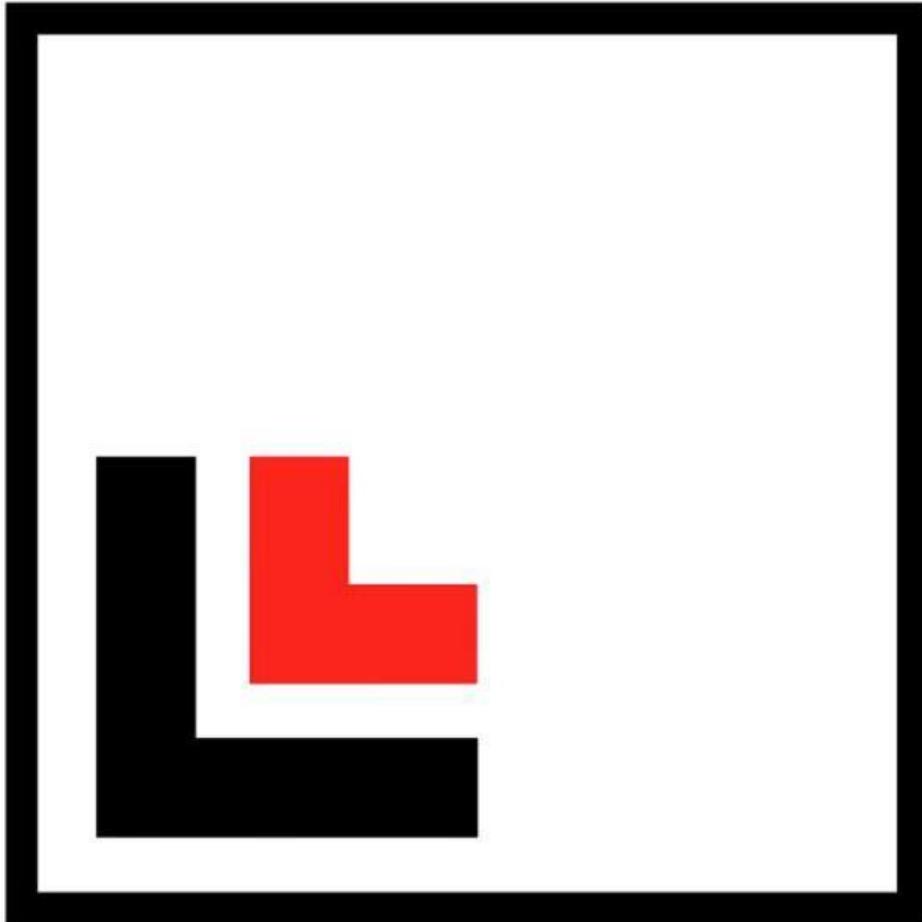


**No profit, no hierarchy:  
A comparative study of the 'lower left'**



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## What is the lower left?

The lower left is defined by anarchist writer [Margaret Killjoy \(2016\)](#) as “any society that does not desire a state and does desire economic cooperation ... [which] is unique in its potential for internal solidarity.” All organisations included in this study (and from hereon defined as lower left) met the following criteria:

- Autonomous (do not rely on state funding for operations);
- Use horizontal organisation for planning and decision making (non-hierarchical, eg., AK Press’ ‘No boss, no managers, no bullshit’ policy);
- Not for profit;
- Anti-capitalist (organisations run as worker-owned cooperatives, by volunteers, by crowdfunding etc., and which have no aims for ‘job creation’ a.k.a. the perpetuation of [‘bullshit jobs’](#));
- Are actively forming new social institutions and transforming oppressive ones (as opposed to lower left groups set up to resist and dismantle the current establishment, which though indispensable to the former group, are beyond the scope of this study).

## What makes organisations in the lower left different to every other organisation?

This study, conducted between March and September 2018, aimed to answer this question using a comparative design which works best when the organisations studied are maximally different: hence how lower left organisations are different to groups organised by capitalists and authoritarians. 66 lower left organisations were included in the study (more details to follow).

Why use a comparative design? Because it is too easy to take for granted our political values. As Feyerabend (1975) argues: *‘How can we possibly examine something we are using all the time? How can we analyse the terms in which we habitually express our most simple and straightforward observations, and reveal their presuppositions? How can we discover the kind of world we presuppose when proceeding as we do? The answer is clear: we cannot discover it from the inside. We need an external standard of criticism, we need a set of alternative assumptions ... an entire alternative world’* (31-32).

