Practicing Solidarity for the Future

Solidarity Economy from the Perspective of Social Sciences and Humanities

Edited by Olga Orlić and Mirna Jernej Pulić

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Practicing Solidarity for the Future: Solidarity Economy from the Perspective of Social Sciences and Humanities

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Foreword

The concept of the solidarity economy (SE), together with the broader notion of the social and solidarity economy (SSE), has, over the past three decades, become a key designation for diverse, globally present, and often locally oriented grassroots initiatives. These aim to develop economic practices that generate equitable benefits for all participants and their communities, expressing solidarity not only toward people but also the environment. Since the 1980s, various related terms have been in use for SE —social, moral, humane, alternative, sustainable, good, and green economy (Puđak et al., 2016), as well as the economy of solidarity (Baturina and Babić, 2021). Although conceptually related, each term carries distinct nuances.

The SSE represents a globally expanding scholarly and activist platform dedicated to promoting economic activities that challenge profit maximisation and prioritise the well-being of people and the environment (Yi, 2023). The concepts of the social and solidarity economy are often presented as interrelated or inseparable (Hahnel and Wright, 2016:77). Hahnel and Wright argue that the social economy should be seen as a broader, more heterogeneous umbrella term, while the solidarity economy constitutes a specific form of it—one where social power, defined as "voluntary cooperation for the achievement of common goals," plays a direct role in organising economic activities without state mediation. The state retains a background role, refraining from direct organisation or regulation (ibid.). As an example, they cite self-organised childcare centres in Canada, initiated by citizens yet supported by state-funded salaries. Such initiatives can be compared to proximity services or solidarity-based third-sector organisations (Laville and Nyssens, 2000). Researchers emphasise that the solidarity economy places greater focus on social capital and has stronger cohesive potential for communities. While the social economy often complements the existing order, the solidarity economy promotes a more transformative and activist approach (Miller, 2009), aiming to challenge and reshape the dominant neoliberal model (Kawano, 2009, cited in Puđak et al., 2016:155). It thus represents the more radical wing of the social economy, encompassing movements that create "alternative ways of living, producing, and consuming" (Bauhard, 2014:62). These initiatives prioritise community well-being over profit and are typically initiated by individuals or communities rather than state or corporate actors.

The solidarity economy includes initiatives such as civic and community-supported agriculture (CSA), cooperatives, fair trade initiatives, sharing economy models, community kitchens, social housing, urban gardening, ethical banking, time banks, cooperatives, commons, ecovillages, co-housing, local exchange and trading systems (LETS), and open-source initiatives. The proliferation of such initiatives intensified after the 2008 global economic crisis, consistent with Simonič's (2019:11) argument that "alternative models

in the economy gain momentum and recognition during periods of ecological and social crises." In times of scarcity and uncertainty, communities seek solutions to precarious conditions while critically reassessing economic models that have contributed to them.

Given its conceptual breadth, scholars have not reached a single definition of the solidarity economy. Interest in such practices expanded significantly after the 2008 crisis, as individuals experienced the inequalities of the capitalist system. Following the global financial crisis, Croatian scholars also began studying these practices (Babić and Račić, 2011; Bokan, 2016; Babić and Baturina, 2021, Orlić, 2014, 2019, 2022; Rubić and Gulin Zrnić, 2015; Šimleša et al., 2016; Posavec, 2017; Tomašević et al., 2018). The expanding body of research on the social and solidarity economy continues to bridge academic inquiry with the tangible social and economic impacts these phenomena generate.

The edited volume Practicing Solidarity for the Future: Solidarity Economy from the Perspective of Social Sciences and Humanities is one of the outcomes of the project Solidarity Economy in Croatia: Anthropological Perspective (SOLIDARan), funded by the Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ_IP_4_2019_3946) in the period 2020-2024. By integrating an anthropological approach and a diachronic analysis of the conceptualization of solidarity across the pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist periods, the project aimed to contributing to theoretical discussions on key anthropological concepts such as solidarity, reciprocity, and community. It also seeked to deepen our understanding of solidarity economy practices within the specific Croatian context. The central research questions focused on the diverse—and often conflicting—conceptions of solidarity in the contemporary era, the emergence of new communities of practice, and novel ways of imagining community, as well as on the perception of the solidarity economy as a means of envisioning a utopia of reconstruction.

The edited volume *Practicing Solidarity for the Future: Solidarity Economy from the Perspective of Social Sciences and Humanities* brings together a range of topics and themes presented at the international conference Practicing Solidarity for the Future, held in Zagreb (Croatia) from 14 –16 September 2022, as a part of the research project SOLIDARan. In addition to the contributions based on conference presentations, the edited volume includes two additional contributions that were not presented at the conference but engage with themes closely connected to the project, further enriching its scope and objectives.

Thirteen papers presented in the volume cover topics dealing with theoretical and applied research, diachronic and historical perspectives of solidarity, gendered approach to solidarity economy, social enterprises, cooperatives and community-led initiatives promoting solidarity, social entrepreneurship education, common-pool resources, and various others. In this vein, the volume is not only an important milestone of the project "Solidarity Economy in Croatia: Anthropological Perspective", but also the result of research and reflections of scholars from diverse disciplines (especially in the social sciences and humanities), who engage in theoretical and applied research, discussion and collaboration on the topic.

In the first chapter of this volume, **Cristina Grasseni** proposes a critical exploration of the concepts of 'food citizenship' and of multiple types of solidarity. She writes about the

ethnographic research on food heritage in three European cities: Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin. The research was conducted for the project *Food citizens?* that aims to investigate how do solidarity economy networks and 'food citizenship' act in practice. The project resulted in a digital interactive platform that visualizes about fifty case studies and is available online.

In the second chapter, **Peter Simonič** writes about different ideologies and practices of solidarity that have appeared throughout human history. The author discusses current developments in the field of solidarity economies and presents the disposition of its different manifestations. He elaborates on dominant and influential ideas and confronts them with recent and ongoing socioeconomic phenomena, frameworks and structures, such as neoliberal, post-socialist and post-industrial.

In the following five chapters, collaborators on the project SOLIDARan present the results of their individual ethnographic research resulting from the project.

Nataša Bokan presents the case study of the NGO *Prospero* and its social entrepreneurship in the rural periphery of the Lika County in Croatia. The author analyses how rural women employment and socially responsible production became the driving forces of significant social changes in the local community. The ethnographic research also demonstrated how the solidarity economy could unlock the perspective of socially excluded classes in the rural periphery.

Orlanda Obad writes about the gendered approach to solidarity economy arguing that women form the majority of employees in many cooperative branches and participate at the forefront position in the solidarity economy. The author presents insights from her ethnographic research of few organizations and initiatives of the solidarity economy in Croatia and, by giving various examples from the interviews, problematizes concepts of solidarity and empathy.

Mirna Jernej Pulić explores the role of several local civil society organizations and community-led initiatives in fostering social and solidarity economy (SSE) within a unique participatory governance model of the Community Centre Rojc in Pula (Croatia). Based on ethnographic research, the author presents specific challenges and development perspectives of the local community-led initiatives, emphasizing the importance of Rojc in promoting ideas of solidarity economy within the local community.

Anja Iveković Martinis, based on her ethnographic research in a non-profit association Vestigium, writes about the importance of social support for entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals. Vestigium acts as a neighbourhood community centre in Zagreb, while also providing informal support to small local business owners. The author compares it to coworking spaces and Community-Supported Agriculture groups. The research shows how important mutual support, solidarity among members and a supportive community can be for new or prospective small business owners.

Duga Mavrinac analyses the *Moje mjesto pod Suncem* initiative and its activities that contribute to the potential definitions and conceptualizations of solidarity economy prac-

tices. Based on her ethnographic research (semi-structured interviews with members of the initiative and participant observation), the author concludes that the economy of solidarity could act as a small-scale catalyst for change by creating opportunities, social equity, inspiring hope and offering alternatives and serve as a counterbalance to the social and economic inequalities.

In the following chapter, **Domagoj Račić** and **Paula Damaška** outline a conceptual framework for the process of managing stakeholder networks, developed on the basis of a case study of the Green Energy Cooperative from Croatia. The cooperative was founded to facilitate local communities and citizens in the planning, development and management of renewable energy sources. The authors problematize the lack of legal recognition and insufficient institutional and financial support for social enterprises in Croatia.

Marijana Bokun and **Danijel Baturina** analyze the characteristics, trends and programs of the social entrepreneurship education in Europe and specifically in Croatia.The authors emphasize the importance of the social entrepreneurship education in fostering solidarity, but they also warn of a lack of such education, and reflect on the need for more advocacy and support mechanisms regarding its future development.

In her detailed study, **Lucija Mihaljević** explores how FLOSS communities articulate and enact solidarity, and how their participants express and experience belonging, contribution, and digital consumption. FLOSS communities are often seen as hubs of technical innovation and social experimentation, and the author studies them as spaces of solidarity. The study presents FLOSS communities as quiet but resilient counterpoints to the dominant logics of corporate capitalism, considering them as laboratories of digital solidarity.

Juliana Ajdini and **Rudina Rama** provide an overview of the measures taken by the Municipality of Tirana during the COVID-19 pandemic to assist older persons. In their research, based on literature review of documents outlining measures related to older persons and semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in providing social services, the authors reconsider the concepts of solidarity and cooperation in crisis situations.

Veronika Gamulin presents her research of two still active cooperatives in Velo Grablje at the Island of Hvar (Croatia): The Rosemary cooperative and the Agricultural Cooperative (the lavender oil). The author writes about the efforts of several local individuals to revitalize the local heritage but also the local identity of the unity and a sense of community, while highlighting the problem of tourism and depopulation.

Based on her fieldwork in the *Z. house*, **Petya V. Dimitrova** writes about the origin and development of this coworking and coliving space in the rural area of Bulgaria. The author problematizes coworking practices and the importance of the reciprocal support and solidarity among members of the coworking spaces. The research included semi-structured ethnographic interviews, fieldwork observations and active participation in the communal life of this entrepreneurial project.

Editors

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Exploring 'Solidarity'. Ambivalences and Challenges of an Overexploited Term

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Original scientific paper

Building on ongoing ethnographic research on food heritage and so-called "food citizenship" in Europe, as well as drawing on the comparative ethnographic framework of the *Food Citizens?* project, this chapter proposes a critical exploration of "solidarity" as a socio-anthropological notion in solidarity economy and collective food procurement in particular.[1] The ethnographic part therefore limits itself to an exploration of solidarity in food procurement, leaving further research to broader considerations about solidarity in, for example, the sharing economy in general, or how financialization of mutuality may disrupt social constructions of reciprocity and care in e.g. medical services.[2]

Collective food procurement comprises initiatives that aim - in diverse and even conflicting manners - at achieving sustainability, social inclusion, and a fairer circulation of food, addressing for example issues of pollution, labour exploitation, food miles and food's ecological footprint, as well as the downsides of intensive agriculture, capital monopoly over the global food system, etc. As such, collective food procurement falls under the rubric of social and solidarity economy networks. Solidarity works here as an underlying preoccupation that places diverse projects within a common framework, but it is also a civic commitment.

In their daily practice, initiatives such as community gardening, direct food provisioning from local farmers, or food waste recuperation and redistribution, aim not (only) at changing the global food system, but also at addressing and alleviating social, relational, and psychological unease. Often, self-improvement or self-betterment goals deliver socially appreciable results, for example, through socialisation in community gardens. But whether and how this happens depends on the context, histories, habits, and cultural meanings

1 A version of this chapter was delivered as a keynote at the "Practicing Solidarity for the Future" conference (Zagreb, 14-16 September 2023) of the project "Solidarity economy in Croatia: anthropological perspective" (SOLIDARan). I wish to thank the PI Olga Orlić for her kind invitation and all conference participants. The project 'Food citizens? Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scale' has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 724151).

2 See for example the work of Richard Titmuss (1970) contrasting voluntary vis-à-vis retributed blood donation blood donation on the social and policy aspect of this 'gift relationship'.

that are associated with each specific initiative, which are necessarily rooted in place and positioned vis-à-vis local movements, societal debates, and challenges (including competing visions on solidarity). I will attempt to clarify the complex and sometimes ambivalent undertones of multiple types of solidarity emerging from mainly, but not exclusively, anthropological scholarship, with the goal of contributing to ongoing reflections and conceptualisations of social and solidarity economies in Europe's past, present and future.

I aim to show how solidarity works as an underlying preoccupation that situates diverse initiatives within a common framework, while also representing diverse, sometimes divergent, perspectives and commitments. I will underline three aspects: firstly, a brief contextualization of solidarity economy; secondly, my ethnographic observation of the convergence, however fragile and temporary, between food activists and heritage food producers; thirdly, a critical analysis of food citizenship, followed by the exploration of solidarity in the comparative framework of *Food Citizens?* and interactive platform (or *i-doc*). I will conclude by clarifying some ambivalent undertones of solidarity in collective food procurement.

Is the solidarity economy about 'sharing'?

In 2013, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) organized an important conference on the Potentials and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy. According to the convener Peter Utting, social and solidarity economy (from now on SSE) "is fundamentally about reasserting social control or 'social power' (Wright, 2010) over the economy, by giving primacy to social and environmental objectives above profits, emphasizing the place of ethics in economic activity and rethinking economic practice in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship" (Utting, 2015, p. 7). This is particularly necessary in the face of everyday financialization, namely the permeation of financial products and dependencies into every aspect of everyday and intimate relationships. For example, Erik Bähre, in his recent book on *Insurance and the Financialization of Kinship in South Africa* (2020), calls "ironies of solidarity" the effects of large-scale and abstract forms of solidarities such as insurance on the daily lives and relationships of victims, relatives and heirs, showing how they in turn affect solidarities among family and neighbors. The solutions offered (for example, regarding car accidents) often create new problems. Seeking solutions to those second-order problems keeps the circle of social change in motion under the hegemony of financialization.

Jean-Louis Laville (2015) maps the different stages of SSE: from early nineteenth-century democratic solidarity and associations of collective action; through late nineteenth-century "philanthropic solidarity," which focused on poverty reduction through individual giving; to the resurgence of democratic solidarity in the early and mid-twentieth century, with public authorities tasked with social protection and market regulation. Under neoliberalism, non-profit service delivery or "third sector" organizations expanded, apparently to fill some of the social cracks in the retreating welfare system, but ultimately serving a more palliative than transformative function. In response, SSE extends beyond cooperatives, mutuals, and non-profits to grass-roots organizations and recognizes a "plural economy" and a mix of principles to govern resource allocation and exchange. These *include* the market, as well as redistribution (via the state) and reciprocity (via group solidarity), as identified by Polanyi

(1944). Peter Simonic, in *Anthropological Perspectives of Solidarity and Reciprocity*, reminds us that it was economic anthropology, with the contributions of Malinowski, Mauss, Polanyi, and others that proposed the concept of reciprocity as "a continuum of moral obligations along the processes of exchange." Beyond the market, anthropology "added many examples of human organizations, economies and their indicators" (2019, p. 11).

One example of solidarity economy principles and innovations that have been co-opted and integrated into the capitalist market is the so-called sharing economy, which has been effectively transformed into an even more alienating and extractive form of labor exploitation under the aegis of the "gig economy." We find a clear analysis of this transformation in the above-mentioned UNRISD conference proceedings, *Beyond the Fringe* (2015). Back in 2013, the author Carina Millstone's critique of the "sharing economy" does not mention Uber, but rather Zipcar (a short-term car rental company) and Buzzcar (a peer-to-peer car rental agency), both active in the USA: "These both provide a similar service to members of car-pooling cooperatives, and have clear environmental benefits compared with individual car ownership. However, while car-pooling cooperatives help to build community, a business such as Zipcar does not. The extent to which Buzzcar could help build new digital communities through its use of social media remains to be seen. Unlike car cooperatives, the profits of these businesses accrue to owners, not to member-users" (Millstone, 2015, p. 96). Ultimately, the sharing economy "is leading to the further corporate presence in what has traditionally been a space of opportunity for SSE organizations. Social media provide traditional companies with the social knowledge and networks that were previously accessible only to SSE organizations, thus depriving the latter of one of their core competitive advantages" (Millstone, 2015, p. 97). Just a decade later, we can see how this analysis holds, well beyond car sharing. This illuminating critique helps us remain skeptical of words (such as "sharing"), also with regard to food, and look more in-depth at actual practices, their diversity and ambivalences. In my work, I try to do that with concepts like citizenship and solidarity in regard to food procurement. In what follows, I summarize the significance of notions of solidarity in the "heritage arena" (Grasseni, 2017). This perspective will add to classic economic anthropology texts on social distribution, reciprocity, and the gift (see Malinowski, 1922, Mauss [1925], Polanyi ,1944, and, more recently, Graeber, 2005).

Solidarity in the heritage arena

Under COVID-19, solidarity activism and what I have called the "heritage arena" – namely, the extremely competitive market for traditional foods – converged in intriguing ways (Grasseni, 2022). Due to the pandemic, lockdowns complicated the distribution networks of heritage foods and impeded them to a degree, especially in the case of mountain cheese from the Italian Alpine region, where quality certification and specialist shops have been the main marketing strategy for local products. In Val Taleggio (Lombardy), a cooperative of producers appealed online to local consumers of the province of Bergamo in the name of solidarity. The cheesemakers also connected directly with solidarity economy networks active in the area, who, in turn, self-organized approximately five hundred collective orders within weeks. Previously, Solidarity Purchase Groups had not been interested in

heirloom productions, especially when marketed as niche by perceived elitist circles such as Slow Food (Grasseni, 2020).

By and large, "food activists" wish to express and practice solidarity with food producers, including heritage and small-scale farmers and breeders, who adhere to certain values (for example, small-scale, ecological sustainability, animal welfare, fiscal transparency, etc.; see Counihan and Siniscalchi, 2013). Food producers, on the other hand, compete for premium prices on the market, using notions of excellence, authenticity, and singularity, particularly within the context of the European system for Protected Designations of Origin (Grasseni, 2017). Solidarity activists, however, are not necessarily moved *per se* by the distinctive quality or cultural heritage of the food their local territories produce. Vice versa, if not disdained, alternative food networks are often overlooked in the glossy brochures that instead tend to celebrate the distinction and excellence of culinary production. Also, in terms of lifestyles, social networks, and personal connections, there is little convergence between the entrepreneurial world of PDO consortia and producers' associations on the one hand, and the food activists and critical consumers engaging in direct and short food chains on the other.

However, the pandemic emergency urged an open and non-elitist communication strategy to broaden and diversify distribution channels, which was also emphasized and enabled by the local (digital) press. Perhaps it was just luck that, just as COVID was breaking out in Bergamo, the cheesemakers of the *Strachitunt* consortium happened to hold a conference in Val Taleggio bringing together representatives of Bergamo's solidarity economy networks and local cheese consortia. Thanks also to my invited contribution to the conference organization, on the eve of lockdown, these speakers and conference participants wove networks which turned out to be crucial just one month later. The breakdown of logistics under lockdown brought new understandings of local productive agricultural landscapes as a valued resource. Now, marketing had to compromise with the language and practice of solidarity economy. As a result, the semantics of "heritage cheese" shifted in this period, from one of mountain cheese as "dairy excellence" to one of mountain cheese as "genuine, local, produced by farmers close-by and in need of help" (Grasseni, 2022). The solidarity groups, who literally bought this semantics of proximity and thus began to support local economies, were driven by processes of identification with the popular roots of mountain cheese rather than its distinction.

However, this emotional identification with local foods glosses over the contradiction that heritage foods would embody folk knowledge, as well as the ecologies and histories of local territories, but have sometimes become inaccessible to popular consumption because of their price, niche availability, and a marketing style based on social distinction. While this is often the only viable strategy for a sustainable business in the highly competitive and often evanescent market of the "heritage arena," it makes it all the more pertinent to evaluate the potentials and limits of the convergence of socio-economic actors coming from these diverse networks and philosophies, supporting each other in times of urgency, as happened during the COVID pandemic, but so far not changing the nature of their relations as market relationship (see Strasser, 2003).

Just as we observed with the sharing economy, some of this solidarity-driven first wave can be lost to digital marketing, and in any case, it never significantly changed the nature of this market. The producers' appeal to solidarity employed digitally-enabled forms of direct sale, rather than more complex forms of community-supported agriculture or participatory certification, which would require lengthier processes of negotiation and a deeper synergy regarding goals. This is because, as observed by the scholars quoted in the previous section, solidarity economies do "not belong naturally to the world of market relations, but occupy another sphere of human exchange, even when they use market mechanisms to bring benefits to their members and communities. Individual consumption of goods and services procured on the market can seem at odds with the collective, civic character of SSE organizations. In fact, consumption has typically been understood as the opposite of citizenship, with citizenship rooted in communal and local practice whereas consumption is associated with the individual identity, the global and the faraway" (Millstone, 2015, p. 96; Trentmann, 2007). In fact we are reminded that "the consumption of goods and services from large companies does require some abstraction from our civic, social or environmental concerns (due to the externalization of environmental and social impact)" (Millstone, 2015, p. 96). The concept of food citizenship emerged precisely in response to this abstraction, as I will elaborate in the following section.

Food citizenship?

The concept of food citizenship is not about citizenship in the formal sense (i.e., being a citizen of a nation). It arose in the context of literature on ethical consumption (Carrier and Luetchford, 2012), economic solidarity (Ash, 2009), and alternative provisioning (Renting et al., 2012). The appropriation of this expression in the context of solidarity economies is consistent with the emergence of the figure of the so-called "activist citizen" (Isin, 2009) as a result of the transformation of societal understandings of solidarity and ethical engagement. To quote James Carrier, ethical consumers are simply "those whose decisions about what to consume are shaped by their assessment of the moral nature of that context" (Carrier and Luetchford, 2012, p. 1). With "food citizenship" instead, one underlines the active engagement of individuals from a civic point of view in societal relations, especially if food citizenship allows a communal perspective and shared practices, underlying the collective and social aspects of it. The limitation of this approach consists in making "active" citizens responsible for ameliorating the societal (and environmental) evils produced by a capitalist economic system. This is part of the double-sided results of critical consumerism in context of neoliberal hegemonic domination, following an argument inaugurated amongst others by Andrea Muehlebach in *The Moral Neoliberal* (2012). Thus, citizens and consumers, activists and volunteers, each in their own role and each in their own way, take over the moral and practical task of providing services that in a welfare state model would be issued by the state, not as a form of charity but, importantly, as a right of citizens.

The equation of "food citizenship" with various forms of ethical "shopping" is present in early scholarship introducing the expression, limiting "food citizenship" to exercising conscious buying according to values (for example, preference for agroecological products) and consumer's agency, albeit limited by their capacity to so-to-speak "vote with

one's dollar." One problem with it is the fact that it conceptually subsumes a political form of participation under a purely economic act. Additionally, consumers are expected to act more responsibly than those economic actors who inject unethical products into the market economy. By a sheer adjustment of demand and offer, the offer would thus be pressured into becoming more ethical. Easily co-opted by corporate social responsibility schemes, this notion of the citizen-consumer asserts that, for example, food should be viewed primarily as a market commodity, overlooking the cultural and embedded dimensions of food procurement. In other words, the term food citizenship does not encompass nor emphasize the diversity of food-citizen practice in diverse contexts, even among different countries from the same macro-region, such as Europe, which still significantly diverge in terms of trust in the market and in the state, citizenry's associative capacities, and cooperative histories. The project FoodCitizens? addresses and problematizes this diversity as I will explain next.[3]

FoodCitizens? bears a question mark in its title because it sets out to investigate precisely how "food citizenship" would work in practice. If we look into the rhetoric and standard imagery depicting the global food system today, there is very little space for nuance, context, and the sociocultural dimension – namely, for agency, conflict, and relationships among humans and between humans and non-humans. The intuition behind the *Food Citizens?* project is that, by re-introducing these collective and social elements, we would be investigating more than food procurement per se, but also styles of participation among citizens in society.

Even within Europe, collective food procurement extends beyond "sustainability fixes" and techno-scientific imaginaries of "future foods," inevitably reminding us of the diversity of histories, styles of governance, ways of getting by, economic standards, relevant societal debates, and modes of participation. Solidarity, diversity, skill, and scale are the chosen cultural dimensions, or entry points in our project - namely categories of analysis from which to interrogate collective food procurement, in order to answer questions such as: Which skills do people involved in collective food procurement acquire or lack? How do they operate across and within diverse communities? Do their networks scale "up" or "out," and how? How do they interpret and articulate solidarity? To answer these questions empiraclly and comparatively, we began with a definition of "collective food procurement" meant as participation as a group in either the production, distribution, or consumption of food. We investigated this in three cities in particular (Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin) at multiple levels: self-production or foraging (e.g., in urban food gardens, allotments, or *gleaning,* see Varda, 2000; Edwards and Mercer, 2012), short food chains (e.g., through solidarity purchase groups, Grasseni, 2013), and local food governance (e.g., through food councils - see Scherb et al., 2012 - but also NGOs - see Vasile and Grasseni, 2022). At the first level of analysis, "self-production and foraging," a team of

3 The project 'Food citizens? Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scale' has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 724151). A research teamwork composed of Federico De Musso, Ola Gracjasz, Cristina Grasseni, Robin Smith, Maria Vasile and Vincent Walstra concurred to produce an i-doc (interactive platform) and several scientific outputs (www.foodcitizens.eu).

fieldworkers discovered several ways of self-catering, such as through urban gardens, as well as through the collection of waste food by comparable groups such as Food Not Bombs self-organized collectives in multiple cities (see, for example, Gracjasz and Grasseni, 2020).

Before leaving for the field, and upon coming back, we critically engaged with a matrix of identified and potential case studies using questions summarized in a field research protocol. We asked, for example, about the interpretations, practices, and limits of solidarity, questioning how local meanings of solidarity emerge from local histories, how collective food procurement networks are perceived differently in different communities, and which shared imaginaries underlie practices of collective food procurement. For example, we asked how "community gardens" recast allotments in terms of self-sufficiency, gentrification, or social inclusion. Do collective food procurement networks recast direct or informal supply in terms of reciprocity obligations, and if so, how? Are such re-significations embedded in definitions of food culturally appropriate (e.g., as "traditional," "local," or "genuine"), and if so, how? Our conceptualization included both narrative and visual dimensions, resulting in a digital platform that is currently available online through open access. This chapter is also an invitation to visit an interactive platform (i-doc) as an ethnographic repository.[4] Based on our recursive discussions and brainstorming on the ethnographies conducted by Ola Gracjasz, Vincent Walstra and Maria Vasile in the cities of Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin, we chose the most iconic people, places, and events that would allow us to depict our lines of investigation on a digital canvas. The i-doc reproduces the conceptual maps we drew during our collective sessions in digital and multimodal form.

As multiple explorations of the Food Citizens? digital canvas are possible, this case focuses on contrasting examples and meanings of solidarity. Navigation of these three cities is done through icons, designed by Federico De Musso, representing real places where fieldwork took place, including community gardens, allotment gardens, food banks, food aid NGO networks, networks of solidarity economy groups and shops, food markets, innovative food entrepreneurs (such as vegan shops and cafes in Gdańsk and the Fenix Food Factory in Rotterdam), food cooperatives, and online delivery platforms among others. By clicking on the icons, one can browse sixty videos, seventy photo slideshows, ten sound files (soundscapes and interviews), and ten text documents gathered during fieldwork. Each field location is described with a short text and multimedia attachments. Four-color lines connect each location thematically with others, both within the same city and in the other two. These thematic connections explore the dimensions of solidarity (what does solidarity mean for this initiative?), diversity (how do they interpret and act

4 The Food Citizens? i-doc (https://www.foodcitizens.eu/idoc/) visualizes about fifty case studies which are identifiable as icons on a map. It is an interactive platform that can be navigated online (please use Firefox as a browser). This imaginary canvas, designed by Federico De Musso, ideally connects Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin in a single cartographic space. This is crossed by a single imaginary river which symbolizes the important waterways marking the landscape and topography of each city, namely the Vistula and the seawaters of the Hanseatic port of Gdańsk on the Baltic sea, the Rhine/Meuse estuary in Rotterdam, and the Dora, Stura, Sangone and Po rivers conjoining in Turin.

upon diversity?), skill (which skills are learnt and taught and to whom?) and scale (can and do these initiatives scale "up" or "out," and why?) of the case studies. These are the four categories we used to juxtapose and contrast cases, in order to create a comparative analysis connecting real people, places, and networks we encountered ethnographically. The complexity and ambivalences of the concepts explored (e.g., "solidarity") are then revealed by acknowledging that such concepts are identified differently by different actors.

With a 4-switch digital dial, one can choose which category one wishes to investigate between solidarity, diversity, skill, and scale (De Musso, 2022). For example, *Orti Generali* is an urban gardening project born in 2019 in Southern Turin as part of broader plans for urban renewal in neighborhoods affected by the FIAT downsizing.[5] Many volunteers were involved in the reorganization of a green public area previously considered semi-abandoned or unmanaged. Now it offers 160 individual allotments for rent as well as shared gardening and recreational spaces, including a didactic farm. While opening up opportunities (for gardening, social relations, and events), the food garden also lives an ambivalent dialectic between imposing management standards and developing an inclusive governance. This is a difficult endeavor because the management aims to either subsume or replace the spontaneous gardens tended in unlicensed allotments on the same plot of land and in the surrounding area. Gardening along streams, rural roads, and railway lines is formally illegal yet widespread practice in Turin. This phenomenon grew particularly in the 1970s, as a result of the increase in urban population due to industrial development and internal migration. The new city residents included factory workers from rural southern Italy, many of whom developed urban gardens for both subsistence and recreation (Vasile, 2021). Among others, more than 300 spontaneous gardens still exist in the vicinity of *Orti Generali*. The argument Maria Vasile makes in her Ph.D. thesis, based on her ethnographic study of this development site, is that solidarity is expected in the form of voluntary work – in this case, in the form of principled participation in projects of urban renewal – the governance of which remains, however, one-sided (Vasile, 2023). In Turin, as elsewhere, solidarity and community building emerge differently in different gardens. For example, *il Boschetto* is a social garden in North Turin comprising around twenty individual allotments encircled by high-rise social housing. This social garden hosts agroecological gardening, social inclusion, and educational activities, and is managed both by an NGO and directly by its gardeners on a daily basis. They organize social events, including food and community gatherings, as well as presentations about sustainable urban practices targeted to the entire neighborhood. Compared with *Orti Generali*, *il Boschetto* is smaller, prioritizes self-managing practices, and involves only local inhabitants. At *il Boschetto*, neighborly solidarity is more self-organized and enacted as cooperation, mostly among gardeners but even for people who live nearby.

In other urban gardens elsewhere, solidarity is experienced as a form of diffused sociality. For example, gardening in Rotterdam's social garden *GroenGoed* (virtually linked and

5 For the urban gardening projects *Orti Generali* and *il Boschetto,* and spontaneous gardens in Southern Turin, the *Food Citizens?* i-doc provides videos, photo slides, soundscapes and textual documentation (https://www.foodcitizens.eu/idoc/). The summary of the cases I offer in this paragraph is paraphrasing the texts appearing in the i-doc and authored by Maria Vasile and Federico De Musso.

compared to *Orti Generali,* in terms of similarities and differences, through the i-doc navigation) is experienced as a tool for sociality. Participants are encouraged to look for collaborations and group activities beyond individual plots, unlike the norm in individual allotments (*volkstuinen* or allotment gardens). Additionally, in other Dutch initiatives involving urban social gardens, we find a similar concern for neighborly relations and a collective experience defining solidarity (Walstra, 2021). This differs from the average allotment gardens, which are individually allocated by the municipal government and are usually tended in a strictly private manner by individuals or families, either as production gardens for self-provisioning or as recreation space in lieu of a home garden.[6] One can speak of top-down solidarity because access to the scarce number of municipal allotments is granted by the municipality (for example, based on income), similarly to how, for example, access to social services and aid is bureaucratically regulated. For example, access to the *Food Bank* in Gdańsk is dependent on income and regulated in detail by municipality social services, who operate the food bank on a token system. We can distinguish this kind of bureaucratic solidarity from the anarchist, activist solidarity of *Food Not Bombs,* who, for example, in Gdansk and Turin, see solidarity as a form of egalitarian redistribution and not as a meritocracy. *Food Not Bombs* provides universal access to their free meals, cooked with waste vegetables gathered for free by the food activists in fresh food markets after the hours of trade (Gracjasz, 2020).

Concluding

After an initial contextualization of solidarity economy literature and a reflection on how it differs from purely market relations, including the so-called "sharing economy," I considered the multiple potential convergences between solidarity economy networks and local producers, specifically those involved in the production of heritage foods. Both share a commitment to transparent chains of production and distribution, both recognize the added value of local foods, and pledge to find ways to compensate their producers through fair prices. Both indicate the higher cultural and environmental sustainability of localized food production systems and aim to provide a protected environment for local economies to thrive while benefiting their communities and constituencies as a form of solidarity. The ways they go about this goal, however, largely diverge. Heritage marketing operates through circuits of added value creation, utilizing certifications, geographical indications, and premium pricing. On the other hand, solidarity economy networks tend to operate through grassroots circuits of critical consumption. How do solidarity economy networks decide with whom to act in solidarity, and what does it mean in practice? To answer these questions, it seems important to take stock of the many nuances and understandings of solidarity in actual practices (the third part of the chapter), behind and perhaps beyond umbrella terms that are trendy in scholarship and movements, such as "food citizenship." Through the food-citizens i-doc, we have tried as a team to combine ethnography in three sites to highlight at least some of these juxtapositions and discrepancies while sharing them with a broader public. So "solidarity" can be enacted in rather top-down ways, through bureaucracies or NGO-promoted volunteerism morality, but can also emerge

6 The summary I offer in this paragraph and the following one, of the case studies Groen Goed, Food Bank Gdańsk and Food Not Bombs, is based on the texts appearing in the i-doc and authored by Federico De Musso, Ola Gracjasz, and Vincent Walstra.

from neighborly relations and feed back into them. However, proximity per se does not cultivate solidarity and does not necessarily play a role in superseding market relations.

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Human Solidarity Economies. From Dualism to Polyvalency

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Introduction

The ideologies and practices of solidarity that are attractive to society and anthropology today are not new, but have appeared throughout history in different forms, at different latitudes and longitudes, with different ontologies; they can reinforce each other or be in conflict. When anthropology deals with different forms of sociality, it should be interested in the socio-ecological conditions and contexts of their emergence, their arguments and practices, and their transformative power. The author discusses current developments in the field of solidarity economies against the background of past crises in European society. The analysis shows various mechanisms that can be used for a comparative study of solidarity economies.

Polyvalent solidarity

The concept of solidarity encompasses various social practices and draws on different epistemologies and ideologies that respond to social asymmetries. It can include state redistribution through taxation, social and health policies, various types of charity, kinship relations, neighborhood and local assistance, local food supply, altruistic contributions and political support, social policies, concessions, grants, funds, food, clothing, social entrepreneurship, sponsorship, and NGOs. The concept of solidarity is thus ambivalent (Smith and Grasseni, 2020) or polyvalent (Brunkhorst, 2005 [2002]) in its essence.

"The history of solidarity is however, older than the egalitarian and democratic definition of the term. The word itself has Latin origins, where it refers to cooperative liability [*Haftungsgenossenschaft*] within civil law. Unlike brotherliness, which was originally familial but had already been detached from blood relations by Christianity and extended to the brotherhood of all Christians/human beings, solidarity is originally a legal concept." (Brunkhorst, 2005, pp. 1-2).

One of the narrower definitions of civic solidarity focuses on the practical co-operation and support of people in a smaller geographical area. It is referred to as *solidarity economy* (Gregorčič, Babič and Kozinc, 2018; Kawano, Masterson and Teller-Elsberg, 2009; Orlić, 2014), *participatory, collaborative or sharing economy* (Simonič, 2019a; Travlou and Ciolfi, 2022), *social economy* (Ash, 2009; Everling, 1997; Gosar, 1924), also *moral economy* (Mau, 2004; Scott, 1977; Thompson, 1971; Tripp, 2006). The more enterprising scholars add *social entrepreneurship* to this bouquet of names and concepts (Defourny

and Nyssens, 2021 [2001]; Nicholls, 2006). Solidarity, cooperation, and morality characterize a particular domain of economic practices that stand in opposition to or in addition to the dominant economic starting points and models (entrepreneurship, corporatism, financialization, private accumulation, wages). Of course, this is not entirely realistic either ethnographically (the intertwining of human economic activities of different legal forms) or theoretically, since we ideologically attribute the characteristic of solidarity only to a selected sphere of the economy, rather than reflecting on the extent and types of solidarities, the historical circumstances and forces of their formation and dissolution, their ideas and actions, ideologues and members, etc. The entire field of human economic practices, attitudes, and theories should encompass the so-called *human economy*, which has a new anthropological theoretical and moral foundation (Hart, Laville and Cattani, 2010).

At the beginning of the 21st century, the solidarity economy was associated with social movements that opposed economic centralization, liberalism, and egoism as well as value dualism, which assigned a subordinate role to contractual or solidarity economies ("alternatives"). Ecological considerations also became particularly important. The anthropology of business and entrepreneurship, for example, went in the completely opposite direction, analyzing individual and corporate interventions in social reality and their changes in line with the neoliberal zeitgeist. We can analyze corporate environments as (interest) communities and write ethnographies about them (Capricorn, 2018, 2023; Rosa and Douglas Caulkins, 2013; cf. Schumpeter, 2021 [1911]).

The concepts of the solidarity economy differ from one another depending on the theoretical rejection of the prevailing political-economic model, the social position of its members and the various practical conditions under which they function. In principle, modern solidarity economies are a combination of civil society movements and social science and humanist thinkers, including sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, and psychologists. Only a few economists are to be found here (Simonič, 2023).

In the article, I present the disposition of different manifestations of "solidarity economies." I consider them as different "spatio-temporal realities" in the life course of societies, communities, and individuals. They occur sporadically yet persistently, at various levels of society and often with different ideological backgrounds. We have known them since the emergence of humans as social beings, and they became politically conscious, especially in ancient centralized political systems, as a defense of family, lineage, local and other sovereignties, or as a retreat into the "archaic" or "anarchic" (Scott, 2009). What historiography and sociology view as particular historical processes or currents of time should serve in economic and historical anthropology as a starting point for comparing views, practices, socio-ecological conditions, etc. Anthropological theory is an important component of such an analysis.

The article, therefore, aims to identify the structure and layers of anthropological knowledge about solidarity economies. What comparisons can be drawn from the available ethnographic fragments? The material comes partly from the literature and partly from my own ethnographic work in the fields of solidarity, reciprocity, economics, politics, and ecology.

Methodological inertia

Susana Narotzky has noted that reciprocity has become one of the fundamental characteristics of economic anthropology (Narotzky, 2007). It has become the central value category that distinguishes economic anthropology from classical economics. The focus of economic anthropologists has been on face-to-face social relationships or communities, on "reciprocity," "embeddedness," or, at the very least, "social capital." As this is a field that is neither individualistic (economic) nor nationalistic (sociological), but somewhere in between – at the level of kinship, local and other collective (civil) society - "reciprocity," "embeddedness," and "social capital" could be defined as distinguishing features and even as a kind of political project of the anthropological "third way." It is not the third way of social democracy redefined by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (2008 [1988]; on the economic collapse of socialism and the new compromise between labor and capital, therefore required in Europe). It is not a third way in the international Non-Aligned movement after the Second World War (Jakovina, 2011; Lamberger Khatib, 2009; Predan and Tepina, 2023; against two political blocs after the Second World War and solidarity [exchange] among the members of the movement). It is not a third way in the sense of bourgeois civil society (Hann and Dunn, 1996), nor is it a third way in the sense of the modern ecological contribution to nineteenth-century (class) critique (Eckersley, 2004). And yet the path of economic anthropology often overlaps morally and theoretically with the above interpretations of thirdness.

The second inertia relates to the localization of the object of research in an imagined dualistic social system. At the beginning of the 20th century, anthropology translated the sociological (national) concept of *solidarity* (Tönnies, 2001 [1887]; Durkheim, 1984 [1893]) into (communal) *reciprocity*. For Mauss (1966 [1925]), solidarity can arise either through contractual agreements of individualized societies through market exchange or through the gift-giving of mostly non-European, primitive, *stateless societies*. Economic anthropology followed the concept of reciprocity – a continuum of moral obligations along exchange processes that differs from the unison prevailing (neo)classical economics (Malinowski, 2002 [1922]; Mauss, 1966 [1925]; Lévi-Strauss, 2015 [1955]; Polanyi, 1957; Sahlins, 1972).

Folklore, ethnology, and anthropology emerged as sciences about the overlooked yet important subjects of state or colonial (imperial) power. Their diversity was linked by a "view from below," a view of people's lives, identities, psychology, and, later, their mass culture, everyday life, and the like, in relation to or in opposition to the state or high culture. "Histories from below" reveal various social processes that circumvent or oppose the dominant discourses and centers of power, even if they are in proactive communication with them. Such a starting point naturally brought political and economic anthropology close to social theories and movements, including *Proudhonism, Marxism, anarchism, mutualism (solidarisme), familiarism, re-evangelization, feminism, autonomism, subalternity, multitude,* and the *revival of the commons*, among others.

Ethnography has traditionally focused on smaller groups and their relationships, both outside and within larger centralized social systems (Greaber, 2004). The relationships between (sub)systems change throughout history. Their agency occurs not only within

the current society but also in the synthesis of past or foreign ideas, vocabularies, and practices. Solidarity economies are institutions with codified memories. In this article, I have attempted to emphasize the application of old ideas by presenting the material in a retrograde way. We move from the present to the past to show the referential and practical overlaps between old and new forms of solidarity economies.

Economic crisis 2008

The global economic crisis was a result of the growth of speculative capital and the "property bubble" in the United States of America. The course for both crises was set by the oil crisis, the liberalization of financial markets, and the rise of the debt economy in the early 1970s, and later also by the industrial rise of China (Harvey, 2005; Lapavitsas, 2009; Lazzarato, 2012; Štiblar, 2008; Varoufakis, 2011).

After the collapse of the stock market due to the insolvency of the banks, these received extensive aid from the state or taxpayers ("bailouts"), while on the other hand, wage and social policies ("austerity," divestments, etc.) and economic policies (precarization) were introduced (Mattei, 2022). The process of digitalization and automation of production, administration, and other communication processes also increased the pressure on citizens' employment, livelihoods, and political opportunities (Graeber, 2015; Podjed, 2019). The economic rationality of the Western world increasingly centralized food supply chains for the needs of the urbanized world population, bought land and housing as investments, managed seeds, water, urban centers ("gentrification") and, in short, included more and more previously public or less protected goods in global commodity valuation and exchange (Bollier, 2014). The common good based on a shared consensus gave way to selfishness, which was ultimately intended to benefit everyone economically (Smith, 2007 [1776]; Hann and Hart, 2009). In the eyes of social critics, society disintegrated into atomized, competitive, and tricky individuals, companies, and states ("game theory"). National laws around the world have adapted to the neoliberal rationality of the world's largest economy, the US, by lowering the tax burden on corporations and reducing or slowing the growth of the value of labor.

Although the crisis statistically increased the unemployment rate, on the other hand, it showed that people survived the crisis with various (additional) informal forms of income: working without contracts, in the garden and at home, returning to the parental household, helping relatives and neighbors, etc., which raised awareness of the contrast between work recognized by the market and other unrecognized, unremunerated forms of engagement and creativity (Narotzky, 2018). They can also be important and even necessary in a crisis, for citizens to survive, and for the state as social relief and economic revitalization (Gregorčič, Babič and Kozinc, 2018; Hart, Laville and Cattani, 2010; Hosaralmo Collective, 2019; Poljak Istenič, 2018; Rakopoulos, 2018; Rosa and Caulkins, 2013). Social insecurity encouraged the search for alternative solutions, which is why participatory political, economic, and ecological movements sprang up like mushrooms. As these *utopias* or *heterotopias* were often inspired by models from the past, Zygmund Bauman (2018) referred to them as *retrotopias*.

The economic crisis has strained relations between the North, South, East, and West of Europe, which are interdependent but have distinct historical, political, and economic backgrounds and goals, resulting in a crisis of European solidarity. The centers of capital in Berlin, Paris, and London exacerbated the crisis in the South and East through their insistence on established financial flows, making the search for alternatives particularly lively in these regions (cooperatives, local food supply, political reorientation). At the political level, discontent also fueled the rise of various national authoritarian leaders in Europe (Berberoglu, 2021), and at the economic level, the European systemic promotion of entrepreneurship and active citizenship (Biesta, 2011; Kozorog, 2023).

The severity of the post-2008 crisis is evidenced by the Nobel Prize in Economics awarded to Elenor Ostrom in 2009 for her research on the *commons* (Ostrom, 2003, 2009). She developed her theory using Robert Netting's cultural ecology in the Swiss Alps (1981) to demonstrate the feasibility and sustainability of managing small commons. Not long before, Western political economy had rejected this theory (Hayek, 1958 [1948]; Hardin, 1968).

Even if the social need and sociological interest in solidarity and self-managed solidarity economies were exceptional, they were short-lived and died out as soon as the economic crisis ended or as people adapted to the new reality. A comparison between cooperatives and digital start-ups in Maribor (Slovenia) from 2008 to 2021 has shown that cooperatives received only temporary political and financial support, while the start-up movement also had global business support and numerous EU funding mechanisms. Thus, even if (supra) national legislation in the crisis comes closer to the normative equality of individual and solidarity enterprises, the problem of their investment attractiveness, growth potential, global transfers in ownership and, last but not least, the ethics of their members socialized by the dualistic school system and mass media remains (Simonič, 2021). A fundamental problem arises as soon as a voluntary association of individuals is transformed into an economic and market-based entity that is to be governed by commercial law rather than civil law (Babič, 2018).

The welfare state

The experiences of the First and Second World Wars led to the establishment of social democracy in most European countries. Social democracy and the welfare states in the parliamentary democracies of Western Europe were a response to the more radical demands of the Marxists and Communists, which intensified after the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. After the end of the Second World War, a new balance had to be found. At the same time, a larger group of socialist countries formed in Eastern Europe, and a fascist group in the south (Portugal, Spain, Greece).

The need for labor due to the reconstruction of Western Europe after the war, the threat of a socialist revolution in Western Europe, and the liberation movements in the colonies intensified the processes of social (state) solidarity, i.e., a conscious confrontation with the contradictions between the interests of capital and labor. At the system level, social democracy ensured redistribution in areas such as housing, scholarships, schools, scientific, health and cultural institutions, pension funds, infrastructure, leisure, holidays, and coun-

try houses. At the same time, the state steered the development of the various economic sectors. Such policies ensured social peace and, at the same time, a sense of general social progress (the capitalist "welfare state"). (Keynes, 2013 [1937]; Edgar and Russell, 2005 [1998]; Gough, 1979; Mau, 2004; Piketty, 2020). Important for our discussion is the fact that solidarity has become a valued feature of centralized Western European states, not just their (alternative) subsystems, groups, and kinships. Indeed, the political-economic system has removed the obstacles to its functioning, at least declaratively. As a result, after the Second World War, interest in gardening declined due to higher standards in Western Europe. Meanwhile, workers in Eastern Europe, where industrialization was on the rise at the time, supplemented their diet and nourished rural nostalgia with urban gardens or second homes – dachas (Rusanov, 2019).

In the authoritarian regimes of southern Europe, production and redistribution were also centralized. The Spanish state maintained a close relationship with the church and industry. A particularly interesting result of this often-overlooked connection is the Basque social cooperative corporation Mondragón, which holds significant economic and political relevance in its relations among members and in the relationship of the ethnic group to the Spanish central authority and the Catholic Church (Bradley and Gelb, 1983; Kasmir, 1996).

In Eastern Europe, socialism or state communitarianism prevailed, which intervened in property, the means of production, social and economic planning, and social redistribution. The desire for a radical transformation of social relations led to the creation of a highly centralized state that, at least declaratively, was collectivist in its thinking at all levels; from agricultural and industrial enterprises to schools, communities, sports, and rituals (Čepič, 2010; Hann, 1993; Humphrey, 1983; Lane, 1981).

With the introduction of legislated neoliberal policies in the early 1980s in the United States and later in Western and Central Europe, the welfare state began to disintegrate. The process of post-socialist transition in Eastern European countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 thus coincided with the accelerated neoliberal transition in the core countries of the European Union.

During this period, research on hunter-gatherers (Lee and DeVore, 2009 [1968]) as the original "affluent societies" (Sahlins, 1972) was developed in light of the critique of Western modernity. And let us not forget the substantivist Karl Polanyi, who explicitly compared the principles of market integration of states and reciprocal (solidarity) mechanisms (Polanyi, 1957). On the other hand, there is the tragedy of Hardin (1968), who theoretically defended the privatization of everything in contemporary society.

Among the particular social experiments, some so-called socialist projects are worth mentioning. One example is self-government in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was based on the third way - neither national nor private, but social (Duda, 2023; Kardelj, 1980; Toplak, 2019). Or the colonization of Palestinian land that took place under the first socialist Israeli government of David Ben-Gurion. Jewish kibbutzim teach us how important agrarian (mutual) community ties can be during the establishment of the

nation-state (Pappé, 2006; Spiro, 1956), and how these ties change and dissolve (Spiro, 2004).

In my own research, I chose to compare the theory and practice of housing cooperatives in Maribor during and after socialism (Simonič, 2015). The analysis showed that the socialist state promoted and protected cooperatives through financial and spatial laws, whereas the transitional and liberalized state completely withdrew from the real estate market, transferring the responsibility entirely to individuals and their relationship with banks (mortgage loans). Community rationalty also influenced socialist architecture, as well as the design of functional neighbourhoods (Simonič, 2015). Another study focused on an agricultural cooperative in the Indian state of Maharashtra, in the area between the cities of Pune and Kolhapur. There, too, it became clear how important the cooperatives of small sugar cane farmers were for the construction of Indian and Maharashtrian sovereignty, how they were linked to the Yugoslav experiment, how they transformed and preserved the caste system, and how they collapsed again with the neoliberal reforms in India in the 1990s (Simonič, 2014).

