



Accepted for publication 13 October 2019 • First published online 17 January 2020

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial 4.0 license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits adaptation, alteration, reproduction and distribution for non-commercial use, without further permission provided the original work is attributed. The derivative works do not need to be licensed on the same terms.

Themed section • Re-reading civil society action for environmental sustainability

## research

# The community economies of Esch-sur-Alzette: rereading the economy of Luxembourg

Gerald Taylor Aiken, [gerald.aiken@liser.lu](mailto:gerald.aiken@liser.lu)

Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research and Luxembourg University, Luxembourg; Rachel Carson Centre, Germany

Christian Schulz, [christian.schulz@uni.lu](mailto:christian.schulz@uni.lu)

Benedikt Schmid, [benedikt.schmid@uni.lu](mailto:benedikt.schmid@uni.lu)  
University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg

This article outlines the community economies of Esch-sur-Alzette, the 'second city' of Luxembourg. 'Community economies' – an approach outlined by J.K. Gibson-Graham – draws attention to alternative narratives of economic development and the representation of economic identity. Despite (the Grand Duchy of) Luxembourg's reputation as a European Union centre, with substantial finance and tax activity, Esch-sur-Alzette is a post-industrial and multilingual melting pot. The alternative narrative here is of the multiple community-based organisations and movements in Esch-sur-Alzette: an energy cooperative, urban gardening, an upcycling clothing factory, a local food shop and restaurant, and vibrant civil society discussions and interventions in (inter)national politics. Civil society, while central to both understandings of grassroots environmental action and the community economies framework of Gibson-Graham, takes on quite a different flavour in Luxembourg. This article then takes the case of Luxembourg to reread the relationship of the state to the so-called third sector, in doing so defending the political possibilities of community economies.

**key words** community economies • rereading for difference • community initiatives • Luxembourg • degrowth • circular economy

To cite this article: Taylor Aiken, G., Schulz, C. and Schmid, B. (2020) The community economies of Esch-sur-Alzette: rereading the economy of Luxembourg, *Voluntary Sector Review*, vol 11, no 2, 211–229, DOI: 10.1332/204080519X15709868759772

## Introduction

The role of community initiatives in the political (for example, environmental action groups, low-carbon initiatives) and social (for example, charities) realm is firmly established. Yet the importance of community-based businesses as labelled by the Community Economies Research Network (CERN)<sup>1</sup> is a case still to be made. Categorised as ‘diverse economies’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008) or ‘alternative economies’ (Zademach and Hillebrand, 2013), community-based businesses differ from conventional, market- and profit-oriented enterprises in terms of their motivations, objectives, ethical standards and surplus allocation practices (North, 2016). Despite obvious similarities and overlaps with the more recognised and established social and solidarity economy, alternative endeavours tend to go further in their aspiration to change the capitalist economic system from within or below.

Their aim is to show that within the current socioeconomic system, dissenting forms of economic practices are viable, indeed preferable, and develop ways to produce societal wellbeing without material growth. An increasing variety of people support these practices – many of them associated with the multifaceted ‘transition towns’ or ‘transition initiatives’<sup>2</sup> – which are trying to do things ‘differently’, not only with regards to the material/ecological dimension of the business, but also including progressive understandings of work organisation, individual working-time models as well as economic democracy (Taylor Aiken, 2017a). In many cases, these endeavours are understood as civil society-based social innovations (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Avelino et al, 2017).

The recent proliferation of various kinds of community-based enterprises in the realms of urban agriculture, repair and upcycling, co-working, barter schemes and local currencies, or non-commercial-sharing initiatives, has sparked a scholarly interest. Disciplines such as ecological economics, urban geography, spatial planning and economic geography are at the forefront here (North, 2015; Krueger et al, 2017; Smith, 2017; Lange and Bürkner, 2018; Rosol, 2018; Schmid, 2018). These academic discussions of community-based enterprises currently revolve around the following questions:

- To what extent are these endeavours truly alternative, that is, able to overcome systemic growth logics and their material and social implications?
- Do these new business models fit with established concepts and methods, or do they need to inspire theory building, methodological fine-tuning and the refinement of indicators?
- What does this mean for policy making? How does urban planning need to adapt to these innovations? Can policy both accommodate these new requirements and also enable future developments?

At the same time, less is said about the ‘community’ aspect of community economies. Frequently, the term is interchangeably (f)used with ‘alternative’, ‘local’ or ‘diverse’, without necessarily clarifying the underlying understanding or social dimension of community.

### *The ethics of community economies*

‘Community economy’ is a term closely associated with Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b). Here, community economy is a ‘political discourse grounded in visions of sociality and conviviality ... explicitly about *resocialising* economic relations’ (2006a, 2006b): 79, emphasis added). Throughout Gibson-Graham’s work, she draws attention

to the problematic and narrow interpretation of the term ‘economy’ in its everyday and technical (academic) sense; however, ‘community’ is just as capacious a term as ‘economy’, so it is important to take some time to outline just what both community and economy imply. Gibson-Graham (2006a: 80) is careful to avoid the straw man of community – its elision with local – pointing out that while a community may often be local, it need not fall into what others have called the ‘local trap’ (Born and Purcell, 2006). However, Gibson-Graham (2006a) falls prey to another pitfall when discussing community, that of enfolding ethical assumptions within it: ‘In all these [community-based] movements, economic decisions ... are made in the light of ethical discussions’ (Gibson-Graham 2006a: 80). Community is a form of being together that regularly accompanies the assumption that ethical concerns are more prominent than in other forms of sociality – whether society, workforce, citizenry or group. The idea that community somehow brings to the fore ethical concerns gives community economy its positive associations, and also attraction for those normatively attracted to alternative economic expressions, or critical of the status quo/mainstream (Taylor Aiken, 2018a: 130). Gibson-Graham is careful only to relate community to ethical concerns in general, and not with saying that those within a community make better (under whatever criteria) ethical judgements. Nevertheless, getting in certain forms of sociality that go under the name of community is presumed to be a more reflective, conscious, thoughtful state of mind: community is ethical. ‘The shared ethic that underlies these community economic development programs privileges care of the local community and its environment’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 80). It is interesting to set this beside much writing on community, which assumes the opposite: community is associated with groupthink, unthinking social norms, or focusing on one’s immediate and seen social relations at the expense of distant and perhaps unseen social and economic relations (Taylor Aiken, 2018b:).