Or as the poet George Oppen more succinctly put it: ***Things explain each other, not themselves...***

The study identified five differences common to the lower left: (1) values, (2) aims, (3) organisational practices, (4) decision making and (5) financing.

## (1) Value-based relations: principles and standards of behaviour common to the lower left.

The values of 66 lower left organisations were collated in order to create a list of the top 20 most commonly cited values in the lower left (Table 1). The most frequently mentioned values were shared responsibility, community and respect.

**Table 1: Top 20 cited values of lower left groups** (% of groups citing specific value) (N=66)

Value	%
Shared responsibility	20%
Community / Commitment to relationship	15%
Respect / Self-respect	15%
Cooperation	11%
Sustainability	11%
Diversity	9%
Open	8%
Participation	8%
Autonomy / Self-sufficiency	8%
Transparency	6%
Solidarity	6%
Gender equality	5%
Communication	5%
Collaboration	5%
Inclusiveness / Inclusivity	5%
Creativity	5%
Fulfilling work	5%
Trust	3%
Ethnic pluralism	3%
Global mobility / freedom of movement	3%

The list of values in Table 1, however, does not fully answer the question of what makes the lower left different. Sure, these values are common to most lower left organisations, but they are not exclusive to the lower left alone. Thus, one more step was required: identifying what values common to lower left organisations are *mutually exclusive* to other organisations (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Mutually exclusive values of the lower left**

Lower left values	Mutually exclusive values
<b>Shared responsibility and participation</b> in the decision-making process in both the community and the workplace	Decisions made by managers and employers in the workplace, and elected representatives in the community. No shared responsibility
<b>Respect for others</b> , the planet, and oneself	Systematic exploitation of resources and human labour for profit
Meeting one's basic needs through <b>cooperation, mutual aid and solidarity</b>	Meeting one's needs through competition, wage labour and consumerism
<b>Value-based relations</b>	Power-based relations
<b>Open systems and transparency</b>	Closed doors and secrecy

## (2) *Pro* and *anti* lower left aims.

The reason this study is called 'No profit, no hierarchy' rather than, say, 'Sustainable practices and horizontal governance' is because the chosen title uses the language of comparative aims: the mother tongue of the lower left (**no** borders, **non**-hierarchical, **anti**-fascist etc.). Whether aims are expressed as *pro* or *anti*, however, they express the duality between "(1) the creative force of forming new social institutions and transforming oppressive ones into liberatory ones, and (2) resisting or destroying what is useless and oppressive to us in the current establishment ... We cannot build until we make space, but our alternative social infrastructure will not make itself, so we must establish it on the ruins of the old order, in the shadow of that order" ([Dominick, 2012](#)).

**Table 3: Top 10 organisational aims of lower left groups (N=66)**

<b><i>Anti</i> (Comparative)</b>	<b><i>Pro</i> (Constructive)</b>
Non-hierarchical governance	Horizontal governance
Refusing dependance on the State	Autonomy / Self-determination
No representation	Consensus/consent decision making
No centralized authority	Decentralized systems / Emergent and adaptive structures
No property	Shared means of production
No borders	Free movement
Without racist/sexist/class/etc oppression	Emancipation

No central economic planning	Bottom-up allocation of resources
No profit	Sustainability / Cooperation
No wage labour	Peer production / Give according to one's ability and receive according to one's needs

Very rarely - *aside from advocacy and research organisations* - did groups mention specific political ideologies when specifying their aims. From those that did, the most commonly mentioned (in order) were: anarchism, anti-authoritarianism, post-capitalist, libertarian socialism, libertarian municipalism and democratic confederalism.

