

# **transformative social innovation theory**



## **The role of social learning in transformative social innovations**

**TRANSIT Working Paper #5**

**Adina Dumitru, Isabel Lema-Blanco, Iris Kunze, Ricardo García-  
Mira**



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**About TRANSIT:**

TRANSIT is an international research project that develops a theory of Transformative Social Innovation that is useful to both research and practice. It is co-funded by the European Commission and runs for four years, from 2014 until 2017. The TRANSIT consortium consists of 12 partners across Europe and Latin America. For more information, please visit our website: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>.

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Contact: Adina Dumitru; e-mail: [adina.dumitru@udc.es](mailto:adina.dumitru@udc.es)

## Abstract

Social learning has become a buzzword within academic, practitioner and policy-making circles. The literature on social learning currently spans several academic disciplines and there has been a proliferation of overlapping and sometimes contradictory definitions of the concept (Reed et al., 2010). Also, the concept of social learning is infused with assumptions about its relationships to capacities for active engagement in decision-making, transformative agency and empowerment, and these assumptions are rarely critically examined, or empirically-grounded.

In order for social innovation initiatives to engage in transformative change, defined as change that challenges, alters and/or replaces established dominant institutions in a specific socio-material context, we contend that there are two prerequisites: first, they need to be able to build a project/initiative that attracts and maintains membership; and secondly, they need to develop effective strategies to engage with different elements in the socio-material context, including other actors, ideas, institutions and existing relations of power. Although social learning can also be approached as the process through which particular communities or societies reach a change in their collective understanding, we are focusing here particularly on how SI initiatives and networks become effective agents of change and how social learning processes might contribute to both the construction of the initiative itself as well as to effective strategies to pursue its goals and achieve the desired impact.

Based on a critical review of the literature on social learning and TRANSIT empirical data, we propose an analytical framework that differentiates between types of learning, learning environments, methods or conditions for social learning, outcomes of social learning processes and actors that facilitate or play a role in promoting it. This framework is then applied to a selection of empirical cases (Slow Food, Credit Unions and Ecovillage Movement). The results obtained stress the importance of social learning environments in creating adequate conditions to link experiences, reflection, and experimentation between individuals and groups. Thus, four main categories of social learning outcomes have been identified in SI initiatives and networks: 1) changes in understandings and framing that lead to new narratives; 2) changes in the quality and characteristics of social relations; 3) empowerment; and 4) changes in behaviours and strategies for action. Finally, we reflect on how wider societal learning promoted by SI initiatives might lead to a series of transformational outcomes, which might contribute challenging, altering or replacing current social systems and institutions.

**Keywords:** social learning, social innovation, transformative change, empowerment, agency

## 1. Introduction

The TRANSIT project aims to develop a middle-range theory of transformative social innovation through a combination of deductive theoretical reasoning and extended empirical research on 20 transnational networks of social innovation initiatives, and around 80 local initiatives in Europe and Latin America. Social innovation has been defined in TRANSIT as “a change in social relations that challenges, alters or replaces dominant institutions in the social context, including new ways of knowing, doing, framing and organizing” (Haxeltine et al., 2015:29). The synthesis of empirical results is guided by four cross-cutting themes: governance, social learning, monitoring and resourcing.

Learning in general, and social learning in particular, is increasingly considered a desirable and normative goal within democratic processes that rely on stakeholder engagement (Reed et al., 2010) and has become a buzzword within academic, practitioner and policy-making circles. The literature on social learning currently spans several academic disciplines (e.g. philosophy, psychology, sociology, educational sciences, organizational studies, environmental management etc.), and there has been a proliferation of overlapping and sometimes contradictory definitions of the concept (Reed et al., 2010). However, in spite of such proliferation, there is still considerable need for conceptual clarity in the definition of the concept which might then guide appropriate measurement of its multi-faceted dimensions. Also, the concept of social learning is infused with assumptions about its relationships to capacities for active engagement in decision-making, transformative agency and empowerment, and these assumptions are rarely critically examined, or empirically-grounded.

The project adopts a co-production approach to social innovation and a perspective of agency as having a dispersed “rhizomic” nature (Scott Cato & Hillier, 2010), but is primarily interested in the agency of individuals, networks and fields and how they engage with different elements of the socio-material context in which they operate and thus play a role in bringing about a change in social relations, involving new ways of doing, organizing, framing and knowing (Haxeltine et al., 2016). As our focus is on understanding how social innovation initiatives and networks become effective agents of change, we have posited social learning as a potentially important set of processes through which the conditions for effective agency might be created. In order for social innovation initiatives to engage in transformative change, defined as change that challenges, alters and/or replaces established dominant institutions in a specific socio-material context, we contend that there are two prerequisites: first, they need to be able to build a project/initiative that attracts and maintains membership; and secondly, they need to develop effective strategies to engage with different elements in the socio-material context, including other actors, ideas, institutions and existing relations of power. Although social learning can also be approached as the process through which particular communities or societies reach a change in their collective understanding, we are focusing here particularly on how SI initiatives and networks become effective agents of change and how social learning processes might contribute to both the construction of the initiative itself as well as to effective strategies to pursue its goals and achieve the desired impact. The questions we focus on in this paper are: What types of social learning are necessary and through which methods is it acquired, in order for SI initiatives and networks to exhibit effective agency? (what is being learned and how is it being learned?) And what are the mechanisms through which social learning contributes to the construction of transformative agency? (what are the outcomes of social learning that are relevant for transformative agency). Furthermore, transformative change requires social learning that can be situated at different scales, and social innovation agents, often either intentionally actively shape such processes to achieve diffusion of new ideas and practices. Although this paper will mainly focus on how the

initiatives and networks themselves become effective agents of change, we do not ignore the relevance of such outward-oriented social learning processes and the role they play in the transformative impact of SI initiatives/networks. In keeping with the difference established between transformative ambition, potential and impact (Haxeltine et al., 2016), the focus here is on how social learning contributes to the transformative potential of SI initiatives and networks.

The present paper will be structured as follows: first, we review the concept of social learning and build on a definition that can be useful in the context of transformative social innovation, based on a brief overview of the literature and on theoretical developments within the TRANSIT project (sections 2 and 3). Secondly, we describe the empirical methodology used to understand social learning in social innovation initiatives and networks. Based on the empirical data, we propose an analysis framework that unpacks the multi-faceted nature of social learning. The analysis differentiates between methods or conditions for social learning, types of learning, outcomes of social learning processes and actors that facilitate or play a role in promoting it. This framework is then applied to a selection of empirical cases (section 4). Finally, we will look at wider processes of societal learning for transformative change, by focusing on the methods SI networks use to promote social learning, the scales of change they target through these and what outcomes can be assessed when analysing transformative impact of social innovations (Section 5).

## 2. Agency and transformative social innovation in TRANSIT

Social innovation has become a hot topic in policy discourses across Europe (Haxeltine et al., 2013). This has been reflected in policy documents such as the Bureau of Policy Advisers (BEPA) report, that have considered social innovation a potentially useful response to important and complex societal problems related to the recent economic crisis, environmental challenges related to climate change and social problems such as decreased cohesion, inequality and poverty (Avelino et al., 2015). Policy enthusiasm with social innovation is infused with assumptions about its potential for driving important social change and bringing about positive outcomes such as higher equality, wellbeing, and empowerment (Avelino et al., *forthcoming*), and TRANSIT has set out to submit these assumptions to critical scrutiny and to analyse the extent and the mechanisms through which social innovation can deliver on such high promises and expectations. As the many societal problems we now confront are considered to require fundamental systemic changes (Haxeltine et al., 2016), the transformational and empowering potential of social innovation is not self-evident (Avelino et al., *forthcoming*).

Scholars have also pointed out that social innovation is viewed as a normative instrument which will resolve social problems through the creation of new products and services (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). The Bureau of Policy Advisers definition of social innovation considering it to be “innovation that is social in both its ends and means” (BEPA, 2010), has been criticized for assuming an intentionality that is not always warranted (Franz et al., 2012). In TRANSIT, we have argued that neither the intention nor the outcome should be included in the definition of social innovation (Haxeltine et al., 2016) and we argue that such normative assumptions about the purpose of social innovation rely on overly simplistic conceptions of agency. TRANSIT project adopts a rich ontology of agency that is distributed and not confined to human actors, although it is also particularly interested in the agency of human actors, considered to be locally rooted and globally connected, and active in porous fields, rather than well-demarcated systems (Cf. Nicholls & Murdoch, 2012, cited in Haxeltine et al., 2016), and it has set itself the theoretical challenge of resolving the linkages and feedbacks between individuals, social activities and the wider socio-material context in which social innovation takes place. Moreover, the “transformative” dimension of agency is conceptualized as an emerging property of relationships among diverse actors in complex social and institutional contexts, and not an intrinsic characteristic of any particular actor

's strategies for action. Social innovation initiatives can have transformative ambitions, but radical social change is the result of co-production, and characterized by complex interactions among diverse actors, objects and ideas in a given socio-material context.

Furthermore, sociologists (Tönnies, 1987; 2002) have concluded that social behavior arises from everyday interaction and living together, subsequently creating communal structures. From this perspective, social innovation initiatives can be seen as fields where communal structures are permanently created. Already in medieval times, in Europe the major social infrastructure changed from small-scale, personal systems of trade to larger, anonymous economic organizations. The traditional community that lived and worked together was substituted on the one side by private nuclear families in reproductive households and on the other side by forms of official employment in commercial enterprises. Historical research on “communalism” during this medieval process of change in Europe has suggested that all governmental and institutional structures result from social processes and communal living – personal-based social organizations that the social innovations of today are re-inventing in a new manner (Kunze 2012). While having mainly occurred in Europe, this transformation has produced effects in other parts of the worlds in early modern times through colonialization. It has created a variety of combinations between traditional and modern social relations that can be observed in different parts of the world. In a nutshell communality has lost its dominance to societal institutions in the changing process from medieval times to modernity mainly in the Western world and to some degree in all modern societies (Kunze 2012). From the perspective of liberalism, the modern ‘loss of community’ can be seen as empowerment and liberalization from traditional, oppressive, small-scale communities. In this interpretation, modern societies afford individuals agency to choose their religion, lifestyle, and occupation. In practice, it can be observed that the modern ‘loss of community’ has produced ambivalent results between freedom and alienation that has led to the *colonialization of the life world* (Habermas 1984).

We have argued elsewhere that agency relies on the capacity for purposive action and the capacity to imagine new ways of being, new relationships and new ways of doing (Haxeltine et al., 2015). Although these capacities depend themselves on the biological, social and cultural contexts that inform and shape who we are, they cannot be considered mere effects of these contexts. The concept of agency has many times been given connotations of free will, understood as a result of our cognitive/rational capacities for understanding options and choosing according to our own criteria. However, in TRANSIT, we go beyond such conceptualizations of agency to include its relational dimensions—seeing it as a central feature of the relational, embodied person, embedded within dynamically evolving social and interactive contexts. Agency is not a static set of capacities, but rather a fluid process through which individuals and groups direct their actions to effect change at individual and interpersonal levels and in the context in which they exist. Agentic capacities are thus conceptualized as emergent, embodied and experiential, and: “this process always evolves within an inter-subjective field and cannot be understood as the function of a disengaged, rational mind” (2008, p.36). Understanding SI has to be informed by an understanding of how individuals organized in groups imagine, experiment with and promote alternative ways of knowing, organizing, framing and doing; and how they organize action in ways that challenges, alters or replaces dominant institutions in the (socio-material) context. We posit that experimenting with new ways of knowing, doing, organizing and framing entails a deconstruction of assumptions and values underlying current societal arrangements; the imagining and construction of an alternative, which includes the articulation of a coherent discourse to express it and the pathways to reach it, which have been conceptualized as narratives of change in TRANSIT, attracting and maintaining membership, resolving difference and conflict. Finally, organizing action relies on the capacity of effective adaptation to complex and dynamic circumstances, which requires reflexive adjustment of strategies in response to these. We will use empirical evidence to characterize social learning processes that contribute to these conditions of effective agency.



### 3. The concept of social learning

Social learning suffers from some of the same problems as the concept of social innovation: it is infused with positive assumptions about its nature and the potential to bring about desired normative outcomes such as empowerment, higher capacities for deliberation and consensual decision-making, higher trust and cohesion, and increased capacities for action; it lacks clear conceptualizations that transcend specific issue- and policy contexts such as natural resource management; and while there is a lot of normative discussion about the concept and illustrations of applied processes targeting learning in a particular context, the literature on social learning lacks clear distinctions among the different dimensions of learning, which could inform assessment and evaluation methods in different contexts.

We argue that in order for transformative social innovation to be possible, members of SI initiatives need to learn how to work together effectively at different scales (e.g. local, regional, transnational) and how to effectively engage with the changing socio-material context in order to pursue their stated goals. Empirical evidence in TRANSIT suggests that initiatives are aware of the importance of these learning processes and they actively shape them, both internally (within the initiative) and externally, to achieve a series of objectives that they reflexively define. Formal and informal reflexive processes are a key part of social learning efforts.

However, although promoting social learning is hailed as a key dimension of transformative agency by social innovators, there is a blatant lack of research and evidence regarding the characteristics of learning processes, contexts and actors, as well as of its outcomes in terms of capacities for effective agency in social innovation initiatives. Also, little research is available on the wider societal learning processes that social innovation initiatives might attempt to promote in their efforts to challenge, alter or replace institutions and the outcomes such processes might have on actually achieving transformative change. TRANSIT has taken up the challenge to propose an organizing framework for social learning in social innovation initiatives that would bring conceptual clarity and open up possibilities for their reflexive monitoring and assessment by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers.

Initial conceptualizations of social learning came from psychological studies of individual processes of learning and the social influences that explained the acquisition of values, norms and behaviour. Early studies of learning through imitation of models and the observation of the consequences of others' behaviour (Bandura, 1977), or through active experimentation (Kolb, 1984, 2001) pointed to the fundamental social nature of learning, highlighting the mechanisms through which social values and frames for behaviour are transmitted from generation to generation, and pointing to the active rather than passive nature of learning through the constant reformulation of the meaning of one's experiences. These studies also stressed the role of *social interactions* in the construction of the meaning of individual experience. Posing the question of how more radical individual transformation might be promoted by learning processes, theories of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1997) contributed insights into how deep changes in values, beliefs and behaviour might lead to autonomous, liberated and pro-active individuals that can then imagine and pursue radically different courses of action, thus becoming effective agents in processes of transformative social change.