For Gibson-Graham et al (2013), in their *Ethical guide for transforming our communities*, ‘our economy is the outcome of the decisions we make and the actions we take’. The central claim of community economy is to ‘take back the economy’ in the sense of understanding the economic not as an ‘out there’ external force or context, which acts on and constrains people and groups, instead seeing the economic as that which is produced from within social relations/togetherness (our actions, our decisions, our practices) and from the activities and exchanges we engage in. The economic is made social. Seeing the economy as a form of sociality is also where its ethical dimension comes in. This, we will argue here, turns out to be just as important as the social made political.

### Hybrid organisations

Researchers in the field of social and solidarity economy are intrigued by a growing convergence between public and private (corporate) organisations and organisations from the ‘third sector’. The third sector is not to be understood in a Fourastiéan sense as equivalent to the service sector, but as activities in civil society or ‘community’. The quilting of these three types of actors in concrete endeavours (for example, fairtrade initiatives, local energy cooperatives) brings about so-called ‘hybrid organisations’ (Evers, 2008; Pestoff, 2014). These organisations supposedly have the potential to link intrinsic ecological or social justice motivations with new business models (Dufays and Huybrechts, 2016). Again, community is seen to fold the ethical back into the economic through a (re)discovered social purpose, where before it was presumed missing. This means that the hybridity of these constellations goes beyond budgetary, organisational and structural aspects, and includes the encounter of different institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio,

1999; Nicholls and Huybrechts, 2014). Despite possible pitfalls (for example, power asymmetries, capture by existing state or capitalist logics) inherent to such arrangements, hybrids show a strong potential for identifying innovative and sustainable ways of production, trade and service provision. At the same time, hybridity may be a first step towards overcoming conventional understandings of formalised economic organisations – for example firms. This broadens our understanding of ‘the economy’, for example following Roth’s (2015) focus on the non-economic function of systems.

In this article we use as our theoretical frame the conceptual tools provided by both community economy and hybrid organisations. Therefore the question we need to focus on, when rereading the economic, is to focus on the social relations and interpersonal understandings that are (re)produced and realised through economy, and by which economy is (re)produced. In our case, rereading the economy of Luxembourg, we delve into these aspects of Esch-sur-Alzette.

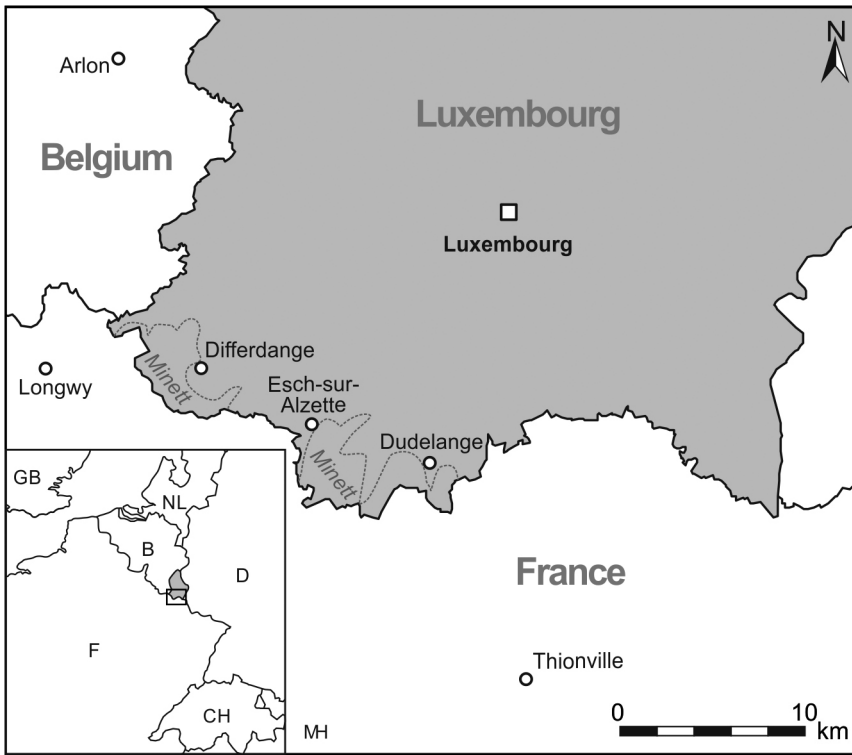
## The context: caught between economic restructuring and growth pressure

At first glance, it may appear surprising to many readers to see Luxembourg as a case study for community economy research, given its dominant international financial sector, the relative material wealth of large sections of the population and the country’s continued demographic and economic growth (Chilla and Schulz, 2015; STATEC, 2018). A socially and spatially more differentiated view, however, reveals that:

- Luxembourg has a quantitatively important social and solidarity economy sector (Rückert and Sarracino, 2014; Sarracino and Gossat, 2015), which in particular takes care of socially disadvantaged citizens – for example in training long-term unemployed people, rehabilitating adolescents who have dropped out of school and accompanying newly arrived migrants/refugees. Civil society organisations, ranging from large charities such as *Caritas* to local grassroots groups, have initiated and/or accommodate many of these programmes, which are financially supported by national and local authorities. Apart from its budgetary commitment, the government more than symbolically recognised the role of this sector by including it in the name of its *Ministère du Travail, de l’Emploi et de l’Économie sociale et solidaire*. Since 2011, the country also has a dedicated action plan, the *Plan d’action pour le développement de l’économie solidaire au Luxembourg* (Ministère de l’Economie et du Commerce Extérieur, 2011).
- Luxembourg’s famous economic prosperity is not evenly distributed across the country and restructuration processes operate differently in different contexts. Notably, the former iron-ore mining and steel industry towns in the south of Luxembourg (see Figure 1) simultaneously show elements of successful revitalisation but also visible and challenging legacies of the past. The largest of these post-industrial towns is Esch-sur-Alzette, introduced next.

