Beyond Ownership: Understanding and Supporting Scaling of Libraries of Things

Case Study of Circle Centre Library of Things in Lund, Sweden

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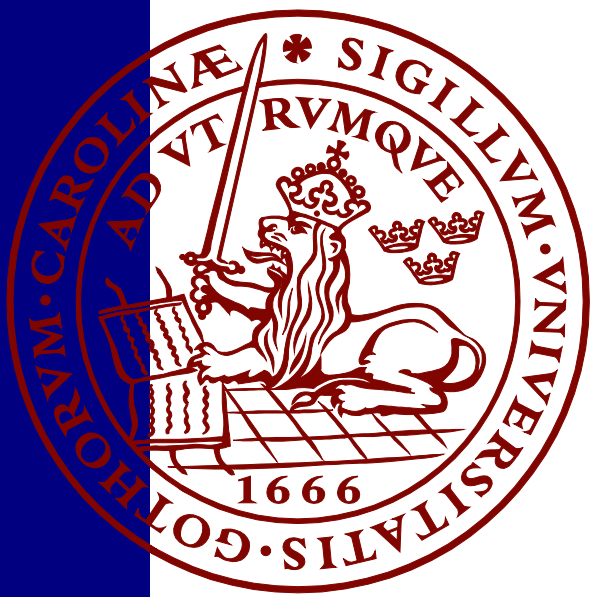

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Abstract

In light of escalating environmental and social challenges, Libraries of Things (LoTs) offer a promising alternative to the unsustainable consumption model. Using a case study of Circle Centre, Library of Things in Lund, Sweden, this paper examines the socio-cultural and organisational dynamics in LoTs and their impact on the scalability potential of share-based organisation. Interviews with LoT board members and officers, representatives of related organisations and the municipality were subjected to reflective thematic analysis and analysed from an institutional theory perspective. Findings show that effective scaling apart from replicating or accumulating resources requires building legitimacy, strategic institutional work, and adapting to prevailing norms and expectations. Key strategies for LoTs include maintaining flexibility in self-presentation and forming strategic partnerships that enable access to resources. A cultural approach to ownership, dependence on external support, and limited opportunities in a volunteer-based model were identified as significant obstacles to organisational scaling.

Keywords: circular economy; sharing economy; share-based initiatives; sustainable consumption; scaling; institutional theory

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1. Introduction

In the face of escalating environmental crises and resource depletion, the global appeal for sustainability is becoming more urgent, with researchers emphasising the need to move towards more sustainable socio-technical systems (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017; Markard et al., 2012; Meadows & Randers, 2012; Seiffert & Loch, 2005). In response, the concept of circular economy (CE) has emerged as a framework offering an alternative to the dominant "take-produce-utilise" paradigm (Ghisellini et al., 2016). CE seeks to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation by closing material loops, extending product life cycles and designing resource regeneration systems (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). By replacing linear production and consumption with circular flows, it aims to create an economy that minimises waste, emissions and the extraction of primary raw materials (Figge et al., 2023; Ghisellini et al., 2016).

Seen as a subcategory of CE, sharing economy (SE) is concerned with "inner loops" that prioritise sharing, conservation and reuse to preserve the value of resources (Hiteva & Foxon, 2021). In essence, SE challenges traditional consumption patterns by promoting access instead of ownership, thereby contributing to the CE's goals of resource efficiency and waste reduction (Curtis & Lehner, 2019). It supports sustainability by enabling consumers to use resources more efficiently, especially for goods that are rarely needed (Claudelin et al., 2022).

Libraries of Things (LoTs) are an example of initiatives that embrace the principle of access over ownership and provide opportunities for sharing (Hiteva & Foxon, 2021). Robison & Shedd (2017, p. 3), in their book on building LoTs, define them as "any collection of physical objects that serve a utilitarian purpose as tools, equipment, or goods; that circulate beyond the walls of the library; that provide a cost-saving benefit to patrons by supplying something for which they have an existing need". LoTs seek to bridge the gap between individuals' willingness to share and their actual sharing practices (Ameli, 2017; Ceschin, 2014). However, the rapid commercialisation of platforms such as Airbnb and Uber has complicated the sustainability narrative around them, introducing issues of "share-washing", in which commercial ventures adopt the rhetoric of SE without delivering corresponding sustainability benefits (Curtis & Lehner, 2019; Martin, 2016).

1.1. Research Gap, Aim and Questions

While LoTs are increasingly recognised for their potential to contribute to sustainable consumption and community resilience, the question of how these initiatives can be scaled sustainably and be successful without engaging in share-washing practices remains largely unexplored (Baden et al., 2020; Lynch, 2023; Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2024). To date, research on circular business models has

mainly focused on optimising the production and management of end-of-life products, with minimal attention given to the operationalisation and expansion of sharing and reuse options (Baden et al., 2020). Moreover, research on SE has disproportionately engaged with commercial profit-driven platforms, often overlooking community-based initiatives that may offer more radical alternatives to conventional consumption patterns (Lynch, 2023; Santala & McGuirk, 2019). Consequently, while the need for socio-technical innovation to address environmental and social challenges is increasingly recognised, there is limited understanding of the conditions and strategies needed to scale LoTs in ways that preserve their original goals (Martin, 2016). In addition, the tendency of business models based on sharing to remain niche is sometimes seen as positive due to concerns of them embarking on the share-washing path as they move into the mainstream (Baden et al., 2020)

This study examines internal factors such as community practices, governance structures, and cultural values, as well as external influences like partnerships, funding mechanisms, and policy contexts. By that, it aims to identify the key factors that support or hinder the expansion of share-based initiatives aimed at building sustainable futures. To address this research gap and fulfil its explorative aim, this thesis focuses on the following research questions:

(1) What socio-cultural and organisational dynamics shape Libraries of Things?
(2) How do institutional challenges affect the scalability and institutionalisation of Libraries of Things?
(3) What strategies can facilitate the scaling of share-based initiatives such as Libraries of Things?

2. Background

2.1. Circular Economy (CE)

Circular economy draws on various interdisciplinary frameworks, integrating scientific, environmental, and economic insights to propose a systemic approach to sustainability (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). At its core, it is built around several foundational principles, including design for longevity and a closed-loop system (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). The principle of design for longevity emphasises creating products that are durable, maintainable, and upgradeable, with a clear path for reuse or recycling to extend product lifecycles and reduce the frequency with which resources are extracted and products discarded (Bocken et al., 2016). Complementing this is the principle of closed-loop systems, in which materials are retained within the economic cycle for as long as possible through strategies such as recycling, remanufacturing, and composting (see Figure 1) (Bocken et al., 2016; Ghisellini et al., 2016).

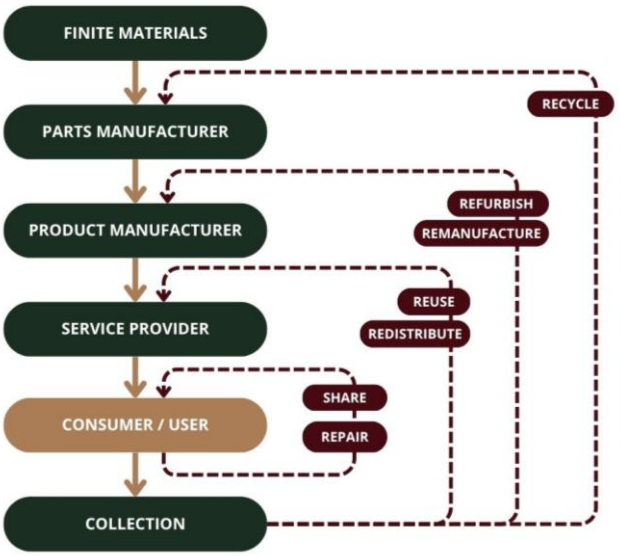

Figure 1. Closing loops in the CE system. Own figure based on (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021)

Globally, CE has gained momentum in policy-making with initiatives such as the European Commission's Circular Economy Package and China's Circular Economy Promotion Law demonstrating the growing institutional commitment to circular strategies (Lieder & Rashid, 2016). This paradigm shift is further evident in the rapid rise of CE-related academic literature and in the strategic agendas of major corporations (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). As a bridge between high-level sustainability ideals and practical economic strategies, CE complements the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by offering operational models to support targets such as SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production), and SDG 13 (climate action) (Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de-Montellano et al., 2023).

However, CE's current emphasis on material and product flows sometimes overlooks the social dimensions emphasised by SDGs, such as human well-being and equitable development (Garcia-Saravia Ortiz-de-Montellano et al., 2023; Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). CE, nonetheless, has the potential to promote more sustainable consumer behaviour (Bocken et al., 2016), which can be achieved through local repair centres, educational workshops and sharing economy initiatives that strengthen social ties and environmental awareness (Murray et al., 2017). In terms of equity and access, it enables more inclusive consumption patterns, such as product-as-a-service and resource sharing, which can reduce economic burdens and improve access to basic goods and services (Kirchherr et al., 2017).