Understanding how individuals become liberated from internalized dominant institutions, and how they elaborate them through processes of integration and identification (Haxeltine et al., 2016, Ryan and Deci, 2000) provides a basis for conceptualizing agency in social innovation and for providing an answer to the question of how new frames and ideas for solutions to pressing societal problems are possible in the first place. However, transformative social innovation also requires an understanding of how collectives learn and adopt new ways of doing, organizing, framing and knowing. Organizational studies provide insight into how groups and organizations

learn through interaction and collaboration, and have looked at the types of social interactions that provide the context for learning to take place (Argyris & Schon, 1978, 1996; Lave and Wenger, 1991). Such studies stress the importance of *learning contexts*, as spaces where stakeholders meet and engage and also focus on the governance structures that shape them. Appropriate social learning spaces are considered to be those that create the adequate conditions to link experiences, reflection, interaction and experimentation between individuals and groups (Reed et al., 2010; Armitage, 2008; Bess et al, 2011) as well as making connections with other communities (Blackmore, 2012). Through the “Communities of Practice” approach, such learning contexts have become institutionalized in domains as diverse as health, police services, farming, environmental regulation and management or education.

Beyond particular organizations or policy domains, political theories analysing democratic processes have included social learning in explanations of social change. Habermas’s theory of communicative action (1984) has stressed the public’s capacity to solve problems of societal relevance, by stressing the fact that actors in society seek to reach common understandings and to coordinate actions by reasoned argument, consensus, and cooperation rather than undertake strategic action strictly in pursuit of their own goals. Based on this, it has been argued that social learning requires the creation or enhancement of a social space for “communicative action”, for example, through new social movements. In this way, social learning may contribute to the changing of social networks and institutional structures, through the deliberation and negotiation of new rules, norms and power relations (Rist et al., 2007 in Reed et al, 2010). The analysis carried out in social innovation initiatives within TRANSIT shows that, beyond rules for negotiation and deliberation that encourage equality, having each voice heard and participation, such spaces also need to encourage active experimentation with alternatives. Creating effective conditions for experimentation and for the translation of lessons learnt into strategies for action are important outcomes of social learning processes.

Many contemporary societal challenges such as economic and environmental crises, are characterized by complexity and uncertainty, and require collective problem-solving and decision-making in order to avoid drastic consequences. Accounting for the lack of clear positions on issues that are nevertheless personally and collectively relevant, a recent school of thought has defined social learning as a process of social change, in which learning takes place in interaction and in ways that can benefit social-ecological systems (Folke et al., 2005; Reed et al., 2010). Adopting this position, an extensive body of literature has analysed social learning processes in natural resource management such as water, land, or wildlife (Ison, 2013; Ison et al, 2007, Pahl-Wostl et al, 2013; Schusler et al., 2003; Brummel et al. 2010; (Measham, 2009; Webler et al., 1995; Dedeurwaerdere, 2009; Buck et al, 2001; Wollenberg et al, 2000; Blatner et al, 2001). Social learning is conceptualized as both action and reflection which may enhance environmental resilience and adaptive capacity through involvement (Reed et al., 2010), experimentation and reflective practice in decision making processes (Armitage et al., 2008; Borowski & Pahl-Wostl, 2008; Muro & Jeffrey, 2008; Reed et al, 2010; Rodela et al, 2012; Rodela, 2013).

Within this collaborative and adaptive management framework, social learning has been defined as “the collective action and reflection that takes place among both individuals and groups when they work to improve the management of the interrelationships between social and ecological systems” (Keen et al., 2005:4). The contextual nature of social learning processes is emphasized, in terms of the places in which they occur, the experiences from which they arise, and the cultures with which they are associated (Keen & Mahanty, 2006). A similar approach has been applied to the analysis of transitions and strategic niche management (Raven, Van den Bosch & Weterings, 2010; Pesch, 2015) highlighting the crucial role of reflexive learning for facing social challenges and stimulating sustainability transitions (Schäpke et al, 2013).

In efforts towards further conceptual clarification, different types or objects of learning have been identified by studies within the field of natural resource management. Also following the theory of



transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1991), Pahl-Wostl and colleagues (2007, 2013) proposed two different categories/types of learning: a) a theoretical/instrumental type, which implies the acquisition of new knowledge or skills through task-oriented problem solving and determination of cause and effect relationships, and b) communicative learning (related to understanding and reinterpreting knowledge through communication with others) that may lead to change in attitudes, values, beliefs, worldviews, and social norms, considered a requirement in sustainability transitions (Pahl-Wostl *et al.*, 2008).

Besides processes, contexts and mechanisms of learning, different outcomes are emphasized as relevant in the social learning literature, ranging from the development of liberated, autonomous and socially responsible individuals with a capacity to move from critical thinking to action within the “communities of practice” approach (Armitage, et al, 2008; Kitchenham, 2008), to deep shifting in societal worldviews, including underlying norms and values, power structures and new regulatory frameworks (Pahl-Wostl et al, 2013).

In spite of the intense proliferation of analyses of social learning, a critical review of the literature undertaken recently has identified three key problems that impede conceptual clarity: confusions between the concept of social learning and the methods or conditions necessary to facilitate it, such as stakeholder participation; between the process and the outcomes of social learning (e.g. improvement management of social-ecological systems, enhanced trust, adaptive capacity, empowerment, etc.); and little distinction between individual and wider social learning (Reed et al., 2010). In order to differentiate between the processes or mechanisms of social learning and their effects, and to bring further conceptual clarity, the authors propose a definition of social learning as “a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social networks” (p.4-5).

This definition provides a good starting point for explorations of social learning processes in contexts of social innovation. We agree with Reed et al (2010) that social learning processes need to be separated from contexts and methods that facilitate it as well as from the outcomes sought through such processes; that a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual is required, and we consider that this should be studied at two different levels in social innovation: within the initiative/network – which already constitutes a wider social unit; and in the interaction between the social innovation initiatives/networks and the wider social context, especially focusing on how SI initiatives actively promote social learning in their efforts to fulfil their goals, at different scales (e.g. a local community, a particular political region or entity, a globally connected society etc.). Finally, we agree with Reed et al (2010) that social interactions between actors are a key differentiating element of processes of social learning, as opposed to individual learning.

However, we further argue that in the context of transformative social innovation, social learning goes beyond a change in understanding that becomes situated in wider social units, to include a change in the quality and type of relations among actors, which encompasses changes in collective meanings/understandings, the reshaping of identities, and new rules and norms of interaction. What follows from this addition is that contexts of learning thus need to facilitate experimentation with, reflection on, emotional learning and personal growth, and negotiation of new relations; the types/objects of learning have to include the development of relational and strategic/political types of knowledge beyond theoretical/instrumental and communicative forms, and the analysis of social learning outcomes would shift from an emphasis on new understandings and capacities for action, to the establishment of new relations between different societal actors. Finally, the social learning literature provides little mention of the different actors that play a role in such processes and the different functions they fulfil. We will discuss social learning actors within the context of social innovation initiatives.

The next sections will describe the empirical approach to the study of social learning and present the integrated framework used for the analysis of results.

## 4. Studying social learning in transformative social innovation initiatives

The TRANSIT project uses an embedded case study approach to ground and develop a middle-range theory of transformative social innovation (TSI). The analysis of the empowerment of (networked) actors, the processes through which they gain the capacities towards influencing the co-evolutionary process of transformation revolves around four crosscutting themes: governance, social learning, resourcing and monitoring (Jørgensen et al., 2014, chap. 6).

Research methodology consisted of case-study document analysis, empirical observation and in-depth interviews with practitioners and other relevant social actors (Jørgensen et al., 2014; Wittmayer et al., 2015c). The semi-structured questionnaire that guided the interviews contained questions specifically targeting the complex processes of social learning in terms of the existing types of learning, actors, processes of transference and learning outcomes (Jørgensen et al., 2014). Specifically, TRANSIT researchers looked for the relationship between social learning and individual and collective agency and empowerment -understood as an instrumental manifestation of agency- (Wittmayer et al., 2015c) that occurs within the SI-initiative/SI-network and beyond the SI-initiative/SI-network (the broader context).

We adopted a deductive-inductive approach to the analysis of the empirical data gathered in the 20 case-studies. First, we reviewed the existing literature as outlined in Section 3, which led to differentiating between: a) objects or types of learning b) contexts or spaces of learning, including the governance arrangements that characterize them; c) methods intended to promote social learning (e.g. deliberation, linking experience and reflection etc.); and d) outcomes of learning. Based on TRANSIT definition of transformative social innovation, entailing a change in social relations which involves new ways of knowing, framing, organizing and doing, we focused attention on how spaces, methods, types of learning and outcomes contribute to achieving the preconditions for effective agency, which includes new understandings, the generation of possibilities to experiment with alternatives, especially in terms of new social relations, and building adaptive capacity to dynamic circumstances in the social context.

Secondly, we proceeded to an analysis of empirical data obtained through semi-structured qualitative interviews in two case studies: Slow Food Araba, Slow Food Freiburg and Slow Food International- the headquarter organization of the Slow Food movement; and Fiare Banca Etica (Spain) and Febea, the European Federation of Credit Cooperatives and Ethical Banks. Specific sections of the analysis have also been enlarged with empirical data from an ecovillage case study (see Box 1 for a description of the three cases). Additionally, we have used qualitative data from participant observation and document analysis. Interviews were content-analysed in terms of the categories of social learning phenomena described above. Analysis was carried out inductively at first, grouping content into emerging categories of analysis in the tradition of modified versions of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). We then used the analytical framework to check for consistency with categories encountered in the empirical data. This resulted in adding subcategories, as well as to the creation of a new category of types of actors that play a key role in social learning for transformative social innovation. Table 1 describes the final analytical framework we arrived at through this process, and signals which elements were added as a result of the empirical analysis of the two case studies. Finally, a last step was included where the analytical framework was checked by using the reports of the remaining 18 TRANSIT case study reports, and social learning content as reported by case study researchers was matched to the

analytical framework, which led to further confirmation of its validity. Next, analyses of social learning dimensions are illustrated with examples from the three empirical case studies presented in Box 1.

#### Box 1. Description of empirical case studies

**Slow Food International Association**<sup>1</sup> is a global, grassroots organization, based in Bra (Italy), which has 100.000 members and one million supporters in 160 countries around the world. **Slow Food** acts as an umbrella organization for its local groups (“convivia”) that work to promote a new food system that changes systems of food production, consumption and distribution in both the global North and the global South. **Slow Food** pursues cultural, environmental and social goals built around the right to food, food sovereignty and biodiversity protection. In this paper we present results of the case study on the International Association of Slow Food and two local manifestations: the Spanish convivium “Slow Food Araba-Vitoria” (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country) and the German convivium “Slow Food Freiburg” (Germany).

**Credit unions and financial cooperatives** are initiatives that aim to create a framework for an alternative financial system that is member-owned, with the potential to operate a profound change in traditional economic systems. Empirical illustrations in this paper will also be provided from the study of focused on FEBEA (European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks) and the Spanish initiative FIARE BANCA ETICA.

**The Global Ecovillage Network** was founded in 1995 as a bottom-up network of ecovillages around the world and has about 400 local ecovillages as members worldwide, including approximately 130 in Europe. With a great variety of ecovillage concepts, a common characteristic is the aim at providing realistic, holistic experiences in sustainable and community-based living often including small scale economy, communal property of land, commons and local gardening. Ecovillages illustrate an indirect societal impact by teaching their best practice methods. In ecovillages social learning is a main target with transformative ambition, expressed in the key description of an ecovillage the international board of GEN agreed upon in 2012: “An ecovillage is an intentional or traditional community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes to regenerate social and natural environments.” (GEN int. board 2012). **Schloss Tempelhof** is a young and popular ecovillage in Southern Germany with an own innovative school and a large seminar centre.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes from Slow Food International Association will be introduced in the analysis as “SFI”. Quotes from Slow Food Araba Vitoria will be cited as “SFAV”.

Table 1. Analytical framework to the analysis of social learning in transformative social innovations

<b>Analytical framework to the analysis of social learning in TSI</b>	
<b>Types of learning</b>	<p><b>Cognitive learning</b>  <b>Inner, personal transformation and emotional learning</b>  <b>Relational learning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting high-quality motivation of members</li> <li>• Learning to participate in cooperative decision-making</li> <li>• Developing communication and leadership skills</li> <li>• Intercultural learning</li> <li>• Learning with and between different social milieus</li> </ul> <p><b>Strategic/political learning</b></p>
<b>Learning environments</b>	<p><b>Physical/spatial spaces and contexts</b> that (intentional or unintentionally) enhance enjoyment and social interaction  <b>Institutionalized educational programs</b>  <b>Virtual learning spaces</b></p>
<b>Methods of learning</b>	<p><b>Re-framing valuable knowledge</b>  <b>Self-oriented learning and collective experimentation</b>  <b>Deliberation (reflexive learning)</b></p>
<b>Outcomes of social learning</b>	<p><b>Changes in understandings and framing that lead to narratives of change</b>  <b>Changes in the qualities and characteristics of social relations</b>  <b>Empowerment</b>  <b>Changes in behaviours and strategies for action</b></p>
<b>Learning actors</b>	<p><b>Inspirational leaders and visionaries</b></p>
<b>Promoting wider societal learning</b>	<p><b>Changes in societal worldviews and deep values (new ways of framing)</b>  <b>Changes in norms and institutions</b>  <b>Changes in ways of doing (practices and behaviours)</b>  <b>Changes in social cultures</b>  <b>New actionable capacities</b></p>

## 4.1. Types of learning

The first question to answer when inquiring into social learning and its relationship to transformative agency regards what SI initiatives need to learn in order to become potentially effective agents of change. The empirical analysis in TRANSIT reveals three types of learning that play a role in SI initiatives' efforts to reach their goals of bringing about change: cognitive; relational and strategic/political.

### 4.1.1. Cognitive learning

In order to build an alternative to existing social and institutional arrangements, and to articulate a coherent vision and theory of change, members of social innovation initiatives often need to acquire specific knowledge that can lead to a change in their understandings of how current institutions and systems work and how action needs to be organized to promote change. This type of social learning is actively promoted by SI initiatives both within and outside their membership, in order for meaningful participation in the construction of the alternative, as well as new ways of doing and organizing to be possible.