For about a century, the south of Luxembourg has been marked by heavy industry. Iron-ore deposits (*Minette*) exploited along the Dogger escarpment were the basis of a flourishing iron and steel production, which was Luxembourg’s main economic pillar until the 1970s/1980s and dominated by the ARBED corporation (today Arcelor Mittal). As this industry declined, the relatively densely populated and rapidly urbanised southern region became subject to profound restructuration.

Figure 1: Locations of Lux-City, Dudelange, Esch-sur-Alzette and Differdange



Today, the Minett region is a patchwork of still-existing steel production sites (with approximately 4,000 employees), derelict brownfield sites with pending development projects, revitalised sites (such as Belval, which hosts the nation's first university, founded in 2003) and a built environment consisting of old worker settlements and an increasing number of new residential developments to accommodate newcomers attracted by new service activities. Simultaneously, the region's social structure remains particular, given a higher unemployment rate (around 9% compared to 7% at the national level) and a higher share of inhabitants with only basic school-level education (Observatoire de PRO-SUD, 2017).

Esch-sur-Alzette, with 35,000 inhabitants, is Luxembourg's second-largest city and the urban centre of the south of the country. Its particular social structure and its traditionally left-of-centre local government (that is, a long sequence of centre-left and socialist majors) chime with a particularly high presence of socially oriented grassroots initiatives. This high concentration of initiatives has recently been complemented by a series of activities inspired by the 'transition' movement (see below), explicitly searching for alternatives to economic growth.

## Community economies of Esch-sur-Alzette

Given the diverse and vivid pattern of initiatives concentrated in Esch-sur-Alzette (see Figure 2), we chose this municipality for our exploratory case study on community-based economies in Luxembourg. After a first screening through desk research, background interviews with key actors and participation in public events, we further

refined our analysis in order to establish a structured sample of relevant initiatives. At this stage, this could not be a comprehensive inventory. However, key stakeholders repeatedly mentioned the same array of initiatives. The selection in Table 1 thus served as a starting point for our endeavour.

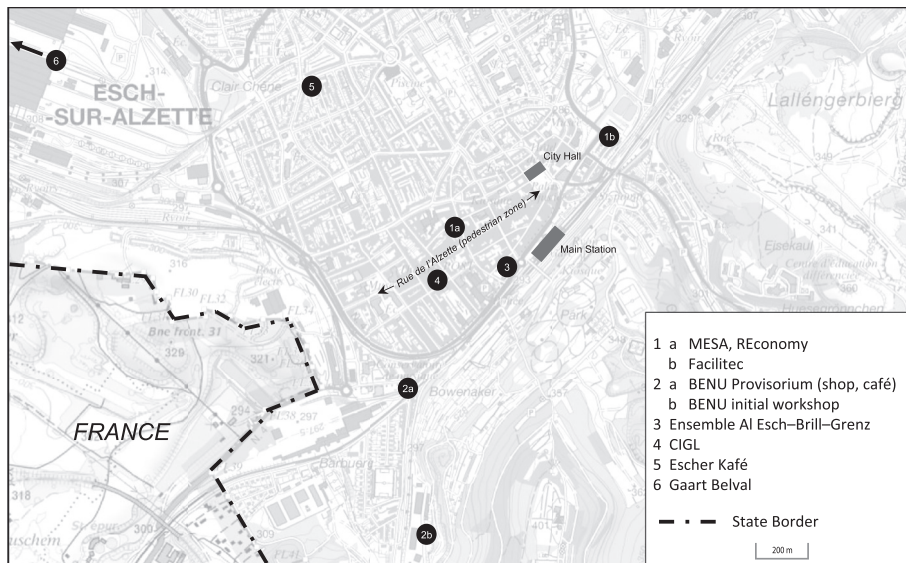
For this article, we focused on two particular prominent initiatives, which we consider to be good indicators of the current community economy of Esch-sur-Alzette: Transition Minett and BENU Village. They are both compelling cases because of their topical scope and visibility in public debates. At the same time, they are quite distinct in terms of their respective trajectories and project architecture. While Transition Minett and its projects listed in Table 1 are profoundly anchored in and managed by grassroots activists gathered in the transition initiative, BENU Village appears more like a one-person initiative, which was granted public funding and then received strong support from civil society and individual volunteers (see below for further details). Both are self-consciously allied with the ‘degrowth’ movement, which neatly compliments community economies. Degrowth challenges

**Table 1: Community economies in Esch-sur-Alzette**

Name	Type	Core activities	Active since	Further details
1 Transition Minett	Grassroots	Transition initiative	2011	Umbrella organisation
1a MESA	Grassroots	Restaurant, grocery store	2014	Part of Transition Minett
1b REconomy	Grassroots	Support of community-oriented start-ups	2016	Part of Transition Minett
1c Facilitec	Grassroots	Hosts and supports hybrid collaborative and circular initiatives	2018	Part of Transition Minett
2 BENU Village	Bottom-up project; led and funded top-down	Circular economy, textile upcycling and retail; foodsharing/restaurant (planned)	2018	Initial funding provided by the Ministry of Environment
3 Inter Action Al Esch-Brill-Grenz	Grassroots	Gift boxes, cooking together, community garden	2016	Part of Inter Action network, coordinating several neighbourhood initiatives in Luxembourg
4 CIGL	Public	Bike repair, community gardens, computer/e-waste recycling, toys	1997	Narrowly cooperates with local authorities and other partners
5 Escher Café	Private	Bike repair, social space, café	2017	Independent café, local food
6 ARCUS	Charity	Large national operator of youth facilities	2008	Cooperates with other initiatives for the training of adolescents/young adults (for example, in BENU Village)
7 Gaart Belval	Grassroots	Community garden, hosts a vegbox scheme	2017	Urban greenspace was started by employees working in Belval



Figure 2: Locations of community initiatives in Esch-sur-Alzette



conventional understandings of the economy and its formal organisations (firms). Central to degrowth is an understanding that overcoming society's growth dependency requires less resource-intensive modes of production and consumption alongside a reorientation towards the common: common good, commons as defined by [Bollier and Helfrich \(2019\)](#) and community ([Latouche, 2006](#); [Jackson, 2009](#); [D'Alisa et al, 2015](#); [Kallis, 2018](#); [Schmid, 2019](#)).