### (3) Organisation: How do the aims and values of the lower left work in practice?

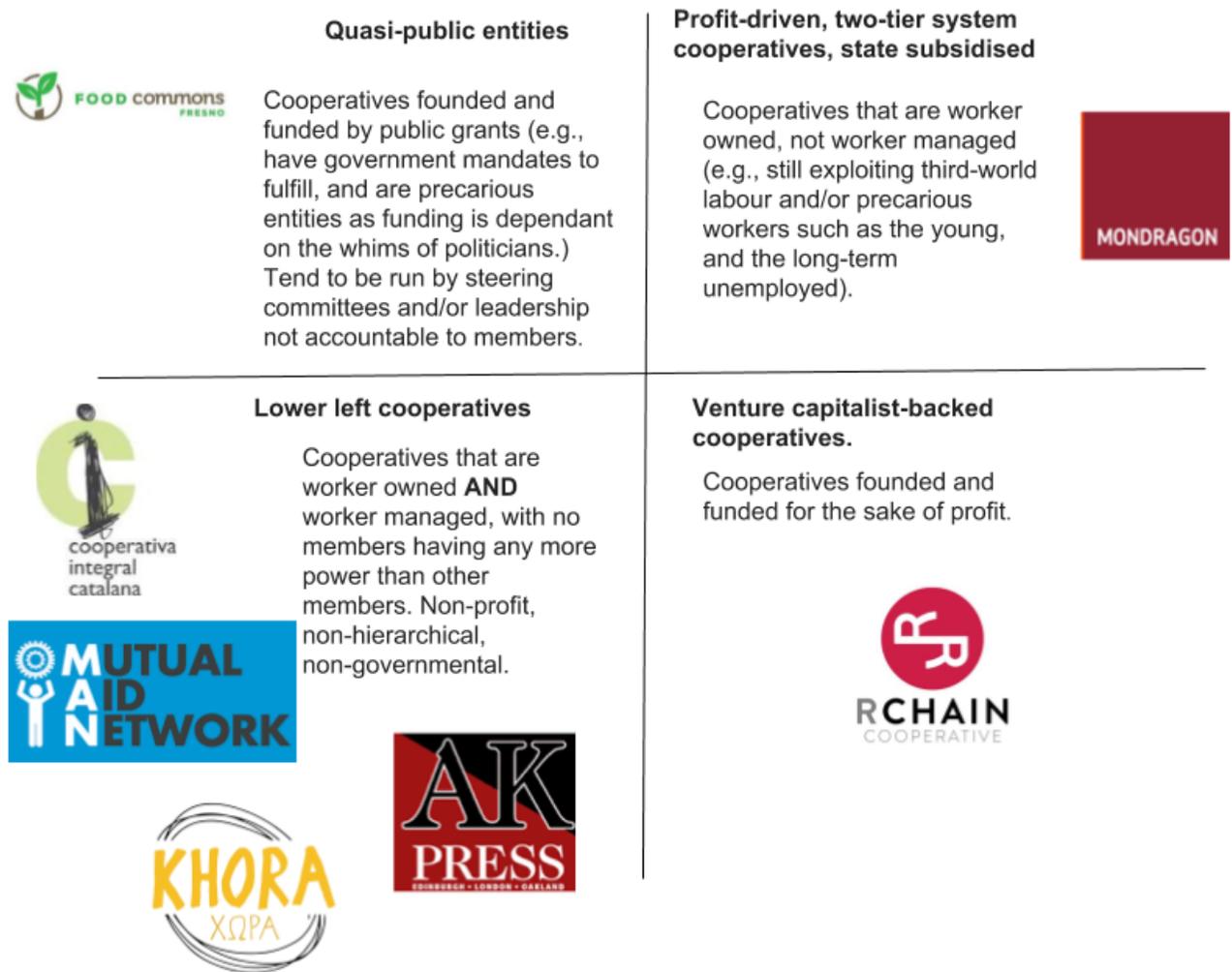
**Table 4: Types of organisations in the lower left (N=38)**

Lower left organization	%
<b>Cooperative</b> ( <i>community, nonprofit, worker managed, worker owned</i> )	34%
<b>Not-for-profit</b> ( <i>social enterprise, communitarian ownership, horizontal, non-governmental, association, organization</i> )	32%
<b>Registered Charity</b>	11%
<b>Online communities with open membership</b>	8%
<b>Participatory democracy - assembly council based</b>	5%
<b>Sociocracy</b>	5%
<b>Heterarchy</b>	3%
<b>Chapters based by area</b>	3%
<b>Decentralized collective of autonomous cells</b>	3%
<b>Open value network</b>	3%
<b>Limited liability company with a charitable constitution</b>	3%

The most popular form of organisation used by lower left groups in the present study were cooperatives: projects practicing economical and political self-management with the equal participation of all its members. However cooperatives are not exclusively found in the lower left: for example, there are co-ops who profit from wage labour, co-ops with hierarchies, and even co-ops that depend on public funding. Just like with the comparative exercise to define mutually exclusive values, it is necessary to identify the mutually exclusive organisational practices that make a cooperative lower left (Figure 2).

