

THESIS SUMMARY

Orsolya Lazányi

**An Ecological Economics Inquiry into the Social and Solidarity Economy
Insights from an Action Research**

Ph.D. dissertation

Supervisor:

György Pataki, PhD

Budapest, 2022

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1. Background of the research and justification of the topic

Scientists and researchers undoubtedly made a great effort to raise awareness about pressing ecological and social issues. The latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021) draws attention to the irreversible degradation processes caused in the ecological system and calls for immediate action to change destructive human activities to mitigate the consequences of climate change. The economic production devoted to unlimited growth which dominates the mainstream economic thoughts and practices, has been argued to be responsible for exploitation of natural resources, degrading ecosystems, and for contributing to socially unjust processes. Across the globe in recent decades, civic resistance movements have appeared as oppositional forces to formerly accepted definitions and the currently dominant institutionalisation of economy and society. At the same time, diverse research has attempted to elaborate alternative pathways.

Related to the global tendencies of searching for alternatives, my personal commitments are interlinked with the research goals. Being a member and a co-founder of a civil organization I am committed to carry out immediate actions which contribute to create environmentally sustainable and just societies. As a researcher, I am dedicated to understand the World in order to contribute to human flourishing. In designing the research, I aimed to create synergies between my embeddedness in the civil area and my academic life in supporting a collective which aims to experiment an ecologically and socially just economic model while providing valuable insights for the academia. These commitments had a great impact on both the theoretical background and on the choice of the methodology.

In my theoretical framework I build on the concept of social and solidarity economy (SSE). The SSE has raised as a practice and movement based theory in Latin-American countries to resist and build alternatives to the growth-oriented economy (Kawano, 2018). The SSE expresses a normative position against the market-based economy which is seen as problematic from both a social and environmental perspective. From local, isolated, informal practices, the SSE has grown into networks and, since the 2000s, it has gain international recognition which was formalized in international organizations such as RIPESS (Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy)¹ and it has been

¹ <http://www.ripess.org/>

included in the field of the academia thanks to scientific networks such as the EMES (Emergence of Social Enterprises in Europe) International Research Network².

The notion of SSE promotes a systemic change, social transformation toward an environmentally and socially just future (Coraggio, 2016). The concept has an emerging role in solving pressing social issues worldwide, improving living conditions of communities in need, empowering vulnerable groups or giving voice for people experiencing oppression or difficulties in access to employment. It shifts the emphasis from profit generation to well-being and to create social benefits for local communities. It promotes democratically managed organizations and groups, which allows to follow common values instead of pure self-interest. The SSE extends economic activities beyond the realm of the market economy following a plural approach based on the Polanyian substantive understanding of the economy (Laville & Nyssens, 2001; Polanyi, 1976). The great potential of the SSE to shift toward environmental sustainability is articulated in many studies and policy documents (Quiroz-Niño & Murgameno, 2017; Henfrey, et al., 2019; Penha-Lopes & Henfrey, 2019; Utting, 2018).

From a radical ecological perspective, however, SSE practices have been poorly explored in the literature. Even though, theorists of the SSE put a strong emphasis on questioning the prevailing economic system and its status quo, the movement as well as the theory has focused rather on social, political, economic aspects much more than on the environmental dimension. The existing sustainability definitions describing the environmental aspect of the SSE vary or even contradict with each other within the literature. Reflecting on this research gap, the aim of the present research is to link and integrate the notion (and practice) of the SSE with ecologically more critical discourses such as ecological economics.

Ecological economics, based on interdisciplinary approach and linking social and natural sciences, offers a critical perspective about human-nature relations. Ecological economics allows to critically reflect on the distinct sustainability approaches which co-exist within the SSE literature, and to outline and strengthen the environmental aspect of the SSE (Sahakian & Dunand, 2014).

Based on ecological economics, two distinct sustainability approaches are outlined in the dissertation. Weak sustainability – based on the assumptions of substitubility of human made

² <https://emes.net/>

and natura capital, technooptimism, decoupling economic production from its environmental impact – corresponds to a mainstream approach which aims to find solutions by staying in the prevailing economic system and applying small adjustment, such as environmental taxes. The other approach presented as radical sustainability – drawing on the strong hierarchy between economy, society and the natural world, physical limits of economics production, techno-criticism – follows a systemic critics of the dominant economic domain and promotes radical change in our social and political system and in our relation toward nature. The argument of ecological economics is that only the radical sustainability approach is able to tackle the social and ecological problems which we are facing. The research question formulated based on the research gap and the theoretical framework is: How the ecological aspects can theoretically and practically be included in the social and solidarity economy?