Around the First World War

Much has been written about the political and economic causes of the First World War and the subsequent "economic crisis" of 1929. Monopolism, technological development, colonialism, imperialism, protectionism, and similar accelerated processes from the 19th century have been cited as reasons (Coolidge, 1919; Lenin, 1958 [1916]; Polany, 2001 [1944]; Taylor, 1948).

For social and cultural anthropology, the period before and after the First World War was a time of theoretical and scientific constitution. Classic works on solidarity, pre- and market-economy relations, and morality were written during this period (Malinowski, 2002 [1922]; Mauss, 1966 [1925]). Institutions and the integration of isolated, non-European cultures were at the center of interest. Socialism, fascism, and the American New Deal were described as collectivist state projects that collided with the liberal principles of laissez-faire "because the market society did not work" (Polanyi, 2001, p. 248).

Mauss advocated the "third way" of economic anthropology (against statism and egoism) and therefore supported the co-operative movement in his time, as it was more akin to kinship relationships and established local cooperation. With regard to social insurance in France and in the socialist (Soviet) state, he notes that it provides security for people who dedicate part of their lives to the prosperity of the community (welfare); he had a similarly favorable opinion of trade unions and consumer cooperatives that emerged in the second half of the 19th century. In short, until then, economists had mostly overlooked or neglected mutuality and exchange between families, clans, and tribes. They mainly pursued the principle of (material) utility – called utilitarianism in English philosophy (Mauss, 1966 (1925), pp. 67-70; Graeber, 2001, pp. 151-228). The young British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown was first known as "Anarchy Brown" and became interested in "stateless societies" later in his academic career (Graeber, 2004, p. 16; cf. Boas, 1897).

The Slovenian Christian Socialist Andrej Gosar took up J.E. Krek's debate from the 19th century (see below) and came to the conclusion that there can be no universally valid system of self-government (such as cooperatives), but that each state must be organized according to its specific conditions; for the best state system is the one that enables as much individual and public prosperity as possible. In the middle between the two extremes – between private property and non–property - cooperatives in particular have established themselves in modern times, tending towards a common economy based on the free cooperation of members (Gosar, 1924; 1994 [1933]). Gosar, who was revived after the 2008 crisis, regarded self-government and democracy as antipodes, since "local authority is as primordial as the state" (Gosar, 1994 [1933], p. 213; Toplak, 2019, p. 102). In the Soviet Union, this dilemma manifested itself in a highly authoritarian manner, stimulating the establishment of socialist cooperatives in Eastern Europe, but also influencing their bad reputation today (Simonič, 2019b).

The 19th century

The 19th century brought decisive capitalist change, increased rural-urban migration, the development of industry, the natural and social sciences, and the emergence of nation-states and heritages. (Hobsbawm, 1975, 1987, 1992). Imagined national communities offered belonging and economic protection (protectionist markets: Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary (Anderson, 1998 [1983]; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Giraud, 2006 [1996], pp. 89-117).

Among the more important authors of anarchist ("non-state") literature in the second half of the century, I single out the Russians Mikhail Bakunin (1970 [1871]) and Peter Kropotkin (1969 [1896]; 1912 [1898]; 1972 [1902]). There are also earlier "socialist," "anarchist," or "self-governing" proposals from the first half of the 19th century: Pierre Joseph Proudhon (in defense of small property, against centralized currencies, abolition of the state), Charles Fourier (self-governing cooperatives, phalansteries of 1,620 people) and Henry Saint-Simon (communitarianism) (Polanyi, 2001, p. 111; Toplak, 2019, pp. 99-102). European urbanization and colonialism generally led to the collapse of traditional values, solidarity, and mutual participation in non-European communities.

At the end of the 19th century, the Slovenian Catholic socialist Janez Evangelist Krek skillfully described the changes and consequences of modern agricultural policy in many European countries in his book *Črne bukve kmečkega stanu* (Black Books of the Peasants, 1885). He was particularly interested in European peasant cooperatives and advocated the establishment of cooperatives and loan companies in Carniola to give peasants the opportunity to defend themselves against the influence of large landowners and financial capital (e.g., the indebtedness of peasants, expropriation of property). On the other hand, urbanization and industrialization favored the formation of trade unions and workers' consumer cooperatives. Take, for example, the solidarity in the Paris Commune of 1871, one of the mythological high points of the European labor movement (Marx, 1979 [1871]).

The 19th century is also a time of American Protestant settler colonies and the arrival of European Anabaptist communities in the United States of America (Amish, Hutterites; Bennet, 1976). The first groups of Jewish colonists also appear in Palestine (Pappe, 2006).

The 19th century in the United States was generally favorable for the formation of colonies and various informal associations of young Protestant men. Informal associations helped immigrants integrate into their new environment. There were numerous secret societies such as the Temperance Society, the Know-Nothings, Nativism, Mormonism, the Copperhead Societies, the Veterans' Organization, the Ku Klux Klan, the Grangers, the Insurance Societies, the Knights of Labor, and others. There were different levels of admission. For membership dues, ritual events, uniforms, banquets, and travel, some spent $200 a year, while industrial workers earned about $500 in the same period. The interest in membership of lodges – another form of solidarity economy – is said to have been brought over from Europe (Carnes, 1989).

The Swedish sociologist Steinar Stjernø summarized that the 19th century in Europe was a time of three overlapping solidarities: national, religious, and class solidarity. Each of them promoted its own ideology, society, and infrastructure (Stjernø, 2004). Their realization depended on the power of institutions and individuals within a particular European environment (e.g., ritual or economic orientation; urban or rural; industrial-commercial, local-state, etc.).

Nineteenth-century sociology and anthropology expressed the dilemmas between different solidarities through the juxtaposition of tradition and modernity (Durkheim, 1984 [1893]; Maine, 1963 [1861]; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Tönnies, 2001 [1887]). The positions also influenced the academic division of labor between sociology, orientalism, and anthropology/ethnology (Wallerstein, 2006, pp. 1-11): the first two at the level of occidental and oriental civilizations, the third at the level of "folklore" and "ethnology" – communities of social ground and borders.

The comparative solidarity economy is a human economy

The further we go back into the (European) past, the less the small-scale, solidary, and collaborative practices of economic organization are seen as intentional groups for changing capitalism (Bürger; Brunkhorst), but are rather perceived as basic social structures at the level of kinship, village, and even guild (professional) cooperation and solidarity. This process contradicts the logic of the anthropology of complex systems and globalization. This is why cooperatives emerged so massively in the 19th century, as they represent a social contract between participants for their common economic goals in the market. Before the second half of the 19th century, the cooperative was neither conceivable nor legally possible and meaningful because generalized (ancestral local) mutuality and reciprocity (Mauss, 1966 [1925]; Sahlins, 1972) and religious solidarity of feudal estates prevailed. Cooperatives could therefore be compared to earlier capital investments or joint stock companies because they bundle interests in certain legal forms (such as projects or utopias), but their starting points, membership, and the goals of their activities differ.

Dissolved medieval institutions of solidarity may also include the guilds (an important model of economic integration, solidarity, and competition in the Middle Ages, which disintegrated due to the state, market, and internal stratification; Weber, 1950 [1923]: 136-161). However, it should not be forgotten that professional interests today are represented in various chambers, trade unions, and associations.

One of the older forms of extended social solidarity is the Islamic waqf (Begović, 1963; Ghazaleh, 2011): a permanent endowment of property or its proceeds for specifically defined users or purposes, intended to achieve Allah's pleasure. Soon after the death of Muhammad, some people gave away land, houses, wells, livestock, or money to establish waqfs. Today, the waqf is also used for various religious, educational, or charitable purposes, such as supporting pilgrimages, restoring sacred objects, removing graffiti, assisting the gifted or disabled, and protecting the human environment. (Shukrija, 2011). The donor of the waqf cannot revoke his decision; the waqf cannot be sold, given away, or bequeathed. In short, the waqf cannot be commercialized (Begović, 1963, pp. 11-12).

The European religious orders of men and women in mediaeval monasteries can be categorized as small, locally anchored, and solidary economies, religious colonies and possible corporations, which, depending on their mission (Franciscan, Benedictine, Cistercian, etc.), had a greater or lesser influence on the development of the surrounding agriculture and horticulture, literacy, cultural community, and landscape (Rebić, Bajt and Kocjan-Barle, 2007). In connection with the inherited medieval solidarity institutions, I would also like to mention the ecclesiastical brotherhoods in Dalmatia, which had various competencies but were essentially intended for the ideological and economic integration of rural communities (Čoralić, 1991) through their common saints and life circles, granaries, oil presses, etc. Today, they are mostly active in the field of cultural tourism.

The family or household has remained the fundamental social institution of solidarity throughout the centuries, even as its composition and role have changed over time. I would like to highlight the significance of the family business in the wake of the capitalist nation-state in Northern Europe (Smith, 2007), which was later replaced by corporate and global enterprises. In Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece), small family businesses are more widespread today.

Given the lesser extent of urbanization, most of the world's population before industrialization was organized in village communities with typical neighborhood assistance and at least a share of common land, pasture, forest, and sacred and profane buildings; not without the use of currency (livestock, salted fish, mate, shellfish), but mainly with little or no monetary exchange organized through large banking systems (Einzig, 1966 [1949]).

Polanyi (2001 [1944]) described the modern trend of *enclosure of the commons* in England, and David Bollier (2015) updated it for modern American readers: from the enclosure of land to the privatization of water and seeds, the banning of traditional forms of health treatment, food corporatism, copyright, and locked databases. In this context, Marx wrote about primordial or primitive accumulation, which took place in various forms across different parts of the world wherever people encountered capitalist logic. The process involved "comprador elites", violence, expropriation, and privatization (Marx, 2012 [1867], pp. 585-622; see Polanyi, 2001 [1944]; Hann and Hart 2009). When the principle of private property, administration, and accumulation is consolidated and enshrined in law, it becomes a self-evident and dominant component of nation-states.

Solidarity is a fundamental characteristic of every social and economic system, but it is interpreted and implemented differently. It can focus on resources, production, exchange,

or consumption, as solidarity models or projects address different segments of economic and social reproduction. They can be linked to the immediate living environment or (statistically) invented; they can emerge from different forms of ownership; they can be ecologically sustainable or not; they can be European or non-European; agricultural or industrial, rural or urban, old or new, in the form of donation or redistribution, etc. They take place at different levels of social organization, from the household to the European Union. Anthropology should therefore overcome its own scientific inertia and ideological oppositions and ask itself what different groups of people, linked by interests, property, production, goods, kinship, ethnicity, language, or otherwise, do to secure their existence.

Anthropology today all too often reproduces modern (Cartesian) dualism. One always rules over the other (mind-body, culture-nature, male-female, etc.). The dualisms are hierarchically structured, which has social, ecological, and political consequences: the privileging of a class, a sexuality (Derrida, 1981), and, let us add, a dominant form of solidarity economy (entrepreneurship, corporatism, nationalism). Activists and solidarity economic anthropologists take the moral side of the underprivileged. Moving from moral dualism to duality – to the recognition of contradictions, but not in their hierarchization but in their complementarity (Escobar, 2018; cf. Granet, 2007 [1933]) – would allow us to disseminate different solidarity economies in a horizontal and comparative arrangement from which we could build a polyvalent and polycentric theory of solidarity institutions and their economies (Hart, Laville and Cattani, 2010; Ostrom, 2009; Polanyi, 1957).

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Making Lives in the Middle of the Periphery: Solidarity Economy from Women, for Women

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The global spread of the solidarity economy encompasses a diverse range of initiatives across various fields, from agriculture and food provision to the design and IT sectors, from community-supported agriculture and artisanal beer social enterprises to programmers' or designers' cooperatives. Solidarity practices in the field of economics have, of course, always existed, but they have proliferated in recent decades as a response to the globalization of local economies and the loss of many patterns and practices that had previously been taken for granted. In late modernity, through the anti-globalization and then alter-globalization movements, local territorial identities and practices began to be affirmed and reaffirmed in different ways. They sprout from different motivations, whether stemming from the protection of biodiversity, kinds of environmental justice, the supply of local or organic food, the revitalization of local crafts, the introduction of local currency, or the empowerment of women to enter entrepreneurship and local politics. In any case, when local economies around the world begin to adopt some form of solidarity principles, they initiate the transition that we discuss in this book. The particular case we want to discuss here arises in the time of a new European rural policy, which clearly emphasizes the role of gender equality in rural areas. Numerous projects are currently being funded at all levels to promote gender equality in rural contexts; however, there is always the question of projectification whenever the capacity to secure funding exists. But what about other, deep peripheral communities without the aptitude to "draw the resources?"

In our endeavor to map solidarity economy actors and pioneers in Croatia, we found that social entrepreneurships are some of the most innovative actors in pursuing solidarity economy practices. In the last decade, there has been an emergence of different kinds of social entrepreneurship across the country. In this paper, we will present the example of *Održivo društvo* from Gračac, a deeply rural periphery in Zadar County. The two-decades-old civil association Prospero founded this social entrepreneurship in 2018, employing several low-skilled workers. It addresses the salient, yet often invisible, issue of the interlocked social settings of class, gender, and social environment. Through the case of NGO *Prospero* and its social entrepreneurship, we will analyze how rural women's employment, in conjunction with socially responsible production in the rural periphery, changes the perspective of otherwise socially excluded women. We used the qualitative approach and collected data through individual and group semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with the organization's head and its five employees. The field re-

search was conducted in October 2021. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Our research questions focused on identifying what kind of social enterprise had been developed, how those actors and businesses affect social issues within the contexts in which they are embedded, and how changes (e.g., in gender relations) become the driving force of change in the local community. It seems that when the state becomes absent from a small rural community, one can only hope that civil society will appear and compensate for some of the services that this community needs.

Solidarity economy in the rural context

The solidarity economy focuses on social justice, tackling the rise in social inequality and social exclusion, discrepancies between classes and societies, and the ecological and climate crises and their challenges. The weakening of the welfare state indirectly transfers the responsibility to civil society to fill that gap by addressing old or new social needs. In our endeavor of mapping solidarity economy actors in Croatia, leaning on the work of previous authors who pioneered these issues (Puđak and Šimleša, 2020; Bušljeta Tonković et al., 2018; Šimleša et al., 2016; Utting, 2015; Millstone, 2013; Sabatini et al., 2012), we have noted the increase of social entrepreneurship as one of the forms of solidarity economy, which has become global in the first decade of this century.

However, movements for solidarity in the rural context largely deal with the social and economic position of peasants, local and sustainable agriculture, and access to local resources and food. For example, the food sovereignty movement is aimed, *inter alia*, at access and the right to agricultural land, a fairer income for farmers, and better quality and more accessible food for citizens, as well as keeping money in the local community while preserving the environment (Matacena and Covo, 2020; Schanbacher, 2010; Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007). A considerable number of civil initiatives have been engaged in this goal in Croatia, and since the pandemic, some local administrations or other institutions have also been involved. And it really is an indispensable part of sustainable and solidary practices.

Nevertheless, when talking about rural areas, agriculture is a framework that sometimes obscures other aspects of rural life. Agriculture has long held a prominent position in rural policy, still commonly referred to as agricultural policy, which has often led to other rural issues being neglected. Leaving agricultural topics aside, we refer to the rural context in terms of civil engagement in the pursuit of better circumstances for rural women in the rural hinterland of South Lika. Here, we rely on the division of the traditional Lika region into five sub-regions, as described by Pejnović (2004).

Layers of periphery

One of the important concepts for our research here is the concept of (rural) periphery. It is seemingly "self-understandable and non-problematic, although a lot of research points out that it is multi-faceted and complex" (Nejašmić et al., 2018, p. 87). The dominant discourse since the 1960s is the center-periphery model, which influenced subsequent models of periphery in later decades. The oldest dimension in identifying the periphery is the spatial dimension, which explains the periphery by natural-geographic factors, such as physical distance and transport accessibility. New ways of thinking about transport acces-

sibility as a key dimension of peripherality were influenced by the idea of spatial-temporal convergence as a decrease in the time required to travel from point A to point B. This was primarily a consequence of technological innovation where "places converge in time-space," with this dimension contributing in the last few decades to the use of non-spatial indicators of peripherality such as IT infrastructure or human and social capital.

Therefore, when examining the periphery, an integral or holistic approach is necessary, allowing us to consider various dimensions when explaining the context of the specific periphery (Nejašmić et al., 2018). This research partly reflects this multi-dimensional model of understanding the periphery, which includes both objective and subjective factors.

In Croatia, with very few exceptions, the rural area is the periphery. What makes Lika a periphery is its underdeveloped infrastructure, decades of depopulation (negative net migration balance, natural population decline, and population ageing), uneven spatial development, unemployment, inadequate governance, and a poorly developed civil society. Regarding subjective indicators, we observed feelings of "nowhere," neglect, and of living in a far hinterland in our fieldwork.

Uneven spatial development is not specific to Croatia, it is also present elsewhere in Europe. For example, researchers have found similar development disparities in Slovenia (Cosier et al., 2014) and Slovakia (Plešivčák and Buček, 2017), spatial inequalities in Romania (Török, 2013), and even in highly-developed European countries, such as Germany, there has been a push factor of internal migration and depopulation in less-developed areas of the former Democratic Republic of Germany for decades (Fendel, 2016).

However, for the last two decades, the natural population change in Lika has continually been negative, and strong emigration has again come to the fore in the recent period, which will certainly have long-term consequences, particularly since a considerable part of the emigrating population are younger adults (Klempić Bogadi and Lajić, 2014). Furthermore, the Census 2021 showed even deeper depopulation, with Lika, the largest county by area, having only 8 inhabitants per square kilometer, which is the lowest population density in the country.

Restructuring the rural area in the last thirty years has had vast consequences on basic as well as social infrastructure and on economic opportunities for the ever-decreasing population. The war in the 1990s, with out-migrations and non-rehabilitated social relations between ethnic communities on one hand, deindustrialisation, and changing the administrative borders opposed to traditional cultural regions on the other, pushed the municipality of Gračac even further to the periphery. Gračac is both one of the most underdeveloped municipalities in Croatia (MRRFEU, 2023) and the largest in terms of area, characterized by a mixed population of Bosnian Croats who migrated in the 1990s and Serb returnees, which further contributes to the reduced level of social cohesion. Additionally, Gospić, the cultural and economic center of this part of Lika (and center of the Lika-Senj County), is a small town itself, characterized by unfavorable social and economic conditions almost identical to those of surrounding countryside. Though Gračac and its surrounding is culturally and historically a part of region of Lika, since the 1990s it is administratively a part of Zadar County. This estranged Gračac from the cultural center of Lika, and it has yet

to establish vital economic, social, and cultural relations with Zadar. Overall neglect by policy and the administration brought Gračac to circumstances of low employment, an aging population, and civil engagement with minimal or no support from local government.

Making lives in the middle of periphery

Gračac, the biggest municipality by area in Croatia (even larger than some counties), has only 3,000 inhabitants and three inhabitants/square kilometer (Census, 2021, Figure 1), an remains subject to intense depopulation and aging. In the last intercensal period (2011-2021), Gračac was severely depopulated, losing 33% of population. In 2021, the average age was 47.7 years, the aging index was 208.6, and the aging coefficient was 35.5.

The area is entangled by remoteness, passivity, and traditionalism. In addition to the insufficient infrastructure, rampant unemployment, and remote and passive social setting, the area contends with the political invisibility of civil social actors and the traditionalism of gender roles. Social expectations within the family and beyond were strong and rigid throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The chances are twice as weak for women in rural Lika to earn a university diploma as for those in urban areas (Bokan, 2021). Consequently, the unemployment rates are higher for women than for men, making women's social position prone to a high level of social exclusion. Before the war (1991-1995), Serbs made up the majority of the population living in Gračac. During the war, and especially during Operation Storm (1995), most of them fled. The area was inhabited by Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina who had permanently fled their country, also because of the war. After the war, some of the displaced citizens returned to their homes, and a coexistence of different ethnicities began, which was intertwined with the consequences of the war and national intolerance or distance that is still felt today. Although the war may seem far away, it has permanently changed this area, and its consequences are still visible today in economic, political, and social realms, and we can assume they will continue for a long time.

Numerous obstacles prevent women from participating equally in economic and social life, particularly in rural areas. Economic barriers are most evident in poor access to employment and education, a lack of access to property and land (which is also related to access to finance), and women's disproportionately higher participation in informal and unpaid work. Structural barriers refer to all those obstacles found in legislation or in practice, i.e., the policy framework that does not implement gender equality deeply enough, as well as stereotypes about women in science and technology and a lack of support for women with two jobs (one at home and one outside the home) (Barada et al., 2011; Shortall and Bock, 2015; Copa Cogeca, 2020; Kovačićek and Bokan, 2023; Bokan et al., 2024). In addition, there are so-called soft barriers, such as a lack of networking, a lack of education and training (McFadden and Gorman, 2016; Fhlatharta and Farrell (2017), a lack of role models, the impression that women are not willing to take risks, and the traditional roles assigned to women (Kovačićek et al., 2023), all of which are even more pronounced in rural areas.

The association *Prospero* (NGO) was established in 2003, initially organizing educational workshops, with a significant increase in the frequency and scope of the programs around 2009 and 2010. The first workshops were those for weaving, felting, ceramics, and pottery, which were followed by programs of learning foreign languages, digital skills, and

tourism. These workshops were attended by women from the local community, and over the years, they gained various skills. The association itself and the women who became part of the community around the organization, through training and volunteering, developed and organically broadened their skills since the first years and extended their interests toward the manufacture of shoes. Consequently, the same association established a social enterprise in the last months of 2018. The first year of its operation was focused on acquiring machinery, and 2020 marked the first year of production, although the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the initial momentum. Since early 2022, however, the enterprise enhanced production, especially after the press started showing interest in their work, which helped them to reach the wider public.

The enterprise primarily employs women from the local community. Their context is important to explain in order to understand this enterprise as a game changer for them in terms of employment, career, and social inclusion. Most of the women included in educational programs from 2003 onwards, and those eventually employed in the social enterprise, had experienced the war in the 1990s, which significantly impacted their life and career trajectories. As they experienced the war during their high school years, many of them were unable to graduate.

> "The war came. We had to leave. I didn't finish school."

> "I studied at the Faculty of Agriculture, but I didn't finish, I only got to the third year... When the war broke out, I started working every day, and I didn't go to the university anymore. I tried to do something in Knin, at least a college, but I didn't, then came the children.…"

Beside personal accounts, the lack of prospects also relates to the external social context. The sense of periphery and remoteness stems from the non-vital economy, insufficient infrastructure, and neglect by public services, particularly the local government. From the perspective of the participants, the local community was lacking any kind of prospects two decades ago, and most of it still applies today.

> "We are far from those centers, on the other side of the hill..."

> "There was nothing, you could work in a fish factory and cut off fish heads. Nothing else."

> "[We are] far from all roads... The entire municipality of Gračac is huge, not to mention Srb, which is not connected by a bus line at all, and we had no connection from Gračac to Zadar all summer. And that is only recent, the line was introduced in September. Those with the concession didn't want to drive because it wasn't profitable for them, until the state introduced a few more kunas per km, now it's profitable for them, and the fact that people couldn't even go for a check-up or had no bus lines anywhere…"

> "The thing with HEP[1] is terrible, having to wait ten years for a connection."

Considering the local administration, participants see it as burdened with many challenges; however, they hold that the administration's rather passive approach is part of the problem of underdevelopment, stressing that local government does not see civil society

1 HEP (*Hrvatska elektroprivreda*) is the national energy company.

as a partner in development. It is also emphasized that two decades of Prospero's work have not been recognized by the administration until recently. They expect the administration to raise many more initiatives and encourage local development in sectors such as tourism, as well as through collaboration with civil associations.

> "There is a lot to say about this. We are the largest municipality in Croatia in terms of area, our municipality is like some counties, and the funds are not generous. They [local government] are lost in this incompetence. They don't do anything, the infrastructure is a disaster, the roads are potholes."

> "There are situations where the local government doesn't want to do these things, in the middle of the town... there's no road, no electricity, no water, and old people live there. If that road is blocked, we sometimes clean it up, cut those branches so they can even get to them..."

> "Well, lately they no longer think that we just knit and crochet, but that we also do something concrete."

> "We have to work for tourists to come to us, so that the community develops, we work on sustainable development... we need more help from the local administration to work on that sustainable development. We need more help from the local administration, and lately we have been motivating them to start from below, from our initiative, although they themselves rarely [encourage the initiative]."

We wanted to find out whether and how their engagement in the association, the trainings, and their eventual employment changed their position and dynamized gender roles. The findings show that, over the last two decades, a process of learning, training, and gradually tailoring these activities to the women's needs and interests occurred. As their skills grew, they spontaneously expanded into new areas of interest, ultimately establishing an enterprise and fostering self-employment.

> "Through the projects, [I was] in favor of women getting a job or self-employment, so they could have some security and money, and that they could feel they were contributing."

> "All these women who have gone through different training, over time they have been weaving less and moved to shoes. We have learned how to make shoes, how to sew, and they have received certificates for that, and now these twenty or so women are slowly being employed. Now we have seven employees."

> "Yes, I work here, we work together, plan together, design together. Here we have everything."

Therefore, when approximately twenty women underwent various types of training, their status began to change in many ways. Since most of them had only completed elementary school up to that point, acquiring a qualified education was a significant step forward for all of them in terms of their employment prospects. They became employable and gained self-esteem as a result. There is also a strong gender aspect of women's economic (in) activity. Traditional gender roles are still embedded in social expectations, even though they have loosened in recent years, as previously explained.

> "It's still difficult for you today, because women are raised that way, especially Bosnian women, and this domicile is not a big difference either... [Women] were raised traditionally and patriarchally, they learned the woman is the one who stays at home, with the children, cooking, housekeeping... there are very few husbands who want to let their wives go to work. Before, when we moved here in 2000-2001, no matter what, the woman needed to do everything in the house, so that when the husband comes home everything is nice, the kitchen is tidy, lunch... and she is the one who serves the husband. Many of them did not let their wives go out, let alone work, maybe a little in some seasonal period, but in a fish market, fish processing, not..."

Hence, what kind of changes have volunteering, training, and subsequent employment in a social enterprise brought for women in Gračac? The first important consequence is the acquisition of various skills in production (from souvenirs to shoes), including digital skills, communication skills, teamwork, planning, organizing production, and project management. The possibility of employment is another important change that would not have occurred without the formal skills that the women acquired through the association. Apart from the mere fact that they got a job, the fact that their salary is not minimal is also important on a symbolic level.

> "We have to be profitable, pay our employees' salaries. Salaries should be solid, not some small change. Around four to four and a half thousand kuna [530-600 EUR]."

The amount was certainly not high, but compared to other jobs available to women in the community, these amounts were significantly higher. This also gives to women symbolic importance and has a positive impact on their self-esteem and social status within the family and community as a whole. Socialization in the work environment is also one of the factors that undoubtedly improve women's self-respect and social status.

> "Yes, [it changed] their status, through years of work in the association, those who came here for public works, for example recycling, they are now project managers and do responsible, valuable work, but it had to happen... In the course of training and projects... over time, as their skills grew and improved, we involved them in some projects as project leaders."

> "Now I work, I contribute."

Findings show that women's status changes both objectively and subjectively. Objectively, women acquire qualifications, secure employment, contribute financially to their families, gain economic independence, and establish a place and role in the community. On a subjective level, their self-confidence increases, they get a sense of achievement, and find themselves able to contribute to their business, family, and the local community. As for changes in the local community, from the perspective of our participants, the social environment has changed in some ways over the past twenty years. Of course, it would be presumptuous to claim that one association or one enterprise caused all these changes, but it seems that it certainly shaped and fostered these changes. These changes were party caused by the economic crisis, which seemingly loosened strict gender roles and "freed" women from contributing exclusively through informal, unpaid work in the private sphere.

> "The need drove the local population to give up the expectation that women should only be at home."

> "Of course, yes, because now every child needs to have a cell phone and the Internet, we also have to work after work, in addition to the salaries we both earn."

Finally, for a social group that was highly unemployable and, apart from formal qualifications, had no support within the family to find a job outside the home, a new employment pattern emerged in the local community that "allowed" them to "both work" (husband and wife). This social enterprise was born out of local needs, and working in this enterprise gave a perspective to local women. Through their skills, they secured a job; through their work, they gained empowerment; and through the collective, they formed a professional and supportive community, as well as an active role in society beyond the private one. In this way, this social enterprise becomes an important social actor in negotiating the dynamic of gender relations in the deep rural periphery.

The final point from these findings is the emergence of the enthusiastic individual who initiates changes and gradually helps prepare the ground for a local civil engagement impetus and, eventually, for an enterprise to be established. We argue that a single individual with the energy required to innovate and address social needs can become a significant driver of innovative and developmental processes within the local community. In Gračac, "the power of individual enthusiasm" (Magnussen, 2016) became a crucial driving force for establishing the first civil association and, consequently, social entrepreneurship in this rural community. With the background of living in a big city, upon moving to Gračac, this individual was faced with a lack not only of public programs and projects but also even basic interest from the local administration in addressing the local population's needs.

> "I have lived in Zagreb... and I have seen how it is when you come from that environment - almost nowhere. In 1996 there was a single shop and a single café. And then you think what you could change because life there is almost unbearable for you. And yet those who are there are used to it, and they are not the ones who dig with their hands and feet to make something, to fix something."

From the perspective of development and endogenous governance of rural communities, relying on an enthusiastic individual is neither a strategy nor can it be planned by policy. However important and game-changing this individual and her accomplishments are, the question of whether they will be recognized by the local administration and whether partnerships will be built with associations and enterprises emerged from it. It is certainly an opportunity to establish a wider participation and interrelatedness of local administration, civil associations and social entrepreneurship actors. Therefore, the developmental prospects of local communities should not be left only to extraordinary individuals who work miracles despite the lack of support, but also to recognize their ideas in a timely manner and include them as relevant actors in local development. If not, in the absence of vital local administration, we leave local rural development to mere chance, whether such a person shows up or not.

In the forthcoming years, we could expect two scenarios. In the first, the local administration will continue to largely ignore the local civil and entrepreneurial engagement built

in and around Prospero, leading to a limited scope for the social transformation of Gračac into a vital, engaging, and prosperous community as a whole. In the other scenario, the local administration will embrace the idea of local, authentic, and developmental efforts, which already exist in Gračac, and implement a participatory approach, thereby establishing partnerships with local NGOs and entrepreneurs. This kind of development from below could also aid in healing the social wounds still present from the disturbing 1990s. Moreover, by offering new perspectives on local vitality and resilience, participatory local development could, therefore, decrease the locals' (sense of) peripherality.

Concluding remarks

The feeling of living "behind God's back" is the general feeling of the women from this community. From the point of view of the women interviewed, the local government seems to be passive and does not provide logistical support either to the social enterprise or to other NGOs that have emerged from the same organization. Nonetheless, the community surrounding Prospero and its enterprise has developed and gone its own way, despite local disdain.

There are several focal points from the findings. Traditional and economically rather devitalised rural community experienced slow, gradual, however substantial change for local women, but for the community as a whole. What happened was a value change in women's employment patterns, with "both [men and women] working now." What first appeared to be a harmless feminine hobby grew into something more and, gradually, changed women's status within the household and local community. The social enterprise also initiated, encouraged, or established other NGOs which are now addressing other social needs in local community, like assisting the elderly in their households. Additionally, one important finding is that the driver of all these changes is one person – a woman with the motivation to change an "almost unbearable nowhere." Therefore, an enthusiastic individual which made so much difference in two decades stands as the opposite of the uninterested, absent, and otherwise silent local government.

Our findings have shown that the main initiator of local initiatives is an enthusiastic individual who often encounters more obstacles than support from local authorities. However, recognizing the considerable obstacles faced by unemployed women and creating conditions for some of them to develop production in a solidary and cooperative manner shows how the solidarity economy can unlock the perspective of socially excluded classes in the rural periphery. Through training, volunteering, and work in the NGO and social enterprise, the transformation took place in both objective and subjective ways. Through their work, these women developed their skills and became involved in the design and production process. And they did this work together, supported by one another to make decisions and become a true collective. Therefore, this work became a perspective that gradually brought about changes in various fields. The acquisition of skills, having a job, having a profession, financially providing for the family, being empowered and being a part of the collective – all exceptionally relevant preconditions for social inclusion.

These changes become a driving force for promoting civic engagement, for changing the status of women, who not only become gainfully employed, but likewise become a driving

force for further change. These women, who were unemployed and housewives, are now creating change in the local community. Rephrasing Defourny and Nyssens (2012), grassroots social enterprises have a chance to endure and thrive even when the fashion is gone. It is likely that entrepreneurship that emerges from the local context will persist as long as it is needed to meet local needs. Therefore, rootedness in the local context, along with solidarity and inclusion goals, proves to be the best initial impetus for meeting specific local needs.

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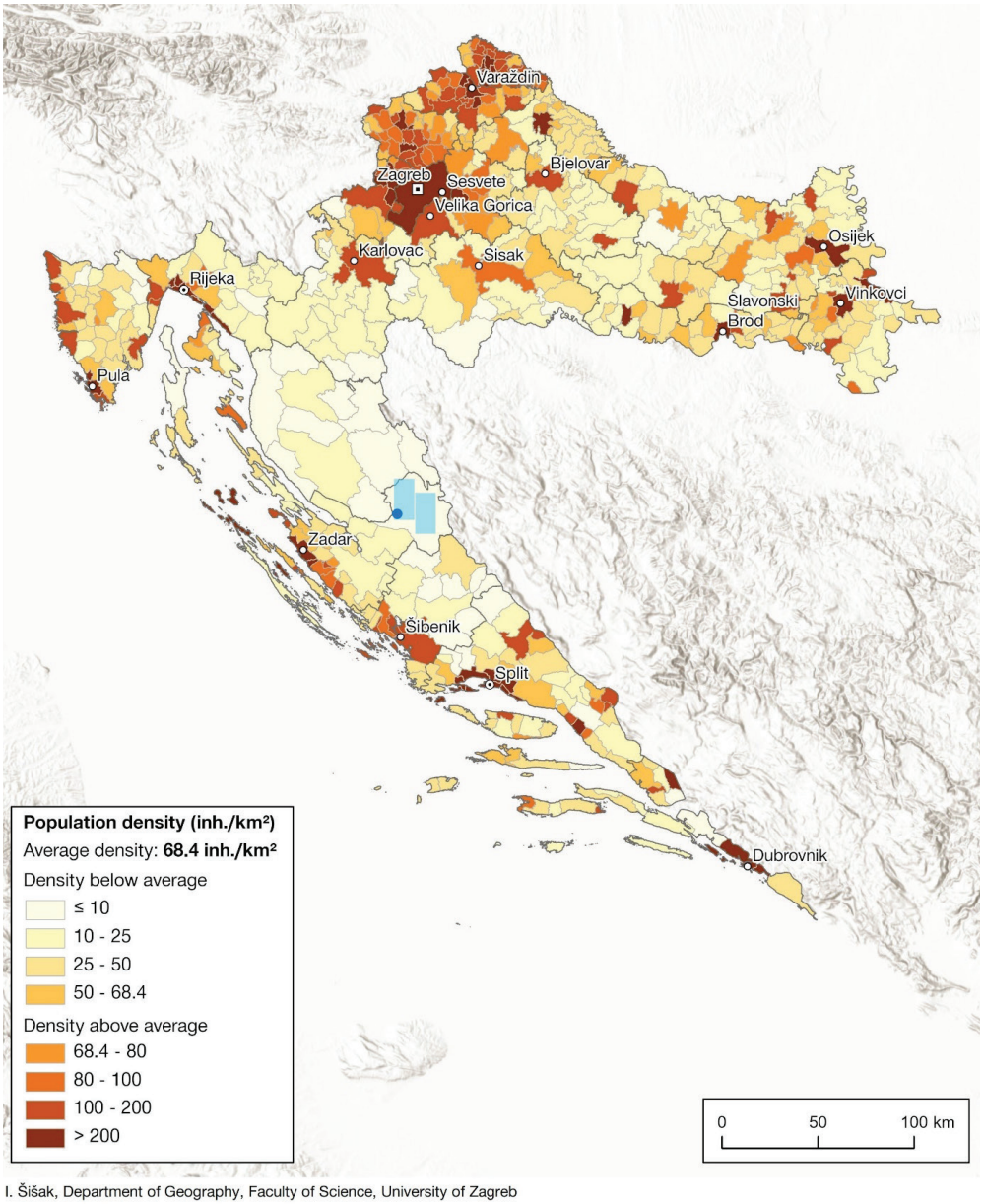

Figure 1. Population density in the Republic of Croatia, 2021.

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Caring is Daring: A Gendered Approach to Solidarity Economy

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Original scientific paper

Years before participating in the project on solidarity economy in Croatia as an academic, I participated in a solidarity economy initiative as a practitioner, a participant. Back in 2012, I joined one of the first so-called solidarity exchange groups (*grupa solidarne razmjene* or GSR in Croatia) in the Croatian capital of Zagreb, a form of community-supported agriculture initially designed according to the Italian blueprint of *gruppi di acquisto solidale* / solidarity purchase groups (cf. Orlić, 2019, p. 15). The initial idea was to establish a direct and cooperative relationship with local, organic family farms who would, in return, gain access to a rather stable and reliable market consisting of educated and caring consumers.

Following a couple of years of relative stability and growth, practical and educational GSR activities changed our shopping habits. Over time, we became better acquainted with what is local and seasonal produce and more aware of obstacles that farmers are facing in various stages of food production, including the bureaucratic and policy-induced ones. All of it contributed to the building of solidarity within the group. Also, the bypassing of "eco-chic" commercial chains felt like a small but sweet personal victory over the system.

About the fourth season in, the inevitable breaking point took place: the fields of our primary producer of vegetables were struck by severe floods, and for an extended period they could offer but a few sorts of vegetables – the more resilient but also the less attractive ones, like cabbage or potatoes. That coincided with the introduction of another producer, and his varied offer of delicious vegetables grown in the tradition of biodynamic farming – perceived by some as a step up in comparison to "ordinary" organic farming – stirred up our small community thoroughly. Some were sympathetic to the family of farmers who were introduced first, insisting that we remain loyal to the producers we originally committed to and continue buying whatever they had to offer. Other members – among whom many joined in the later stages – expressed growing dissatisfaction with the GSR rules, which they perceived as overly restrictive and ideologized. Some of the more consumer-oriented members insisted that the "disloyalty" that consisted of buying the newer producer's products, thus leaving the original one with less money, was understandable considering the circumstances. They also emphasized the leverage they held, precisely as buyers and not "solidarity exchangers," as they underscored that the strength of the group lies in its large membership and not its minority avant-garde core. Imposing overly strict

and rigid rules, they argued, would turn people away and eventually affect the producers negatively as well.

The group, whose majority consisted of women, had no official leadership as it was envisaged that decisions would be reached together, in regular group meetings. In time, however, some members insisted that they were not bound by the decisions made in those meetings because they did not participate. Some of them claimed that they could never attend such a meeting due to their busy schedules. Nonetheless, they continued spending hours writing long posts on the forum. The most devoted members, who had conducted the majority of the organizing tasks, were frustrated with the turn of events but also reluctant to take more decisive steps as they lacked the legitimacy to expel somebody from the group or forcefully impose rules.

The subgroup of women that was more *caring*, more compassionate with the producers, and more concerned with the overall effects of their consumption choices was also less daring in terms of protecting the group's initial postulates as well as less willing to close the gate to the members who were pushing the more consumerist, self-centered agenda. They were empathetic and solidary with the consumers but also rather hesitant regarding confrontation or the possibility of breaking the rules or imposing them in a commanding manner. Eventually, some of the initial and more ardent members left.

Theoretical underpinning: openness that hurts

In many domains of the solidarity economy, women are at the forefront. An important part of critically examining its practices, therefore, demands a thoroughly gendered perspective. According to a study on the social and solidarity economy in Portugal, authored by Eduardo Pedroso (2019) on behalf of the *Cooperativa António Sérgio para a Economia Social,* women form the majority of employees in many cooperative branches.[1] As much as 81.8 percent of the "social solidarity" cooperatives, which provide social and/or health services such as childcare, elderly care, or services for vulnerable persons, are women. Additionally, 74.7 percent of employees in the consumer branch, as well as 64.5 percent in the culture branch, and 62 percent in the education cooperative branch, are women (p. 154). There is no comparable data on this sector in Croatia; however, the women who participated as interviewees in this study consistently demonstrated their intense investment in the field, and their moral and affective challenges to the predominant ways of feeling and thinking (Jasper, 2018) proved worthy of research on its own.

I will approach the multifaceted phenomenon of the solidarity economy through the components that most consistently appeared throughout the research: an amalgam in which empathy, caring, and striving for mutuality and connectedness are coupled with affective commitments (Jasper 2018) to broader social issues or causes. In this chapter, I will critically approach these aspects, which form the "good" and "solidarity" part of the equation, by illuminating the broader affective backdrop as well as specific intersections of gender and care.

1 Within the SOLIDARan project, cooperatives were approached as pertaining to solidarity economy.

In the book "Feminism for the 99%," Cinzia Aruzza, Tithy Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser (2019) call for a united front in support of social causes such as "environmental justice, free high-quality education, generous public services, low-cost housing, labor rights, free universal health care, or a world without racism or war" (p. 15). It is a manifesto, a text meant to posit a program and propose a blueprint for realizing a set of goals and/or values, which represents a valuable example of the radical, leftist understanding of solidarity: there is a list of social causes one should care about and a call for fight against the usurpers, be it the capitalist state, corporate magnates or local and global warmongers. This mode of change, which echoes Marx and Engels, advocates for a class struggle through mass uprising, with feminists at the forefront (p. 20). Instead of the *lean-in,* liberal feminist strategy which encourages women to push harder individually to gain more power within the system, the manifesto advocates *kick-back* feminism. As the authors write: "We have no interest in breaking the glass ceiling while leaving the vast majority to clean up the shards. Far from celebrating women CEOs who occupy corner offices, we want to get rid of CEOs and corner offices" (p. 13).

If we agree on the ultimate goal – a radical, unwavering parting from or fight against the current "capitalist roots of metastasizing barbarism" (p. 14) – the proposal leaves us with the modest question: how? If one who is not already caught up in a struggle by the nature of her positionalities wishes to join in the *kick-back feminism*, how does she go about it? If she were to take action, apart from signing an online petition or clicking a subscribe button for a newsletter, would she be emotionally and physically drained by caring, frustration, and taking on the third shift of fighting the long, seemingly never-ending list of social injustices?

Conservative authors may reduce the leftist intellectual elite's calls for solidarity with various minorities, "primitive cultures," and people who are repressed in one way or another to hypocrisy. As Roger Scruton writes in an article which focuses mainly on multiculturalism, it is about a "play with alternatives – a possibility which universities eminently provide" (Scruton, 1993, p. 97). A "radically rational" approach offers yet another perspective. In his book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (2016), Paul Bloom tackles empathy as a sort of contagion of feeling: "if our suffering makes me suffer, if I feel what you feel (…)" (p. 16). He insists on the fact that our capacities to empathize are very restricted and also that we are more prone to *feel the feelings* of people or groups of people that are "close to us, (…) similar to us, and those we see as more attractive or vulnerable and less scary" and that this may have class, racial, and other implications. If we follow the author's argument, that is also the reason why we may be more prompt to help save one single person in a dramatic situation than millions who slowly but regularly die of disease or hunger in a place remote from our homes, without dramatic media coverage.

On the progressive side of the political spectrum, however, rules are somewhat different: one may feel it is crucial to support people who may be distant in terms of geography or different in terms of culture or class, yet nevertheless important to the values one cares about deeply. In a subsection of an article on "radical solidarity" whose subtitle reads "empathizing with the victims of social power," Christian Arnsperger and Yanis Varou-

fakis (2003) distiguish between solidarity in which we empathize "with persons afflicted by some shared misfortune" and radical solidarity in which misfortune is "a social artefact, as opposed to an accident of nature" (p. 177).

It is a general tendency of human societies in all places and at all times to generate social power structures that arbitrarily place whole groups of people into "unfortunate" roles and situations. Spontaneously, and through no fault of their own, they become victims of an evolved social force which expels them to the periphery of social life. A disposition toward making sacrifices on their behalf will be defined below as *radical solidarity*. (p. 177)

Thus, it is tackling the "root-causes of others systematic disadvatage and misfortune" which transcends mere "palliative efforts" (p. 180).

Regardless of the perspective on "input" motives, I shall proceed with a focus on "outputs," questioning the constraints of our capacity for doing "good" and our ability to engage and make sacrifices for others.

What solidarity may feel like in practice is thoroughly depicted in Romana Pozniak's (2022) study of humanitarian aid to refugees in Croatia during the mass transit in 2015 and 2016. The author argues that in the sectors of humanitarianism and activism, the important surplus value in the broader context of postfordist economy is "innate people-loving and unselfishness combined with workaholism, pronounced work ethic and self-discipline" (p. 67). In humanitarian practices, whether voluntary or professional, an individual is often placed in a position where they are physically not capable of responding to every person demanding help on any given day. It is precisely the ability to shut down one's empathy and emotions, even in the face of imminent danger and suffering of the people they are supposed to be helping, that allows humanitarian practitioners not to succumb to "*burnout, secondary traumatization, and compassion fatigue*" (p. 137; italic in original). It seems to be about cruel affective management, in which the heavy task of containing one's urge to care for and empathize is highly individualized – a professional risk one is expected to overcome primarily on one's own.

As one of Pozniak's collocutors succinctly put it, at the beginning of a humanitarian career, there is a certain naivety in ignoring one's boundaries. It is also, as one of her collocutors explains, about a savior complex, which prevents a person from resting and taking care of herself had she "not had enough time to give support to each person who asked me for it today" (p. 138). The very characteristics that draw people to helping others, such as increased sensitivity to suffering and a sense of justice, which are traits that many practitioners of solidarity economy share, are the very reasons that may ultimately endanger their physical and mental health and turn them from saviors into victims of their good intentions.

In an article on "caring entrepreneurship," Tea Škokić and I (2018) critique the very demand for caring that is pressed upon women in their private lives as well as in professional fields such as entrepreneurship. We posit that "the informal women's practices, such as the inclination to unity and solidarity, turn out to be the basis of the economy because they maintain the functioning of social reproduction necessary for the unrestrained in-

terweaving of neoliberal and patriarchal business practices" (p. 97). In the article, the "pre-existing condition" of enhanced empathy and inclination toward solidarity and cooperation among women is critiqued for its exploitative potential but, at the same time, it is not dismissed because of the possibilities it holds in society. In this case, it is about the potential for "socially responsible business, ethical approach to work and coworkers, empathy and cooperativeness" (p. 99). This troubling, double, and paradoxical relationship toward "caring" steered my research on the solidarity economy in Croatia toward the messiness and meandering in life strategies that result from practicing solidarity economy in everyday life.

Regarding the broader affective and sensory backdrop, Petar Bagarić (2015) critiques a specific form of, primarily but not exclusively, progressive demand for openness, "staying in touch," that "prohibits detachment and distancing" while requiring the subject's "ability to flow and change" (p. 132). The call for boundary-less, immediate, bodily immersion with the Other, examined here through the rise of phenomenological approaches in anthropology, is pointed to as a globally significant sign of the times of postmodern societies. It is expected to escape the Cartesian, dualistic mind-body polarization and secure a direct, bodily immersion with the object of study. The author claims that instead of the prophesied increased understanding, such demand for radically immersive approaches may actually diminish or altogether inhibit an understanding of the object of study, in that the "promoted openness and empathy easily […] become the subject's patronizing feature that ignores the painful and violent aspects of the nature of both reality and the Other" (p. 145).

From this vantage point, the incessant, indiscriminate affective openness to the world is a privilege reserved for the few, for the members of the creative class who *write on paper, not the skin* of people, and who have the backdoor option of restricted and/or controlled contact with the object of empathy and solidarity. When we descend from the world of ideas into everyday life, the grand concepts suddenly become less exciting and more prosaic; the conversation shifts to logistics, organization, selection, prioritization, and drawing boundaries.

From theory to methodology

In his exploration of solidarity economy from the Marxist perspective, Chris Wright (2021) claims that the transition from capitalism to post-capitalism is expected to happen progressively, "as new production relations sprout (initially) in the 'interstices' of a decaying order" via the gradual strengthening of cooperative modes of production and distribution. The change will be slow and gradual – the author mentions "at least a century or two" – until "an emergent economy has evolved to the point that it commands substantial resources, is highly visible, and is clearly more systemically 'rational' than the old economy." That is, Wright argues, an increasingly plausible scenario if the social context is one of "general economic stagnation and class polarization."

Commenting on the current confusion or lack of direction in political systems and institutions, the author writes that "all this floundering opens up space for 'decentralized' innovation, grassroots experimentation, localism and regionalism, under-the-radar moves

toward cooperativism. This slow, semi-interstitial process is the natural way in which social (economic) systems yield to their successors" (n. pag.).

The research on this decentralized, local, under-the-radar transformation thus requires compatible methodological approaches. Over the course of the research, which began in June 2020 and concluded in May 2022, I conducted interviews with 35 individuals. My initial case study centered on a cooperative brewery in the coastal town of Zadar, founded by two young women. From that point of departure, my research expanded, partly through snowball sampling and the inclusion of key actors in the solidarity economy in Croatia, eventually encompassing multiple field sites.

Most of my interviewees were women in their 30s and 40s from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. They also originated from and lived in various parts of Croatia, including both urban and rural areas. Most of the interviews were semi-structured as I strived to pose a list of core questions to most of my collocutors. Interviews conducted with people who are observers rather than practitioners of the solidarity economy were closer to unstructured interviews in that their purpose was exploratory, and the conversation was mainly directed by the interviewees' answers. For the purpose of this analysis, I have selected several key themes revolving around the intersection of (over)caring and lifestyle choices of the practitioners of solidarity economy in Croatia.

In this chapter, I will present insights from several interviews and ethnographic fieldwork.