In terms of the political map, lower left organisations are different from those of the upper left and upper right due to their **autonomous funding and horizontal (or ‘flat’) structure** (compared to co-ops that rely on public funding or have hierarchical management structures). Lower left organisations are different from those in the upper right and lower right due to their values of **sustainability and their aim of worker management** (compared to co-ops that seek to make a profit with two-tier memberships or wage labour).

**Figure 2: Cooperatives according to the political compass.**



A majority of lower left organisations in the study were found to have a variation of the following practices to avoid:

Power imbalance:

- Rotation/sortition of roles with limited terms;
- Onboarding practices for new members on culture and values, including pairing up with more experienced members;
- Horizontal organisation explicitly stated in founding articles and code of conduct;
- Members tuned to identify attempts to introduce centralisation and representation (as well as moral relativity or efficiency arguments that justify these actions). Systems in place to stop power grabs by individuals or groups;
- Ability to kick out members from organisation due to violations against the code of conduct.

Profit motives:

- No worker ownership without worker management;
- Not-for-profit motive explicitly stated in founding articles and code of conduct;
- Members tuned to identify profit motive doublespeak: ‘scale up’, ‘grow’, ‘grow up’, ‘incentivise’, ‘capitalise’, ‘streamline’, ‘wasted potential’, etc.

Reliance on State funding:

- A varied system of sustainable resources and income streams in place (such as crowdfunding campaigns, membership fees, non-monetary contributions, *see section 5*);
- Not applying to any state-funded grants/scholarships/funds.

#### **(4) Decision-making: how can everyone *really* have a say?**

Decision-making processes within the lower left in the study depended on the number of people in the organisation: the larger the group, the more complicated the process. Assembly-based decision making, however, was the most common process in the lower left regardless of the size of the group.

**Table 5. Lower left decision making processes (N=21)**

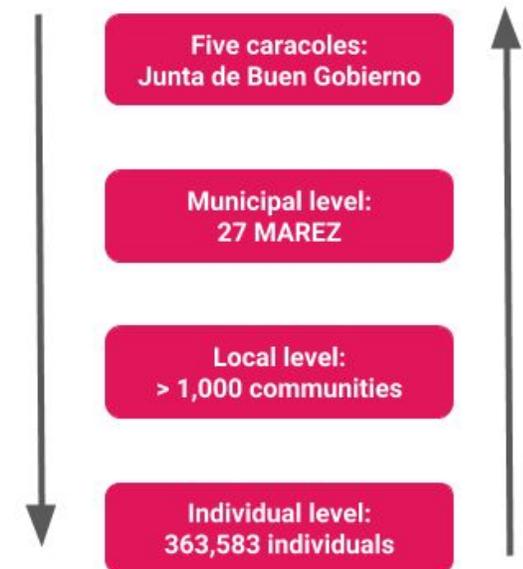
Consensus decision making in assemblies (gatherings, meetings)*	43%
Members elected as representatives and accountable to membership	24%
By consensus (not specified)	19%
Collectively (not specified)	10%
Council republic	5%
Collaborative decision making using Loomio	5%

\**Assembly meetings in order of frequency: monthly (33%); quarterly (22%); weekly (22%); annually (11%); fortnightly (11%).*

## Assembly-based decision making in large groups

**EXAMPLE ONE: The Zapatistas** are a community of over 363,000 people in Chiapas, Mexico. Since 1994 they have practiced horizontal autonomy and mutual aid by building and maintaining their own anti-systemic health, education, and sustainable agro-ecological systems, promoting equitable gender relations via women's revolutionary law and building international solidarity. The Zapatista decision-making process is assembly-based participatory democracy.

Autonomous governance begins at the local level, moving to the municipality level (*municipio*) which is made up of community members nominated to serve for two or three years, and finally the five *Caracoles* which each have a *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (good governance). Sometimes issues discussed at the local assembly need to be brought forward to the *Junta*, or vice versa: decision-making flows back and forth between the levels.