2. Research methodology

2.1. Action research

The research design of the dissertation follows Maxwell's (2009) interactive model, also used and slightly modified by Csillag (2016). According to Maxwell (2009) the research design is an iterative process in which the components of the research mutually affect each other. Therefore, the methodology and the methods used for the research is shaped by the research goals, research questions, validity and by the theoretical framework.

Given the research goals and context, my embeddedness in the civil area, I have turned to action research to comply with and both my practical and intellectual aspirations and desires. Action research is a type of scientific inquiry which allows to co-construct knowledge with civil actors and take responsibility in shaping the World which I am part of.

Action research lies on the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the participatory paradigm (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997). Heron and Reason (1997) reveal that the world 'out there' cannot be understood (only) through objective observations because it can only lead to a narrow understanding of what is there. The reality what we experience and what researchers aim to explore is a co-creation and it is relational involving human feelings, acting and interacting with each other within both human and non-human parts of the world (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). It entails that action researchers reject the value-free, objective role of a researcher and instead they take an objective-subjective standpoint. According to the participatory paradigm, reality neither absolutely objective nor absolutely subjective (Heron,

1996). Subjectivity is treated as a given instead of pursuing value-free inquiry. Therefore, action researchers accept their subjectivity in participating in the reality but they critically reflect on it.

The various methodological approaches within the family of action research refer to researchers who work *with* rather than *on* people (Reason, 1999). Knowledge is created through a democratic process in which all participants are considered co-researchers and, at the same time, subjects of the research as well. Participants of an action research are usually a group of people who have similar interests, work together in order to explore their world, find new ways of looking at things and to improve or change their action in order to do the things better (Reason, 2006).

Different action research approaches emerged in different fields, e.g. co-operative inquiry based on psychology (e.g. Csillag, 2016; Heron, 1996; Reason, 1994), participatory action research concerned with human rights and activism (e.g. Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Udvarhelyi & Dósa, 2019), action science in the field of management and organizational learning (e.g. Argyris & Schön, 1989; Gelei, 2005) among others in the field of education, community building, healthcare, social work, etc. Based on the overview of the related literature (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 1997; Levin, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), all action research aims to create scientific knowledge but at the same time solve practical issues.

The three most important characteristics of action research that it is participatory, it is a cyclical process and it is action oriented. **Participation** refers to that all participants who share the targeted problem take part in the research process and act as co-researchers. The boundary between trained researchers and problem-holders blurs. Action researchers reject the privileged position of a trained researcher who is responsible and thus controls the research process (including the overall aim, methods and the use of research results). Instead, action research approaches argue for an open and democratic way of knowledge creation where all participants – disregarding who is the theoretical expert or the local stakeholder – equally participate in the inquiry (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). This means that identifying research goals and questions, the implementation and the achievements of the research will be a collaborative or co-creative process between the so-called experts and the local actors (Greenwood et al., 1993).

What also common in action research that it is a **cyclical** process. A cycle includes steps of problem identification, planning, acting, reflecting and learning or re-valuating. This last step leads to the next cycle which builds upon the experiences of the previous cycle. The exact steps of the cycles, the content and time frame can vary among different action research methodologies. The iterative process of planning-acting-reflecting and learning characterizes the structure of this type of inquiry and guarantees that the knowledge is produced through a systematic inquiry (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Reason, 1999).

Action research is also **action oriented**. It aims to change or transform system – being it on individual, organizational or societal level (Elden & Chisholm, 1993). It entails that action research can occur on different levels, Bradbury and Reason (2003) and Coghlan (2019) refer to first, second and third person inquiry. Namely, action research can range from personal inquiry to research within an informal group, in an organization or in communities always in collaboration with those experiencing a social problem (Elden & Chisholm, 1993). During action research the co-researchers carry out different actions of interventions in order change something (e.g. the organization) or learn something (e.g. about themselves).

2.2. Participants of the research

In case of action research, the research team can be formulated in two different ways (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Reason, 1999). On the one hand, (relatively) independent participants can be invited to explore a topic which is interesting for all of them. On the other hand, the demand for research can raise within an already existing group which was formed for some other purpose (e.g. a civil group, local community, etc.) and they create a research group themselves (or invite a trained researcher) (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Gayá Wicks & Reason, 2009). In case of the present research, according to the second option, members of an existing collective engaged themselves in the research process.

This collective called Cargonoma was founded in 2015 by five active citizens involved in local sustainable transition movements in Budapest, Hungary including the author. The mission of this group is to contribute to sustainable transformation toward a socially and environmentally just future by questioning the dominant economic system through practical, educational and research activities. The main activities of the collective cover:

- redistribution and pick up point for local, organic food;

- promotion of sustainable transport logistics by being a centre of cargobike sharing system and supporting cargobike deliveries;
- organization of educational events about organic food production and consumption, sustainable mobility, bike repair workshops as well as about transition and degrowth;
- organization of community events and participation in research via its open space.

