transformative social innovation theory

Social learning in social innovation initiatives

Learning about systemic relations and strategies for transformative change

Social innovation (SI) initiatives and networks

start out when people come together in attempts to find better ways to pursue certain values and ideals and create a space in which these can be put into practice. In doing so, they experiment with new solutions to problems and alternative ways to respond to societal needs.

Social innovation has become infused with grand expectations in academic, practitioner and policy-making circles, and often seen as capable of delivering solutions to the complex problems of our times (exclusion, inequality, exploitation, alienation, and the degradation of nature and erosion of community life).

The mechanisms through which social innovations occur and the conditions through which wider impacts are achieved are studied in the TRANSIT project. TRANSIT places changes in social relations at the heart of social innovation and looks at the processes through which initiatives strive to bring about these changes. This is visible in its definition of social innovation –as *"new social relations, involving new ways of doing, organizing, knowing and framing"* – and its view on transformation. In TRANSIT, we don't divide social innovations in the categories transformative and non-transformative but see transformation as an emergent outcome of the interaction of social innovation with its context (other actors and institutions).

Social innovations *become transformative* when they challenge, alter, replace or produce alternatives to well-established social relations, and ways of doing things. In their journeys, social innovations are subject to pressures for change themselves. They thus need to learn how to maintain autonomy and integrity and resist capture, especially from government and other powerful actors.

Because social innovation initiatives experiment with radically different ways of doing things and have ambitions to achieve change in society, social learning is of paramount importance. *Through experimentation with new social relations, interaction and conscious reflection*, members of SI initiatives learn about how to develop, thrive and engage in effective strategies for transforming existing practices and institutions. They develop ways of relating to one another that are more fulfilling, and strategies for interacting with existing institutions, practices and relations of power. When such **insights, strategies and the underlying values become shared**, we speak of social learning.

This 4th TRANSIT brief offers insights into the following questions: *what is social learning, what does it consist of in the case of SI initiatives, and why is social learning important – even foundational – for SI initiatives as well as wider society?* Also, the brief provides insight into the role of networks in social learning for social innovation.

Answers to these questions will be illustrated with empirical examples from the following three (TRANSIT) cases: **Slow Food, credit unions & financial cooperatives** and **eco-villages.**

Occupy Wall Street | Source: Aaron Bauer

Slow Food is a global grassroots movement, whose aim is to transform current systems of food production, distribution and consumption that emphasize 'fast' mass production to one which protects biodiversity, local products and traditions in producing and consuming food, and dignifies food producers and their role in the system. The movement proposes a change in relations between producers and consumers, based on an ethic of co-responsibility, conviviality and enjoyment, the right to food, and the protection of cultural diversity. In TRANSIT, we studied the International Association of Slow Food, a global grassroots organization, based in Bra (Italy), which has 100.000 members and one million supporters in 160 countries around the world, and two local manifestations: the Spanish convivium "Slow Food Araba-Vitoria" (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country) and the German convivium "Slow Food Freiburg" (Freiburg, State of Baden-Württemberg).

Slow Food Araba-Vitoria | Source: Aitor Buendía

The Global Ecovillage Network is a bottom-up network of ecovillages around the world, that aim to create holistic experiences in sustainable and community-based living often including small scale economy, communal property of land, commons and local gardening. They define themselves as intentional communities that are "consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes to regenerate social and natural environments." (GEN int. board 2012). In TRANSIT, we studied 'the network', which has some 400 local ecovillages as members worldwide, including approximately 130 in Europe. We also studied several local initiatives including, the more than 20 years old ecovillage of 'Sieben Linden' in East Germany, and Schloss Tempelhof, a young and popular ecovillage in Southern Germany.

Schloss Tempelhof ecovillage | Source: Iris Kunze

Credit unions and financial cooperatives aim to create an alternative financial system that would support a fairer, more inclusive, and environmentally sustainable economy. They promote a view of financial systems that are based on solidarity and trust and the definition of common beneficial objectives for community thriving and development. They place support for shared social and environmental objectives at the core of economic and financial transactions, and work towards changing the logic of profit for the sake of profit. They are member owned and cooperatively governed. In TRANSIT, we studied the European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks (FEBEA) and the Spanish initiative Fiare Banca Etica.

left: Fiare´s office in Bilbao (Spain) | right: Fiare credit cooperative | Source: Fiare Banca Etica

What is social learning?