2.2. Sharing Economy (SE)

Sharing economy represents a socio-economic system built around the sharing of human and physical resources, typically facilitated by digital platforms (Frenken & Schor, 2017; Mont et al., 2020). This system allows individuals and organisations to make use of underutilised assets by granting temporary

access, rather than transferring ownership, challenging the conventional economic model of exclusive ownership and offering a new paradigm (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Baden et al. (2020) and Mont et al. (2020) note that SE is an umbrella term for many different operating models, including product-service platforms that provide access to physical resources, peer-to-peer platforms for sharing knowledge and skills, and platforms that facilitate the resale and exchange of used goods, gifts, swaps and barter. However, in the academic context of sustainability science, Curtis & Lehner (2019) define SE more narrowly by several properties critical to its sustainability potential: information and communications technology mediation, non-pecuniary motivation for ownership, temporary access without ownership transfer, the sharing of rivalrous goods, and a focus on tangible items (Table 1).

Table 1. Properties of sharing economy initiatives for sustainability (Curtis & Lehner, 2019).

Semantic properties	**Description of the property**	**Examples of elements excluded from the property**
Information and Communications Technology Mediated	The sharing economy is mediated by information and communications technology, either formally (e.g., app or website) or informally (e.g., Facebook group), creating two- or multisided markets.	Garage sales, business-to-consumer models
Non-pecuniary Motivation for Ownership	The goods are not owned or purchased for the sole purpose of earning money. The sharing economy leverages the idling capacity of goods.	Business-to-consumer markets
Temporary Access	The sharing economy is characterised by consumption practices that do not lead to the transfer of ownership.	Second-hand shops, redistribution markets, long-term car or apartment rental
Rivalrous	When sharing prevents the simultaneous use of goods by another person.	Parks and roads, file sharing, streaming services, Wikipedia
Tangible Goods	The sharing economy is seen as the sharing of space, durable goods and nondurable goods.	Product-service systems (PSS), time banks, streaming services, crowdfunding, gig economy

Unlike traditional market models, SE creates platforms facilitating the sharing of underutilised goods rather than encouraging the production of new ones, which enables the reduction of material consumption, fosters social innovation by addressing inequalities, and promotes more collaborative consumer behaviour (Albinsson & Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Martin, 2016). Nonetheless, for SE to fulfil its role within CE, a clearer and more consistent conceptualisation is necessary to prevent its co-option by purely profit-driven models and to realise its full environmental and social potential (Curtis & Lehner, 2019; Martin, 2016).

2.3. Libraries of Things (LoTs)

Over the past few decades, some book lending libraries have gone a step further and launched "special collections" available to attract new library members and to support lower-income households or permanently expanded their range by adding items such as toys or tools to their inventory (Baden et al., 2020; Lynch, 2023). Since then, the idea of formalised item sharing grew beyond the walls of traditional book libraries and turned into a concept on its own (Baden et al., 2020).

According to Curtis and Lehner (2019), LoTs do not meet the criteria for a SE initiative due to being seen as a product-service system (Ameli, 2017), operating in a business-to-consumer model (here usually NGO-to-member), limited ability to take leverage idling capacity of goods between loans, and partial availability of goods for long-term lending for even up to a year. However, as LoTs remain ICT-mediated through lending and loan management platforms, are motivated by environmental or social effects, and provide access to rivalrous tangible goods, I argue that they can be considered and analysed in the context of a sharing economy for sustainability.

Research suggests that LoTs can contribute significant environmental benefits by reducing the need to produce new products and reducing associated resource consumption and carbon emissions (Baden et al., 2020; Hiteva & Foxon, 2021). In addition, LoTs foster community engagement by encouraging skill sharing, mutual learning, and shared decision-making, thereby strengthening social capital (Baden et al., 2020; Hiteva & Foxon, 2021).

In the Swedish context, the best-known LoT network operates under the collective name Fritidsbanken (English: The Leisure Bank) and specialises in sports and outdoor equipment (Högman et al., 2024). Since 2013, it has gained presence in 40% of the municipalities in the county and intends to open at least one branch in each municipality (Fritidsbanken, n.d.). In addition, the reviewed literature mentions the experimental activities of the Garaget (The Garage) library branch, run by the public library in Malmö (Malmö stad, 2024; Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2024), and several theses written at Lund University describe the Circle Centre Library of Things located in that city (Circle Centre, n.d.).

3. Theoretical Context

3.1. Critiques of CE, SE and Uncertainties Around LoTs

While the critique of hyper-consumption and resource-intensive production was central to the emergence of the concept of SE, over time it has been reframed as a purely economic opportunity (Martin, 2016) that could potentially lead to rebound effects (Acquier et al., 2017; Korhonen et al., 2018). Martin (2016) notes that if the further development of SE is based on corporate co-option rather than grassroots framing of the term, it is unlikely to lead to a transition towards sustainability.

Despite the promising potential of LoTs, significant uncertainties remain regarding their long-term viability, operational efficiency, and actual environmental benefits, as empirical evidence is sparse (Palgan & Mont, 2023). Life cycle assessments of shared products tend to be context-specific and often lack generalisability across different geographic or socio-demographic settings (Martin et al., 2019). Moreover, in the case of LoTs, the aforementioned rebound effects can take several forms: behavioural rebound, income-based rebound or substitution effects (Font Vivanco et al., 2016). Behavioural rebound can lead to borrowing items users wouldn't otherwise consider due to reduced access costs (Font Vivanco et al., 2016; Sorrell et al., 2009), income-based rebound redirects savings made thanks to borrowing to other forms of consumption (Madlener & Alcott, 2009), and substitution effects mean that despite sharing instead of owning, emissions are generated through frequent transport and repairs (Zink & Geyer, 2017). The magnitude and implications of rebound effects in LoT systems remain largely unmeasured, posing a risk of overstating the sustainability benefits of LoTs while underestimating the complexity of user behaviour (Font Vivanco et al., 2016). However, this work does not address criticism regarding environmental issues and potential rebound effects, but focuses on explaining the process of change and development and the role of institutions in this process.

Despite promises of transformation, critical voices have emerged, pointing to conceptual ambiguities, unexamined assumptions about scalability, and a limited understanding of the institutional conditions necessary for systemic change (Acquier et al., 2017; Korhonen et al., 2018; Mont et al., 2020). A key shortcoming in much of the literature is the inadequate explanation of how change should occur in complex socio-economic systems (Korhonen et al., 2018). Discussions of CE and SE often focus on technological innovation, sharing business model characteristics, or consumer behaviour, but rarely address the broader institutional dynamics that enable or constrain the expansion of these alternative economies (Cheng, 2016; Korhonen et al., 2018; Mont et al., 2020). LoTs face significant operational and logistical challenges, such as inventory management, item maintenance, and user accountability that can lead to increased costs and reduced service reliability (Mont et al., 2020). These challenges directly affect user satisfaction and participation, influencing the economic sustainability of LoTs. Moreover, user participation is heavily influenced by community norms, levels of trust, and digital skills (Schor et al., 2016). These variables not only impact uptake and behaviour but also intersect with broader issues of accessibility and equity.

This gap opens the door to a more robust engagement with institutional theory, which provides a lens to explore the conditions under which new practices gain legitimacy, spread across sectors and either challenge or are absorbed into existing institutional arrangements (Scott, 2014). By focusing on the role of norms, rules and shared beliefs in shaping organisational behaviour, institutional theory enables a deeper exploration of both the structural constraints and opportunities that influence the expansion of sharing-based initiatives.

3.2. Institutional Theory

This study draws on institutional theory to explore how LoTs navigate complex social, cultural, and regulatory environments as they attempt to scale. Underpinning this theory is the assumption that an organisation's behaviour is not driven solely by efficiency or strategic rationality, but is also deeply influenced by established social structures, shared meanings, and norms that define what is considered appropriate or legitimate within a given context (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 2014).

Institutions are the enduring systems of rules, norms, and beliefs that guide human behaviour and structure social life. According to Scott (2014), institutions rest on three interconnected pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. The regulative pillar is based on formal rules, laws and sanctions that constrain and enable behaviour through coercive mechanisms. The normative pillar is understood as social norms and values that define what is desirable and appropriate, shaping expectations and obligations. The cultural-cognitive pillar, in turn, refers to the shared understandings and accepted beliefs that constitute the "common sense" of the social world.

The new institutionalism recognises that institutions are not static, but they evolve through processes of institutional change, which can be gradual or sudden, driven by internal contradictions, external shocks or the actions of institutional entrepreneurs - actors who mobilise resources to challenge existing arrangements and promote new ones (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996; Koning, 2016; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Understanding institutional change is key to analysing how new practices, such as those associated with CE and SE, can move from the margins to the mainstream.

Change can take the form of institutional isomorphism, a process in which individual organisations in a given organisational field, i.e. a network of organisations that operate in the same area, interact regularly, and are subject to similar norms, regulations, and pressures, become increasingly similar over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Thornton et al., 2012). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify three main sources of isomorphic pressure: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism results from formal pressures such as laws, regulations or mandates from powerful actors like governments or funders. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organisations imitate others in response to uncertainty, often following perceived leaders or successful examples in the field. Normative isomorphism results from the professionalisation and influence of common educational and cultural standards, particularly through professional networks and associations. Isomorphism helps to explain the proliferation and replication of organisational practices, even if they are not the most efficient, as conformity often serves to ensure legitimacy and survival.

Behaviour and sense-making in a particular institutional area are further guided by institutional logics, the broader belief systems and associated practices that provide meaning to social reality and influence organisational decision-making (Thornton et al., 2012). These logics act as cultural frames

that inform actors' roles, goals, and acceptable behaviours within a given context. Organisations often operate at the intersection of multiple, sometimes competing logics, whose presence can lead to tensions, negotiations and hybrid practices (Jay, 2013). These dynamics play a critical role in shaping how new ideas, innovations, or reforms are interpreted and either adopted or resisted. Alignment between logics can facilitate legitimacy and smooth diffusion, while conflict may hinder change or lead to contested outcomes (Ocasio et al., 2017; J. Yin & Jamali, 2021).