The Cargonomia collective works in cooperation with many other organizations including non- and for-profit, informal groups and individuals. Cargonomia operates as an informal group without any legal entity. Among the founders none receives any direct financial income from Cargonomia, nevertheless it indirectly contributes to their paid jobs through gaining experiences and new skills, social networks as well as to their personal wellbeing.

The collective has always been a learning community aimed to experiment an alternative form of social organization with economic and educational activities. The engagement in the AR was an opportunity to improve the organizational performance through deepening understanding about the challenges which the collective faces while navigating through the dominant economic system. My engagement with the collective covers several roles including co-founder, coordinator, friend, researcher, which needed to be taken into account and reflected upon while analysing the results.

2.3. Research cycles

An AR consists of cycles of planning, acting, reflecting and learning. During these cycles, first, the co-researchers identify the problems and plan actions to understand and change them (planning phase). Following the planning phase, the co-researchers carry out the previously planned actions and interventions (action phase). The action phase usually is accompanied by certain data collection methods. At last, the co-researchers reflect both on the result and on the process to be able to learn from the actions (reflection phase) and to be able to start a new cycle incorporating the conclusions of the previous one. An AR consists of several cycles. The cycles are connected to each other, one building on the previous one, but they can be distinct regarding their content, their aim, the type of actions and their time frame.

The research is presented through three research cycles which emerged from the lived experience of the collective (illustrated in Figure 1). The main components of each cycle are summarized in Table 1.

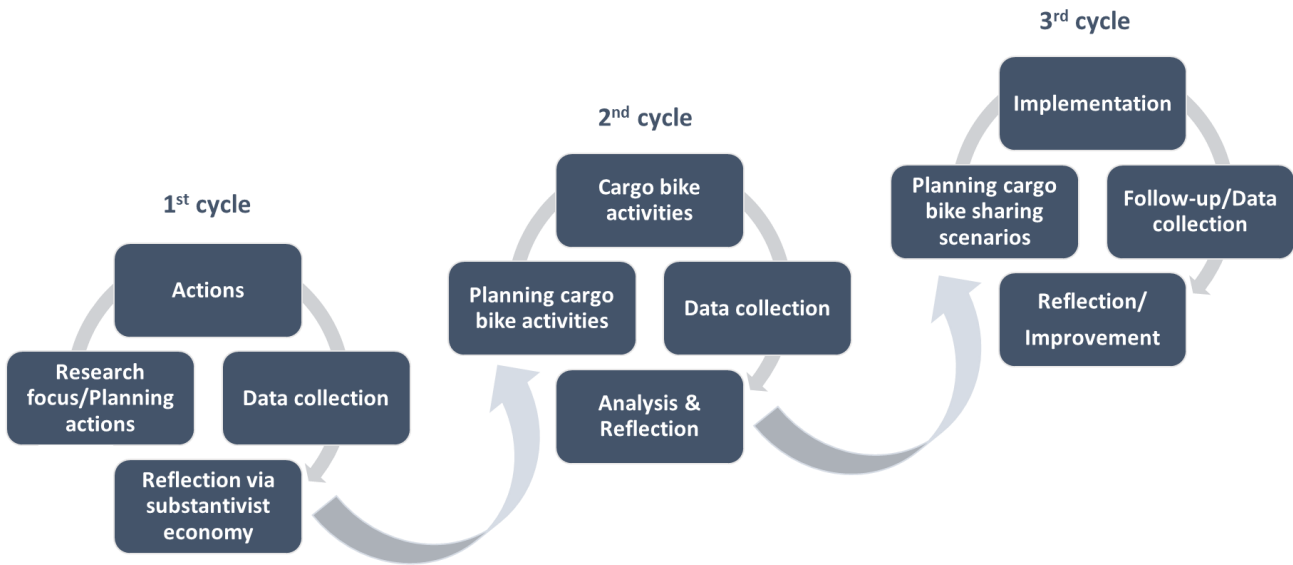


Figure 1. Research cycles. Source: own illustration

	Planning phase	Action phase		Reflection
		Type of action	Data collection method	
Cycle 1	Establishment of the research and identify research focus via organized workshops	Listing historical events organized by the collective		Reflection in a dedicated workshop via the lens of substantive economy
		Organizing events	on-site Participant observation	
Dates	19/12/2016 27/01/2017	27/01/2017-17/08/2017		17/08/2017
Result	Understanding the organization model			
Cycle 2	Explore cargobike usage and the impact of Cargonomia	Listing and analysing historical events organized by the collective		Ongoing reflection in meetings
		On-site cargobike activities	Participant observation	
		Explore cargobike use in general	Literature review	