Social innovation initiatives often start out with an idea about what they want to change, a set of principles and values founders co-shape and endorse, as well as a narrative of change, or set of ideas about how to bring this change about. These initial ideas are further shaped over time, through *direct experimentation as well as through reflection and integration on better ways to reach their goals.* In their development, SI initiatives have to grapple with many challenges, in order to ensure the viability of the project.

These include maintaining motivation and enthusiasm among members, solving tensions and contradictions in relations, and developing effective strategies that take advantage of the opportunities that arise and manage obstacles well, while not loosing their initial values and appeal.

Grafitti *"let's make a change"* | Source: European Parliament

The set of processes by which particular groups or communities, through social interaction reach a new understanding about how social relations and practices could be organized differently and how change can be brought about is called social learning. Members in SI initiatives learn many things as individuals and reach new worldviews and understandings that have an impact on their behaviors. Personal transformations are a frequent outcome of engagement in social innovation initiatives. But beyond the individual, SI initiatives reach *new shared meanings, through interaction, collective experimentation and joint reflection, and these become situated in shared norms and practices.* This is social learning.

The new social relations and practices that SI initiatives promote can have an impact beyond a particular community or locality, and contribute to wider societal change. The processes through which this happens are addressed in TRANSIT brief 3 *(Understanding how social innovation leads to transformative change).*

What do social innovation initiatives need to learn?

In order to articulate a coherent vision and theory of change, and build an alternative to existing social and institutional arrangements, members of SI initiatives need to:

- **acquire specific knowledge** about how particular institutions and systems work and how they perpetuate values and practices that are not desirable;
- **develop competencies for cooperation and dealing with tensions** in order to create new social relations and maintain motivation in the face of obstacles; and
- **develop effective strategies of engagement** with other relevant actors and institutions, in order to achieve their objectives, which often include changing existing states of affairs.

Acquiring new in-depth knowledge about systems and institutions

The Slow Food movement revindicates local products, practices of production, landscapes and the enjoyment of food. Its practitioners acquire knowledge about the why and how of producing "good, clean and fair" food, food sovereignty and the negative impacts of the current food system on biodiversity, rural areas and cultural and community traditions. They learn about the relationship between current food production and distribution and climate change and what makes food environmentally sustainable and healthy.

Food action in Brussels | Source: European Parliament

This entails a change of paradigm, as one practitioner put it:

> *"Basically, Slow Food allowed me to value the products we are consuming. I am aware now that when we eat a pineapple, that pineapple has travelled thousands of kilometres. That this tomato we eat in November is no longer a seasonal product. 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". (member of Slow Food Araba Victoria)*

Credit union members learn about the regulations governing the practices of financial institutions, their day-to-day work, and how to manage such an institution. Members do not normally have previous training in economics and finance and they learn to deal with the contradictions of creating financial services based on ethical principles of solidarity, trust, and inclusion as they experiment with the creation of an alternative.

Most SI initiatives recognize that in order to change existing social relations, they need to contest the relationships of power supporting them. The lack of knowledge on particular issues, and the criteria that establish who is an expert - and thus has a right to be listened to - are elements on which the existing financial institutions are based or unequal relations in the food system are maintained.

Social innovation initiatives endorse cooperative decision-making as a key element of bringing change about. They recognize that this is only possible on the basis of knowledge of the issues involved and the ability to elaborate proposals and defend certain positions. In their efforts to build particular projects or alternatives, initiative members first have to learn a lot about the workings of specific systems and institutions. Meaningful participation thus relies on shared social learning.

As one of the members of the Spanish credit union Fiare Banca Etica says, *"financial issues are not only for the smart people, the professionals or the experts. Everybody in Fiare should be knowledgeable of the issues that are up for discussion. Otherwise participation would be a lie"* (intervention of a leading member of Fiare in a public event, 2014).

The aim of the ecovillage movement is to build a network of resilient communities that is not easily affected or hit by negative societal crisis. There is a certain critique of large scale systemic structures that are perceived as non-resilient 'dinosaurs'. In the words of one member: "GEN wasn't really created as a response to a crisis; more as an enthusiastic expression."