## Assembly-based decision making in medium groups

**EXAMPLE TWO: The Catalonia Integral Cooperative (CIC)** has nearly 5000 members and is creating an alternative economy (which includes production, distribution, funding, and local currency) capable of satisfying the needs of the local community of Catalonia better than the existing system. It is organised through fortnightly assemblies where decisions about its functioning are taken, and tasks are carried out by specific working groups which include: people; communication; economy, law and production; coordination; needs and exchanges. Participation in the assemblies is open and free, regardless if one is a member or not, and the decisions are preferably taken in consensus. All previous agreements are revocable. Any associate can add a point to the agenda of the assembly - if it's not possible to attend the meetings physically it is possible to join through video chat software like Mumble. In assemblies, proposals are reformulated until a consensus is reached, thus avoiding the existence of minorities and majorities.

## Assembly-based decision making in small groups

**EXAMPLE THREE:** Tamera is an ecovillage in Portugal of 200 people run as a 'council republic'. The community collectively owns the property, the infrastructure, all of Tamera's projects and takes part in management decisions. The councils have the responsibility to regularly publish their work to the community and present suggestions, although all members can question suggested decisions if they cannot go along with them. The decision-making bodies consist of: the planning council (overall vision); the 'carrier' circle which is a group of

project leaders; women’s council (love, sexuality, conception, birth); Finance council; Manifestation council (infrastructure, buildings); and social groups. The weekly gathering of the whole community is called the plenary, and “is a community decision-making organ where people can bring relevant and creative ideas and plans, and ask for resonance and feedback. Decisions in community aren’t made in private. In a community of trust, we share our daily lives and let each other’s feedback inform our decisions. Trust is at the heart of the new paradigm in group decision-making.”

## **(5) Sustaining lower left organisations in a ‘pre-revolutionary society’**

**Table 6: Sustaining lower left organisations (N=60)**

<b>Funding methods used by the lower left</b>	<b>%</b>
Donations / Crowdfunding	32%
Membership dues	23%
Selling cooperatively-produced goods / Subscription services	15%
Nonprofit foundation grants	12%
Training and education workshops	7%
Revolving funds	3%
Mutual credit	2%
Cryptographic mining	2%
Bonds	2%
Ethical investment	2%
Collaborative funding	2%

### **EXAMPLE ONE, CROWDFUNDING: OPEN SOURCE ECOLOGY.**

Open source ecology is a network of farmers, engineers, architects and supporters whose main goal is the manufacturing of the Global Village Construction Set (GVCS): a set of the 50 most important machines that it takes for modern life to exist. Open Source Ecology funds its operation through crowdfunding: a \$4,000 monthly budget paid for by 1000 True Fans. This model is based on Kevin Kelly’s ‘1000 true fans’ funding structure where a lot of people donate a small amount periodically to sustain a project they really believe in.

### **EXAMPLE TWO, SUBSCRIPTIONS AND BREAD BONDS: THE HANDMADE BAKERY.**

The Handmade Bakery (HMB) is a workers co-operative in West Yorkshire, owned and run by its members, which produces 2000 loaves of bread and patisserie each week and runs a vibrant café space, “The support of local people committing to a regular HMB loaf on subscription was integral to the establishment of our business. When we first moved to our current premises we

had the generous support of local people which enabled the bakery to move to our current canal side position. As part of this innovative business model we paid back our lenders their interest in bread, we have now paid all of these bread bonds back. These Bread Bond holders were the first of their kind in the UK.”

**EXAMPLE THREE, DONATIONS FOR EMERGENCY SITUATIONS: PROACTIVA OPEN ARMS.**

Proactiva Open Arms is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation whose main mission is to rescue refugees from the sea around Europe. Between September 2015 and August 2018 they had a hand in saving 59,395 lives. Open Arms has total economic independence thanks to all the small contributions from private individuals. Of the total funding received, 96% came from the private donations of more than 50,000 people, with contributions so far reaching 3.6 million euros.



**EXAMPLE FOUR, ETHICAL INVESTMENT: RADICAL ROUTES.**

Radical Routes is a network of radical co-ops (mainly housing co-ops, a few workers co-ops and a couple of social centres) with an ethical investment arm coined ‘Rootstock’ with an 100% lending record. Individuals and organisations can make ethical investments in Rootstock which is then re-invested into Radical Routes as loans to member cooperatives, “helping to house hundreds of people and create bases from which people can work to change the world for the better.” Interest rates are set at 3% maximum.