The **Slow Food Movement** promotes learning about the food system through a “new paradigm for the global food system” (Slow Food, 2013), a new theoretical discourse that needs to be comprehended by its own members. Practitioners acquire new conceptual knowledge concerning the global food system and the alternative model that Slow Food proposes (why and how “good, clean and fair” food can be produced; how to achieve food sovereignty; the economic impact of food system organization on rural areas etc). They learn about the relationship between current food production and distribution and climate change (e.g. transport footprint of food, principles of biodiversity etc) and what makes food environmentally sustainable and healthy, which in turn contributes to a change in their overall vision of the food system. In the words of one practitioner:

“Basically, Slow Food allowed me to value the products we are consuming. I began to appreciate gastronomy in my adulthood. I am aware now that when we eat a pineapple, we know that pineapple has travelled thousands of kilometres. We know that there are no local tomatoes in November. That this tomato we eat now is no longer a seasonal product. Slow Food opened my eyes. Life is full of these apparently small details. But as human beings we need to eat three times a day, so it's really not a trivial issue” (SFAV\_03).

Besides a change of understanding about the food system, such cognitive learning also leads to a re-framing of the roles of different actors within the food system:

“The possibility of a direct contact between producer and consumer gives both new opportunities for learning on how to play their respective roles better. From what the consumers ask, the producer learns how to satisfy them best; from what the producer answers, the consumer learns information about nature, about the labour that goes into a food — and also how to evaluate that food and what a fair price for it should be” (Scaffidi, 2010:2<sup>2</sup>).

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2 Intervention of Cinzia Scaffidi, current Vice-president of Slow Food Italy and Director of Slow Food Study Centre in the Seminar on “The development of a sustainable food supply chain as a factor in the integrated development of urban and rural areas”, organized by the Committee of Regions in Poland, on Monday 13 September 2010. Retrieved from: <http://cor.europa.eu/en/news/highlights/documents/1d8b84fb-b8a0-4387-bba3-b465443b31bb.doc>

The advantages of direct contacts to producers for Slow Food members include the possibility of taking personal insight into the conditions of production. Learning by doing and while experiencing is another way how Slow Food Freiburg improves the cognitive learning success. While guests were waiting for the first course at a Slow Food diner, the farmer explained details about potatoes, based on his own farming experience.

In the case of **Credit Unions**, considering the nature and objectives of the initiative, members and volunteers require specific and extended knowledge on ethical finances, bank management, and social and solidarity economy principles in order to meaningfully participate in management work, decision-making processes or internal debates. Credit unions are normally run by people who have no previous formal training in economics or finance. They had to learn the basic rules regarding the functioning of the financial system, and leaders make an enormous effort to transmit that knowledge to their partners and newcomers.

“Most people had no knowledge in Economics or Finance. We did not know what we were getting into. We were eager to learn, to understand how a bank operates. It was very positive. I do not know to what extent we were irresponsible, starting this without knowledge. But we enjoyed that process of learning, and this is a shared view, this is what other people tell me as well” (Fiare\_04).

“In order to be able to introduce our project, in our GIT (N.A: Fiare’s local manifestations) we dedicate some sessions to inform members about and debate the principles of Fiare, ethical finances, the characteristics and differences with other traditional forms of banking. We did this as group work, with more volunteers; it was exciting and very fulfilling. I had never talked in public before, but I can do it now, and it was also a personal milestone” (Fiare\_03).

Such learning is closely related to meaningful participation in the shaping of the initiative and in engaging in efforts towards transformative change. Decision-making is only possible on the basis of content knowledge and abilities to elaborate proposals and defend certain positions. Finance and banking do not constitute common knowledge. If lack of knowledge leads to feeling excluded from internal debates, their motivation and involvement is likely to diminish. This preoccupation is often manifested by interviewees, when they reflect about the need of keeping people “engaged and active” in the initiative:

“Finances are not only for the smart people, professionals or experts. Everybody in FIARE should participate in relevant decisions. Members must be knowledgeable of the issues that are up for discussion. Otherwise participation would be a lie” (Juan Garibi, 2014<sup>3</sup>).

Social learning is a main core of ecovillages because:

- Ecovillage members live & work together, run a community-based governance, collective decision making, shared property (cooperative, association, foundation), and commons
- In ecovillages formal structures are based on informal social relations
- The glue of ecovillages is social relation illustrated in the estimated number of 95% of new ecovillage attempts that ‘fail’ in first 5 years because of social inner conflicts. In the following, the remaining approximately 5% that manages to stay as unorganized, sustainable community and includes the realization of major outcomes of social learning, shall be referred to as ‘successful’.
- Therefore the remaining successful ecovillages have learnt how to ‘work’ on social relations and develop social competencies for their stability and survival.

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3 Intervention of Juan Garibi, director of FIARE Banca Ética in FIARE’s Info Day, held in Lugo (Spain) on 18th October 2014. Participant observation notes taken by the authors (source: Dumitru et al, 2015).



- Having developed successful methods of interaction and reflection many of them are teaching and disseminating these practices in their seminar centers and abroad thus promoting ecovillages to other contexts.

#### 4.1.2. Inner, personal transformation and emotional learning

During our observation and interviews we noticed that self-reflection, personal transformation and emotional learning were of high value for a number of people in the initiatives. While this area is given meaning on a very personal and subjective level, it is hardly expressed in the movement officially, except for instance the ‘well-being, heart and soul working groups’ of the transition town movement<sup>4</sup>.

“Changing our worldview from separate to interconnected, from scarcity thinking to enough for all, from competitive to collaborative, all form part of the Inner Transition landscape. As individuals, we may experience a wide range of emotions as we imagine and work to build the future we want – or fear of a future much worse.”<sup>5</sup>

From their point of view and many other individuals in the initiatives social learning includes questioning own attitudes, imprints and growing over oneself in relation to social interaction (Tempelhof\_1).

Even when there is no official statement from the initiative on personal growth and emotional learning, in the ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof, for instance, the formal tools and spaces for personal development are established by the WE-process and the social forum (Kunze et al. 2015). The interviewees say that social learning also includes de-learning of old stereotypes and habits and to be really open for listening to and understanding others (Tempelhof 1,2,6). Community is a field for ‘rubbing’. It is seen as a promoter for personal growth. Tempelhof has cultivated a field where people mirror each other in daily life.

“If you are on your ego-trip, you can be sure that someone gently tells you about it.”  
(Tempelhof\_6)

„After my craftsman work, talking about my sensitivities in the social circles in the evening is not easy for me as a man. I also take a distance and clarify things for myself. But I also enjoy those processes if I am awake, then I do need to take care of going there. It is still exhausting for me – even after three years now” (Tempelhof\_4).

Members of the ecovillages in Schloss Tempelhof and Tamera (Kunze et al. 2015), as well as in many other communities, repeatedly emphasize that one can only live in such a community if he or she is willing to change her/himself. The collective transformation towards a new ‘we-culture’ also includes the ongoing transformation of every single member ‘from a rough to a gentle individualist’ (Peck 2005).

At its conferences, the **GEN** team is highly motivated to create an atmosphere of trust and openness which invites people to share even deep emotions. At our visit to the GEN Europe Conference (summer 2014 at ZEGG ecovillage), we witnessed emotionally moving moments in the plenary session with more than 400 people.

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4 <https://transitiontownmedia.org/volunteer/working-groups/heart-soul-working-group/>

5 <https://transitionnetwork.org/support/inner-transition/about-inner-transition>

“The emotional level is crucial. “The Forum” is central as a learning method for going through your own processes. Singing and massaging each other: these are small non-mental activities.” (GEN5)

Ecovillages believe in a long-term approach of cultural change and small scale resilience. An important element of their narrative of change is to start with oneself and then unite to build resilient communities. Ecovillages are passionate about changing individual mind-sets and to support personal development towards more responsibility, cooperative behaviour and empowerment. As a GEN member living in Findhorn formulates it:

“We do a lot of sharing: Being heard, sitting in a circle; the sharings can go very deep... issues, dragons, backgrounds. Some people and guests say it is the first time they feel really heard... an atmosphere, very open hearted... it is mind-blowing and heart-blowing... a lot of people go away completely transformed.” (GEN2)

In a nutshell we conclude from our interviews and observation that individuals in the initiatives can be emotionally triggered and use the chance for emotional and personal growth. Initiatives like ecovillages and transition towns offer forums to work on emotional growth which appears as a fundamental precondition for social learning.

#### 4.1.3. Relational learning

As mentioned earlier, social innovation entails a change in social relations. New social relations require learning to relate in ways that rely on different values than the current institutional arrangements allow for. For a social innovation initiative to be maintained or to grow over time, attracting membership and sustaining motivation for involvement is necessary. Furthermore, being a member of an SI initiative entails participating in equalitarian decision-making processes, which in turn requires ability for dialogue and consensus-reaching; cooperation, which ~~in turn~~ relies on trust building, conflict resolution and communication skills; and leadership in designing strategies to achieve goals.

##### **Supporting high-quality motivation of members**

Based on research in self-determination theory, we have argued elsewhere that autonomous forms of motivations are maintained if basic psychological needs are satisfied in a social innovation initiative (Haxeltine et al., 2016). It has been previously signalled that SI initiatives learn to shape their contexts in ways that support such need satisfaction (Reznickova & Zepeda, 2016). Our empirical research in TRANSIT points to the fact that relational learning entails understanding of how to create environments and relate in ways that lead to the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence.

The local initiative of Slow Food in Araba-Vitoria learned to create environments that contribute to friendship and conviviality, thus contributing to the satisfaction of relatedness needs:

“Something fundamental is to ensure an environment where people have a good time. (People like) going home with the satisfaction what they done well. We are happy with our (volunteering) work, we have made friends and we had dinner” (SFAV\_01);

“I thought about giving up many times. But you feel their support, which gives you strength to keep going. Seeing that you are well received, how they look me, that feeling, that encourages me, it motivates me to keep going” (SFAV\_05).

Slow Food are also spaces where practitioners feel free to start, conduct or participate in

meaningful projects that make a difference in local conditions and contribute to them developing a sense of mastery, thus bringing satisfaction to both the need for autonomy as well as the need for competence:

“If I could make a change or have an impact I had to do it and I was able to use the Slow Food name as my organization and so...I think Slow Food gave me the freedom to express myself, to bring my skills and talents out. You know I love the garden, I love to cook and I love to teach. Well, that's what I'm doing right now in the School Garden program. I am teaching kids how to garden, cook and teaching teachers how to teach (...) I am not working for a company that has strict policies. Slow Food lets me do it in a lot of different ways (...) I have a lot of freedom, and it's been an opportunity for me to become a leader” (SFI\_06).

As illustrated in the following quotes, credit cooperatives support enhance feelings of competence through promoting conditions for active participation that leads to learning

“A main value of this project (Fiare) is its vocation for transformation and social inclusion through the credit. Hence, the priority areas of work are solidarity economy, environmental sustainability and supporting cooperatives (...). This project involves the active participation of people and organizations that put their savings in the service of an alternative bank. Fiare is a financial instrument in the hands and for the service of citizenship; transparency and participation are the blueprints of our identity” (Fiare-Galicia, 2014).

The members of Fiare are proud of their capacity for transforming the economic system, and supporting (local) social and solidarity economy by means of credit:

“We have demonstrated that normal people are able to create a bank, which is also a tool of empowerment, because it shows that individuals can change society. Until now, we were just people working together, but we realized that (through the cooperative) we could be and change much more” (Fiare\_03).

Members of ecovillages under study said they had to learn to work on their social competences and communication skills in order to improve community management and to be able to reach consensus decisions. Because of the strong influence of every single member within the decision making process, ecovillages have further elaborated diverse conflict resolution techniques (Kunze 2012). Members of ‘successful’ ecovillages learn in daily life interaction and courses how to co-manage a community, including conflict resolution through practicing challenging negotiation processes. These processes are based on democratic principles, mutual understand, empathy and individual learning. A lot of time is spent on community and relationship building processes as fundamental for decision-making: “what I have learned here is to stay in contact, also if I disagree with you; To communicate directly, openly and honestly” (Tempelhof\_4).

### **Learning to participate in cooperative decision-making**

Building a grassroots credit cooperative requires “a lot of patience, consensus, reflection and capacity of team-work” (Fiare\_09). As one of the long-term volunteers of Fiare assures, “society does not have ability for dialogue; there is a lack of social skills and group participation” (Fiare\_02). Credit Unions consider participation in decision-making processes and collective activities as a means to train such skills:

“Febea is an inspiring learning space regarding legal principles, the structure of banks or what it means to have a plurality of owners and function as a cooperative. We also learned quite a lot about the importance of a presence on the ground, of having volunteers and

involving them in the bank processes, so that they can contribute in the assessment of the projects and the assessment of loans, in the control and verification of the output and the result of projects, and there are a lot of nice examples that you could look at” (Febea\_05).

A number of social innovations put special emphasis on educating their members for cooperation, conflict resolution and gaining social competences (e.g. ecovillages – Avelino & Kunze 2015; Transition Towns – Longhurst and Pataky, 2015).

Good cooperation requires **building trust**, as reflected in the experience of the Spanish Credit Union Fiare. For instance, the agreement between *Fiare Foundation* and the Italian credit cooperative *Banca Popolare Etica* and their posterior merge was possible after a long-term relationship (favoured by their participation in the network Febea) that enabled, at the same time, a close and continuing interaction between volunteers and members of both initiatives.

Trust-building and cooperation are also supported by strategies to **develop new identities that unite rather than divide**. Slow Food uses an intentional symbolic and persuasive rhetoric discourse that connects with human needs and emotional engagement. Motivational discourses stress elements of a common identity, or the feeling of being part of a “global community” that dreams and work together:

“Actually, we are not inventing anything new...because sustainable farming was already there before...biodiversity was already there before...community supported agriculture is not our idea...maybe, the different thing we offer is that we dream together, all the people who are engaged in sustainable food and farming, we have created an international network of people who shares a dream; and we collaborate at both local and global level too, to change the food system” (SFI\_02).

### **Developing communication and leadership skills**

The following illustrates how Slow Food fosters learning processes that allow members “to bring our skills and talents out” and “make a change or have an impact”:

“Slow Food allows people to develop their leadership skills. I am a good example of that. I knew nothing about food systems ten years ago and now I’m working in schools helping them develop food systems, you know, for the meals that are given to kids, so...and Slow Food gave me the opportunity to become a leader. I was able to take it to certain levels and become effective about it. So I don’t believe Slow Food is the doer in making this new food system but we allow the discussions to happen. We create the possibility for people to discuss, and create platforms where people can become leaders and make the change happen” (SFI\_06).

In both Slow Food and Credit Unions, practitioners insist on the importance of acquiring communication skills due to their educational mission, which they do through giving talks and participating in public debates, info days, and mass-media interviews.