Central to institutional theory is the notion of legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). For organisations or practices to be accepted and sustained, they must be perceived as legitimate, that is, as conforming to existing rules, norms and belief systems (Scott, 2014). The different dimensions of legitimacy: cognitive, normative and regulatory, contribute in different ways to the institutional embeddedness of the organisation. Cognitive legitimacy refers to the extent to which an organisation or model is taken for granted or seen as a natural part of the social landscape. Normative legitimacy is linked to alignment with social values and moral obligations. Meanwhile, regulative legitimacy involves compliance with legal frameworks, organisational standards and institutional rules. Legitimacy is a resource for an organisation to access support, sustain and survive in the institutional field (Suchman, 1995). Innovations that do not conform to institutional logics may have difficulty scaling or institutionalising (Greenwood et al., 2011).

4. Methods

4.1. Research Design and Data Collection

This study adopts a qualitative single case-based approach with semi-structured interviews to explore internal and external factors that impact the organisational scaling efforts for Libraries of Things in the real-world context, and how the key challenges could be overcome (R. K. Yin, 2018). This methodological approach can be considered relevant in this case due to the relatively early stage of developing the concept of LoTs and exploring this topic in the sustainability-related literature (Baden et al., 2020; Witjes & Lozano, 2016).

This paper looks at the operation and development of the Circle Centre Library of Things, which was initiated in Lund in the Skåne region of Sweden in late 2018 by a group of Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science students (Circle Centre, 2024a). This non-governmental organisation published its first official vision document in 2024, setting development goals for 2030 and 2040, and entering the organisational scaling stage (Circle Centre, 2024b).

4.2. Interviews

The data for this study came from eleven semi-structured interviews, the format of which provided room for moments of randomness and exploration of any new issues that arose in the interview (R. K. Yin, 2018). They aimed to provide insight into the factors influencing the development of Libraries of Things.

In light of institutional theory, to capture both the internal dynamics of the organisation and the external factors that influence its scaling efforts, two distinct groups of informants were chosen to participate in the interviews (Table 2).

Table 2. Anonymised interview participants, organisational affiliation, and role.

Anonymised identity	Organisation	Role in the organisation
INT1	Circle Centre	board member
INT2	Circle Centre	employee
INT3	Circle Centre	board member
INT4	Circle Centre	officer
INT5	Circle Centre	officer
INT6	Circle Centre	board member
EXT1	Repair Cafe Malmö	board member
EXT2	Lunds Kommun	civil servant
EXT3	Fritidsbanken	employee
EXT4	Zero Waste Europe, Communities for Climate (C4C)	high-profile employee, subject matter expert on circular economy
EXT5	Stenkrossen	operations manager

Six internal actors, including Circle Centre's officers, board members and an employee, were interviewed to help understand how institutional pressures and scaling efforts are felt within the organisation. Volunteers who do not fulfil the specified functions within the organisation and Circle Centre members, i.e. individuals registered in the Circle Centre's online lending system, were not interviewed due to sporadic and selective interactions with the organisation and low involvement in processes beyond the pickup and return of the borrowed items.

External actors, such as funders, collaborators and local authorities, were interviewed to gain insight into the broader institutional forces shaping the scaling process of the Library of Things. They were contacted based on the list of sponsors and partners available on the Circle Centre's website and information derived from interviews with internal actors. The final list of external interviewees,

however, heavily depended on their availability and whether they saw themselves as valuable sources of information.

Two separate interview guides were developed for internal and external interviewees due to the significant differences in the roles they play in the process of scaling LoTs, however, both were built on insights provided by the institutional theory, especially on analysis frameworks suggested by Scott (2014). The guides used open-ended questions to encourage detailed answers and extended reflections (Knott et al., 2022; Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). The guide for internal actors consisted of questions covering the organisational mission, scaling strategies and challenges, and perceptions of institutional pressures. Meanwhile, the interviews with external interviewees focused on learning about the values and goals of the organisations, their approach to partnerships and sponsorships, as well as their attitudes towards LoTs and their development. The full interview guides can be found in Appendix A.

Most of the interviews were in-person and recorded using a private mobile device with an in-built recording tool, except for the ones with INT5 and with EXT4 and EXT5 that were conducted online and recorded using Zoom due to logistical circumstances. Due to the international nature of the interviewees, interviews were conducted in English. Beforehand, participants were informed of the interview's purpose and the aim of the study, and they signed a consent form for the audio recording of the interview and the use of their information.

The recorded interviews were transcribed using Transkriptor, an online transcription tool. Interviewees who expressed such a wish in the consent form were able to review the transcript of their interview and clarify any ambiguities arising from the use of English as a foreign language.

4.3. Data Analysis

The data collected was subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, a common method of interpreting quantitative data that allows for the simple identification and analysis of themes addressed in the interviews (Byrne, 2022). It emphasises the active role of the researcher in the analysis, providing a snapshot not only of the pure data, but also reflecting the theoretical assumptions of the study (here institutional theory) and the preexisting knowledge of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

4.4. Limitations and Positionality

Case study methodology allows for a deep dive into a specific case from a certain perspective, however, it has limitations when it comes to the representability of the analysed data (R. K. Yin, 2018). While the study of Circle Centre provides an in-depth insight into its experiences and difficulties, and an understanding of the socio-economic context in which it operates, the results of this analysis cannot

be generalised to all existing LoTs, or even to those operating in Sweden, due to local context dependency.

Moreover, there are biases from my work as a researcher, my life experiences and my academic training that may have been unconsciously reproduced in the study design, selection of methods and data analysis (Knott et al., 2022). Due to my academic and professional experiences as well as my interests in the areas of sustainability, environmental protection and climate change, I am more inclined to have a positive perception of solutions with an alleged positive impact on these areas than disciplinarians in other fields. Knott et al. (2022) note that research discipline is one of the factors that can normalise certain assumptions that are questioned outside of that research in that discipline or outside of academia.

Another limitation is the degree of bias to be expected when researching an organisation with which one is associated through volunteering over an extended period and connected emotionally with. However, this study draws on literature about other LoTs to find commonalities of experience and to increase the credibility of findings. It also considers the perspective of external actors with whom I was not in contact and whose actions and views I was not familiar with.

5. Findings

The findings are presented in relation to the first two research questions, successively exploring the socio-cultural and organisational dynamics at Circle Centre (section 5.1.) and how they influence the scalability and institutionalisation of the LoT (section 5.2.).

5.1. Socio-Cultural and Organisational Dynamics

Libraries of Things operate within a complex context of socio-cultural expectations and institutional frameworks that guide how they are structured, managed, and perceived. To understand the dynamics that shape Circle Centre, it is crucial to explore two interrelated concepts: institutional logics (section 5.1.1.) and organisational fields (section 5.1.2.).

5.1.1. Institutional Logics at Play

As mentioned before, institutional logics refer to the socially constructed, historical patterns of practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals and organisations provide meaning to their social reality (Thornton et al., 2012). Circle Centre is rooted in a normative institutional logic focused on sustainability and community well-being. This mission-based identity resists the dominant market logic, prioritising degrowth-related values (INT2). One of the organisation's board members not only sees Circle Centre as a practical resource now, but also as a

seed for what society will look like in the future, when sharing and borrowing will be an economic and ecological necessity rather than a niche alternative (INT6). Circular economy, in which Circle Centre is anchored, is perceived as a response to broader geopolitical and socio-economic challenges such as inflation, social impoverishment, dependence on imported raw materials and finite resources (EXT4, INT6).

Despite the overall internal consistency of values in Circle Centre, external cultural norms are not always in line with them. The dominant cultural logic in many societies still places individual ownership on a par with success, wealth and status, making it difficult to mainstream the practice of borrowing. As one interviewee noted: "[W]e live in a culture that's very based on private ownership. It's ingrained in our mind since we're small kids" (INT2). There is no consensus regarding the attitude of society in Sweden towards borrowing among the interviewees. While some note a lesser tendency towards materialism associated with environmental awareness and living in a welfare state (INT5), others highlight the wealth of Swedes as a factor that allows them to continue “disposal” consumption (INT2). In turn, a respondent dealing with circularity at the European level noted a growing awareness of the irrationality of owning rarely used items, a flagship example being a drill (EXT4). Circle Centre's offer, aimed especially at students and people staying temporarily in Lund, is a practical alternative that is both economical and fair (INT1, EXT2). However, for more settled populations, status-based habits and consumption are dominant, requiring not only infrastructure but also a cultural change to normalise sharing (EXT2). The tension between existing cultural assumptions and the logic of LoT reveals a discrepancy between the normative logic of Circle Centre and the cognitive-cultural logic of wider society.

Another part of the institutional tensions in and around Circle Centre stems from the clash between socio-environmental logic and economic rationality. Operating as a non-profit organisation (NPO) based on community and degrowth values puts the initiative in a vulnerable position when interacting with market-oriented partners. There are divergent views on how the scaling of Circle Centre and its impact should be pursued. Some stakeholders lean towards professionalisation (INT6, EXT4), while others fear that this will lead to a shift away from the original values (INT2, EXT1, EXT3). The tension is particularly pronounced when external stakeholders, such as the municipality or funders, advocate for a more profitable model that may involve higher user fees or more commercialised practices (INT2). These conflicts highlight the friction between institutional logics: the logic of efficiency, revenue generation and scale, and the logic of participation, accessibility and social value.