Ecovillages have learned to use legal frames to protect their shared property due to their values of self-organisation, ecological living and land-use as well as affordable housing. In most of the ecovillage cases the land and houses are owned by a foundation or a cooperative. It prevents the land from speculation and the community from losing their space to residents, who are not connected to the ecological values and to the community. Ecovillages choose their members in newcomer processes to make sure they support the ecological way of living and connect to the community.

Setting up an alternative economy based on shared property, new legal frames, appropriate business concepts and constructing eco-buildings are issues concerning which new knowledge is developed and acquired by members.

Setting up an ecovillage sometimes requires learning how to overcome legal obstacles, as the example of 'Sieben Linden' ecovillage shows. A land-use plan to build a completely new village of 300 residents was worked out to ask permission from official governmental administrations.

Conflicts between different administrative levels had to be overcome, as the regional planning office opposed a new ecovillage while the authority in charge of granting permits for buildings insisted on the necessity for a legally-binding land-use plan. Members learned how to overcome such obstacles.

Of course, many ecovillages had to also learn from mistakes. As a member of a popular ecovillage states, they had to learn how to create a local economy that could benefit the ecovillage:

> *"It was a mistake of the foundation to sell off some of the companies. Also the many B&B around our ecovillage do not pay anything back. We have been naive in how we sold things off." (Interview Global Ecovillage Network).*

(11)

Stanciova ecovillage (Romania) | Source: Alberto Díaz

Learning to build and maintain new social relations

SI initiatives actively experiment with new forms of relating, and, as they develop over time, learn how to grapple with tensions and contradictions and acquire a shared understanding about enacting such new relations. Each becomes a 'micro-cosmos' of experimentation in which new values can be put into practice.

The principle of "fair food" sets new bases for the relationship between producers and consumers in Slow Food. Consumers share the burden and learn about fair treatment of producers. The initiative endorses a vision of relationships within the food system that are based on principles of "conviviality", enjoying food while recognizing and respecting the contribution of producers.

The latter have been disenfranchised through the de-individualization of food production and distribution. They also endorse cooperation as the basis for new relations, by which responsibility for protecting biodiversity and the uniqueness of each community´s identity and history is shared, and benefits and burdens are fairly distributed.

Collaborative relations between consumers and producers are promoted through *the facilitation of contact and face-to-face encounters, having fun and meeting around food, which contribute to the experience of empathy and feelings of ownership*. It also fosters learning and makes people more responsive. This is in opposition to the alienation and depersonalization that characterizes relations between producers and consumers in the current food system.

In Slow Food, consumers are considered co-producers:

> *"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 food — and also how to evaluate what a fair price for it should be"* (member of Slow Food Italy).

Beyond direct contact, governance structures that promote meaningful participation are also a way to promote change in existing social relations. The value of solidarity endorsed by Credit Unions incorporates a new perspective on the relationships between financial entities and other community and institutional actors. They start out of a double concern about money being used to support harmful projects and about the exclusion of environmentally and socially beneficial projects from the mainstream banking systems.

A bank is understood as a platform that facilitates cooperative partnerships in a community, based on principles of solidarity and on agreements about goals of common interest. Such principles constitute a radical departure from understanding the pursuit of personal interest as the basis of economic relations, towards an understanding of interdependent interest, benefitting the community as a whole. Their cooperative governance structures at the same time reflect these new relations and facilitate their practice.

Building new identities that unite rather than divide and the emphasis placed on an ethic of responsibility also contributes to the facilitation of cooperative partnerships. Both Slow Food and Fiare Banca Etica managed to bridge previously existing divides between community actors and broker agreements of cooperation between them. Motivational discourses in Slow Food, for example, stress elements of a common identity, or the feeling of being part of a global community that dreams and works together.

Solving tensions and conflicts in relations

Changing existing social relations is not always easy or free of tensions however. Sometimes, members have different ideas about which principles to endorse or which action to take to achieve their mutual objectives. Like any other human endeavor, SI initiatives are not free of power struggles. For these reasons, many SI initiatives put special emphasis on educating their members for cooperation, conflict resolution and gaining social competences. As one of the long-term volunteers of the Spanish credit union Fiare assures, *"society does not have abilities for dialogue; there is a lack of social and group participation skills"*. Another member remarks that building a grassroots credit cooperative requires *"a lot of patience, consensus, reflection and capacity for team-work"*.