		Explore the opinion of local cargobike users	Interviews, Focus group discussion	
Date	27/01/2017	27/01/2017-17/07/2018		14/02/2017-17/07/2018
Result	Explore the limits and challenges of cargobike use and the impact of the collective			
Cycle 3	Plan cargobike sharing model via a scenario planning workshop	Implementation of cargobike sharing model	Participant observation, informal offline and online discussions	Ongoing reflection in meetings
Date	05/02/2018	05/02/2018 - 07/09/2018		20/02/2018 - 07/09/2018
Result	Improve cargobike accessibility, deepen understanding of limits and challenges			

Table 1. The main components of the research cycles

2.4. Data analysis

In interpreting the data I build both on the collectively produced knowledge by the co-researchers, and on my own data analysis. The collective interpretations which have emerged during the AR cover collective understandings, analysis and interpretations of the results. These collective understandings form the basis of the AR, the co-construction of knowledge.

During my own analysis which has been carried out individually, I revisited and reviewed the data which have been gathered during the research cycles. This includes both the content (what has happened) and the process (how it happened). I applied a deductive-inductive process to make sense of the data in light of the theoretical background.

The data covers audio records, my research diary, field notes, emails, notes and visual illustrations from meetings and workshops and collectively produced documents. In analysing the rich and diverse empirical records, deductive analysis provides a theoretical sensitivity (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Deductive data analysis is considered as a top-down process, and it refers to being driven by the theoretical framework. Inductive analysis, on the contrary, can be described as being driven by the data (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). Inductive analysis enables to illuminate a diverse picture based on the lived experience, and it ensures

that the knowledge produced is grounded in experience. During data analysis I carried out thematic coding based in the data but having in mind the theoretical background. During coding, I draw on repetitive codes and patterns which emerged from the data and organized them into categories and bigger topics.

The coding was accompanied by a continuous reflection on the theoretical framework. Therefore, the data analysis process can be described as several cycles of coding, reflecting on the theoretical background and organizing codes into bigger topics. It allowed me to be driven by the data but having in mind the research question. The several cycles of sense-making of the data led to the formulation of a few analytical concepts which answer the research question.

My own coding was contrasted with the collectively produced narratives, and the main analytical findings were discussed with the co-researchers. During this workshop the co-researchers shared their opinion and gave their feedback on the analytical results. Based on their contribution, some of the analytical findings were specified and interpretations were clarified.

2.5. Validity

The validity of scientific research refers to the ‘goodness’ of the research. According to Bradbury and Reason (2001) and Levin (2012), in action research the goodness of the research shifts from validity concerns about rationality or goodness of the data to the quest of what is important, what is worthy and what relevant research is. It does not mean that objectivity does not play a role, but subjectivity is accepted, embraced and reflected upon. Therefore, one of main questions of quality is that how subjectivity is treated. According to Levin (2012) the relevance of the research (working on local problems) and high emotional, personal involvement cannot overrule critical and analytical sense. These issues (importance, relevance, emotional field involvement) needs to be addressed to present the trustworthiness of the research.

The quality and validity of the research is described based on the following aspects (Bradbury & Reason, 2001; Levin, 2012; Reason, 2006; Elden & Chisholm, 1993; Csillag, 2012): quality of participation, reflective-practical outcomes and critical reflexivity summarized in Table 2.

Validity ‘criteria’	Description	Implications of the validity ‘criteria’ during the AR
Quality of participation	Level or participation of the co-researchers and their involvement in forming the research questions, participating in actions, data collection and reflection	Define the research aim collectively Involve co-researchers in formulating the research question Engage in dialogue with them to listen their needs and desires Address informal hierarchies and gender issues
Reflective-practical outcomes	Conceptual-propositional integrity of the research: practical problem solving is accompanied by conceptualizing grounded experience to produce scientific knowledge	Provide balance between action and reflection Develop and adopt an analytical and reflective sense Be flexible in following the needs of the co-researchers
Critical subjectivity	High critical-analytical capacity to reveal potential distortions due to the deep field involvement implying that the researchers’ own beliefs, feelings and values can influence the interpretation of empirical evidence	Cycles of action and reflections Consultancy with a critical outsider Reflection on the special roles within the research group

Table 2. The quality and validity of the AR. Own collection

3. Main empirical results

The implications of the radical sustainability on SSE initiatives was explored through the operation of the Cargonomia collective. Based on the empirical results, the answer for the mains research question of the dissertation is that, ecological aspects can be included in the social and solidarity economy theoretically and practically through

- respecting certain environmental principles
- dealing with contradictions
- applying an organizational structure which allows to prioritize environmental and social values over financial gains, and
- redefining the meaning of work.