“At least the most active people had to learn a lot. We did some training, but I had no idea of economy. Economists are a minority in Fiare. The last years have served to learn a lot and also learn how to communicate. Because it is not only what you know, but the way we transmit our knowledge. It must be in an accessible language, comprehensive to the general public. It is difficult. In public presentations, some colleagues focused more on the ideological part of Fiare. Others focused more on the economic area. It depends on our interest or expertise” (Fiare\_09).

Ecovillages purposely intend to live cooperative relations in the community and therefore practice and demand from their members a high degree of interaction and communication including

personal openness. Joining an ecovillage often includes a yearlong approaching process for the newcomer to get to know the community and vice versa.

### **Intercultural learning**

GEN has fostered exchange and mutual learning between ecovillages in different countries. Projects in developing countries get support from ecovillages in industrial countries regarding the application of eco-technologies like solar panels. In return, ecovillages from developing countries teach traditional methods of natural building as well as spiritual and social knowledge about community building, which is often perceived to be missing in industrial countries.

A strong point that GEN activists from Latin America emphasize as social innovative is that GEN fosters respectful approaches of communication between people from the global North and South which enhance mutual learning. They comment on what they find to be innovative about the combination between mostly urban, educated Western people, with traditional, indigenous tribal people:

“For so long there was such a gap... racism, rejection of the old, colonialism: now there is acknowledgement... that is a really an interesting dynamic, recovering the old medical practices, agricultural techniques, spiritual – there is wealth of knowledge and examples there” (Interview GEN4).

### **Learning with and between different social milieus**

In the case of Slow Food Freiburg, the initiative supports setting for socializing with different milieus, for instance elder people and students, and farmers and academics. Also, an Interviewee of Schloss Tempelhof ecovillage notes that the ecovillage is a place where he slowly witnesses: “How the intellectual class and the working class are approaching each other because people can work in areas different from their traditional profession” (Tempelhof\_2).

#### **4.1.4. Strategic/political learning**

Strongly connected with relational learning is the strategic and political learning, which refers to the knowledge and skills required to increase the political and social influence of the SI initiative, and increasing their potential and ability for transformative change. Strategic learning for transformative agency includes the creation of good relationships and strategic alliances with a wide range of actors:

“Slow Food works with different groups, including a neighbourhood of Vitoria, Zabalgara. We approached very well to the topic of urban gardening and school gardens. Slow Food is collaborating with neighbourhood groups, ecologists, etc. There are many platforms. With public administrations the relationship is also excellent. No matters the political colour of the institution. Slow Food has a fantastic reputation; both the County Council and the City Council support us” (SFAV\_03)

This capacity for strategic relationship building also contributes to their playing an intermediary role among previously divided actors. SI initiatives learn to engage community actors and the wide society in their activities and strategies, and overcome previous divides in order to achieve their goals and have social impact. Slow Food Araba-Vitoria succeeded in bridging previous divides or relationships of indifference, and establishes collaborations with local third sector and governmental entities to bring new impulse to common sustainability projects:

“We have managed to combine synergies. Here, there are two environmental organizations that have never collaborated, because they had their suspicions, etc. Now their presidents are both members of Slow Food. We meet them and we do things together. We sit around a table; we enjoy and have fun, and get agreements. For example, now, we have a platform with more than 20 local associations to promote healthy and sustainable food systems in our city” (SFAV\_01).

A similar role is played by the Spanish credit cooperative Fiare, which **reunites apparently opposite sides of the civil society** to create a common project as the following interviewee explains:

“Fiare served to unite groups that, otherwise, would not have come together to do anything. For example, FIARE has unified the two Galician environmental organizations. We joined together the Christian community with the atheists. It was the teamwork of a large and plural range of organizations that greatly enriched the project” (Fiare\_09).

Cultivating a position of **inclusiveness** is part of the strategic learning of social innovation initiatives. Many interviewees point to the importance of being inclusive and “not be too radical or strict” in their positions: “we need to be very careful; if you are a fanatic, or if you are excessive in talking about these issues you can be dismissed as a freak, a geek, then one suffers” (SFAV\_03).

“We refuse to settle on just one issue, we want a holistic change to the entire food system, right? What distinguishes us quite a bit is that we are a space where people who have never thought about the food system before are welcome to come and join us for a community parlor, and think for the first time about what the relationship to food is or people who are involved...who are starting their own community, running a farm...” (SFI\_05)

Such a position of inclusiveness is also manifested in credit cooperatives, whose practitioners consider that it is possible to maintain the philosophy of FEBEA, while also allowing for some flexibility in order to become stronger actors and manage system change:

“There is an example in France, a bank called *Credit Cooperatif*, which is not an ethical bank, but it has a department of about 20 people who are really working in the social and solidarity sector, so, we decided to accept them as members. This is political thinking (...) there are bigger banks that, nevertheless, have maintained a relationship with the territory, with social and solidarity activities. We need the support of these banks to enter a stage of growing our activity” (Febea\_03).

**Lobbying capacities** are developed by both SI initiatives aiming to gain political influence. Credit Union leaders learned about the importance of becoming a relevant political actor and, as a result, they launched political campaigns to achieve political commitment to ethical banking practices:

“Febea has an important political role. For the European elections we will ask parliamentary candidates what they think about ethical finance, through the campaign Change Finances to Change Europe” (Ugo Biggeri, 2014<sup>6</sup>).

“After the European elections, new members of the European Parliament are more sensitive, talk to you, and want us to present things, studies on ethical banking. They ask a lot of things. Just yesterday we were working on a draft about the value of ethical banking and which regulatory frameworks should be changed to protect it. This will be much more effective for us” (Febea\_04).

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6 . Intervention of Ugo Biggeri, President of Banca Ética in FIARE’s FIARE’s General Assembly, holded in Barcelona (Spain) on March 2014. (source: Dumitru et al, 2015)



The European network Febea has gained expertise in lobbying European institutions in order to achieve formal recognition of ethical banks and to develop a legal framework that would support them. Such institutional recognition came in the form of a Resolution of the Assembly of Council of Europe on the role of ethical and solidarity-based financing and responsible consumption in social cohesion (Council of Europe, 2007). This public acknowledgement has opened the way to the implementation of social cohesion programmes through financial initiatives funded by the European Union as well as stimulated negotiations with the European Commission with the purpose of modifying restrictions to ethical and alternative banking:

“The first question that the Commissioner asked was: what is the difference between an ethical bank and a commercial bank? Febea worked for about a year to establish 30 points of difference, and this information was enough for the Commissioner. Febea is now starting to work on the second question: to establish, at a scientific level, the basis for supporting ethical and alternative banks, the social impact they have. For example, with one million Euros, Febea members will create five times more jobs than a traditional bank would. This means that FEBEA is working on establishing indicators for the social and environmental impact of ethical banks, and this information is more or less ready to be presented to the Commissioner in the next meeting” (Febea\_03).

Slow food combines a coherent political discourse with pragmatic proposals, which has been positive appreciated by political institutions, as a spokesperson of the Slow Food liaison office for the European Union explains to us:

“The way you gain influence has to do with lots of issues (...) I can tell you that, for instance, one officer from the European Commission told me we are one of the few civil society organizations who work directly with people on the ground, with farmers and producers. We can collect these experiences and communicate them to the Commission. The way we work at grassroots level is fundamental because it gives us credibility, together with the political vision. We have both the political vision and the fact that we have experience at the grassroots level and can collect input from our grassroots people. We increase our influence, through better communication, better interaction with civil society... with all the stakeholders, not necessary only civil society organizations but with stakeholders with whom we are working on the same topics” (SFI\_02).

Credit union leaders emphasize the strategic impact of good performance and best practices conducted by ethical banking, as the president of Banca Etica explains:

“We have to do rigorous work, better than the others banks. A bank uses the money of its clients and has to do it well. It has to consider both economic and social effectiveness, supporting projects which engage social organizations and local networks. The projects that our bank funds are better, the quality of the credit is better than what the traditional banking sector offers, with a high level of commitment and few slow payers” (Ugo Biggueri, 2014<sup>7</sup>).

Besides, initiatives learn about the influence of **mass media** in gaining reputation and acknowledgement.

“The press. We always call the newspapers, journalist come and take pictures. Last year we organized 72 activities. 40 or 50 were covered by press. It sees the press. We also have a radio program. If three articles talk about you, politicians think that you are important” (SFAV\_01).

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7 Intervention of Ugo Biggeri, President of Banca Ética in FIARE’s FIARE's General Assembly, holded in Barcelona (Spain) on March 2014. observation notes taken by the authors (source: Dumitru et al, 2015)

Credit unions across Europe increase their popularity through increased press coverage, especially in the midst of the financial crisis of 2008, as journalists focused on the successful experience of ethical and alternative banks (presented as an alternative to mainstream banking). For FIARE, the researchers were able to find extended mass media reports, articles in newspapers -including interviews with pioneers-and TV documentaries that have covered the process of creation of the credit union and projects funded by FIARE.

## 1.1. Learning environments

Learning environments are spaces/contexts in which practitioners interact and new knowledge, skills and abilities are acquired or new relations are developed. When inquiring into processes of social learning, a recurrent theme in the discourse of social innovation initiative members refers to appropriate spaces/contexts for experimentation with new social relations, as well as new ways of knowing, doing, organizing and framing. Both physical/spatial characteristics as well as social and symbolic dimensions are considered important. Social learning is promoted through sharing of spaces and activities that promote free interaction and interchange of ideas as well as common reflection on values, goals and strategies. The co-shaping of the rules governing these spaces already constitutes experimentation with new social relations, entailing new ways of knowing, doing, organizing and framing.

Some spaces are fluid and flexible and learning is not necessarily pursued as an explicit objective. They are shaped in ways that enable emergent, spontaneous interactions that lead to learning and at the same time are experienced as natural, self-driven, fun, non-constrained, and autonomous. Slow Food leaders highlight the necessity of creating adequate spaces for conviviality, knowledge sharing and engagement. The Slow Food movement claims that knowledge transmission is an act of “conviviality” that can take place through the sharing of food: “getting together around a table not only to share a meal but also to talk and discuss and indulge in social relations. Conviviality enables the “shaping of ideas and agreements and the creation of affective bonds, promotes friendship, and reinforces the pursuit of common good and the capacity of every person to shape his or her own future” (Slow Food, 2012:15-16).

Spaces/contexts for social learning promote enjoyment and social interaction as a way to reach new understandings and to support motivation for maintained involvement. Slow Food leaders have learned that enjoyable sharing activities are needed to keep the project alive, attract new members, maintain motivation and reinforce group cohesion:

“Many people who first become involved with slow food are more interested in enjoying themselves, eating and having fun, but things change when they participate in our activities with children, students or producers. After a while, their interest shifts to about 60 % for the sustainability aspect of our projects and 40 % for enjoying food and having fun, because they learn a lot and change their minds” (SFAV\_01).

Slow Food local initiatives have developed innovative and experiential learning activities (for both practitioners and non-members) which take various forms: food and wine tastings, visits to farms and agricultural production sites, cooking clubs, conferences, workshops and dinners with producers.

“Our visits and fieldtrips aim to establish contact with artisans and food producers, in order to know their problems and place their products on the market. By pursuing direct information, you may find ways to avoid the traps of the current food system. A system that decreases our decision-making capacity in relation to food, imposing culinary standards and food habits that reduce, and even eliminate, much of the cultural and culinary diversity of our society” (SFAV\_01).

“Last weekend we organized an event called “we feed the planet” with more than 2000 young farmers from across the globe (...) They were basically establishing collaborations, discussing solutions, from farming to solutions in terms of how to encourage civil society to dream about change, and about alternatives” (SFI\_02).

**Spaces/contexts that promote face-to-face encounters**, the sharing of meaningful experience with others confronting the same difficulties in other places and the establishment of trust, are considered to be conducive to social learning. Credit Unions practitioners constantly emphasize the importance of learning spaces -especially those that enable physical encounters like international conferences- that provide the opportunity to meet and know each other, learn from other experiences and partners, and reinforce trust. Credit Union practitioners stress the emotional significance of social initiatives as spaces where one could meet with like-minded others, and feel part of a group of peers. Becoming part of a network and participating in networking events is considered a ‘crucial’ part in processes of social learning and in identifying common strategies and possibilities for collaboration that might increase their transformative potential:

“Becoming a member of Febea enabled us to get in contact and establish “a trustworthy relationship with the Italian credit union Banca Popolare Etica, sharing knowledge, expertise and finally sharing the same project” (Fiare\_07).

“We learned a lot. It is mutual learning. One can see it from the first assembly in Barcelona. All the board of Banca Popolare Etica was there. Many Italian members come here. We saw a lot of interest from both sides (i.e: Italian and Spanish). They meet you, they know you, and you talk to them. This is the most important part of these meetings, meeting people, both for the Spaniards as for the Italians” (Fiare\_01).

Some practitioners recognize that, as a consequence of the personal contact with other European ethical banks, their banking model became “a sort of combination” of the best practices that they have learned from FEBEA, “with their own innovation” (Febea\_05):

“I really like how BANCA ETICA is dealing with the alternative social market, how they are able to have very low default rates through very simple methods, having volunteers who are reporting back to people, taking this as a part of integral risk assessment approaches for example. It was quite impressive to see how alternative banks in Switzerland receive support and they finance housing cooperatives and invest in green energy and how to basically create value without any or almost any risk from those kinds of investments; the management of a large social cooperative, with hundreds of thousands of members. The German GLS Bank experiences with local currencies, where they are working introducing them to several municipalities; We have learned a lot about ethics, what criteria to look at, what kind of assessments in the projects we will have priorities just from the practice of others and this kind of things” (Febea\_05).

In addition to being a place for knowledge and experience exchange, the network Febea forged new business relations to support existing European initiatives and to encourage the growth of new initiatives in the field of solidarity finance. Examples of this are a number of financial tools created by Febea or their member:

“In this sense, six members of FEBEA are creating a new European financial cooperative called “TAMA” (There Are More Alternatives) with the aim of providing spaces for social investment for people interested in supporting social economy projects in the European context” (Febea\_04).