Moreover, the organisational struggle to remain non-commercial while covering operating costs illustrates a broader systemic issue. As interviewees noted, being “profitable for society” does not translate into financial viability in a capitalist system that rewards extractive models (INT6, EXT2). This paradox highlights how alternative organisational models, such as Circle Centre, have to negotiate the

limits of legitimacy, survival and fidelity to their founding values in a dominant institutional environment that does not usually favour them.

5.1.2. Circle Centre's Position in the Organisational Field

Because Circle Centre operates as an NPO, it often relies on support from public institutions such as the municipal council and partnerships with private actors for funding or logistics. Their evolving relationship with Lunds Kommun reflects the organisation's navigation of formal and informal institutional structures, rules and cultural-cognitive expectations. The findings demonstrate the enabling and constraining forces of institutional embeddedness in municipal cooperation. Several interviewees emphasised the importance of municipal legitimacy and institutional alignment for Circle Centre's functioning and credibility. Lunds Kommun provided critical infrastructure support, including access to physical space through the Mini, Midi, Maxi support model and funding through Miljöanslaget (INT2, INT3, INT6, EXT2, EXT5).

> "[T]hey have been a huge support throughout. Many of the things we have now wouldn't be possible without the municipality." (INT2)

However, this support is fragmented, shaped by policy preferences and project-based funding (EXT2). While Circle Centre participates in meetings with representatives of Lunds Kommun (INT1, INT6) and receives periodic support (e.g. through Klimatneutrala Lund), interviewees express frustration at the lack of embedding cooperation in a long-term strategic partnership (INT1, INT6).

Municipal actors themselves face legal and policy constraints that shape the extent of their engagement with Circle Centre. One municipal employee referred to legal prohibitions on competing with private companies, which limit direct long-term support for rental and sharing initiatives (EXT2). However, the same municipality covers the rent and staff salaries of another LoT, explaining that Fritidsbanken offers items to try before you buy rather than to replace first-hand consumption (EXT2, EXT3). Furthermore, despite its formal NPO status in Sweden, Lunds Kommun finds it difficult to draw the line between Circle Centre as an NPO and a company (EXT2), which affects the municipality's limited willingness to support Circle Centre and its requirements for a stronger business model (INT2). Interviewees highlight the lack of a strategic municipal roadmap for a circular economy or community-based reuse infrastructure, underlining the gap between a municipality's sustainability rhetoric and its institutional capacity or political will to support transformational change (INT6, INT1). The reliance on informal relationships and individual municipal actors (e.g. manager of Klimatneutrala Lund) reflects the importance of personal networks in institutional ecosystems.

In the case of corporate collaborations, the current key partner is Lunds Kommuns Fastighets AB (LKF), the city's housing company, which is providing Circle Centre with new rent-free space. This partnership represents a form of institutional complementarity in which the two entities pursue convergent but distinct goals: LKF reactivates an underused property (an old laundry room) and increases its social value, while Circle Centre gains stability and legitimacy through access to infrastructure (INT2).

> "It's kind of a win-win for them that we can actually do something with that space. So they are an important partner." (INT2)

Beyond this example, interviewees point to the absence of significant partnerships with the private sector (INT1, INT2). This is rooted in the normative dissonance between Circle Centre's values and the profit-driven logic of most companies.

> "Circle Centre is quite rooted in degrowth values, we are also quite critical of companies that are rooted in making a profit." (INT2)

Nevertheless, there are new forms of soft collaboration, such as knowledge sharing with mission-driven social enterprises, such as Cohabit, a company focused on furniture sharing. These interactions, although informal and non-contractual, indicate the potential for institutional bridging and collaborative opportunities (INT2). One of the Circle Centre board members also mentions an aspirational model present in Gothenburg, where private housing company has incorporated social initiatives such as a toy library into their offerings to foster sense of community (INT1).
Circle Centre's approach to engaging external stakeholders demonstrates a strategic balance between normative integrity and institutional alignment. As one of the board members says, rather than presenting a single identity, Circle Centre consciously shifts its emphasis according to the goals and values of the partner with which it is working:

> "Let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of Renhållningsverk. What do they need? What can we provide? And let's make a project together." (INT6)

This illustrates a form of institutional work to maintain legitimacy among different audiences. Circle Centre is adapting its value proposition, emphasising climate impact for environmental departments, community well-being for housing providers, student services for university-related bodies, and waste reduction for recycling entities. This selective approach reflects the realisation that different bodies are guided by different assessment criteria, and that aligning with these expectations increases the chances of support.

Libraries of Things are also a part of a wider network of sharing and circular economy initiatives. Circle Centre's relationships with other LoTs, as well as with community projects such as tool libraries, repair cafes and makerspaces, foster knowledge sharing, joint advocacy and shared infrastructure.

Circle Centre actively engages in peer learning with other LoTs, particularly through informal partnerships and study visits. Rather than positioning themselves as a model to be replicated, they approach these engagements as opportunities for mutual learning and capacity building. Circle Centre actively seeks to understand the administrative strategies, funding models and operational systems of its partners.

> "Our goal to visit those places was more about to listen to them, to learn… we want to know what you're doing. How is it working? Where do you get the money from?" (INT1)

> "Try to get access to their budget reports… understand how it worked for them and try to copy it for Circle Circle Lund." (INT6)

Such practices illustrate mimetic isomorphism, an institutional response to uncertainty in which organisations model themselves after others perceived to be successful. However, Circle Centre remains selective, adapting rather than adopting holistically.

In addition to two-way learning, Circle Centre is striving to create a more organised LoT network, particularly in Europe (INT1, INT2, INT3, INT6). While this effort is currently marginal to the organisation's core activities, the intention is in line with institutional entrepreneurship, a desire to shape the field by fostering a collective identity and knowledge exchange among like-minded initiatives:

> "We are really happy to help them… trying to create some kind of network where… individuals or already existing LoTs could communicate together, grow up together." (INT6)

At the local level, Circle Centre engages in partnerships with other small NGOs in Lund, many of which share common sustainability goals but operate in different fields (e.g., food cooperatives, bicycle repair, student organisations). These partnerships facilitate mutual support, information sharing, and sometimes joint advocacy.

> "We start organising dinners once a month… maybe working together in a plan… let's write a letter together to the municipality." (INT1)

The role of the university further strengthens this ecosystem. Through partnerships with student groups and academic departments, Circle Centre leverages institutional legitimacy, volunteer work and information platforms.

5.2. Institutional Challenges Affecting the Scalability of Circle Centre

The scalability and institutionalisation of LoT are not solely technical or operational challenges, as they are shaped by broader dynamics. As Circle Centre recently published its first document outlining its vision for the development of the organisation until 2040 (Circle Centre, 2024b), this subsection outlines what difficulties and pressures the organisation is facing in the process of achieving its set goals.

5.2.1. Institutional Pressures and Constraints

The Issue of Trust in Sharing

Circle Centre faces behavioural and normative pressures rooted in cultural attitudes, social norms and public perceptions related to lending and repair. These pressures shape both the level of community engagement with LoT and the viability of its long-term goals of promoting a circular economy. As mentioned in section 5.1.1, while Sweden's cultural orientation towards sustainability creates fertile ground for initiatives such as Circle Centre, normative pressures rooted in convenience, trust, and consumer habits remain a constraint.

From a socio-economic perspective, the sharing model is seen as increasing access and equality (INT1, EXT2). A board member who studied in Lund reflects on the value of being able to furnish living spaces inexpensively: “It's a way… of equality… I don't have to have that much money to have access to things” (INT1). However, more permanent residents are believed to be more hesitant to borrow second-hand items, suggesting class or generational divisions in attitudes to consumption and cleanliness (INT1, EXT2).

One of the main barriers is the perceived inconvenience of sharing compared to ownership. As a person involved in sharing a borrowed lawnmower states: “The next time you come to mow your lawn, it was broken down because some of the other people were lazy and didn’t care. So that’s one of the problems” (EXT2). Such experiences undermine trust in shared systems and can lead to withdrawal into private ownership. Interviewees also note that the effort required to engage with shared systems, such as going to the Library of Things for one tool, can outweigh the perceived benefits. As a board member notes: “Maybe we don't need to go to Circle Centre every time we need a drill. Maybe some

parts can be organised in the same building or the same quarter" (INT6). These comments highlight the gap between ideological support for sharing and the reality of everyday convenience.

Another key normative constraint is trust in service providers. While companies are often associated with professionalism, consistency and cleanliness, volunteer-led initiatives such as Circle Centre are met with scepticism due to their informal nature. "It feels a bit weird and it hurts to say this, but I think if we were a company, people might be more willing to try sharing", admits INT2. The lack of perceived formality and quality assurance, resulting from limited resources and reliance on donated goods, can discourage potential users, especially from outside the student community. The issue is further complicated by the expectations of users. Volunteers face the dual challenge of maintaining a positive user experience while coping with burnout and limited resources. "We do the best with the resources we have… but people expect us to work like a professional shop", notes INT6.