The following sub-chapters present the implications of the radical sustainability approach on the environmental aspects of SSE initiatives; the contradictions which have emerged based on

the empirical results; the underlying organizational logic which enables to apply strong environmental principles; and some further insights related to the role of work and to the limitations of the research are shared.

3.1. Environmental aspects

The research explored what type of environmental issues a SSE organization can consider in its operation based on a radical approach to sustainability. The literature review suggests that the sustainability of SSE initiatives can be grasped through their products and services and their production processes, their impact on material consumption, their localized character, the behaviour of the members. The empirical findings outline the implications of the radical sustainability approach on these aspects of the SSE initiatives.

One of the consequences of this approach is the significance attributed to the physical limits of economic production which constrains the activities of any economic organizations. On the one hand, they have to minimize their ecological impacts through **reducing energy and resource consumption** in their production processes (Johanisova & Franková, 2013). On the other one, **downsizing material consumption** (or in other words minimizing sales of material goods) is also an important pursuit to respect the physical limits of economic production (Loh & Agyeman, 2019; Kawano, 2018).

Regarding the production processes, the targeted collective of the research does not produce new goods which would require a large amount of raw material. The empirical results highlighted that reduced resource use can, however, be pursued while providing services too. Logistical and infrastructural choices of the Cargonomia collective (through emission-free, low-tech logistical solutions, local, meat-free catering services, and avoiding unnecessary carbon-based transportation) contribute to the radical sustainability approach. These sustainable logistical and infrastructural choices allow the collective to be coherent with its narrative: The vegetarian local food which has been delivered by cargobikes, offered in compostable plates during recycling workshops or presentations about sustainable transition, connects the context to the content.

Concerning the impact on material consumption, SSE initiatives can encourage low level material consumption through decoupling material wealth from satisfying needs / well-being (Henfrey, et al., 2019). The targeted collective of the AR aims to minimize material consumption through encouraging partners and customers to share and reuse tools and

materials. According to the radical sustainability approach, however, the sharing and reusing of goods should not lead to increased consumption (see the rebound effect, Málovics & Bajmócy, 2009). It needs to be accompanied by and embedded in social relations, outside of the realm of market economy. Therefore, as the empirical results demonstrate, the sharing of cargobikes, for example, cannot be accompanied by profit-orientation, because that would lead to increased material assets and to a shift from prioritizing environmental benefits toward financial interests.

Both the above mentioned aspects (reducing resource-use and material consumption) can be touched upon related to the question of technologies. The radical sustainability approach emphasizes the role of **viable technologies** (Gowdy & O'Hara, 1997). In spite of the spread of green, smart, often expensive and exclusive technical solutions globally, the research shed light on the significance of low-resource intensive, locally repairable technologies. Low-tech, or convivial technology phrased by the co-researchers, contributes to reduce resource consumption by reusing materials and by repairing tools. Furthermore, low-tech is not limited to the physical, technical aspect of sustainability; it contributes to democratizing knowledge and to mitigating the dependence on the carbon-intensive, growth oriented economy (Nikolaeva, et al., 2019). Among the activities of the collective, the repair cafés and DIY bike repairing workshops share the know-how about repairing things, and encouraging cargobike use increases the potential to create a transportation system which is less dependent on the global production of oil.

The **localized character** of the SSE initiatives reflects on the hierarchical relation and strong interdependence between economy, society and the natural world. Using local resources, cooperating with local actors, and working for the local community contribute to being responsible for the local context and thus for local natural resources. Initiatives with localized activities and production can take into account the available resources and also the absorptive capacity of the natural environment (Munda, 1997; Gowdy & McDaniel, 1999). If negative environmental externalities are not outsourced to distant places, the initiatives causing the problem can take the responsibility and can take immediate counter-actions (Johanisova & Franková, 2013; Henfrey, et al., 2019).

The empirical results highlight some of the options related to food and logistical solutions to take into account the local environmental context. The results furthermore, confirmed the positive social impact attributed to the cooperation among local actors. Cooperating locally

mutually supports local partners, and contributes to enrich and strengthen local knowledge and capacities. The cooperation with local actors, and therefore localization provides embeddedness in the local social and environmental context (Johanisova & Franková, 2013; Barkin & Lemus, 2014).