We accompanied both of the initiatives over a period of months and interviewed their coordinators and key employees for the purpose of this research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the framework of a larger research project undertaken by the authors. In addition, we attended public events and meetings of the initiatives. One of the authors (GTA) was a member of the advisory board of one of the initiatives (CELL) and thus got first-hand insights into ongoing debates and evolutions.

### MESA (*La maison de la transition*)

MESA is the hub and flagship expression of Transition Minett.<sup>3</sup> Transition Minett, in turn, is the most active and impactful initiative of the Centre for Ecological Learning Luxembourg (CELL). CELL serves as the national hub for the international transition movement in Luxembourg, and has a range of official transition initiatives, including Transition Minett, and other transition and non-transition initiatives. Both Transition Minett and CELL were launched in 2011 and, as the names suggest, take the transition movement's principles of permaculture-based social movements and community action to make their local economic and environmental situations more resilient. Permaculture is a design system taking natural principles and patterns and applying these to agriculture initially, and now social and economic systems ([Taylor Aiken, 2017b](#)).

MESA, then, is a key site for both the transition and permaculture movements in Luxembourg, and also Esch-sur-Alzette and the surrounding Minett region. It serves as a shop, collection point, office space, meeting point, restaurant, café, bar and also an events space for more public artistic events (see [Figure 3](#)). MESA was conceived

as the ‘house of transition’ to further the aims of Transition Minett, and the transition movement in Luxembourg as a whole. MESA’s functions can be broadly separated into both externally orientated and public-facing aspects, and also those that are internally useful for the transition movement in Luxembourg.

MESA is a visible, public-facing enterprise. It is located on a street corner next to Esch-sur-Alzette city centre’s main shopping street, and with tables and chairs for the café on the street in summer, and open windows for watching passers-by, it is seen locally year round. On entering MESA one finds initially a shop selling products harmonising with the values and principles of CELL, Transition Minett and the wider transition movement: organic, locally grown vegetables; fair-trade products; take-away coffee; and plentiful vegan options. Further in, the space opens out with tables and chairs and functions as a restaurant during mealtimes, a café all day and a bar in the evening. It is a cosy, convivial space, where one can bump into or plan to meet many people who are either involved in Transition Minett, likeminds – for example Greenpeace’s Luxembourg headquarters are nearby – or local others.

In planning meetings, which one of us (GTA) attended, there was great excitement at ‘having a home’ for Luxembourg’s transition movement, which previously met peripatetically across the country. Since opening in 2014, MESA has gathered these scattered transition activities. Transition Minett’s focus on MESA is partly because of its office space for volunteers and staff members behind the shop front and partly because it has become the go-to venue for Transition Minett’s national public events, particularly in the evenings – all despite not being in the capital city.

While CELL in general subsists MESA thanks to both volunteers and donations from supporters, recently MESA has proved relatively successful at winning government grants. These include pump-prime funding for the ‘REconomy’ project and

**Figure 3: MESA**



Photo credit: CELL



consultation with local authorities throughout Luxembourg for the ‘Pacte Climat’, the country’s state-led attempts to reduce carbon emissions at the local level. Both projects employ a mixture of full- and part-time staff who are based in the ‘back office’ at the MESA hub. All this activity fulfils a positive feedback system where a general bustling vibe, symbiotic interactions and conversations feed off each other, to reinforce a general cultural milieu of those interested in similar ‘alternative’ themes.

REconomy’s main aims are to facilitate civic initiatives aspiring for more solidary and more democratic practices that consume less fossil fuel and thus contribute to climate change mitigation. Out of this MESA/REconomy context, a new initiative called ‘Facilitec’ was launched in 2018, co-funded by a national charity (ŒUVRE Nationale de Secours Grande-Duchesse Charlotte). Similar to REconomy, it aims to incentivise collaborative and circular economies. It makes reference to the hybridity of the *tiers lieux* (third places) movement, that is, to initiatives that bring together professional and private activities in particular places, and enable joint endeavours of public, corporate and civil society actors. These endeavours are supposed to cover a wide range of activities, for example providing an open workshop for artisan start-ups and do-it-yourself projects, offering rooms for artwork, music, sports and relaxation, as well as providing an inspiring environment for learning/vocational training, meetings and communication. These activities will be accommodated by a collaborative co-working space, which the future users are about to arrange according to their needs. As of spring 2019, Facilitec will be housed in a temporary home for the coming three years, the premises of a former carpenters’ workshop in a vicinity near to the city centre of Esch-sur-Alzette. This vacant building comprises three storeys of approximately 100 m<sup>2</sup> each. It stands on a larger brownfield site, which is supposed to be reused by a private developer with a mid-term perspective. In the meantime, the building can be used by Facilitec. Necessary (basic) renovation work is logistically supported by the City of Esch, and part of the ŒUVRE grant assigned to Facilitec will be used for refurbishment (including a new heating device).

The concept for the building’s refurbishment and the layout of the rooms was developed in a series of collaborative workshops held in early 2019. Facilitec is conceived as a living lab that, despite only temporary availability of the building, hopes to have a longer perspective and to serve as a pilot and showcase for similar projects to come.

### **BENU Village**

‘BENVillage’ is a new project, inaugurated in 2017, which opened its first building (BENU Provisorium, see [Figure 4](#)) in early 2019.<sup>4</sup> The Village started to take shape in a former carpark next to Luxembourg’s French border in the south side of Esch-sur-Alzette. In part of the carpark, nine former shipping containers form the public-facing side of the project, including a café and public workshop space. It currently hosts a sewing workshop as well as the fashion shop for BENU’s upcycled clothing. In an abandoned factory on some land between a railway line and a forest on the outskirts of Esch-sur-Alzette, there is also a workshop space. These are both temporary locations and will be used until a new centre is established across the street, which will bring the factory, shop, café and workshop space together on one site. This new site is currently in preparation, with a planned 40 containers forming different buildings and housing a multiplicity of functions and comprising the name