In some cases, sharing is not seen as a goal in itself, but as a transitional step towards ownership. As a Fritidsbanken employee describes, users often borrow items such as sports equipment to test them out before making a purchase: "We're a way in to a new thing… if you liked it, you go away and buy a pair that suits […] better" (EXT3). This approach allows sharing services to coexist with consumer markets, but it also limits the potential for long-term behavioural change if borrowing remains a temporary substitute rather than a preferred means of access.

Insufficient Regulative and Financial Support

Several interviewees highlight the lack of comprehensive systemic support at both the local and European levels (INT1, INT6, EXT4). While NGOs and civil society actors advocate for initiatives such as LoTs, broader policy frameworks remain underdeveloped. For example, despite some progress in the EU policy frameworks such as the Right to Repair, interview participants note that consideration of initiatives such as LoTs remains marginal and "is not much considered in European policymaking" (EXT4). Locally, there is a lack of strategic direction and infrastructure readiness to support systemic change towards a circular economy (INT6). This lack of clear pathways and exploratory space inhibits innovation and makes initiatives rely on short-term improvisation rather than long-term planning.

The interviews also show that these initiatives are rooted in the political structures and funding priorities of municipal and regional governments. As shown in section 5.1.2., Circle Centre is heavily dependent on support from institutions such as Lunds Kommun and related programs. While this support can be crucial, providing physical space and funding, it also makes initiatives vulnerable to changes in political will or administrative priorities. Staff at public institutions acknowledge that their ability to support initiatives is tied to political decisions and tax-funded mandates (EXT2, EXT5). Moreover, different political ideologies regarding citizen autonomy and sustainability goals create inconsistent levels of support, further complicating long-term planning. This fragmentation is

particularly evident in disputes over the meaning and implementation of social and economic sustainability (EXT2).

A recurring theme in the interviews is the lack of stable, operational funding. Although project grants are available, they often require organisations to constantly reinvent or reformulate their work to meet specific criteria. As INT6 says, “We need to create a new project every year to get the funding”, which makes continuity and strategic development difficult. Even when funding is secured, it is often limited in scope and inflexible in terms of how it is used, rarely covering basic costs such as rent or long-term employment. EXT5 echoes this frustration: “There is no funding you can apply for, which will help you with some of the costs for like the rent for a place”. These financial constraints significantly affect scalability and day-to-day operations. Without core funding or reliable infrastructure, Circle Centre has to constantly navigate uncertainty, limiting its ability to fully realise its vision.

Difficulties With Human Resources

While the external institutional framework influences Circle Centre's strategic positioning, internal organisational pressures also pose significant constraints to its operations and sustainability. These pressures are largely due to LoT's reliance on a volunteer-based structure, limited leadership continuity and operational challenges around staffing, recruitment and retention.

A central internal pressure is the fluctuating level of commitment and engagement among volunteers and volunteer officers, which directly impacts operational efficiency.

> “I feel like it's a little bit overwhelmed when you join Circle Centre at the beginning of the year because there are a lot of things going on. But at the same time, after a while, you realise, like, okay, maybe it's not that much. And then for some people, for some volunteers, they're like, I can relax and not do my thing. And that affects the group dynamic”. (INT1)

This inconsistency in motivation and participation results in uneven workloads, impedes goal-setting, and can generate frustration within teams. Despite strong reliance on student volunteers, largely sourced through networks at Lund University, this demographic brings inherent instability due to academic turnover and short-term availability. Several interviewees emphasise that while a passionate and motivated core group is foundational to success, volunteer participation varies widely: “There’s always people giving more and people giving less” (INT5).

The LoT’s dependence on unpaid volunteers brings structural vulnerabilities, even with one part-time temporary employee who joined the team recently. Volunteers bring diverse experiences and energy (EXT5), but also conflicting expectations, differing levels of availability, and competing life responsibilities (INT5, INT6). As INT6 explains, “It’s always a bit challenging to be 100% volunteer-

based". As some highlight, the absence of permanent personnel means that knowledge is often lost between terms. This is especially true for officer roles, which are typically reappointed annually. One participant observes, "Right now I feel like every year has something and then it stops, and then another year comes and then it stops" (INT3). Moreover, the daily operations require significant behind-the-scenes coordination, which is often hard to maintain with part-time, unpaid engagement (INT5).

Recruiting all new officers each year is supposed to be a solution to the high turnover of people in the university town, but at the same time, it is a recurring problem. As INT4 notes, "Circle Centre struggles with recruiting volunteers", and the issue is compounded by the difficulty of keeping officers involved long enough to build continuity of institutional knowledge. A few interviewees emphasised the need for more long-term operational roles beyond the strategic oversight of board members. Sustaining initiative momentum year after year requires not only new volunteers but also stable figures within the officer group who can guide onboarding and continuity: "There needs to be maybe two, three people who can be those kind of long-term in the officer range" (INT3).

A specific operational issue raised is the challenge of maintaining the inventory in working order. Maintenance is often understaffed, and processes are not clearly defined or passed down effectively between cohorts. This lack of continuity can leave maintenance officers feeling overwhelmed. One volunteer describes the issue as "something that I've seen come up… everything is marked for repairs. It just makes it not nice" (INT5). Without a systematic approach to maintenance and repair, Circle Centre risks undermining user trust and reducing the functionality of its offerings. These challenges underscore a broader need for formalised processes and clearer role delineation that can survive personnel changes.

5.2.2. Individual and Organisational Challenges

While institutional pressures shape the broader landscape in which LoTs operate, their ability to scale also depends on how individual actors and organisations respond to and cope with these constraints. The organisational adaptability of Circle Centre is closely linked to the role of the board of directors, which is increasingly taking on strategic leadership, including the development of a formal vision for the organisation (INT1, INT2, INT3, INT4, INT6). This indicates a shift towards institutional formalisation and long-term planning. However, this process appears somewhat isolated from the wider organisational body, particularly officers, whose involvement in vision development is described as limited and often passive, characterised by information rather than engagement (INT3, INT4). This introduces a gap between strategic direction and operational implementation. Officers express confusion about their roles in relation to the vision and note that high-level decisions are often not

clear at the operational level (INT3, INT5). The lack of shared organisational understanding reflects institutional fragmentation and is a barrier to coordinated action. Individual agency plays a critical role in shaping Circle Centre's strategic adaptability. Certain board members have acted as clear agents of change, particularly in initiating the visioning process and securing funding (INT2, INT6). Officers, while less involved in strategic planning, contribute through their functional roles, focusing on communication, community outreach, and operational maintenance (INT3, INT5).

As mentioned before, LoT's reliance on volunteers creates both opportunities for inclusive engagement and constraints to sustainability. Volunteers bring diverse skills and perspectives, but the transient and uneven nature of their involvement makes long-term planning and institutional memory difficult (INT6, EXT5). This vulnerability is acknowledged internally, with concerns that the loss of key volunteers could destabilise activities. Circle Centre itself is increasingly aware that scaling beyond its current capacity requires structural strengthening (INT6).

A significant institutional development is the recent creation of a part-time paid position, funded by a municipal grant. This role is closely linked to the goals of scaling and diversifying lending methods (INT2). The move towards professionalisation marks a key moment in the maturation of the organisation, signalling a shift from volunteer-based experimentation to more strategic and resource-supported expansion. However, the introduction of paid roles raises new challenges around equality, communication and role differentiation. Board members express concerns about how to fairly communicate and justify the introduction of a paid worker in a predominantly volunteer-based system (INT1).

The organisation exhibits institutional bricolage, a combination of formal and informal structures to meet changing demands. This is particularly evident in the way Circle Centre negotiates its identity between a community-embedded initiative and a more formalised, potentially professionalised entity. This is reflected in the interviewees' comments on professionalisation, which is simultaneously seen as a strategic opportunity and a potential threat to trust with partners. A board member of Repair Café Malmö (EXT1) notes that "if Circle Centre were to become a more professional organisation, [...] it would also be harder to rely on some of these partnerships with other community organisations" due to the mismatch in the level of development and the scale of activities.

Organisational adaptability also manifests itself in the way Circle Centre engages with the strategic vision. Although the vision is described as emerging rather than fixed: "[y]ou don't have to have a detailed step by step plan on where you want to be in 10 years, but just a general vision of what would be the ideal state of your Library of Things" (INT2), it still serves as a device that guides decision-making in complex and uncertain contexts. The ability to maintain a flexible but consistent sense of direction enables an organisation to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities and navigate institutional ambiguity.

The shift from manual systems to integrated digital platforms such as Lend Engine also shows a form of technological institutionalisation. This shift was driven by growth pressures, “because the numbers became too much, so manual doesn't really work anymore” (INT3). Furthermore, the proactive search for new lending models, “could we have lockers, could we partner with libraries? Like what are different ways in which we could work?” (INT2), further indicates an openness to institutional experimentation that maintains organisational autonomy while expanding access. This form of innovation is not only technical but also institutional, as it changes how the organisation is understood by stakeholders and how it interacts with wider social systems.

5.2.3. Inadequate Support for Scaling

Scaling for Circle Centre is not a single, linear process. Rather, it involves navigating multiple, often divergent pathways, shaped by physical constraints, strategic intentions, community values and sustainability imperatives. From an institutional perspective, scaling is understood less as expansion and more as a reconfiguration of practices, spaces and relationships that sustain the organisation's mission in new forms and contexts (Dorado & Fernández, 2019).