Part one: on motivation or what feels good

In all instances, the motivation of my interviewees to enter various kinds of "solidarity entrepreneurship" defied the economic paradigm of necessity versus opportunity, according to which people are either forced to become entrepreneurs to make a living or they enter the field because they spot a business opportunity. Additionally, the discrepancy between the market and the social side, noted by Davorka Vidović (2012) in a study of social entrepreneurship, was not as pronounced in the interviews. Practitioners of the solidarity economy were far more concerned with the latter, even at the expense of their livelihood. Although they were extremely entrepreneurial when it came to realizing goals, their actions were rarely aimed at gaining economic success. Most of the time, they were more concerned with achieving a transformative social impact in their immediate surrounding. Their goals included creating the best possible workplace for themselves and their coworkers, community building, enjoying their work, and escaping the draining work rhythm within institutional frameworks.

In some cases, their organizations or initiatives have evolved organically over a longer period. When choosing a high school, one of my interviewees, a 40-year-old woman who resides near a small rural town in Northeastern Croatia, decided to enroll in the agricultural school in Zagreb despite her mother's preference for a more art-related school. She could not fathom, as she explained, a school without biology classes. At the agricultural school, often deemed one of the least desirable in Zagreb, she was introduced to an initiative aimed at preserving and exchanging traditional crop seeds. It would be the beginning of her later trailblazing career in permaculture and agroecology.

> "The school mostly consisted of people who were there because they would not be able to get in anywhere else. And then there were us, who were really interested, and who came there to get the knowledge and the skills. And I loved those four years dearly! It was simply a great decision and I adored just how practical the knowledge I was getting there was. Not that it was all easy, on the contrary. I ended up working really hard for some classes. But I loved it. And it is also where I first developed my interest and appreciation for seeds. Especially preserving the heirloom seeds. Had I enrolled somewhere else, I wonder whether I would have discovered that interest of mine."

In other examples, the initial motivation was less about what we could categorize as "social impact" than about personal needs and subtler, inner impulses. In the following example, my interviewee, a woman in her 40s who now lives in the rural outskirts of Zagreb, explains that the initial motivation for founding an alternative local social center primarily stemmed from feelings of isolation and solitude during her maternity leave. Many young mothers experience this sense that the city is poorly adapted to parents, especially mothers with small children. Sidewalks may be too narrow or overly exposed to cars for strollers to pass by safely. Most cafés in Croatia are still not smoke-free. There are few clean and safe spaces to change a baby's diaper, and many women, for one reason or another, avoid breastfeeding in public. In many of Zagreb's neighborhoods, there is not much to do apart from strolls up and down the street or an occasional cup of coffee on a terrace when the weather permits.

For my interviewee, it was an impetus to establish a space that would be friendly to mothers with small babies, as well as to everyone else with a similar desire for a supportive community and a non-commercial, public space. Once she rented the space, however, she did not immediately start the revolution in her neighborhood.

> "Truth be told, I was still alone in there (…) with my two kids, and every now and then another mother would drop by from somewhere else. In my own neighborhood, I had this feeling that nobody, you know, that there was nobody in the neighborhood, that no one… Simply, as you said it yourself, everybody was focused on themselves within their own four walls and I guess they did not have the same need as I did. But mothers from [other parts of the city] would burst in for a coffee and then the two of us talk, hang out, and kids, you know, they would crawl on the floor… And it is easier this way to share some experience you have, trauma… Or happiness. It is nice to share it. So, I guess there were not many people like that at that moment, but still, there are some. And [the center] for me was the perfect form for that because we, who are like that, could meet. (…) We are not satisfied with that average, with that which is normal in the mainstream. We are not satisfied with it and if we have a need we will try to solve it at all cost, and satisfy it. We will not leave it, like… It can't be done. Let's see how it can be done!"

At another point in the interview, she also mentions that they "did not go into it to become saints, for people to appreciate them for it, we were satisfying our needs in a way that felt natural."

In another example, we see even more clearly that it is about joy and inner satisfaction. In the following quote, my interviewee is a veteran climate change activist, journalist, and long-time member of a "bike kitchen" in Zagreb – a place that helps people repair their

bicycles and, in some cases, organizes the collection, repair, and distribution of bicycles for various groups of people in need.

Kernel of her motivation to join the bike kitchen consists of the joy of fixing these vehicles, manipulating bike parts, and getting hands dirty with black grease, all to witness, in the end, the positive response of those who came in need of repair. Asked how the Zagreb bike kitchen, "Biciklopopravljaona," succeeds in being inclusive in terms of class, while many solidarity economy organizations and initiatives seem to primarily draw in people with middle-class backgrounds, this interviewee portrays bikes with unreserved, genuine admiration, and straightforward, almost axiomatic wording.

> "There is this magical word and that is the bike. The bike is an almost perfect machine that has this huge potential, [in many cases] it became clear that it can matter a lot. It was, for example, important in the women's emancipation movements... The bike is, you know, important when we speak of environment and climate change and traffic and organization of the city and health and… I don't know. (…) It may not be the solution, but in any case most people feel better with the bike, one way or another. (…) And at the same time, it is not expensive. It does not require, it does not require a large financial investment, yet it assures covering more needs. You can, at the same time, cover your need for transportation, for movement, health, freedom…"

A more traditional approach to addressing such needs within civil society would be to write up a project, secure funding from the European Union or another available source, purchase the bicycles, and then distribute them. The manual, slower, and time-consuming way of Biciklopopravljaona, however, accomplishes other functions as well. Some relate to ecology, waste management, circular economy, and climate change. Another important function is the strengthening of the social fabric and rehumanizing interpersonal relations, and such processes are not easily projectified. One could wonder whether packaging it into milestones and deliverables would diminish these subtler, intangible qualities and contributions.

Throughout the years, this bike kitchen has distributed hundreds of bikes. My interviewee recounts that in 2021, a single year, 250 bicycles were collected, repaired as needed, and distributed. It entailed hundreds of unpaid working hours. And, according to my collocutor, for many people who were given bicycles, such as migrants, this bike kitchen was the first and only place in Zagreb where they felt they were "regular," equal members of the community, rather than special, excluded, or marginal people.

Inner satisfaction and joy, intertwined with community building, seem to be an important source of motivation. Should we consider that disruptive to the current order of affairs?

In their book on postcapitalism and work, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) claim that the main ideological underpinning of the contemporary work ethic combines remuneration and suffering. To get paid means to endure suffering. Working while enduring suffering of one kind or another is the paramount *rite de passage*, the transition into adulthood (p. 74). This is why the authors conclude that it is precisely the deeply ingrained work ethic that we have to overcome first for the capitalist order of things to be truly challenged and transformed. Work ethic has invaded our lives to such a degree that many

people cannot, as Srnicek and Williams claim, "imagine a meaningful life without work" (p. 73). The internalized *horror vacui* is menacing, capable of turning us into competitive subjects seeking competitive forms of self-realization while making our job posts the primary means of accomplishing meaningfulness. Such a hierarchy, however, takes its toll on people's mental and physical health as well as their overall well-being. From the perspective of the predominant order of things, such motivations to enter the solidarity economy may appear whimsical, utopian, or even childlike and naive. But we could also interpret them as approaches to work/life that have not succumbed to the demands of the pedagogy of suffering.

Part two: the price of doing good

In the following example, my interviewee explains how she initially quit her well-paid job at a public utility company because she could no longer continue with the 9-to-5 daily work routine. It took time for her husband to fully accept her decision, and he supported her on the condition that she earned a certain amount of money necessary to pay some of the household expenses. Years later, her new way of living and working became incongruous with the suffering her husband endured at his well-paid corporate job.

> "We would literally, you know, kids would go to sleep and we would sit down once a week, open a bottle of beer and start talking. And he would always, you know, talk about his job. And all the time, all the time he would come from work pissed off… His stomach hurt, he got some allergies… His health, you know, started to deteriorate. Both psychologically and physically. And I got him one day to bet: quit your job and do not work for one whole year. Just meditate, go fishing with the boys and you may cook and do cleaning at home if you want. If not even that, okay. Do not do anything that does not bring you joy. Just do what makes you happy and see you in a year with this beer again and you will tell me how you feel. And this is where I got him to bet."

When I ask her how they live now and how this cut in income impacted their family budget, my interviewee explains that her family of four is frugal and does not need much money anyway. She gives me an example of how their "green basket," which they order directly from a farmer every week, costs around seven euros and lasts them the whole week. Additionaly, as her husband has quit his stressful job, he has enough time and energy to put the extra effort into renovating a house she has inherited in the meantime in a rural part of Zagreb. After selling their apartment and paying off their debts, they have recently opened a new cooperative social center in the part of the city where they moved, which is home to many young families but lacks content and initiatives that contribute to community building.

Overall, the question of paying the price for "practicing for the future" within the realm of solidarity economy was one of the questions that instigated the deepest reflections in the interviews I conducted. Some of the interviewees were adamant and expressed no regrets regarding their choices, which, more often than not, rendered their everyday existence precarious. They placed their bet on the unsustainability of the present system, and from that perspective, living a modest, frugal life was often perceived in itself as a recipe for a more sustainable future. I remember vividly a GSR member telling me on a hot summer in Zagreb just how annoyed she was with people asking her where she was going to spend

the summer vacation. "Not that long ago, my grandparents' generation had no vacation at all," she said. She raised her voice with an undertone of exasperation, "People would just stay where they lived and that was that… What sea? What vacation!"

Another one of my collocutors is enamored with marathon bicycle rides across the country and beyond. She combines a materially minimalist lifestyle with regular trips into nature, including on weekdays, which many "regular" workers would probably consider luxurious and out of reach, reserving such excursions for planned weekend and holiday trips. She explains that the proposed solution to reducing the problems with climate change greatly revolves around localization, focusing on finding ways to satisfy all or at least most of our needs in our immediate surroundings. My interviewee stresses that she counts joy and fun as among her needs as well. "We need to figure out how to enjoy ourselves and have fun around us, without necessarily spending a fortune on it, without needing to spend many resources on it," she concludes.

At other times, however, my questions about how their choices reflected on the quality of their lives were met with pensive silence. There were women, nearing their 40s, who may have wished to have children but lacked the means or capacity to form a proper infrastructure for such an endeavor. Some interviewees admitted that they had not yet fully figured it all out and discussed coming to terms with the realization that, in the near future, they may have to prioritize their own needs, such as buying an apartment or finding a steady income, over their activities in the solidarity economy.

At all times, however, the sacrifices they made were weighed against the alternative (i.e., entering or reentering the "regular" workforce) almost without exception, at the expense of the latter.

> "What I see, when people ask me, you know, why [we do it] and then it is always the question. We do it because we can. Why do we do it? We do it because we can. And really from the position that I can… Like… You know… I can do it… It's: WOW! I can really do it, you know, I can have that enormous impact on the community, you know, and that can spread on further…"

More often than not, the people I spoke with combined different sources of income to make ends meet within the existing system. Many times, in order to do what they enjoy and consider most important, without getting paid, they find other, more reliable sources of income. The following interviewee works part-time for a private company and leads an organization within the civil society sector through which she occasionally obtains funding for various projects related to organic family farming while also volunteering in various solidarity economy initiatives. She says that it is very hard for her to define what the word "job" actually means.

> "You know?! Because you do some things, I don't know, if job is only when you get paid… Sometimes you get money for nothing, at other times you work yourself to death. And sometimes you do more important stuff volunteering than what you do for money. (…) You may do stuff that makes no sense to you at all for money, and that generates income. It is hard to draw the line, you know…"

Part three: on psychologization and counterpsychologization

Veering from the usual path, along with the price that it often entails, elicited a search for a deeper meaning among my interviewees. From that point on, the conversation would usually turn in one of two directions: psychologization or spiritualization.

The latter involved expressing trust in the helping hand of a larger spiritual entity – the universe, energy, fate, God – once one is aligned with one's true life path and purpose. Some of my interviewees with a more spiritual, and not necessarily religious, bent, ranging from practices that could be subsumed under the New Age umbrella to a broad belief in "cosmic justice," interpreted their choices and their consequences as not particularly courageous because the alternative – things remaining as they were before – was simply not tenable.

One of my collocutors explained how at this point in her life, nearing the age of 50, still finds herself worrying about some decisions and uncertainties.

> "So, now when I even get a thought: Jesus, how we shall manage? [I think to myself] God, why do you still ask yourself that? When so many times you have learned that things will work out one way or another and whatever happens you need to say: I am really interested in seeing how this one will end up well. And as a matter of fact it always, you know, ends well, even if at some point it seems hopeless and stupid and pointless. (…) It is stupid to become nerve-racked about… About anything."

She explains that in an easygoing fashion, conveying the message that worrying itself is a mechanism that keeps us in control, scared of stepping out of the predominant ways of operating. From this perspective, choosing safety over change is, paradoxically, not a safe choice as avoiding change leads to certain suffering.

Other collocutors were more likely to resort to a psychological explanation for their proclivity for solidarity, empathy, and helping in general. In the following excerpt, my interlocutor grapples with the deeper, inner psychic mechanisms that underlie her motivation to do good in the world and dedicate her time to fighting for social causes.

> "I did not do that so I can prove myself to someone, but because I saw an opportunity to, I don't know (…) You know, I can form a group that will help someone I know to sell their produce. (…) It really is a powerful feeling, and it forces you to… to work relentlessly because you feel great and it makes sense to you. (…) I can't say I have a perfect private life, on the contrary, it is quite shitty in a lot of ways (laughter)… I compensate, you know, also, you know, for a certain personal unfulfillment here and so I don't know, you know, I can do here something that is great and so it is not hard for me."

Others also reflected on their deep urge to be solidary or to sacrifice their immediate needs for a greater good as a form of defense mechanism with its roots in complicated, sometimes even traumatic, childhoods. This whole field of economics is, as an interviewee states, filled with people whose early lives were unhappy and who are now trying to save others since they could not save themselves when they were little.

I would, however, propose reversing this psychologizing lens to examine the patterns of antisocial traits within the system in which we currently live – the global capitalist one,

as well as its particular local variants – rather than focusing on the individual. Describing capitalism as antisocial is by no means an original idea, and psychologizing its mechanisms may seem to be precisely what some of the leftist approaches are against – taking away from the brutal logic of the system. Nonetheless, it may be illuminating to interpret its modes of functioning, such as aggressiveness, deceitfulness, or lack of remorse, as "pathological" in the everyday sense of the word.[2] The "alternative" responses to it may thus be viewed as a response that is appropriate and corrective instead of hypersensitive or guilt-induced.

If greediness is a byproduct of the capitalist system, it may, indeed, be misleading to direct the critique toward the personal greediness of capitalists. Conversely, we may be inclined to regard the longing for dignity, freedom, mutuality, and solidarity found in the actions of solidarity economy actors not as a sign of a personal, overempathic, bleeding-heart distortion but as a blueprint for what may become the predominant way of functioning in the future.

Instead of conclusion: solidarity as a refugium for the sane

The solidarity I witnessed throughout my fieldwork was dense, both internally, within the initiative or organization, among coworkers and members, and externally, as it extended to the outside, supporting other enterprises or causes, and joining more strategic, frontal forms of action. That is a possible "how" regarding the solidarity economy. The organizations and initiatives I researched are social laboratories of sorts in which alternative modes of functioning are practiced through trial and error. The primary affective mode I encountered throughout my fieldwork on various sites where solidarity economy is practiced evoked the notions of rest, relief, autonomous functioning, and even a parallel reality. Thus, I find the notion of refugium particularly useful in the analysis. This term is employed in "Refugia: Manifesto for Becoming Autonomous Zones" by the (cyber) feminist art collective subRosa (2002).

Natural sciences define the term refugia to designate "areas in which a population can survive through an extended period of unfavourable conditions" (Wittmann 2022, p. 59). They can be defined as "habitats or environmental factors that coupled with morphological, life history, and behavioral attributes of animals reduce the impact of disturbance" (Lake, Bond, Reich 2006, p. 47). According to subRosa's manifesto, refugium may, among other things, be: "[a] critical space of liberated social becoming and intellectual life; a space liberated from capitalist Taylorized production; a space of unregulated, unmanaged time for creative exchange and play; experimental action and learning, desiring production, cooking, eating, and skill sharing; (…) a space of convivial tinkering; a commonwealth in which common law rules."

It is, as they state, "not a retreat, but a space resistant to mono-culture in all its social, environmental, libidinal, political, and genetic forms." It is also "[a] reproducible concept that can be adapted to various climates, economies, and geographical regions worldwide."

2 In psychiatry, these three patterns of behavior are regarded as common traits of antisocial personality disorder. For more on definition of antisocial personality disorder see Walsh and Wu (2008).

And, most importantly, "any useless space can be claimed as a refugium": the manifest lists the edges of agricultural lands, suburban lawns, rooftops, vacant urban lots, office buildings, and fallow land.

When applied to solidarity economy organizations and initiatives examined in this research, it is also a space in which new modes of production and understanding of "added value" are practiced. In many of them, women are leading the way toward a more egalitarian, just, and inclusive economic ecosystem in ways that, for the most part, remain publicly unrecognized. This mode of solidarity is capable of cutting across some structural and intersectional disadvantages. One's capacity and willingness to cooperate and share are its central tenets and a decisive factor in the solidarity economy's openness and closedness. Also, the existence of boundaries of the primary "inside" within which the densest forms of solidarity are practiced may reinforce preventing the "doing good" from becoming the source of (self)-exploitation.

In the following quote, the interviewee, a pioneer of permaculture in Croatia, explains how she understands the sometimes tumultuous, chaotic state of affairs in the solidarity economy by quoting a friend of hers. The quote mentions the areas that border with wilderness, which are, according to permacultural landscape design, deliberately left intact to enhance diversity.

> "It is about what you have in permaculture, bordering areas, you know, for example, the transition between a meadow and woods. And it is an area in which there is the greatest diversity. Just as well, in human communities you have, you know, bordering areas of people who are capable of entering such alternative… But they are borderline themselves, you know, there is always chaos there and who knows what. (…) They are important because they are pioneer species. They take an area that nobody else wants to and then, when at some point it becomes more mainstream, people who are more stable come in and they create more stable communities. It is some form of, I don't know, natural succession. It makes sense to me, that sort of ecological explanation."

An area in which women participate at the forefront, which is not necessarily attractive in terms of economic or symbolic gains, which is cultivated and experimented with through painful sacrifice and joyful advances, and in the end, offered for the more mainstream modes of functioning to take over and benefit from it... That may be a way to consider how solidarity economy organizations and initiatives contribute to global solidarity movements today.

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Local Community-Led Initiatives Promoting Solidarity and Sustainability: The Community Center Rojc in Pula

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Introduction

The last few decades have been marked by a large increase in the number of diverse bottom-up initiatives and civic organizations based on cooperative and solidarity principles that began to emerge primarily in response to the global financial crisis of 2008. By prioritizing the common good as well as social and environmental needs over profit and fostering solidarity and sustainability, all such organizations, enterprises, and initiatives can be placed under the common denominator of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)[1]. SSE organizations basically encompass "various organizations or collective efforts that aim to achieve the collective purpose and common goals" (Silva Junior, forthcoming, 2023, p. 1), such as social justice, cooperation, solidarity, mutuality, social inclusion, and equality, as well as economic and ecological sustainability. They encompass associations, cooperatives, foundations, NGO's, community-led initiatives, community banks, mutual organizations, social enterprises, productive groups, exchange clubs, ecovillages, commons and many other forms of associations and movements whose activity is "driven by values of solidarity, the primacy of people over capital, and democratic and participative governance (OECD, 2022, p. 14)." Such practices have a socially innovative character and are opposed and critical to the dominant capitalist economic system (cf. Orlić et al., 2022). Since SSE organizations primarily address societal needs and environmental challenges and prioritize ecological sustainability and benefits to society over financial profit and growth (cf. Šimleša et al., 2015), they have to implement innovative approaches, solutions, and specific business models based on collective action, collaboration, and democratic governance. According to Henfrey et al. (2019), the social and solidarity economy becomes a vehicle through which various community-led initiatives operate and are trying to influence policy with the aim of implementing sustainable development goals. This has been confirmed by the research of Esteves et al., whose four case studies demonstrated "how particular forms of SSE arising within movements of community-led initiatives for sustainability and social justice facilitate the delivery of sustainable development goals" (Esteves et al., 2021, p. 1424).

Although already well established in most European countries, similar initiatives in Croatia have begun to appear on the local scene only in the last decade, albeit with increasing

1 Cf. Utting, 2023; Orlić, 2019; Simonič, 2019; Šimleša et al., 2015; Miller, 2010.

speed as their popularity spread. Thus, one of the goals of the scientific project "Solidarity Economy in Croatia: Anthropological Perspective (SOLIDARan)"[2] was to investigate and map the already existing and new initiatives, organizations, and practices of the solidarity economy in Croatia.

In this chapter I reflect on the role, activities, problems, challenges and perspectives of the several local civil society organizations and community-led initiatives that act in accordance with the principles of the social and solidarity economy and are located within the Community Center Rojc in Pula, the biggest town in the region of Istria in Croatia. The programs and activities of the bottom-up associations researched primarily reflect the needs and interests of the local community. Through activism and artivism,[3] they promote and support the sustainable development of the local community and environment, circular economy principles, alternative forms of exchange and consumption (based on ecological awareness and solidarity), and the cooperation and social inclusion of marginalized groups. In this way, they significantly contribute to the construction of solidarity economy practices both in Pula and Istria as a whole. Having in mind their characteristics and aims, the associations I investigated are "community-led initiatives" that were self-organized around common environmental and/or social goals (Henfrey et al., 2019, p. 2).

During my fieldwork in Istria, conducted for the project "SOLIDARan" over a period of three months in 2022, I employed a qualitative ethnographic methodology, which included semi-structured in-depth interviews with the associations' gatekeepers, representatives, leading actors, and members, as well as participant observation and photo documentation of their practices. The aims of this research were to examine their motivations for their involvement and work in the associations and initiatives, to learn how they perceive solidarity, to understand in which ways they affect the social, economic, and ecological sustainability of the local community, and to uncover the problems they face in their work. The goal was also to investigate whether and in which ways Rojc, as a community center, can have a positive social impact and effect on sustainability and the future development of the associations and community-led initiatives that are the subject of this research. Twelve interviews were analysed for the purpose of this chapter, and the interpretation of the data collected is based on qualitative analysis.[4]

The historical transformations of the Community Center Rojc in Pula

The Community Center Rojc (hereafter, Rojc) is a unique place in Pula and Croatia as a whole for several reasons. The building in which it is situated is the largest building in the city (16,739 m²) and its purpose has changed several times throughout history to finally become what it is today. The building in which today's Community Center is situated was built in 1870, during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when it originally housed the mari-

2 The project is funded by the Croatian Science Foundation under grant IP-2019-04.

3 Artistic activism.

4 Some significant quotes from the interviews are presented in the paper. With the aim of protecting the personal data and ensuring the anonymity of the interlocutors, only their gender (F/M) and age are indicated in the parentheses.

time military school, the *Marinen Schule*.[5] It retained this role when Istria was annexed to the Kingdom of Italy in 1920. Within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the building came to house the Partisan machine school, and from 1973, it served exclusively as military quarters, when it was renamed in honor of a World War II national hero, Karlo Rojc. In 1991, following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, when the Yugoslav army left the building, it was repurposed yet again to house war refugees. In 1998, the first civil society organizations moved into the building, and a year later, the city of Pula decided to formalize the situation, leading to the first contracts on the use of the premises inside the building being signed.

> "That place [Rojc] was created in a way by accident. That kind of energy was, like, bottom-up, it was simply that creative something ... people started entering, they started doing things and then that energy. But then, over time, we structured ourselves a bit, so that we could develop these certain things. After all, so that the building does not fall into disrepair." (F, 43)

The building's transformation followed the world's post-industrial trend of reusing brownfield sites (abandoned former industrial and military facilities) and transforming them into community and cultural centers. Today, Community Center Rojc encompasses about 110 civil society organizations that address different areas of social activity and interests (sports, culture, art, ecology, health, social care, youth, national minorities, and the social inclusion of marginalized groups, to list a few). Most of them form part of the network of associations founded in 2011, named *Savez udruga Rojca* ("Rojc Alliance") or simply *SUR*. The Rojc Alliance formally represents their interests to the city government, encourages cooperation between government and civil society, and strives to improve the management of Rojc. Additionally, SUR promotes and acts on the principles of SSE, such as solidarity, cooperation, active care for the environment, sustainable development, social innovation, active citizenship, gender equality, respect for diversity, social justice, and similar (Celakoski et al., 2021). Such a great number of associations coexist in the premises of Rojc that it is sometimes called the "city of civil society." Since it plays an important socio-cultural role in the city of Pula (more than a thousand users visit Rojc daily), Mišković (2018, p. 172) considers Rojc "a mirror of the situation in the community." It was described in a similar way by my interlocutor, an active member and founder of several organizations in Rojc:

> "Rojc is a specific place. I mean, this story, however slow or unimportant it may seem to some, when you get to know Rojc, the story is actually very important. There is no place in Croatia, in the region, that gathers such a large number of associations in one place. And this is exactly its strength. This can only happen in Rojc. Because Rojc has this enormous strength in the amount of people who enter it every day. (…) I think that all this could have happened in Rojc and that it is questionable how it would develop elsewhere." (F, 57)

Rojc is also a meeting and gathering place for people who attend social activities, workshops, and training programs that take place in its common areas, like the courtyard and the inner space named the "Living Room". The Center has its own official website "for

5 More detailed information and the historical overview of transformations and purposes of the today's Community Center Rojc is available in Celakoski et al. (2021).

the citizens of Rojc and their guests" (https://rojcnet.pula.org/), the community newspaper *Veznik*, a community library named Rojc Book (which operates on the principle of donations), and community media, *Radio Rojc*.[6] Besides being a unique example of a huge and thematically diverse community center in Croatia, as part of the Trans Europa Halles, a network of grassroots European Cultural centers, Rojc also has gained international recognition. The city of Pula, as the owner of the Rojc building, manages and co-finances its maintenance. The associations are exempt from paying rent and must only maintain their premises and pay the utility bills. Rojc is an example of successful cooperation between a city government and local civil society organizations. Their cooperation reflects the so-called participatory management model, an innovative model of civil-public partnership.[7] This new and innovative model of the organization and management of public resources is defined as a "joint and collaborative action and dialogue between the public and civil sectors for the purpose of better quality, more effective and efficient management and use of public resources compared to conventional and traditional approaches" (Mišković et al., 2015, p. 62, cf. Račić, 2022). Representatives from the city of Pula and the Community Center Rojc associations are equally represented on the six-person committee of the Coordination of the Community Center Rojc, founded in 2008.

Local community-led initiatives and associations at Rojc

The associations that operate on the principle of having a positive influence on the local community and society in general are primarily non-profit oriented. Šimleša et al. (2015) point out that SSE, besides usual actors (cooperatives, enterprises, and associations that offer services and products), also includes informal groups or initiatives for mutual assistance, solidarity networks of joint production and purchase, associations of the informal economy, local currency, common good management, sharing economy, and the like. In order to successfully address primarily local socio-economic and environmental issues, SSE organizations and initiatives operate within civil society arenas and are community-led. They generate novel and innovative bottom-up solutions for sustainable development and prioritize the welfare of local communities over profit. In doing so, they form a part of what is considered the social economy (Račić, 2022). This section outlines and describes such associations housed at Rojc, highlighting local variation in SSE organizations and initiatives created by the Pula community. What is particularly interesting and unique in the case of Rojc is that the mentioned associations are located within a community center, and this fact may have a positive effect on their development and the impact they have on the local community.

There are several civil society organizations and local bottom-up initiatives located within the premises of Rojc that act on the principles of sustainable development for the local community and the environment. The activities they carry out are mostly of a non-profit

6 Radio Rojc is a non-profit community radio, which started broadcasting in 2018 and, among other things, promotes the work of Rojc associations.

7 The participatory management model has become extremely popular in the last two decades. It emphasizes effective participation and active citizenship that form the basis of sustainable and equitable development (Mišković et al., 2015; cf. Silva Junior, forthcoming, 2023).

type (sharing economy, collaborative and sustainable consumption, etc.) and aimed at solving major social and environmental problems on a micro level, such as environmental pollution, unemployment, the exclusion of certain social groups from the labor market, and similar.

> "In order for us to live better some other communities, some other people suffer and live in very bad conditions. And we think that this simply needs to change. And actually, that's why we also like to do all these things, to show these innovative projects ... where, for example, social entrepreneurship and circular economy can show that it can be done differently." (F, 43)

They promote and develop various SSE practices, including circular and sharing economy principles, exchange and consumption based on ecological awareness, the social inclusion of marginalized groups, and various non-capitalist practices. Considering their characteristics, the associations presented in the paper can be considered community-led initiatives (CLI) (Henfrey et al., 2019), as explained in the introductory part of the paper.

Zelena Istra ("Green Istria") is a non-profit citizens' association committed to protecting the environment, natural resources, and social justice. For over twenty-five years, it has actively participated in building a democratic, solidary, and environmentally sustainable society.[8] The association also advocates for participatory forms of governance of public goods and services, as opposed to their privatization, and it encourages public participation in decision-making processes. It regularly organizes do-it-yourself workshops, training programs (on zero-waste, recycling, natural cosmetics, vertical gardening, permaculture, gender equality, etc.), and implements national and EU projects primarily aimed at environmental protection and advocating the principles of the sharing economy.[9] In addition to promoting sustainable consumption by organizing swap and exchange fairs and no-money events (e.g., the *TiDam-TiDaš* fair, a wheel exchange fair for bicycles, scooters, inline skates, skates, etc.), Green Istria encouraged the founding of the Urban Gardens Group in 2021, which resulted in the creation of the inclusive Community Garden in Pula's Gregovica neighborhood. Besides being a place for socializing, it also offers members a sense of community, as stated by one member in the interview. Additionally, one of its aims is to educate kindergarten and school children, as well as to organize various thematic workshops on urban gardening. One of Green Istria's most innovative and commendable initiatives is the establishment of the first repair café and workshop in Croatia. Founded in 2021 as a bottom-up initiative by a civil society organization, the Re-Geppetto Workshop and Repair Café is a well-equipped tool library within the Rojc building. Re-Geppetto offers people the opportunity to repair their small household appliances, furniture, clothes, and toys on a do-it-yourself basis, free of charge, by using the tools available in the workshop (which are usually not feasible for an individual to buy) with the help and advice of an expert or workshop manager. By acting on principles of the sharing economy, waste reduction, and circular economy, and by promoting sustainable consumption patterns through various thematic workshops for schoolchildren, women,

8 The Green Istria association: https://www.zelena-istra.hr/en/about-us/

9 "Communities go circular", "Garden (ACT)ivism", "Not in my backyard", "Tools for learning – tools for sustainable development" and many others.

and other interested public, this repair café and workshop seeks to build a stronger and more resilient solidarity community. It was launched within the project "*ROJC: Razvijamo-Omogućavamo-Jačamo-Cijenimo*" ("ROJC: Developing-Enabling-Strengthening-Appreciating") with the financial support of the European Union, the European Social Fund, and the Office for Cooperation with NGOs of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. One of the Re-Geppetto Workshop projects carried out by Green Istria, the "Repair Café Re-Geppetto - circular community and art" action, received the award for outstanding action in the Association/NGO category during the 13th edition of the European Week for Waste Reduction (EWWR) in 2021.

Udruga Merlin ("The Merlin Association") is a non-governmental and non-profit organization founded in 2001 that also forms part of the partnership project "ROJC: Developing-Enabling-Strengthening-Appreciating." With the aim of promoting creativity and creating a society of equal opportunities, the association organizes community projects for the inclusion of marginalized groups (e.g., persons with disabilities, unemployed women, Roma children, etc.). Social inclusion is fostered through creative workshops on traditional and art crafts, recycling, community gardening, and the organization of various cultural and historical manifestations. The latter also represents an opportunity for self-financing by selling souvenirs created by the association's members, enabling the Merlin Association to go in the direction of social entrepreneurship.

The last example of an SSE initiative within Community Center Rojc considered in this research is *Buvljak Veštit,* a second-hand flea market and swap event launched in February 2022 by a young student and held monthly at Rojc. In addition to supporting the sharing economy and zero-waste principles through the offer of second-hand clothes, shoes, and other items, this event, through the way it is organized and operated, also fosters solidarity and social capital – it offers people who come to Rojc another opportunity and place to socialize, exchange ideas, and give mutual help and support to one another.

Problems, challenges, and development perspectives of local community-led initiatives

During the analysis of the interviews, some common problems and obstacles that the Rojc associations faced in their work turned out to be significant. In this paper, I will present excerpts from the interviews that illustrate these obstacles. One of the crucial problems that these community-led initiatives face is the lack of financial support, as they are dependent on grant-based funding, which makes them financially insecure and, in some instances, even unsustainable. As stated by my interlocutors, the risks and limitations of temporary project funding include challenges in the availability of public funding, continuous project applications, and difficulties in ensuring long-term financial support:

> "We are constantly applying for various projects. We are trying to get funds because we need funds for everything we want. (…) Somehow it goes on, we're glad about that. It's easy to get a project, but then it makes no sense to close the Radiona. (…) Because it's a waste of invested money if we lock it down later. I think that even local government units and utility companies should support us more, maybe financially." (F, 43)

This consequently results in economic precarity, temporary employment (while a project is active), constant employee turnover, and personnel under capacity, affecting the sustainability of the initiatives and associations:

> "It happened to us that you hire someone, and then you don't have a salary for them. So that everyone who works must be prepared that it is not a permanent job. Maybe it turns into a permanent one, maybe not. So, I think that's the problem with all the associations. That institutional support." (F, 43)

The impossibility of permanent employment leads to a shortage of qualified employees. This includes a general employee deficit, as well as a lack of professional staff and experts who are sufficiently knowledgeable to deal with specific tasks such as writing applications for and implementing large EU projects, marketing, and similar activities.

> "More employees would be needed, but those employees need to be paid. (…) I mean, you should have a professional who will write the project proposal and then you would get the project." (F, 60)

> "Of course, we lack capacity. We could do many more things if we had, I don't know, another engineer, another biologist and someone else who would write another project." (F, 43)

Since engagement with civil society also implies volunteering, undefined working hours, overloading of a small number of engaged individuals and financial insecurity, it often results in what my informants consider "a civil society burnout", which is characterized by exhaustion and cynicism:

> "After ten years I had had enough. It is very difficult for me and my colleagues who are in civil society to work. (…) So, the basic problem is burnout. (…) The female inclusion or the female work in the non-governmental sector… we are all, almost eighty percent, I think there was a research, I read it a long time ago, after ten years you burn out." (F, 60)

Such a negative situation is further exacerbated by weak institutional support, or even the absence of it. The need for supportive public policies and greater recognition by local and regional authorities is something that the interlocutors are aware is crucial for the sustainability of the investigated associations and initiatives:

> "Without such [institutional] support nothing can be done. Because we can advocate, lobby, urge, encourage, educate, but the decisions are made elsewhere." (M, 30)

> "In my opinion, a workshop like this should be supported by the local community, because the local community definitely benefits from it. For now, it's all on our shoulders, on the Rojc Alliance and the Zelena Istria. We have already written a couple of projects related to that. (…) But, I definitely think that the local community, the city of Pula, should play a role in this. In the sense that they support this workshop". (M, 49)

Besides the institutional support at the local (the city of Pula) and regional (the county of Istria) levels, the interlocutors mostly emphasized the need for cooperation, networking, and cohesion among associations, as well as the more active participation of other associations residing within Rojc. Instead of an individual approach and the usual kind of competitiveness that is present among associations, which reduces developmental possibilities

and potentials for the whole community center, they advocate for a more collaborative action with the goal of benefiting the common welfare:

> "Because it is actually very important that the associations are not just some passive users, observers of some kind of changes that are happening, but simply that they actively participate in it. (…) On the other hand, Rojčani, that is, associations from Rojc, should be more active. They should be more actively involved". (F, 57)

> "If it all functioned as a whole, well, it would be bursting with young people and events. And this is how it is now: this is mine, that is our part of the courtyard ... you know." (F, 23)

The same issue was noted by Mišković (2018), who claims that associations at Rojc act independently of one another and that there is no high-quality program synergy. This creates discontent among the associations, as they do not all share the same priorities, goals, or common interests. Another problem is the need for large investments in the infrastructure of the old Rojc building. Many unused spaces, the lack of larger common spaces, and inadequate disability-friendly access represent significant obstacles to the further development of the associations' activities and work.

Despite the negative aspects and challenges that the associations are facing, Rojc is still recognized as a model for other Croatian cities to transform brownfield sites into community and cultural centers (Mišković, 2018). It offers the residents of Pula a large number of diverse activities, it has increased the possibility of social engagement, and it is on the right track in making the local community aware of the benefits and necessity of applying solidarity economy principles in everyday life:

> "There are, of course, many problems, but I think, simply, that the amount of social influence, programs, what we [Rojc] offer to the citizens all together, I think it is a huge influence." (F, 43)

Its advantages also include an innovative management model and a large number of members and users, which implies a diversity of knowledge and skills at their disposal, as well as a range of different areas of activity, services, and programs offered to the citizens within a single unique building. The associations' practice of networking with similar centers in Croatia and abroad and continuously adopting best practices positively affects the further development of the community center. Perhaps one of the most significant positive aspects regarding its development perspectives is that Rojc represents a unique place in the city that is very important in terms of identity for many of its users. It represents a source of frequent social interaction and a venue for networking and socializing, thereby contributing to the production and maintenance of social cohesion and social capital, even transgenerationally, as a few interlocutors pointed out in the interviews.

> "I've been coming here since I was young, and my child already goes to some activities here. I mean, we're very connected." (F, 43)

The role of the community center can thus be compared to, or even equated with, the role that Forrest and Kearns (2001) assign to the neighborhood. In such a sense, it represents "an extension of the home for social purposes" and gives its residents "a sense of be-

longing and identity" (Forrest and Kearns, 2001, p. 2130). In this vein, Ellery and Ellery (2019, p. 237) argue that "creating a sense of place is important because it also develops a strong sense of community among those who live there." Creating a sense of belonging to a place is defined as the process of placemaking, where public spaces act as centers for community members and thus become integral to community development (ibid.). In Rojc's inner courtyard, many musical and cultural events are organized as well, and the younger generations in Pula have recognized this and gather in large numbers:

> "A new generation of young people who come and use Rojc's courtyard has been created. (…) Recently, we had an event outside in the yard and there were many, many young people. (...) Young people come in the evening, they sit outside and hang out in the courtyard." (M, 49)

Many of Rojc members "grew up with Rojc" (they attended various extracurricular activities there since childhood), some of them were the founders of the Rojc Alliance and the first users of Rojc's facilities when it became a community center. For this reason, they consider it a kind of community, or even their second home:

> "Well, it's like being at home for me. I would sleep in Rojc if necessary. No problem. I would go to Rojc to drink coffee rather than to the city centre. To drink coffee from the coffee machine, but just to be there. (…) There is, really, when you enter Rojc and start to act, when that energy starts to be exchanged and you get and give something, and then when you really enter that ... it's a community. It really is a closed community, but at the same time it is open to anything." (F, 23)

Despite the many challenges and problems they are facing, the general attitude of people working in associations within Rojc is very positive and optimistic, with a lot of enthusiasm and creative ideas and plans among interviewees (especially the younger generations). This certainly represents an important prerequisite for future development:

> "As far as this topic is concerned, the solidarity economy and the circular economy, there is a lot of potential here [in Rojc]. There really is potential and, simply, maybe with a greater understanding of the local authorities, something could really open up. Some new situations." (M, 49)

> "There is a lot of space there, and really when you have space and someone gives you a place where you can express yourself and work on yourself and your ideas, it can't be bad. And then you surround yourself with people who are so creative and then you connect, you network … let's do this, let's do that, let's go, and then anything can be done." (F, 23)

Concluding remarks

Numerous community-led initiatives oriented toward the solidarity, collaborative, and sharing economies, an inclusive society, and environmental protection have appeared in Croatia in recent decades, with the majority originating from civil society. The bottom-up associations and community-led initiatives within Rojc in Pula arose in response to various social, economic, and environmental problems and needs. They rely on the principles of the social and solidarity economy, thereby developing local, innovative dynamics that foster cooperation and promote sustainable development in a social, ecological, and eco-

nomic sense. Their activities strive towards positive social change and local community development. Bearing in mind that they engage different age groups, those associations are considered promoters of principles and practices of the social and solidarity economy.

Community centers across the world, serving as hubs of innovative practices, contribute to positive changes in society and, in some cases, can be considered incubators for new ways of working, living, and creating sustainable communities. However, the way in which the activities of a community center can contribute to shaping and strengthening social relations and social cohesion within a community, as well as promoting positive societal changes, is generally an under-researched topic that deserves more attention from future researchers. Rojc, besides being a community center and "an advocate of innovative social practices and cooperation models" (www.rojcnet.pula.org), also proved to be a locus of the social and solidarity economy practices, promoting and developing values of the social and solidarity economy through the work and activities of some of its associations and its innovative participatory management model. Rojc attracts people who share similar opinions, ideas, and interests, and, as perceived by its users and members, represents a place where numerous innovative ideas and knowledge are shared, and where civic initiatives motivated by activism for the benefit of the community and the environment are born and realized. Through the activities of these associations and initiatives located in its premises, Rojc represents a site of production of diverse practices and values that have a positive impact on the social, economic, and ecological sustainability of the local community. Besides the innovative ideas and the generally strong enthusiasm among the main actors and members of the associations and activities, their perspective of development is additionally reinforced by the fact that they are located within the premises of a community center. The centre offers the opportunity for people to meet, contributing to the social cohesion and to creating a sense of place with which individuals can identify. This positively affects the existence and social impact of the local community-led initiatives and associations. Despite this, their contribution to supporting and promoting the social and solidarity economy practices and values should be recognized and further supported, both financially and organizationally, by local and regional authorities and public policies. Effective collaboration between civil society and local government in the form of stronger and systematic financial, institutional, political, and legal support would provide the basis for the sustainability of these associations and the further development of their activities. As Račić (2022) noted, the results and the future prospects of the social and solidarity economy sector in Croatia are significantly influenced by the fact that the incentive framework for their development remains generally incomplete and insufficient.

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“As if You Were in Your Parents’ Home”: Social Support for Small Business Owners in a Community Association

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Original scientific paper

Introduction

Against the backdrop of deindustrialization and the rise of the service economy, small artisanal businesses have been “promoted as a liberatory alternative to large-scale enterprise and mass production” in the wake of the 2007 global financial crisis (Munro and O’Kane, 2021, p. 1). Additionally, due to their small scale and mostly local reach, they align well with the growing trend of purchasing locally produced goods, both for environmental reasons and to stimulate local economies, as a counterweight to the dominance of larger national or multinational corporations. However, it can be very difficult to establish and maintain these kinds of businesses on a level that is profitable, and this sector is thus characterized by significant precarity and uncertainty (ibid.). Despite this, at a meeting that I attended in Vestigium (the association that is the focus of this paper), many of the twenty or so people present said that they would like to quit their jobs (or had already done so) to start their own small business project or to give their full attention to a project already underway.

The role of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) practices in this context can be to foster collaboration and different forms of mutual support, both among the artisans/producers themselves and between them and their customers and other community members, to provide more security and help with overcoming obstacles that often result in the closing of small businesses or discourage their opening in the first place. Rather than individualism and competition, the SSE promotes collaboration, reciprocity, building social ties, and the formation of communities (Dash, 2014). It has long been recognized in studies of entrepreneurship and self-employment that, although often initiated and led by one person, such ventures need to be viewed as shaped by and reliant on the person’s relationships with a number of other people (e.g., Johanisson, 1998). Social support provided by people in a person’s network has been pointed out as a crucial resource in this regard (Wright et al., 2021). Even in the context of increasing trends towards precarity and individualization, or precisely because of them, new practices of building supportive networks and communities have been developing (e.g., coworking, start-up incubators). Some of them have faced critique, however, claiming that, while enabling mutual support, they can also encourage (self-)exploitation and the development of power imbalances (ibid.).

This paper will present a somewhat different case - that of a non-profit association in Zagreb which acts as a neighborhood community center, while also providing informal support to people looking to start small (primarily artisanal) businesses. Since this is a quite specific combination in the Croatian context, I was interested in understanding the role played by the association and the community it fosters in providing different forms of social support to small business projects that align with the principles of the SSE. The paper is a result of fieldwork conducted over several months in 2021 and 2022, as part of the SOLIDARan project. The emphasis of the fieldwork was on participant observation and informal conversations with producers at the farmers' market, which Vestigium hosts every Saturday throughout the year (these conversations, however, were not recorded and thus no quotes from them are provided). In addition to this, seven interviews were conducted: three with the founder and coordinator of Vestigium and the others with four women who have started or further grown their small (individual or family)[1] business projects through their engagement with the association (Vestigium's founder also joined in halfway through one of those interviews). The ages of the women interviewed ranged from approximately twenty to fifty, and the duration of the interviews was between one and two hours.

The first part of the analysis focuses on the relationships between producers, artisans, or service providers, on the one hand, and their customers, on the other. In contrast, the second part foregrounds mutual support among the former. Before that, I will briefly describe the motivation behind founding Vestigium and how the association now functions, and then present a theoretical framework for interpreting its activity in terms of support for small businesses.

From the personal to the societal: the motivation behind Vestigium

Vestigium is a community association located in the Vrbani neighborhood in Zagreb, and it was founded in 2011 by Irena,[2] who was a resident of the neighborhood at the time, along with some of her friends. Their motivation can be viewed on three levels. On the personal level, Irena was seeking a type of work that would allow her to spend more time with her family and be more in tune with her beliefs, worldview, and interests, while providing opportunities for creativity and self-expression. On the community level, Irena and her friends noticed a lack of a neighborhood community center, despite interest among their neighbors. Irena also had a strong personal desire to be part of a more closely knit community; as she told me, she wanted something resembling a small village, but since she did not have the possibility at the time to move to the countryside, she had to build this kind of community in the city. The link between the local community level and the broader societal level was provided by the ideas of the Transition movement, founded by Rob Hopkins in England in 2005, which advocates for engagement with wider social and environmental issues through local community building and sees "small" local acts as contributing to change on a broader level. Along with the fundamental ethical principles of permaculture (caring for people, caring for nature, and a just distribution of resources

1 While three of these four women are the founders of their own businesses, one joined her partner's family business.

2 Real first name used with permission of the research participant.

with limits to consumption and reproduction; cf. Holmgren, 2011 [2002]), these are the ideas that spurred Irena and her friends to start with their activities on the neighborhood level, while keeping in mind the broader goals of change that they aspired to.

From the beginning, the range of activities that the association was going to organize and the different domains of life to which these activities are linked were not delimited in advance. Apart from the diverse interests of Vestigium's founders, another reason for this was the community-oriented ethos of the association, with an inclusive and participatory attitude. Vestigium's space is open to anyone who would like to organize an activity or event there, as long as it is in accord with the basic ethical principles and a small fee is paid to help cover rent and utilities. A further reason for this openness is that the association prefers to be financially self-sustainable to some extent and not dependent exclusively on project-based funding, as the latter is often accompanied by discouraging bureaucratic procedures and long waits for funds with strict limits on their use. Thus, Vestigium's activity and the network of people and businesses that have developed around it over the years comprise a platform that enables all participants to benefit from it, among other things, in an economic sense. Customers find products (locally grown food, cosmetics from natural ingredients, etc.), services (massage, aromatherapy) or leisure and educational activities (yoga, dance, various arts and crafts courses, etc.) that are perhaps not available or are of a lower quality elsewhere; artisans and agricultural producers sell their wares and find new customers; and the fees paid for using the association's space and resources help cover its costs (furthermore, those who use the space are expected to help maintain it and keep it clean).

Today, Vestigium has approximately 130 more or less active members.[3] Another 90 or so people are occasionally or regularly involved through selling products or produce (e.g., at the weekly farmers' market, which is the association's best-known regular activity) and/or holding workshops, courses, presentations, and other activities open to the public. The association's activities are funded both through membership fees, private donations, and the above-mentioned fees paid by users of the space, as well as through project-based grants from various sources (the City of Zagreb, the National Foundation for Civil Society Development, the European Social Fund, etc.). In 2021, a co-operative was founded to further strengthen, develop, and promote the network of artisans and agricultural producers that has been built up around the association, as well as another community center in Brezovica near Zagreb, where Irena and her family now live.

A framework for interpreting Vestigium's activity

Social support has long been recognized as an important factor in entrepreneurship, influencing the likelihood that a person will enter the entrepreneurial process and perform successfully within it (Søgaard Nielsen, 2019, in reference to Stam et al., 2014). Social support can be defined as "the resources that people obtain from their social relationships and use when they face difficulties" (Søgaard Nielsen, 2019, p. 1, in reference to Kim et

3 These members are people who more or less frequently participate in Vestigium's activities (attend workshops, buy produce at the market etc.) or at least support the association by paying a membership fee.

al., 2013) or more specifically as the perceived "number and quality of friendships or caring relationships that provide either emotional reassurance, needed information, or instrumental aid in dealing with stressful situations" (Fisher, 1985, p. 40, in Zhu et al., 2017). Support can thus be in the form of providing, for example, information or advice relevant to the business project, instrumental support (helping with specific tasks), or emotional support. Emotional support in general can be defined as "individuals' encouragement of others and expression of love and liking" (Søgaard Nielsen, 2019, p. 2, in reference to Pierce et al., 1996) and it can "increase entrepreneurs' confidence in completing business tasks, thereby motivating them to devote more efforts to their venture" (Zhu et al., 2017). Social support can be provided by various sources, for example, the entrepreneur's family, friends, coworkers, or supervisors at work (ibid.). Family support in particular has been shown to reduce the entrepreneur's intention of giving up a business venture that is already underway, among other things by affecting how they perceive circumstances related to their work: the more support they receive, the more likely they are to perceive difficult circumstances as a challenge ("that can be eventually overcome and produce feelings of fulfilment and personal growth"), rather than a hindrance (something "that stand[s] in the way of achieving one's goals") (ibid.).