Village. Here, BENU hopes to platform principles of circular economy, upcycling and reuse. This platform will function as a location for artistic activities too. The space will include a café/restaurant and is intended to form a social hub, albeit smaller than the role played by MESA. The exhibition space is conceived as itself embodying the themes of upcycling and circular economy, turning former shipping containers into a building (see [Figure 4](#)). Principles of salvage are found throughout the building fabric: from reused window frames to furniture within. Given the highly dynamic building sector in Luxembourg ([Affolderbach and Schulz, 2018](#)), there are plenty of (reasonably good-quality) building materials that form a useful recycling/upcycling resource here. The Village also aims to raise awareness of BENU's main activity: its garment factory. The upcycling of clothing (BENU Couture) with its distinctive BENU logo (see [Figure 5](#)) is the central activity of the project around which the other aspects swirl. The exhibition space in the carpark will sell the remade clothes that are refabricated in the factory. This is currently located around a kilometre south on the outskirts of Esch-sur-Alzette (see [Figure 2](#)). The ultimate goal is to move this production to the containers so that the whole process is on one site and more visibly closer to the city centre. As a second pillar, the BENU Restaurant using food-sharing resources is planned to open in late 2019.

For BENU, just as in Transition Minett/MESA, social values are what gel and give purpose to the project; various different initiatives and people who get involved are subsumed behind the goals of 'social responsibility', 'ecological excellence', 'local production' and 'transparency'.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to MESA, however, the driving force behind BENU Village is not the transition movement but, first, personality and, second, institutional.

**Figure 4: BENU Village under construction**



Photo credit: the authors

Figure 5: The BENU logo



Photo credit: the authors

First, in terms of personality, Georges Kieffer conceived and designed the project. He has made the project happen and it revolves around him, BENU reflecting many of his wishes. Kieffer makes decisions ranging from matters of strategy, to everyday choices such as the colour of the daubing insulating the shipping containers. Although BENU has a committee and surrounding governance structures that fit an *a.s.b.l.* – equivalent to a registered not-for-profit social enterprise/charity – Kieffer is on hand and on site daily.

Second, institutionally, as always in Luxembourg (and perhaps in any small country/society) the personal relationships between different institutional actors are key. For example, in one article on BENU in the main national newspaper, a third of the article was taken up mentioning key institutional actors without whom BENU would not have happened (*‘Ohne sie wäre das Projekt nicht zustande gekommen’*, *Wort*, 12 July 2018). These include the mayor of Esch-sur-Alzette when the project gained planning permission, local councillors since the local elections in 2017 and resulting change in local authority control, and the-then Secretary of State for the Ministry of Environment, which funds BENU. Such a deferential attitude to established political figures is in contrast to Transition Minett’s more proactive positioning of itself as an active agent of change, for instance in challenging the rhetoric and explicit aims of growth in Luxembourg’s economic policy, rather than reforming the already

existing political and institutional framework. BENU when identifying as an agent of change, does so in a reformist rather than revolutionary manner when it comes to transformatory ideas in economy, ecology and society. The deference may, however, be because of the large injection of funds starting BENU, all of which came from the national government (seven figures). BENU would not be possible without these funds, as much as the charismatic Kieffer who wrote the funding proposal. If BENU is ‘bottom-up’, such grassroots phenomena are only possible via influential individuals spearheading the project and heavy government funds channelled into these strategic aims.

## Discussion: hybridity, civil society and politicising community economy

The evidence from this study makes two theoretical contributions to the literature on community economies. The first refers to the relationship between community initiatives for change – whether social, political or economic – and the state. The second points to the political consequences that resocialising economic relations might have.

The most striking aspect when reviewing the proliferating community-based initiatives in Esch-sur-Alzette is the close proximity to the state. Each initiative listed in [Table 1](#) receives funding either directly or indirectly from one of Luxembourg’s ministries, sometimes both. The connections to the governing regime are not only financial, but also social and cultural. After only a short time in the alternative milieu – to take [Longhurst’s \(2013\)](#) term – of Esch-sur-Alzette does it become apparent that most of those in the environmentalist or solidarity economy ‘scene’ not only know each other, but also often have longstanding relationships – whether positive, negative or ‘it’s complicated’, as relationships often can be. Luxembourg, despite being a strongly internationalised city-region, in this respect resembles a remote rural village, or island, where the same person can wear multiple hats. In the stereotypical village, the police officer is also a farmer, who staffs the fire station in emergencies. While Luxembourg does not quite reach those extremes, the interconnections between and intertwining of personal biographies, friendships and familial ties, and the fact that most actors often wear more than one hat, mean that it has a tight social web. This of course stretches to the connections between what are here presented as separate initiatives. As we have indicated, we can often find those working and volunteering at Greenpeace having lunch in MESA, and many others rubbing up against one another. Importantly for our purposes here though, these connections do not stop at the ‘grassroots’ or remain only within civil society. The (inter)relationships also connect volunteers to the city of Esch-sur-Alzette’s Aldermen (councillors), and staff workers to the government ministries. This challenges the idea of a civil society distinct from, under or within the state. In this way, our arguments compliment much of recent scholarship, which destabilises the ‘givenness’ of taken-for-granted, established categories. Our arguments are of a kind of [Miller’s \(2019\)](#) critique of the way the social and the economic – alongside the environmental – are seen as ‘universal categories inscribed across all of human life’ (2019: 13). In our case too, the economic and the social are not ‘core dimensions of reality [which] appear as simultaneously distinct and related’ (2019: 8) or ‘in tension or conflict and in need of (re)connection’ (2019: 9). The social in these initiatives is not just a backdrop upon which economic projects play out – the social

functioning, as Miller (2019: 5) puts it, ‘as a kind of relational glue in the background of daily life’. Rather, the social is a productive force where reimagining and practising new forms of togetherness in community come together at the same moment as reimagining and practising new forms of economy.