The Panya Project | Source: Website

Social learning on these competences is an important part of the survival of social innovation projects. Research on ecovillages, for example, has shown that about 90% of them fail within the first years of planning, due to conflicts and tensions, before they even get to the stage of buying a site.

Good cooperation requires building trust, as reflected in the experience of the Spanish Credit Union Fiare Banca Etica. The credit cooperative is able to fund projects that might be evaluated as "unbankable" by traditional banks because trust is developed through the embeddedness of financial practices within local community webs. The agreement between Fiare and the Italian credit cooperative Banca Popolare Etica to merge was possible after a long relationship that enabled, at the same time, a close and continuing interaction between volunteers and members of both SI initiatives.

Ecovillages have invented or elaborated on a range of innovative techniques for fair and participatory decision making processes aiming to avoid conflict over power imbalances, which have then also been taken up by other organizations and social innovation initiatives. A lot of time is spent on community and relationship building processes in ecovillages, as these are considered fundamental for decision-making.

In several of the SI initiatives we studied, members are willing to question their own attitudes and positions in social interaction. Ecovillage members emphasise that self-reflection and personal transformation are an essential part of changing relations. Learning new emotional communication and conflict-resolution skills is a pre-condition for social learning of new relations, based on transparent communication and trust. Only groups who can handle conflicts in a productive way can motivate people to stay actively involved. Using mediation and moderation techniques supports the creation of a resilient community.

Maintaining long-term motivation

Before striving to achieve transformative impact, SI initiatives need to attract and maintain a sufficient number of members who dedicate their time and energy. Involvement needs to be sustained over time, and many social innovation initiatives are confronted with the challenge of maintaining members motivated, beyond a small, dedicated group of volunteers. In TRANSIT, we have looked at the issue of motivations and how they relate to feeling empowered to act. As developing a social innovation initiative normally requires considerable resilience to obstacles and failure, sustaining motivation for involvement over time is paramount.

The psychological theory of self-determination (Ryan and Deci, 2000) offers interesting insights about how this can be achieved (see Box 1 for a brief overview of this theory).

Based on extensive and cross-cultural empirical research, the theory of self-determination posits three innate psychological needs, which are considered basic for optimal human functioning and for the actualization of potentialities for growth and creativity: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When satisfied, they contribute to human growth and well-being, when undermined they give rise to negative outcomes such as loss of meaning and alienation.

Autonomy refers to the ability to choose one´s own acts and to act in line with personal values and identity. Relatedness is about feeling part of a social group and feeling supported. Competence is related to the perception of effectiveness in carrying out actions to achieve one´s goals, and involves a search for stimulation and optimal challenges (Bidee et al., 2013). The theory also distinguishes between autonomous motivation (doing things because one believes in them) and non-autonomous motivation (doing things out of reasons such as fear, or achieving status.)

People join SI initiatives searching for spaces in which they can better align their values with their practices, experience more meaningful relationships, have the freedom to determine their actions, and work and develop a sense of competence or mastery in doing so. If these motivations are nurtured and supported, people stay involved over time. Such motivations are nurtured if specific psychological needs are satisfied. Part of the social learning that takes place in SI initiatives has to do with how to foster relationships and environments that contribute to the satisfaction of these psychological needs and thus provide an alternative to existing arrangements that can contribute to collective growth and thriving. We next look at how the satisfaction of needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence is supported in SI initiatives.

Experimentation is possible in spaces that enable emergent, spontaneous interactions that lead to learning and at the same time are experienced as natural, fun, non-constrained, and autonomous. SI initiatives provide a space where practitioners feel free to start or participate in meaningful projects and which create the conditions for self-determined, autonomous action.

Experimental garden in Glenwood Green Acres, Philadelphia | Source: Tony Fischer

They promote an experimental culture that provides opportunities for trying out new and "utopic" alternatives. As one member of Fiare Banca Etica says: *"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".*

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. After a long time of theoretical discussion, Fiare created a space in which experimentation is encouraged. Due to this feature, and their cooperative governance structures that give members a say in the configuration of the initiative, Fiare supports people in achieving a better alignment between their values and their practices.