The question of sustainability is interlinked with the **behaviour of the members** of SSE initiatives too. According to Mihály (2021) and Johanisova and Franková (2013), the environmental performance of the initiatives is defined by the personal commitment of the members – which is underlined by the empirical results as well. In turn, the organizations can have an impact on their members' behaviour through technical-practical incentives (see examples in Sahakian & Dunand, 2014), or by questioning, debating and discussing personal habits (i.e. organisational culture) as presented in the empirical results. Critical review on personal habits through discussions and personal interactions (in case of the presented AR including jokes), can encourage individuals to change daily habits and behaviour which better respect environmental barriers. The impact on personal level unfolds the interlink between the analytical, macro-, the organizational meso- and the individual, micro level.

3.2. Dealing with contradictions

The empirical results revealed that following a radical sustainability approach is not evident and not easy. In case of the Cargonomia collective, many contradictions and obstacles arise related to the principles of the initiative and to the external, contextual conditions. The empirical results highlight that an alternative initiative committed to radical sustainability faces many contradictions in addition to the potential achievements. Both achievements and failures, however, can contribute to learn and enhance sustainability if they reflected upon.

The strategies of the Cargonomia collective (exploring viable alternatives, accepting compromises, rejecting activities) can serve as guides or starting points for further exploring and implementing coping strategies. The difficulties, contradictions and coping strategies raise awareness to the importance of critical reflection. Alternative organizations questioning the prevailing economic and political status quo has to be able to reflect on systemic contradictions (Quiroz-Niño & Murga-Menoyo, 2017). The ability to critically reflect on analytical-conceptual issues (such as on the complex question of sustainability) through daily activities of an organization can be supported by AR methodology as presented through the empirical case. The cycles of actions and reflections can help to develop and adopt critical stances. Nevertheless, the empirical results reveal that sustainability is not an achievement at a

point in time, but rather a journey over time which requires continuous negotiation, learning, reflecting, evaluating and adapting.

3.3. Organizational structure

The research highlighted that the environmental aspects which have been identified during the research can be followed because decisions are not made based on profit but based on the potential social and environmental impacts. The prioritization of environmental principles becomes possible through, or embedded in, the **organizational structure** of alternative organizations which are distinct from market oriented (or from public) ones (Johanisova & Franková, 2013). The empirical results highlight three aspects of the organizational structure which can enable a SSE initiative to follow strict environmental principles. These aspects are democratic governance, staying small and applying a plural economic model.

The democratic governance structure which – ideally – characterises the SSE initiatives carries the opportunity to make decisions which respect environmental aspects. Democratic decisions enable to follow collective interests rather than individual (financial) interests (Barkin & Lemus, 2014). Democratic governance however which is limited to one-person-one-vote or to similar practices (examples given in Johanisova & Frankova, 2017) does not necessarily lead to environmentally conscious decisions. Furthermore, the common interest of an SSE initiative might seek growing, producing more or offering more services (e.g. to generate more income for the community) which contradicts with strong environmental values.

The empirical results suggest that democratic governance should be accompanied by discussions, debates, questioning goals and assumptions which allow critical reflection (features and practices of a deliberative democratic ideal). The importance of critical sense has been already touched upon related to the contradictions. Critical reflection in the Cargonomia collective is assisted by a diversity of knowledge and experience which is shared among the co-researchers. Linking intellectual and physical work which characterizes the activities of the collective also enables the co-researchers to review practical activities in the light of scientific knowledge. These results suggest that following a radical sustainability approach is a multidisciplinary task which requires the ability to link environmental, social, political and economic issues. Sharing know-how, sharing tasks and information can support the capacity to review and assess a wide range of different disciplines.

Staying small is a goal and an advantage in itself. Remaining relatively small allows the members of the initiative to keep their control over the organization (Johanisova & Franková, 2013) and to follow with their own (environmental) principles: *“to find a balance, and also to avoid an investor and loosing our independency, but to maintain our independency and ability to make our own decisions”* (Member 3, 2017). Furthermore, according to the empirical results, being small-scale guarantees the ‘human face’ of the collective which allows the members to identify themselves with the impacts of the organization and with the organizational culture. The strong commitment and loyalty to the organization and to its activities increases the responsibility toward the local community and to the local environment which are touched by the activities of the collective.

The research revealed that staying small supports the collective to remain locally embedded, to maintain social relations with the direct partners and with the members of the wider community (e.g. citizens of Budapest). These social relations are essential to cooperate through social, reciprocal relations, instead of exclusively through market or bureaucratic ones. The empirical results, thus, reinforce that small-scale initiatives are more likely to be free from existing social, political and infrastructural lock-ins of the carbon-intensive economic system, and to successfully experiment different forms of livelihoods (Penha-Lopes & Henfrey, 2019). Altogether, the absence of the pressure of growth contributes to the operation of an organisation in which moral decisions are not overruled by profit generation.