**EXAMPLE FIVE, MEMBERSHIP DUES AND MUTUAL CREDIT: MUTUAL AID NETWORK.**

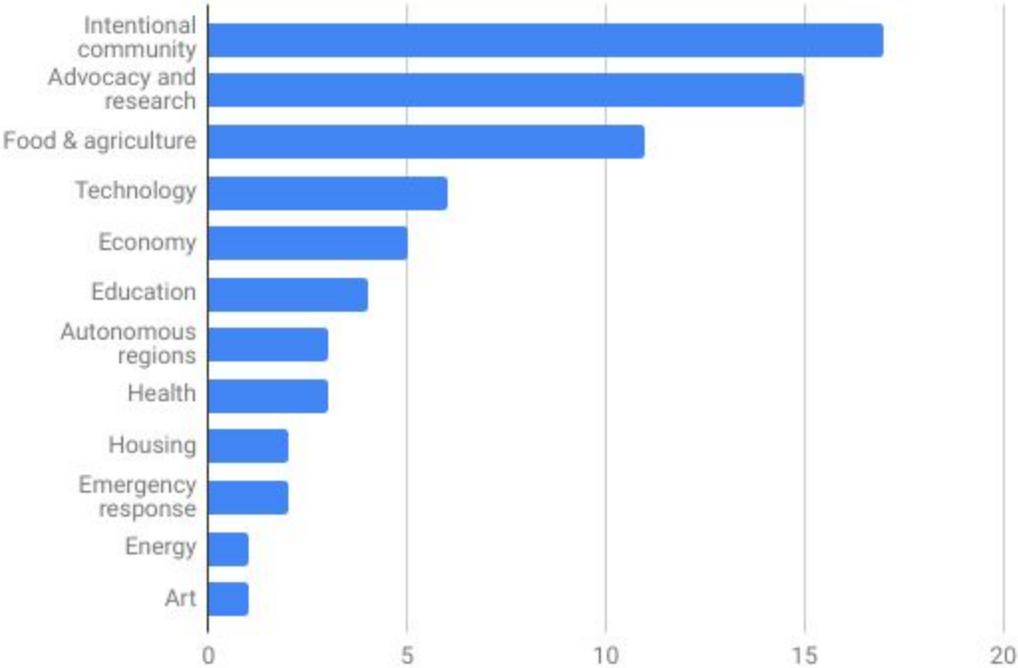
The Mutual Aid Network is a global cooperative creating a legal, social and financial framework to help people redesign their work lives. Membership dues are paid annually and dependant on income: from \$10 to \$1000 for households, and \$25 to \$2000 for businesses. The Mutual Aid Network run



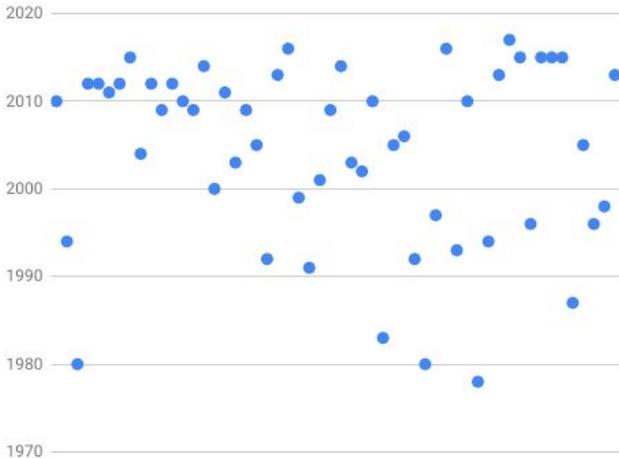
a price-based mutual credit currency for businesses and highly professionalized services: for example, “someone buys a \$1,000 piece of equipment from a participating business for 1,000 points of interest-free credit, which is paid back by selling \$1,000 worth of goods and services to the network in the future.” The Mutual Aid Network also utilises timebanking and swapping, “for example, an hour worth for a service, be it babysitting, cooking, cleaning, rides, light carpentry, gardening, art/music/language lessons, in exchange for a service. Contribute frequent flyer miles, meals, plots of land, buildings, equipment all to be acknowledged in community credits that are fair, transparent, and always mutually beneficial.”