The most intense learning space including a strong impulse for changing of behaviour is living together in a community space with purposeful rules, for instance on sustainable living, cooperative interaction and collaboration in daily life like in ecovillages. Membership rules,

newcomer processes and internal, protected spaces for communication enable the members to learn and share deeper issues. In ecovillages like Schloss Tempelhof the experimental space is allowing members to informally try out new jobs. The residents state to easily have the chance to learn new occupations because of three reasons: First, the community offers an informal frame to join “friends” at their work places and get professional advice more informally. Second, there are lots of opportunities for everyone to contribute like in agriculture, cooking for more than 100 people or facilitating meetings. Third the barrier to try out something new is low because an attitude of empathy is cultivated where failing is accepted based on the trust and broader knowledge of each other (Tempelhof\_1).

**Participating in common projects** also becomes a social learning space/context in which sharing knowledge and experiences is the learning method. This is observed not only in Credit unions and Slow Food but also in Transition Towns (Longhurst and Pataki, 2015), Time Banks (Weaver et al, 2015) and Desis network (Cipolla, Afonso and Joly, 2015) among others. Information transparency, peer-to-peer cooperation and participatory decision-making rules are characteristics of social learning contexts in SI initiatives (as observed by members of Inforse, Credit Unions, Ecovillages and HackerSpaces (Elle et al, 2015; Dumitru et al, 2015; Kunze & Avelino, 2015; Hielscher, Smith and Fressoli, 2015).

Some initiatives – in special Impact-Hubs and Fab Labs- further highlight sharing the same working space as conducive to social learning. Members spontaneously exchange experiences and information, develop common projects such as free software/hardware innovations in Hacker-Spaces (Hielscher et al, 2015), or become “incubators and facilitators” of learning networks in which individuals are continuously encouraged and nudged into joining activities and are exposed to others that become models and inspiration (Wittmayer, Avelino and Afonso, 2015).

Other **spaces/contexts are intentionally designed** to promote the acquisition of specific knowledge, abilities and competences and these tend to display more formal characteristics. These include educational programs, workshops and seminars, regional or international conferences that are intended to serve to identifiable actors and specific learning objectives. In the case of the Slow Food movement, education has become an important explicit goal that the initiative pursues at local, national and global levels.

Creating inspiring spaces is also conducive to social learning. Getting inspired contributes to enhanced motivation for pursuing the goals of the SI initiative, to the creation of a common identity and to more effective strategies for pursuing their goals. The biannual “Terra Madre Forum” illustrates the relevance of enabling inspiring spaces that gather “thousands of food communities, producers, chefs, academics and students from 160 countries” (Slow food, 2014). Invited lectures are combined with workshops and small group discussions where participants share experiences and learn how others face the same problems, as well as finding new solutions (“real tools”) to their problems. Social learning in these inspiring contexts leads to a series of positive outcomes such as empowerment, fuelled by a sense of communion with others sharing the same values, fighting for the same objectives and confronting the same obstacles, maintaining and renewing motivation, which can support them in their local struggles:

“Terra Madre empowers people to return to their territories. They all say that before they felt lonely, but that after Terra Madre they did no longer feel alone. Slow Food is an international network that understands what they are facing; they meet people who share the same issues and problems that they have to cope with in their countries. This emotional gain has been the core of Terra Madre at first, but I think that we have learnt we need to include and address more issues. The emotion is still very important but we must also provide real tools for people to build things when they return home. We have just organized the young Terra Madre and it was very touching for young activists. Through social networks, we are now able to observe how things keep evolving, how the young

people who participated have an ongoing dialogue, they discuss things between them, what they need and so on. For future activities, we will focus on providing them with concrete tools they can use in their countries. Using the fact that they meet face-to-face, not just online” (SFI\_04).

The cases we study in TRANSIT differ in their kind of creating and using space. The emphasis of activities can be more on the global network or on the local cases. In terms of creating physical space according to their ideas and culture the local cases show a great variety which has an effect on the degree and kind of impact to the members’ lifestyles and to the local societal structures. Some mainly collaborate virtually and have little physical spaces in limited time frames (durational perspective) where they encounter internally (e.g. hackerspaces, FABLABS) while others trying to manifest their ideas and culture physically (transition towns) and even live together (ecovillages).

Intentional social learning spaces sometimes include **institutionalized high quality training/educational programs**. Examples of that are the “Transition Trainings” developed by the Transition Town network (Longhurst and Pataky, 2015) or the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) programs that the Global Ecovillage Network launches in 42 countries worldwide (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). FabLabs are connected to universities like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in order to develop training courses (e.g. Fab Academy) (Hielscher et al, 2015b). In the case of the Inforce network (Elle et al, 2015), training activities are not only oriented to the members of the initiative but also NGOs and civil society (teaching “future scenarios” techniques to increase resilience to peak oil). Impact Hubs facilitate learning through programs that “give room to structured and unstructured, explicit and implicit learning from and with each other” (Impact Hub School Event in Brasil, Wittmayer, et al, 2015).

**Virtual learning spaces** have gained relevance in the last years and several initiatives have enlarged their presence on the cloud for educational purposes, Time Banks enable social learning through peer-to-peer exchange conferences and workshops as well as on the online “TnT platform”, developed by the hOurworld Timebank network (Weaver et al, 2015). The Impact Hub’s “Hub-Net” (Wittmayer et al, 2015) or Hackerspaces’ website provide shared working spaces for “autodidactic” and “peer-to-peer” learning (Hielscher et al, 2015).

## 1.2. Methods of learning

Different learning contexts are characterized by different methods for the facilitation of social learning, depending on the learning culture that social innovations endorse and the specific objectives they set for themselves. Learning methods range from re-framing of the value of different types of knowledge, the facilitation of self-oriented learning and collective experimentation with new ways of doing, relating, organizing, and to creating conditions for deliberation as basis of new forms of decision-making. Through adopting innovative learning methods, SI initiatives aim at developing capacities for reflexivity and adaptation to complex and dynamic social contexts.

### 1.2.1. Reframing valuable knowledge

Social learning is strongly enhanced within SI initiatives through processes of peer-to-peer interchange of knowledge as TRANSIT’s researchers identified in numerous cases such as Credit Unions, Slow Food, Time Banks, Impact Hubs, etc. Initiatives engage in a re-framing of what constitutes valuable knowledge, departing from traditional manners to establish expertise and towards a valorisation of practical and experiential knowledge:



“Slow Food really owns the expertise of people who are not experts, right? So it brings together people who would not think of themselves as experts like for example someone who is a community gardener, he doesn't think he is an expert on urban biodiversity. He doesn't think he's an expert on social relationships necessarily. And that knowledge, based on experience, is exactly the knowledge that is lost in other places so...If we would have met with someone who is a...you know- running a huge Foundation or working for the government or working at a local restaurant and you say- You guys are equal here expressing your opinion...Your opinions have equal value and that's real movement building, right? which is exciting...But globally you also see it happening, I've seen amazing projects appearing and growing in places where people just learn to think differently...They create relationships with each other....they change their bad habits, maybe more importantly they change their social habits...All the way to, you know, very large scale influence like, . you know, the Cattle-Rangers Association where you see wow these people at this level, they want to invest in Slow Food...These big players, they suddenly become interested in ideas that we call today from people who would be kind of left aside if you were only looking at traditional experts” (SFI\_05).

Other SI initiatives studied in TRANSIT also engage in such re-framing. In the case of Hacker Spaces, vertical “tutor-pupil” relation disappears in favour of “*non-tutoring relations between peers*” based on autodidactic learning methods (Hielscher et al, 2015). As the Smith and colleagues observed (2015, non-published report): “values that relate to learning through sharing knowledge and self-teaching become are very quickly visible when spending a day at the Amersfoort Fab Lab (...) Such efforts of sharing knowledge, helping each other to find out things nobody might not know about and encouraging people to learn and experiment for themselves runs through all the machines and activities in the lab” (p.49-50).

### 1.2.2. Facilitating self-oriented learning and collective experimentation

Most Social Innovation initiatives enable spaces for experimentation in an attempt to provide the right contextual conditions for social learning. Slow Food claims that social learning arises through direct experience and active engagement. The cultivation of the sense of taste or acquisition of knowledge about good, clean and fair food form part of a “broad-reaching educational approach” that involves “cognitive, experiential and emotional dimensions” that makes those involved “feel good and enjoy ourselves” (Slow Food, 2010<sup>8</sup>). Slow Food defends a “hands-on experience” (in school gardens, guided tastings, farm visits, practical workshops, etc.) to offer an insightful approach to food:

“In Slow Food you can learn about the other side of the issues (...) If you want to be active, Slow Food gives you an opportunity to get involved in different activities. If you want just to be a passive learner, either you can join and receive the documents, and the emails and learn from that. If you want to participate, you will have fun with food...because certainly we have a lot of events and a lot of opportunities for people to get involved (SFI\_05).

European **credit cooperatives** intentionally provide opportunities for experimentation with “utopic” alternatives to existing social and economic models or systems and with strategies for action to achieve their goals. The process of building Fiare (which took almost eleven years) was a ‘learning-by-doing’ process that allowed their members to develop flexible adaptation strategies to

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8 The culture of experimentation is explicit in the Education Manifesto: “Education for Slow Food”(Slow Food, 2010: pp.1-2).



changing and unforeseen circumstances (e.g. new legal requirements, changes in political support). In the words of one of their pioneers, Fiare emerged from the desire of a group of concerned people who were interested in testing and experimenting with the possibility of creating a bank that truly fulfilled their objectives, expectations and ambitions –which were theoretically discussed for a long time.

Following this idea of experimentation, The Fiare Banca Etica is launching the project of “the new economy lab” in Spain with the aim of creating a common networking and public space for businesses, academia and third sector organizations, which can together evaluate the experiences that are contributing to a new economy in Spain and thus also receive external feedback and inputs on ethical banking activities and possibilities. This initiative has been inspired by the Italian “Laboratorio di Nuova Economia”, inspired by the ideas of the economist Antonio Genovesi:

“We should have imagination to respond to the changing needs of society. The structures we put in place should not limit us to do what we have to do. We should be a “laboratory of constant experimentation”. The initiative must be a good place to “fight for the transformation from a sense of justice (...) We want to sit with relevant stakeholders, not only members of Fiare, but also the business sector, organizations that promote innovation and entrepreneurship etc., and ask them what we could do with the credit activity according to them” (Fiare\_07).

The presence of an experimental culture is also observable in the cases of ecovillages - which intentionally set an experimental space appropriate to “create heterotopias of a “new culture” of creativity, experimenting, and collaboration” (Kunze & Avelino, 2015:99)- and Transition Towns, that encourage practitioners to follow their own passions and interests. Transition network stimulate people to experiment and create their own projects, providing resources and counselling (Longhurst and Pataky, 2015). The Transition network “is an ongoing social experiment, in which communities learn from each other and are part of a global and historic push towards a better future for ourselves, for future generations and for the planet” (TN, 2014 in Longhurst & Pataki, 2015:13).

Some social innovation initiatives attempt to introduce this ‘learning by practice’ approach in external institutionalized contexts like education system: “FabLabs are already changing institutions in education (e.g. more hands-on, practice-based learning in schools), investment (e.g. crowd-funding and alternative finance), consumption (e.g. post-consumerist interest in how things are made), knowledge production (e.g. free culture), and other key areas of social life” (Smith et al, 2015b:7).

The idea of **ecovillages as living and learning centres** emerged in the late 90es. Ecovillages can be seen as ‘laboratories for sustainable living’ (Kunze 2012, Kunze et al. 2015). They create social learning environments in daily life. With the effect to learn by experience and while doing it; an important way of education for visitors in one of the many seminar centres in ecovillages: “We have positive, real examples. Seeing a living example is much more valuable than talking. Living the change.” (Interview GEN5).

**As a way to support free and creative experimentation, some initiatives** – such as Impact hubs, Transition Towns or HackerSpaces, have introduced a culture of “failing is okay”, supported through moments of sharing failures. Transition Towns explicitly encourage an experimental ethic where failing is permitted and comprehended as a necessary part of putting in practice new ideas and projects (Longhurst & Pataki, 2015). Going further, Impact Hub organise specific meetings to “exchange failures” (Wittmayer et al, 2015: 41).

### 1.2.3. Facilitating deliberation

Reflexive learning in SI initiatives is enhanced through participatory environments and democratic (non- vertical) structures that engage practitioners in process of decision-making, providing information and spaces for deliberation and where decisions are reached through discussions and reaching consensus. As TRANSIT researchers observed in most SI initiatives studied, such as Credit Unions, Impact Hub, Ecovillages, Transition Towns, Hablabs, Inforce, etc., SI initiatives develop methods (new social techniques and participatory dynamics) to promote the free expression of ideas that leads to deliberation – essential element is the encouragement of expression of ideas as well as to innovative processes of community organizing (Longhurst, 2015). Ecovillages have implemented different techniques of innovative facilitation methods for consensus decision-making, conflict resolution and plenary meeting processes (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). Novel governance practices include examples such as “sociocracy” and “The Social Forum” in the Ecovillage Movement (Kunze & Avelino, 2015), “magic anarchism” in Hacklab Barracas (Smith et al, 2015); and “holocracy” in the Impact Hub Amsterdam (Avelino et al, 2015). As Kunze and Avelino (2015) pointed out, ecovillages have developed a range of innovative techniques for fair and participatory decision making processes aiming to avoid conflict over power imbalances, that eventually have spread out or teach to other organizations (e.g. *World Cafe, Think and Listen, Open Space, Mind mapping, Fishbowl, Forum space*).

In their seminar centres these techniques are offered in courses and taught to external visitors. In ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof a general attitude of learning could be observed for instance when several interviewees say, we do not know yet how we solve the challenge of caring for elderly people in our community in several years, but we trust we will find out when the time comes. The ecovillage movement has worked a lot on improving and adapting consensus decision making methods to their needs. Ecovillages like Schloss Tempelhof have proven that the idea of decision making by consensus – sometimes smiled at as utopian – can indeed work. Understanding the larger picture, we observe that successful consensus decision making is related, first, to a system innovation in the ownership structures and, secondly, to social tools of conflict resolution thus constituting social learning outcomes. Supported by clear rules of commitment, power and responsibility, as well as by a culture of non-violent communication, ecovillages have designed methods that have spread out to very different organizations in society.

## 1.3. Outcomes of social learning

As already mentioned above, the social learning literature is infused with positive assumptions about outcomes. Empirical research in TRANSIT has focused on the outcomes of social learning in terms of the potential for exercising effective agency in pursuing the initiative goals. We were particularly interested in identifying whether social learning leads to changes in the quality and characteristics of relations, empowerment and changes in capacities for strategic action; and to understand how or through which mechanisms such changes happen. As recent definitions of social learning consider its main outcome to be a change in understandings that become situated in wider social units (Reed et al., 2010, see section c), and changes in understandings are likely to accompany all the other outcomes of interest, we also looked at the effect of social learning processes on how understandings of the social context and of how to engage it change over time, upon reflecting on their experiences.