This is important as initiatives in the literature on community economies are often presented as separate, or distant from, the state. This might make sense in comparatively large sprawling territories such as Australia, or the United States where many of these ideas were developed. Central case studies that informed the theories of community economy were places where one could feel the state’s absence, such as in the Latrobe Valley in Australia (Cameron and Gibson, 2005). Other long-established entities that had the heft to carve out their own sustained existence are also distinct from the national state or solely profit-seeking enterprises in their own way. The Basque Country’s Mondragon is perhaps the best example here. In Luxembourg, by contrast, one is never far from the state, whether in official reified form or as a ‘prosaic state’ (Painter, 2006). The evidence here thus points to the importance of bringing longstanding political geography or state theory into the conversation with heterodox economic geography. This conversation between the literatures would point to authors arguing that ‘civil society’ as such does not really exist – at least, not as a separate, tangible entity distinct from the apparatus of the state. Writers such as Jessop (2005, 2016) justify this claim theoretically. Swyngedouw (2009) argues that the identification of a realm of civil society, distant and distinct from either the state or capitalism – in the capitalocentric form Gibson-Graham (2006a, 2006b) critiques it – is mistaken. ‘Civil society can neither be theorized independently from the content, form and structure of the state nor from the conjunctural characteristics of capitalism’ (Swyngedouw, 2009: 68). In its small size and scale, Luxembourg evidences these theoretical claims empirically.

Another distinction to be made compared with the established social economy is that public subsidies are supposed to be temporary seed money, and not long-term institutional funding without which projects could not function. We see the ‘hybridity turn’ in heterodox economic thinking as being highly useful in understanding contexts such as Esch-sur-Alzette. While MESA is more socially or community anchored than BENU as an established grassroots movement, it also depends on public financial support provided by the Luxembourgish state. This applies as much to CELL as the umbrella organisation of the various transition initiatives in the country, as to MESA as a local platform hosting the REconomy and the Facilitec projects. Beyond being a usual social economy or charity organisation, both MESA’s and BENU’s hybridity goes beyond a bilateral public–civil society partnership. They both try to include (alternative) economic actors, social entrepreneurs and other start-ups in the case of MESA/Facilitec, or a chef/restaurant for BENU Village. They thus engage in new ways of bringing together different institutional logics under the roof of a joint idea with shared objectives and standards.

At the same time, the ‘temporary’ public funding follows other logics than would be the case in a purely corporate context where start-up endeavours are expected to prove (or not) their profitability after a given time. Success of these hybrid activities is to be evaluated with more than just financial balance sheets. Even though both projects aspire to economic sustainability to ensure long-term viability, their targets are not expressed in terms of profitability leading to surplus. Rather, their orientation towards the common good assumes that economic benefits are immediately reinvested



into maintenance and improvement measures. This can be verified by the initiatives' strong commitment to transparency and participative decision making. They have the potential to be in the vanguard of economic democracy, which is considered to be key to the success of degrowth aspirations (Johanisova and Wolf, 2012; Gradin, 2014; Wagenaar et al, 2015).

Despite these entanglements between the state and community initiatives for change, these initiatives are still attempting something new. They are still inaugurating an emerging reformulation of society, with a fresh articulation of economy. The evidence presented here shows that the entanglement of community economy initiatives does not necessarily imply their capture by state logics or capitalistic logics. Such entanglements are simply unavoidable. Rather than 'capture', they point to movements of revivification, and a 'rereading' of the logics of the state and capital too. Connected to this point, is our second emergent theme: that these community initiatives, by baptising the economic within the social, point to a politicisation of the economic.

The initiatives presented here show the potential to not only diversify the understanding of the economic – so-called reading for difference. They go beyond this and point to future potential points of politicisation. In reconnecting the economy to its social roots, Gibson-Graham (2006a: 54) seeks not only to place the economic within the social, but also to 're-politicize the economy'. What is interesting from our point of view is exactly *how* – the means by which – reconnecting the economic to the social, or even subsuming the social within the economic, is political. Following Laclau and Mouffe's terminology, community economy is here a 'nodal point' (1985: 112) around which a discourse can develop to resignify the economy as 'a site of decision [and] of ethical praxis' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 87). This affirms that economic practices are 'inherently social and always connected in their concrete particularities to the "commerce of being-together"' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 88). In *making these moments visible*, they become available for processes of negotiation, deliberation, contestation and hence politics.

Gibson-Graham seeks a way to "unfix" economic identity' Gibson-Graham (2006a: 56) and by extension to parse this from capitalism as a natural form of economic being-in-common. By 'widening the identity of the economy to include all of those practices excluded or marginalized by a strong theory of capitalism' Gibson-Graham (2006a: 60), other subject positions can emerge that were not offered by the hegemonic discourse. Eventually, this endeavour wishes to 'dislocate capitalocentrism's hegemony' Gibson-Graham (2006a: 77), producing spaces of new ethical decision making, and hence repoliticising the economy. Rereading economic landscapes for difference is, then, an attempt to realign and collect together the social and the political, alongside the economic. This is also a rereading of their relationships to each other, including the imbrications mentioned above.

While Gibson-Graham argued against capitalocentric language and representations, the capitalocentric form *du jour* is neoliberalism. In the rhetoric of neoliberalism, there is no alternative *con brio*. Luxembourg, then, makes an excellent case study for reading for difference here. Few places, other than perhaps Wall Street or the City of London, are so iconically embedded in the current financial system. This received wider prominence through 'Lux-leaks', revealing Luxembourg's facilitation and systemically allying itself with attempts by multinationals to avoid tax. Luxembourg



is perhaps an outlier, but if so it is an instructive one. If heterodox economic futures can be discerned in Luxembourg, such hope can be found anywhere.

Davies (2014) argues that neoliberalism functions at base as the disenchantment of politics by economics. Neoliberalism:

is an attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation, including, but not exclusively, the evaluations offered by markets. Of course, both political and economic logics are plural and heterogeneous. But the central defining characteristic of all neoliberal critique is its hostility to the ambiguity of political discourse, and a commitment to the explicitness and transparency of quantitative, economic indicators, of which the market price system is the model. Neoliberalism is the pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics. (Davies, 2014: 19)

Authorities such as Davies theorise these factors as being the evisceration of politics by economics. The community economies frame, by contrast, seeks the repoliticisation of economics, by embedding the economic within the social. Or, to put it more poetically, these initiatives seek the re-enchantment of politics by economics – primarily through social relations, by resocialising economics.