The presence of an experimental culture is also observable in the case of ecovillages - which intentionally set an eperimental space appropriate for a ´new culture` of creativity, experimenting, and collaboration.

Ecovillage Sieben Linden | Source: Iris Kunze

The encouragement of such experimentation, supported by an attitude of ´failing is okay` makes SI initiatives spaces in which autonomy and freedom can be experienced. Ecovillages explicitly encourage an experimental ethic where failing is permitted and comprehended as a necessary part of putting new ideas and projects into practice.

Experimenting with alternatives also needs sharing and support from others. SI initiatives provide contexts in which positive experiences and a sense of support and accomplishment contribute to the long-term motivations of members. Slow Food Araba, for example, learned to create environments that foster support, friendship and conviviality, thus providing satisfaction of needs for relatedness:

> *"It is fundamental to ensure an environment where people have a good time. People want to go home with the satisfaction of what they have done well, thinking, we are happy with our work, we have made friends and we had dinner".*

Credit Unions practitioners constantly emphasize the importance of these spaces that provide the opportunity to meet and know each other and reinforce trust.

These also contribute to the emotional experience of feeling part of a group of like-minded others, sharing goals and challenges. SI initiatives learn that promoting direct, face-to-face encounters both locally and in networks contributes to a sense of belonging, as practitioners share meaningful experiences with others.

A culture of experimentation, peer-to-peer cooperation, and participatory decision-making creates environments in which members also develop new competences and capabilities for producing change. Participating in common activities promotes knowledge exchange, collective experimentation and drawing inspiration from others.

Ecovillages like Schloss Tempelhof make it easy for members to informally try out new jobs and learn new occupations, by creating the possibility to join fellow members at their work places and receive professional advice; by providing opportunities for everyone to contribute, independent of their level of experience (e.g. taking part in agricultural activities, cooking for more than 100 people or facilitating meetings); and by lowering the barriers to try out something new, through an attitude of empathy where failing is accepted based on the trust and broader knowledge of each other.

Terra Madre Parade Embodies the Spirit of the Event | Source: Slow Food image library

Members of FIARE, for example, report experiencing a sense of mastery and competence as a result of participating in the shaping of the initiative. As one member put it:

"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 is encouraging because we tend to think that one or two individuals will not be able to do anything. In Fiare, I witnessed that these initiatives do succeed, which motivates you to participate".

Cohousing project funded by Fiare in Spain | Source: Trabensol

Developing strategies of engagement with other actors and institutions

In pursuing their objectives, social innovation initiatives learn how to engage with actors and institutions in the contexts in which they operate. Some SI initiatives have explicit transformative ambitions, others discover that making space for an alternative requires removing obstacles, which in turn involves developing political and strategic skills.

Cultivating a position of inclusiveness and engaging community actors widely

Research in TRANSIT showed that cultivating a position of inclusiveness is part of the social learning process in initiatives. Slow Food members 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, of if you are excessive in talking about these issues you can be dismissed as a freak, a geek, then the movement suffers"* (member of Slow Food Araba Vitoria). Inclusiveness is not achieved at the expense of bending principles, but rather by cultivating a space where common ground can be found and connections can be established among different sensibilities.

This is done by providing opportunities for relaxed and spontaneous interaction, sharing activities, having fun and by supporting people and projects that embrace and show commitment to the principles of the initiative, even if they cannot fully implement them in practice. FEBEA, the European Federation of Credit Cooperatives and Ethical Banks, has, for example, accepted among its members a mainstream bank that had gone through significant effort within one of its branches to embed ethical banking principles in their practices.

FEBEA | Source: FEBEA Website

Learning to create a common space in which actors can overcome previous divides and learn to cooperate has been part of the success of Slow Food Araba-Vitoria:

> *"There are two environmental organizations here that had never collaborated before, because they had their suspicions towards each other and disagreements. 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. As a result, we now have a platform of more than 20 local associations to promote healthy and sustainable food systems in our city".*

Fiare Banca Etica has also brought together, through the cultivation of a position of inclusiveness, actors that previously considered themselves to be on the opposite sides of the political spectrum, such as catholic associations and leftist grassroots organizations.