A dominant theme in the interviews is the desire to scale through physical and spatial development, which includes securing larger and more sustainable spaces, establishing multiple centres across the city, and developing new types of community-integrated infrastructure (INT1, INT2, INT4, INT5, INT6). The vision is not just to replicate the current model, but to create new types of places:

> “[T]hose centres would be seen as what would I call like third places. So not only a Library of Things, but like a living place where people can come and have a coffee or make a[n] event or do some craft” (INT6).

However, such expansion is constrained by logistical and financial barriers. The organisation has to cope with a shortage of suitable, available and affordable spaces. As a Stenkrossen employee explains, “you have to find the right place and then you have to be able to afford it” (EXT5). These institutional constraints highlight the tension between an urban location compatible with the mission (e.g. walkability, community integration) and economic feasibility. Moreover, the infrastructural needs of the LoT are not small: “the Library of Things needs basically a warehouse. This is actually what you need, a warehouse and you need a social space to meet” (EXT5). Circle Centre's current operations are perceived to be “outgrown”, reflecting both operational maturity and an urgent need for spatial reinvestment (EXT5).

Scaling is also seen in terms of diversifying services to increase community engagement and long-term viability. Several interviewees presented a vision in which lending is just one element of a broader

offering that includes repair services, community events and cafes (INT4, INT6). These ideas reflect a shift from a single-purpose library to a multi-functional hub that is in line with the broader institutional logic of community development and sustainability. This model not only facilitates deeper community integration but also serves as a form of institutional legitimacy. By embedding Circle Centre in broader community value systems, it becomes more resilient to market pressures and funding fluctuations.

Circle Centre has begun to implement institutional changes to its financial model. In particular, the shift from a token annual membership fee to object rental fees reflects a desire for financial stability while maintaining accessibility. This evolution has been influenced by the experience gained in partner organisations: "they had fees for each item and that we kind of learned, by looking at others" (INT2). Such changes are indicative of a strategic institutional isomorphism whereby Circle Centre selectively adopts the practices of similar organisations to strengthen its viability. Importantly, financial reform is carried out with care and sensitivity to the core values of the organisation. There is a consistent emphasis on scaling in a way that can be achieved and sustained for a very long time (INT2, INT5), rather than rapid or opportunistic expansion.

As mentioned before, part of the Circle Centre's vision for the future is supporting other initiatives in Sweden and Europe by providing tools, guidance and community. As INT6 states, "We want more structure like Circle Centre, but we don't want to manage them". This peer-to-peer institutional replication model follows a collaborative logic, aiming to build a horizontal network of like-minded initiatives rather than a top-down franchise. In this case, scaling is institutionalised not only through physical replication, but through knowledge diffusion, relationship building and collaborative learning, an alternative logic to conventional growth.

A key institutional factor behind the scaling efforts is the ambition to widen access and include different demographic groups in Lund. Several interviewees highlight that while Circle Centre currently serves mainly students, efforts are planned to adapt and replicate the model in a way that meets the needs of other population groups. As INT1 notes, "we want to have more spaces spread in town that can adjust to the population that is nearby", highlighting the intention to locate future LoT sites based on community context (INT1, INT2, INT3). INT2 echoes this, stating: "scaling means diversifying for us, making sure that we attract different people", emphasising the importance of tailoring services to families, long-term residents or other user groups through a specialised offer. However, Lunds Kommun employee expresses uncertainty about the inclusivity of Circle Centre's activities to date: "I really don't know if it's how much it reached other people in Lund. I mean if you live here, you don't borrow your sheets, you have them", suggesting a perceived gap between the initiative's mission and its current demographic reach (EXT2).

Operational scalability is also being realised through digital transformation. The move from manual spreadsheets to dedicated software platforms such as Lend Engine has significantly improved the

efficiency and scalability of operations. This change has enabled better item management, improved member access and facilitated remote bookings (INT1, INT3, INT5). In addition, new financial management and project tracking tools are currently being considered to allow the team to cope with increasing complexity as the initiative grows. As part of a wider innovation strategy, Circle Centre is also evaluating new service delivery models, such as automated lockers or decentralised lending points, to expand access without proportionately increasing staff or infrastructure costs (INT2).

Lastly, interviewees emphasise that scaling is only just beginning. Recent years have focused on consolidation, stabilisation and internal restructuring, laying the foundations for future growth (INT6). Similarly, others note that while the number of members and position base has grown significantly (INT1, INT2, INT3), spatial and operational expansion has lagged, mainly due to capacity constraints and infrastructure challenges (INT2, INT5). This reflects a realistic institutional self-awareness: growth is not only about ambition, but also about building internal systems and capacities that can support and sustain scaling efforts.

6. Discussion: Facilitating the Scaling of LoTs

This discussion interprets the findings in the light of the third research question: What institutional mechanisms and support structures facilitate the legitimacy and growth of sharing-based initiatives such as Libraries of Things? Building on the insights from the first two research questions regarding socio-cultural and organisational dynamics and their impact on scalability, this section integrates the research findings with the theoretical perspectives of institutional theory and collaborative consumption. It explores how LoTs navigate the broader socio-economic and regulatory landscape to gain legitimacy, secure resources, and expand their reach.

6.1. Institutional Legitimacy and the Growth of LoTs

Legitimacy is often achieved when an organisation aligns with established norms, values, and cognitive expectations of its institutional context (Suchman, 1995). As LoTs diverge from traditional ownership-based consumer models, their ability to grow and sustain themselves depends significantly on how they navigate institutional pressures and conform to or strategically resist normative structures. This section explores how different forms of legitimacy contribute to the institutionalisation and scaling of LoTs, highlighting the mechanisms by which these initiatives secure societal trust and organisational viability (Deephouse et al., 2017; Scott, 2014)

6.1.1. The Role of Branding

For LoTs, which may challenge dominant paradigms of individual ownership and consumerism, achieving cognitive legitimacy, i.e. being seen as understandable and necessary, can be challenging. Baden et al. (2020), however, point out that breaking down norms associated with ownership, together with the very awareness of alternatives, is the most important factor influencing consumer adoption of access-based models. In the case of Circle Centre, normative legitimacy is expressed through alignment with the values of the circular economy, environmental sustainability and social well-being. These normative associations frame the organisation not only as a practical alternative, but as an ethically superior model, being an integral part of sustainable living. Regulative legitimacy, though often less significant in early stages, becomes critical when formal recognition is needed to access funding or public partnerships. Circle Centre achieved this through obtaining non-profit status (Swedish: ideell förening), allowing access to resources such as Miljöanslaget (English: environmental grant).

LoTs actively construct legitimacy by aligning their mission and practices with dominant social narratives and moral imperatives. This includes positioning themselves within global environmental discourses, such as the European Commission's Circular Economy action plans from 2015 and 2020 (Claudelin et al., 2022), and the European Parliament's directive on Right to Repair (European Parliament, 2024). These associations elevate their work beyond utility, embedding it within a larger moral and political landscape. In this sense, LoTs operate as moral entrepreneurs, advocating for new norms around ownership, repair, and resource use (Suchman, 1995).

Through storytelling, branding and community engagement, LoTs can present their purpose externally, fostering legitimacy, attracting funding, and recruiting volunteers. However, the case of Circle Centre also reveals that limited resources and capacity can hinder the effectiveness of external communication. Branding, therefore, is not just a cosmetic function but a vital part of institutional survival and societal integration.

6.1.2. The Role of Institutional Actors and Intermediaries

The institutionalisation and sustained growth of LoTs depend heavily on the support of a network of institutional actors that provide legitimacy, resources and visibility. As mentioned above, legitimacy is not acquired passively but requires active construction through alignment with dominant institutional logics and influential actors, such as municipal authorities, sustainability-oriented NGOs, and intermediary networks (Scott, 2014; Suchman, 1995)

As the example of Circle Centre showed very vividly, municipal governments play a pivotal role in providing regulative legitimacy by offering formal support in the form of grants or inclusion in

sustainability strategies. Land use regulations should also be adapted to include non-commercial community spaces in residential and mixed-use areas, overcoming regulatory barriers that prevent LoTs from obtaining affordable and visible locations. In addition, financing mechanisms tailored to hybrid social enterprises, such as blended finance, social investment or complementary financing, are needed to support organisations that do not fit into traditional charitable or business models. Such backing helps shift public perception and reduces operational precarity, legitimising LoTs in the eyes of funders, media, and regulatory bodies. However, regulative legitimacy through municipal or other state support depends on the views of those in power, which may translate into difficulties in obtaining it in an unfavourable political context.

Finally, the evolution of the ecosystem supporting LoTs must take into account multi-level governance, recognising that national, regional and municipal actors shape the conditions conducive to development in different ways. National governments set the overall regulatory and financial framework, regional authorities can provide targeted support through programmes for innovation and sustainable development, and municipal authorities often act as local enablers or gatekeepers, providing access to space, promotion and integration with local development plans. Effective coordination between these levels is essential to avoid fragmentation and ensure that LoTs can operate in a coherent and supportive institutional context (Smith et al., 2014).

At the same time, NGOs and non-profits focused on sustainability and social innovation help to establish normative legitimacy by endorsing the ethical values represented by LoTs. By engaging in partnerships with organisations such as Bike Kitchen (bike repairing), Matvarukooperativ (food cooperative) and ABC (sustainability and community-building), Circle Centre connects to broader discourses on environmental responsibility and community resilience (Mont et al., 2020).