By pointing to the potential for the community economy initiatives of Esch-sur-Alzette, we do so in a humble, or in a theoretical sense, *weak*, manner (Katz, 1996; Lorimer, 2003). Here we are in line with Gibson-Graham's *weak ontology* when understanding key concepts such as 'community' or 'economy'. We point to the hybridity and entanglement of emerging and established factors and forces in Esch-sur-Alzette as being full of potential – politically, socially and economically. In each of these, however, we do not have what Barnett (2017: 9) calls a 'strong interpretation of the concept of the political' that accords 'a privileged status to proper expressions of the political'. Neither do we have a singular vision of what constitutes a proper engagement or influence socially or economically (Miller, 2019). Rather, we see that it is the reification, and the parsing, of these categories that is precisely what initiatives such as BENU and MESA seek to overcome. By collecting these different registers of living together in Esch-sur-Alzette, just as they collect volunteers, participants and diverse logics, initiatives such as BENU and MESA provide a platform for the rearticulation of being-in-common – socially, politically and economically.

## Conclusion

This article presents evidence of a thriving community economy sector in Esch-sur-Alzette. It shows how a reading for difference that focuses on the social relations and interpersonal relatedness illuminates how economic difference can be produced through this focus on the social, and can then subsequently be made political. All the projects described here show close state involvement, either through direct funding, or from involvement in state funding schemes at arm's length, such as the charity *ŒUVRE Nationale de Secours Grande-Duchesse Charlotte*, named after the former Head of State.

However, rather than conclude critically, and dismissively, we see this state involvement as unavoidable in such a small state as Luxembourg. Rather than sully some pure notion of civil society, free from state influence and engagement,

we question the idea of civil society as a distinct entity in the first place. Moreover, from our engagement with involved actors on the ground, and participation in the cultural milieu of Esch-sur-Alzette, we see the formation of these initiatives and start-ups as a harbinger of possible economic futures. Thus, we conclude more hopefully, rather than dismissively, of the potential of these initiatives to chart new, and open possible future, economic trajectories. They have already begun this charting of alternative economic trajectories, as can be seen from the seeding off from MESA and the transition movement of the REconomy and Facilitec initiatives. Indeed, it is in MESA – perhaps because it is the longest established of the initiatives we looked at – that we see the most hope.

One of Longhurst's (2013) criteria for the existence of an 'alternative milieu' was the presence of an "anchoring object" (2013: 2, 103) around which 'the various processes that lead to the emergence of an alternative place can be organised' (2013: 2, 103). This importance of the structural (or at least the temporally structural) focuses on the *particular* contingent processes and institutions that help generate alternativeness. It would seem that in Esch-sur-Alzette, MESA serves as exactly the sort of anchoring object around which the alternativeness of Esch-sur-Alzette, and by extension Luxembourg, may be built. It remains to be seen whether BENU can build on its promising foundations and do something likewise in the years to come. We cannot systematically compare these two initiatives – MESA has a few years' head start in these ambitions than BENU. Yet the evidence here would indicate that if BENU is to be an effective community agent for economic and environmental change, it needs to stick to a project of transforming social relations: socialising the economic.

### Acknowledgements

Christian Schulz acknowledges the support of the Fonds National de la Recherche, Luxembourg (FNR), CORE C16/SR/11338441/CIRCULAR.

### Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://communityeconomies.org/about/community-economies-institute>

<sup>2</sup> <https://transitionnetwork.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.transition-minett.lu/>

<sup>4</sup> [www.benu.lu](http://www.benu.lu)

<sup>5</sup> <http://benu.lu/en/benu-charter/>

### References

- Affolderbach, J. and Schulz, C. (2018) *Green building transitions: Regional trajectories of innovation in Europe*, New York, NY: Springer International Publishing.
- Avelino, F., Wittmayer, J.M., Pel, B., Weaver, P., Dumitru, A., Haxeltine, A., Kemp, R., Jørgensen, M.S., Bauler, T., Ruijsink, S. and O'Riordan, T. (2017) Transformative social innovation and (dis)empowerment, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 145: 195–206, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2017.05.002>.
- Barnett, C. (2017) *The priority of injustice: Locating democracy in critical theory, geographies of justice and social transformation*, Athens, Greece: The University of Georgia Press.

- Bollier, D. and Helfrich, S. (2019) *Free, Fair and Alive: The insurgent power of the commons*, Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Born, B. and Purcell, M. (2006) Avoiding the local trap: scale and food systems in planning research, *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 26: 195–207, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X06291389>.
- Cameron, J. and Gibson, K. (2005) Alternative pathways to community and economic development: the Latrobe Valley Community Partnering Project, *Geographical Research*, 43(3): 274–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-5871.2005.00327.x>.
- Chilla, T. and Schulz, C. (2015) Spatial development in Luxembourg: mimetic evolution or emergence of a new planning culture?, *European Planning Studies*, 23: 509–28. doi: [10.1080/09654313.2013.875129](https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2013.875129)
- D’Alisa, G., Demaria, F. and Kallis, G. (2015) *Degrowth: A vocabulary for a new era*, London: Routledge.
- Davies, W. (2014) *The limits of neoliberalism: Authority, sovereignty and the logic of competition, theory, culture & society*, London: Sage Publications.
- Dufays, F. and Huybrechts, B. (2016) Where do hybrids come from? Entrepreneurial team heterogeneity as an avenue for the emergence of hybrid organizations, *International Small Business Journal*, 34: 777–96. doi: [10.1177/0266242615585152](https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242615585152)
- Evers A. (2008) Hybrid organisations: background, concept, challenges, in S.P. Osborne (ed) *The third sector in Europe: Prospects and challenges*, Abingdon, England and New York, NY: Routledge, pp 279–92.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006a) *A postcapitalist politics*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2006b) *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2008) Diverse economies: performative practices for ‘other worlds’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 32: 613–32. doi: [10.1177/0309132508090821](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508090821)
- Gibson-Graham, J.K., Cameron, J. and Healy, S. (2013) *Take back the economy: An ethical guide for transforming our communities*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gradin, S. (2014) Radical routes and alternative avenues: how cooperatives can be non-capitalist, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 47: 141–58. doi: [10.1177/0486613414532764](https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613414532764)
- Jackson, T. (2009) *Prosperity without growth? The transition to a sustainable economy*, London: Routledge.
- Jessop, B. (2005) *The future of the capitalist state*, reprinted edition, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jessop, B. (2016) *The state: Past, present, future*, Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Johanisova, N. and Wolf, S. (2012) Economic democracy: a path for the future?, *Futures*, 44: 562–70. doi: [10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.03.017)
- Kallis, G. (2018) *Degrowth*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda.
- Katz, C. (1996) Towards minor theory, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14: 487–99, <https://doi.org/10.1068/d140487>.
- Krueger, R., Schulz, C. and Gibbs, D.C. (2017) Institutionalizing alternative economic spaces? An interpretivist perspective on diverse economies, *Progress in Human Geography*, 42: 569–89. doi: [10.1177/0309132517694530](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132517694530)
- Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*, London: Verso.