### 1.3.1. Changes in understandings and framing that lead to new narratives of change

As a result of experiences of engagement with the initiative, participants experience changes in their attitudes, values, beliefs and worldviews. Initiatives start out with a set of principles and values founders co-shape and endorse, as well as a theory of change expressed in more or less coherent narratives (Wittmayer et al, 2015b). These are further shaped over time, through collective reflexive processes and by adapting to a dynamic social context and through elaboration of their experiences in pursuing their goals. Such processes of elaboration of and reflection upon experiences of interaction with the social context lead to new visions of certain systems, of relationships between different institutional actors, and of the causes and consequences of specific actions.

The Slow Food network offers a new -holistic- frame to understand relationships within the food system and proposes a recovery of an enlightened version of hedonism (based on the right to “good, clean, and just food” and “the right to pleasure”) within a framework of social and environmental responsibility. Practitioners of Slow Food report how their understandings of both the relations within the food system, as well as the sense of their personal responsibility, has changed as a consequence of their involvement in Slow Food: and Joining a Slow Food chapter can provoke a change in practitioner’s values and sensibility towards food, environment or culture, rethinking their own lifestyles in terms of consumption, time-use or relations:

“Slow Food discourse connected with my own beliefs. By looking from the angle of a desire for good, clean and fair food, one starts to care about the living and working conditions of food producers. When I see products that have ridiculously low prices because they are imported by multinational companies, I know that those people more paid terribly. Slow Food has opened my eyes a lot in that regard. Also, it has made me more aware of my moral ethical and professional duty to contribute something to society” (quote: SFAV\_03)

Besides, both initiatives reflect – as a consequence of their experience dealing with challenges such as the economic crisis - on the concept of “commons” (in terms of the economic governance of commons by communities proposed by Ostrom, 2000) and the new meanings of democracy:

“It is a very important ethical and cultural step, as well as economic, to think of natural resources in terms of commons. Air, water, biodiversity, the health of the land, seeds: these are all commons (...) Creativity, beauty, happiness and health must be considered commons, since commons have the most important characteristics: without them we cannot survive; if someone blocks access to the resource, it becomes impoverished; enjoyment by the individual can and must be reconciled with enjoyment by the community (...) On the basis of these premises, food itself should be considered a common (...)The first step to do all this is to recognise the incompatibility between the idea of a free market and the idea of commons” (Scaffidi<sup>9</sup>, 2014).

Reflexive learning led to changes in worldviews of credit union members as a result of the 2008 economic crisis, and alternative narratives started to include a focus on “democratic-cultural regeneration” of societies oriented to “the common good”, sustainability and solidarity:

“We are in a systemic crisis that is not just financial, environmental, or economic; it is a political crisis, it is a systemic crisis and we need a new generation of people, of

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9 Article of Cinzia Scaffidi, Director of Slow Food Study Centre, published online in “Glocalism” <http://www.glocalismjournal.net/Other-Contents/Focus/Feeding-The-Planet-Energy-For-Life/A-Sustainable-Future-The-Words-To-Do-It.kl>

organizations with the ability to interpret the new future. (...) It began with the financial crisis but we are in a phase where, for the first time, we have a problem to change almost everything... What we are doing is we are forming people in the culture of a new system, not just economic, solidarity and social, but political and economic, of all of them. There are some places which have already taken this up, have transformed themselves; in Italy there are some small cities, which call themselves in transition: they are working in a holistic manner and they do not only undertake an economic or social transition, they are going through a cultural transition, a different way of life. I believe that this is the main novelty and it is, roughly, 400 small communities in Italy that have started on this path, only in the last 3 or 4 years". (Febea\_03).

Transformative social innovations have introduced or embraced a new generation of universal human rights. Slow Food movement defends Slow Food defends the "right to food" as the primary right of humanity to ensure, symbolically declaring "a fight against hunger, just like the fight against slavery was declared in the past" (Slow Food, 2012). Credit Unions posit a **"new paradigm of banking based on the human right to the credit"**, the transformative discourse proposed by the Nobel Prize, Muhammad Yunus. The right to credit is defined as an **emergent human right** and it incorporates discourses of **"critical economy"** into their transformative discourses.

Furthermore, their theories of change evolve as a result of experience, and SI initiatives refine their ideas about cause and effect relationships; actors and institutions to target and through which methods; and the scales at which to operate. For example, Slow Food's discourse gained in complexity and consistency over time, by encompassing a number of emerging issues such as global warming, GMOs, animal welfare, women's or indigenous rights, among others (e.g., Slow Food incorporates new discourses such as the one on food sovereignty, initially proposed by 2002 Forum of NGOs and Civil society held in Rome) as practitioners learn about how different issues are connected, and different strategies to reach a wider audience and to exert influence:

"We have taken a while to understand what this story of food sovereignty was. It is an expression that has not even emerged in news broadcasts, let alone in our homes. We have had to deal with it, more or less confidently, for little more than ten years (...) The link between food sovereignty, sustainable agriculture and the right to food makes us understand that the situation of nutrition in which the rich countries find themselves is not only in some way connected to the conditions in which the poor countries find themselves, but shares with those problems the origin of the solution, which must inevitably be political" (Scaffidi<sup>10</sup>, 2014).

The 2012 Slow Food conference constituted a critical turning point in terms of framing, ambitions and discourse of change. The former hedonistic discourse (based on the "right to pleasure") evolved in terms of environmental protection and political action, by defending good labour conditions for food producers, emphasizing consumers' capability and responsibility to orient the market with their choices. Despite being approved by the network (and explicit in the document "the central role of food"), practitioners and local leaders needed to comprehend this change of vision, and incorporate it to their own discourses and ways of doing:

"How and when the movement was born also matters. It has different characteristics in each country or region. Over 25 years, the movement has changed considerably. It is different in countries where Slow Food was born over 10 years or before, and those regions where Slow Food is more recent. In the first group, gastronomy and pleasure have still

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10 Article of Cinzia Scaffidi, Director of Slow Food Study Centre, published online in "Glocalism": <http://www.glocalismjournal.net/Other-Contents/Focus/Feeding-The-Planet-Energy-For-Life/A-Sustainable-Future-The-Words-To-Do-It.kl>

stronger importance. Where Slow Food was born later or where the initiatives have adapted better to the recent changes within the movement, the national and local structures are more aware of political issues or food sovereignty. Slow Food has a strong political component (...) The movement has changed. In Mexico it has changed. At the beginning they (practitioners) were more exclusive, they made very interesting things but they didn't engage many people from different sectors of civil society, now Slow Food is more inclusive" (SFI\_04).

Besides, as a consequence of social learning and knowledge co-production, modern Credit Unions have built -in the last thirty years- a new framework for financial practices, establishing the principles, norms and organizational relations that must drive the activity of ethical finances. At the same time, Credit Unions propose a change in personal values, attitudes and behaviour of consumers, claiming a change in the passive attitude oriented to a critical and co-responsible involvement of citizens in the economy.

SI initiatives purposefully promote an attitude of constant reflexivity regarding one's values and behaviours, and their relationship to transformative change. Most endorse a vision of internal individual transformation as a stepping stone towards the generation of a new society. The ecovillage movement, for example, proposes a "cultural inner transformation" from individualism to a new communal culture (Kunze & Avelino, 2015). The Transition Towns movement promote an 'inner transition' from individualistic consumer identities and behaviour, towards a more co-operative and convivial way of life" (Longhurst & Pataki, 2014:63).

When Slow Food practitioners are asked about learning, a number of them describe how the initiative changes their understanding, through a process of reflexivity on their own lifestyles:

"Slow Food has almost become a lifestyle to me. A way of being more coherent with everything. For example, concerning my consumption choices, my behaviour has changed a lot. Before (joining Slow Food) I used to buy in big supermarkets and grab any product without checking who the producer was, where it was produced etc. I sought after the sales or simply bought the ones I liked the most. But thanks to Slow Food, now I care a lot about what I am buying" (SFAV\_04).

### 1.3.2. Changes in the quality and characteristics of social relations

Changing social relations is at the core of social innovation (Haxeltine et al., 2016). The values and principles SI initiatives endorse normally include a vision of new ways of relating. The principle of "fair food" in Slow Food, refers to new bases for the relationship between producers and consumers. The value of solidarity endorsed by Credit Unions incorporates a new perspective on the relationships between financial entities and other community and institutional actors.

SI initiatives experiment with the creating of relations of a different quality and are likely to learn how to achieve such changes. Slow Food endorses a vision of relationships in local communities and within the global food system that are based on conviviality; cooperation; recognition of and respect for the contribution of actors that have been disenfranchised through the de-individualization of food production and distribution; fair distribution of benefits and burdens; sharing of common responsibility for protecting biodiversity as well as the uniqueness of each community's identity and history.

Experiencing enjoyment through collective celebration, sharing quality time in gathering with others around the pleasurable experience of food contributes to the establishment of emotional

connection between different community members, of solidarity around a set of commonly-shared goals and of trust which supports collective action. Recovering rituals of shared pleasure around food is a pathway to community building through the re-valuing of local landscape and production techniques, the re-framing of stakes as being common and shared.

Slow Food practitioners observe that local manifestations which develop an intense activity and enable spaces for celebration seem to be more successful and participative: “close relations and friendship encourage people’s participation in our activities, because they are sharing time with friends and having a good time” (SFAV\_04). Slow Food leaders promote camaraderie and friendship ties because they have learned that, to be attractive and maintaining members’ motivation, the convivium must be a space that makes people happier. The president of Slow Food Araba Vitoria presents himself as a leader who really cares about human relations inside the group, and a facilitator of a good atmosphere: “I like people having a good time, enjoying, that they feel satisfaction with what we have done, and experiencing that the work they do is useful” (SFAV\_01).

Belonging to a group where they meet other like-minded people, that work and care about “the same things, the same rights, who share common values” provides practitioners with important emotional experiences (SFAV\_03). This vivid engagement occurs also in the global context, when they meet people from other parts of the world who are interested in their work, products and experiences. Interviewees describe participating in “Terra Madre” event as an emotional and learning experience that reinforces belongingness and identity processes (see quote SFI\_04 on page 27).

Collaborative relations between consumers and producers are promoted through the facilitation of contact and face-to-face encounters, which contribute to the experience of empathy, which in turn supports egalitarian or collaborative relations between actors. In Credit Unions, relationships with customers are thought of as a partnership. This entails a governance structure where broad participation is ensured of both the customers/members and the employees. In Slow Food, consumers become “co-producers”, emphasising their strategic role and individual responsibility in supporting “good, clean and fair” production worldwide “because they want to feel part of the network and are aware of and develop responsibility for their consumption choices” (SFI\_01).

The change in relationships towards more collaborative ones goes beyond the interpersonal or social innovation initiative level, to a larger institutional level.

“Networking is key, helps a lot. Slow Food always collaborates with local organizations, cooperatives, associations of producers. When we promote a project in these countries, rarely we work with individuals. There are many approaches to national and international organizations, while more national than international, such as Greenpeace Mexico. It is important to join efforts. When we apply to calls for international projects, we should work together with these organizations. The interesting thing is that now we are working permanently with some of them. We also have tried to create Latin American networks, for example, we formed the *Platform for the Regional Biodiversity* in order to work together in these territories. In some cases, we develop projects with the same financier, the Ford Foundation, and the same partner, RIMISP, the Latin American Centre for Rural Development” (SFI\_04).

Developing institutional relationships of collaboration where before there was fragmentation is also a result of social learning, (in special when occasional collaboration turns into stablish relations).

“We have even engaged politicians from local and regional administrations as well as different political parties, Trade Unions, cultural associations; because Slow Food has the



ability to reach people from all the sectors of Araba society. We can do that because everybody cares about food” (SFAV\_01).

Slow Food works in Italy with food and beverage companies with whom they previously did not share interests, like the Italian coffee company Lavazza (with whom they are working on the development of “product narrative labels”):

“Which is of course a traditional company, but it has started a very good and transparent process, also related to producers in South America and they are doing a good job of managing change in a sustainable direction. Of course, change is very slow, because a company like that does not change overnight, but we continue to support their efforts because they look promising (...) we teach them about the narrative labels, which give more information about the production and distribution of food, and attract people more to food. The European Union only asks for very little information about the characteristics of the products, and we teach them to tell the story of the product” (SLI\_01).

In the case of Credit Unions, Febea network has strengthened its relations with European organizations and networks that are involved in supporting the social and solidarity economy, such as RIPESS or the Institute for Social Banking. Also, several members of Febea belong to another international network named the “*Global Alliance for Banking on Values*” which groups together credit unions and ethical banks such as *Triodos*.

“Fiare has networked with other ethical banks around the world through the Global Alliance for Banking on Values, which consists of 25 banks that have different organizational models, but that respond to the same question: What is done with my money? Among all of them, possibly Fiare has the widest level of social participation and embeddedness in the social network. The aim is to promote and accelerate the local economy, this process of globalized ethical banking. Other projects, as microcredit, are very positive but I believe that only with microcredit we won’t be able to contribute to social change. It is necessary that ethical principles enter in banking” (Ugo Biggeri, 2014<sup>11</sup>)

Changes in quality and characteristics of relations have been facilitated by certain innovative experiences of radical democracy like “sociocracy”, “holocracy” or “magic anarchism (see section on methods of learning). Besides, new social relations have been forged through **Participatory Budgeting** initiatives, which forge egalitarian relations between government, civil servants and citizenship (Cipolla et al, 2016). The **cohousing** Argentinian cooperative “El Hogar Obrero” positioned cooperativism as a way of organizing people in Argentina and installing cohousing as a form of access to housing for the working class (Picabea et al, 2015:53).

### 1.3.3. Empowerment as an outcome of social learning

Within TRANSIT, we have adopted the view of empowerment as the instrumental subset of agency (Alkire, 2005) and have argued that it relies on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, which supports the development of autonomous motivation and thus the carrying out of behaviour that is self-determined, as well as outcomes such as wellbeing, creativity and commitment, which are essential for innovative ideas to arise in SIs (Haxeltine et al., 2016; Reznickova & Zepeda, 2016; Zepeda, Reznickova and Russel, 2013). Empowered people can challenge, alter or replace elements of the social context that thwart the satisfaction of these basic

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11. Intervention of Ugo Biggeri, President of Banca Ética in FIARE’s General Assembly, held in Barcelona (Spain) on March 2014. (source: Dumitru et al, 2015)

psychological needs, and as a consequence, lead to passivity and alienation, as well as social relations and institutions that do not support the natural human potential for growth, integration and pro-active, engaged and committed behaviour.