Staying small, however, may contradict with the desires of Cargonomia collective to increase its social impact. Increased impact can be reached in case of such initiatives which pursuit social change, through the replication of the activities/projects instead of scaling up through the size of the organization (Vickers & Lyon, 2014). Another strategy to increase the positive impacts is to create networks of initiatives with similar interests, for instance, along value chains (Kumbamu, 2018; Loh & Agyeman, 2019). The replication of the initiative was perceived challenging by the co-researchers, due to the implications of the special organizational structure. But creating networks through local and international partnership was identified as one of the main strengths of the collective. Networks of SSE initiatives can mutually support each other against market pressures, and local partnerships also contribute to the local embeddedness of the organization.

The plurality in the economy which describes the different principles of economic relations on macro level, also refers to the form of involvement of resources within SSE initiatives

(Laville & Nyssens, 2000). Non-monetary and non-market relations are emphasized beyond market exchange, which differentiates SSE initiatives from market-oriented ones. Inspired by existing studies (Lemaitre & Helmsing, 2012; Mihály, 2017), the empirical research revealed the diversity of resources involved in the operation of the Cargonomia collective through the operationalization of Polanyi's concept of the substantive economy. Beyond the practical outcome of providing a better explanation of the rationale of the collective, the results also demonstrate links between the plural economic model and the radical sustainability approach.

The **plural economic model** allows the collective to step out from the growth-oriented, market economy which has been identified fundamental to comply with a critical environmental approach (Johanisova & Franková, 2013; Penha-Lopes & Henfrey, 2019). It creates a balance between different resources – which can be accessed through reciprocal relations, redistribution, market exchange and the combination of these – and, thus, eases the dependence exclusively on market exchange. The plural economic model, relying on socially embedded economic relations in addition to monetary income, such as cooperation based on barter, donations, and other in-kind contributions, liberates grassroots, economic initiatives from financial pressure. Therefore, income-generation does not have to be prioritized over social and environmental principles.

Furthermore, the emphasis on socially embedded relations can directly contribute to minimize resource demand through sharing, reusing and putting tools in common. Instead of buying and investing in new assets (which would increase resource consumption), resources can be accessed through social relations: *"We value the importance of social interaction as opposed to financial exchanges and benefits – which is the core of environmental issues, it should be in the core of sustainability discussions that to reduce your environmental footprint you cannot produce the same amount of profit but you have to prioritize social interactions"* (Member 2, 2016). The plural economic model allows a locally embedded initiative to access available resources within its network without high financial engagement while minimizing its negative environmental impact.

3.4. The role of work within the SSE

Last but not least, the empirical result revealed important insights related to the question of work within SSE initiatives. The empirical results reveal, that to follow an alternative organizational structure cannot be possible without strong personal commitment. In case of the presented AR, members of the collective **apply the plural understanding of the**

economy on the individual level as well. Members of a collective which relies on the plural economy, have to move away from satisfying their own needs exclusively through monetary income. Non-monetary and non-market goods can also contribute to individual well-being, which can be appreciated and valued while participating in such a collective. In the empirical case under discussion, the co-researchers can rely on locally produced, organic food, access to land, cargobikes, skills they develop during activities, joy, experienced community, knowledge on repairing things, conviviality, network – in-kind and material resources which they gain through their membership of the collective. It does not mean that earning monetary income through paid jobs becomes unnecessary. In case of the co-researchers, however, a full reliance on having a paid job is less of a need due to the fact that they can also count on the diversity of resources what they can get access to through their membership in the Cargonomia collective.

The implications of the plural economic model on the individual level suggest that SSE initiatives are capable of **redefining the meaning of work**. Work in the empirical case is not primarily marked by monetary income, but by the value which is created for the local community, by joy and by meaningful activities: *“it is much easier to keep something alive which does not pursuit profit, where profit is not in the centre, because you can do what you like to do, also if you don’t get money for it. Then, you have to find survival possibilities, but that can be done based on what you know and what you are able to do”* (Member 4, 2016). Work within the collective is considered a process which allows self-realization while creating benefits for the society: *“You don't separate your professional capacities from your activist tendencies and desires”* (Member 2, 2018) / *“We question division of work, not based on economic rationality but based on human interaction and what makes sense for the local community and to the society”* (Member 3, 2016).

To give an accurate definition of work goes beyond the ambitions of the present dissertation. But raising critique against the meaning of work as a tool for income generation, links the SSE to the critical ecological discourse (see Köves, 2015). Within the SSE literature, the role of paid workers and volunteers often emerges (Laville & Nyssens, 2001; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013). Beyond the dichotomy between paid and unpaid employees, however, the diversity of provisioning, reciprocal relations which describe the participation in SSE initiatives, can be conceptualized as the decommodification of work. To extend the meaning of work to unpaid, non-monetary, reciprocal and non-market activities based on a holistic

understating of work (Nierling, 2012; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) can further strengthen the critical aspect of the SSE.