Ecovillages had to learn to be sensitive towards the reservations of local village residents. In the case of 'Sieben Linden', local residents were excited that so many young people would move to their marginal area but they were also sceptical about ideological ambitions. The ecovillage initiative had to ensure that they would respect the local way of living and not try to evangelise or take over too many abandoned houses in the region. As one ecovillage member states:

> *"This was a very vulnerable point, because we did not know how the people would react to us. Before we could buy the land, we then invested a lot of energy to contact them, talk with them and make them understand, we are the guests, they are the 'land lords'".*

Reframing discourses in response to new challenges

Slow Food adopted the concept of the 'commons' (Ostrom, 2000) and framed thinking about food in terms of commons as an important step towards transformative change, which in turn led them to question the compatibility between this framing and the idea of a free market. 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. Practitioners learnt about how different issues are connected, and about different strategies to reach a wider audience and to exert influence.

The 2007 economic crisis, led credit union members to develop an alternative narrative of ´democratic-cultural regeneration´ of societies oriented towards ´the common good, sustainability and solidarity´. They portrayed credit unions within a broader vision.

Gaining reputation and legitimacy

Social innovation initiatives learn about the importance of gaining reputation and legitimacy to increase their leverage and political influence. **Reputation** is gained by doing things well and demonstrating a valid alternative, and **legitimacy** by maintaining a certain level of purity of values and principles, while also demonstrating pragmatism and embeddedness in local networks and communities.

Being a model for a functioning alternative or "living the change", as one ecovillage member states, is an important educational tool at wider societal levels: *"We have positive, real examples. Seeing a living example is much more valuable than talking".* Demonstrating validity also draws attention away from mainstream actors, especially at times when traditional institutions are being challenged. Credit Unions have gained credibility by doing well during the economic crisis in 2007 in Europe, while being true to their model of prioritizing social and environmental criteria in banking.

Good food march to Brussels | Source: European Parliament

As one member 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 these times:

> "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".

Both Credit Unions and Slow Food have learned that legitimacy depends on their capacity to maintain the integrity of their principles and core values, while demonstrating the validity of alternative ways of doing, which requires a degree of pragmatism. Credit Unions achieve impact by maintaining the purity of the concept of socially responsible and ethical banking in practice and thus draw societal attention to the perversion of the mainstream banking system. As one member puts it, it is about being "alternative, but not marginal". SI practitioners in both Slow Food and Credit Unions insist on the importance of not compromising their principles:

> "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" (member of Fiare Banca Etica).

Ecovillages may sometimes seem like isolated projects, somewhat apart from other settlements. Nevertheless, their innovations spread through education centers run by some of the larger ecovillages.

Ecovillages cooperate with the regions they are living in through constant economic relations, cultural exchange and school education. They contribute to the local economy and attract young people to rural, marginal areas, thus contributing significantly to rural economies. By doing so they also demonstrate a viable alternative.

Legitimacy is also gained by maintaining strong relations in local communities. Slow Food has become a credible dialogue partner for European policy-makers, because it combines a coherent discourse about a new food system with strong embeddedness at the grassroots level:

> *"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 necessarilly only civil society organizations but with stakeholders with whom we are working on the same topics".*

Besides strong connections at grassroots levels, and the capacity to demonstrate the validity of an alternative organization of relations within the food system, SI initiatives must also learn how to engage with political actors and institutions, and develop specific strategies to gain political influence. Through such efforts, Slow Food has gained a role in "advising and counselling on agriculture issues" for international policy-making bodies such as the European Union or United Nations (member of Slow Food in their Brussels office). After gaining reputation, legitimacy and credibility, FEBEA was approached by the European Commision and asked to establish the criteria that differentiate ethical banks from traditional commercial banks as well as the indicators to assess the social impact of banking practices. They did so, and FEBEA was invited to become part of the Expert Group on Social Entrepreneurship, through its chairman, Fabio Salviato, as expert for the financial sector.

The role of networks in social learning for social innovation

Networks play an important role for social innovation initiatives. By facilitating interactions between practitioners of SI initiatives in different parts of the world, they provide opportunities for enhanced learning, practical support, the experience of belonging and connectedness, and contribute to creating an identity of being part of a movement, and having a sense of increased impact as a result. This often contributes to new ideas, renewed enthusiasm and stronger motivation for members of local SI initiatives.