Empowerment can be considered the actual ability to carry out effective action towards goals are freely chosen and are important to a person or a group. Such ability relies on the felt sense of individual or collective power to carry out goal-targeted actions, and is supported by the experience of achieving impact, which entails the capacity to reflect upon and adjust courses of action as well as to persist in front of obstacles and failures.

Slow Food members experience a sense of personal power when they contribute to their communities in meaningful ways, when they experience they bring change to the places where they live, or feel they make a difference in the life of farmers and food producers. Interviewees mention that face-to-face relation between producers and consumers (“co-producers”) reinforce their commitment to action, in special whether they perceive that their effort has a direct and immediate positive effect on local community:

“One feels proud when one feels able to improve the living conditions of local peasants or organic farmer, as we are getting through the food communities, or when one perceives that one’s message is known by the local community because politicians care about your presence in press and you are very well known here” (SFAV\_01).

“It is not the same if I buy a product in a supermarket than if I go to Victor’s house (N.A.: a local food producer), have a coffee with him, talk a bit and buy his product paying a fair price. The second one is better for me, as well as for the customers that come to my restaurant and for him (the producer). I am helping him to have a better life” (SFAV\_02).

The projects being carried out within the framework of SI initiatives are considered laboratories of empowerment – thus experimenting and learning how to achieve impact is seen as a key source of empowerment or, alternatively, as a way to counter helplessness or disempowerment: “this is a Utopia, but it is also real, and we need more people to have more impact. Two or three leaders are not enough; because the first step is to reinforce the local, involving people in small projects. It is happening worldwide” (Paolo di Croce, 2015<sup>12</sup>).

In similar terms, Hackerspaces’ members manifest the empowering outcome of constructing the initiative. As Hielscher and colleagues affirm, “it is a tremendous source of pride and empowerment for those involved that the space has been created through their own resourcefulness” (p. 40). Fiare is perceived by practitioners as a useful tool for social transformation and empowerment because “normal people can put together a bank that actually works like a real bank and supports projects that its members believe in” (Fiare\_03).

“Demonstrating that normal people are able to create a bank is also a tool of empowerment, because it shows that individuals can change society. Until now, we were just people working together, but now, we realize that we can be and change much more” (Fiare\_03).

In Credit Unions, interviewees perceive themselves and the initiative as more capable to fulfil their aims and to deal with challenges, (e.g. changes in banking regulations that jeopardized their position), to deal with internal and external obstacles, and to take advantage of changes in the

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12 Intervention of Paolo di Croce, General Director of Slow Food during a meeting with the convivium Slow Food Galicia, in Vimianzo (Spain) on June 2015. Notes taken by the researchers during a participant observation activity.

social context, which gives members a sense of competence: “You see that it's possible to collaborate in small initiatives without another bank or government funds. Some projects have succeeded thanks to the initiative of one or two people. That encourages you because sometimes we do not trust individual initiative; we say we are not able to do anything. In Fiare, I noticed that people take the initiative, which motivates you to participate” (Fiare\_06).

Also, acquiring practical knowledge and abilities to function with limited resources, or to obtain external financial resources increase initiative's capacity of resilience, flexibly adapting to new circumstances, as this Slow Food interviewee explains: “we are tremendously flexible. There are associations that cannot operate with less than 40,000 euros. If we have only 8 euros, we will do things with these 8 euros. I believe in this idea. We are able to do more or less depending on our resources. When we started we have nothing and we managed. But this project must go on” (SFAV\_01).

#### 1.3.4. Changes in behaviours and strategies for action

Interviewees report changes in individual and collective behaviours as a result of social learning that takes place through activism in SI initiatives. Slow Food aims to change the kind of products people consume as well as the way and the place where people (individuals, chefs) purchase fresh produce (substituting supermarkets for local or rural markets or online direct selling services, etc.).

As a consequence of increased awareness, practitioners mention changes in their consumption choices, such as buying more local, organic and fair products, in local/rural markets or directly to the producer (joining to food communities); living in a healthier way, or behaving in ways that are coherent with their values. Being asked about in what extent Slow Food has contributed to a change in their behaviours, the following interview responds that after being a member for ten years she feels that her life has totally changed:

“Yes! Absolutely! I can tell you that I love cooking, I've worked in restaurants, and I loved it and it is OK. But now I decided to be a food activist fulltime, so it is a big change. The way I think about the world, I feel myself as more connected to the environment; I am more an environmentalist than I used to be. I work more with my community that I've ever had otherwise. So many ways! Absolutely, Slow Food changed my life. Certainly my consumption practices have changed as well. When I shop, I cook at home a lot. I've always cooked at home but now I cook things absolutely differently than I used to do. I love to know the whole story of the product I cook. I don't think that I am slower in other parts of my life” (SFI\_05).

The following practitioner reflects on necessary steps to introduce people in Slow Food Lifestyles:

“The most important thing I've learned is to be patient, to be slow... To be patient and to accept that people need multiple points of entry. In order to get people to come along and think with you, you need to give them a very, very easy way to start. Eventually, people change, people's mind changes, people's behaviours change, but they need a place to start. It is possible to change behaviour; I think so” (SFI\_05)

Slow Food chefs have also introduced slow practices in restaurants, hosting students or mentoring new associates:

“We teach students about slow food philosophy and I feel proud when you see them introducing our practices in their own restaurants (...). When a new restaurant approaches

Slow Food aiming to be a “KMO”, I advise them and I introduce them to local producers, and farmers who supply me with products” (SFAV\_02).

In the case of Credit Unions, one of the goals of the initiatives is to help improve people’s financial behaviours and habits, in terms of responsible and conscious consumption of banking products as the following interviewee affirms: “I don’t see credit unions as an alternative to banks or payday lenders, I see them as part of a financial package for the individual. We want people to choose wisely because it’s about thrift and changing behaviour not just about the money” (Ian Leather, 2014<sup>13</sup>). Developing an interest in how the money is used can also be seen as a driver of behavioural change:

“This is the question we address in many of our presentations of the bank: Okay, look, you know you cannot get support from mainstream banks, but whose money are the banks using? It is our money! Do you think it is logical that we do not have any influence? There is no transparency, you have no clue about what they are doing with the money, and you don’t have any oversight control. Banks have a relevant role in our economy and they decide which type of economy will be developed by choosing certain investors. And why wouldn’t we have any control over this?” (Febea\_04)

Strategies for action are also developed as a result of cross-fertilization of ideas between initiatives in different places, which in turn can lead to the development of new practices within the SI initiative.

“I see Banca Popolare Etica as a big bother. I see the steps we can take in the future. Managing and operating ideas... the network of mutuality, where partners offer their services, the crowd-funding platform... They give mortgages. Of course our steps don’t have to be the same. We should choose our own pathway. We learned a lot. It is a mutual learning. You can see it since the first assembly in Barcelona. There was all the board of Banca Popolare Etica. Many Italian people come to here. We saw a lot of interest from both sides. We met and talked each other. This is the most important part of these meetings, meeting people, from the Spanish territory as well from the Italian one. You feel happiness on both sides. And we also bring freshness to the project. When we work in groups, everyone wants you in their group, because you are Spanish and you bring freshness. They have been working together for so long that maybe they do not generate new ideas. Another perspective makes them think differently. This is an interesting part of the project. Learning from all persons and organizations that are very different” (Fiare\_01).

**Gaining reputation and legitimacy** becomes one of the strategies that SI initiatives learn in order to increase their leverage and become influential, which also serves to maintaining member’s motivation. Both Credit Unions and Slow Food have learned that reputation depends of their capacity to maintaining the integrity of their principles and core values on the one hand, and being an example of viability and sustainability of alternative ways of doing, becoming an authority in the field, on the other.

**Maintaining certain level of credibility implies do not compromise SI initiative’s principles.** SI practitioners in both Slow Food and Credit Unions insist on the importance of not compromising their principles and maintaining their core values. Thus, when Slow Food activists are asked about their critical positions confronting, for example, European policies, they feel confident that their consistent work on the ground supports their claims:

“We do the projects we want to do, and the European Union sees that what we do is not utopic but it works because we write reports and show how we are able to increase the

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13 Norwich CU expert. Interview conducted by Anne Frances, in Norwich, in 2014 (source: Dumitru et al, 2015)

number of local producers, the economic activity etc., and they see that it works and ask us for more information and projects. This does not conflict with that we claim, it is in line with our discourse and practice" (SFI\_01).

Such understanding seems to be shared also by credit unions members. As one interviewee stated, impact is achieved by maintaining the purity of the concept of socially responsible and ethical banking in practice and thus drawing societal attention to the perversion of the mainstream banking system. Impact is achieved by occupying a position of being "alternative, but not marginal" (Febea\_02).

In Febea, there is an ongoing discussion on how to achieve transformative change and the need to grow or not in number of associates, whether that is desirable. For the "grow bigger" perspective, impact will be achieved by becoming a stronger actor in the field -which is related to the level of representativeness of Febea- and thus slowly transforming the rules of the system. On the contrary, the founding members of Febea -which have been pioneers in starting credit cooperatives in their own countries- tend to perceive Febea as a place to meet, discuss and exchange experience and thus find a like-minded group and environment. They are also reluctant to letting go of this culture and tend to fear that being in a hurry to grow or achieve political objectives might have that effect.

"We need to maintain the qualities of being an alternative and ethical bank, so this poses a problem...I believe at this point most ethical Banks are working to consolidate their growing, okay? The next step – and this is a personal opinion, would be to have an ethical bank in every country...and these Banks will need to work together more...at this moment we have the federation, but the federation is an association where we go to meet and talk about our problems, solve our problems and do some activities, but the problem is that European ethical Banks want...need a greater consolidation and it might be that some need to merge with one another. But at this point, it is not...we do not talk about it. We talk about our problems, about the problems related to consolidation and responding to society's need for credit. This is the main issue now" (Febea\_02).

**Being an example of viability of alternative ways of doing.** Credit Unions are proud of being able to respond to the increasing needs of individuals and institutions that are excluded from the banking system as well as to the needs of investors interested in how their money is used. Credit Unions have gained credibility functioning effectively during the economic crisis, by sustaining their model and the idea of giving priority to social and environmental criteria in banking. As one interviewee stated, credit cooperatives were the only ones still giving credit during the economic crisis. As they have not engaged in speculative financial activities before, they did not have to reform or suffer the consequences of the crisis. On the contrary, they grew at a significant rate (some up to 20 %) during the crisis. These paths are opposite to commercial banks (...) which have created the premises of a financial crisis that have affected the lives of millions of citizens" (Febea, 2012<sup>14</sup>).

Slow Food leaders claim to own "**the moral authority**" to promote a more 'civilized' economy that, actually, "has limited persuasive power in comparison to large corporations and food industry lobbies" because they do "the work that institutions should have done for safeguarding of their heritage and they hadn't" (Interview to Carlo Petrini in Le Monde, 2005). Slow Food gained reputation overtime developing a consistent discourse and demonstrating the viability of their proposals, despite being a minority discourse confronting dominant food and economic systems:

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14 Source: Febea's position paper: What really differentiates ethical banks from modern banks?  
[http://www.febea.org/sites/default/files/definition\\_ethical\\_bank-en.pdf](http://www.febea.org/sites/default/files/definition_ethical_bank-en.pdf)

“We are a minority, but we have the ability to influence, to change things gradually, through food education activities that change individual consumption decisions” (SFAV\_02).

“We have already seen that, without local economies, there would be no Terra Madre, no producers or “co-producers” and no exchange between them: exchange of knowledge, products, information, innovation and sincere friendship. It also has to be pointed out that the small productive scale is not a “return to the past”, but is as modern as can be—even from an economic point of view. It has been demonstrated, in fact, that many small-scale economies produce at least as much as large-scale or global-scale systems. They are fairer, more sustainable systems for the distribution of wealth and well-being at every level, from the personal to the global” (Slow Food, 2012).

In addition, Slow Food establish bodies that can provide them with expertise as a way to gain credibility, like the “group of experts in food issues” that counsel and elaborate documents and “position papers” regarding the main “hot topics” in food system:

“They (the group of experts) are people who created slow food in the first place and who have been following the whole evolution and have the political vision. Also, we have an animal welfare expert group. It involves producers, farmers, who give us the point of view of the farmers so that we not suggesting something that is not feasible for the farmers and it involves other farmer’s organizations who are collaborating with us on the topic (SFI\_02).

**Social learning leads to the refinement of effective strategies for influencing existing institutional relations.** In order to increase their transformative capacity, SI initiatives learn, from their own experience, that political institutions should be involved in transition processes, and SI initiatives are conscious of the need of developing strategies to gain political influence.

Slow Food has developed -in its 30 years of history- extended lobbying capacities as well as the International Association has become an “acknowledged interlocutor” for political institutions, a counter voice that has demonstrated change is possible and gained a role in “advising and counselling on agriculture issues” (SFI\_02). The European Commission, considers Slow Food as being the biggest membership-based organisation in the world and therefore most welcome in policy debates (e.g. in the CAP reform). However, Slow Food leaders reflect on the difficulties to change political decisions and reflect on the necessity to develop new ways of lobbying: “The officer of the EU Agriculture Commission told us two years ago, before the approval of the new European common agriculture policy, which is a disaster; he told us that we have to invent a new way of lobbying” (Paolo di Croce, 2015<sup>15</sup>).

This influence has been observed at the local scale in different ways. In the case of the Basque initiative, Slow Food leaders are called by the local Council to advise in the development of food, tourism or edible garden local projects. Besides, Slow food discourse is relevant for political parties: “For example, in the last 2015 local elections several parties included in their political programs to attend Slow Food demands and support our projects, which means that we are doing a good work here” (SFAV\_01).