While the concept of social support is focused on the individual (entrepreneur) and how their relationships with people around them contribute to the success of their business project and their own well-being, to understand the way Vestigium works we also need a conceptual framework that can acknowledge multiple, mutually supportive relationships among a broader, variously interconnected group of people. Although Vestigium is not a coworking space, it shares several important similarities with the practice of coworking. Coworking is described as "a constructive and highly social activity that promotes free exchanges of ideas underpinned by commonly held values of collaboration, openness, community, accessibility and sustainability" (Butcher, 2018, p. 4, in reference to Merkel, 2015). Apart from helping coworkers master "the financial, organizational and social aspects of independent work" (ibid., p. 5), coworking allows them to benefit from "interaction, feedback, trust, learning, partnerships, encouragement and referrals" (Butcher, 2018, p. 5, in reference to Spinuzzi, 2012) within the community formed in a particular coworking space. According to Butcher (2018, p. 11), coworking "invites an intentionality to connect," through "routines and rituals", including communal activities. Spontaneity and informality are welcomed in approaching others, communicating with them, and establishing relationships. This allows for the development of connections (and thus also for building entrepreneurial social capital) for people who would otherwise be working individually and would not have "such a range of opportunities for social exchange and collaboration with individuals from diverse occupational backgrounds" (ibid., p. 10). Relationships built in this way, as well as the whole coworking environment, are conducive to continuously learning from each other's different areas of knowledge, experience, and skills and supporting each other's business projects in various ways.

Although coworkers can and do personally benefit from these relationships and thus also to an extent "tactically position themselves" (ibid., p. 15) with a personal business interest in mind, this is not considered problematic and is accepted as an aspect of coworking practices, among other things because "it can construct an internal economy of exchange that

sustains the community" (ibid., p. 16). Apart from the abovementioned mutual support among coworkers, individualist tendencies are balanced out by the fact that coworkers are expected to also give back to the community in various ways (for example, by helping maintain the space). Through coworking, they "learn how to develop more collective, less individualistic entrepreneurial everyday practices" (ibid., p. 17), which helps them cope with their precarious working conditions by "gaining support and developing agency" through "co-constructing a sense of community" (ibid., p. 15). An important result of this is that "career trajectories are being reimagined, re-enacted and reproduced as collective endeavors" (ibid., p. 17).

Wright et al. (2021), on the other hand, are among those authors who have been more critical of coworking practices. They find that offering emotional support to other coworkers is an important aspect of the process of becoming part of the community and that it helps those receiving it deal with emotional issues related to their projects. This is in accord with the "values of altruism and mutual support" which are espoused by coworkers and seen as a "collective strength" (ibid., p. 12). Apart from emotional support, coworkers are also expected to offer their professional services for free or at a lower price to other coworkers as part of the community ethos. Rather than seeing them as mutually supportive, the authors consider these practices (potentially) exploitative, since there is no guarantee of gaining something in return. The empirical research that they present does not, however, provide any indications of power relations in this regard, i.e., of certain coworkers benefiting more and giving less than others. Rather than direct exchange, relations in coworking communities might instead be based more on a form of long-term generalized reciprocity, i.e. "when individuals repay favors to someone other than those they initially received favors from", which "is shown to enhance social solidarity more than direct exchanges in terms of bonding between individuals and the groups they are a part of" (Søgaard-Nielsen, 2019, p. 3, in reference to Molm et al., 2007). Therefore, a lack of directly reciprocal, clear, and relatively "short-term" instances of "returning" or "repaying" favors does not necessarily need to be interpreted as exploitative or as an imbalance in power relations.

On a more fundamental level, the intertwining of the economic and social aspects of relationships can be seen as validating Karl Polanyi's theory of the social embeddedness of the economy, as interpreted by Roy and Grant (2019). The latter authors emphasize that it is important to avoid conceptualizing the "social" and the "economic" as opposite poles on a binary scale, because that would imply that if e.g. an organization decides to focus more on the social (e.g. community) aspects or benefits of its activity this would necessarily mean that it will focus less on economic (e.g. commercial) activity and vice versa. Instead, it is important to recognize the different ways in which the social sphere (institutions, relations, norms, etc.) intertwines with and shapes economic systems and activity; I would add: on a macro as well as a micro, everyday level. This is particularly relevant, the authors argue, when studying organizations which combine the three basic economic principles described by Polanyi (market exchange, redistribution and reciprocity) and three sectors of the economy: the private sector, the public sector (the state), and the voluntary (community and civil society) sector. Roy and Grant's paper specifically focuses on social enterprises, but the theoretical framework could also be applied to other

examples of similar "hybrid" activity[4], where economic and social relationships can reinforce each other rather than being mutually opposed.

Producers and customers: a heterogeneous community based on social and economic connections

In comparison to coworking spaces, start-up incubators, or, for example, professional associations, the community that Vestigium has built is more inclusive and heterogeneous. The fact that the association is conceived primarily as a social or community center, without a strict formal structure or criteria determining who can participate and in what way, encourages and provides ample opportunity for the development of connections between people in different positions: both agricultural producers, artisans and people offering services or activities, as well as customers or attendees of those activities, or their friends, neighbors and family members who might stop by.

These opportunities for informal socializing are particularly present during the regular weekly farmers' market held every Saturday throughout the year, which I attended for several months and which constitutes the main part of the fieldwork. Tables for the wares are set out in front of the association's premises, located in a quiet but accessible corner at the rear side of an apartment building, with a shaded green area (a lawn with trees) adjacent to it. Seating is set up in this green space, and in the warmer part of the year, it is used for children's workshops and other activities taking place during and after the market. Thus, on Saturdays, both the indoor and outdoor spaces are busy with people who might be there for different reasons, but, due to the physical proximity of everything going on in the relatively small space, it is hard to avoid being exposed to other aspects of the association's activity that they were perhaps previously not aware of. With people chatting and children running around, it certainly has the feel of a neighborhood gathering place. An example of how different social connections can easily develop in this context was given by one of my research participants, a woman who lives in the neighborhood and who started her small artisanal business through the association:

> Participant: "This whole group of us women who went to the yoga class [in Vestigium] had this phenomenal energy, we connected very quickly, we've stayed friends to this day, this kind of smaller group of people. We organized dinners here [in Vestigium], cooking workshops."
>
> Anja: "That same group from the yoga class?"
>
> Participant: "That, and the circle was spreading, so we were very open, Irena supported that togetherness, collaboration, and all that; although we were a small group, we were actually a whole part of Vestigium, we very quickly met everyone here: the people who were selling [their products at Vestigium's market], who were coming here, organizing anything, we actually networked with everyone." (W, small business owner and Vestigium member)

4 As mentioned above, Vestigium's activities rely on voluntary work (reciprocity) and are partly funded through grants from public sector sources (redistribution), while also stimulating market exchange, i.e. the buying/selling of products and services offered by privately owned small businesses.

Attending yoga classes in Vestigium and connecting with others in that context was what prompted this participant to start her own business: she began making things that she needed for her own yoga practice (such as pillows to use while meditating) and gradually other practitioners also showed an interest in them, which grew to the extent that eventually she was able to quit her previous job and move to full-time self-employment with her artisanal business. She emphasized that she did not even have to put any effort into promoting her products, since it was actually the great demand for them that encouraged her to devote more effort to production in the first place. Thus, by attracting and building networks of people interested in the kind of activities that the association offers, along with the lifestyles and values associated with them, Vestigium provides a readily available pool of potential customers for artisans and others, helping them in the early stages of their business.

The key to developing a customer base, as Irena explained to me, is to establish a personal connection, primarily through direct, in-person interaction. Just as coworkers "tactically position themselves" (Butcher, 2018, p. 15) in order to (eventually) benefit economically from relationships, this is also encouraged in Vestigium, but without implying, however, that the relationship can or should be reduced to this utilitarian aspect – rather, the opposite.

> "Actually, the best way to get to people is to go to the activities and workshops, so you meet people, and one recommends you to the other... There's no, you know... I can't post - I mean, I can post 'Lidija does Raindrop,' but I doubt that someone will latch onto just that one post and say: 'I'm going to Lidija, Vestigium recommended it.' But if she goes to a workshop and spends two hours here with ten women, they'll all say something about themselves and some people will 'click' [get along well or find that they have something in common]. She'll just say: 'Well, I'd like to try that.'" (Irena, Vestigium founder and coordinator)

She gave the example of a Vestigium member who makes cosmetic products from natural ingredients and was initially disinclined to share her recipes and methods, fearing that others would copy them. But Irena managed to convince her to hold workshops, and this, as she had predicted, finally led to a growing interest in the products, which was not the case when she was only selling them at the association's market. A similar approach applies to both artisans and agricultural producers: spending some time with them and getting to know them, as well as seeing for oneself their production process or trying it hands-on (by attending a workshop) makes people much more likely to prefer buying those products from those producers on the basis of these personal connections and experiences, as Irena told me. In this way, Vestigium, like coworking spaces, encourages those involved with it to develop an "intentionality to connect" (Butcher, 2018, p. 11) with others on both social and economic levels. In terms of this emphasis on stronger connections between producers and consumers, based on, among other things, the development of trust, loyalty and solidarity, Vestigium's approach is similar to that of the networks of Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), through which a group of consumers supports a number of small, usually environmentally friendly agricultural producers in an organized way by regularly buying their products or even assisting financially or otherwise when needed (cf. Orlić, 2019).

The social aspect of economic exchanges can also be encouraged by the more personal relationship that some Vestigium members have with their work, since it often originates in a need or desire of their own (e.g., for a specific type of food for medical or other reasons) which is linked to their lifestyle, values, preferences, or interests. In this sense, Vestigium itself is similar to the small businesses that it supports. Both Irena and the participant who makes yoga accessories pointed out how important this personal aspect is in what they do (in Irena's case, referring to coordinating Vestigium's activity), for example, when promoting their activity through online posts, which they always write themselves to give them a personal tone. Seeing one's work as a form of personal expression might be viewed as leaving one potentially more exposed and vulnerable (cf. Culpepper and Gauntlett, 2020, p. 156), but on the other hand it might also facilitate the establishment of connections with others based on shared values or tastes, perhaps going beyond a fleeting transactional encounter between provider and customer, thus contributing to the community aspect of Vestigium's activity.

An example of how this form of connection, initially established through interaction at a workshop, can endure even without regular contact and provide significant emotional support to self-employed people during difficult times is provided by another research participant:

> "And then when Covid came, when there was no yeast in Croatia and all... The messages started: 'Aw, hi [name of participant and her partner], thank you for the sourdough, you taught us to make bread, thank you for that, we taught our moms, dads, grandmas, the knowledge spread...' And, like, in all that madness, you get a nice thank-you like that, your heart's as big as a house, like: 'Aaaw, there's some use from those workshops after all, those people did keep doing it...!' And then you remember: 'But that was two years ago! They've been feeding the yeast for two years! Wow, like...!' People do use it, we taught people something good." (W, small business owner and Vestigium member)

What starts as a simple provider-customer relationship can also acquire additional layers with time, in some cases with people switching roles according to their current needs, as one of the research participants, a member of a family agricultural business that sells its products at Vestigium's market, showed in this comment:

> "Our customers, for example, one of our customers is our dentist [laughs], then another one fixes our car [laughs] and so, we've developed networks of different acquaintances and so, all kinds of things got rolling from Vestigium and friendships and so, business acquaintances..." [laughs] (W, Vestigium volunteer and member of family agricultural business)

Such ties, that allow those participating in them to benefit in more than one way, are a good example of the "internal economy of exchange that sustains the community" (Butcher, 2018, p. 16). They also introduce into contemporary urban life the multiple interconnectedness of traditional small rural communities, which Irena wanted to recreate, based in this case on voluntary relationships rather than arising from necessity or a lack of options.

Mutual support among association members

The importance of mutual support and solidarity among the association members themselves came across both in my conversations with them and in interactions that I observed between them. In order to facilitate this and discourage competitive attitudes, specifically among those who sell their products at Vestigium's market, a selection is carefully made so that there is a minimal amount of overlap in their offer of products (the market is small, with about 9 to 12 producers selling their wares at any one time during the period when I was there[5]). Newcomers whose produce overlaps significantly with that of older members are welcome to participate a few times to give them the opportunity to reach new potential customers, but they cannot become regulars. Although this means that certain limits are set to the general openness and inclusiveness of the association's practices, this is a way of creating a space for economic activity that is protected from free market principles which are not conducive to solidary relationships. In this respect also, Vestigium is akin to coworking communities, which are carefully "curated" in a similar way by their hosts in order to encourage productive relationships of mutual support and learning (Butcher, 2018). A research participant described this supportive attitude among members by comparing Vestigium's market to larger farmers' markets:

> Anja: "So in other places that feeling isn't there, among other people or other groups...?"
>
> Participant: "Well, it's hard to achieve. Well yes, I think that that togetherness and that openness, you just have to find yourself in that kind of circle of people and that it isn't there in other places because there's this competitiveness. When you look, for example, I don't know, let's say, I'll compare [Vestigium's] market and the market on the real market, let's say. There is a bit of that competitive spirit there and with us it's all different somehow, because I think we all really *want* everyone else to make it and just that feeling of togetherness is something that separates us from the others. Somehow we all want to improve our own and also help the other in some way. There isn't as much competitiveness." (W, Vestigium volunteer and member of family agricultural business)

This readiness to help one another can take the form of different types of social support, including for newcomers. Market "regulars" with more experience would generally show interest in those who have recently started or are in the process of starting their own business; conversations in which they provide them with advice and useful information could frequently be heard at the market. Where good quality and affordable packaging can be found, or which other small markets are good places to find customers, are examples of the kind of information shared. Advice is also regularly provided by Irena, particularly to those starting artisanal businesses or looking to organize workshops or courses, since she has by now accumulated a lot of experience in this regard and knows well the preferences of Vestigium's "clientele." She also assists with promotion, announcing new activities in advance or products at the market on the association's Facebook page, and taking and posting photographs of the products when the stall is set up. (Due to the importance of photographs in the online promotion of small artisanal businesses, Vestigium's activities include a photography course specifically aimed at business owners.) Other instrumental

5 This relatively small number is due to the fact that many of the producers connected with Vestigium only occasionally come to sell their produce at the market, since they only have small amounts to sell and the produce is seasonal, so not available throughout the whole year.

support is also provided among the association members; for example, when one of them had to deliver an order to another town, a member who lives in that town was happy to do it for him. It almost goes without saying that members selling their produce at the market also regularly buy from each other, at discounted prices, commonly gifting or bartering in a friendly and informal fashion. This recalls the description by Wright et al. (2021) of coworkers trading discounted or free-of-charge professional services, but while the authors view this critically as potential (self)exploitation, similar practices in Vestigium did not seem to have any negative aspects; rather, they contribute to the establishment and maintenance of mutually beneficial social and economic relationships.

These different forms of social support are not based on the principle of short-term balanced reciprocity, as market transactions are, but rather on that of long-term generalized reciprocity, which is also characteristic of kinship relations, as research in economic anthropology has shown (cf. Stewart, 2003). It is thus not surprising that some research participants use family-related metaphors when speaking of Vestigium, as we will see in the following quotes. Such supportive relationships, that can be relied on in the long-term, provide a stable base which makes it easier to deal with a certain amount of risk, for example, with regard to other relationships which might not be as reliable (ibid.). Another way that Vestigium helps people starting businesses deal with risk and uncertainty is through its infrastructure: a relatively large pool of potential customers and different opportunities to interact with them, as well as the possibility of holding workshops and selling the products made there through the association (without the business having necessarily been officially founded yet). This allows prospective (artisanal) business owners to test the potential market for their products or services while minimizing the risk and stress that accompany the early stages of a business venture, as a participant explained:

> Participant: "It was somehow a safe zone, a safe environment, as if you were in your parents' home, to start, to play, to try out –"
>
> Anja: "Meaning Vestigium?"
>
> Participant: "Meaning Vestigium. Vestigium was that, really a safe environment where you can try out some things and see which direction you'll actually go in, which I needed very much at that time, actually, I would say that it was maybe one of the most important things, that I was supported in what I was doing and that I don't actually, kind of - like you have a parachute the whole time and when you fall you're actually safe. And you can't fall because everything is here." (W, small business owner and Vestigium member)

The feeling of safety and the space that it provided for creativity and enjoyment in work without financial pressure were a strong and much-needed encouragement for this participant in the crucial early stages of her business (although she did also stay at her previous job for another five years and only quit when her business had sufficiently grown). She likens this feeling to being in her parents' home, like a child who is unconditionally supported and cared for, which resonates with another participant's description of her own relationship with Irena:

> "I often joke that for me Irena is like my second mom. What I've said to Irena, like, Irena knows, literally, *everything*. Like, some things I didn't dare tell my mom, I'd tell Irena." (W, Vestigium volunteer and member of family agricultural business)

The "infrastructural support" offered by Vestigium is thus closely connected to the emotional support provided by Irena and other members of the community formed around the association (including those in the role of, or in the process of becoming, loyal customers), which creates an environment characterized by a feeling of belonging and care for one another, of being among "one's own". Emotional support and a sense of belonging have been recognized as aspects of family support for entrepreneurs that significantly contribute to sustaining their business projects (Søgaard Nielsen, 2019). Although Vestigium itself is not a family in the usual sense, it thus provides support similar to that commonly provided by business owners' family members.

Another term used in the context of Vestigium is "tribe," which, in this case, can be understood as implying not just mutual support, but also similar values, interests, and lifestyles. For example, in the following exchange:

> Anja: "What would you say you've learned through relationships with people in Vestigium or through some advice you maybe got about work, in the sense of starting your artisanal business?"
>
> Participant: "Follow your passion and be as simple as possible, don't complicate too much, and find people with whom - find your tribe. Find your tribe, people who support you, and roll your own film."
>
> Irena: "Along with 'follow your passion' is '*share* your passion.' That's very important too."
>
> Participant: "Yes. *Share* your passion."
>
> Irena: "So, when you figure something out and find that spark of yours and that something that is you, that you're made for, then you have to share it with others, too. So, like, for me that's kind of an upgrade." [laughs]

Here they again emphasize the importance of a supportive community in the early phases of starting a business, not least as a source of validation, which might be badly needed when considering a career change (or an additional career, if one is not looking to quit one's current job). As opposed to the concept of social support, which focuses more on individuals within an entrepreneur's network, the emphasis here is on a group of mutually interconnected people, rather than being primarily connected to the entrepreneur as the central node in the network. This allows for the development of a feeling of belonging and identification with the group, which can occur either in parallel with the process of establishing and growing one's business, or it can provide the necessary encouragement and support to make the first step in that direction. In this way Vestigium helps (prospective) small business owners develop a relationship toward their project that is shaped by and intertwined with their relationships with others who are involved in different ways with the association, resulting in (as Butcher [2018, p. 17] put it with regard to coworking communities) "more collective, less individualistic entrepreneurial everyday practices

that benefit community and society." Self-realization or self-fulfillment, which is often promoted as one of the main purposes of starting one's own small (particularly artisanal) business (cf. Munro and O'Kane, 2021), should thus not be seen as separate from the feeling of belonging to a supportive community or group that shares similar values, experiences, and goals.

Similarly, mutually supportive communities of young entrepreneurs in Slovenia (although articulated in some cases as an ideal rather than something that has been achieved, due to the country's small population) are described in two papers by Miha Kozorog: on youth entrepreneurship (2018) and on coworking spaces (2021). Similarities to Vestigium are particularly apparent in some of the projects described in the latter paper, where coworking spaces are part of a broader, non-commercial, activist agenda, including, e.g., social and economic community development, self-employment support for vulnerable groups, revitalization of public space, and providing a hub for youth subcultures. As a result of these broader and more diverse aims, another similarity between these projects and Vestigium is the heterogeneity of the communities that they are building (which do not include only entrepreneurs, i.e., small business owners). The key role of support provided by young entrepreneurs' local social networks in helping their business ventures reach financial sustainability (Kozorog 2018) is a further common characteristic. In the Slovenian case, this support is interpreted as a result of the small size of the close-knit communities where the businesses are located. In contrast, in Zagreb, a much larger city, a community with a similar function has gradually grown around Vestigium's activities. The neighborhood where Vestigium is located is, in this sense, perhaps more like Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana, in that it does not need economic development as much as a hub for social activity and building links between community members, which then also spontaneously grew into an informal support network for small local, environmentally friendly business projects. The neoliberal discourses and values that Kozorog attributes to some of the young entrepreneurs in Slovenia, however, are not something that I have observed with research participants in Vestigium; thus, the somewhat critical tone in the author's approach to his research topics is not present in this case.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show how important belonging to a supportive community can be for new or prospective small business owners. In this regard, Vestigium is most similar to coworking spaces, which encourage the development of friendly relationships among their members and a community ethos of providing and receiving emotional and other forms of support (cf. Butcher, 2018; Wright et al., 2021). The important difference, however, stems from Vestigium's primary role as a community center of sorts, which means that it hosts various types of activities, with different possible ways of engaging in them: by offering one's own products or conducting activities on one hand, or by buying products or participating in activities on the other hand, or by switching between the two roles.

Through its open and participatory attitude and encouragement of the development of friendly relationships, the association has, through the years, accumulated a large number of people who are involved with it and who, to a greater or lesser extent, share its values

of respect for people and the environment. It is particularly relevant that these values are also adopted by business owners themselves through their involvement with the association (e.g., not using plastic or single-use packaging). This heterogeneous community provides opportunities for new or prospective small business owners to receive informational and instrumental, as well as emotional support, the latter reinforced by a feeling of belonging and identification with a supportive group, akin to relationships within a family. The fact that this group includes not just other business owners, but also (prospective) customers, provides another crucial form of support, giving small businesses a necessary initial "boost" in building up their customer base. In this regard, in encouraging not just economic, but also social relationships, and in the resulting trust, loyalty, and solidarity between producers and customers, Vestigium is similar to Community-Supported Agriculture groups.

By establishing close links between economic activity and direct social relationships, Vestigium can be said to be attempting to re-embed the economy in social life, thereby counteracting the tendency described by Polanyi of the economic sphere exerting an overly strong influence on other areas of life (cf. Roy and Grant 2019). This tendency is particularly harmful if the economy is seen as reduced to the market, which is also a perception that Vestigium's activity is challenging. Although market exchange of goods and services for money does happen and is encouraged in Vestigium, certain aspects of market functioning are intentionally limited (such as competition between producers selling the same product), while solidarity and mutual support are strongly promoted, rather than prioritizing profit maximization or business growth.

It is important to mention, however, that most of the small business owners involved with Vestigium also have another job which contributes significantly or predominantly to their household budget, i.e., few of them manage to live solely off their small business. So, although the support that Vestigium provides has significantly helped some small businesses become the only or main source of income for their owners (and will continue to do so more efficiently through the recently founded co-operative), in many cases, this form of support is not sufficient in order to achieve this goal. Another question that merits further research is why there are not more associations in Croatia that, like Vestigium, combine an open, participatory community orientation with support for small local ethical and environmentally friendly businesses. Although Irena has been active in promoting Vestigium's way of working and occasionally holds workshops on founding and coordinating a non-profit association, none of those she met and who expressed great interest in this have yet managed to successfully get a similar project off the ground. The persistence and competence of a single central figure, such as Irena, and their ability to engage and motivate others appear to be crucial factors in the success of some social and solidarity economy initiatives. The next step might thus be to study less successful attempts at organizing in order to pinpoint the specific types of obstacles that they face in the contemporary Croatian context and how these obstacles might be overcome.

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“People Must Have Hope and Care for Each Other”; Solidarity as Care and Trust Practices in the *Moje mjesto pod Suncem* Initiative

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Original scientific paper

The solidarity economy movement, as both a theoretical and practical response to environmental deterioration, raging capitalism, and corporativism, evades reductionist attempts of only one inherent form, structure, or definition (Kawano, 2009). Rather than being a one-dimensional pre-established practice, it is a hybrid between market and non-market economies (Laville, 2009) consolidated in economic and social activities, oriented towards a balanced combination between different resources (Salustri, 2020). This means that instead of being a fixed form or format, solidarity economy is better viewed as an ongoing process which, nevertheless, holds a relevant theoretical fluidity (Kawano, 2009).

A common denominator of the solidarity economy is a multitude of manifestations and activities aimed at carving out an economy that responds to crisis and serves both society and the planet. Baurhardt sums up how such goals of democratic and participatory reorganization of the economy can be achieved through consumption practices based on “meeting the concrete needs of human beings” by adding value, meaning, and utility to their activities (2014, p. 63). However, such changes must first be envisioned before being put into practice. In Arjun Appadurai’s theory of modernity, similar endeavors can arise from complex and localized experiences of modernity, which are embedded in struggles and contradictions that shape contemporaneity and motivate us to conceptualize the future as a cultural horizon, nurtured by the aspirations, projections, and imaginations of social actors (2001). Consequently, authors of the edited volume on practicing anthropology in times of crisis argue that the challenge in facing economic, environmental, social, or political adversities lies in “the difficulty of imagining potential parachutes” to navigate such predicaments (Benadusi, Giuffè, Marabello and Turci, 2023, p. 9). This means that times of economic, environmental, or social troubles can either be a *sign of* or *lead to* a crisis in creativity when it comes to envisioning potential solutions. Here, I want to stress how SSE practices can be seen as both crafting effective responses and contributing to new envisioning; therefore, they “empower and decolonize our collective imagination as we evaluate transformative ideas and practices for inhabiting and coexisting in the world” (*ibid*). When addressing solidarity and SEE practices, this empowerment may also

involve broadening the range of possibilities and tools while trying to avoid any form of reductionism or mystification. Guérin et al. underline the need to critically approach a utopian view of solidarity economy while we "examine the nature of social relationships that drive SE practices" (2021, pp. 35 – 36) and investigate if they are embedded in gender or class inequalities. Coming from a feminist theory perspective, the authors argue that solidarity economy initiatives may not necessarily empower women and, in some cases, could reinforce or even create inequalities (ibid.). Similarly, Bauhardt has previously criticized the solidarity economy, the Green New Deal, and the Degrowth movements for neglecting the contributions of ecofeminism - an alternative to the capitalist growth paradigm, still deeply influenced by male-biased economic concepts - in fostering gender equality (2014).

Building on this last observation, in this paper, I draw on the analytical lens of care in framing the *Moje mjesto pod Suncem* (or MMPS) initiative. As feminist activists and theorists have long warned and advocated, the social and economic impact of care (work) has been disregarded for centuries (Davis, 1981; Hill Collins, 2000; Russell Hochschild, 1989; Waring, 1988, and others). However, care work is not only essential to the capitalist and productive system, as well as to our social structure, but is also, as feminist (and later ecological) knowledge has long highlighted, a political matter. In their inspiring introduction to the edited volume on ecologies of care from a transfeminist perspective, Fragnito and Tola remind us how care concerns everyone, and anyone who can, should take care of others, the planet, and future generations (2021). By critically addressing the neoliberal western modern "fantasy of the self-sufficient subject" they call for a "*resposo – abilità*" or the responsibility to act and recognize the relations of interdependency on other bodies and on other living and non-living forms (Fragnito and Tola, 2021, p. 8). More so, care is infused with inequalities that shape its organization and distribution. It follows that, to care means also to fight and dedicate time and energy to transform asymmetric relations of power (ibid.). Care is also integral to the solidarity economy. As Travlou and Bernàt highlight, solidarity economy is an economy of care in which "interrelated people act on the basis of mutual trust and sensitivity" (van Osch in Travlou and Bernàt, 2022, p. 208) to "repair the world they inhabit" (Tronto in Travlou and Bernàt, 2022, p. 208). As it is a complex, multifaceted concept, I approach care both as a means and a result of MMPS practices. From this theoretical perspective, I reflect on how the initiative impacts and shapes socio-economic relations by implementing practices of solidarity and care through various activities.

In the Croatian context, the last fifteen years depict a slow emergence of solidarity economy practices often launched by individuals or small groups of enthusiasts. This does not necessarily mean that actors themselves identify with solidarity economy and/or are familiar with its terminology and concepts (Orlić, 2014; Puđak, Majetić and Šimleša, 2016). Nevertheless, endeavors which promote alternative practices to the profit-driven neoliberal modes of production and consumption are gradually being embraced in the last decades by the post-socialist context (ibid). While *Moje mjesto pod suncem* operates as a highly contextual, locally based initiative adaptable to recognize and resolve local problems of disadvantaged youth by applying direct solutions, in doing so, they put the welfare of human beings and overall social sustainability at the heart of their work. I suggest that they

operate not only as a platform that activates the selfless *homo solidaricus* (Kawano, 2009, p. 14) but also produce practices of solidarity by activating an economy based on a circulation of trust and care, which become relational goods (Donati, 2019). The circulation of these goods creates a relational economy of solidarity that serves as a counternarrative to the ideology of "every man for himself" and fosters social change.

"*A bunch of people and a bunch of needs*"; fighting poverty and building a platform of social change

While researching the degree of prevalence and the variety of solidarity economy practices in Istria and Primorje-Gorski Kotar counties, as well as the public and media discourses on SSE in contemporary Croatia, I had an opportunity to engage in fruitful conversations with members of energy communities, community-supported agriculture initiatives, and various socio-economic cooperatives in the cities of Pula and Rijeka and throughout the above-mentioned counties. At some point during our discussions, many of them pointed me towards members of the association *Moje mjesto pod suncem,* formerly known as CeKaDe. They described it as an inspiring and well-known initiative that has successfully mobilized thousands of people and garnered remarkable visibility. I quickly realized the pervasive presence of this initiative in Rijeka's public sphere and its deep integration within the city's social and urban fabric.

The research methodology involved semi-structured interviews and participant observation carried out between November 2021 and May 2022. I conducted a total of 7 interviews, 3 with members and leaders of the MMPS initiative, and 4 with volunteers and supporters. In the more in-depth parts of the interviews, I focused on motivation and goals of the initiative and its members, financial and social sustainability, the decision-making process, and how solidarity and solidarity economy, trust and care are being articulated and implemented by my interlocutors. Adding to this, while conducting interviews with members of other NGOs and practitioners of the solidarity economies in Rijeka and Pula, I inquired about the MMPS initiative and its role within the community and the broader NGO sector. However, the initially planned implementation of the research, was deeply affected by the COVID-19 epidemic and my filed trips from Pula to Rijeka coincided with the peak of the fourth wave of the epidemic in Croatia. Even though the uncertainty and fear that initially pervaded all aspects of (social) life were gradually subsiding, they still impacted the dynamics of the research as well. More than in any other prior research, I had to cancel several previously planned interviews and field trips due to unexpected illnesses of my interlocutors or their close ones. This directed me to focus more than I had initially intended on the social media platforms of MMPS, the comments and engagement of their followers and supporters (which, during the pandemic, became vital in maintaining many businesses and connections), as well as their web site.

In 2014, the *Moje mjesto pod suncem* ("*My Place Under the Sun*") project took shape after an inspiring and successful campaign, led by a group of citizens under the wing of the NGO Centar za kulturu dijaloga Rijeka ("Center for Culture of Dialogue*"*) or CeKaDe. The campaign called *Mreža hrane* ("*The Food Network*") targeted the abolition of VAT on donated food. While primarily focused on battling food poverty, this initiative was also an attempt to transform the "world of food … the new politics of food provisioning and

global fair-trade built on imaginaries and material practices infused with different values and rationalities that challenge instrumental capitalist logics and mainstream worldviews" (Goodman D., DuPuis and Goodman M, 2012, p. 3). On their web site and social media platforms, CeKaDe presents itself as a non-profit civil society organization dedicated to:

> "…fighting poverty and social exclusion and promoting the value of civil solidarity and social dialogue. […] It cultivates a sincere dedication to achieving its goals by encouraging active citizenship and civic participation, which resulted in the creation of an extremely broad and active community that follows and supports our work, made up of numerous volunteers, experts, advisors, business entities, public institutions, friendly associations and organizations, and others."[1]

They have operated and continue to advocate as a platform with the aim of connecting legal and natural persons, establishing an effective national system for food donation and distribution, and promoting change in public policies and waste and food management. The campaign was a success, situating CeKaDe on a broader regional and national stage as one of the leading actors in social activism and building citizen participation in social solidarity. While campaigning in 2014 and the early months of 2015, the NGO members made a collective decision to initiate a new project called *Moje mjesto pod suncem*. After a period of adjustment and steady growth, in October 2020 and throughout 2021, they launched a significant media and social networks campaign, which resulted in raising the necessary amount of 2,100,000 Croatian kunas (almost 280,000 euros) to renovate and open a new working domain to host their daily activities. It is a bright, colorful, and cozy space of approximately 370 square meters, located in an area close to the city center. Owned by the University of Rijeka, the space, free of charge to use by the initiative, is also a professional base for teachers and students of the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka, which participates in the NGO's activities. The primary objective of MMPS is to tackle grassroots problems by focusing on children living below the poverty line in the hope of breaking the cycle of poverty. This is done by, first of all, providing a stimulating environment that offers a wide range of inputs and information that would otherwise be inaccessible within children's own economic and social contexts. It involved organizing various activities aimed at improving academic achievements, boosting self-esteem, and offering systematic development support for both children and parents in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. These activities included tutoring, excursions, makeup workshops, psychotherapy, gym memberships, going to the theatre, museums, movies, etc. By 2023, five staff members were employed, almost two hundred volunteers were activated, and over three thousand workshops were organized, offering support to one hundred children and eighty families overall. These activities fall into the domain of what Orlić summarizes in the concluding pages of her book on community-assisted agriculture: a form of prosocial behavior following "the concept of solidarity in today's sense, denoting the relationship of mutual inclination among members of a particular community" (2019, p. 101). However, such inclination is not to be mistaken for condescension or pity. When asked, Sandra, one of the project leaders, consciously rejects the definition of the initiative as humanitarian work, which she views as a top-down approach that puts active donors and passive receivers in a paternalistic relationship. According to studies related to the

1 https://www.mojemjestopodsuncem.com/o-nama

still emergent field of anthropology of humanitarianism, humanitarian work is often regulated by mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and is therefore a highly problematic political act that singles out individuals and groups as suitable objects of care, thereby creating further cracks in the social tissue (Thelen, 2015, p. 505). Sandra continues:

> "It irritates and frustrates me terribly when someone says that what we do is humanitarian work, I have an aversion to that… to state that some of us 'good people' are now helping some 'poor people,' I really, really oppose that. It implies a power relationship that is terrible and unfair. Instead, our goal is to create social change and move all together, become visible, and create hope based on trust."

More than a top-down it is a circular and horizontal movement with MMPS at its epicenter that drives change. Besides the above-mentioned activities for the children and their families, a secondary goal is to provide a meeting ground for volunteers willing to share their time, skills, knowledge, recipients, and funders. So, their focus on social and economic equity is addressed by creating opportunities for participatory practices and promoting citizen participation and social activism. Sandra, again, is responsible for this segment of work. She dedicates her time to searching and promoting social entrepreneurship, finding potential companies that could get involved, and edits a monthly newsletter for the companies already involved, in which she keeps track of the previous achievements, future strategies, etc. Hence, MMPS is an important element that functions as a missing link in a triangulation in which ends meet and the needs from each side – companies, volunteers, beneficiaries – converge. But to provide such service requires both material and, mostly, affective and care work. In terms of materiality, it takes time and energy to develop strategies, activate networks, find suitable partners, manage activities, supervise volunteers, and so on. As affective work, it means motivating, involving, creating meaning, caring for, and inspiring everyone involved. During our meetings, Sandra candidly remarked that running such a project is hard and intensive work. She often feels worn out and inadequate:

> "Right now, I feel totally exhausted and drained, and if I could, at this moment, I would go away for a few months to rest. The difficulty is in handling all these people. We are all over the place, and there is too much to organize."

She must continually seek new ways to attract local entrepreneurs and stay financially afloat. In today's highly neoliberal environment, she needs to constantly be creative. Hence, the tiredness is both physical and mental. One example of her inventiveness was a successful collaboration with local restaurants and pizzerias, which involved, along with collaborators and volunteers, the design and editing of a special menu offering individual dishes, the selection of which would automatically ensure a donation of a certain amount of money in favor of MMPS. Hence, restaurant customers have the possibility of combining fine dining with a socially aware purchase. This latter is an example of how MMPS activities go beyond simple network building and activate a social economy aimed at creating possibilities for individuals and triggering mechanisms that can rebalance social cohesion and solidarity.

Keeping the initiative running is an ongoing, almost around-the-clock activity, and paid work and volunteering are intertwined within the NGO. Daily, staff members coordinate various activities such as tutoring in different school subjects, after-school day care, psychological and pedagogical supervision for children and adults, and so on. In doing so, in the last eight years, MMPS has relied on 180 volunteers who have been involved in programs of social mentorship. Such programs imply a mentoring and collaborative relationship between a mentor and a mentee with a goal to bring about a positive change in the social status of an individual (child or adult), build up hope for a different future, and provide a safe space for empowerment and exchange of care. This activity is less time-consuming than it is emotionally difficult.

> "I struggle a lot with the feeling of frustration when someone does not want to take advantage of an opportunity that we offer them, but then Cvjeta Bišćević, a well-known permaculturist, helped me a lot, and she once told me '*What grows, grows, and what doesn't grow, doesn't grow, stop pressure yourself'*."

In the initiative's day-to-day activities, both productive and non-productive time overlap, as does the paid work of the staff with the free-of-charge work of the volunteers who have cumulatively spent over 5,500 hours volunteering.[2] The volunteers make use of what Lusini, Meloni, and Zanotelli call "busy free time," associated with the principles of leisure and self-realization that "values of collective life sublimated in social solidarity" (2019, pp. 1-2). While analyzing concepts of "crisis" and "mutualism" as essential topics of contemporaneity (ibid.), the authors argue that this engaged unpaid time becomes a form of an investment that transforms free leisure time into socially productive time by fostering social relations (2019, p. 2). Timebanking practices add value to individuals' time. Built on the principle that everyone's time is equally valuable and, as such, it constitutes an alternative currency or exchange system using the person-hour or some other time unit, time is equally valued because it is "capable of generating beneficial interactions between people, creating sociality and solidarity, civil and emotional bonds, promoting good life and good living" (Cacciari, 2018, p. 9). One volunteer expresses her feeling about the engagement with the children involved in the program: "I sometimes wonder whether it is me who supports them or is it vice versa. My life is fuller, richer, and happier thanks to them." For her, volunteering is a meaningful act that values the relationships formed during the experience. It is based on this added value that Zoran, the president of CeKaDe, articulates as the intent of the program to create a long-term culture of volunteering that has continuity, rather than being a one-time ad hoc action. Although the latter can mobilize tens of thousands, they still fail to create a foundation for permanent engagement over longer periods of time.

Economies of hope: trust and care as relational goods in the MMPS initiative

As Cacciari reminds us, the economic value of goods is no longer solely measured based on physical units used in their production. It is also determined by their emotional potential — that is, their ability to "set in motion," excite the imagination of consumers, attract attention, and stimulate desire." (2018, p. 7). The category of a "relational good" was introduced into the theoretical debate from four different perspectives: the philosopher

2 https://www.mojemjestopodsuncem.com/program

Martha Nussbaum (1986), the sociologist Pierpaolo Donati (1986), and the economists Benedetto Gui (1987) and Carole Uhlaner (1989) (Cacciari, 2018). While the economic approach to relational goods frames them as independent realities from the relationship itself and sees the good as distinct from the act of consumption, and therefore tends to separate the good from the people who produce and consume it, for the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, relational goods are those human experiences where it is the relationship in itself that constitutes the good (Donati, 2019). Consequently, the sociologist Donati defines relational goods as "a type of goods that are neither material things, nor ideas, nor services but consist of social relations" (Donati, 2019, p. 11). From this perspective, the relationship itself is the good and not a mere functional tool to economic exchange. More so, in such exchange, the identity of the other person(s) is essential: I can change hairdressers and consume the good (i.e., the "haircut") elsewhere, but if I change partners, that specific relational good is destroyed because one friend is not as good as another (ibid.). According to Donati, the production of relational goods implies a particular level of social aggregation and can occur in different contexts. He identifies two elements: intersubjectivity and reflexivity, without the activation of which relational goods cannot come to light (Donati in Todesco, 2016, p. 2). Todesco further clarifies that relational goods differ from social capital in that the relationship itself is the goal, rather than a tool to achieve something (2016, p. 3). Later, Bruni identifies several characteristics of relational goods, such as simultaneity (as relational goods are produced and consumed simultaneously), gratuity and the constraint of temporal scarcity (it is time intensive and it implies a simultaneous investment of time by multiple subjects) (Todesco, 2016, pp. 3 -7).

In the case of CeKaDe and the MMPS initiative, besides care, I add to the equation the concept of trust. The latter plays a crucial role in understanding human societies and interactions. Generally defined as a belief or confidence in the reliability, honesty, and integrity of another person, group, institution, or system. Overall, trust is a fundamental aspect of human social life that is shaped by cultural, social, economic, and political factors. By studying trust, cultural anthropologists aim to uncover the underlying mechanisms that govern social relationships and contribute to the broader understanding of human society and culture. Coates highlights the contextual and processual nature of trust, which has various degrees in duration, different scales, and complexity (2018). Previously, Lutz following Sabel, underlined the relational, fragile, and precarious nature of trust that can be defined as "the mutual expectation that neither party in a mutual relationship will exploit the vulnerability of the other*"* (2011, p. 81). So, although trust is expected from both parties it is not necessarily a fiduciary pact between equals. However, if it is based on a hierarchical relation, it always hinges on expectations of reciprocity on both sides.

In conceptualizing theatre as a relational good, Todesco shows how relational goods are widely expressed in different economic markets, primarily in cultural ones (2016). In my view, the theoretical concept of relational goods can be beneficial for analyzing the MMPS initiative and the relational economy of solidarity it fosters. I suggest that CeKaDe activities and projects, particularly the MMPS initiative, can be defined as key actors in activating and maintaining the circulation of relational goods among individuals involved in the initiative and the community at large. They do so by exchanging not only services (such as tutoring, teaching, supervision, and so on) but also by using these services to cre-

ate an economy of relational goods, such as trust and care. Consequently, through the exchange of care and trust, the initiative adds value to its activities. Trust is a building block of MMPS modus operandi and a pivotal element of their success. This trust has been gradually created through long periods of time while CeKaDe members at the same time rely on and create new relations. For starters, they capitalize on private and personal connections, informal relations that they have established during childhood and their teenage years with childhood friends and acquaintances. That is how, for instance, they managed to get the support of an internationally renowned designer, Mirko Ilič, in designing their logo. After he joined, the campaign exploded and attracted wider engagement. However, this substantial engagement also requires affective work that can be burdensome. Among other things, it involves verifying the cultural gratuitousness of many people who are sensitive and attentive to social issues, ready to get involved, and recovering their sense of values (Lusini, Meloni and Zanotelli, 2019). This includes grafting trust (restoring, having, and gaining trust) with coherence and transparency. When I spoke to the project leader, she confessed that she was having a hard time in dealing with all the support and the trust the public, the families, and the children have given them: "I am trying so hard not to make a mistake, but I will fail at some point, for sure, everyone makes mistakes sometimes… it is a big responsibility." She reflects upon and is aware of the value of trust in their public and daily activities. This awareness extends to the type of public communication they engage in, characterized by a clear, direct, and often informal tone. The economy of trust they have built among their volunteers, beneficiaries of the program, and the community at large has become both a testament to their work and a social and civic responsibility. This is because, in their words, the lack of trust at every level of society is holding back social change and preventing economic alternatives from emerging: "Our society is based on distrust and it takes a hard work in building this trust, people must have hope and care for each other, micro steps… this is precisely what we do." Such a task is time-consuming and requires care work. Hence, the latter is much more than a mere life-sustaining practice. It involves creating, maintaining, and dissolving significant ties and is both a material and immaterial practice. Most importantly, in the MMPS initiative's postulate, care becomes the responsibility to act (Fragnito and Tola, 2021, p. 8). Besides eradicating poverty and giving a chance to children and families beyond the poverty line, their activities have "evoke(d) ways of cooperation between people, and interaction between people and things" (Cacciari, 2018). It follows that their knowledge, abilities, time, and readiness are not readily available goods for profit maximization, but are pivotal in building good relationships. As such, these last ones are "economic goods in every respect, as they produce utility for individuals, their communities and society. However, they are not governed by standard market logic" (Cacciari, 2018, p. 2).

Social sciences and humanities long have argued that the economy is not just an economy of money and "economic are all forms of production, exchange, and use of any good or service useful for the good life of the person" (Cacciari, 2018, p. 4). However, challenging hegemonic notions of exchange and value, as well as the belief that value is solely produced through paid labor (Wilson in Travlou and Bernàt, 2022, p. 215) remains a demanding task that is put into question by gender, class, and racial discrimination. Travlou and Bernàt argue that actions of solidarity constitute value-in-themselves and "the value of these communal actions of solidarity was seen as determined by the potential of these

actions to translate into, inform, and enrich meaning; to constitute 'meaningful actions'" (ibid.). In this context, the MMPS initiative serves as both a tool and a space for an alternative economy based on solidarity and participatory citizenship, focusing on the circulation and exchange of trust and care, and intentionally fostering infrastructures of trust rather than just mere sharing. As articulated in Travlou and Bernàt's paper on the solidarity economy in Greece and Hungary and their response to the migrant and, later on, Covid crises, the concept of care has stretched the original definition of solidarity economy, as well as the meaning of donation, donor, recipient, and non-monetized activity (2022, p. 224). In the case of the MMPS initiative, a donation to recipients is non-monetary, and the products of the exchange are both care and trust. The donors, in this case, are MMPS, the volunteers (for whom the former adds value to their free time), and the community at large (which, through participatory practices, gives meaning and value to its actions). Finally, the provision of donations to the consumers (children and families) serves to create new visions of a better and equalitarian society. Adding, these activities can be culturally constructed as hope (e.g., hope for social equality and change, hope for a better future for the children).

Towards a conclusion

Conventional economics has described reality by making invisible a full set of practices, initiatives, human relationships, and motivations therefore limiting us to imagine potential economic alternatives and identify or gasp them on the field (Miller u Kawano, 2009, p. 29). Mutualistic initiatives such as consumer cooperatives, associations, and cultural solidarity centers exemplify contexts where the sharing of projects, objects, spaces, and social times embodies a principle of alternative consumption ethics (Bauman, 2000). These initiatives serve not only as ethical alternatives but also as strategies of resistance and survival. They respond to the urgent need to critically rethink our resource use, encompassing not just material resources but also lifestyles and daily choices. Through active citizenship projects and participatory actions aimed at sustainable production, individuals come together to challenge existing paradigms. This collective effort fosters a community-oriented approach that prioritizes social and environmental well-being.

In a time marked by economic and social uncertainties, individuals create spaces for social connection, develop new forms of sharing with transformative intentions, and challenge the status quo. Rooted in an ethos of care, hybrid participatory practices aim not to eliminate capitalism but to contribute to its ongoing reorganization, creating alternative opportunities that benefit both society and the environment (Travlou and Bernàt, 2022, p. 209). However, this counternarrative is not given but something to be sought and constructed. In this paper, I choose to set aside nuances, overlaps, and differences between SSE practices, such as the Green New Deal and Degrowth, and focus on one initiative and its activities that, in my view, contribute to the potential definitions and conceptualizations of solidarity economy practices. Both *Mreža hrane*, previously, and later MMPS have invested in contributing to a mutually supportive society or what Lusini, Meloni and Zanotelli define, following George Simmel (1917) and consequently Richard Sennett (2012), as a particular sensitivity towards others which takes the form of an ethical disposition, as a practice and social competence in creating bonds (2019, p. 2). The MMPS

project is economic in terms that it produces goods and establishes a platform for their circulation. Its economy is based on the circulation, exchange, and sharing of relational goods such as trust and care, which, through exchange, add value to time and the actions of the individuals. This economy of solidarity acts as a small-scale catalyst for change by creating opportunities, envisioning a different future, social equity, and inspiring hope. In the long term, they have the potential to foster economic resilience for those just above the poverty line by breaking the vicious cycle of poverty for future generations. While they may not fully eradicate the social and economic inequalities inherent in capitalist systems, they can at least offer alternatives and serve as a counterbalance to them.

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Social Enterprises and Their Ecosystems: Managing a Multi-Territorial Network to Achieve Viability and Impact

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Introduction

Social entrepreneurship provides and addresses opportunities for social change through entrepreneurial activity. OECD (2010) broadly defines it as entrepreneurship aimed at providing innovative solutions to unsolved social problems. That entails identifying and providing new services that improve the quality of life of individuals and communities, as consumers and/or producers.

Similarly to other forms of entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship does not exist in a vacuum, but in a given social, political, economic, cultural and institutional context - which is often described in terms of 'entrepreneurial ecosystems'. Such ecosystems comprise actors, institutions, policies and stakeholder networks that influence and/or are influenced by social enterprises, and consequently affect their development, growth and impact (cf. Moore, 1993, Mason and Brown, 2014). The emergence and development of effective entrepreneurial ecosystems is not a trivial task even in the case of profit-oriented entrepreneurship in developed countries with supportive institutions. When the focus is shifted onto social entrepreneurship, which seeks to fulfil a more ambitious social, economic and environmental agenda, the task becomes even greater. If such a task is undertaken in countries with underdeveloped institutions, the lack of tradition and recognition of social enterprises, and underdeveloped social entrepreneurship policies with weak capacities and limited resources, developing effective entrepreneurial ecosystems become rather difficult.

Social enterprises in many countries face a lack of legal recognition and insufficient institutional and financial support. Although the term is widely used, social enterprises are still conceived in significantly different ways by national legislations, strategies, policies, scholars and social entrepreneurs (EC, 2020). Mainstream enterprise policy instruments often do not acknowledge the specificities of social enterprises and are insufficiently adjusted to their needs. The lack of similar social enterprises and weak advocacy efforts may preclude their recognition as a legitimate policy actor and/or policy beneficiary (cf. Račić,

2022). The ecosystems that support the emergence and development of social enterprises are therefore often weak. On the other hand, social enterprises respond to important societal challenges that are relevant to multiple stakeholders at different territorial levels. Their innovative practices may generate interest, recognition and financing outside of the boundaries of local or national entrepreneurial ecosystems (cf. EC, 2020). This multi-territorial nature of stakeholder networks in which social enterprises are embedded often stems from the ecosystem gaps, which prompt social enterprise to overcome weaknesses at one territorial level by utilising opportunities at other levels - and thereby seek overall viability and impact.