- Lange, B. and Bürkner, H.-J. (2018) Open workshops as sites of innovative socio-economic practices: approaching urban post-growth by assemblage theory, *Local Environment*, 23: 680–96. doi: [10.1080/13549839.2017.1418305](https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1418305)
- Latouche, S. (2006) *Le pari de la décroissance*, Paris: Fayard.
- Longhurst, N. (2013) The emergence of an alternative milieu: conceptualising the nature of alternative places, *Environment and Planning A*, 45: 2100–19, <https://doi.org/10.1068/a45487>.
- Lorimer, H. (2003) Telling small stories: spaces of knowledge and the practice of geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28: 197–217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5661.00087>.
- Miller, E. (2019) *Reimagining livelihoods: Life beyond economy, society, and environment*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ministère de l'Economie et du Commerce Extérieur (2011) *Plan d'action pour le développement de l'économie solidaire au Luxembourg (PLES 2012)*, Luxembourg: MECE.
- Nicholls, A. and Huybrechts, B. (2014) Sustaining inter-organizational relationships across institutional logics and power asymmetries: the case of fair trade, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 135: 699–714. doi: [10.1007/s10551-014-2495-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2495-y)
- North, P. (2015) The business of the Anthropocene? Substantivist and diverse economies perspectives on SME engagement in local low carbon transitions, *Progress in Human Geography*, 40: 437–54. doi: [10.1177/0309132515585049](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515585049)
- North, P. (2016) The business of the Anthropocene? Substantivist and diverse economies perspectives on SME engagement in local low carbon transitions, *Progress in Human Geography*, 40: 437–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132515585049>.
- Observatoire de PRO-SUD (2017) *Indices Sud IV*, Esch-sur-Alzette: PRO-SUD.
- Painter, J. (2006) Prosaic geographies of stateness, *Political Geography*, 25: 752–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.07.004>.
- Pestoff, V. (2014) Collective action and the sustainability of co-production, *Public Management Review*, 16: 383–401. doi: [10.1080/14719037.2013.841460](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2013.841460)
- Rosol, M. (2018) Alternative Ernährungsnetzwerke als Alternative Ökonomien, *Zeitschrift Fur Wirtschaftsgeographie*, 62: 174–86. doi: [10.1515/zfw-2017-0005](https://doi.org/10.1515/zfw-2017-0005)
- Roth, S. (2015) Free economy! On 3628800 alternatives of and to capitalism, *Journal of Interdisciplinary Economics*, 27: 107–28. doi: [10.1177/0260107915583389](https://doi.org/10.1177/0260107915583389)
- Rückert, E. and Sarracino, F. (2014) Assessing the social and solidarity economy in Luxembourg, *Economie et Statistiques: Working papers du STATEC*, Luxembourg: STATEC.
- Sarracino, F. and Gossat, A. (2015) Assessing the non-economic outcomes of social entrepreneurship in Luxembourg, *Economie et Statistiques: Working papers du STATEC*, Luxembourg: STATEC.
- Schmid, B. (2018) Structured diversity: a practice theory approach to post-growth organisations, *Management Review*, 29: 281–310, <https://doi.org/10.5771/0935-9915-2018-3-281>.
- Schmid, B. (2019) Degrowth and postcapitalism: transformative geographies beyond accumulation and growth, *Geography Compass*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12470>.
- Seyfang, G. and Haxeltine, A. (2012) Growing grassroots innovations: exploring the role of community-based initiatives in governing sustainable energy transitions, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 30: 381–400. doi: [10.1068/c10222](https://doi.org/10.1068/c10222)

- Smith, T.S.J. (2017) Of makerspaces and hacklabs: emergence, experiment and ontological theatre at the Edinburgh Hacklab, Scotland, *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 133: 130–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2017.1321137>.
- STATEC (2018) *Luxembourg in figures 2018*, Luxembourg: STATEC.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2009) Civil society, governmentality and the contradictions of governance–beyond–the–state: the janus–face of social innovation, in D. MacCallum, F. Moulaert, J. Hillier and S. Vicari Haddock (eds) *Social innovation and territorial development*, Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, pp 63–78.
- Taylor Aiken, G. (2017a) The politics of community: togetherness, transition, and post–politics, *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 49: 2383–401, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308518X17724443>.
- Taylor Aiken, G. (2017b) Permaculture and the social design of nature, *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 99(2), <https://doi.org/10.1080/04353684.2017.1315906>.
- Taylor Aiken, G. (2018a) One–way street? Spatiality of communities in low carbon transitions in Scotland, *Energy Research & Social Science*, 36: 129–37, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.09.028>.
- Taylor Aiken, G. (2018b) Community as tool for low carbon transitions: involvement and containment, policy and action, *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654418791579>.
- Thornton, P.H. and Ocasio, W. (1999) Institutional logics and the historical contingency of power in organizations: executive succession in the higher education publishing industry, 1958–1990, *American Journal of Sociology*, 105: 801–43. doi: [10.1086/210361](https://doi.org/10.1086/210361)
- Wagenaar, H., Healey, P., Laino, G., Healey, P., Vigar, G., Isern, S.R., Honeck, T., Beunderman, J., van der Heijden, J. and Wagenaar, H. (2015) The transformative potential of civic enterprise, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 16: 557–85. doi: [10.1080/14649357.2015.1083153](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2015.1083153)
- Zademach, H.–M. and Hillebrand, S. (2013) *Alternative economies and spaces: New perspectives for a sustainable economy*, Bielefeld: Transcript.