Members of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) emphasize the importance of the network in fostering exchange and learning between people in the global North and South, as well as facilitating changes in entrenched attitudes:

> *"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." (Member of GEN).*

In addition, networks provide opportunities for inspiration, through exchange between practitioners in different parts of the world, who might confront similar problems. Practitioners learn new and effective strategies for pursuing their goals.

The biannual "Terra Madre Forum" organized by Slow Food International serves to enhance their motivation and sense of belonging, as well as empowering them to keep striving for change in their communities. Annual meetings within FEBEA provide opportunities for seeking advice and support from more experienced network members in other countries, about how to set up a credit cooperative. Continuous advice and support is also provided by the network, when requested by local initiatives.

Networks also play a key role in establishing collaborations at wider scales with actors that work towards similar goals, or that have the necessary leverage for achieving change, thus becoming a tool for empowerment of local initiatives, communities and individual members. FEBEA, for example, had a key role in strengthening 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, FEBEA has established collaborations with other international networks such as INAISE, the International Association of Investors of Social Economy, or the 'Global Alliance for Banking on Values' which groups together credit unions and ethical banks such as Triodos.

Banking on Values | Source: Fiare Banca Etica

Proud to put PEOPLE Before profit

Concluding remarks

The experience of co-shaping and participating in the building of a social innovation initiative, learning from experience and witnessing the different impacts that it can achieve, is considered by members to be deeply empowering. When a collective manages to transform ´utopia into reality`, as a member of Slow Food put it, and contribute to a community in meaningful ways, the result is a sense of personal and collective power.

Members of FIARE feel empowered by the fact that "normal people can put together a bank that actually works like a real bank and supports projects that its members believe in". Also, as they develop and evolve, members undergo a change in perception as a member of FIARE states, which strengthens this sense of empowerment:

> *"Demonstrating that normal people are able to create a bank is also a tool of empowerment, because it shows that a handful of individuals can change society. Until now, we were just people working together, but now, we realize that we can be and change much more".*

Social innovation initiatives experiment with and develop new social relations and new ways of doing things. By doing so, they become active agents of change and engage in processes of deep societal transformation. Such transformations involve social learning but also political struggle and attempts at co-option or capture (see TRANSIT Brief 2 for these processes). There are limits to what social learning can achieve, but social learning is key to understanding how social innovation contributes to transformative change, as an outcome of social experimentation.
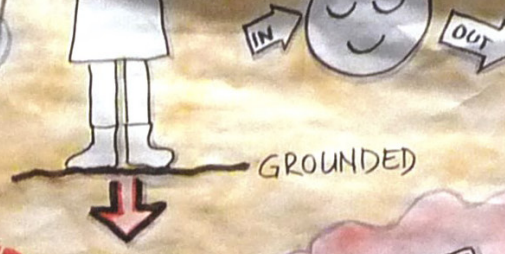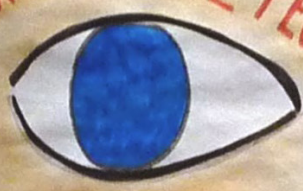
Source: Iris Kunze

Drift
Dutch Research Institute for Transitions

IHS
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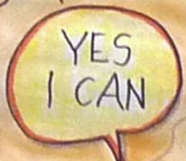
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TRANSIT is a research project which aims to improve understanding of how social innovation can bring about empowerment and societal transformation. The research team is carrying out in-depth case studies with around 20 transnational networks and the use of engagement with social innovators, social entrepreneurs, policymakers and scientists in workshops, to gain new insights into the field. The outcomes will include training tools as well as policy and practitioner briefings like this one, to share this knowledge and help support social innovators for sustainability.

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Authors of the TRANSIT brief:
Adina Dumitru, Isabel Lema-Blanco, Iris Kunze, Rene Kemp, Julia Wittmayer, Alex Haxeltine, Ricardo García-Mira, Linda Zuijderwijk and Stefana Cozan.

transitsocialinnovation.eu
communication.transit@ihs.nl
transit@drift.eur.nl
@TransitSI