The paper outlines and applies a conceptual framework for the process of identifying stakeholders managing stakeholder networks which comprise local, national and international levels. Key stakeholders can be identified and categorised by their level of salience (based on Mitchell, Age and Wood, 1997) and by the material and symbolic resources a social enterprise obtains from them and/or provides to them. After this introduction, the second section of the paper explores the notion of entrepreneurial ecosystems and their applicability to social entrepreneurship. The third part is devoted to the notion of stakeholder networks as components of entrepreneurial ecosystems in which social enterprises are embedded. The conceptual framework is subsequently applied to a case study of the Green Energy Cooperative (GEC) from Croatia, which was founded to facilitate local communities in planning, development, management and financing of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency projects. Finally, some concluding remarks are provided in the last section.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems and their applicability to social entrepreneurship

The contextual dimension of entrepreneurship development is usually captured by the term ‘entrepreneurial ecosystem’. The notion of ecosystem was coined by Moore (1993) who studied the relationally embedded nature of firm interactions with suppliers, customers, financiers and other stakeholders. Similar ideas about the positive effects of geographical proximity, clustering and ongoing interactions of dense stakeholder networks have been postulated even before. Alfred Marshall’s work inspired research into industrial districts (e.g. Piore and Sabel, 1984), whereas complementary perspectives have focused on clusters (e.g. Porter, 2000), knowledge and learning regions (e.g. Keeble and Wilkinson, 1999) and regional innovation systems (e.g. Cooke, Uranga and Etebarria, 1997). Recent relevant research on entrepreneurial ecosystems emphasised the issues such as contextual factors (Acs, Autio and Szerb, 2014, Brown and Mason, 2017) and linkages and relations within the system (Brown and Mason, 2017, Motoyama and Knowlton, 2017), the role of policy (Isenberg, 2011) and entrepreneurial universities (Guerrero, Urbano and Fayolle, 2017).

The concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems has evolved over time, but its main features are fairly stable. Based on a literature review, Mason and Brown (2014) define it as a set of interconnected potential and existing entrepreneurial actors, entrepreneurial organisations, institutions and entrepreneurial processes which formally and informally combine to connect, mediate and govern the performance within the local entrepreneurial environment. Although effective entrepreneurial ecosystems are likely to increase the likelihood

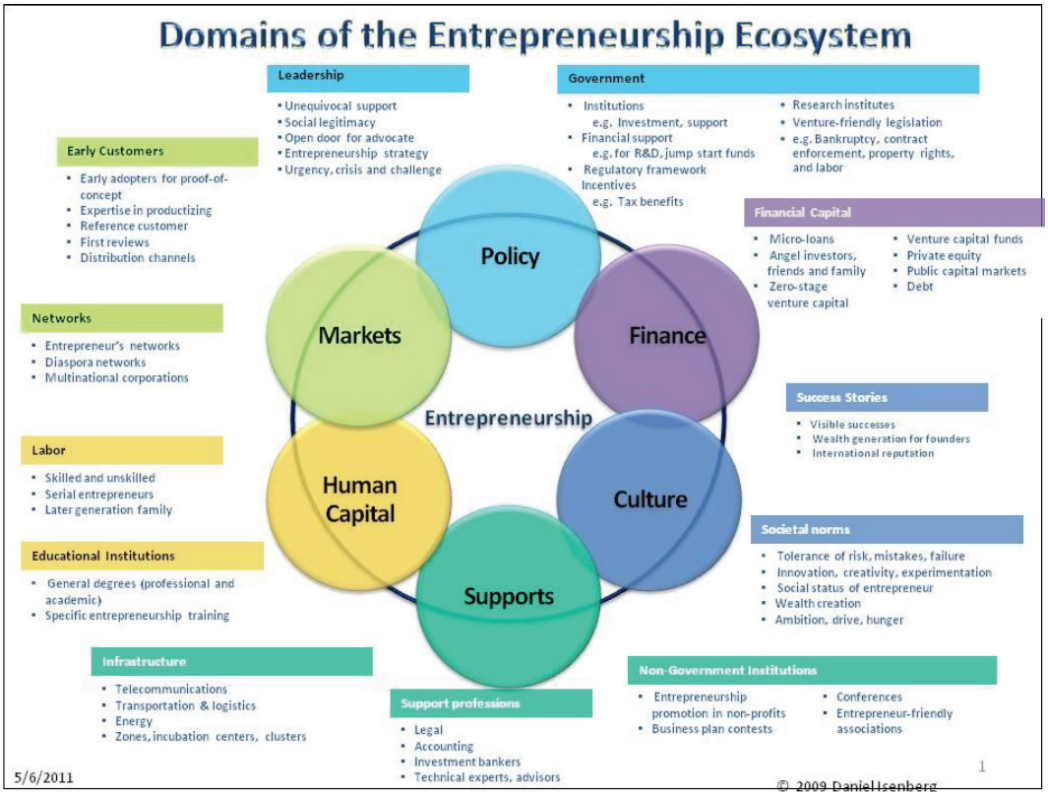
of the emergence and growth of new firms, the key policy challenge that entrepreneurial ecosystems attempt to address is support to high-growth businesses rooted in the ecosystem. The development and eventual scaling up of high-growth enterprises is expected to create jobs, economic prosperity, additional demand and knowledge spillovers within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Such cases of 'blockbuster entrepreneurship' (Napier and Hansen, 2011) are particularly important for entrepreneurial ecosystems, as they create both tangible and intangible benefits, including demonstration effects, serial entrepreneurship, and contributions to new start-ups (cf. Brown and Mason, 2017). Although linkages between multiple actors in multiple territories also exist, the research on entrepreneurial ecosystems largely gives preference to local/regional environments characterised by geographical proximity of stakeholders and a relative intensity of interactions within the system (Mason and Brown, 2014). A notable exception to this notion is the concept of the 'national systems of entrepreneurship', proposed by Acs, Autio and Szerb (2014). Their approach emphasises the institutional embeddedness of entrepreneurship within national (eco)systems, which are viewed as resource allocation systems driven by individual-level opportunity pursuit, through the creation of new ventures, with country-specific institutions regulating the outcomes of individual action.

In practice, entrepreneurial ecosystems are multi-actor, multi-level systems with a heterogeneous nature (Motoyama and Knowlton, 2017). Mason and Brown (2014) propose a taxonomy which recognises four aspects of the entrepreneurial ecosystem that can be targeted by national and regional policymakers. Within ecosystems, they distinguish entrepreneurial actors (entrepreneurs and supporting entrepreneurial infrastructure), entrepreneurial resource providers (finance, academia, large firms), entrepreneurial connectors (associations and matchmakers) and entrepreneurial orientation (e.g. values and entrepreneurship education). An influential model of the structure of the entrepreneurial ecosystem has been proposed by Isenberg (2011). He identified six domains within the entrepreneurship ecosystem, which are then subdivided into more specific elements. These domains are human capital (labour and educational institutions), finance, markets (early customers and networks), policy (government and leadership), culture (societal norms and success stories), and supports (infrastructure, support professions and NGOs). Each of these (sub)domains and their elements can play a conducive role in the development of entrepreneurship in a specific area, but they can also strongly reinforce each other. Isenberg thus advocates a holistic policy perspective towards ecosystem development. His model is presented below.

Mason and Brown (2014) notice that entrepreneurial ecosystems usually emerge in locations with place-specific assets and then outline some of their distinguishing features, which are broadly consistent with Isenberg's (2011) model. The central role is typically played by large, technology-intensive businesses with management, R&D and/or production facilities. Such businesses attract and develop human capital (including future entrepreneurs), create demand and technology spillovers. Entrepreneurial ecosystems also have numerous serial entrepreneurs and business angels, which (re)invest their knowledge and capital following successful exits or acts as mentors to new entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the ecosystems are 'information-rich', due to knowledge flows which stem from business collaboration, personnel movement, individual and organisational linkages and events.

Access to finance is also important, with an emphasis on seed and start-up investors which provide both finance and support. Mason and Brown (2014) acknowledge, but somewhat downplay the role of universities in entrepreneurship facilitation[1]; that role is more related to education than to successful technology transfer, which rarely results in high-growth enterprises. Finally, service providers such as lawyers, accountants, recruitment agencies and business consultants also play a role.

Figure 1. Isenberg's model of an entrepreneurship ecosystem



Source: Isenberg (2011: 7)

An entrepreneurial ecosystem, as any ecosystem, needs to generate value (monetary and non-monetary benefits) within the ecosystem and then distribute the value among the actors within (and sometimes also outside) the ecosystem (cf. Clarysse et al., 2014). Audretsch et al. (2019) distinguish economic, technological and societal impacts of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Economic impacts refer to economic benefits of regional agglomeration of local factors and resources and their entrepreneurial exploitation as well as the associated spillover effects. Technological impacts relate to the efficient transformation of ideas and inventions to innovative products and services. Societal impacts entail both monetary and non-monetary outcomes through which social benefits spill over into the delivery of new products and services that are beneficial for society, and any additional

1 An alternative view is advocated by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000). They view the entrepreneurial university, which has a proactive role in producing, sharing and utilising new knowledge, as cornerstone of triple-helix collaboration.

positive externalities that are created through entrepreneurial ecosystems. Audretsch et al. (2019) also emphasise that economic and technological dimensions of entrepreneurial ecosystems are primarily concerned with the value creation, whereas the societal dimension is concerned about the value distribution, but it also contributes to the value creation. However, the societal dimensions and impact of entrepreneurial ecosystems tend to be undervalued and under-researched.

There is no standardised strategy for effectively developing entrepreneurial ecosystems (Audretsch, 2015). Although entrepreneurial ecosystems are conceptualised on the basis of 'best practice' examples observed in a few core economic regions and capital cities, it is obvious that most ecosystems fail to achieve ideal conditions. To provide a preliminary solution to these issues, without developing a fully-fledged taxonomy, Brown and Mason (2017) outline a basic dichotomous framework comprising two diametrically opposed 'ideal types' - 'embryonic ecosystems' and 'scale-up ecosystems'. Underdeveloped or embryonic ecosystems, which are characterised by a relatively modest level of entrepreneurial orientation and growth-oriented entrepreneurship, are the most common type. Embryonic ecosystems are characterised by the dominance of established firms and create a limited number of start-ups and high-growth firms. Interactions within them are limited, especially when it comes to serial entrepreneurs, business angels and dealmakers. Available funding is driven by the needs of start-ups, usually with good sources of seed and early-stage funding, which often partly comes from public sources. Entrepreneurship is mostly locally focused, with some linkages to (inter)national organisations in order to obtain funding, R&D services or human capital. Policy actors play an important role, in particular in increasing funding to new technology-based firms. Furthermore, Cao and Shi (2020) identify three groups of elements widespread in emerging economies, which challenge the direct transfer of the models based on advanced entrepreneurial ecosystems. First, there is a scarcity of available resources, including human and financial resources, knowledge and physical infrastructure. Second, there are structural gaps in entrepreneurial ecosystems such as the absence of particular actors, networks and collaboration practices. Third, there are also institutional voids related to both formal and informal institutions. Consequently, developing entrepreneurial ecosystems in such conditions is a challenging task that needs to take into account the specificities of particular countries and sectors.

When it comes to social enterprise ecosystems, the situation becomes even more complex. On the one hand, social enterprises are burdened with similar risks and costs as other enterprises. Although innovativeness and proactiveness and many entrepreneurial processes are similar, the autonomy, competitive aggressiveness, and risk-taking of social enterprises are somewhat constrained by the presence of multiple stakeholders and limited access to resources/funding (Lumpkin et al., 2011). Although social enterprises aim to develop and scale-up their activities and resources, neither their strategies nor public policies typically focus on the creation of high-growth or 'blockbuster' enterprises in the conventional sense. Social enterprises are closely linked with social innovations; addressing opportunities for social change through entrepreneurial activity rather than through public policy or civil society organisations is innovative by itself in many social contexts. Rather than deriving from business models as it does in the United States, social entrepreneurship in Europe is mostly rooted in collective action; it is a collective entrepreneurial model based

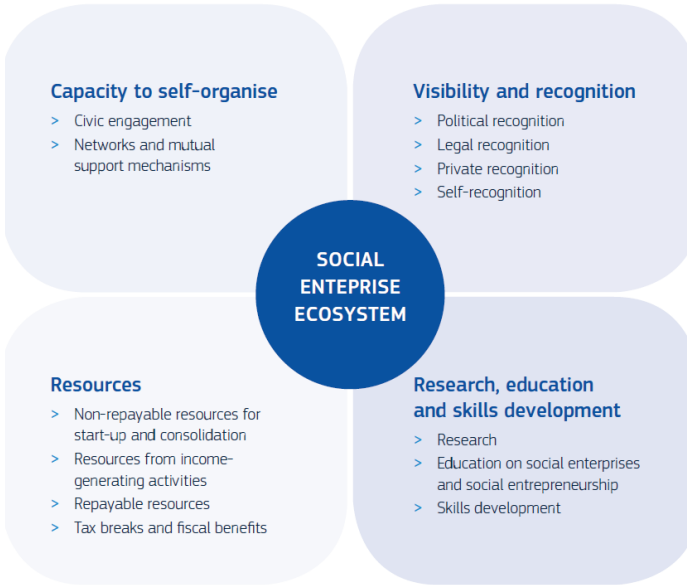
on the values of solidarity, self-help, participation, and inclusive and sustainable growth (EC, 2020). All these factors contribute to the complexity of the interplay between social enterprises and their environments.

EC (2020) provides an analysis of social enterprises and their ecosystems in Europe. Hereby the ecosystem concept is defined in a relatively basic manner and without explicit references to the literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems. The term "…is used to describe the environment within which social enterprises operate. It reflects the fact that social enterprises evolve with and develop relationships with their beneficiaries, lead producers, suppliers, stakeholders, governments, and even competitors" (EC, 2020, p. 162). In other works, an ecosystem is mainly understood as a stakeholder network in which social enterprises emerge, develop and operate while being largely dependent on it. Since the document is based on inputs from specific countries, there is an implicit focus on the national level, at which relevant policies are adopted, with some attention also being devoted to the local and EU levels.

The following figure identifies the four pillars of such ecosystems:

- citizens' ability to self-organise, which facilitates the emergence and development of social enterprises;
- visibility and recognition of social enterprises by policymakers (including legal recognition), private actors (e.g. private marks) and willingness of social enterprises to declare as such and self-organise;
- access to resources, including finance (grants, vouchers, investments, loans), tax breaks and fiscal benefits and capacity to generate income;
- research, education and skills development activities.

Figure 2. Social enterprise ecosystem



Source: EC (2020)

The identified social enterprise ecosystem pillars broadly correspond to the elements of Isenberg's (2011) framework outlined above (please also see below). However, it is obvious that the model proposed by EC (2020) clearly refers to the initial stage of ecosystem development, in which enterprises still seek basic visibility, recognition and access to financial and knowledge resources, rather than a functional conducive environment in which they can thrive. In comparison to the 'embryonic' stage of development of many entrepreneurial ecosystems, we might call these social enterprise ecosystems 'proto-embryonic', as they often lack even basic prerequisites for enterprise development.

Stakeholder networks in social enterprise ecosystems

As outlined above, the notion of a social enterprise ecosystem in the EU still seems underspecified and it would benefit from a more explicit acknowledgement of academic literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems and stakeholder management, which should be adapted to the specific characteristics of social entrepreneurship. A deeper understanding of social enterprise ecosystems would also contribute to the formulation of policies that would facilitate their effectiveness. In this paper, we are developing such a framework based on a revised Isenberg's (2011) model of ecosystems that includes social enterprise pillars from EC (2020) and translates these elements into specific stakeholder relationships faced by social enterprises. Social enterprise ecosystem domains, which are taken from Isenberg (2011), are divided into two subdomains, which revolve around specific resources and involve specific stakeholders of social enterprises. The revised framework is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Social enterprise ecosystems and their key stakeholders

Domain	Subdomain	Resource	Stakeholders	Level
Culture	**Storytelling**	▪ Legitimacy and support ▪ Participation	▪ Citizens ▪ Media ▪ Prospective social entrepreneurs	▪ Local ▪ National
	Societal norms	▪ Legitimacy and support ▪ Participation	▪ Citizens ▪ Media ▪ Prospective social entrepreneurs	▪ Local ▪ National
Policy	**Government**	▪ Legal recognition ▪ Policy scope ▪ Institutional support	▪ Ministries / agencies ▪ Advocacy organisations	▪ National ▪ EU
	Leadership and advocacy	▪ Policy innovations ▪ New knowledge	▪ Ministries / agencies ▪ Research organisations ▪ Advocacy organisations ▪ Citizens	▪ National ▪ EU

Domain	Subdomain	Resource	Stakeholders	Level
Human capital	**Labour**	▪ Skilled labour ▪ Mentorship	▪ Founders ▪ Employees	▪ Local ▪ Regional
	Education	▪ Education and training	▪ Educational institutions	▪ Local ▪ Regional
Finance	**Grants and investments**	▪ Co-investment	▪ Ministries / agencies ▪ Public sector companies ▪ Local authorities ▪ Social impact investors	▪ Local ▪ National ▪ EU
	Tax breaks and fiscal benefits	▪ Reduction of taxes ▪ Reduction of social security obligations	▪ Tax authorities	▪ National
Supports	**Support organisations**	▪ Education and training ▪ Visibility ▪ Partnerships	▪ Support organisations (e.g. hubs) ▪ Other social enterprises	▪ Local ▪ Regional
	Support professions	▪ Mentorship ▪ Professional services	▪ Providers of mentorship and professional services	▪ Local ▪ Regional
Markets	**Customers and users**	▪ Income	▪ Citizens ▪ Public sector ▪ Corporations (e.g. CSR)	▪ Local ▪ National
	Networks and organisations	▪ Visibility ▪ Partnerships ▪ Income from projects ▪ Branding	▪ Other social enterprises ▪ Other organisations with a similar mission (NGOs) ▪ Certification providers	▪ Local ▪ National ▪ EU

Source: Adapted from Isenberg (2011) and EC (2020)

The domain of culture starts with storytelling, which entails sharing social entrepreneurship stories of successes and failures, difficulties, innovative approaches to social problems, etc. It is best that the stories are rooted in or related to the experiences of the target audience (i.e. that they come from similar contexts), which may be reached through direct contact or through the media, including social networks. Moreover, culture also entails and affects societal norms and values which may motivate or constrain social entrepreneurship, e.g. by demonstrating the viability and attractiveness of social entrepreneurship as a collective effort to promote social change and innovation which has both similarities to and differences from civic engagement and business entrepreneurship.

The policy domain largely revolves around the activities of the national government, but also includes the EU, as well as national and international advocacy organisations that aim to influence relevant policies. The key resources in this area are legal recognition of social enterprises, the scope of relevant policies, available financial resources and institutional support provided to social enterprises by government bodies or other organisations (cf. Račić, 2022). The policy domain also encompasses leadership and advocacy, i.e. production of new knowledge, pilot projects and policy innovations that can steer, strengthen and enlarge policies that support social entrepreneurship. However, leadership development and advocacy efforts are more likely to flourish when there is at least minimal policy support for social entrepreneurship, with responsible bodies to which advocacy efforts can be addressed.

Another crucial dimension of the social enterprise ecosystems is human capital, which entails the availability of skilled labour, which can act as founders, mentors or employees of social enterprises, and availability and access to education and training that can increase the capacities and interest of participants to engage in social entrepreneurship. The processes of skills anticipation, development and deployment largely operate at local and regional levels. The lack of recognition of social entrepreneurship as a legitimate societal domain may constrain the development of human capital through education and training which cannot be adequately compensated by informal and non-formal learning.

It is widely recognised that social enterprises deserve support in the form of financial and tax incentives for their activities, due to both the social impact they aim to create and to the specific difficulties they encounter. However, the extent of these incentives is a direct consequence of the relevant policies and funding programmes at national and EU levels; local or regional authorities may also provide a contribution. Grants and investments available to social enterprises can be allocated and/or disbursed by ministries, agencies and public sector companies, which usually provide grants or soft loans, as well as by social impact investors that seek environmental, social and/or financial returns. Furthermore, social enterprises may be entitled to reduced taxes and/or social security obligations.

The supports domain encompasses support organisations that complement the resources and competencies of social enterprises and promote their interests in society, usually by providing education and training, visibility and partnerships. Availability of support is a key prerequisite of an effective entrepreneurial ecosystem, as it enables access to resources that otherwise may not be available. Therefore, the supports domain is usually interlinked with one or more other ecosystem domains. Support may be related to capacity building (related to the human capital domain), market access and branding (related to the domain of the market) and/or projects funded by public authorities (related to policy and finance). A facilitating role is played by support professions, which provide mentorship and professional services needed for the business development of social enterprises.

Finally, the social enterprise ecosystems also include markets. On the one hand, there are different groups of customers and users, from which income is generated directly or indirectly. These may include citizens, public sector organisations (which may procure some services from enterprises or act as intermediaries) and corporations, with which so-

cial enterprises may generate new business models or participate in their corporate social responsibility initiatives, usually related to community development or environmental activities. However, many social enterprises are currently unable to generate sufficient income from these streams. The markets in which social enterprises operate tend to be underdeveloped. Due to weak incentives, insufficient knowledge and finance, behavioural inertia, technology risk and other factors, final beneficiaries are often unable or reluctant to use the products and services offered by social enterprises. Consequently, a crucial role in viability of many social enterprises in Europe is played by networks and organisations that formally or informally link similar or complementary social enterprises and their partners from other sectors (NGOs, universities, public sector organisations such as development agencies etc.) but operating in the same domain (e.g. renewable energy), which enable not only better visibility and branding of social enterprises but also turn these partnerships into projects, often financed by the EU. Such projects provide more stable income streams than 'pure' market activities.

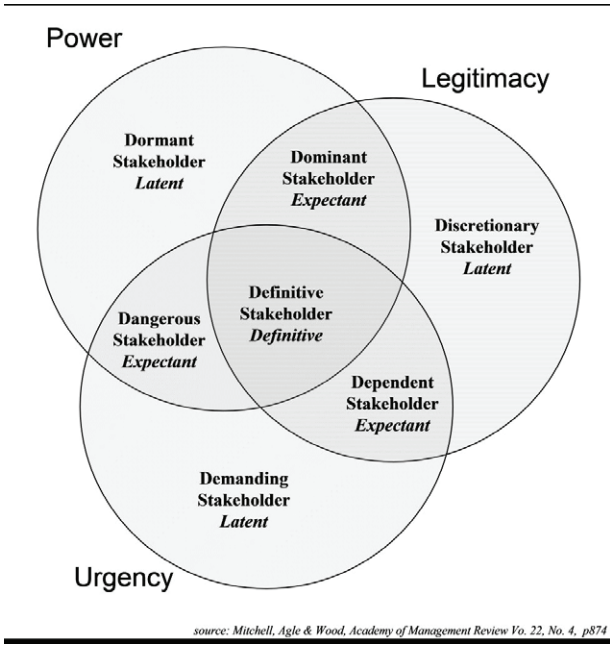
Each ecosystem (sub)domain is populated by specific sets of stakeholders. Specific stakeholder relationships are formed and operate at local, national and/or international (EU) levels, as it can be observed in Table 1. Stakeholder relationships in social enterprise ecosystems are diverse and numerous but often weak. Consequently, ecosystems populated by such stakeholders are currently usually proto-embryonic. Social enterprise operating in such environments still tackle rather basic issues such as societal legitimacy, legal recognition and market presence, receive little institutional support and to a significant extent depend on non-market sources of finance, usually in the form of project grants and favourable tax treatment.

Freeman's (1984, p. 46) original definition of the stakeholder in an organization as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' has retained its pertinence, but it has provided limited guidance to the relative priority of claims of different stakeholders. To address that issue, Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997, p. 854) developed a theory of stakeholder salience as 'the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims'. This normative theory of stakeholder identification and salience is based on three variables: power to influence the firm, legitimacy of the stakeholders' relationships with the firm and the urgency of the stakeholders' claim on the firm. Based on Etzioni (1964), power is defined as the extent to which a party has or can gain access to coercive (physical means), utilitarian (material means) or normative (prestige, esteem and social) means to impose their will. Based on Suchman (1995, p. 57), legitimacy is defined as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'. The definition of urgency is contributed by the authors themselves, as the degree to which stakeholder claims require immediate attention. Urgency is related both to time-sensitivity and to the critical nature of the relationship with the stakeholder and the characteristics of their claim (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). Definitive stakeholders are an 'ideal type'; their claims demonstrate power, legitimacy and urgency at the same time. Lower level of salience is exhibited by expectant stakeholders, whose claims are characterised by power and legitimacy (dominant stakeholders), power and urgency (dangerous stakeholders) or legitimacy and

urgency (dependent stakeholders). Latent stakeholders' claims exhibit only one dimension – power (dormant stakeholders), legitimacy (discretionary stakeholders) or urgency (demanding stakeholders).

The typology of stakeholders based on the theory of stakeholder salience is given below.

Figure 3. Stakeholder salience



Source: Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997)

The stakeholder salience framework is applicable to any organisation, i.e. to its stakeholder relationships and stakeholder networks in which it is embedded. However, it is argued here that such a framework is particularly suitable for social enterprises, given the importance of stakeholder networks in the governance of social enterprises, access to resources and markets, procurement and generating local support for the enterprise (cf. Shaw and Carter, 2007; EC, 2020). Value creation and distribution in/by social enterprises is inherently bound to their embeddedness in stakeholder networks, which therefore need to be analysed and managed. Consequently, this paper applies the aforementioned framework in the context of social entrepreneurship and ecosystems in which social enterprises operate.

Case study: Green Energy Cooperative in Croatia

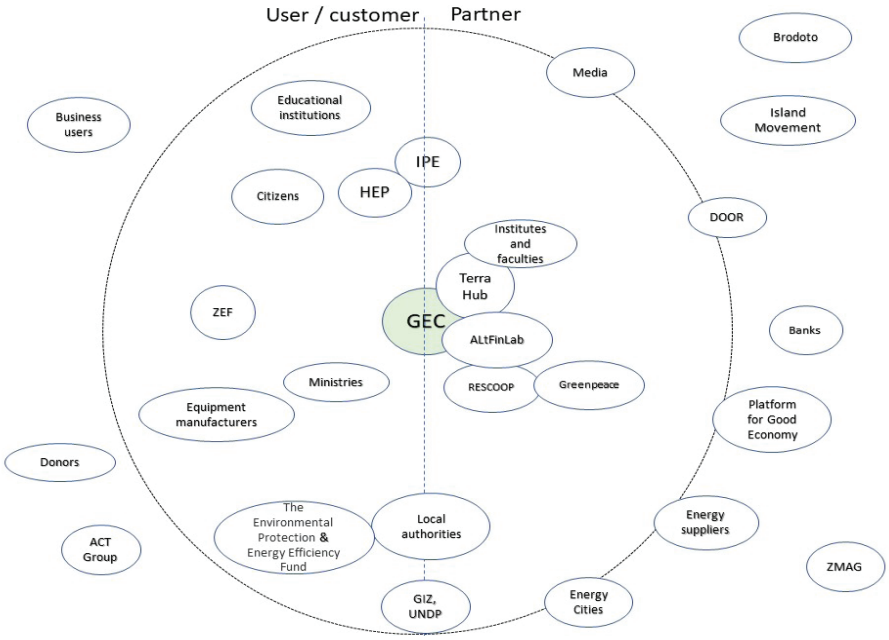
The framework is applied to the case study of the Green Energy Cooperative (GEC) from Croatia (in Croatian: Zelena energetska zadruga (ZEZ)). GEC is a social enterprise that was founded in 2013 by a group of experts and activists who aimed to facilitate local communities in planning, development, management and financing of renewable energy sources and energy efficiency projects. The current focus is on solar energy projects owned by citizens and communities. Many of the founding members gathered experience

by working for or with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Over time, GEC has grown into one of the most successful social enterprises in Croatia with about 20 employees (who are often but not necessarily members of the cooperative), a wide range of successful projects across Croatia, including spinoff projects in local communities which continue to operate independently. Given the underdevelopment of the relevant ecosystem in Croatia, fulfilling the 'localised' mission of promoting behavioural change and energy transition also simultaneously required strategic engagement of GEC with policymakers at the national level, as well as with EU and other international funding sources and advocacy organisations. Each of these territorial dimensions (related to local projects, national policies and international funding and advocacy) involves relationships with multiple stakeholders which need to be developed and maintained over time, if viability and impact are to be achieved.

The case study is developed in two steps. First, GEC stakeholder maps from 2018 and 2023 are presented in Figures 4 and 5, respectively, which also indicate the evolution of the GEC stakeholder network over a five-year period[2]. Consequently, main stakeholders are grouped in accordance with the framework from Table 1 and additionally analysed.

In the maps below, stakeholders are grouped into users/customers, which are positioned on the left-hand side, and partners, which are placed on the right-hand side of the network. GEC is positioned in the centre, so the distance from it indicates the salience of a particular stakeholder to the cooperative.

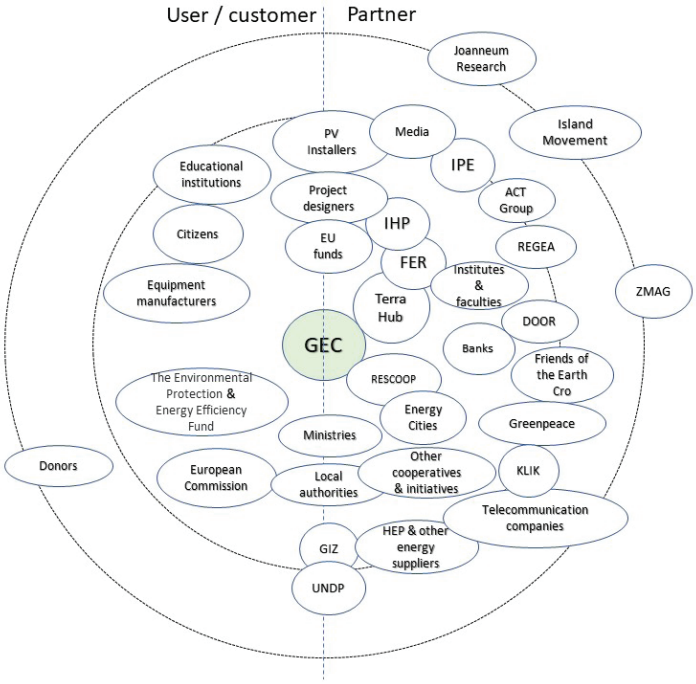
Figure 4. Green Energy Cooperative stakeholder network, 2018



Source: Green Energy Cooperative

2 Figure 4 provides the stakeholder map made by the GEC team in a strategic meeting in 2018. Figure 5 provides an updated map developed in semi-structured interviews with GEC board members Zoran Kordić (cooperative manager) and Sandra Vlašić (partnerships coordinator).

Figure 5. Green Energy Cooperative stakeholder network, 2023



Source: Green Energy Cooperative

The next step in the analysis is categorising the main stakeholders into groups defined above. The results are presented below.

Table 2. Key stakeholders of the Green Energy Cooperative

Domain	Subdomain	Key stakeholders	Salience	Level
Culture	**Storytelling**	▪ TerraHub (NGO) ▪ Media	▪ Dominant ▪ Discretionary	▪ Local ▪ National
	Societal norms	▪ Institute for Political Ecology / IPE (NGO) ▪ Friends of the Earth Croatia (NGO ▪ KLIK (Coop)	▪ Definitive ▪ Dominant ▪ Discretionary	▪ Local ▪ National
Policy	**Government**	▪ Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development	▪ Dominant	▪ National
	Leadership and advocacy	▪ RESCoop ▪ Greenpeace	▪ Definitive ▪ Discretionary	▪ EU ▪ National

Domain	Subdomain	Key stakeholders	Salience	Level
Human capital	**Labour**	▪ Cooperative members ▪ Employees ▪ PV installers ▪ Project designers	▪ Definitive	▪ Local
	Education	▪ Educational institutions	▪ Discretionary	▪ Local ▪ Regional
Finance	**Grants and investments**	▪ European Commission (Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, LIFE)	▪ Discretionary	▪ EU
	Tax breaks and fiscal benefits	▪ Tax authorities	▪ Dormant	▪ National
Supports	**Support organisations**	▪ Research institutions (FER, IHP, Joanneum) ▪ Banks	▪ Discretionary ▪ Dominant	▪ Local / EU ▪ National
	Support professions	▪ Researchers ▪ Journalists	▪ Discretionary ▪ Dependent	▪ Local ▪ National
Markets	**Customers and users**	▪ Cities and communities ▪ Citizens ▪ HEP ▪ Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund	▪ Definitive	▪ Local ▪ National
	Networks and organisations	▪ Project partners in EU-funded projects ▪ RESCoop & other coops ▪ International organisations (UNDP, GIZ, ECF, Energy Cities) ▪ REGEA (energy agency)	▪ Definitive ▪ Definitive ▪ Dominant	▪ Local/EU ▪ EU ▪ Local

Source: Authors' analysis based on inputs provided by GEC

Green Energy Cooperative is embedded in a multiplicity of stakeholder relationships with different levels and types of salience. The stakeholder network grows and becomes more diversified over time, which also indicates a diversification of activities, relationships and resources that are being developed and/or exchanged in these relationships. In order to manage its relationships within the stakeholder network, GEC needs to invest increased efforts and build internal organisation with more specialised roles. As the stakeholder network becomes more diversified, the heterogeneity of relationships with particular partners also increases, with some of them becoming more salient and strategically important. Moreover, increased relationship density may also indicate a more developed social enterprise ecosystem in Croatia, but such a claim should be verified and supported by additional research.

Despite the important (and increasing) role of different types of customers and users as definitive stakeholders, which have power, legitimacy and urgency, the business model employed by the GEC is currently insufficient to generate income which would enable continuation and long-term viability of the organisation. Therefore, GEC still relies on donor-funded projects, such as those funded by the European Commission through the Horizon 2020 or LIFE programmes. Such projects are undertaken in consortia with partners from Croatia and other European countries, which makes relationships with these partners crucial for the organisation. The projects encompass a wide range of activities which develop, pilot and utilize new technological and social innovations in the fields of renewable (solar) energy and energy efficiency, including analysis, development of tools, methodologies and know-how, pilot and demonstration activities, policy recommendations, networking, events, alternative modes of financing etc. These activities help develop the relevant markets but are rarely followed-up by reaping of the plentiful social and economic benefits by GEC. In other words, GEC is still unable to move on from 'projectification' of its activities towards more market-driven approach based on the outputs and outcomes of the undertaken projects. Moreover, continued projectification turns current and prospective project partners into definitive stakeholders, whose power, legitimacy and urgency may lead to lock-in effects with long-term consequences for the strategy of the organisation. At the same time, its main donors such as the European Commission are examples of passive (discretionary) stakeholders which possess legitimacy but neither power nor urgency.

When analysing the territorial dimension of the stakeholder map, there is an increasing number of salient local stakeholders, with an accent on customers and users, supports and culture domains. Many of them are definitive stakeholders, which have power, legitimacy and urgency, so GEC invest considerable efforts to engage them in projects and policy initiatives and develop mutual commitment. Local partnerships are important to GEC for piloting and confirming best practices in a real-life environment, as well as for the overall promotion and visibility of GEC as a key actor in the area of solar energy owned by citizens and communities. Furthermore, local academic institutions are partners in technological and social innovations implemented by GEC in its projects. The national level of stakeholder relationships is important for legislation and setting standards and investment priorities in the energy sector; the government is a dominant stakeholder, whereas the national energy company (HEP), as a market leader, is a definitive stakeholder. Market

development in solar energy also makes banks increasingly important as support institutions that can provide funding, but there are only few examples of such projects. The primary resource obtained by GEC at the EU/international level is funding. However, policy perspective, advocacy, visibility for future partnerships and opportunities for replication and scaling-up of specific activities are also important – and they are achieved through multiple partners within the networks and organisations domain.

The key domain for the future development of GEC and the ecosystem in which it is embedded is markets – both in terms of customers/users and networks/organisations. The relationship between GEC and the market is complex. First, there is still an internal strategic dilemma within GEC between its 'social' and 'enterprise' dimensions, i.e. to what extent its activities should be funded externally and free to final beneficiaries (e.g. citizens) and which (if any) services should be charged. This dilemma is reflected in internal resource allocations and relatively weak internal capacities to focus on market-based activities. Moreover, social innovation, upon which GEC market activities are often based, needs to be rooted in local environment, which is a major constraint when the market is still in the early stages of development. In such conditions, partners and competitors may sometimes be difficult to differentiate. For example, different public and private entities in Croatia may provide nominal support to the GEC activities which promote solar energy projects owned by citizens, but, when it comes to capturing market opportunities in that area, they will seek to capture the benefits themselves. Monetisation of market-building activities is difficult, as there are few public tenders for the services GEC offers. Moreover, many intermediate (e.g. PV installers and project designers) as well as final beneficiaries (e.g. citizens and local communities) expect to receive those services for free. When it comes to networks and organisations, there are opportunities in developing stronger partnerships. On-demand relationships with partners driven by project implementation concerns often prevail where there should be more coordination and, exchange of information, experiences, and data. Project-related communication could thus be utilised to develop more strategic relationships with selected partners. Furthermore, the focus on project implementation and the lack of articulated and effectively communicated demands and proposals in the public domain do not result in adequate visibility and public recognition of GEC. That is also in part due to the underdeveloped (pre-embryonic) ecosystem, which leaves social enterprises in a bubble of their own and makes them recognized within it, but not so much beyond it.

According to the interviewed GEC board members[3], the social legitimacy of the cooperative is improving. Positive trends occur despite the lack of legal recognition of social entrepreneurship as a specific form of entrepreneurship which deserves a targeted policy approach. The diversity of possible legal and organisational forms of social enterprises leads to their invisibility in the field of public policies, with very few support measures (Račić, 2022)[4]. Social entrepreneurship seems still associated with NGOs, rather than with

3 Semi-structured interviews with GEC board members Zoran Kordić (cooperative manager) and Sandra Vlašić (partnerships coordinator) were conducted in February and March 2023.

4 Despite the adoption of the Strategy for the Development of Social Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Croatia for the period from 2015 to 2020, minimal progress has been made in the support and development of this sector. Social enterprises are still not legally recognised as

reaching social objectives through entrepreneurship. Given such unfavourable conditions, GEC board members emphasise the need for GEC to build stronger internal capacities to position itself on the market and utilise its potential. On the other hand, project-based financing will also be needed in the foreseeable future. Consequently, GEC recently formally changed its legal status to a non-profit cooperative (although it has effectively acted as a non-profit enterprise since its foundation), thus widening its access to funding programmes which provide support to non-profit entities.

Concluding remarks

Social enterprises evolve in entrepreneurial ecosystems which tend to be even less developed than in the case of profit-oriented entrepreneurship; inspired by Brown and Mason (2017), we call them proto-embryonic. Hereby an ecosystem can be viewed as a stakeholder network in which social enterprises emerge, develop and operate and in which they obtain relevant resources. Given unfavourable conditions in many local and national ecosystems, many successful social enterprises broaden their horizon in terms of stakeholder networks in which they participate. That leads to the multi-territorial nature of stakeholder networks in which social enterprises are embedded, whereby weaknesses at one territorial level are overcome by utilising opportunities at other levels. These developments have been analysed by a revision and adaptation of Isenberg's (2011) model of ecosystems to fit social enterprises, their stakeholder networks and the resources exchanged within these networks. That model has been complemented by Mitchell, Agle and Wood's (1997) analysis of stakeholder salience which provides insights into the relative weight of particular stakeholder claims. The conceptual framework has subsequently been applied to the case study of the Green Energy Cooperative, as a social enterprise with diverse capabilities and stakeholder relationships, which nevertheless exemplifies the difficulties of shifting from project-based financing (i.e. grants) towards a market-driven approach.

This dual nature of GEC, based on simultaneous implementation of project-funded and market-driven activities, can be viewed both as an 'insurance policy' which reduces risks during downturns and as a strategic challenge to the coherence of the organisation. However, unless social enterprise ecosystem gaps in Croatia are addressed through effective public policies, dense stakeholder networks and emergence of new social enterprises, such a dual strategy is a reasonable response to the uncertainties of an underdeveloped ecosystem.

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Fostering Solidarity through Education: Social Entrepreneurship Education in Europe and Croatia

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Introduction

The primary objective of social entrepreneurship[1] efforts is to generate a positive social impact. Unlike traditional entrepreneurship, which is primarily driven by profit, social entrepreneurship is centered on achieving social change and addressing societal needs. (Austin, et al., 2006; Peredo and McLean, 2006; Mair and Martí, 2006). Social entrepreneurship represents a growing trend within the broader entrepreneurial landscape. Sometimes, social entrepreneurship is viewed as a panacea that should eliminate market failures and ensure the well-being of people and the planet. Others view it as evidence that business models are infiltrating all aspects of life (Nicholls, 2006). Although social entrepreneurship remains a contentious concept (Teasdale et al., 2021), it is nonetheless a global phenomenon, with the growing number of social enterprises worldwide. Also, social enterprises are becoming increasingly well-known throughout Europe (ICF, 2014.; European Commission, 2021). Social entrepreneurship education (SEE) is recognized as one of the key ingredients for developing the sector (European Commission, 2020; European Commission 2021). Entrepreneurship education has rapidly gained prominence in the last decades as an area of study (Thomsen et al., 2019). Although social entrepreneurship and related topics were introduced into formal education several decades ago, their integration across most EU Member States has only gained momentum in recent years. (Bokun, 2022; European Commission, 2020).[2]

Education plays a crucial role in driving social progress and is essential for maintaining a competitive workforce in an increasingly globalized economy. It can contribute to devel-

1 More on the historical development of the social entrepreneurship in Teasdale et al., 2021, Teasdale et al., 2022 and Baturina and Babić, 2021.

2 In higher education world-renowned universities such as Harvard, Stanford, and Berkeley were the first to offer courses in social entrepreneurship in the 1990s and Europe quickly followed suit. Since then, there has been an explosion of courses in the in social entrepreneurship (Brock and Steiner, 2009).

oping skills and understanding of the importance of participation in civic life, cultivation of life skills, expanding knowledge as well as realizing our full potential. Besides, it is the most effective means for creating a level playing field and reducing the impact of social injustices and social exclusion (Spiel et al. 2018).

Social enterprises demand a distinct set of skills to maintain an economically viable business while upholding a social mission (OECD, 2022b). As a specific form of education, social entrepreneurship education faces a difficult task in reconciling the entrepreneurial and social aspects of social enterprises' work and providing the skills and knowledge necessary for the future promotion and sustainability of these enterprises.

The importance of social entrepreneurship education (SEE) is also highlighted from a practical perspective. Social enterprises primarily focus on integrating work and providing services to vulnerable groups. However, in many countries, skills in the sector are not properly developed, which limits the social impact in these aspects (European Commission, 2020a).

This chapter aims to analyze the characteristics and trends of social entrepreneurship education in Europe, with a particular focus on Croatia. The first part of the chapter provides a brief overview of the development and importance of social entrepreneurship education as a groundwork for the analysis. An analysis of social entrepreneurship education will be presented afterward. It will focus on various dimensions, such as education levels, types of programs, and trends, and will give analytical insights at the European level and specifically in Croatia. The discussion will be oriented towards assessing the importance of social entrepreneurship education, highlighting its possible contribution to the field of social entrepreneurship and beyond. In the concluding part of the chapter, we will summarize the key aspects and reflect on the potential future developments.

Development and importance of social entrepreneurship education

The development of social entrepreneurship education has been gradual, partly due to the early belief—prevalent until the 1990s—that individuals could not be taught to become social entrepreneurs. As a result, there was a certain amount of skepticism regarding the possibilities of social entrepreneurship education. In spite of this notion, Leadbeater (1997) considered that people can still be taught certain skills that social entrepreneurs need for success in their own venture (Kedmenec, Rebernik and Tominc, 2016; Vidović, 2012; Toplek, 2019).

In response, Harvard Business School launched the "Social Enterprise Initiative" in 1993—a pioneering program dedicated to researching and advancing this emerging form of entrepreneurship. In the mid-1990s, Gregory Dees, was the first at Harvard University to introduce the subject of social entrepreneurship and held his first lectures on this topic. This was a strong influence that marked the entrance of this term into the academic community. After Harvard, other highly respected American universities and colleges, such as Columbia, Stanford, Berkeley, and Yale, followed a similar path (Kedmenec et al., 2016; Vidović, 2012). Since then, there has been a significant expansion of social entrepreneurship courses (Brock and Steiner, 2009), and the concept of social entrepreneurship

began to be introduced into the educational and scientific systems of various European universities. Many professors and researchers have focused their interest on this form of entrepreneurship. The first documented lecture, a collaboration between Maximilian Martin from the University of Geneva and Pamela Hartigan, a member of the Schwab Foundation, dates back to 2003. Further development of educational programs for social entrepreneurship was most noticeable in Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Italy (Brock and Steiner, 2009; Vidović, 2012).

Studies suggest that higher rates of education will lead to higher rates of entrepreneurship (e.g., Kolvereid and Moen, 1997; Dobele, 2016; Ahn and Winters, 2021) and better performance in entrepreneurial activities (Singer et al., 2021; Hunady et al., 2018). In EU policies, education for entrepreneurial competences has a high priority, especially since 2006 when entrepreneurial competences were defined as a key lifelong competence (Singer et al., 2021). Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan (European Commission, 2013) highlights the work needed to ensure that being an entrepreneur is an attractive prospect for Europeans, which also includes social entrepreneurs whose potential is often underestimated. It also invites member states to develop social entrepreneurship education and training. The European Agenda for Entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2004) outlines a program to encourage entrepreneurship and create a more favorable entrepreneurial climate, mentioning social entrepreneurship as one of the types of entrepreneurship that addresses open social issues (Zrilić and Širola, 2014).

SEE is studied in a variety of geographical contexts related to program goals and curricular content (Mirabella and Young, 2012). For example, Ndou (2021) analyzed ten European social entrepreneurship courses and programs, recognizing some patterns in social entrepreneurship education regarding learning goals, entrepreneurship content, learning approaches, and stakeholder engagement. Azqueta et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review of trends in SEE as a multidisciplinary research field. They find a lack of consensus on the concept of an entrepreneur and on what social entrepreneurship is in education.[3] In another systematic mapping of social entrepreneurship education (Al Issa et al., 2024) identified as most important cluster integrating S.E. principles into educational models which highlights the importance of incorporating social entrepreneurship principles into educational models while highlighting the need for a comprehensive and transdisciplinary approach that integrates knowledge and skills from multiple disciplines and emphasizes experiential learning, collaboration, and the development of competencies. Generally, there is a lack of studies classifying and analyzing existing SEE research Alourhzal et al., 2022)

On the other hand, social entrepreneurship is still marginally represented in education, and due to its complexity and insufficient research, it often appears only as a sporadic subject taught as part of other related subjects, including business economics, manage-

3 In one of the systemic reviews (Montes-Martínez and Ramírez-Montoya 2022) orientated toward educational and social entrepreneurship innovations issues of innovation and entrepreneurship training emerged as prominent. However, the authors do not observe that education for entrepreneurship has gone much beyond business education and has become incorporated into training for social entrepreneurship.

ment, entrepreneurship, and similar social subjects (Brock and Steiner, 2009; Vidović, 2012). Social entrepreneurship education can give the individual an ability to see entrepreneurship opportunities in any area and evaluate these opportunities as well as develop the individual's ability to combine sources effectively (Dobele, 2016). Besides prompting individuals to start a social enterprise, social entrepreneurship education also equips the individual with social characteristics and gives them an idea of how to develop society. Social entrepreneurship education could potentially yield various benefits for the broader society. Therefore, given the limited research on these topics, it is important to analyze the status and trends of social entrepreneurship education.

Analysis of social entrepreneurship education: levels, programs, trends

This analysis of social entrepreneurship education is based on the analysis of thirty-five collective comparative reports of the European Commission on social enterprises and their ecosystem in Europe by various authors, detailed in the list of references.[4] We systematically examined the sections related to research, education, and skills development in each country. This methodology enabled us to identify and compare how social entrepreneurship education (SEE) is integrated across various levels of formal and non-formal education systems within the EU and associated countries. The analysis focuses on several key dimensions: education levels, types of programs, and prevailing trends in the development of SEE in Europe.

First, regarding the level of education and types of programs, the inclusion of social entrepreneurship and related phenomena in formal education is visible only recently in most EU member states. In the EU, curricula on social entrepreneurship and related fields are now available in most high-level educational institutions (European Commission, 2020a; Bokun, 2022).

4 References from European Commission 2018a to European Commission 2020i- also stated below the table 3.1.)

Table 3.1. EU countries are distributed by the level of education for social entrepreneurship

Level of education	Country
University programs/higher education only	Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom
From high school to higher education	Belgium, Estonia, Lithuania
From primary school to higher education	Denmark
From preschool to higher education	Netherlands
In the report of the European Commission on social enterprises and their ecosystem for these countries - the aspect of education for social entrepreneurship is not mentioned. The summary report lists a number of universities and other institutions that provide education for social enterprises for Albania and Turkey, while for North Macedonia it is stated that there are no plans and programs in higher education. / *non-EU countries participating in the EaSI program	Albania*, Montenegro*, Iceland*, Luxembourg, Norway*, North Macedonia*, Serbia*, Turkey*

Source: Author's own analysis based on: European Commission, 2018a, European Commission, 2018b, European Commission, 2018c, European Commission, 2019a, European Commission, 2019b, European Commission, 2019c, European Commission, 2019d, European Commission, 2019e, European Commission, 2019f, European Commission, 2019g, European Commission, 2019h, European Commission, 2019i, European Commission, 2019j, European Commission, 2019k, European Commission, 2019l, European Commission, 2019m,European Commission, 2019n,European Commission, 2019o, European Commission, 2019p, European Commission, 2020, European Commission, 2020a, European Commission, 2020b, European Commission, 2020c, European Commission, 2020d, European Commission, 2020e, European Commission, 2020f, European Commission, 2020g, European Commission, 2020h, European Commission, 2020i.