# The sample of lower left organisations used for the study:

Graph 1: Specific field (N=66)

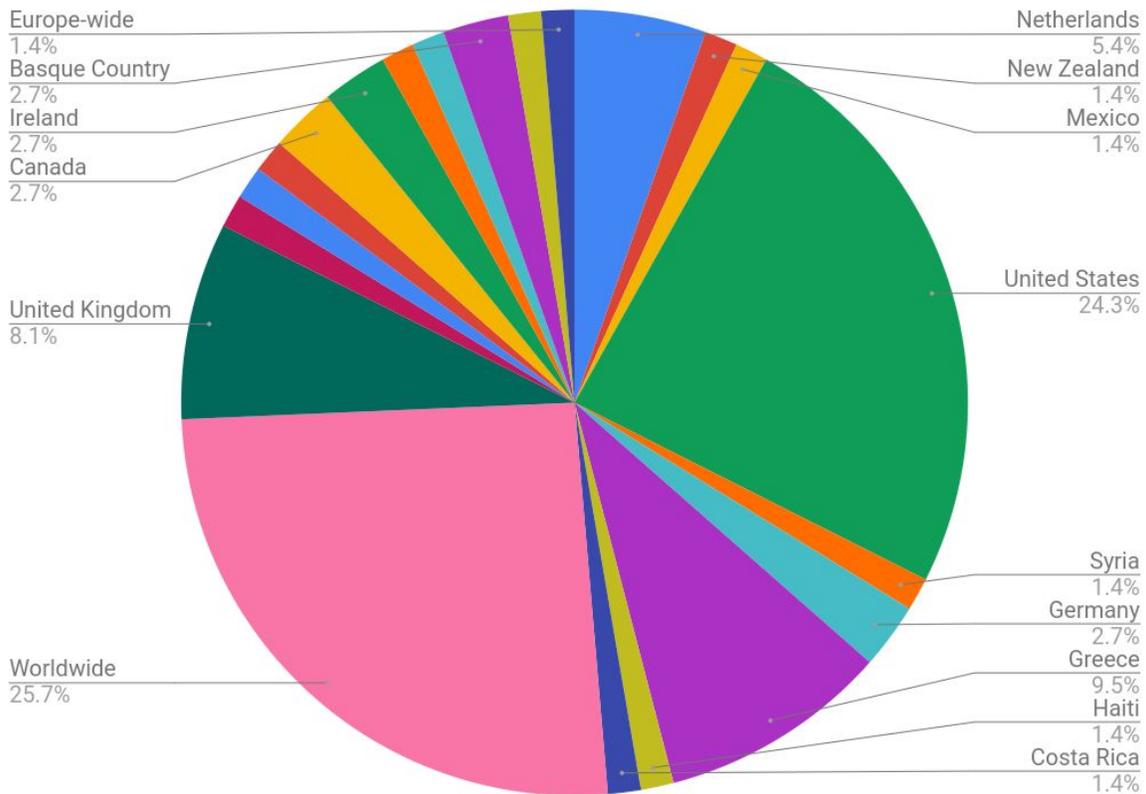


Graph 2: Date founded (N=65)



Aside from Freedom News, which was set up in 1886 by a group of volunteers, most of the lower left organisations included in this study were founded relatively recently, with a significant increase in groups beginning to operate after the 2008 financial crisis.

**Graph 3: Region (N=66)**



**List of lower left organisations included in this study in no particular order:** Enspirial Foundation Limited; Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN); Center for a Stateless Society; Food not Bombs; Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS); Embassy Network; League of Urban Cannors; Kitchen Share; Glia Free Medical hardware; New Harvest; Restart; Peer 2 Peer University; Canberra City Farm; Mutual Aid Network; Catalonia Integral Cooperative; ZAD; FairCoop; The Last Organic Outpost; Sensorica; Farmhack; Open Source Ecology; Community Forge; P2P Foundation; Radical Routes; Growstuff; Four Thieves Vinegar; Gcas college Dublin; City Plaza; Women on waves; Ronja; Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO); Vivir sin Empleo; Book Crossing; The Handmade Bakery (HMB); Soulardarity; Journal of peer production; Laboratorio Sociale Occupato Autogestito Buridda; Stroud Community Agriculture; Free and real; Permaculture Association; Cascadia Commons; The Cloughjordan Ecovillage; Transition Network; Amalurra; Lakabe; Sieben Linden; Khora; Los Angeles Ecovillage; One Community; Tamera; Villages; subMedia; Bbbfarming; Edusquats; Unicorn Riot; Institute for Anarchist Studies; Proactiva Openarms; Dirty Girls of Lesvos; Manna; AK Press; Dyne; Justseeds Artists' Cooperative; Agrarian Trust; CrimethInc; Its Going Down; Freedom News.

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