However, other local chapters have not been so proactive in pursuing political influence or they have avoided it intentionally due to their intuition that society would not perceive it positively:

“I don’t think USA is a good place to launch this political campaigns, because we have a kind of allergy to politics and I think people don't want to participate, we do not care how people

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15 Intervention of Paolo di Croce, General Director of Slow Food during a meeting with the convivium Slow Food Galicia, in Vimianzo (Spain) on June 2015. Notes taken by the researchers during a participant observation activity.



lives over there (in developed countries) if they are not attached you. But I think this is part of the logic of difficulties in engagement” (SFI\_05)

In the case of Credit Unions, especially the newer members of FEBEA tend to see the initiative as an instrument to achieve significant objectives that would lead to system transformation. For these members, changing European regulations would contribute to a wider systemic change by re-setting the rules of competition and potentially making social impact indicators a central aspect of banking activity. They see the potential of FEBEA as a relevant interface with European institutions and other relevant governmental and regulatory institutions:

“It is clear that it is a small development in relation to everything that happens, but being able to meet with the President of the European Commission, the Director of the European Investment Bank, of the European Investment Fund, I believe that this is a sign of recognition, it shows some will for change”. (Febea\_03)

**Developing strategies to gain more autonomy and capacity for action on the ground.** Reflection on experience leads to questioning of initial strategies and the development of new ones that helps the initiative adapt to changing circumstances, as the following Slow Food interviewee explains:

“Our most fundamental challenges we have for several years now I mentioned we are trying to figure out right now is to create a kind of business model so we can continue to give very good support to our network and to grow the movement and continue to engage with the international community. The non-profit sector, since the economic downturn here, as in Europe, has struggled to a sort of redefinition in order to act within this environment. Fewer and fewer people are interested in membership organisations, there is more competition for fundraising, more competition for government money and so on.. So that's internally, I would say, our biggest struggle and then externally I think that our greatest challenge is really making sure that we are involving rural communities and communities that are not as fully engaged in the food movement. We've made excellent strides in a lot of communities and you could say that it is becoming a majority opinion the need to change our food system but I think we need to really work to incorporate, to be more inclusive of those groups...I think that's always the hardest part, because we are a very large country and so figuring out how to work within the existing model, either trying to fix it...or actually proposing an entirely different model. I think that's kind of the struggle that Slow Food is having in the US right now...” (SFI\_05).

#### 1.4. Actors who play a key role in processes of social learning in social innovation initiatives and networks

A number of SI initiatives have mentioned the relevance of “inspirational leaders and visionaries” in contributing to social learning both within and outside the initiative. Carlo Petrini (leader of the Slow Food movement) or Rob Hopkins (founder of Transition Movement) are examples of such inspirational leaders who have received international acknowledgement for their pioneering work in founding and leading global movements “which have had a significant positive impact on the environment. Petrini received the UN's *Champions of the Earth award* and served “as inspiration for transformative community action across the world” (as the UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner, stated in 2013).



Leaders and gurus successfully disseminate the vision and main values of the initiative in both internal (inside the initiative) and external contexts, by giving talks, having an impact in the media, creating alliances with politicians or maintaining good relations with relevant international figures (as Carlo Petrini did with Pope Francis). Such leaders also travel across a certain space/geography and they develop a dissemination or pollination activity, constructing discourses of change and developing visions of the future. Peru Sasia, in Fiare, as well as Ugo Biggeri in Banca Etica, are both representatives of the European credit union movement that fit this category of leaders. Mulgan (2006) has also described a category like this, asserting that social change seems to be driven “by a very small number of heroic, energetic, and impatient individuals that planted the seeds of a powerful idea into many minds” (pp.148-149).

The networking culture of ecovillages works rather in the form of community and circular communication than with frontal leaders. GEN is a bottom-up and diverse network of very different projects. Nevertheless, there are key people who have brought forward the global movement like Ross and Hildur Kackson from the GAIA trust and the GEN presidents. Since the HABITAT II conference 1996 GEN collaborates with the United Nations and UNESCO, for instance in the United Nations institute for Training and Research (CIFAL Scotland<sup>16</sup> Affiliated Training Centre of UNITAR) to empower individuals, local authorities, governments and organisations through knowledge and learning to effectively implement sustainable development.

However, besides such visionary leaders, visiting or receiving members from other initiatives seems to have “pollination effects” enabling the interchange of experiences and conducting common projects. As Kunze & Avelino (2015) explain, such “pollination” between local ecovillages happens when individuals move to other projects or start a new one, carrying their knowledge and experience with them, or when they “supervise, coach or teach methods to others” (p.93). Especially in the younger ecovillages (like Schloss Tempelhof) we observe a (small) number of community experienced people who have lived in several ecovillages or intentional communities before. The same occurs within the Impact Hub network (Wittmayer, et al, 2015) and Fab Labs network with “travellers or gurus that share information between labs” (Hielscher et al, 2015b:29-30).

SI initiatives and networks also assume an educator role in wider communities, actively teaching and stimulating the emergence of projects through enrolling other actors (from ordinary citizens to political leaders) to work towards the overall goal, as in the case of Transition Towns (Longhurst & Pataki, 2015). Slow Food and Global Ecovillage Network have developed educational projects that are connected to society as well as Schools with alternative (experiential, hands-on) learning models (Kunze & Avelino, 2015), and DESIS network attempts to introduce innovative educational methods in design schools (Cipolla et al., 2015). Science Shops introduce participatory research methods in academic contexts through the interaction between Universities and NGOs (Dorland and Søgaard Jørgensen, 2015). FabLabs enhance the participation of the community in their knowledge sharing and learning activities, popularizing and training people in free software technologies and digital fabrication (Hielscher et al, 2015b).

Most of SI initiatives put their efforts into publishing books, guidelines and handbooks (as well as Webpages, blogs, documentaries) to disseminate their activity, philosophy or theories of change. For example, Carlo Petrini's best-sellers (*“Buono, pulito e giusto. Principi di nuova gastronomia”*, 2005; *“Slow food nation: Why our food should be good, clean, and fair”*, Petrini et al., 2013) have contributed to the general knowledge of the food system complexity and the alternative “eco-gastronomy” paradigm that Slow Food proposes. Fiare’s leaders Peru Sasia and Cristina de la Cruz published the book *“Banca Etica y Ciudadanía”* (Ethical Banking and Citizenship, Sasia & De la Cruz,

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.cifalscotland.org/>

2008) to set up the ethical values and principles of its innovative project. Robert Hopkins' *Transition Handbook* (2008) serves of inspiration for transition leaders and practitioners worldwide.

## 1.5. Promoting wider societal learning

Social innovation initiatives often contribute and/or actively promote wider processes of societal learning. Although a detailed account of how these processes are organized is not within the focus of this paper, we point to a set of social learning outcomes that can be assessed in order to evaluate the transformative capacity of social innovation initiatives.

We do not claim, however, that social innovation initiatives are the sole sources of such outcomes. Consistent with the co-production framework adopted in TRANSIT (Haxeltine et al., 2016), we argue that social innovation initiatives/networks are key actors in the shaping of wider social learning processes, but that the final outcome is a result of co-production.

### **Changes in societal worldviews and deep values (new ways of framing)**

Slow Food has introduced a new frame to comprehend food systems and market relations (between producers and consumers) which involve taking personal responsibility/commitment to social transformation and adopting new values in food consumption such as respect for producers. Credit cooperatives proposed a different understanding of the relationship between financial entities and their beneficiaries, and promoted a change in the role of the bank as an external observer to either success or failure of its projects, towards that of a partner with a stake in a project's success. Hackerspaces pursue the transference of their organizing model to a wider society, "creating new cities in which people co-live with each other and organise themselves in a decentralised manner" (Hielscher et al, 2014:18).

### **Changes in norms and institutions**

Social innovations initiatives have a direct influencing role in promoting social learning that leads to changes in norms and institutions. The European credit cooperative (Febea) has recently engaged in an interesting dialogue with the European Commission on defining the elements that differentiate ethical and alternative banking from traditional banking, aiming to protect the cooperative model in European banking norms. Slow Food advises governments (Colombia, Brasil, South Korea) and public institutions (Council of Vitoria-Gasteiz) on changing food systems in both global and local contexts. Slow Food's President has been invited to speak at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (New York, 2012) on the right to food and food sovereignty as well as he has been panellist on the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development- Rio+20 (Brazil, 2012). The free software movement gained the support of public institutions and governments to pro-free software/open source policies. Inforse adopted a strategy of involvement in energy institutions to develop a more favourable framework for renewable energies in Europe, by participating in the works of the Belgium National Committee of Energy (Elle, 2015). Interest in trying to change the educational system is shared by Slow Food (Dumitru et al, 2016), Desis network (Cipolla et al, 2015), Ecovillage movement (Kunze and Avelino, 2015), Living Knowledge (Dorland and Sogaard Jørgensen, 2015) or the FabLab network Hielscher et al, 2014b) proposing new learning methods in schools and based on experimentation and the "learning by doing" model.

### **Changes in ways of doing (practices and behaviours)**

Social innovation initiatives also promote societal learning about new ways of doing, contributing to changes in practices and behaviours. Slow Food cooperates with market organizations such as *AlceNero* or *Lavazza* on the development of "narrative labels" in food products (see quote SLI\_01, p.38). Credit Cooperatives have introduced transparency practices that other banking institutions

started to implement. The Desis network was able to introduce changes in institutions such as new design practices in Design Schools (going further traditional industrial design themes and involving communities in designing methods). Ecovillages also propose changes in the educational system, introducing innovative teaching models (“Reform village school”) based on experimental learning methods (Kunze & Avelino, 2015).

### **Changes in social culture**

Looking from a sociological perspective we discover a reinvention of a new mode of community. Based on modern individualization, the social innovation initiatives of today seem to herald a revival of community in a new, post-individualised manner. Social learning becomes increasingly important in a globalized world of change and insecurity. In our initiatives under study we observe that social cohesion is not only be based on a collective of like-minded people but in a post-individualized manner on a pluralistic community of mutual sharing and welfare. Robert Schehr (1997) discusses the impact social movements, especially intentional communities including ecovillages, make upon the *decolonialization* of the lifeworld. Susan Brown (2002) characterizes intentional communities as a ‘cultural critique’ in the form of a ‘revitalization movement’.

### **New actionable capacities**

Besides the development of new ways of behaving, social learning processes also contribute to the development of capacities for higher self-determined action on the part of wider groups or communities. Different previously vulnerable groups might develop capacities to self-organize in order to get access to certain services, opportunities etc. Previously passive citizens might be inspired and gain the capacities to intervene and become active contributors to different causes. Slow food enhances community empowerment, especially in rural areas (agricultural based) providing them support, resources and assistance that permit them to develop new ways of doing things (such as alternative food systems and short market circuits) and enabling rural slow-life communities. ‘Hacker ethic’ has been said (Haywood, 2012 in Smith et al, 2015) to influence the democratized activism of the ‘Arab Spring’, Occupy and Anonymous ‘movements (p 18).

## **2. Conclusion**

Transformative change entails learning for different societal actors. The types of lessons that each group needs, the leverage they have in shaping public discourse, as well as how the discourse of social innovation initiatives starts to shape the lenses through which certain issues are seen are questions which TRANSIT attempts to answer. Social innovation and social transformation inherently require new ways of thinking and doing which in turn entail dedicated learning processes that are essential to transformative change “in terms of capacity-building, individual and collective empowerment and self-determination of social actors, which constitute the basis of the success or failure of social innovations” (Haxeltine et al, 2015:54).

Following an inductive-deductive analysis of the social learning processes manifested in TRANSIT empirical studies (Jørgensen et al, 2015; Wittmayer et al, 2016), this paper proposes an analytical framework for understanding and assessment of social learning that include both personal/individual change and changes in the social structures which can lead to (transformative) social innovation.. concretely, this paper focused attention on how spaces, methods, types of learning and outcomes contribute to achieving the preconditions for effective agency, which includes new understandings, the generation of possibilities to experiment with alternatives, especially in terms of new social relations, and building adaptive capacity to dynamic circumstances in the social context. Following an inductive-deductive analysis of the social learning processes manifested in TRANSIT empirical studies (Jørgensen et al, 2015; Wittmayer et al, 2016).

Research methodology consisted of case-study document analysis, empirical observation and in-depth interviews with practitioners and other relevant social actors (Jørgensen et al., 2014; Wittmayer et al., 2015c). The semi-structured questionnaire that guided the interviews contained questions specifically targeting the complex processes of social learning in terms of the existing types of learning, actors, processes of transference and learning outcomes (Jørgensen et al., 2014). Specifically, TRANSIT researchers looked for the relationship between social learning and individual and collective agency and empowerment -understood as an instrumental manifestation of agency- (Wittmayer et al., 2015c) that occurs within the SI-initiative/SI-network and beyond the SI-initiative/SI-network (the broader context). Secondly, we proceeded to an analysis of empirical data obtained through semi-structured qualitative interviews in two case studies: Slow Food Araba, Slow Food Freiburg and Slow Food International- the headquarter organization of the Slow Food movement; and Fiare Banca Etica (Spain) and Febea, the European Federation of Credit Cooperatives and Ethical Banks. Specific sections of the analysis have also been enlarged with empirical data from an ecovillage case study.

The framework proposed in this paper identifies and evaluates social learning taking place in social innovation initiatives (types of learning), describing the characteristics of those processes (learning environments and methods) and mapping the personal and collective changes that they lead to (outcomes). We distinguish between four types of learning: cognitive learning, inner, personal transformation and emotional learning, relational and strategic/political learning. Cognitive learning refers to the acquisition of new theoretical or conceptual knowledge which is required for meaningful participation in the social initiative. Inner learning refers to self-reflection processes that lead to personal transformation on a subjective level. Relational learning involves supporting high-quality motivation of members, capacities for participating in cooperative decision-making, intercultural learning, as well as developing communication and leadership skills. Strongly connected with relational learning is the strategic and political learning, which refers to the knowledge and skills required to increase the political and social influence of the SI initiative, and increasing their potential and ability for transformative change.

This approach also stresses the importance of social learning contexts/spaces and methods, which create adequate conditions to link experiences, reflection, and experimentation between individuals and groups. We analyse the knowledge creation and reflexive thinking processes taking place within the initiatives, the relationship between learning processes and empowerment, those leading to active engagement in collective decision-making and actions. This paper focuses on understanding how social innovation initiatives and networks become effective agents of change, and what are the mechanisms through which social learning contributes to the construction of transformative agency. Thus, we identify four main categories of outcomes of social learning in social innovation initiatives and networks: (1) changes in understandings and framing that lead to their causes and their solutions; (2) changes in the quality and characteristics of social relations; (3) empowerment; and (4) changes in behaviours and strategies for action.

Social learning processes have to be understood in order to further develop our comprehension of the mechanisms through which social networks and institutional structures change. As the last section of this paper argues, social learning contributes to wider societal changes in terms of promoting changes in societal worldviews and deep values (new ways of framing), changes in norms and institutions, changes in ways of doing (practices and behaviours), changes in social cultures and, finally, new actionable capacities.

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