As we can see from the table (3.1), twenty-two countries have SE at university programs/higher education only. Three countries have SE from high school level to higher education level. One country has SE from primary school to higher education, and one country has SE as early as from preschool to higher education. However, for eight countries there is not sufficient data about the level of SE, so they cannot be included in the analysis.

We see can see how, for example, in Belgium, the development of education and training on social enterprises can be noted on the different educational levels, from high schools to universities and universities (European Commission, 2020e). In Bulgaria (European Commission, 2019a), several universities incorporate social economy, most often as part of lectures on social policy and social work, but also as specialized courses focused on social economy. In the Czech Republic (European Commission, 2019c), there are over fifty undergraduate programs and an affinity for social enterprises, with significant inter-

est among students on the topic, as noted in the many papers already written on the subject from different perspectives. Developing a coherent study program to equip future social entrepreneurs with business skills and ideological grounding constitutes a long-term priority in this regard.[5]

In Denmark, educational programs related to social entrepreneurship and social innovation have been integrated into many different levels of the education system, such as the Center for Social Entrepreneurship (CSE) at Roskilde University (European Commission, 2019e).[6] In Estonia, Tallinn University launched a special Master's program in Social Entrepreneurship in 2018. It focuses on project-based learning providing students with the knowledge and support to start their social enterprises (European Commission, 2019f). As far as Greece is concerned, several newly founded institutions are promoting the learning and education of social entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2019h). In Hungary, the growth of scientific research interest and educational programs for social entrepreneurship is visible, however, a more comprehensive program targeting social entrepreneurs is needed (European Commission, 2020d).

In Italy, education and training for social entrepreneurship are developed at different levels and with different durations. Several universities now offer courses and programs on social entrepreneurship and related topics (European Commission, 2020a; Bokun, 2022).[7] In the Netherlands, social responsibility has become a topic that is increasingly included in pre-schools, elementary-primary schools, and middle-high schools, and in line with this trend, some schools are involved in programs dedicated to social enterprises - for example through the program offered by Jong Ondernemen in cooperation with NN Social Innovation Relay (European Commission, 2019o).

In Poland, a special "educational package" in the form of a manual for teachers has been prepared by the Council for Systemic Solutions in the Social Economy to promote social enterprises in primary and secondary schools. More recently, the National Social Economy Development Program envisages research into the core curriculum for general education to supplement the curriculum of the "Fundamentals of Entrepreneurship" course with information on the social economy and social enterprises (European Commission, 2020b).

In Portugal, programs are focused on practitioners or offered at postgraduate levels, although they recognize the need to generate social economy awareness among younger students. For example, one of the recommendations of the Social Economy Congress is

5 Good example of education for social entrepreneurship in this country could be that the Department of Environmental Studies at Masaryk University has started the process of accreditation of the joint master's study "Entrepreneurship driven by sustainability", which will be realized in a consortium with the Business University of Vienna and the University of Barcelona, with the support of the Erasmus Mundus program (European Commission, 2019c).

6 Which is involved in organizes Master program Social Entrepreneurship and Management.

7 An example of good practice could be EURISCE (European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises) which provides different training programs in cooperation with other SE stakeholders and education institutions. More info on: https://euricse.eu/en/education/ (Eurisce).

the inclusion of social and solidarity economy issues and activities in schools (European Commission, 2019b). In the UK, in addition to several programs at the higher education levels, there are also several social enterprise-specific programs for potential and existing social entrepreneurs (European Commission, 2019n).

The previous analysis of data from thirty-five collective comparative reports of the European Commission on social enterprises and their ecosystem in Europe was based on the levels of education in the formal educational system. It is also important to mention that providers of social entrepreneurship education and training also exist outside formal educational institutions. (European Commission, 2020a).

In Slovenia and Slovakia, this role is played by regional development agencies. (European Commission 2020a). In Bulgaria, Ireland, and Germany there are summer educational camps about SE organized by NGOs (European Commission, 2019a; European Commission, 2020g; European Commission, 2020f). In Estonia, a network of social enterprises offers various development programs. In Croatia, social entrepreneurship education is offered through student cooperatives at both the elementary and high school levels. In Sweden, public high schools and informal study associations offer education of interest for social entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2019d).

Analysis has shown that social entrepreneurship education in EU countries ranges from courses and modules to full programs, and is available via online learning, distance learning, and blended learning platforms. It is found on different levels, from regular undergraduate subjects to graduate and postgraduate levels. There are also some good examples of online universities with dedicated social entrepreneurship curricula, such as The Open University in the United Kingdom and UNED in Spain (European Commission, 2020a; Bokun, 2022). It is worth mentioning the arrival of social entrepreneurship programs in primary and secondary schools in countries such as Belgium, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom (European Commission, 2020a; Bokun, 2022).

Another aspect of our analysis is related to trends of SE education in Europe. Annex 1 presents the level of SE recognition, the size of the SE sector (both as per European Commission, 2020 estimates), the main SE characteristics, and the main SE ED characteristics, according to each of the countries analyzed.

A detailed analysis of the main trends reveals a discrepancy in the development of education for social entrepreneurship, which is closely aligned with the state of development of the sector. More developed countries with a higher number of social enterprises also tend to have more developed education for social entrepreneurship. For example, Belgium, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom are among the countries with a long-standing tradition of social enterprise education and training at higher education institutions. Of course, the question is whether education for social entrepreneurship followed the development of the sector or appeared consequently, inspired by the growth of the sector that has put pressure on the development of specific educational programs.

Some countries have a relatively low recognition and SE size. In these countries, the sector is not at a high level of development, and education programs for social entre-

preneurship are primarily found at higher education institutions, with sporadic ones also present in the third sector (examples include Malta and Albania). Countries, such as Croatia (Vidović, 2019), the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, have also developed university curricula on social entrepreneurship in recent years, reaching graduate and postgraduate levels (European Commission, 2020a-, Bokun, 2022).

The third aspect is the countries that have an average level of recognition and a low to medium-sized sector. There, the situation is diverse. We mainly notice education at the higher education level (e.g., Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Poland). But some have also recorded expansion beyond higher education into secondary education or capacity building for practitioners (such as Portugal or part of Latvia). In some countries (Iceland, Montenegro, and North Macedonia), the examined research does not mention education for social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship education in Croatia

Social enterprises as a specific area of practice are a relatively new phenomenon in Croatia, still in the phase of progressive development (European Commission, 2019p). The promotion of social entrepreneurial activity in Croatia began approximately two decades ago (Vidović, 2012; Vidović and Baturina, 2021).

A strategy for the development of Social Entrepreneurship in the Republic of Croatia for the period of 2015–2020, delivered in 2015, was a key moment for the recognition of social entrepreneurship in the Croatian context. One of the four measures was "Promoting the importance and role of social entrepreneurship through all forms of education" (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2015). Financial allocation for this measure was 75 million HRK (approximately 10 million EUR) and a large number of activities were planned in this area.[8]

The strategy overestimated the possibilities and political will for the development of the sector (Baturina, 2018), and in the end, most of the measures were not implemented, including those related to education. Therefore, the strategy did not significantly impact the sector's development (European Commission, 2019p; Vasseur et al., 2021) by implementing the education-related measures and achieving goals related to that part of the strategy as well as the others.

Despite the lack of institutional and financial support, as well as existing legal disadvantages, interest in social entrepreneurship and social enterprises is still growing in several areas of the ecosystem. We are witnessing the emergence of new social enterprises, new courses and educational programs, social enterprise incubators and accelerators, and other financial and support programs, developed primarily in an intermediary sector (European Commission, 2019b; Vidović, 2019). Current data suggests that many social enterprises are small (by the number of employed people and revenue), often in early development stages, focused on vulnerable groups, and foster participative governance (Vidović et

8 Nine of them related to support for the development of education for social entrepreneurship at different levels, the development of various programs, from innovation to those of lifelong education, and support for promotion, information, and training.

al., 2023; Baturina et al., 2025). Findings from the Croatian Social Enterprise Monitor (CSEM) (Vidović et al., 2023) indicate that the social enterprise sector in Croatia is becoming more diversified, but it still lacks appropriate support. Some authors (Račić 2022) conclude that we can assess the situation of the sector by referring to the lack of a systematic approach and resources.

Specifically, regarding education, we may say that several aspects of education are slowly developing.[9] In the secondary level of education, student cooperatives can be a potential for developing knowledge on cooperatives and social entrepreneurship, and their growth has been noticeable in the last few years (Vidović, 2020).[10] In addition, social entrepreneurship was part of a draft of the comprehensive educational reform, as the intersection of entrepreneurship and sustainable development (European Commission, 2019p), but civic education is still not fully implemented at the secondary level of education.

At the higher level of education, there are some positive developments as more and more faculties are, in some way, engaging with the topics of social entrepreneurship, either by having specific courses or making these topics part of other courses (Vidović, 2019; Baturina and Babić, 2021). There is a balance between courses held in economics and other social sciences.[11] Some previous analysis indicated that Croatian universities are not sufficiently active in incorporating social entrepreneurship into their curricula (Perić and Delić, 2014), however, recent analysis (Toplek, 2019) states that faculties are increasingly recognizing the importance of social entrepreneurship and the benefits that come with introducing such subjects into teaching content.[12]

In addition, several organizations have launched various projects related to the non-formal education and training of social entrepreneurs in the last couple of years (shown in European Commission, 2019p) and Bokun (2022).[13] Recently, various associations or social organizations (partly connected to project funds by the European Social Fund) carry out non-formal education activities connected to the topic of social entrepreneurship.

9 Looking into entrepreneurial education in Croatia we may also notice that scores for entrepreneurial ecosystem on the national level in Croatia are also well below the EU average regarding entrepreneurial education in pre-tertiary schools but all in colleges and universities (Singer et al., 2022).

10 However, it is also noted that some cooperative principles, such as cooperative education, are insufficiently reflected in the work of student cooperatives. (Vidović, 2020).

11 An overview of the courses and faculties Involved in social entrepreneurship education could be found in Bokun (2022), Baturina and Babić (2021), and Vidović (2019). Among others, they note the Faculty of Political Sciences in Zagreb, Faculty of Law in Zagreb - Social Work Study Center, Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Organization and Informatics Varaždin, but also various economic faculties such as the one in Osijek, Zagreb, Pula, Split, VERN'

12 The first university textbook in the Croatian language that covers topics of Social economy and social entrepreneurship (Baturina and Babić, 2021) could be potentially relevant for the further development of education on this level.

13 At the beginning of the development of the sector, some international organizations like AED and NESsT were also an important source of education for aspiring social entrepreneurs (Vidović, 2019; Šimleša et al., 2015).

They are orientated toward certain groups such as young people, vulnerable groups, or the general population.[14] The transfer of good practices through educational seminars and workshops organized by social enterprises and civil society organizations is, therefore, part of the sector (Bokun, 2022.; Vidović, 2019).

We may conclude that education for social entrepreneurship in Croatia is sporadic and occurs at only a few educational institutions and specific non-formal educational programs (Bokun, 2022; Baturina and Babić, 2021). Evaluation of the Strategy for the Development of Social Entrepreneurship stated that there are dozens of secondary and higher education institutions that develop education and training programs, but cooperation between them is not significant (Vasseur et al., 2021).

Discussion

SEE is recognized as one of the key ingredients for developing the sector (European Commission, 2020). Social entrepreneurs need a specific set of skills (OECD, 2022b) and sensitivity to their context. In recent years, entrepreneurship education has become increasingly common in education systems, though social entrepreneurship and social economy business models are still far from being a standard component in all entrepreneurship education curricula and business courses (European Commission, 2021). On the other hand, some growth in social entrepreneurship education is notable, and it is connected to a variety of factors from equipping individuals with the skills to create innovative solutions, overall demand, the rise of global communities of changemakers, or new pedagogical trends (Al Issa et al., 2024).

Our analysis has shown that, in most EU countries, SEE is to be found in higher education.[15] The introduction of social entrepreneurship study courses in curriculum primarily depends on higher education institutional strategies, academic initiatives, and motivation.

Many university programs aimed to meet the training needs in social entrepreneurship rely on the foundations and teaching strategies of general or traditional entrepreneurship (García-González, and Ramírez-Montoya, 2021). However, on the other hand, it is estimated that faculties have done a good job of utilizing powerful pedagogical methods like service learning (Brock and Steiner, 2009). Therefore, SEE in higher education therefore has significant potential, though it has yet to receive sufficient attention (British Council, 2017).

Other forms of SEE (non-formal) are developed in the third sector and are more prominent than in formal education, though they are quite diverse and less systemized and structured (Bokun, 2022). That is aligned with Alourhzal and Hattabou's (2021) findings that show that SEE programs contain different content and teaching methods, along with a lack of uniformity on "what" and "how" social entrepreneurship is taught.

14 Currently, there is also ongoing creation of the lifelong learning program of education for work integration social enterprise within Erasmus+ project B WISE (Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills in Work Integration Social Enterprises

15 Social entrepreneurship in higher education has been studied worldwide for example in Iran (Salamzadeh at al., 2013) or India (Kumar, 2021).

In addition, the analysis has shown that SEE is path-dependent and often follows the level of recognition and development of social entrepreneurship in each specific European country (European commission, 2020). The The Croatian case demonstrates how the development of SSE depends on the context. The social entrepreneurship field is slowly developing with a lack of support. Thus, SEE programs in higher education are developed through the enthusiasm of individuals who recognize their importance, though without appropriate or structured support. On the other hand, non-formal education and training for social entrepreneurship is fostered by European-funded projects in the third sector.

Due to delayed recognition and limited institutional support, social entrepreneurship in post-socialist countries is often described as "less developed" in comparison to its Western European counterpart (Baturina, et al., 2021.; Galera, 2016). Analyses (Baturina et al., 2025; Vidović et al., 2023; Anđelić et al., 2021; Majetić et al., 2019) reveal that social enterprises tend to be small and possess some skill deficiencies (e.g., managerial, digital). Critical skills that SEE can foster are still partly missing in the sector which can be a sound argument for the further development of SEE.

Another important question is why to develop SEE. It should be noted that SEE can have various effects. First, it can transmit knowledge and foster skills development to start a social enterprise. Young people are most likely to seek entrepreneurship training at school or university (European Commission, 2023).[16] Students who are exposed to SEE perceive social entrepreneurship as more desirable and feasible (Kedmenec et al., 2016), and SEE increases the propensity of students to launch social enterprises through a process of experiential learning in which students co-create shared communities of practice (Hockerts, 2018).

Secondly, SEE is likely to increase social awareness, make people sensitive to problems in their environment, helping them to create innovative solutions (Dobele, 2016). SEE can help foster innovative solutions for the world burdened by wicked problems (Amundam, 2019). The role of social entrepreneurship, which SEE can help develop, is also seen in helping vulnerable populations, innovating solutions for social problems, and protecting both people and the planet (WEF, 2020). Therefore, SEE is closely connected with addressing social problems and is a possible step towards achieving social progress in society.

Conclusion

SEE plays a crucial role in the development of individuals and society. By incorporating SEE into higher education institutions, it is possible to develop an individual's social awareness, creativity, and sensitivity to societal problems. Social entrepreneurship in higher education can establish catalytic social actions that drive social value creation, societal change, and sustainability (Păunescu and Cantaragiu, 2013). However, the introduction of social entrepreneurship study courses in the curriculum primarily depends on the higher education institution's strategy and initiative and the motivation of academics.

16 But they also expect to acquire entrepreneurship skills outside of formal education – via online content creators, such as YouTube and Instagram or an entrepreneurship coach or network

Therefore, there is a need for more advocacy and support mechanisms for the introduction of SEE (OECD, 2022a; European Commission, 2021).

The development of SEE at other levels of the education system could foster sustainable changes from an early age and encourage the pathways of thinking differently about the nature of the economy and society. The OECD (2022a) recommends considering the inclusion of activities related to social entrepreneurship and social economy in formal and non-formal learning at all levels, from primary to postsecondary and adult education.

In the end, it is important to mention that social entrepreneurs are needed to develop a social entrepreneurship education program for the new century (Paunescu and Vidović 2020), and therefore, strong transdisciplinary collaboration in this area is necessary. The United Nations (2020) recommends an experiential learning approach to SEE, including all aspects of sustainable development in school curricula starting at the primary level.

This analysis presents preliminary insights into the main trends, levels, and programs of social entrepreneurship education across a wide range of SEE in European countries. Although our analysis reveals some SEE trends in Europe, whether the field will continue to converge into a commonly accepted framework of educational principles, standards, and content for future SE managers and leaders (Mirabella and Young, 2012) is still an open question.

Due to the limited research on this topic, this analysis can serve as a good starting point for further research development on the topic. It is strongly recommended to make a catalog of education for social entrepreneurship in EU countries,[17] with a further need to research the specifics of education (program content, which groups are engaged, and which pedagogical tools used), as well as the impact of education on the development of new social enterprises, the social entrepreneurship field, and on addressing social problems. As part of these research efforts, case studies of SEE development in individual countries can be developed.

Insight into the Croatia case can be a lesson for specific recommendations for the stakeholders relevant to the country's SEE development. One can be related to the question of support. The Strategy for the Development of Social Entrepreneurship in Croatia 2015-2020 recognized some relevant measures related to the promotion of social entrepreneurship in all forms of education (Baturina et al., 2018). However, those measures were largely not implemented (Vasseur et al., 2021). Therefore, maybe it is time for the renewal of those types of measures in the current policy period. Analysis of CEE countries (Baturina et al., 2021) suggests that external financing, particularly from the EU, was relevant to the development of social entrepreneurship. The same could be the case for SEE, especially though available EU funding, such as the European Social Fund Plus.

17 For example, currently the EEE3S+ - Erasmus + School for Social Entrepreneurship project is trying to gather and analyze existing regulated university education offerings in Europea and Latin America in the fields of Social Entrepreneurship, Social Enterprise, Social Economy, and other related areas, such as cooperativism, social innovation, and the solidarity economy. More info: https://www.iscap.ipp.pt/investigacao-1/projetos/a-decorrer/eee3s and https://ciriec.es/Erasmus/

Other aspects of the development of the SEE could be related to utilizing some existing practices (like further development of student cooperatives), the wider integration of SEE within general education practices (such as citizenship education), or using some new potentials to develop lifelong learning programs (such as micro-credentials).

The role of universities need to be strengthened towards providing knowledge on the topic but also experimenting in the development of social enterprises or supporting existing socio-innovative initiatives. Additionally, this could included the development of new types of teaching methods and a more direct connection of students to practical experiences close to social entrepreneurship (Baturina, 2022; Kumar et al., 2020; Benneworth and Cunha, 2015)

However, current insights (Baturina et al., 2025; Vidović et al., 2023) do not provide arguments for the claim that the level of support or recognition of social entrepreneurship from the side of policy will rise. Therefore, SEE education can be a crucial factor in the emergence of new social enterprises, alongside the bottom-up development of the sector. Similar lessons may be relevant for other post-socialist countries or others with weak traditions of social entrepreneurship (European Commission, 2020a.; Baturina, et al., 2021).

This paper primarily focused on what the social entrepreneurship ecosystem mapping reports by individual countries say about social entrepreneurship education. However, these insights are far from comprehensive, due to the limited amount of research on the topic in the EU. Nonetheless, a few general recommendations can also be mentioned. In developing education for social entrepreneurship, it seems necessary to involve different types of experiential learning (such as service learning) and foster the collaboration of teachers and practitioners. For the effective policies and measures for the development of social entrepreneurship, further educational programs are recommended, which would provide knowledge about social entrepreneurship and foster entrepreneurial skills (Ndou, 2021). As a concluding note, we may support the British Council's (2017) observation, which emphasizes that, if we are to empower the next generation to address society's needs, we need to raise the awareness of different stakeholders about the potential impact of social entrepreneurship education and social entrepreneurship in education systems.

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Solidarity in Code: An Anthropological Perspective on FLOSS Communities and Digital Consumption

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Introduction

In the contemporary digital environment, communities organized around Free/Libre and Open-Source Software (FLOSS)[1] represent alternative models of technological production and distribution. They are increasingly attracting the attention of social scientists, particularly within digital anthropology and critical consumption studies (Kelty, 2008; Coleman, 2013; Benkler, 2006). FLOSS communities bring together a wide range of participants: developers, designers, educators, activists, and enthusiasts, who engage in the collaborative creation, maintenance, and sharing of digital tools and knowledge outside classical market relations and often without monetary compensation.

Through practices of open access to code, transparency in software development and distribution, and horizontal modes of organization, these communities establish their own ethics of collaboration and collective engagement. This is conceptualized here as a distinctive form of the digital solidarity economy (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012).

The solidarity economy, grounded in the concepts of reciprocity, the commons, and fair distribution (Mauss, 2002 [1925]; Polanyi, 1957), takes on new expressions in the digital sphere. FLOSS communities function not only as technical platforms but also as cultural and social collectives in which shared narratives, ethical practices, and participatory models continually evolve. In this context, it is crucial to recognize that digital communities are not peripheral to society but active agents in shaping contemporary forms of belonging, economic alternativism, and cultural production (Postill, 2011; Boellstorff, 2008).

1 FLOSS (Free/Libre and Open-Source Software) refers to software that grants users the freedom to use, study, modify, and distribute it. The term brings together two closely related but ideologically distinct traditions. *Free software*, as defined by the Free Software Foundation, emphasizes freedom as an ethical and political value—the user's right to control the software they use. In this context, "free" refers to freedom, not price. *Open source*, by contrast, emerged later and highlights the practical advantages of source code openness, such as improved collaboration, flexibility, and innovation, without necessarily invoking ethical or political principles. The term FLOSS was introduced to avoid reductionism and to encompass both perspectives (Stallman, 2002; Raymond, 1999).

Digital technologies serve not only as tools but also as social and symbolic spaces in which meaning, relationships, and power are shaped. Within FLOSS communities, information technology becomes a medium for expressing collective values and social imagination. These communities demonstrate that the consumption of digital products need not be passive but can instead constitute an active mode of participation in the co-creation and governance of shared resources (Shirky, 2010). FLOSS communities can thus be conceptualized as specific social formations that combine elements of the gift economy, volunteerism, commons-based resource management, and technical autonomy, all under digital conditions.

Of particular interest is how the idea of collectivity is articulated within these communities and how members themselves interpret their work, contributions, and sense of belonging. Their narratives are deeply embedded in notions of freedom, responsibility, creativity, and resistance to hierarchical or corporate forms of power (Coleman, 2013). These narratives allow for the analysis of meaning-making processes and identity formation within digital spheres.

This study explores how FLOSS communities articulate and enact solidarity, and how their participants express and experience belonging, contribution, and everyday digital consumption. The interpretive framework, drawing on interdisciplinary literature from cultural anthropology, media studies, and communication studies, is developed in the first two theoretical chapters. This is followed by a contextual chapter that introduces the two selected FLOSS communities, Debian and Blender, as the focus of analysis. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach to collecting and analyzing digital ethnographic material. The methodology is grounded in a qualitative, discursive, and phenomenological perspective, with emphasis on ethical expression, communicative patterns, and narrative structures within the two selected FLOSS case studies. These are (1) the Debian Project, a FLOSS operating system, and (2) Blender, an open-source 3D software platform. These cases provide insights into how digital tools and infrastructural code operate not merely as technical resources but as infrastructures through which emergent forms of digital solidarity, shared ownership, and collaborative relations are enacted.

Digital commons and the ethics of solidarity

In contemporary societies marked by deepening inequality, ecological crises, and the dominance of market logic, the concept of the solidarity economy emerges as a vital theoretical and practical alternative. Instead of individual competition and profit maximization, the solidarity economy emphasizes reciprocity, social justice, cooperation, and the collective satisfaction of needs (Miller, 2010). While its historical expressions have typically been linked to cooperatives, labor unions, and local economies, in the digital age it has expanded into new domains. One of the most notable is the production of free and open-source software, where collaborative labor becomes a form of resistance to proprietary logic.

Building on the classical works of Marcel Mauss (2002 [1925]) and Karl Polanyi (1957), the solidarity economy can be understood as a system of gift and reciprocity. In this system, exchange is inherently a social act – an act of recognition, obligation, and relation-

ship-building. In his seminal study of the gift, Mauss demonstrated that giving is never merely a gesture of generosity. It is a social act that implies the obligation of return: "one gives because one is obliged to give, and also because one expects a return" (Mauss, 2002 [1925], p. 13).

In FLOSS communities, contributions in the form of code, knowledge, or documentation represent a type of non-equivalent exchange. There is no contractual obligation, but there is a normative expectation that a member will "give back", if not directly, then to others or to the community as a whole. These contributions are embedded in peer practices such as code review, issue triaging, and support through forums. Such actions operate not as transactional duties, but as moral acts within a shared ethic of reciprocity, mirroring the Maussian (Mauss, 2002 [1925]) obligation to return the gift, even if indirectly or asynchronously. Contributions are often not driven by market incentives but by a sense of moral duty, gratitude, and identification with the collective.

Similarly, Karl Polanyi described the market as "a stark utopia"[2] (1957, p. 3). This model seeks to completely extract economic relations from their social context and submit them to a self-regulating mechanism of price, supply, and demand. This "utopia", according to Polanyi, is far from benign. He argued that the very separation of the economy from society is a root cause of social disintegration and resistance in modern societies. He emphasized that "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships" (Polanyi, 1957, p. 46), meaning that economic activity is always embedded in norms, values, and social ties.

FLOSS communities can be understood precisely in this way, as contemporary manifestations of embedded economies, in which software functions as a common good and technical collaboration is an expression of social obligation and cultural identification rather than market interest. In these communities, labor is not motivated by wage incentives but by a sense of purpose, belonging, and social responsibility. The rejection of corporate ownership, transparency of processes, and open access to resources all signal that technological production within the FLOSS environment is a deeply socialized activity, where technical functionality is inseparable from ethical orientation. At the same time, rules of cooperation – such as collective decision-making, free licenses, and public code review – do not constitute an absence of structure. Rather, they represent a form of alternative institutionalization: a specific model of resource governance that is structured yet decentralized, open yet normatively demanding.

FLOSS communities are composed of networks of individuals and collectives collaborating on the development of software tools that can be freely used, modified, and redistributed without proprietary restrictions (Kelty, 2008). From a cultural anthropological perspective, it is therefore legitimate to consider them as social formations based on a

2 The phrase "a stark utopia" is used by Karl Polanyi to describe the ideological concept of the self-regulating market, a model that seeks to entirely separate the economy from social and cultural relations. In his view, it is a utopia because it has never been fully realized. It is "stark" (meaning harsh or unforgiving) because, if applied consistently, it would have profoundly destructive effects on social cohesion and human security (Polanyi, 1957, p. 3).

logic of gifting rather than market exchange. Christopher Kelty defines them as "recursive publics", communities that not only produce software but also simultaneously create and maintain the legal, technical, and discursive conditions under which that production is possible. As he writes: "A recursive public is a public that is constituted by a discourse about the technical and legal conditions of possibility for the circulation of discourse" (Kelty, 2008, p. 3). In this sense, FLOSS communities are not merely functional groups of programmers, but reflexive social formations that continually examine and configure their own conditions of existence and decision-making processes. They create both the software and the framework within which that software is produced, including discourses, licenses, and power structures. This reflexivity makes them especially relevant for anthropological study.

Their autonomy and horizontality make FLOSS communities paradigmatic examples of the digital commons. In these contexts, both the content and the conditions of production are publicly accessible. What is essential and distinctive here is that the resource is not organized around ownership but around open access, collaborative production, and collective governance. Unlike classical physical commons (such as pastures, forests, or water sources), digital commons have specific characteristics: they are non-excludable (no barriers to access) and non-rivalrous (one user's use does not diminish another's). Software licensed under FLOSS models remains freely available to all users regardless of scale and can be modified, shared, and redistributed without restriction.

However, as both Elinor Ostrom (1990) and later Yochai Benkler (2006) emphasize, a "cultural" commons is not a state of disorder or lawlessness. It relies fundamentally on collectively established and constantly evolving norms and rules. Sustainability depends on these governance structures being actively maintained by the community. In FLOSS environments, this includes public repositories of mailing lists, open discussions on proposed changes, community voting, forum moderation, and clearly defined contributor roles. Together, these form an "institutional framework without institutions", in which both infrastructure and practice are created and sustained through collective agreement rather than imposed authority.

Thus, the digital commons do not merely imply "free access" but constitutes a democratic form of production relations in which both the content (code) and the conditions of its production (rules, licenses, communication) evolve in parallel, transparently and collectively. This dynamic balance between openness and normativity is crucial to the sustainability of FLOSS projects and sharply distinguishes them from neoliberal narratives of "freedom", which often conceal the concentration of power and exploitative relations within digital capitalism.

In the digital context, commons are intangible but no less democratic. Software code can be endlessly copied, distributed, and modified without loss. Yochai Benkler (2006, p. 63), in his analysis of the networked information economy and collaborative production, argues that "The nonproprietary model has proven to be not only viable, but also often more innovative, flexible, and socially inclusive than proprietary systems." He emphasizes that production models based on open access, decentralization, and voluntary participation,

such as FLOSS communities, not only function effectively. They often surpass proprietary systems in terms of innovation and inclusivity. In *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler introduces the concept of commons-based peer production to describe decentralized, voluntary collaborations that yield publicly accessible outputs. He claims that such models – spanning free software, wikis, and open science platforms – more efficiently allocate knowledge and resources, as people are motivated by intrinsic incentives (curiosity, reputation, solidarity) rather than purely market-driven ones (Benkler, 2006).

What makes FLOSS particularly valuable, according to Benkler, is its ability to facilitate cooperation through technical and legal mechanisms (e.g., free licenses) without relying on institutional hierarchies or market-based coordination. Such systems are more resilient, inclusive, and responsive to community needs, as production is not constrained by proprietary interests but guided by shared goals.

FLOSS thus produces not only functional tools but also social relations, collective responsibility, transparency, and inclusion, qualities rarely seen in corporate environments. Classical economic theory, especially in its neoclassical variant, has long assumed that commons inevitably lead to overexploitation, a scenario often referred to as the "tragedy of the commons" [3] (Hardin, 1968). However, Elinor Ostrom (1990, p. 25), through extensive empirical research across diverse local communities around the world, decisively refuted this assumption. She demonstrated that communities are capable of developing effective rules and enforcement mechanisms that ensure the sustainable management of shared resources without centralized authority.[4]

Rather than viewing governance as a dichotomy between the market and the state, Ostrom proposed a polycentric model in which actors at various levels jointly manage resources through agreed-upon rules, monitoring systems, and sanctions. She explained: "What we have ignored is what citizens can do and the importance of real involvement of the people involved – versus just having somebody in Washington make a rule" (Ostrom, 1990, p. 25). This ability of communities to design and implement their own rules, what Ostrom termed "design principles", is key to understanding the success of digital commons such as FLOSS. The foundation of sustainability does not lie in external oversight or formal institutions, but in the active participation of community members, collectively agreed-upon rules, accessible conflict-resolution mechanisms, and the continuous care invested in

3 The concept of the "tragedy of the commons" was popularized by biologist Garrett Hardin in his 1968 essay of the same name. He argued that if individuals act solely in their own self-interest, they will inevitably overexploit a shared resource, such as a pasture, because each person has an incentive to maximize their use while the costs are distributed collectively. According to this logic, commons are inherently unsustainable without either external regulation by the state or privatization (Hardin, 1968).

4 Elinor Ostrom's research challenged this assumption through comparative field studies of more than one hundred cases of commons management, including irrigation systems in Nepal, fisheries in the Pacific, and alpine pastures in Switzerland. These communities developed their own systems of rules, monitoring, and sanctions. Contrary to Hardin's prediction, locally governed commons often demonstrated high levels of stability, efficiency, and resilience over decades.

maintaining the shared order. It is precisely this combination of freedom and self-regulation that enables both physical and digital commons to endure over time.

This exchange unfolds within a moral economy – an arrangement in which value is not defined by market price but by social norms, symbolic recognition, and ethical expectations. In such a system, acts of exchange, labor, or resistance are not driven solely by personal gain but are grounded in shared notions of justice, obligation, and the common good. E. P. Thompson (1971), in his study of eighteenth-century English peasants, showed that popular resistance to market reforms was not rooted in a rejection of modernization per se. Instead, it was based on the belief that new practices violated the moral order of the community: "This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor" (Thompson, 1971, p. 79). He emphasized that uprisings and resistance were guided by deeply held expectations of fairness and social duty, confirming the central role of moral understandings in shaping economic behavior.

In FLOSS communities, this moral economy becomes visible when developers resist commercial appropriation, push back against opaque governance, or initiate forks. These actions constitute a defense of communal norms, such as transparency, fairness, and collective ownership, against perceived ethical breaches.

Digital belonging and the practice of the self

Anthropological approaches to FLOSS communities require us to see them not merely as functional systems but as cultural and symbolic formations. In digital anthropology, the concept of community is no longer tied to physical proximity but to shared practices, values, and symbolic patterns (Boellstorff, 2008; Miller & Slater, 2000; Čapo Žmegač, 2008). FLOSS communities can be understood as imagined communities in the sense proposed by Benedict Anderson. In analyzing the concept of the nation, Anderson argues: "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6)[5]. Similarly, FLOSS contributors across the globe may never meet in person, but they share code, language, goals, and symbolic references. Through this, they develop a genuine sense of collective identity and belonging.

Within such communities, ethics and practice are not separate domains; rather, they shape and affirm one another through members' everyday activities. FLOSS is not merely a collection of technical tools. It is an expression of political and moral imagination, a way of acting in the world that rejects the logic of control, ownership, and exclusivity. FLOSS

5 The concept of imagined communities was developed by Benedict Anderson to describe the nation as a community whose members do not personally know one another, yet perceive themselves as part of a shared, emotionally resonant collective. Although originally applied to political communities (i.e. nations), the concept has been adopted in digital anthropology to analyze online communities that also generate a sense of belonging and shared identity, despite physical distance and the virtual nature of their interactions (Anderson, 1983).

projects materialize values that oppose the dominant norms of digital capitalism: openness instead of closure, sharing instead of exploitation, collaboration instead of competition.

Gabriella Coleman (2013, p. 39), in her ethnographic study of FLOSS communities, shows how a specific hacker ethic emerges within them, a system of values that includes freedom of information access, process transparency, technical elegance as both aesthetic and moral value, and a sense of responsibility toward the community and users. Unlike formal institutions that define ethics through explicit regulations, in FLOSS communities, ethical behavior is not prescribed. It is learned, demonstrated, and accumulated through practice. As she notes: "For many free-software hackers, the act of writing software and learning from others far exceeds the simple enactment of an engineering ethic or a technocratic calculus for the sake of becoming a more proficient and efficient programmer or system administrator. Software development and related technical activities are construed as valuable avenues for highly creative forms of expression, even if they openly admit to various constraints" (Coleman, 2013, p. 91). With this emphasis on practice as a form of creative expression, Coleman shows that contributing to FLOSS is not merely a technical task but a culturally and ethically charged act. Through this work, not only is software created, but the subject (the hacker, the contributor, the community member) is also formed.

Although rooted in shared ethical norms, participation in FLOSS communities is enacted through everyday practices that carry both technical and social significance. Contributors gain recognition not through formal status but through acts that demonstrate alignment with the community's values. These include reviewing code with care, patiently answering questions from newcomers, writing clear documentation, or quietly maintaining overlooked infrastructure. These gestures, often modest and routine, become moments where trust is built and belonging is affirmed.

Such dynamics resonate with Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice. As Bourdieu (1986) suggests, each social field operates through specific forms of capital that are recognized and valued internally. In the FLOSS field, symbolic capital is not granted through degrees or institutional authority. It accrues through long-term, visible engagement and through the reception of one's labor by others. This capital is inherently practical: it is not held but enacted, sustained through a rhythm of participation, responsiveness, and care. In this way, FLOSS communities cultivate an alternative moral economy, where authority stems not from hierarchy, but from relational labor, quiet, cumulative, and deeply embedded in the everyday.

Seen through this lens, FLOSS communities represent an alternative configuration of social space, where power and authority are tied not to ownership, profit, or external status, but to publicly visible practices of collaboration. It is through everyday micro-interactions and informal recognitions that a collective ethics is formed, one that does not require an external norm but is generated internally through practice.

If Bourdieu helps explain how symbolic capital is accumulated through socially recognized forms of action, Foucault directs us to a more intimate, reflexive relationship of the subject to the self. While Bourdieu's subject is shaped through the internalization of social structures (habitus), Foucault's concept of technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) em-

phasizes proactive, conscious self-formation. Individuals do not simply reproduce norms; they examine, adopt, and embody them as modes of being. Applied to digital solidarity economies, this means that producing code, maintaining documentation, and mentoring new members are not merely socially valued activities. They are also forms through which individuals internalize community values and construct themselves as ethical subjects.

Foucault describes technologies of the self as practices "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). FLOSS contributors are not merely developers; they shape their identities through everyday practices of openness, collaboration, and self-discipline. Working on code becomes a form of working on the self, shaping one's ethical position within the community.

In the context of FLOSS communities, developers are not merely technicians executing tasks. Through sustained participation, they are shaped as ethical and social subjects who build their position through practices of collaboration, transparency, and openness. Work on code thus becomes work on the self, a dynamic through which individuals continuously affirm, reinterpret, and embody their ethical identity within a shared space.

It is precisely these everyday practices that form the "silent" foundation of the community, a set of actions that may not be visible on the surface but are essential for its maintenance and continuous creation. Michel de Certeau (1984, p. xiii) describes them as "a 'silent' production", a production of meaning through everyday gestures that are not spectacular but are structured, normative, and deeply effective. These acts do not seek attention, are not converted into capital or social fame, but are indispensable for the functioning of collective life.

In FLOSS communities, such practices include writing and updating documentation, fixing minor bugs in the code, helping newcomers on forums, moderating mailing lists, and performing the quiet but committed work of infrastructure maintenance. These are practices rarely celebrated as "heroic," but they are precisely what make the community possible. They allow knowledge to circulate, new members to join, and existing ones to remain active and motivated. In de Certeau's sense, these are "micro-tactics" of the everyday that, while unobtrusive, continually produce collective order, meaning, and a sense of belonging.

This quiet, routine practice also carries an ethical dimension. It expresses commitment to the community, responsibility toward others, and a willingness to collaborate without seeking recognition or reward. In this sense, "quiet work" is not merely functional. It embodies the norms of the community, its rhythm, and its stability.

Ultimately, technology in the FLOSS world is not neutral. It is an embodiment of relationships, values, and imagination. Daniel Miller (1987; 2005) argues that objects, including digital ones, are always socially and identity-charged: "things do not just exist, they act" (Miller, 2005, p. 5). Code, in this context, disconnected from financial institutions and

market imperatives, is not merely a set of instructions for a machine. It is a cultural text, a medium through which the community expresses who it is, what it aspires to, and how it envisions a just future.

Context: FLOSS communities in focus – Debian and Blender

This chapter explores two specific communities operating within the world of FLOSS: Debian and Blender. Since many readers may not have a technical background, it is important to begin by clarifying what these communities do, how they function, and why they matter. FLOSS communities bring together individuals who collaborate on developing software tools that anyone can freely use, modify, and share (Stallman, 2002; Raymond, 1999), including developers, designers, educators, activists, and enthusiasts.

For most FLOSS communities, formal registration is not required. Public repositories, mailing lists, and forums are accessible to all. Contributors typically become involved gradually, through practice and visible participation, without central authorization (Debian Project, n.d.-b; GitHub, n.d.). Access and participation are based on openness and self-initiative rather than exclusive admission mechanisms. They are defined not only by the software they produce but also by their ways of working, organizing, and creating collectively, grounded in principles of openness, collaboration, and mutual responsibility.

The first case, Debian, exemplifies this as a free operating system[6], meaning it is the foundational software installed on a computer that enables all other applications to function (Debian Project, n.d.-b; GNU Project, n.d.). In that sense, Debian is like the foundation of a house: it supports everything else you do on a computer. Comparable to more widely known systems like Windows or macOS, Debian is unique in that it is not produced by a company but by a global network of volunteers. Its development is not led by a single institution but by the community itself, through democratic processes, publicly available documents such as the Debian Constitution and Social Contract (Debian Project, 2004; Debian Project, n.d.-a), and carefully structured procedures for onboarding new contributors. Debian shows how software can become a collective project, guided by openness, long-term stability, and a strong reliance on community-defined rules and ethical principles. In short, Debian is not "just another operating system." It is a foundational project within the FLOSS ecosystem, renowned for its longevity, committed community, and deeply normative approach to software development.

The second case, Blender, by contrast, is not an operating system but a sophisticated software tool for 3D modeling, animation, visual effects, and video production[7]. It is

6 It is based on the Linux kernel, the core software that manages hardware and system processes and combines it with GNU tools (*GNU's Not Unix*, such as compilers, libraries, and command-line utilities) to form a complete and fully functional operating system.

7 Originally developed by the Dutch company NeoGeo, Blender became open source in 2002 through the "Free Blender" campaign. Maintained by the Blender Foundation, its development depends on an active global community of users and developers. Blender's FLOSS status ensures that it is fully free, customizable, and open to public contribution.

used in professional creative industries yet remains accessible to everyone, free of charge and without limitations. Developed collaboratively by programmers and artists, Blender evolves through an open, dynamic process of community contribution. Although the Blender Foundation provides organizational support, the project's momentum still derives from an enthusiastic, decentralized community (Blender Foundation, n.d.). In Blender, creative and technical contributions are valued equally. For instance, a designer proposing interface improvements may influence the software as much as a core developer contributing code. Blender is more than a digital production tool; it is a flagship FLOSS project for creative collaboration, recognized for its transparent development process and its distinctive fusion of artistic and technical input. Its strength lies not only in the software itself but in a participatory production model that brings together users, developers, and educators to collectively shape tools, practices, and values.

To clarify the key distinctions between FLOSS tools like Debian and Blender and commercial software systems, the table below offers a basic comparison:

Table 1. Basic differences between FLOSS and commercial software (made by author).

Feature	Debian / Blender (FLOSS)	Windows / macOS (Commercial)
License	Free software (open source)	Proprietary software
Who develops it	Community of volunteers and contributors	Commercial company
Cost	Completely free	Paid (or included with the device)
Access to code	Open and available to everyone	Closed, for internal use only
Flexibility	High – users can modify and share	Limited – modifications are not allowed
Mode of collaboration	Open participation, public forums	Internal development, closed processes

Both Debian and Blender illustrate how software development can take place outside market-driven and proprietary structures, through collaborative practices grounded in openness, shared labor, and non-profit orientation. Debian achieves this through formalized procedures, clearly defined responsibilities, and a strong normative infrastructure. Blender demonstrates how less formal, creativity-driven communities can also sustain collective and long-term development. These projects function as open systems in which knowledge, tools, and decision-making processes are publicly accessible and collectively shaped.

These cases invite exploration of whether and how such FLOSS communities cultivate practices of digital solidarity, not only by producing software but also by generating forms of trust, belonging, and ethical cooperation that actively challenge market logics. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, the analysis that follows focuses on the everyday practices, normative documents, and discursive infrastructures through which digital

commons are built, maintained, and experienced as spaces of shared responsibility and collective care.

Methodological approach

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach, situated within the framework of digital ethnography, to explore how FLOSS communities, through everyday practices of collaboration, sharing, and reciprocity, shape concrete forms of solidarity in the digital sphere. Following Pink et al. (2016), digital ethnography is understood here as the adaptation of ethnographic methods to the study of online environments, with attention to the social, cultural, and affective dimensions of digital interaction (Pink et al., 2016). As Pink observes, "Digital ethnography … invites us not only to theorize the digital world in new ways, but also to re-think how we have understood pre-digital practices, media and environments" (Pink et al., 2016, Introduction).

The analysis focuses on two specific FLOSS communities: the Debian Project and the Blender platform. These cases are explored as potential expressions of solidarity-based economies, where technological production is not driven by ownership and profit but by collective work, openness, and ethical commitment. Rather than treating software solely as a technical artifact, the aim is to understand the cultural dynamics that develop around it, how practices of contribution, documentation, interaction, and self-organization influence modes of identification, moral orientation, and collective responses to the logic of digital capitalism. The central research question guiding this analysis is: how do practices within FLOSS communities, grounded in reciprocity, openness, and collective responsibility, enable the development of digital solidarities beyond market logics?

Empirical material was gathered from publicly available sources, including official documents (e.g., Debian Constitution, New Maintainer Process), development blogs (Blender Developers Blog), forums (Debian-user, BlenderArtists), and archived Blender and Debian mailing lists. The openness of these sources is not only a practical feature but also an ethical principle embedded in the FLOSS model. Given the extensive volume of available material, the analysis did not involve a systematic review of entire databases but instead relied on targeted keyword searches within the search engines of the respective platforms.

The search strategy followed the logic of theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focusing on analytically relevant materials aligned with the study's categories, which were derived from the theoretical framework and refined through engagement with the empirical material. Examples of search codes corresponding to specific objectives include: a) Infrastructure and normative foundations: keywords relating to formal governance documents, decision-making processes, and the public nature of communication channels (e.g., project constitutions, social contracts, maintainer guidelines, public mailing lists); b) everyday practice and creativity: phrases describing first contributions, onboarding and mentorship experiences, collaborative problem-solving, and expressions of mutual support among participants; c) subjectivity and belonging: statements of personal identification with the community, rd d) conflict and the boundaries of solidarity: accounts of forks, public disagreements, changes in community norms, and reactions to perceived threats from external (e.g., corporate) actors.

The methodology combined discourse analysis with a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (Charmaz, 2006), situated within a digital ethnographic framework (Pink et al., 2016). The phenomenological aspect addressed how community members describe their participation, entry, contributions, and ethical dilemmas, not as purely technical statements but as narratives of belonging, learning, and moral orientation. Discourse analysis enabled the interpretation of manifestos, rules, forums, blogs, and official documentation as textual practices that structure community life and negotiate normative frameworks in online environments. Reflexivity is treated as integral to the research process, requiring constant awareness of the researcher's standpoint in relation to the material, in line with Pink et al.'s observation that "reflexivity is one of the key principles" of digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016, p. 12).

Materials were not read as transparent insights into the "inner world" of the communities, but as textual manifestations of social practice embedded aesthetic and normative regimes. Normative documents were interpreted as attempts to articulate shared rules and expectations, while personal testimonies and user-generated posts were approached as discursive expressions of an individual's relationship to the community, technology, and the self.

All analyzed materials are publicly accessible, clearly attributed with usernames and publication dates, and linked via archival URLs[8]. While their use is legally and technically permissible, the analysis was conducted with ethical sensitivity, mindful of context, audience, and potential implications for community members. No attempt was made to anonymize already public identities, but interpretive care was taken to avoid misrepresentation or decontextualization.

The researcher is not a member of the studied FLOSS communities but approaches them from a stance of critical proximity, engaged yet external, acknowledging that interpretation is shaped by personal theoretical commitments and positionality (Pink, 2007). Reflexivity is treated as integral to the research process, requiring constant awareness of the researcher's standpoint in relation to the material.

Infrastructure and normative foundations of community: the case of Debian

Often described as one of the longest-standing and most ethically grounded distributions within the GNU/Linux ecosystem, Debian distinguishes itself not only through the software it produces but also through the collaborative infrastructure that simultaneously enables, structures, and regulates both technical and social relations. Mailing lists, repositories, constitutions, processes, and forums are not merely tools for collaboration; they are textual and procedural traces of collective life, spaces where values that define the community are negotiated and affirmed.

8 Regarding the cited sources, it should be noted that, as is often the case with large mailing list archives, URLs are presented as they appeared during the research period; such databases rarely provide fully permanent links, and subsequent changes are a normal part of their maintenance.

Key documents such as the Debian Constitution (Debian Project, 1998)[9] and Debian Social Contract (Debian Project, 2004)[10] function not merely as technical references, but as normative declarations that explicitly mark the boundaries of ethical action.

The Debian Constitution defines the purpose of the organization in collective rather than purely functional terms: "*The Debian Project is an association of individuals who have made common cause to create a free operating system."* (Debian Constitution, 1998, §1)[11], while the Debian Social Contract commits the project to remaining 100% free and transparent: *"Debian will remain 100% free. We will never make the system require the use of a non-free component… We will keep our entire bug report database open for public view at all times."* (Debian Social Contract, 2004)[12].

Such rhetoric highlights that freedom, openness, and transparency in Debian are not merely technical decisions; they are foundational ethical commitments. As Elinor Ostrom (1990, p. 90) argues, successful commons are characterized by "design principles", rules and norms that are not imposed from the outside but generated and maintained by the community itself. Debian insists on this through clearly defined decision-making mechanisms, internal regulations, and collective oversight of development.

One of the clearest examples of such institutionalized self-governance is the New Maintainer Process (NMP) (Debian New Maintainers' Guide, 2022)[13]. This procedure enables new members to become official contributors with responsibilities for package maintenance. However, the NMP is not merely a technical filter; it is a social process that evaluates not just skills but normative alignment. The process includes a review of motivation, knowledge of key documents, technical competence, and an interview to assess one's understanding of the community as an ethical and political project. In this sense, NMP becomes a form of what Mauss described as the gift: "a gift is never given without expectation of return" (2002 [1925], p. 13). Contributions are not made for compensation, but out of a sense of responsibility and belonging to a community that cultivates and reproduces these values.

In everyday community life, mailing lists play a central role: open, publicly archived forums where not only technical coordination, but also political deliberation occurs. Debian's mailing lists function as an open infrastructure of deliberation, where technical and normative issues are discussed publicly and permanently recorded. As the project's official website states: *"All Debian mailing lists are public, and their archives are publicly*

9 Debian Project. (1998). *Debian Constitution*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from https://www.debian.org/devel/constitution.

10 Debian Project. (2004). *Debian Social Contract*. Retrieved March 9, 2024, from https://www.debian.org/social_contract.

11 Debian Project. (1998). *Debian Constitution*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from https://www.debian.org/devel/constitution.