Cooperation with book libraries, considered by Circle Centre as one of the development paths, is a reality for many LoTs (Baden et al., 2020; Lynch, 2023). Public libraries act as valuable partners, providing cognitive legitimacy, i.e. making the concept of sharing tangible goods understandable and obvious in a familiar institutional setting. Integrating Libraries of Things into or alongside public libraries normalises their function by creating parallels with long-established public lending systems (Baden et al., 2020). This cognitive alignment increases public trust and facilitates user adoption.

Intermediary organisations, such as umbrella networks, perform critical functions at the system level by facilitating standard setting, knowledge transfer and public recognition. By documenting best practices, organising events and creating advisory toolkits, these actors provide a common institutional infrastructure that local projects can use to meet funders' expectations or scale operations without compromising their grassroots identity (Hargreaves et al., 2013). The results of this study show that one of the Circle Centre's goals is to create a LoT network, but before building a new formalised network, it is worth exploring existing ones in the field, such as RREUSE, a network of social enterprises

operating in a circular economy with a focus on reuse, repair and recycling. For more effective action, further research is needed to catalogue existing networks, their geographical coverage and their offerings to determine where new assistance is needed and to what extent.

6.2. Organisational and Institutional Dynamics in Scaling

Scaling, in an institutional context, is not just a matter of growing in size or replicating a model, but involves navigating processes of institutionalisation, legitimisation and strategic adaptation (Dorado & Fernández, 2019)

6.2.1. Institutionalisation and legitimisation

As LoTs seek to scale and gain broader recognition, they increasingly operate within complex institutional fields shaped by normative expectations, regulatory standards, and prevailing models of legitimacy. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of institutional isomorphism offers a critical lens through which to understand how LoTs adapt to their evolving environments. While scaling opens new opportunities for funding, visibility, and policy integration, it also introduces pressures that can challenge core values of community empowerment, flexibility, and grassroots innovation.

The coercive isomorphism may oblige LoTs to implement standardised inventory systems, adopt data privacy protocols or ensure that lending procedures meet liability and insurance requirements (Becker et al., 2018; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). While these adaptations are necessary for external legitimacy and risk management, they may also impose administrative burdens on volunteer-led initiatives or inadvertently crowd out informal practices that foster community ownership and accessibility (Becker et al., 2018). This is in line with the experience of Circle Centre, whose volunteers see the formalities of non-profit status or the reporting requirements of funding programmes as a push in the right direction, but are also aware that this requires additional human resources, knowledge and skills that they do not always have.

In the LoT ecosystem, newer initiatives often exhibit the phenomenon of mimetic isomorphism, replicating operational structures and branding approaches of other organisations in the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2016). While this strategy can accelerate scaling and reduce the learning curve, it can also lead to homogenisation and reduce responsiveness to local needs and cultural contexts (Masocha & Fatoki, 2018). The results of this study show that adapting to a specific social context by adjusting the offer, the location of the LoT, the opening hours or the form in which items are collected is the basis for users' acceptance of the initiative. For example, a Circle Centre offer consisting of kitchen appliances and bedding sets would not work well outside the context of a university town where students come for a short time.

As local organisations participate in networks, they are increasingly exposed to sectoral best practices and indicators of success, and thus susceptible to normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Kontinen & Onali, 2017). These networks provide valuable support and legitimacy, but also introduce expectations around impact reporting, governance structures and staff professionalism. For grassroots initiatives, conforming to such norms requires negotiating the boundary between community-led informality and institutional compliance (Kontinen & Onali, 2017). However, the negative impact of such participation does not seem to be apparent at this stage of Circle Centre involvement, while the development of soft skills and resources through interaction within networks such as Communities for Climate (C4C) or Zero Waste Europe at the European level is noted.

Excessive standardisation in the pursuit of legitimacy can undermine those qualities that make an LoT effective and trusted in its communities (Kontinen & Onali, 2017). As research on bottom-up innovation has shown, over-formalisation can distance organisations from their user base, reduce local adaptability and stifle the experimental culture necessary for social innovation (Hargreaves et al., 2013). While formalisation is expected of state institutions, local organisations such as Repair Café Malmö may feel a newly created mismatch and move structurally and ideologically away from an LoT.

6.2.2. Strategic Adaptation

As LoTs evolve from grassroots initiatives into established entities, their organisational structures and strategic identity framework become central to resilience, scalability, and long-term legitimacy. The Circle Centre case shows that LoTs may strategically shape their identity to appeal to multiple audiences, balancing the logics of community-led activities and professional service delivery.

Circle Centre, for example, formalised its operations by becoming a non-profit organisation, a legal status that offers credibility and access to funding. However, it also introduces compliance requirements and organisational complexity (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). In different national contexts, LoTs may choose other legal forms, such as NGOs, cooperatives, or social enterprises such as community interest companies (CICs). Each form entails trade-offs between flexibility, accountability, community involvement, and professional recognition (Mikołajczak, 2020).

Internal governance models also influence how LoTs manage this balance. Some rely on flat, volunteer-led structures, which promote inclusivity and grassroots legitimacy but struggle with consistency and accountability. Others introduce paid staff and hierarchical roles, increasing operational capacity but potentially diluting participatory values. In Circle Centre, for instance, the flat structure has been challenged by tensions between unpaid volunteers and the introduction of a paid employee, creating ambiguity around roles and undermining perceptions of equality (Pinz et al., 2024). A hybrid approach is possible, combining professional capacity with participatory governance mechanisms like advisory

boards or membership councils (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2016). This supports both internal effectiveness and external legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, Circle Centre adjusts its presentation of identity according to its audience to increase its chances of success. LoTs also adapt their public identity strategically to resonate with various stakeholders. To funders and political actors, they present themselves as sustainability innovators, emphasising contributions to carbon reduction, waste minimisation and behavioural change in line with public environmental goals. This approach capitalises on dominant political narratives and is consistent with institutional expectations of impact and accountability. To local communities, they highlight their role as inclusive, place-based hubs for mutual support and empowerment. This identity emphasises accessibility, trust and place-based relevance, resonating with grassroots values and local networks of relationships. Finally, within the circular economy industry and networks, they emphasise technical innovation and participation in sustainable supply chains and sustainable consumption models (Michelini et al., 2017).

These multi-layered identities allow LoTs to bridge institutional fields and attract diverse resources. However, this strategic hybridity also involves risks. Overemphasis on professionalism can alienate grassroots users, while focusing too heavily on community may limit institutional support. The central challenge for scaling LoTs lies in sustaining hybridity, not just structurally, but as a dynamic, ongoing negotiation between differing institutional logics and stakeholder expectations.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has examined the operation and scaling process of Circle Centre Library of Things through the lens of institutional theory, contributing to an understanding of how this type of community-based innovation grows and embeds itself within existing socio-institutional contexts. The case study revealed that scaling is not solely a matter of replication or resource accumulation, but is shaped by institutional dynamics such as legitimacy-building, strategic institutional work, and adaptation to normative expectations. Key mechanisms observed included tailoring self-presentation and narratives to the values and goals of the community, partners or funders, and forming partnerships that provided access to resources and legitimacy. Limiting factors included beliefs related to borrowing and ownership, dependence on external resources and support, and limited engagement and capacity of volunteers.

From a practical point of view, the study provides information for those who want to develop LoT or similar social innovations. It highlights the importance of investing in relationship building, networking and institutional adaptation, beyond the infrastructure base. Local authorities and community-based organisations focused on sustainability can play a key supporting role by offering stable financing

mechanisms, integrating LoT into broader urban sustainability programmes and strengthening their legitimacy through public support and policy consideration. On the other hand, rigid bureaucratic processes and short-term funding cycles can hinder the long-term institutionalisation of such initiatives.

This study, conducted in the field of sustainability science, contributes to the growing body of work on socio-technical transitions and bottom-up innovation. It provides an experience-based example of how institutional processes shape the functioning and development of LoTs in the context of the circular and sharing economy. The study suggests that sustainable living is not only a matter of implementing new technologies, but also of institutional transformation.

However, several limitations should be noted. Using a single case study limits the possibility of generalising the results to LoTs with a different organisational structure or operating in a different institutional context, and the interpretative nature of the study may lead to potential bias. The limited duration of the study also prevented us from reaching a wider range of actors and observing long-term institutional changes.

Future research could build on this work by conducting comparative studies across multiple LoTs in different institutional settings, thereby testing the universality of the identified mechanisms. Quantitative research could further explore the effects of scaling, including environmental impacts and community engagement. Such efforts would strengthen the empirical and theoretical foundations for understanding how community initiatives can contribute to the transition towards sustainable development.

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Appendix A. Interview Guides

A.1. Internal Perspective (Board Members & Officers)

A. Organisational Mission and Growth

1) How would you describe the mission and core objectives of Circle Centre?
2) How does Circle Centre define and approach scaling?
    a) What do you mean when you think about scaling? (definition)
    b) Why do you want to scale the organisation? (reasons)
    c) How do you measure your success in scaling the organisation? (indicators)
3) What do you think is your role in scaling Circle Centre?
4) Have there been internal debates about scaling? If so, what are the key tensions or concerns?
5) How has Circle Centre evolved since its inception in terms of scale and operations?
    a) How have you been approaching scaling so far? (strategies)
    b) How do the operations of Circle Centre Library of Things look now?
    c) What are your plans regarding scaling Circle Centre?