The implications of decommodifying work in relation to sustainability is that, it can shape social imaginaries which has been identified as one of the blockades to move away from the desire for material consumption (Mihály, 2021). It has been argued that shifting the emphasis from satisfying human needs through material consumption to satisfying needs through social relations can contribute to downsizing material consumption (Kallis, 2012; Hayden, 1999; Nierling, 2012). Social relations can compensate for reducing material goods (Penha-Lopes & Henfrey, 2019). The empirical results highlight that SSE initiatives can contribute to decouple well-being from material consumption by reconceptualising work through personal experience.

3.5. Limits

The empirical findings of the AR reveal that following a radical sustainability approach is more complex than offering environmentally-friendly services or products. Sustainability, in addition to technical solutions, is interlinked with **social, economic and political processes**. The application of the plural economic model carries the opportunity to follow a radical sustainability approach. The personal commitment on which the activities of the Cargonomia collective lies demonstrates the most limiting factor of the model.

"It's somewhat a shame that you have to be at the point of being privileged in your life to be able to say that I am going to choose only to do what I want to do and what I believe in. You have to be lucky. That is sad with the current system." (Member 2, 2021)

The co-researchers, based on their own testimonies and reflections, need to self-organize themselves in their personal lives to be able to allocate time for earning income, practicing political activism, and for leisure and caring activities. The time-share among these activities is not dominated by the desire for earning more and more income. Instead of pursuing continuous increase in personal income, the co-researchers invest a part of their time and energy in the activities of the collective. The ability of self-organization, however, creates a significant exclusivity to involve further members within the collective:

"It is an obstacle that we can only involve people who can self-organize themselves like us." (Member 5, 2017)

"It is challenging to participate in an organization which is "largely based on volunteer time, especially in the local environment where people do not necessarily have the financial comfort to give 2 or 3 hours on the way home from work to something, is demanding from our members, so it's even hard to meet regularly, you need to be a very efficient communicators to be sure that everybody has the chance to express their opinions, their ideas, the goals for the organization" (Member 2, 2016)

Furthermore, the empirical reality reveals that personal conditions are shifting. It can occur that developments in personal lives, e.g. having a child, moving abroad or other changes in personal desires, restrain the opportunity of sharing personal capacities among paid job and other unpaid, reciprocal activities. It means, however, that while some of the members are becoming more reliant on paid jobs because of changing personal responsibilities, others may become available for investing volunteer time in the collective.

The opportunity to share one's life in such a diversified way lies in the personal resources and capacities of the co-researchers, including social capital, level of education, access to social networks, family background, etc. Such a diversity and richness of social capacities usually characterizes the middle class. The fact that for a significant part of the society such resources are unavailable limits the opportunity to generalize the empirical findings. Therefore, the analytical findings and results are highly contextual and they can be understood within social groups which acquire such resources. The application of similar findings across social groups would require further investigation.

Further limitations of the empirical results concern the components of the radical sustainability approach which have been presented in Table 6 in Chapter 2.3.3. Even though there is a potential connection with the ecocentric approach of the SSE (see Loh & Agyeman, 2019, Miller, 2010 and Barkin & Lemus, 2014), the intrinsic value of nature and natural beings related to the empirical case remained unexplored. Furthermore, the empirical results suggest that the use of money plays a different role within the initiative compared to the mainstream economy. The scope of the dissertation however did not cover exploring this issue deeper.

Limits related to the methodology concern the generalizability of the results. Given the fact that the empirical results of an AR rely on one unique case, the research findings are often contextual and cannot be universalized beyond the case (Coghlan, 2019). Taking into account

the specific context of the research and the case, the meta-analysis which was applied to review the whole AR process allows to construct robust analytical conclusions. Furthermore, the deep engagement of co-researchers, the embeddedness of the research, both its practical and theoretical outcomes enriches the research process and enhancing its practical validity which would have been impossible with other, conventional research methodologies. Based on the personal testimony of the co-researchers, the research can be considered an experimentation of personal transformation to move away from the conventional habits locked in the prevailing economic system:

„Cargonomia is an experimentation what happens if the basic needs of the people are fulfilled (even in cash or in gift economy) and so when you have some kind of security what kind of solidarity behaviour can emerge from this type of situation” if they in their 'free' time they come together to do thing” (Member 3, 2017)

"If we didn't start to explore these other ways which we can support our initiative, probably we wouldn't have gone where we are now. We learned these things as we went along." (Member 2, 2018).

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