12 Debian Project. (2004). *Debian Social Contract*. Retrieved March 9, 2024, from https://www.debian.org/social_contract.

13 Debian New Maintainers' Guide, version 1.2.53, last updated October 8, 2022. Retrieved March 19, 2024, from https://www.debian.org/doc/maint-guide/.

available on the web" (Debian Project, n.d.)[14], making transparency not only a feature of the open code, but also of the open process of decision-making and collective discussion.

Because of this, mailing lists can be described as a community's thinking infrastructure. As one Debian FAQ post confirms that the archive is not only public but carefully organized, reinforcing the idea of mailing lists as open, deliberative infrastructure:

> "It is often useful to look through the archives to see whether the issue you wish to raise or a similar issue has been raised before by someone else. The top level link to the archives of this list is at https://lists.debian.org/debian-user/ organized by year, then month" (Debian-user mailing list, April 2025)[15].

Mailing lists such as debian-devel@lists.debian.org and debian-project@lists.debian.org are not like chat rooms: communication is asynchronous, structured into threads, and messages are often long, reflective, and well-argued. These spaces show how the community routinely confronts disagreement, uncertainty, and ethical dilemmas. One participant note:

> "Debian decision-making happens in the open, on our public mailing lists, where anyone can follow the discussion and influence the outcome." (Debian Project mailing list, April 2021)[16].

Similarly, the Debian Project Leader has emphasized: *"Because of our governance, ultimately our policy will be set by the members."* (Debian Developer Mailing List, December 2019)[17], underscoring that project governance is participatory and consensus-driven rather than imposed from above.

Mailing lists thus serve as an infrastructure of deliberation, a space where both normative and technical aspects of collaboration are negotiated. As another contributor put it during a sensitive governance debate:

> "We have a governance process that lets us work out that disagreement and make project decisions in the face of a disagreement, and we're going through that process now." (Debian Project Mailing List, April 2021)[18].

From a methodological perspective, mailing lists represent a digital trace of collective thought, making them especially valuable for qualitative and discursive analysis.

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14 Debian Project. (n.d.). *Debian mailing lists*. Retrieved March 8, 2024, from https://www.debian.org/MailingLists/.

15 Debian-user mailing list. (April 2025). *Debian-user archives*. Retrieved March 15, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/debian-user/.

16 Debian Project mailing list. (April 2021). *Debian decision-making*. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/.

17 Debian Developer Mailing List. (December 2019). *Debian policy statement*. Retrieved March 27, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/.

18 [Debian Project Mailing List. (April 2021). *Governance process discussion*. Retrieved March 24, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/.

Unlike chat systems, mailing lists are asynchronous public email channels. Each message is delivered to all subscribers, automatically archived, and accessible to everyone. Instead of short, informal exchanges, mailing lists host structured, argumentative discussions that resemble deliberative forums more than technical help desks. Messages are organized into threads, replies remain within the same conversation, and discussions can span days or weeks.

They are not a neutral medium, but a space where meanings of "good code" and "good contributor" are simultaneously shaped. This openness is visible not only in technical debates but also in community events that replicate the deliberative character of the mailing lists. As one DebConf organizer described an open Q&A with the Debian Project Leader:

> "One of the events at DebConf that I'm running is an 'Ask the Leader' session. This is a town hall meeting event, where you have the opportunity to ask the DPL anything you want! To make sure we have enough questions on a broad range of topics, I'd like to get some prepared questions beforehand. Note that the DPL won't see these, or have time to prepare his answers. There'll also be a session of questions from the floor. You don't need to be attending to ask, simply drop a mail to neilm@debian.org and I'll try and get as many questions put as possible." (Debian Developer Mailing List, July 2011)[19].

Through such practices of everyday deliberation, normative questions are not pre-established but continually articulated, contested, and reaffirmed. Another contributor reflects on the broader meaning of contribution within the community:

> "Despite all disappointment, I still contribute, even if it's only by publishing software I created under GPL. Nobody cares, but I do it nonetheless because I'm using software others have contributed to, so I find it only right to let them use what I created or contributed to… What I don't understand is that criticism and other forms of speaking up cannot be considered as a form of contribution." (Debian-user mailing list, September 2014)[20].

This comment shows that contribution is not merely a technical act, it is also a moral obligation and affective bond with the community. Critique, disagreement, even frustration, all are seen as forms of participation that reflect a deeper understanding of the shared project.

In this sense, Debian exemplifies what Kelty calls a *recursive public* (Kelty, 2008, p. 3), a community that not only creates software, but also the conditions of its own reproduction: of language, licenses, norms, and discursive frameworks. As Star and Ruhleder argue: "infrastructure does not just support work, it structures and mediates it" (Star and Ruhleder, 1996, p. 113), meaning infrastructure actively shapes belonging, authority, and collaboration. Debian is thus an example of a digital community that institutionalizes ethics rather than markets.

19 Debian Developer Mailing List. (July 2011). *Ask the Leader session announcement*. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/.

20 Debian-user mailing list. (September 2014). *Contribution and criticism*. Retrieved March 12, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/debian-user/2014/09/msg01365.html.

Debian is thus an example of a digital community that institutionalizes ethics rather than markets. Through publicness, process transparency, and ongoing normative reflection, it shows that it is possible to sustain complex technical infrastructure based not on hierarchy, but on reciprocity and self-governance. Sustained not by profit but by collective ethics, reflection, and collaboration, Debian ultimately represents a paradigmatic case of digital solidarity.

While Debian illustrates how formalized structures, constitutions, and clearly documented processes can sustain a large, long-standing FLOSS project, Blender shows that solidarity, governance, and the regulation of norms can also emerge in a more decentralized, creativity-driven environment. Both communities rely on transparency, open participation, and a shared ethical framework, yet they operationalize these principles differently. Debian's model builds solidarity through procedural clarity and collective decision-making within a structured institutional framework. Blender, by contrast, nurtures it through informal mentorship, peer recognition, and a shared creative ethos that binds contributors together.

By exploring these two cases side by side, it becomes evident that digital solidarity is not tied to a single organizational form. Whether embedded in the deliberative infrastructure of Debian's mailing lists or in the affective economy of Blender's forums and collaborative projects, solidarity in FLOSS emerges from the same core practices: openness, reciprocity, and the mutual recognition of contributions.

Everyday practice, creativity, and ethical labor: the case of Blender

Unlike Debian, which is a highly institutionalized project with a constitution and formal procedures, Blender represents a grassroots FLOSS community, one that develops from the bottom up through the initiatives of users themselves, without a hierarchical structure or corporate control. Blender is free software for 3D modeling, animation, and visual effects, used by a wide range of users, from professional artists to hobbyists, researchers, and educators. Its distinctiveness lies in the fact that it is not merely a tool but also a community in which knowledge, code, and creativity are freely exchanged.

The term grassroots in this context refers to initiatives that emerge "from below", directly from the practices and needs of community members, rather than through formal institutional actions. The Blender community functions as a network of enthusiasts and contributors who independently shape the direction of tool development, whether through coding, documentation, tutorials, proposals, or aesthetic interventions. While formal support exists in the form of the Blender Foundation, key innovations and day-to-day maintenance are driven by the community itself through public discussions, repositories, and forums.

Blender's infrastructure includes platforms such as developer.blender.org, code.blender.org, and blenderartists.org, which serve as spaces for knowledge exchange, support for newcomers, discussions of new features, and sharing of resources. Unlike closed systems, every stage of development here is transparent, from the initial idea to the final implementation. Contributors openly discuss bugs, propose improvements, and assist one another, maintaining a dynamic, informal, and highly participatory infrastructure.

Blender, then, is not reducible to a purely technical product; it is a space where everyday practices and creative labor are inseparable from ethical principles of openness, reciprocity, and the common good. Precisely because of this hybrid nature, between software tool and cultural community, Blender stands out as a compelling case for understanding digital solidarity in practice.

Participation in a FLOSS community like Blender often begins not with a plan but with an affective impulse, a desire to learn, contribute, and connect. Users frequently describe their first steps in forums and blogs as filled with uncertainty but also with a feeling of becoming part of something greater than themselves. One new contributor wrote:

> "I was so lost with Blender code until I had a meeting with @ThomasDinges. He's very kind, patient, and willing to answer beginner questions. I recently submitted my first patch to Blender and I couldn't have done it without Thomas' help." (Blender Developer Forum, January 4, 2022)[21].

Such testimonies reveal that contribution is not simply a technical act; it is also a moment of social recognition and emotional belonging. On Blender forums, newcomers often express fear of "doing something wrong" or "not being good enough," while also voicing gratitude for having been met with understanding, encouragement, and useful feedback. Mentorship emerges informally through comments, forum support, and code review, fostering a sense of shared learning.

In this context, contribution is not limited to code. It may take the form of tutorials, documentation edits, interface designs, or constructive comments on forums. These diverse modes of participation underscore Gabriella Coleman's insight that "ethical practices are demonstrated and refined in action" (Coleman, 2013, p. 105).

Here, Foucault's concept of technologies of the self becomes particularly illuminating. In FLOSS communities like Blender, to contribute, learn, and receive feedback is not only a means of becoming technically proficient; it is a way of shaping oneself ethically. As Foucault describes it, this process involves "operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). In this way, participation becomes a practice of ethical self-formation, not just through what one creates but through the ways in which one learns, errs, repairs, and recognizes others.

Beyond technical knowledge and organizational infrastructure, the Blender community is held together by a strong affective economy, a system of mutual relations based on gratitude, recognition, care, and emotional investment. As one forum participant expressed it:

> "There's almost no bigger satisfaction from thinking and clicking within Blender, in and all inside out towards ways of optimization…" (Blender Artists Forum, May 3, 2022)[22].

21 Blender Developer Forum. (2022, January 4). *Open chat for new developers*. Retrieved March 19, 2024, from https://devtalk.blender.org/t/open-chat-for-new-developers/21578.

22 Blender Artists Forum. (2022, May 3). *Issues*. Retrieved March 16, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/issues/1377556.

This kind of statement conveys that working with Blender is more than a technical task; it is a deeply engaging process that involves creativity, curiosity, and care. Community contribution is not purely instrumental but an emotionally charged experience through which individuals invest a part of themselves. Praise, thanks, and even acknowledgment of mistakes become key mechanisms for sustaining a shared space. While there is no formal reward system, the community develops its own forms of recognition: supportive responses, highlighting of valuable contributions, or informal mentorship.

This affective economy also plays a regulatory role. While there are no lengthy formal rules, behavioral norms are embodied in everyday interactions and publicly upheld. For example, a moderator explains:

> "Instead, we now have one rule: 'Don't be a jerk' […] I feel it has been instrumental in turning BA around and making it a positive, constructive place for conversations about Blender again." (Blender Artists Forum, October 18, 2024)[23].

This concise ethical standard sets the tone: users who disrupt the collaborative atmosphere through rudeness or exclusion are implicitly discouraged. Conversely, constructive engagement is encouraged and visibly appreciated. As one member remarked:

> "Some of you are confusing jackbooted censorship with simply having manners and showing respect for others." (Blender Artists Forum, October 20, 2024)[24].

Together, these statements show that behavioral norms in Blender communities are not enforced via formal sanction lists but through cultural expectations, peer affirmation, and moderation that aligns with collective values.

Users who disregard the collective tone, withhold knowledge, or ignore others' input are often subtly excluded from discussions. Conversely, those who demonstrate solidarity and constructive engagement, regardless of technical expertise, quickly earn the community's trust. Moreover, trust and inclusion are not tied strictly to technical expertise but to one's willingness to collaborate. As one collaborative project organizer put it:

> "This is a true collab. Your ideas and suggestions are welcome and encouraged in all areas." (Blender Artists Forum, October 26, 2022)[25].

This kind of open invitation signals that trust and status in the community derive as much from one's willingness to engage constructively as from technical skill.

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23 Blender Artists Forum. (2024, October 18). *New policy: All political discussions are now off-topic*. Retrieved March 14, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/new-policy-all-political-discussions-are-now-off-topic/1554076/107.

24 Blender Artists Forum. (2024, October 20). *New policy: All political discussions are now off-topic*. Retrieved March 12, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/new-policy-all-political-discussions-are-now-off-topic/1554076/131.

25 Blender Artists Forum. (2022, October 26). *Collaborate on a sci-fi project – 3D artists needed*. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/collaborate-on-a-sci-fi-project-3d-artists-needed/1413378.

This dimension can also be interpreted through Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital. In Blender, status is not earned through formal authority but through the accumulation of recognized contribution, ethical behavior, and long-term involvement. A moral hierarchy emerges, one that is not fixed but continuously reconfigured through everyday practices and affective relations among participants (Bourdieu, 1986).

The Blender community does not merely produce functional software; it generates a collective space for creativity, where technical labor intertwines with aesthetic and ethical imagination. Code is not just a tool but a medium of expression, collaboration, and shared authorship. This understanding of software contribution points toward a broader conception of the digital commons, where creative resources are not privately owned but remain open for use, modification, and redistribution. As Yochai Benkler notes, "the nonproprietary model has proven to be not only viable, but also often more innovative, flexible, and socially inclusive than proprietary systems" (Benkler, 2006, p. 63). Blender exemplifies this claim through ongoing innovation and the aesthetic diversity generated by free contributions from designers, developers, educators, and amateurs alike.

The community's role extends beyond technical support; it involves the shared stewardship of a creative environment. The blenderartists.org forum, Blender Studio platform, and a wealth of video tutorials demonstrate how knowledge and creative work circulate as commons, accessible to all but also maintained by all. This recalls Elinor Ostrom's studies of self-managed communities, where resource sustainability depends on rules, trust, and the continued engagement of participants (Ostrom, 1990).

In Blender, creativity functions as a form of solidarity. Collaborative work yields not only digital content but also shared meaning, connection, and belonging. Code and design are not merely artifacts; they are symbols of collective identity. In this sense, Blender offers more than an alternative model of technological production; it is a living example of cultural commoning[26] in action.

Subjectivity, affective belonging, and moral economy

Although FLOSS communities often operate without rigid hierarchies or formal structures, they generate strong feelings of belonging and subjective investment. For many contributors, participation in projects like Debian or Blender is not merely a technical contribution; it becomes a form of personal affirmation, identity work, and ethical positioning.

Blogs, forums, and development platform comments are full of testimonies in which individuals describe how they "found their place" within the community, how contribution gave them a sense of meaningfulness in their work, or how communication and collabo-

26 The term *commoning* refers to the social practices through which commons are actively created, maintained, and governed, rather than merely being resources to be consumed. In this sense, *cultural commoning* describes collaborative cultural production and stewardship of shared symbolic resources, such as art, code, or knowledge. See Linebaugh, P. (2008). *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and commons for all*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

ration fostered a personal sense of responsibility and connection to something larger than themselves. Instead of being passive users of technology, many become active participants in its shaping, which gives them a sense of autonomy, competence, and community belonging where their engagement is valued:

> "It doesn't matter if it's going to be used by thousands of people or two people… if you can do your work to the standards… and without negative impact on Debian's other contributors…" (Debian Technical Committee, December 2013)[27].

> "The majority of Blender users are friendly, responsible, and contribute to the community and the software in positive ways." (Blender Artists Forum, August 18, 2012)[28].

Ethics also form a key dimension of belonging. As one Debian developer put it:

> "I value communities that don't tell people what they must believe… I believe that our values are expressed in terms of our actions, not our beliefs." (Debian Project Mailing List, July 7, 2015)[29].

On the other hand, a rupture in the relationship with a project or community can be a deeply destabilizing experience. When contributors feel that their work is no longer recognized that the community no longer shares their values, or that their ethical standards have been compromised, emotional investment turns into frustration, disappointment, and even a sense of betrayal. These are not simply rational decisions to leave a project; they are signs of a broken moral economy and a collapse in symbolic reciprocity:

> "When the community's feedback stops, the motivation to contribute code also fades, it's not about the programming, it's about feeling that your work matters to others here." (Debian Developer Mailing List, March 2019)[30].

This kind of statement clearly shows that technical contribution is not enough without acknowledgment, feedback, or a sense that one's labor is part of a shared meaning. When the community stops functioning as a moral framework, where work is perceived as socially and ethically valuable, motivation for contribution fades. This moment of losing affective grounding in the community can be understood as a kind of ethical rupture, as crucial to understanding FLOSS subjectivity as the process of its formation.

These reflections affirm that belonging in a community is closely tied to recognition, reciprocity, and a sense of moral purpose. When that affective bond breaks, technical work loses its meaning. For this reason, FLOSS communities cannot be understood only

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27 Debian Technical Committee. (2013, December). *Debian-ctte mailing list*. Retrieved March 12, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/debian-ctte/2013/12/msg00258.html.

28 Blender Artists Forum. (2012, August 18). *How to be a positive member of the Blender community: Don't be a fanboy*. Retrieved March 21, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/how-to-be-a-positive-member-of-the-blender-community-dont-be-a-fanboy/549761.

29 Debian Project. (2015, July 7). *Debian-project mailing list*. Retrieved March 16, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/debian-project/2015/07/msg00000.html.

30 Debian Developer Mailing List. (2019, March). *Debian-devel mailing list*. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from https://lists.debian.org/debian-devel/2019/03/msg00112.html.

through structure or output but through intimate narratives of involvement, frustration, and pride. As one contributor to the Blender Artists Forum explained:

> "I suppose this thread shows that the patches can only be thoroughly reviewed by devs[31]. who know the code they touch. However, the BF[32] could have people whose job is to check consistency in code style … helping contributors refine their stuff, directing to the appropriate resources … and making the communication bridge between contributors and the concerned devs … Kind of a contribution-specialized community manager." (Blender Artists Forum, July 21, 2023)[33].

This statement shows that meaningful participation depends not only on technical skill but also on systems of guidance, feedback, and interpersonal connection—elements that sustain a shared moral economy.

From an ethnographic perspective, the subject in FLOSS communities is not a stable entity but is continually constituted through practice, validation, and the feeling that one's contribution "counts." These reflections add depth to Thompson's concept of moral economy by showing that violations of value are not just normative; they are felt. Solidarity is produced through recognition and emotional investment, not merely through declarations.

Gabriella Coleman (2013) describes this kind of belonging as an ethical imaginary, describing communities not based on formal membership but on the continuous production and recognition of ethical behavior. The ethical subject in FLOSS is not predefined but shaped through practice: through contributing, through responding to others' mistakes, through maintaining forums, and through sharing knowledge without expectation of reward.

In that process, technology ceases to be neutral. In his essay on software materiality, Daniel Miller notes: "Much of what we are, exists not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us" (Miller, 2005, p. 5). He concludes that digital objects, such as code repositories, interactive forums, or documentation, function as an "external environment." They are not neutral tools: as we come to accept them as normal, they shape our behaviors, expectations, and sense of self.

A concrete example of this shaping comes from Debian's own participation guidelines:

> "Don't participate more than once a day to a given thread. There are many people subscribed; you should leave room for other people to express their point of view." (Hertzog, February 24, 2011)[34].

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31 *Devs* is an informal abbreviation for "developers" commonly used in online technical communities.

32 *BF* refers to the Blender Foundation, the non-profit organization that supports Blender's development and community initiatives.

33 Blender Artists Forum. (2023, July 21). *Discussion on how to handle contributions*. Retrieved March 15, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/discussion-on-how-to-handle-contributions/1474581.

34 Hertzog, R. (2011, February 24). *7 mistakes to avoid when participating to Debian mailing lists*. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from https://raphaelhertzog.com/2011/02/24/7-mistakes-to-

This rule is not merely about efficiency; it encodes a form of everyday solidarity. By limiting one's own voice to make space for others, contributors enact a collective ethic: recognizing the value of diverse perspectives and practicing restraint for the benefit of the whole community. In this sense, the very structure of the mailing list and its social norms cultivate a habitus of shared responsibility and inclusion.

Contribution to FLOSS communities is not just work on software; it is work on the self, shaped through infrastructure, collectivity, and everyday micro-interactions that affirm community values. This subjectivity is not only emotional; it is political, as it expresses resistance to models of ownership, hierarchy, and control that define most digital environments.

Conflict, resilience, and the boundaries of solidarity

Despite ideals of reciprocity, openness, and collective work, FLOSS communities are not homogeneous spaces of consensus. On the contrary, it is precisely in moments of conflict, whether over forks, disagreements about development priorities, or reactions to corporate involvement, that solidaristic practices become most visible. Conflict, in this sense, marks moments of normative intensity: it reveals the limits of tolerance, redefines rules, and articulates ethical orientations.

In the Debian community, one of the clearest manifestations of this dynamic is the phenomenon of "forks" that means splits from the main project due to deep disagreements[35]. In the FLOSS context, a fork refers to copying an existing software project into a new development line. It occurs when a community, or part of it, decides to split due to technical, organizational, or ethical disagreements:

> "A group of developers… announced the existence of a fork of the Debian distribution called 'Devuan'[36]… First mid-term goal is to produce a reliable and minimalist base distribution that stays away from the homogenization and lock-in promoted by system." (LWN.net, November 27, 2014)[37].

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avoid-when-participating-to-debian-mailing-lists/.

35 In the context of FLOSS, a *fork* refers to creating a separate development line by copying the full source code of an existing project. This is legally and technically possible due to open-source licenses, which allow modification and redistribution. Forks usually occur due to technical, organizational, or ethical disagreements, and while they may signal conflict, they can also foster innovation and pluralism.

36 Devuan is a GNU/Linux distribution created in 2014 as a fork of Debian, initiated by community members who opposed adopting *systemd* as the default init system (a low-level component responsible for initializing and managing system services at system startup). Its goal was to preserve modularity and user choice by avoiding a single dominant init framework. See: Williams, C. (2014, December 1). *Debian systemd controversy results in fork*. InfoQ. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from https://www.infoq.com/news/2014/12/debian-fork-devuan/.

37 Corbet, J. (2014, November 27). *A fork for Debian*. *LWN.net*. Retrieved March 18, 2024, from https://lwn.net/Articles/623358/]. LWN (Linux Weekly News) is a long-standing and reputable online portal, founded in 1998, that provides news, analysis, and commentary on the development of Linux, open-source software, and FLOSS communities. It is considered one

A fork is technically possible because FLOSS licenses allow free copying and modification of source code. On a symbolic level, however, a fork is more than a technical act: it is a sign of crisis in consensus, a loss of trust, and a need to redefine core values. It is a symptom of crisis in the shared normative order, but it is also an expression of community resilience: rather than collapsing, the community reorganizes.

In Debian, a well-known example is the decision by part of the community to leave and create Devuan, a separate distribution, following disagreements over technical decisions they viewed as contrary to FLOSS ethics. Although painful, a fork can lead to vital innovations by enabling pluralism, alternative models, rules, and practices within the broader digital ecosystem.

The Blender community is also not immune to tensions. Debates about development direction, user engagement, or the role of the Blender Foundation often result in sharp disagreements. While most members engage constructively, some behaviors are seen as undermining the community ethos:

> "There is, however, a small minority of users that do more harm to the community and Blender's reputation than good. This group of users are generally referred to as the 'Blender Fans'. They are the users that refuse to hear anything bad about Blender and will stand up in blind support of it, regardless of what the issue at hand might be. As is common with these small minority groups, they also speak the loudest and often give a false impression of Blender and its community." (Blender Artists Forum, August 18, 2012)[38].

Such statements show that solidarity in Blender is not about blind loyalty, but about constructive engagement. Identifying and naming harmful patterns reinforces the idea that openness also requires a commitment to respectful and critical dialogue.

> "While reviewing code, there are some patterns that I frequently stumble upon. To me, they are clear anti-patterns, but the fact that I see them so often suggests people have different ideas about this. I would like to have a discussion about two of those (from my perspective) anti-patterns. … I respect the authors of the code, and my aim is to collaborate and discuss to improve Blender." (Blender Developer Forum, November 8, 2022)[39].

These episodes highlight the importance of internal mechanisms for conflict resolution—principles Elinor Ostrom identified as crucial for sustainable commons: clear rules, accessible grievance mechanisms, and inclusive decision-making. FLOSS communities rarely depend on formal legal regulation; rather, their resilience lies in the capacity to continually redefine the boundaries of cooperation from within, adapting their norms and practices to evolving circumstances.

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of the most reliable sources in the field and is frequently cited by researchers as well as open-source developers themselves.

38 Blender Artists Forum. (2012, August 18). *How to be a positive member of the Blender community (don't be a fanboy)*. Retrieved March 10, 2024, from https://blenderartists.org/t/how-to-be-a-positive-member-of-the-blender-community-dont-be-a-fanboy/549761.

39 Blender Developer Forum. (2022, November 8). *Some anti-patterns*. Retrieved March 22, 2024, from https://devtalk.blender.org/t/some-anti-patterns/26490.

Theoretically, FLOSS conflicts can also be interpreted through Thompson's (1971) notion of moral economy: collective responses to ethical breaches are not only defensive, but also constitutive. Resistance to commercialization, concerns about open-washing, or leaving a project for moral reasons. These are ways communities define what freedom, reciprocity, and responsibility mean to them. Furthermore, this moral tension is not abstract; it appears in the everyday statements of contributors. One participant writes:

> "My worst experience is to submit two decent PR[40] that was ignored by maintainers. I had burden to support them for a month … and then I saw that maintainer not just ignores but closes every else PR with these words: 'your contributions are too undisciplined and difficult to review…' I have rage closed all my contributions and … I think I will never go open ever again." (Hacker News, IvanStepaNovFTW, 2025)[41].

Here, it is clear that the ethical value of FLOSS lies not only in open code but also in behavior: ignoring contributions, dismissing them without constructive engagement, or discouraging contributors can be as harmful to solidarity as outright exclusion. Paradoxically, conflict is one of the most important mechanisms through which a community defines itself. As Coleman (2013) notes, the ethics of FLOSS communities are not fixed; they are produced and negotiated in real time. In this sense, the boundaries of solidarity are not a weakness, but a structural feature of open communities: without conflict, there can be no ethical growth.

Another example further illuminates a sense of vulnerability in the face of corporate influence:

> "As I meet more and more people from the wider area, I realize, that it was just the small, sweet circle of people around me… Random people … often react with something along the lines of 'Microsoft penetrates into Red Hat!'[42] … Do you want game developers and NET engineers to love it, or to hate it and be scared of the community? … Stop trying to scare them away. Keep on building nice and inclusive community." (Gustavsson, 2017)[43].

The quote expresses concern that embracing corporate structures without normative safeguards may undermine the core of FLOSS culture. Viewed from an anthropological perspective, this opposition invites the reflection that solidarity, when practiced as a form

40 PR (Pull Request) is a mechanism on platforms such as GitHub or GitLab through which a contributor submits their code changes for review and potential merging into the main repository. A PR allows for transparent code review, encourages discussion and peer review before integration, serves as evidence of contribution, and often becomes a site for mentorship through comments and suggestions.

41 IvanStepaNovFTW. (2025). *Comment on Hacker News*. Retrieved March 25, 2024, from https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=44809551.

42 The expression "Microsoft penetrates into Red Hat!" is used here as an example of a rhetorical framing employed by some members of the FLOSS community to voice concerns about corporate influence, particularly when large commercial companies become involved in open-source projects. In this context, the author cites it as a typical reaction from the "fringe" of the community, which can deter new contributors and create a perception of a hostile environment.

43 Gustavsson, A. (2017, May). *FLOSS Community*. Retrieved March 28, 2024, from https://rhea.dev/articles/2017-05/FLOSS-Community.

of mutual aid and collective governance, may sit uneasily within, and at times even be perceived as a challenge to, the dominant corporate order of the contemporary world.

Concluding reflections: FLOSS communities as laboratories of digital solidarity

This study has explored FLOSS communities as distinct forms of digital practice that extend beyond the purely technical domain of software development, creating spaces for alternative economic, social, and ethical possibilities. Drawing on theoretical insights from Mauss, Polanyi, De Certeau, Ostrom, Coleman, Foucault, Thompson, Bourdieu, Benkler, Kelty, etc., alongside a qualitative analysis of the Debian and Blender online communities, it has shown how these spaces cultivate models of solidarity rooted not in market logic, but in reciprocity, openness, self-regulation, and collective responsibility.

Grounded in a form of digital ethnography, the empirical analysis demonstrates that the values of common work, self-governance, and moral economy are expressed not only through formal documents and technical structures, but also through everyday practices such as writing documentation, participating in discussions, mentoring newcomers, resolving conflicts, and maintaining infrastructure. FLOSS communities are thus defined not solely by the software they produce, but by the norms they uphold, the identities they foster, and the ethical frameworks they continually negotiate.

In this sense, FLOSS communities can be understood as laboratories of digital solidarity, sites where not only tools are developed but where alternative forms of collaboration, governance, and ethical subjectivation are actively tested and refined. Through their everyday practices, they enable visions of collective and technological production organized around shared resources, affective belonging, and social responsibility rather than profit accumulation.

These communities are not immune to tensions, conflicts, or inequalities. Yet it is precisely in such moments that they demonstrate resilience and reflexivity, the ability to continually reassess and redefine their boundaries, values, and modes of cooperation. FLOSS communities should therefore be recognized not merely as technical phenomena, but as cultural and political projects, ongoing experiments in shaping and sustaining digital solidarity.

At the same time, certain limitations of this research must be acknowledged. The analysis relies on publicly available documents, discourses, and testimonies, which means it reflects only those voices already articulated within the digital sphere. It does not capture the less visible dimensions of exclusion, silence, emotional labor, or informal power relations that leave minimal or no archival traces. Moreover, focusing on two communities, Debian and Blender, provides deep analytical insight but does not necessarily offer a representative picture of the broader FLOSS ecosystem. Although this research draws on a form of digital ethnography, the study of digital solidarity would benefit from the inclusion of individual interviews with community members. Such an approach could provide deeper insight into lived experiences, personal motivations, and the affective dimensions of participation that remain inaccessible through the analysis of publicly available texts alone. Future research could extend this work through comparative case studies, long-

term ethnographic fieldwork, or by incorporating a wider range of perspectives, particularly those from marginalized groups, to better understand the ethical, political, and emotional complexities of digital solidarity.

More broadly, this research affirms that the digital sphere is not merely a technical or infrastructural domain, but a deeply cultural and anthropological terrain. FLOSS communities reveal that even within code, infrastructure, and software collaboration, core processes of symbolic exchange, identity formation, and the negotiation of social values take place. Approaching digital communities not as technical objects but as cultural forms open the way for an anthropological analysis of new modes of digital solidarity —collectivity, identity, and ethics modes forged in online spaces yet carrying tangible implications for collective life in late capitalism, especially within the accelerating transformations of contemporary digitalization of everydayness.

In this light, the digital domain must be understood as an integral part of the social fabric, a space where key societal tensions, competing values, and visions of the future are shaped, contested, and at times redefined. Ultimately, the practices of FLOSS communities suggest that solidarity, when embedded in collective governance and shared responsibility, can serve as a quiet yet enduring counterpoint to the dominant logics of contemporary corporate capitalism.

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Civic Solidarity and Municipal Response: Addressing the Needs of Older Persons in Tirana during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introduction

According to the United Nations (2009, 2012), the global older population is projected to exceed 1.5 billion by 2050, with the number of individuals aged 65 and older expected to double. Research has also shown that living arrangements significantly affect the health of older persons, particularly in developed countries (Grundy, 2001). Moreover, global reports emphasize that older people have the right not only to health but also to be properly counted and included in data systems (HelpAge International, 2018). Additionally, as a result of urbanization, the proportion of older people living in urban areas is increasing globally (United Nations, 2012).

Albania, like many other countries, is experiencing the demographic effects of an aging population. This trend is driven by several factors, including rising life expectancy and demographic shifts, which have led to an increasing number of individuals who can, and should, continue to contribute actively to society even after retirement age. In 2019, life expectancy at birth in Albania was 79.0 years, with men expected to live an average of 77.6 years and women 80.6 years. These figures highlight a gender gap, with women expected to live nearly three years longer than men. Tirana, in particular, stands out as the region with the highest life expectancy in Albania, with men living an average of 80.6 years and women living an average of 84.4 years. This trend, while creating opportunities for active ageing, also raises challenges related to the sustainability of pension systems and labour market participation (Kinsella and Gist, 1995).

As of 2021, Albania's older population consisted of approximately 400,000 individuals, constituting 14% of the total population (INSTAT, 2014b, 2021). However, a significant portion of this older demographic faces challenges such as living alone or in poverty, which, in combination with barriers like chronic health conditions or inadequate infrastructure, hinders their full and effective participation in society (Rrjeti Shqiptar i Moshimit – MOSHA, 2017). As of January 1, 2020, Albania's older population (aged 65 and above) was 420,036, while the number of children under 15 was 478,850 (INSTAT,

2021). During the same period, the median age of the population increased slightly, from 36.7 years in 2019 to 37.2 years in 2020. Furthermore, the older dependency ratio (the ratio of individuals aged 65 and older to those aged 15-64) rose from 20.5% in 2019 to 21.6% in 2020, reflecting the ongoing demographic shift.

Tirana, Albania's capital, has a population of 900,661, representing approximately 31.8% of the country's total population, making it the most densely populated region in Albania (INSTAT, 2021). However, alongside this population growth, Albania is also experiencing a demographic transition marked by a reduction in traditional family structures, which historically played a key role in supporting older persons, especially those with special needs (Dule et al., 2014; Gjonca et al., 2008).

Unlike many countries in the region, Albania lacks a longstanding, integrated system of health and social care for older persons. These demographic shifts, combined with the evolving family structure, have underscored the need for the development of comprehensive social services and policies that address the challenges of aging in Albania. This highlights the importance of a rights-based approach, as emphasized in global reports on ageing and social inclusion (HelpAge International, 2018). The evolution of social services in Albania has been part of a broader reform process in the social care system over the past decades, bringing a fresh perspective to policy design, the establishment of services for vulnerable groups, and the training of professionals tasked with providing these services. Such gaps highlight the need for a rights-based approach to ageing, aligned with international calls for social inclusion and dignity in old age (HelpAge International, 2018; United Nations, 2009).

In this context, the Territorial Reform in Albania has granted local government units, particularly municipalities, greater authority over the provision of social welfare services. Municipalities are now actively involved in preparing Social Plans, which include identifying the needs and services required for older persons as part of the financial mechanisms of the Social Fund. The Municipality of Tirana, in particular, has developed the Social Plan of the Municipality (2018-2020) and the Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2018-2020) (Bashkia e Tiranës, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). Both documents aim to address the needs of marginalized groups, including older persons, and outline the challenges to be tackled in the coming years, ensuring that social services are adapted to meet the evolving needs of this growing demographic.

Purpose and objectives of the study

The primary purpose of this study is to evaluate the measures undertaken by the Municipality of Tirana, Albania, to address the needs of older persons during the period of isolation imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives of the study:

- To assess the accessibility and quality of services provided to older persons, with a particular emphasis on residential care services, in alignment with the legal framework, regulations, and documents outlined in the social plan and social inclusion strategy.

- To offer evidence-based recommendations for revising the objectives and activities of the social services, ensuring they meet the evolving needs of the older population.

Significance of the study

This study aims to shed light on the services provided to older persons within the framework of the Municipality of Tirana's Action Plan and Social Inclusion Plan. It examines the transformations in social services for older persons, identifies the professionals responsible for conducting needs assessments, and investigates how these assessments are translated into specific services, programs, and policies within the municipality. The findings of this research aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the issues affecting older persons, as addressed by the municipality's social plan and inclusion strategy. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of maintaining high-quality services for older persons, while also identifying the crucial role of professionals in ensuring the effective implementation and continuous improvement of these services. The importance of strengthening municipal capacities during emergencies such as COVID-19 was also documented in the Municipality of Tirana's governance report (Bashkia e Tiranës, 2020).

Review of policies related to older persons in the Republic of Albania and the Municipality of Tirana

To ensure a high quality of life for all age groups and to safeguard autonomy, health, and well-being, Albania has implemented various legal regulations and standardized service packages (MMSR, 2016; MSHMS, 2019). A significant development in this area occurred in 2014 when a new service package was introduced in all primary healthcare centers across the country, aligned with the objectives of the National Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance (2014–2020). This package, established through a joint agreement between the Minister of Health and the Director of the Compulsory Health Care Insurance Fund, includes a dedicated section (Section 5) focusing on "Health Care for Older Persons." This section outlines the concept of "elderly-friendly" health centers and emphasizes the need for healthcare personnel to adapt their skills to meet the specific needs of individuals aged 65 and older. The primary goal of these services is to reduce complications and maintain the health of older persons. The package includes eleven diagnostic and follow-up services, along with fifteen preventive and counseling services specifically aimed at older individuals. Notably, it introduces, for the first time, interventions such as home and community-based care, psychological support, and the monitoring of potential abuse. Notably, it introduces, for the first time, interventions such as home and community-based care, psychological support, and the monitoring of potential abuse. These policy directions are consistent with the decentralization process and local governance reforms (Bruka et al., 2015), as well as with conceptual documents on social care planning and financing in Albania (Matković, 2016).

Social services for older persons in Albania

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection is the central institution responsible for drafting and overseeing policies related to the protection, care, and integration of older

persons in Albania. Social services for older individuals are organized into two main categories:

1. Public Social Care Services: These services are provided through public service centers, including community centers, residential centers, day centers, or home-based services. They are financed by both the state budget and local government bodies.

2. Non-Public Social Care Services: These services are offered by both for-profit and non-profit organizations and centers.

At the national level, social services for older persons, delivered through various types of social care centers, account for only 15% of the total social service centers in Albania, with 39 centers dedicated to older individuals out of a total of 259 service centers. This reflects a significant gap in the availability of social services for older persons, with existing centers having limited capacity to meet the growing demand.

To effectively serve the older population, it is essential that social care service centers employ specialized staff, including multidisciplinary teams trained to assess the individual needs of older individuals. These teams are responsible for creating personalized intervention plans tailored to the needs identified during assessments. In public social care centers for older persons, the staff primarily consists of doctors and nurses, although social workers also play a crucial role in the overall care plan.

Moreover, national standards for care services for vulnerable groups, including older persons, have been developed to ensure service quality and protect the rights of older individuals. These standards are based on key social care principles, such as respect for values and individuality, universality, equality of opportunity, the right to access services, partnership, transparency, impartiality, non-discrimination, social integration, independence, and participation in community life. These principles are fundamental in guaranteeing that older persons receive care that respects their dignity and promotes their inclusion in society.

Deinstitutionalization of social services

The reform of social care services in Albania is guided by the principles of decentralization, deinstitutionalization, and diversification. Central to this reform is the growing role of municipalities as key providers of social services at the local level. The new Law No. 139/2015, "On Local Self-Government," grants local government units a wide range of responsibilities in the social care sector, recognizing them as the most suitable level for delivering social services due to their proximity to the community. This aligns with the principle of subsidiarity, which advocates for decisions to be made as closely as possible to the citizens affected by them. Municipalities are responsible for providing community-based social services, reviewing and making decisions on guardianship procedures, and managing residential services in specific cases.

Despite the decentralization of powers, municipalities' ability to establish, manage, and operate social services for older persons is constrained by limited financial resources. According to the 2018 study, "Observation on Local Budgets for Social Care Services in

Some Municipalities," supported by UNDP, social care services are primarily financed through conditional funds. The contribution from "unconditional funds" or the municipality's own income is minimal, typically accounting for only 2-3% of the budget, with the exception of Tirana, where the municipality's own income covers 8% of the required funding.

Social plan of the Municipality of Tirana (2018-2020)

The Social Plan of the Municipality of Tirana for the period 2018-2020 identifies older persons as a particularly vulnerable group in need of social services, which remain limited. Recent data indicates that the number of older individuals in the country is increasing. In 2011, individuals aged 65 and over constituted approximately 10.2% of the population in Tirana, and this figure is projected to rise to 19% by 2031 (INSTAT, UNFPA, 2015).

This plan emphasizes the urgent need for increased attention to older persons, recognizing that existing services are severely limited. The proposed strategy includes the establishment of centers to provide basic health services and socialization activities, as well as home-based services for individuals who are unable to travel. Additionally, the plan proposes the establishment of a volunteer network to support these initiatives.

Based on an assessment of service needs in the area and consultations with staff and partners, the Municipality of Tirana has identified key priorities in the development of social care services for older persons. These priorities are reflected in the 2018-2020 action plan and include:

1. Enhancing Existing Services: Expanding services where none are currently available for older persons.

2. Developing New Services: Establishing new services specifically for older persons, utilizing volunteer networks.

Furthermore, the Municipality of Tirana has set goals to develop collaborative initiatives with the Ministry of Education and Culture to design new services. These initiatives include:

- Drafting and signing a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Education and Culture to establish a pilot model for providing family-based services, with priority given to individuals with disabilities and older persons.
- Developing the pilot model for family services, assessing its cost, and implementing it across the city.

Within the framework of the Social Plan, the general objective is to "improve existing social care services and establish new ones." Specifically, the sub-objective "Development of Pre-Social Services" outlines several key activities, such as:

- Providing family-based services.
- Expanding the map of services available to field teams.
- Deploying new teams to deliver services.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was employed for data collection, which included a review of relevant literature, secondary data analysis, and both the analysis and interpretation of primary data (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). The sample consisted of key informants and stakeholders involved in providing social services to older persons in the Municipality of Tirana, with eleven participants taking part in the study. The sampling strategy followed principles commonly applied in qualitative research (Marshall, 1996). Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool.

The study was conducted in three distinct phases:

1. Phase one: literature review

The first phase involved an extensive review of existing literature on the development of housing services in Albania, with a particular focus on Tirana. Key documents reviewed included national strategies, social policies, the Social Plan, the Municipality of Tirana's Social Action Plan, national legislation, social service standards, and relevant national and international studies and reports. This phase was crucial for establishing a comprehensive understanding of the issue, which informed the refinement of the study's research objectives and the design of the data collection tools.

2. Phase two: primary data collection

The second phase involved collecting primary data through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. Participants were selected from the Municipality of Tirana and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in social services for the elderly, particularly from residential care services. The semi-structured interview format allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' professional experiences and perceptions regarding the provision of services for the elderly in Tirana.

3. Phase three: data analysis and interpretation

The final phase focused on analyzing and interpreting the collected data. The researcher extracted key findings, discussed them, and formulated conclusions and recommendations to help relevant institutions address the challenges in providing housing services for the elderly in Tirana.

Sampling

The participants in this study were selected based on their expertise and significant experience in providing social services to the elderly in Tirana. A total of 11 participants took part in the research. The snowball sampling method was employed, which is ideal for identifying individuals with specific expertise in a given field. The selection criteria for participants were as follows:

a. Expertise in the field of social protection and services for the elderly.
b. Representation of both public and non-public social services for the elderly within the Municipality of Tirana.

The table below summarizes the sampling composition and characteristics of the participants:

Group	Number of Participants	Affiliation
Municipality of Tirana	3	Municipality of Tirana
Community Centers (Tirana)	6	Multidisciplinary Social Centers (3), Skoze Community Center (1), "Gonxhe Bojaxhi" Community Center (2)
Civil Society Organizations	2	Ryder – Albania (1), ASSETS (1)

The average age of the participants was 33 years, with ages ranging from 26 to 40 years. Only one participant was male, which reflects the global trend of a predominantly female workforce in the social services sector.

Instrument development

During the second phase, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews. A total of eleven interviews were conducted in person between February and March 2021, each lasting approximately 35 minutes. These interviews were held in neutral, comfortable environments to encourage open and honest responses from participants.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to collect rich, qualitative data on complex issues. Two distinct interview guides were developed: one for social service providers within the Municipality of Tirana and another for representatives of NGOs. The interview questions focused on the following key areas:

- The services offered by the Municipality of Tirana to the elderly.
- The organization of the multidisciplinary team.
- Knowledge and implementation of the Social Plan (SP) and residential services.
- Success stories and challenges encountered in service delivery.

Instrument validity

To ensure the validity of the interview guide, it was piloted with two individuals who were not part of the final participant group. These preliminary interviews allowed for refinement of the guide, ensuring it effectively addressed the research objectives. Feedback from the pilot phase, along with consultations with professionals in the field, contributed to the development of the final version of the interview guide used for data collection.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted manually by the researcher. All interview data were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the data. Based on this in-depth review, categories were identified and coded using keywords or expressions that emerged from the data. A thematic coding system was applied to organize and interpret the qualitative data, following the guidelines of Coffey

and Atkinson (1996), which emphasize the importance of coding to uncover patterns and derive fresh insights. The coding system was developed in alignment with the study's research objectives.

Ethical considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the research process to protect participants and maintain the integrity of the study. The following ethical considerations were implemented:

- Respect and Dignity: Participants were treated with the utmost respect, and the study ensured a conducive environment for open and honest data collection.
- Informed Consent: All participants were given detailed information about the study's purpose and were required to sign an informed consent form before participating. The consent form outlined the study's goals, the voluntary nature of participation, and assurances of confidentiality.
- Confidentiality: Participant confidentiality was maintained by using coded identifiers for all interviewees. The collected data were securely stored in a protected digital format, accessible only to authorized personnel.
- Scientific Accuracy: The study adhered to rigorous scientific standards, ensuring that methods, data collection, and analysis were conducted with precision and accuracy. No manipulation or falsification of data occurred at any stage of the research.

Results and discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the state of social services for older persons in Tirana, particularly in relation to the impact of the Social Plan and the interventions undertaken by the Municipality of Tirana. A key observation is that the Social Plan for older persons' care, although legally supported, has a limited focus on this demographic. While it envisions the development of services in the future, it lacks clarity regarding staff allocation and service costs, making it challenging to evaluate its effectiveness.

Impact of the earthquake and COVID-19

The study revealed that the Municipality of Tirana effectively managed both the aftermath of the November 26, 2019, earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of care for older persons. In response to these crises, the Municipality took significant steps to strengthen services for older persons, especially those living alone. Notable initiatives included the introduction of innovative services catering to the immediate needs of older persons in their homes, such as food, medicine, pension distribution, and psychosocial support. The "Adopt a Grandma, Adopt a Grandfather" initiative, launched in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, was particularly successful. It involved outreach to approximately 3,654 older persons, many of whom were living alone and isolated. Through this initiative, older persons received essential services through social workers and volunteers, ensuring timely assistance.

1. Identification and referral mechanism

Older persons in need were identified via various channels, including the Green Number (0800 0888), emails, the Co-Government Platform, the My Tirana app, and referrals from social networks, NGOs, and local police. This broad network of communication facilitated a comprehensive response to the needs of older persons across the 27 administrative units of Tirana. Approximately 520 older persons accessed daily services through community centers during the pandemic.

2. Intervention plans and assistance

Personalized intervention plans were developed for each beneficiary, and the staff of the Multifunctional Community Centers (MCCs) were mobilized to deliver these services. These services ranged from food and healthcare to psychosocial support and socialization activities.

3. Collaboration with civil society and business

The success of the initiative was also attributed to the collaboration between the Municipality, civil society organizations (CSOs), and local businesses. This cooperation ensured that older persons had continuous access to necessary services during the pandemic.

Key observations and recommendations

- The Social Plan of the Municipality of Tirana, while legally grounded, needs to adopt a more focused approach towards older persons. It lacks detailed plans on staffing and service costs, which makes it difficult to assess the sustainability of these services.
- Social services for older persons must be based on comprehensive needs assessments and include clear financial planning for their implementation.
- The older persons care system requires a stable, well-trained, and motivated workforce, which is essential to ensure the quality of services offered.

Access to social services for older persons

The study highlighted several factors influencing the access of older persons to social services in Tirana. Although the municipality has made significant strides in providing services through the MCCs, there are still notable barriers to access:

1. Geographical barriers

One of the main challenges reported was the distance between older persons and the community centers. Many older persons live far from the centers, making regular access difficult. To address this, it was suggested that the Municipality consider providing transport services to bring older persons closer to the centers.

2. Awareness of services

Another barrier is the lack of awareness among older persons about the services available to them. Many older persons are unfamiliar with the offerings of community centers, and it was recommended that the centers enhance their visibility within local communities.

This could include strategies such as community outreach, family visits, and more frequent use of social media platforms to inform the public.

3. Stigma

There was also a stigma associated with accessing social services. Some participants noted that the community often perceives beneficiaries of these services as marginalized individuals, which discourages some older persons from seeking help. Addressing this stigma could be a crucial step in increasing service uptake.

Quality of services

The quality of services provided to older persons was assessed in light of Law No. 121/2016 on social care services, which emphasizes the importance of community-based services. The study confirmed that the services offered at the MCCs adhere to the standards established by this law, which includes social work, psychological support, and medical care. These directions are also in line with the National Social Protection Strategy (MSHMS, 2019) and the Social Inclusion Policy Document (MMSR, 2016), as well as the objectives of the National Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance (2014–2020). In addition, reforms in social insurance (Law No. 104/2014) and amendments to the Social Assistance Law (Law No. 47/2014) have further shaped the framework for social protection. The quality of services is largely dependent on the capacity and training of the multidisciplinary teams, which include social workers, psychologists, therapists, and medical professionals.

Participants in the study expressed that while the services are generally of good quality, challenges remain. The family services provided during the pandemic, for instance, were seen as particularly challenging, as they lacked a pre-existing model and had to be adapted to the crisis situation. However, the collaboration with NGOs during this time was appreciated, as it helped to mitigate the challenges and improve the services offered.

Pandemic response and service offerings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Municipality of Tirana, in collaboration with NGOs, offered several essential services to older persons, including:

- Supply and distribution of ready meals at home.
- Provision of medications and other necessary supplies.
- Personal hygiene assistance to ensure the well-being of older persons.
- Psychosocial support, including continuous counseling lines and the dissemination of information.
- Case-by-case support, based on individualized assessments.

These services were crucial in ensuring that older persons received the care they needed during the pandemic, especially those who were isolated and vulnerable. This response serves as a model for how municipalities can quickly adapt to crises and continue providing essential services to at-risk populations.

Comparison with similar research

Similar studies conducted in other countries have shown that municipal responses to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic often play a critical role in mitigating the impact on older persons. For example, a study in Denmark (Henriksen et al., 2021) highlighted that the Danish government responded swiftly with home delivery services for older persons, including groceries, medication, and emotional support through phone calls, which mirrors the actions taken in Tirana. The effectiveness of these initiatives was enhanced by the strong coordination between local authorities, healthcare providers, and volunteer organizations.