B. Scaling Strategies and Challenges

6) What key factors enable scaling for Circle Centre?
    a) What internal and external elements contribute to your ability to scale? e.g. resources, partnerships, funding, organisational structure, or market demand
    b) Are there specific strategies, frameworks, or conditions that have been particularly effective in supporting your scaling process?
7) What are the main challenges, both internal and external, that Circle Centre faces in the scaling process? e.g. funding limitations, legal requirements, public perception, organisational capacity
8) What kind of support would make scaling easier for Circle Centre? e.g. financial, operational, regulatory

C. Institutional Pressures

9) What type of interactions do you have with other organisations?
10) How have external institutions (such as government, funders, local authorities, regulatory bodies and more) shaped the way Circle Centre develops? Have you experienced any pressure from these entities to operate in a specific way?
11) How have partnerships and institutional norms influenced your decision-making about scaling (e.g., looking at other LoTs, nonprofit best practices, or social enterprise models) and your ability to scale?
12) How do the local community and society at large perceive the concept of Libraries of Things and Circle Centre (e.g. ownership, hygiene, status, convenience, competition for for-profit companies), and how does it influence your decisions around expansion and service offerings?

A.2. External Perspective (Funders & Partner Organisations)

A. Getting to know the organisation/company

1) Can you share an overview of what your organisation/company does, its core mission, and the key services or initiatives it focuses on?
2) What are the core values that drive your organisation/company, and what long-term goals are you working towards?

B. Partnerships & Sponsorships

3) What motivates your organisation to engage in sponsorships and partnerships, and what strategic goals do you aim to achieve through them?
4) How do you evaluate the legitimacy and credibility of an organisation before deciding to support or collaborate with it? What key factors influence your decision-making process?
5) What types of evidence or impact measurements do you prioritise when assessing the success and effectiveness of the sponsorships and partnerships you engage in?

C. Libraries of Things

Institutional Context and Support

6) What role do Libraries of Things play within the broader landscape of sustainability, the sharing economy, and community development? How do they complement or challenge traditional public services and commercial rental models?
7) From your perspective, what factors make a Library of Things a viable investment or partnership opportunity?

Institutional Logics and Expectations

8) Do you believe Libraries of Things should professionalise and formalise their operations, or is it more beneficial for them to maintain a grassroots, community-driven approach? What are the trade-offs between these models?
9) What institutional barriers hinder the scaling of initiatives like Libraries of Things, and what changes or support structures could help overcome these challenges?

D. Circle Centre:

10) What motivated you to support or collaborate with Circle Centre, and what aspects of its mission or approach resonate most with you?
11) How does Circle Centre compare to other community-driven initiatives you support?
12) What legal, financial, or reputational factors would make you more inclined to support a larger-scale version of Circle Centre? Are there specific conditions that would enhance its viability as a long-term investment or partnership?

Appendix B. Thematic Analysis Framework: Codes and Themes

THEME	SUBTHEME	CODE	INTERVIEW REFERENCE
Institutional Pressures	External Regulative & Cultural-Cognitive Pressures	Insufficient system support for sustainable initiatives	EXT4, EXT5, INT6
		Political Influence and Dependency	INT3, INT5, EXT2, EXT5
		Measuring The Relevance Of Initiatives Through Profitability	INT6
		Funding Limitations	INT1, INT4, INT5, INT6, EXT1, EXT5
	Internal Pressures	Inconsistent Volunteer And Officer Engagement	INT1, INT2, INT3, INT5
		Recruitment and long-term retention of officers	INT3, INT4, EXT5
		Limited Volunteer Capacity And Staffing Limitations	INT1, INT2, INT3, INT5, INT6, EXT1, EXT3, EXT5
		Difficulties with Maintenance And Repair Management	INT5
	Behavioural & Normative Pressures	Culture and Perceptions Around Borrowing And Repairing	INT1, INT2, INT5, EXT2
		Inconvenience Of Sharing	INT2, INT6
		Distrust Towards Services Provided By Non-Companies	INT2, INT6
		Sharing As a Trial Before Buying	EXT2, EXT3
Legitimacy	Pragmatic Legitimacy	Having A Status Of An NPO In Sweden	INT2
		Having An Employee	INT3
		Financial Support And Grants	INT1, INT3, INT4, INT6
		Visibility & Outreach	EXT1
		Measurable Indicators	INT2 / INT6 / INT6
		Accessibility And Inclusivity	EXT2, EXT3
		Providing Items And Services That Match The Local Context	INT1, INT2, INT3
		Effective Volunteer-Led Structure	EXT5
	Moral Legitimacy (Normative)	Institutionalisation Of Sustainability	INT1, INT3, INT6, EXT2, EXT4, EXT5
		Local Sustainability Frameworks	EXT2, EXT4, EXT5
		Public Nature Of The Organisation	EXT1, EXT3
		Value Alignment	EXT1
		Recognised As A Circular Economy Actor	EXT2
		Community Building Through Sharing	EXT1, EXT3
		Circle Centre As A Leader Of Action	INT1
		Keeping The LoT In Lund	INT1, INT3, INT6

	Cognitive Legitimacy	Drawing On External Insights	EXT2
		Institutionalisation Of Sustainability	EXT2, EXT4, EXT5
		Local Sustainability Frameworks	EXT2, EXT4, EXT5
		Recognised As A Circular Economy Actor	EXT2
Institutional Logics	**Core Values and Organisational Identity**	Being rooted in degrowth values	INT2
		Relevance Of The Initiative For The Future World	INT6
		Caring For The Cause And The Organisation	INT2
		Circular Economy As A Geopolitical and Social Necessity	INT6, EXT4
	Cultural Norms Around Ownership and Use	Perceptions Around Borrowing	INT1, INT2, EXT2
		Shift From Ownership To Access	EXT1, EXT2, EXT4
		Culture of Ownership	INT2, INT5, EXT4
	Value Conflicts and Tensions	Capitalism As A Barrier To Sustainability	EXT2, EXT4
		Non-Profit Vs. For-Profit Business Approach	INT2, INT5, INT6, EXT1, EXT2, EXT3, EXT5
		Acting In A Way That Isn't Aligned With The Organisation's Values	INT2
		Loss Of The Community Aspect In The Process	EXT1, EXT3
Institutional Change	**Strategic Vision and Leadership**	Board Members Responsible For The Vision	INT1, INT2, INT3, INT4, INT6
		Increasing Role Of The Board In The Organisation	INT1
		Presence Of Individual Agents Of Change	INT2, INT6
		Officers Help Scale Through Fulfilling Their Roles	INT1, INT3, INT5
		Different Ways Of Achieving The Same Goal	INT6
		Not Knowing What Scaling Means For Circle Centre	INT3
	Organisational Capacity and Structure	Volunteer Capacity And/Or Staffing Limitations	INT1, INT2, INT3, INT5, INT6, EXT1, EXT3, EXT5
		Job Creation Potential	EXT4, EXT5
		Knowledge And Capacity Gaps	EXT1
		Having A Good Track Of Previous Data	INT2
	Growth and Physical Expansion	Expansion In Size And Quantity Of The Location	INT1, INT2, INT4, INT5, INT6
		Space Limitations And Infrastructure	EXT2, EXT3, EXT5
		Providing services other than borrowing	INT4, INT6
		Past experiences with organisational growth	INT1, INT2, INT3
		There Hasn't Been Scaling Happening So Far	INT1, INT64, INT6
		Building A Network Of Libraries of Things	INT3, INT5, INT6
		Extension Of Opening Hours	INT1, INT4
		Introduction Of The Item Fee	INT1, INT2

		Ensuring Sustainability Of The Organisation While Scaling	INT2, INT5
		Providing An Alternative To The Current Consumption Model	INT3, INT5, INT6
	Access, Inclusion, and Reach	Diversifying the audience	INT1, INT2, EXT2
		Diversifying The Offer	INT1, INT2, INT6
		Sharing Knowledge And Best Practices With Other Communities	INT5, INT6
		Community-Building	INT1, INT2, INT3, INT5, INT6, EXT5
	Governance Models and Decision-Making	Change In Partner And Partnership Type	EXT1
		Community Ownership Vs. Top-Down Expansion	EXT1
		Public-Anchored Model	EXT3, EXT4
		Grassroots Vs Professional Model	EXT1, EXT2, EXT4, EXT5
		Having A Clear Vision For The Future	INT2, INT6
	Technology and Operational Innovation	Introduction Of Technological / Software Solutions	INT1, INT3, INT5, EXT1
		Diversifying Ways In Which People Can Borrow	INT2
Institutional Isomorphism	**Coercive Isomorphism**	Meeting Formal Funding Or Partnership Requirements	INT6
		Reporting Obligations	EXT2
		Governance Boundaries	EXT2, EXT3
		Paid Coordination Role	EXT5
		Importance Of Formal Structure For External Legitimacy	EXT5
		Residency & Space Provision	EXT5
		Event Co-Creation & Participation	EXT5
		Exit Planning Support	EXT5
	Normative Isomorphism	Drawing On External Insights And Activism	EXT2
		Alignment With Strategic Goals	EXT1, EXT2
		Pilot Project Orientation	EXT2, EXT5
		Volunteer & Staffing Capacity Constraints	EXT1, EXT3
		Knowledge On How To Engage With Partners	INT5, INT6
		Getting Informed About Best Practices In The Field	INT6
	Mimetic Isomorphism	Sharing Knowledge And Best Practices With Other Communities	INT5, INT6
		Listening To The Feedback	INT2
		Strong Public Communication	EXT5
		Circle Centre As A Leader Of Action	INT1