Similarly, a study by Tolkacheva et al. (2020) in the Netherlands emphasized the importance of outreach programs, particularly for older persons who are socially isolated. Their findings indicated that proactive identification of vulnerable individuals through digital platforms and local community networks resulted in a more comprehensive and timely response. In Tirana, the use of the My Tirana app and the Green Number for identifying older persons in need aligns with these practices but could benefit from the more extensive use of technology and data integration found in other European countries.

Furthermore, research from the United Kingdom (Coulter et al., 2022) identified the need for clear financial planning and staffing strategies in social care services for older persons. Their findings pointed out that although services were available, the lack of long-term financial sustainability and workforce challenges often limited their effectiveness. Similarly, the study in Tirana highlights the need for clearer financial planning and a stable, well-trained workforce in the Social Plan.

Comparing these international studies with the situation in Tirana reveals both successes and areas for improvement. While Tirana's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was commendable, as reflected in the adoption of initiatives such as "Adopt a Grandma, Adopt a Grandfather," there are notable gaps in long-term planning and resource allocation. These gaps are also seen in other European contexts, but successful countries have focused on creating stronger frameworks for financial planning and workforce stability, areas where Tirana could benefit from more detailed policy design and implementation.

Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, while the Municipality of Tirana has made significant strides in addressing the needs of its **older persons,** several improvements are essential to enhance service delivery. The **Social Plan** for **older persons'** care should place greater emphasis on this demographic, with clearer definitions of the types of services offered and their specific objectives. Furthermore, it is crucial that the costs of services are outlined transparently, and that adequate staff are recruited, trained, and retained to ensure the long-term sustainability and high quality of care.

The findings of this study suggest that expanding access to services, improving communication strategies, addressing the stigma surrounding social services, and ensuring that services are tailored to the specific needs of **older persons** will be central to improving the

overall care system for **older persons** in Tirana. These actions will not only enhance the reach and efficiency of the services but also contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for **older persons**.

Furthermore, additional research is needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of these interventions, as well as to investigate the role of family caregivers and the impact of community-based care models on the well-being of **older persons**. Understanding how different models of care—such as home-based care and community-based services—contribute to better health outcomes for **older persons** could help refine future strategies. Comparisons with international best practices in the provision of social care for **older persons,** such as those implemented in Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands, could offer valuable insights into ways of further improving the social care system for **older persons** in Tirana and beyond.

By incorporating lessons learned from international experiences, the Municipality of Tirana could adapt and strengthen its current strategies, ensuring that **older persons** have better access to services, enhanced quality of care, and improved overall well-being. Furthermore, clear policy design, continuous staff training, and the development of a stable care workforce will be crucial for the success and sustainability of the system.

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Beginnings of Cooperatives on the Island of Hvar - Maintaining the Identity of the Collective in the Village of Velo Grablje

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Professional paper

The beginnings of cooperatives in Dalmatia

Church brotherhoods in Dalmatia have been involved in acts of solidarity since the Middle Ages. The best-known example of a pre-cooperative community in Dalmatia can be found in the area of Blaca Hermitage on the island of Brač in the 16th century, where Glagolitic priests built a monastery and farm buildings and eventually formed an agricultural cooperative. From the very beginning, church cooperative gatherings were guided by the ideals of equality, morality, social security and joint decision-making, and were also open to non-believers (Gizdić, 2004, p. 11).

In the 19th century, Dalmatia was a region within the Austrian Empire[1], the poorest and most agrarian province in the great Empire. Dalmatian industry was practically still in its infancy, and a significant part of its inhabitants self-employed farmers and fishermen. Throughout the centuries, wine, olive oil and salted fish production represented the most important economic activities for the majority of the inhabitants of Dalmatia. Most of the Dalmatian peasantry did not own much land, but instead worked mostly on landholders' land in exchange for a share of the produce. (Kovačić, 1996, p.126). Bare survival and a debt-ridden existence was the lot of the Dalmatian peasant.

In the second half of the 19th century, during the wine trade boom, Dalmatia exported more than 600.000 hectolitres of wine. This was the result of the high demand for Dalmatian wines at a time when phylloxera[2] had begun to destroy French and Italian vineyards. To be able to sell as much wine as possible, the Dalmatian farmers would cut down centuries-old olive groves to plant grapevines that eventually became a monoculture (Gizdić, 2004, p. 24). The phylloxera pandemic eventually reached Dalmatia at the end of the 19th century and destroyed most of Dalmatian vineyards. In addition to this catastrophe, in 1982, the Austro-Hungarian government banned the export of Dalmatian wines ("wine clause"), so a great number of Dalmatians were forced to emigrate to overseas countries (Kovačić, 1996, p. 129).

1 From 1867 until 1918 it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

2 Phylloxera is a grapevine's root disease which destroys unvaccinated vines. It first appeared in Europe in 1863 in England, in 1867 in Southern France, in 1880 in Croatia and in 1894 in Dalmatia.

At the end of the 19th century, Dalmatian cooperative movements became crucial generators for rural communities, first in the form of credit unions but also as local agribusinesses. As they were rooted in the value of solidarity and based on the principle of self-organisation, cooperatives enabled not only the existence but also the cultural and social development of poor rural areas of the former Austro-Hungarian periphery.

The first cooperative in Dalmatia was founded in Korčula in 1864, under the name of The Mutual Credit Treasury (*Blagajna uzajamne vjeresije*). This was basically a credit union that enabled farmers to get loans, but also encouraged them to save money (Mataga, 2005, p. 21). This cooperative was founded only twenty years after the founding of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers which was the first modern cooperative organisation. The main goal of the cooperative was written in its statute: "The purpose of the association is to meet the financial needs of various social groups, namely artisans, merchants, landlords and farmers, to help them in obtaining mutual loans through mediation, and to encourage its members to save, which is no less important than granting loans." (Martinović, 2022, p. 3) In addition to providing loans and saving accounts the Credit Union also procured seeds, mineral fertilizers and other materials for framers (Mataga, 2005, p. 21).

The village of Velo Grablje

Figure 1 - View of Velo Grablje and the Pakleni islands in the distance, Tošo Dabac, 1950s, The Tošo Dabac Archive, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, owner: the City of Zagreb

The village of Velo Grablje is located at an altitude of 350 metres above sea level on steep slopes in a valley in the interior of the western part of the island of Hvar and is surrounded by grids of drystone walls. Given its well-preserved architectural heritage and the characteristics of the surrounding landscape, the village seems to have remained unchanged since the 19th century (Figure 1). Modern architectural interventions of the infamous *apartmanizacija*[3] type are rare and mostly do not disrupt the harmonious idyll of the utopian-like landscape (Figure 2). Today, only around fifteen inhabitants live in the village.

Figure 2 - A satirical photomontage "Dubai in Velo Grablje", a caricature of a dystopian tourist vision of the village with a gigantic hotel building and an artificial sea, Ivo Zaninović, courtesy of the Pjover Association

The area of Velo Grablje has been inhabited since prehistoric times and, during antiquity and the Middle Ages, it was located on the municipal road (via communis) from Stari Grad (Faros i.e. Pharia) to the town of Hvar, which is indicative of the millennial vitality of this area. This village has been designated as a protected area by the Croatian Ministry of Culture on account of its exceptional cultural and natural heritage, and it has been part of the Ethnological Ecovillage program since 2005.[4]

It is commonly assumed that the settlement developed around shepherds' dwellings, which were used for seasonal work with livestock. In addition to animal husbandry, the first inhabitants of this area engaged in hunting and agriculture for their own needs.

3 *Apartmanizacija* refers to the recent trend of developing new housing accommodation ("apartments" in the coastal region of Croatia for the purpose of renting to tourists during the summer season, a trend which has become more pronounced in the last 25 years.

4 The "Ethno Eco Village" project was implemented by the Split-Dalmatia County on the basis of the Program for Encouraging the Reconstruction of Displaced and Neglected Villages on the Island of Hvar.

Apart from the main village ‚Velo Grablje,[5] (meaning "Greater Grablje"), there were other villages which developed over time, villages such as Malo Grablje (Lower Grablje) in the basin on the southern side of the island, and Selca, on the northern side towards Stari Grad. The very name of the settlement Velo Grablje is derived from the collective noun for hornbeam trees (in Croatian: grab) that once covered the entire island of Hvar.

Most of the land in the Grablje area was communal, and its mass cultivation began when the so-called Gratia (gratia) was granted to landowners and peasants who, in return, were obliged to give part of their income to the municipality (Petrić, 2008, p. 8). One of the peculiarities of the Dalmatian landscape relates primarily to the traditional way of cultivating the sparse karst terrain. In the Grablje area, this mosaic relief with a geometric grid of drywall is well preserved and bears witness to the painstaking efforts of the former inhabitants of this area. The wild rugged terrain, mostly hilly and inaccessible, had to be almost entirely cut down and cultivated for planting purposes. The islanders broke and ground stones which they used to build stone walls, between which they would then pour fertile soil. Most of these jobs were done manually with the help of donkeys, which was the only form of transportation. These fenced-in plots in which vines, olives, figs, lavender or other crops were planted, have always been essential to the survival of numerous generations of islanders (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - The traditional harvesting of lavender takes place in the month of July - by hand with the help of a sickle, Unknown photographer around 1950s, courtesy of the Pjover Association

5 Velo Grablje was once known as Gornje Grablje (Upper Grablje).

In addition to testifying to how people influenced the formation of the island landscape, today's drystone walling is one of the crucial components of the collective identity of the island's communities., The art of dry-stone walling has been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2108.[6]

The collective memory of the hard physical work of their ancestors, such as it is embodied in dry stone walls, stands in stark contrast to the easy way of life that the majority of the islanders who live off tourism now enjoy. In conversations between generations, the older generations will often tell the younger generations of islanders that it is their ancestors who are responsible for their current well-being as "everything was served to them on a plate", in other words, they became landowners without having to do any hard work . [7]

Although the settlement was established in the 15th century, it seems that its inhabitants, who were shepherds and farmers, made economic progress very quickly. In the 18th century, Velo Grablje gradually gained its independence (as a village and parish) from the town of Hvar (Kovačić, 1996, p. 130). In the 19th century, as on most other Dalmatian islands, Hvar was affected by waves of emigration on account of an extremely difficult economic and political environment on the island. The people of Grablje emigrated mainly to the USA, Chile and Argentina (Petrić, 2012, p. 17).

In the second half of the 19th century, the farmers who remained in Velo Grablje survived primarily thanks to the sale of wine and the pyrethrum flower, "Buhač", which were produced in large quantities. After phylloxera had finally ravaged most of Hvar's vineyards[8], "Buhač" was the only remaining crop to be planted and processed on a massive scale. "Buhač" (*Tanacetum Cinerariifolium Trevis*) is an endemic plant that contains pyrethrin, the first natural insecticide that was used for pest control in households and agriculture. "Buhač" fields were harvested in June, then dried, ground into a powder and exported all over the world in large quantities. The boom in "Buhač" lasted from the 1870s until the 1920s, when Japan took over the market with more competitive prices and superior processing (Gamulin and Palašti, 2025, p. 17).

There is evidence of gratitude for "Buhač" in the inscription on the chimney of the Bartuč family's house in Malo Grablje, which reads "God and Buhač helped in 1888", as well as on the frescoes in the interior of the church of St. Cosmas and Damian in Velo Grablje which depict the plague with St. Mary. Moreover, ten guilders and and ten flowers of "Buhač" were placed in the very foundations of the church, next to the memorial charter (Petrić, 2012, p. 13). The number of inhabitants in the village reached its peak of 532 in 1881 (Petrić, 2012, p. 10).

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6 The art of drystone walling is also practised in Cyprus, Spain, France, Greece, Italy, Slovenia and Switzerland.

7 For example, in informal conversations in which I participated: "Your ancestors broke their backs to build houses so that you can laze around today..." Or "…They (young people) don't even know how to hold a hoe, let alone how to milk a goat. Well... they don't even know what a goat and a donkey look like... They just look at what they will inherit and how they will build apartments for the tourists…"

8 According to Kuzma Petrić phylloxera hit Velo Grablje around 1914.

The first Rosemary Cooperative in Dalmatia

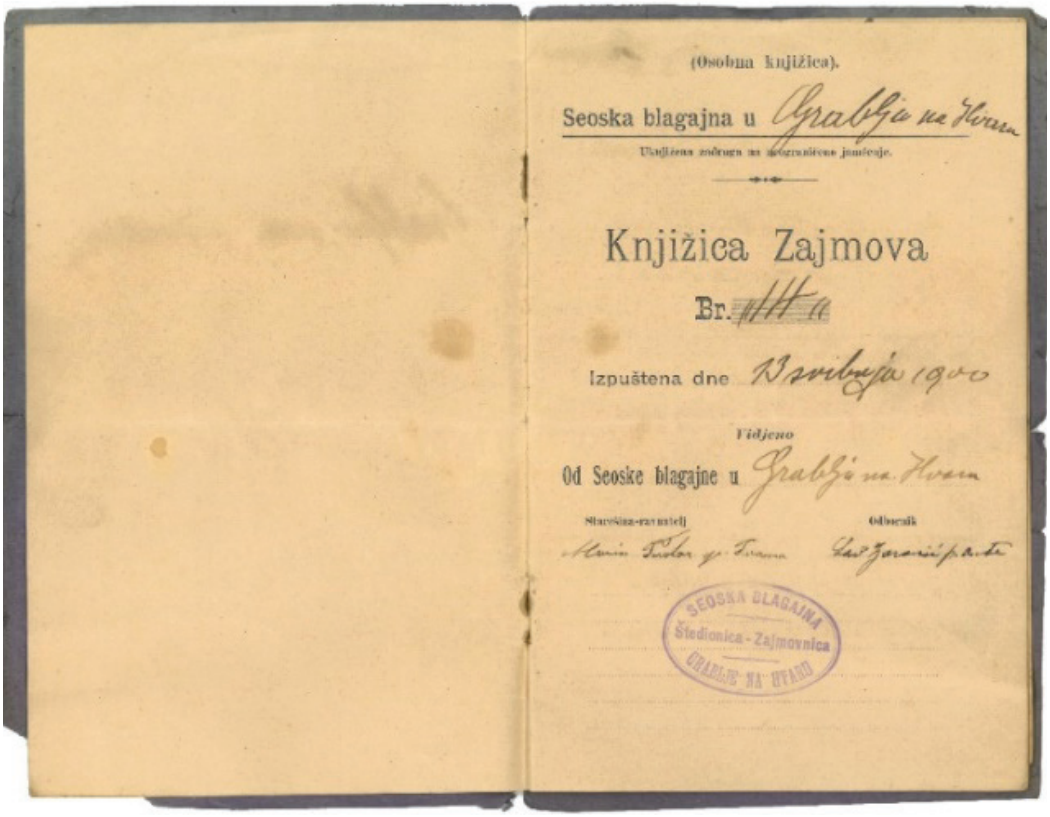
In addition to the traditional cultivation of mainly vines and olives, the inhabitants of Velo Grablje have a long tradition of processing aromatic herbs. The islanders have been collecting and growing medicinal aromatic herbs since ancient times, either for export or to be used in the production of medicines and cosmetics (Božić-Bužančić, 1987, p. 110). It is usually thought that rosemary has been processed in Velo Grablje since the 16th century.

Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) is a wild plant from the Mediterranean coast, which is widespread along the entire Eastern Adriatic coast, especially on the islands of Hvar and Vis. In the Croatian language, it has many names, names such as "zimorod", or "zumrod" as it is locally known on the island of Hvar. It grows like a bush to a height of between one to three meters, it has fragrant evergreen leaves with light blue flowers full of sweet juice, which are extremely popular among bees. The healing properties of rosemary were already known in ancient and medieval times, and it was used to treat various types of diseases. In particular, its medicinal properties have become increasingly important since the Middle Ages, when rosemary oil (*Quintascenza di Rosmarino*) began to be produced (Petrić and Štambuk, 2007, p. 2).

Back in the 19th century there were few very profitable island manufacturers who specialised in producing essential oils. The most famous island product was the so-called "Queen's Water"[9] (Acqua della Regina d'Ungheria) produced by a certain Giuseppe Marincovich from the island of Hvar (Božić-Bužančić, 1987, p. 111).

The rosemary Cooperative in Velo Grablje was founded by a priest, Ante Petrić, in 1892, to facilitate the work and increase the profits of this ancient village business. It was the first cooperative association established on the island of Hvar. In 1893 the same priest founded the Village treasury (*Seoska blagajna*) based on Reiffeisen principles, a kind of credit union for farmers which provided an unlimited guarantee to help its members. Without a skilled manager and a bookkeeper, these initial pioneer cooperatives failed, but they were re-established a few years later.

9 The name "The Hungarian Queen's Water" was probably taken from the mythical 14th century preparation, which was the first known fragrant European perfume based on the essence of rosemary, and which, according to legend, served to rejuvenate the skin, but also to treat gout, diseased bones and the like. Numerous rosemary-based cosmetic products are still produced under similar names. "The Queen's Water" by Giuseppe Marincovich was produced from various fragrant essences according to a secret recipe and was used to treat numerous "female" diseases such as neurosis, epilepsy, migraines, dizziness, fainting, feebleness, hysterical excitement, heart palpitations, stomachache, etc. (Božić-Bužančić, 1987, p. 111).


(Osobna knjižica).

Seoska blagajna u Grablje na Hvaru

Upisljena zadruga za neograničeno jamčenje.

Knjižica Zajmova

Br. 111

Izpuštena dne Siječnja 1900

Vidjeno

Od Seoske blagajne u Grablje na Hvaru

Starješina-ravnatelj

Odbornik

SEOSKA BLAGAJNA
Štedionica - Zajmovnica
GRABLJE NA HVARU

Figure 4 - Loan ledger of members of the Village Treasury in Velo Grablje from 1900, courtesy of the Pjover Association

In 1900 the Village Treasury was re-established by the local pastor, Niko Gamulin from Jelsa (together with the priests Ante Petrić and Jure Tomičić, and a local teacher Bartul Žufić) who was in charge of the prosperity of the village that is to say, its cultural and economic progress (Figure 4). The President"s explanation of the joint savings system can be found in the 1901 records of the annual assembly of the Village treasury in Velo Grablje and reads as follows:

"The spirit of the Village treasury is the spirit of the community, according to which a person should forget his private funds and instead pool his money, together with fellow members of the cooperative, into a communal fund - known as the the Village Treasury - in which he will save money every time God provides for him, and from which he will make a withdrawal whenever necessary.[10]

In 1905, the Village Treasury built a cooperative building,[11] with a large cellar, two office rooms and a large hall for assemblies, which was managed by Niko Gamulin. In 1902, the

10 Records from the first annual assembly of the Village Treasury (*Seoska blagajna*) in Velo Grablje from 1901, The Pjover Association Archive, Velo Grablje.

11 This building still exists in the village under the name of "The Agricultural Cooperative" ("*Poljoprivredna zadruga*") with the year 1900 - the year in which the Village Treasury was founded - written on its top.

same priest re-established the Rosemary Cooperative. The main role of the cooperative was to assemble rosemary collectors, organise and improve the distillation of rosemary oil and ensure its placement on the market. The COOP also arranged for the production and sale of other products, primarily honey.

The Cooperative built a small industrial facility for the distillation of rosemary oil with modern distillation boilers from the German company Volkmar Hänig & Co. from Dresden (Figure 5), and this is considered the beginning of the modern production of essential oils on the island of Hvar and in Croatia in general (Petrić and Štambuk, 2007, p. 14).

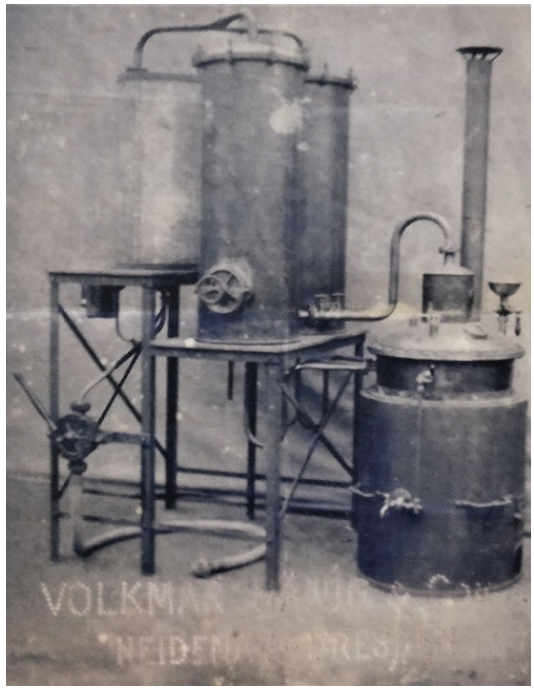


Figure 5 - A model of a steam distillation boiler from the German company Volkmar Hänig & Co. from Dresden, acquired in 1902 by the Rosemary Coop in Velo Grablje, marks the beginning of the modern production of essential oils on the island of Hvar and in Croatia in general, courtesy of the Pjover Association

In 1906, the Rosemary Cooperative was presented in the Dalmatian exhibition section at the major Austrian exhibition in London, along with fifty other exhibitors from Croatia.[12] As a sign of appreciation, the Rosemary Cooperative received a special certificate from Archduke Franz Joseph for successfully participating in the London exhibition. This certificate is still kept today in the archive of the Pjover Association.

The Pjover Association and the Lavender Island

"The Island of Lavender" is one of the many names given to Hvar. It was in Velo Grablje that the planting of this new agricultural product began, which in many ways marked the

12 The exhibition catalogue states that Dalmatia exports a significant amount of rosemary and sage oils, the most important exhibitors being Juraj Gamulin from Jelsa and the Rosemary Association from Brusje and Grablje.

life of many Hvar residents in the 20th century. Hvar's climate and land were ideal for growing this aromatic plant, which requires a lot of sun and light (Figure 6).

Figure 6 - Hvar's traditional cultivation of lavender with separate bushes planted in a small field, often on steep hilly terrain, within a dry-stone wall, formed a unique landscape that dominated the Velo Grablje area in the second half of the 20th century, Tošo Dabac, 1950s, The Tošo Dabac Archive, Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, owner: the City of Zagreb

Planting and growing lavender did not require much experience, and and it takes three to four years for its fruits to appear, much less time than for grapes. Bartul Tomičić from Velo Grablje is remembered as the pioneer of lavender cultivation in 1928 on the island of Hvar. The lavender boom reached its peak in 1950's.[13] In 1957 Lorenzo Tudor (1894-1975) from the village of Malo Grablje produced a record 503 kilos of lavender oil, which

13 To be more precise, Kuzma Petrić mentions the period from 1952-1957 and the year 1963, when islanders were able to get a good price for lavender (Petrić, 2012, p. 35).

earned him the nickname "The King of Lavender" in the domestic and foreign press (Petrić and Štambuk, 2007, p. 2). Islanders would often remark that the island of Hvar was responsible for 90% of the entire lavender production in Yugoslavia and 10% of world production.[14]

The notion of "collective" is the notion which is most frequently evoked by islanders who originate from Velo Grablje as a defining feature of their cultural identity. While researching local identifications on the island of Hvar, the anthropologist Ana Perinić Lewis noted that people from Velo Grablje are perceived as "harmonious", as "collectivists, a "clan", or as "those who stick together" (Perinić Lewis, 2017, p. 326). One of the local nicknames attributed to the people of Velo Grablje is the Sioux (*Sijuksi*), after the Indian tribe that is known for its collectivism.

The way in which people from neighbouring settlements would sometimes describe the harmonious relationships and successes of the inhabitants of Velo Grablje sometimes bordered on envy (for example, "…The people from Grablje have managed to preserve their houses in the village and they don't allow the sale of a single building in the village. If one family is too poor to invest, they somehow manage to help them…" or for example in the statement "Everything is tidy in Velo Grablje, they come to the village now and then, and they tend to their gardens…" (Perinić Lewis, 2017, p. 326).

Although there are only around 15 inhabitants today, Velo Grablje has a village Council, a church committee (called *Fabriceri*), an agricultural cooperative, the Pjover Association, a football club, a *bocce* ball club and an informal association "The Brides from Velo Grablje" (Croatian: *Grobaljske neviste*).

The cooperative is still active today in Velo Grablje under the name of The Agricultural Cooperative. Ante Tonči Petrić, one of the COOP members who remains active, has been living in Velo Grablje since he was born (1957) and still remembers the activities of the cooperative from its golden days. Tonči explains how the inhabitants of Velo Grablje have always been known for their collective spirit and great hospitality:

> "We, the people of Grablje, have always been known for our harmony and solidarity. Our church even bears the inscription "God's love and the unity of the people of Grablje" …I remember as a child that everybody was somehow involved in the COOP, that is to say, the oldest male member of the family was a member of the cooperative. When the younger brother got married, in other words, when he started a family, he would become a new member of the cooperative. Lavender oil was never brought home, you had to hand over all the lavender to the cooperative's administration, who would then weigh it (Figure 4). Back in the day, everything was under control, until sometime in the 1980s. Later, there were some dodgy deals…There was a guy who took a few litres of oil home for his own needs, he was then expelled from the COOP…The cooperative had its own grocery store that worked until the 1980s. You could buy everything there, even underwear… "

14 Kuzma Petrić highlights these specific figures for the world production of lavender in 1966 when around 800 tons of lavender oil were produced in the world (Petrić, 2012, p. 38).

Figure 7 - Traditionally, lavender was collected in jute sacks, which were then transported to the distillery on donkeys, which were the only means of transport on the island of Hvar for centuries. Unknown photographer around 1980s, courtesy of the Pjover Association

Petrić notes that in the 1960s in the former Yugoslavia, the Velo Grablje COOP fell under the umbrella of the town of Hvar COOP. Furthermore, he claims that evolving mainstream state politics led to a modification of the local COOP structure, but the COOP, nevertheless, managed to resist potential adverse influences by acting in unison as united members:

> "I was employed in the cooperative in the town of Hvar. During the war in the 1990s, a new law on cooperatives was promulgated, according to which village cooperatives could be separated from their umbrella cooperatives. At that time, the system had broken down completely. I wasn't even receiving a salary. It was immediately clear to me that the Hvar Cooperative would sell our village cooperative building first. That bothered me...They're not going to sell what belongs to them, are they? In order to prevent this, I organised an initiative committee: an assembly of citizens, we were all in agreement and we managed to split off from the parent cooperative in the town of Hvar, so it was not possible for them to sell our property. When they saw how successful we were, they did the same thing in the cooperatives in Brusje and Milna."

Even though The Agricultural Coop still operates with around 40 members, Tonči believes the spirit of togetherness has been lost, mostly because COOP members no longer meet regularly:

> "We still produce some lavender oil, but it is just two weeks a year ... Today, none of these young people have any interest in planting lavender... since they know that they can earn

> more money by carrying a couple of suitcases in the town of Hvar during the tourist season. Once, we were all involved in harvesting lavender …There were disagreements, of course, but people used to meet up, so they would have come to an agreement. Today, we don't meet often enough, that's the problem in my opinion. And that hurts me the most, because we fought to get out of the clutches of Hvar, and now, once again… nothing."

Today, lavender is grown by only a few people from Velo Grablje. There were two catastrophic fires, in 1997 and 2003, which practically destroyed all the lavender fields in the Grablje region. But the main reason for the neglect of lavender production is the new tourist industry that has taken root on the island since the middle of the last century. In the 1950s and 1960s, all the inhabitants of the village of Malo Grablje moved to Milna, a nearby seaside settlement, where they could engage in tourism and transport manufactured goods more easily by using maritime routes. The tiny village was completely abandoned. Similar processes took place in Velo Grablje, from where most of the villagers moved to the town of Hvar on a permanent basis on account of the possibility of working in tourism.

It is often said that people from Velo Grablje bought their real estate in the town of Hvar, since they earned quite a lot of money from lavender production (Perinić Lewis, 2017, p. 222). Since the local people had moved out, the lavender failed to recover, and Velo Grablje was left without lavender and with only a few inhabitants. The village had a permanent population of just five until only a few years ago. The situation changed when a group of young activists, who were originally from Velo Grablje but were now living mainly in the town of Hvar, started to revitalise local traditions, and this eventually led to the foundation of a new association called Pjover[15] in 2006.

Figure 8 - The Pjover Association management, from left to right: Laura Jurić, Ivana Kuhar, Katarina Buratović, Marija Jaman and Ivan Zaninović, courtesy of the Pjover Association

15 The word "Pjover" refers to a component of a traditional island rainwater collection system, usually a catchment area that collects rainwater and directs it into a tank.

Pjover is engaged in the protection and revitalisation of Velo Grablje, and is actively involved in efforts to popularise its local heritage, mainly to encourage local people to cultivate lavender again. In 2008, they organised the first Lavender Festival, which now takes place every year in the month of July, when the lavender is harvested. In addition to the market with stalls selling local products, the festival consists of workshops, lectures, exhibitions, screenings of documentary films, book promotions and concerts. Almost every year, the association publishes a new book on the topic of local heritage. Over time, this festival has become a kind of island institution, and every July, thousands of local and foreign visitors flock to this otherwise almost deserted village, eager to try their hand at harvesting lavender or distilling essential oil.

The initiator of the festival and the president of the Association, Ivan Zaninović, founded the association in his 20s while still living in Split, with the idea of returning to his homeland island and reviving its village. He was especially inspired by the local identity based on a spirit of unity and a sense of community, which he remembered from his childhood.

Although the initial idea of the Association was to bring the village back to life by imbuing it with a cooperative and harmonious spirit and by creating better living conditions for the locals, Zaninović concludes that it is currently extremely difficult to maintain any kind of activities on the island, given that all the young people are involved in some form of tourism.

> "Initially (2006) the Association had over a hundred members, but today, I struggle to find two or three volunteers. I "haul in" these youngsters because the older generations will never come to help us. Why? Because when they realise at the age of 18 that they can earn 300 euros per day by renting a boat for tourists, they will never come to help us. By the age of 24, I had already realised that this was a hopeless cause… We have had a lot of success, but it is very difficult. There is a saying: Those who have tasted the riches of Hvar cannot be brought back to their former lives! (People have got used to a new living standard, it's normal. There is no more community, in a life that revolves around tourism, everyone only looks out for their own interests… I'm a volunteer, it's a bit on the border of madness, the amount of work I do for Pjover. I have aged a lot in the last 16 years…
>
> "I think the biggest success of the Pjover Association is that we have managed to make the community aware of the fact that we have something valuable, and that we should preserve the village and its surroundings as a whole. Back in the 1990s, Velo Grablje was like a warehouse in which locals would keep their old furniture. Now the situation is reversed, they understand the new value of authenticity…"

Nowadays, Velo Grablje is indeed "preserved", unlike many other villages on the island. During the mass tourism boom in the former Yugoslavia, which started in the 1960s, the demand for rural tourism was almost non-existent. As the village had been almost abandoned, there was no need for new constructions, which in other similar locations greatly disrupt the overall harmony and authenticity of the place. Today, when tourist trends are focused much more on authentic experience, and with a greater demand for escape from tourist resorts, Velo Grablje offers a new tourist paradise.

> "Do you know what the future of tourism is? Visitors will be looking for peace and silence! And we have plenty, of that right here…" concludes Zaninović prophetically.

The community's identity has remained a core component of the village's cultural identity throughout a period of time that runs from the establishment of the Rosemary Collective, which adhered to the principles of community and mutual assistance, to the time when the Pjover Association embarked on a project to revitalise the local heritage - a period of time during which the people of Velo Grablje have been described as complex and hospitable from the perspective of other island settlements.

If socio-economic development is viewed as a process of interconnected economic, political, social, cultural and economic changes aimed at improving the well-being of the population, the activities of the *Pjover Association* can be seen as an example of best practices for the revitalisation of island life. Paradoxically, the preservation of the authentic appearance of the village is the result of the development of mass tourism in the former Yugoslavia, which focused mainly on the island's coastal area. As a local and non-institutional organisation, the Pjover Association initiates and implements measures for sustainable tourism while insisting on the preservation of the integrity of the village and its environment, in accordance with protective measures for conservation. It is by no means simple to implement such measures in a context in which everyday life is marked by tourism, as has been demonstrated by their experience.

While the official cultural conservation services try primarily to protect the material and cultural heritage of settlements, the local initiatives launched by the Pjover Association remain one step ahead, and systematically strive to safeguard not only the material remains, but also the cooperative spirit of the community the majority of population now lives in the town of Hvar), thus re-establishing the cultural identity of Velo Grablje. The future will show how to avoid the "museumification" of the villages, so typical of similar examples in the world where traditional ways of life have been turned into museum products. But it seems that Pjover is on the right track.

> "Every year the village has more inhabitants. A child was born in the village in the village (in 2024), and now, if I include my daughter who comes here every weekend, there are five children in total. Also, there are currently six or seven Colombians living temporarily in the village, and working as seasonal workers in Hvar. We follow global trends..." concludes Zaninović.

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Records from the first annual assembly of the Village Treasury (Seoska blagajna) in Velo Grablje from 1901, Courtesy of the Pjover Association

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Ante Tonči Petrić

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Collaboration and Support, or the Lack of It: The Case of a Bulgarian Entrepreneurial Project in a Rural Area

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Professional paper

Introduction

In the opening article of the volume "Anthropological Perspectives of Solidarity and Reciprocity," editor Peter Simonič underscores the emergence of various communitarian models of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption in response to the subsistential challenges following the 2008 global financial crisis. These models, often referred to as "alternative economic practices," encompass cooperatives, agrarian commons, immediate supply networks, social enterprises, and housing communities, among others (Simonič, 2019, p. 11). In this article, I explore a case study that embodies both a small-scale social enterprise and a housing community.

In early 2017, a 30-year-old woman, hereafter referred to as C. embarked on an innovative venture in the context of Bulgarian entrepreneurship. Inspired by the Serbian coworking and coliving space called *Mokrin House*[1] described in its website as "a modern and urban spot in a rural surrounding", and influenced by the Spanish "glocal network of people, initiatives and places" called *Pandora Hub*[2], C. formulated a business plan to bring a similar entrepreneurial project to her hometown of Botevgrad. This project ambitiously aspires to "attract young people closer to nature (…) to transform our first rural Bulgarian house into coworking and coliving space, where entrepreneurs, freelancers, digital nomads and startups can enjoy nature, secluded working environment, home-made food and to attend various events and workshops" (direct quote copied from the project's website[3]). The house is named *Z. house* and is situated in the recently urbanized villa zone (*vilna zona*) referred to in this article as Z., just 70 km away from the capital city of Sofia, accessible via a one-hour drive on the highway.

It took C. over a year to crystalize her concept to herself and to potential contributors. She presented the idea in various forums for young entrepreneurs, and even on the TV show

1 https://www.mokrinhouse.com/about-us
2 https://www.pandorahub.co
3 (Footnote added during the revisions of the article in 2025) In 2024, the website was completely transformed, as was the domain and the whole project. Therefore, it's not available to cite the website here.

Da hvanesh gorata (Escaping to the Forest), eventually attracting the first volunteers who joined in some yard activities in early 2019.

In the spring of the same year, C. finally found the pivotal support of a local 33-year old man named K. who was hired to demolish an old shed with his excavator. Four years away later, in 2023, while explaining to me how he ended up as the main person who's maintaining the coworking space, he says:

> "I liked the idea, I simply resonated with it. This woman described to me in words that greatness, which I feel inside me, that I strive for, but I can't explain it through my own vocabulary. In a couple of words: many interesting people will come, I will meet different personalities, each strong in a different field, and that's something cool".

The story of C. and K. offers an illustration of several facets of cooperation and support. In this article I draw upon my fieldwork conducted at *Z. house* in February 2023, as part of a broader research project on mobility, counterurbanization, and entrepreneurial initiatives in rural areas[4]. I employ the term 'solidarity' to denote *the fundamental social relationships taking place in everyday life, based on mutuality, sharing, and reciprocity*. In this context, I address several questions. How do C. and K. contribute to each other? More broadly, how do values of collaboration, sharing, mutuality, and networking manifest themselves among the entrepreneur, other local entrepreneurs and visitors? Last but not least, what forms of non-solidarity are evident? To provide answers, I draw on some semi-structured ethnographic interviews, fieldwork observations and my active participation in the communal life at *Z. house*.

Z. house as an example of lifestyle migration practices

Before delving into the significance of solidarity and cooperation in the establishment and operation of *Z. house* as well as its broader "network of projects, people and places", we need to understand the life story of the project's owner, referred to as C. This narrative provides insights into why she conceived the idea of a coworking space and how her core values of cooperation and networking developed.

C.'s story is an example of a phenomenon known as "lifestyle migration" which is conditioned by the characteristics of contemporary life. Coined by sociologists Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly this term describes "relatively affluent individuals, moving either part-time or full-time, permanently or temporarily, to places which, for various reasons, signify for the migrants something loosely defined as quality of life" (Benson, O'Reilly, 2009, p. 621).

Before she ended up living and working in the house of her ancestors, C. had traveled a long way starting from her local town of Botevgrad (and the village of Z. in particular) marked by a constant mobility. In 2013, she embarked on a career as a stewardess with *Emirates* airline living in Dubai, but eventually left the job in late 2014 and returned

4 The article is published within the ongoing research project "The Neighbour from Sofia, the New Villager from Germany: Counterurbanisation, Sociocultural Interactions and Local Transformations" funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund (Contract No: КП-06-Н70/10)

to Bulgaria's capital, Sofia. Here she sought the career she's been expected to follow, having already attained a Law degree. She joined the Road Infrastructure Agency and in the meantime was considering to establish her own legal practice. She spent a year and seven months in this institution in order to familiarize herself with the professional legal milieu. However, a growing disenchantment with the corporate and urban lifestyle began to manifest within her.

> "I was clear to myself that I don't like to deal with law in the standard way", C. reflects. "I didn't envision myself confined to a static environment, communicating with the same individuals along a singular trajectory. I yearned for the creativity and freedom that nature in Bulgaria offered, I knew this is why I left Dubai. I had reached a point where big cities, corporate atmospheres, office sterility, and the artificial dynamics of large organizations were overwhelming. I craved a life closer to nature, waking up to clean air and breathtaking views."

This strong desire for personal freedom and creative expression resonated with the concept of coworking spaces. As defined by Gandini (2015, p. 194), these are "shared workplace utilised by different sorts of knowledge professionals, mostly freelancers, working in various degrees of specialisation in the vast domain of the knowledge industry (…) these are, more importantly, places where independent professionals live their daily routines side-by-side with professional peers, largely working in the same sector".

C. recalls that the events she attended at different coworking spaces (like Mokrin House in Serbia) often revolved around topics close to her heart, such as culture, art, and business.

> "I realized this was a perfect fit for me. It involved organizing and constant interaction with diverse people, something I sorely missed in the legal field. I felt limited both professionally and personally, lacking cultural diversity and freedom of thought, lacking meaningful communication on both a professional and interpersonal level. My experience in Dubai reinforced my preference for engaging with a variety of people, helping them, connecting with them, learning from them, trying different foods even. These are the activities that make me feel empowered."

Incorporating a coliving component into her idea to establish a coworking space in nature, C. aimed to host like-minded individuals with aspirations and mindset similar to hers. According to Musilek (2020, p. 12, 15), a coliving space is "a form of cohabitation in a built structure which seeks to formulate a particular vision of life and puts in place arrangements (social, spatial, temporal, discursive) to create and sustain it. (…) creating and enhancing opportunities for effortless socialisation, providing options for easily accessible leisure activities, and helping with tiring and mundane aspects of life (such as cleaning or shopping for household essentials) which could stand in the way of professional success and enjoyment of leisure." C. spent three years converting her family's old house into a welcoming space with nine beds in three shared rooms. Additionally, she renovated the existing old garage into a cosy event hall with a studio designed for two individuals.

To emphasize that *Z. House* is not a mere guesthouse but a coliving space, C. encourages guests to stay for at least five days, with reduced pricing for longer durations. In the beginning of 2023, a room for three or four people costs 85 euro per day, but only 480

euro for a week and 755 euro for a month. This means that if three people reside there for an entire month, they pay just 260 euro, equivalent to the average rent for a two-room apartment in Sofia.

Mixing freelance work as an entrepreneur in a rural area, and a jurist, C. embarked on a journey of self-realization, akin to the visitors of the coworking and coliving space she was expecting. Most commonly known as 'digital nomads' (Al-Zobaidi, 2009; Dal Fiore et al., 2014; Richards, 2015), these are individualistic online workers that tend to be on the move and experiment with rootlessness, reflexivity, and strangeness (D'Andrea, 2013). They are also referred as neo-nomads (Naz, 2016), or lifestyle migrants (Rana, 2018). As Orel argues, "Due to digital nomads' active involvement in local society, whilst performing work, they should not be mistakenly linked with leisure-seeking tourists".

In sum, while pursuing an existence more consonant with her aspirations, C. undertook a geographical shift, one that brought her closer to nature and rural life while maintaining the advantages of civic life. She made an assemblage of those two environments. The new lifestyle she strived to step into is in stark contrast to what she believed constrains her horizons and limits her meaningful social interactions.

Z. house and the practice of solidarity

Lifestyle migrants, such as my research participant C., often employ innovative strategies and practices to align their surroundings with their interests, hobbies, and mindset. She designed the place and chose its target group in such a way, so that everything fits into her values – freedom and independence; support and mutuality; striving for development of both the self and the community. *Z. house* is a mix between a business project and a project aimed at the self-growth of its owner, visitors and contributors. Most of them can be characterized as 'culturepreneurs': urban protagonists who possess the ability to mediate between and interpret the areas of culture and of service provision (Lange, 2006). Put in other words, the prevailing part of these are "knowledge professionals with multi-functional skills and irregular career paths, operating as self-entrepreneurs within scarcely-institutionalised economies" (Gandini 2015: 196).

In the same article Gandini remarks that the coworking phenomenon has been "connoted with the expectation of being the 'new model of work' in the context of the 'collaborative and 'sharing' economy". However, in my research I approach coworking not as *the* new model of work, but rather as *one of* the new potential models of work. As Gandini (ibid.) warns, we shouldn't consider coworking phenomena as inevitably positive, as the 'vibe' seems to support, and we should stay alerted to an emerging 'coworking bubble', given that coworking is being increasingly used for branding, marketing and business purposes. But these do not seem to constitute the primary objectives for which C. has utilized her coworking space.

Numerous articles in popular media over the last two decades depict coworking not merely as a product of entrepreneurship but as a philosophy and movement with values centered on *collaboration*, *community*, and *networking* (see for example Reed 2007). These three concepts address the needs of contemporary microbusinesses and freelancers who

are the typical visitors coexisting and collaborating on a variety of actions/tasks/events in a coworking space (Capdevila, 2014). Gandini (2015, p. 196) notes that "a significant element that seems to characterise coworking practices is an open source community approach to work, intended as a collaborative practice that seeks to establish communitarian social relations among the member-workers". It's not only the workers who practice solidarity and reciprocity, but the proprietors of the space too. Spinuzzi (2012) considers them as "hybrid figures" that simultaneously lead the space and cowork within it. They and their visitors both cultivate social relations to increase profit, business outcomes are achieved by the means of temporary or continuing partnerships.

This is exactly what I've observed in *Z. house*. After my initial fieldwork in February, during the whole 2023, a couple of digital nomads reached out to C. and stayed at her space, but the number of such guests remained relatively limited, and they did not constitute the central focus of her efforts. Her primary emphasis was directed towards the establishment of "a network of places, people and projects".

In the previous years, she had already initiated several joint initiatives with like-minded individuals. Her first successful collaboration happened in July 2019 when, despite the house's unfinished state, it hosted 20 people from across Bulgaria came to *Z. House* to take part in *Zero start* – the first Bulgarian entrepreneurial program in a rural area. For five days they've been working with five mentors from various sectors, including finance, and marketing. Participants developed their ideas for projects or businesses focused on social change and the mentors helped them to clearly formulate these ideas as business projects. C. involved in the event a couple of products and services such as: a friend of hers who prepared gourmet food and catering for the guests during the five days; a local artist who hosted a painting workshop in the coworking space; a local man who arranges hot air balloon excursions and bungee jumping in a village near Botevgrad. These individuals have taken part in other events in the following years too.

Another notable initiative that enrolled local people in a collective action was the cleaning of a local hut which is not operating for visitors. In 2020 C. and her main local collaborator K. teamed up with a local man who's a world champion in taekwondo and the children he was coaching. Alongside many other volunteers, they cleaned up the accumulated waste some of which has been there since almost five decades. The deputy mayor invited a national television to cover the cleaning initiative. Apart from this the municipality didn't help a lot, it just sent a small truck which wasn't enough for the amount of waste. All of the transportation and materials were provided by K. As a follow-up of the event C. developed a business plan for the hut to be opened for visitors again but stumbled upon the resistance of some powerful local people.

When I ask C. about her main problems regarding her entrepreneurship in a rural area, she says that she prefers the word "challenges" and explains:

> "What I do is not simply about making money from this place as a business. The bigger motivation and intention that has guided me from the beginning is to create new models, to develop the entire area together as a community. That's why I don't see how it could happen without communicating with the locals. So, the challenge is establishing contact and social

> reintegration. (…) Despite all of my contacts (…) I haven't found anyone eager to take serious initiative. I often encounter skepticism and resistance to new things and new topics, despite them seeing how things can happen. Nevertheless, there is no motivation for them to keep working. They seem to focus more on how things can't happen and how nothing depends on them, whether it's due to a lack of money, a lack of skills, the belief that someone will hinder them, or because there's no one to appreciate the efforts."

Nevertheless, C. has cultivated connections with individuals who share her values and ideas and are engaged in various projects in the Botevgrad region. Notably, she has established contact with the son of the owner of one of the largest organic farms for apples, pears, and cherries on the Balkan peninsula. This farm presents a potential venue for hosting collaborative events, bridging diverse business domains. In recent years, C. has also forged a connection with a like-minded family of entrepreneurs in the nearby towns of Lukovit and Karlukovo, 60 km away from Botevgrad. They are dedicated to developing tourism in the region by meticulously building and restoring houses using clay, stone and wood. However, the couple are primarily driven by a personal pursuit of gratification rather than specific business objectives and the intended collaboration between C. and them has been failed by now. In 2023, C. has tried to co-host a group event with another guest house in Z. While the initial plan involving 18 guests eventually fell through, as they decided not to come, C. and the house owners committed to future collaborative efforts.

The most consistent local person who is the only one contributing regularly, even daily, to the coworking space and to C.'s initiatives is K. – the 33-year old neighbor who owns a small business related to heavy machinery and in the meantime helps her with almost everything. Since his involvement in demolishing an old shed in the yard in 2019, K. has evolved into "the key person assisting me with the maintenance of the space and its overall development, the main person I've relied on for building the space itself" (quote by C.).

When I discuss with K. his role for *Z. house*, he proudly recalls:

> "In this place, I've basically touched every paving stone, tile, or rock along the fence, and every plank has passed through my hands. I help when I could with money, when I could with work, with connecting to local people too. When I met C., the names of some locals whom I'd like to connect her to just popped up in my mind."

The reciprocal support between K. and C. transcends the boundaries of their professional relationship and extends into the realm of friendship, marked by the sharing of personal matters and the pursuit of emotional assistance. They've become friends who share a lot with each other and seek emotional help. C., whose recent hobby has evolved into a burgeoning specialization in psychology, now serves as a quasi-psychotherapist, owing to her growing expertise in the field. K. acknowledges the importance of this support as he's had a difficult relationship with his family resulting in severe alcoholism and residing in a sober living home for a couple of months. When I ask him to comment on the emotional support of C. and on her firm and often critical attitude towards him, he explains:

> "For me, the ego is something huge. C. always knows when I'm not authentic while we communicate –I notice these things in myself, but admitting them is much harder. However,

> knowing that there's someone who can point it out and remind me makes it much easier. And this communication builds me up. I'm like bla-bla-bla-bla and she's like tak-tak-tak-tak".

K. confirms C.'s opinion that he has problems to express himself and his feelings, and often outlines how much she did for him and for everyone in the establishing network of people and projects. C. contends that while people contribute to the success of her coworking and coliving space, she reciprocates by nurturing their personal and professional development.

Conclusion

While working on this article in September and October 2023, I had the opportunity to reengage with C. once more. She called me and proudly informed me that she enrolled in the *Developmental Psychology* MA program at one of Bulgaria's most prominent universities. Concurrently, she is also attending a course on hypnosis offered by a private organization. As part of her educational journey, she now resides in Sofia for at least three working days each week, all the while maintaining her connection with Z. through regular travels.

A quote by Rana (2018, p. 255) that resonated with C.'s evolving lifestyle immediately flashed in my head: "In today's world, we find mobilism as a lifestyle choice." The conversation with C. reaffirmed my premise underlying this case study, which revolves around the dynamics of solidarity and cooperation in the context of contemporary rural entrepreneurship and lifestyle migration.

C. established *Z. house* coworking space not merely as a conventional business venture but as a deeply personal and communal endeavor. It serves as a magnet for individuals who share her interests, offering a platform for mutual growth and development among its diverse users. Her overarching objective transcends the conventional notion of managing a successful and economically viable coworking space. Instead, she seeks to achieve the following key goals: a) personal development through continuous engagement with a dynamic and culturally diverse community, and b) regional development by introducing innovation, enhancements, and fresh business and cultural opportunities to Botevgrad. Her overarching vision is to create a cohesive "network of people, places, and projects" that collectively enrich the region of her hometown. As Pileva et al (2023, p. 110) conclude: "developing a business for years affirms and strengthens the connection with the given place not only on a day-to-day basis, but also on an economic and social level."

Notably, while C. has successfully fostered a sense of solidarity and collaboration by initiating a variety of joint projects with like-minded individuals, her innovative methods and ideas seem to face resistance or inapplicability among the majority of local small-scale entrepreneurs and even local authorities. As of now, she has garnered only the support of a couple of individuals who share her values and resonate with her methods and ideas. Unfortunately, C.'s project proofed unable to make some real impact apart from its symbolic value.

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