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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Helping the community means helping oneself": An ethnographic case study of a Basque solidarity economy

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Abstract
A small Basque town within the province of Gipuzkoa is experimenting with a convertible local currency and seeking to set up a wider solidarity economy project. This article explores residents' interpretations of the currency and its potential for revitalisation of the local community and economic life.

The history of the Basque separatist movement, and its ties to *Euskara* revival efforts, have shaped the political identity of the town; in turn, creating a hospitable environment for such an initiative to thrive. Spearheaded by a leftist, pro-independence local government, this project of radical democracy and local economic sovereignty represents an interesting case for the possibilities of localised, postcapitalist futures. Employing theories of social capital and a framework of symbolic consumption, this study posits that community members identify an intrinsic connection between a thriving local economy and a good quality of life. Therefore, the use of the convertible local currency has become synonymous with acts of community revitalisation; therefore, building upon social capital and further enmeshing intimate and economic relations.

Moreover, this study identifies numerous factors which contribute to the goals of the initiative, such as a strong degree of idealism among residents, an intergenerational nature of the community, high levels of community trust, and socially motivated businesses.

Preface

Faced with mounting complexity and intersecting global crises, research often gravitates toward urgent, actionable answers. We can be so interested in getting to the heart of the matter – discovering "facts" and "rules" – that the generalisability of findings becomes the goal in itself (Flyybjerg, 2006). But if there is anything we have learnt from history, it is that phenomena are specific and deeply rooted in their socio-political, cultural, and ecological

context. Accordingly, I propose we heed Tsing's (2015) call to rediscover the "*art of noticing*." This is exactly what I sought to do when I stepped into a small Basque town in the province of Gipuzkoa.

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1. Introduction

Through a series of interviews, surveys, and participant observations, this study explores the experiences, opinions, and beliefs of members of a Basque consumer cooperative. The consumer cooperative is underpinned by a community currency; which is, in turn, backed by the local government, and forms part of a wider solidarity economy initiative. The study branches into discussions of Basque language ideology, social capital, and localism. The outcomes confront questions related to the transformation of social relations, economic localisation, and exclusion.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods case study approach, integrating participant observation, electronic surveys, interviews, and document analysis. Qualitative data is central, with quantitative data providing complementary insights. An interpretivist approach guided the ethnographic narrative – aligning with Tsing's (2015) view that ethnography seeks to understand situations alongside informants. Given the initiative's early stage, an exploratory approach was best suited to identify key variables and hypotheses.

Key research questions included:

- What factors support or hinder the initiative's development?
- How is the initiative perceived by different stakeholders?
- How do Basque politics and identity relate to the initiative?

Data collection included an electronic survey (20 responses from 500 prompted), five days of fieldwork, and 12 informal interviews with diverse stakeholders (users, business owners, cooperative employees, and local government representatives). Document analysis incorporated materials from the cooperative's website and a tourism leaflet.

Rationale

A case study approach was chosen to highlight socio-economic and cultural specificities (Stake, 1995) and contribute to activist knowledge (Calhoun, 2008). While case studies face criticisms of verification bias (Flyvbjerg, 2006), their value lies in exploring real-world complexities. The mixed-methods approach ensured triangulation: enhancing reliability and providing a holistic view (Cresswell, 2017).

Data Collection & Analysis

Interviews were conducted informally to foster open dialogue (Beuving & Vries, 2015). Surveys provided broad insights but lacked interaction for clarifications. Participant observation drew from "naturalistic inquiry" (ibid.), with fieldnotes analysed thematically using NVivo. Surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics and factor analysis. Document analysis supplemented findings, adding socio-cultural depth (Bowen, 2009).

Reflexivity & Ethical Considerations

Reflexivity was key in acknowledging my position as an "outsider" and potential biases due to my affiliation with a post-growth research institute (Nickerson, 1998). Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was ensured through multilingual consent forms. Anonymity was maintained by fictionalising names and locations.

Limitations

Constraints included limited time for participatory action research (Schubotz, 2020), survey sample size, language barriers, and the complexity of stakeholder involvement. While these limitations impact generalisability, the case study's strength lies in capturing contextual ambiguities rather than producing broad generalisations (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

3. The case

This study examines a digital payment system (DPS) regulated by the Bank of Spain and operated by a non-profit consumer cooperative in a town of approximately 20,000 residents in the Gipuzkoa province of the Basque Country.

Established in 2020, the DPS has garnered around 1,200 users—about six percent of the local population—of whom 900 are active users each month. The system is accepted by 120 businesses and is supported by the local government (*ayuntamiento*). This is part of a broader sovereignty initiative aimed at promoting self-sufficiency through the creation of cooperatives within a localised solidarity economy. Thus, this study also explores the features of this wider solidarity economy.

To participate as a member of the cooperative, users pay an initial €10 sign-on fee, which goes into a social fund which is used to support various community initiatives. Then, users pay a monthly subscription fee of €1.95. While it is possible to use the system without becoming a member, non-members are excluded from participating in the cooperative's democratic general assemblies and miss out on certain benefits. The DPS operates via a mobile application, where users can load funds into their "wallet" and make direct payments to participating businesses.

One of the key features of the DPS is its *cashback* system. When users make a purchase, they receive a percentage of the total price back into their wallet. This *cashback* is earmarked so it can only be used within the DPS network. The *cashback* is funded both by the participating businesses (32%) and the *ayuntamiento* (68%). However, non-members only receive the portion funded by the *ayuntamiento*. The *ayuntamiento* allocates a fixed amount each month to finance its share of the *cashback*, and once these funds are depleted, the *ayuntamiento*'s *cashback* contribution is paused until the next month. There is a monthly *cashback* cap of €100 per user from the *ayuntamiento*, but no limit on the *cashback* provided by businesses.

In addition to *cashback*, 0.5% of the average monthly balance in a user's wallet is donated to a local *asociación* (nonprofit) of their choice at the end of each month. On average, the DPS

facilitates 10,000 transactions per month, circulating over €225,000 within the local economy. The *ayuntamiento* invests €12,500 per month to maintain the *cashback* scheme, with users typically accruing €15 in *cashback* each month, and local *asociaciónes* collectively receiving €275 monthly. Businesses using the DPS see average monthly sales of €1,875 through the system, accounting for approximately 10% of total payments made in participating stores.

The DPS aligns with the concept of community currencies, such as service credits, mutual exchange schemes, and barter markets – as it aims to build more socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable systems of finance and exchange (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013). Specifically, DPS represents the emic term (an insider's perspective) for what, in etic terms (an outsider's perspective), is closely aligned with a convertible local currency. It is deeply integrated into the *ayuntamiento*'s broader vision of a self-sufficient, solidarity economy, and operates as a form of solidarity finance (Utting & Laville, 2021, p. 2). In the context of escalating climate change and the challenges of 'peak oil', the DPS contributes to economic localisation, fostering self-reliance and resilience (Marshall & O'Neill, 2018, p. 273). This approach resonates with Transition Towns which are grassroots, community-led initiatives to foster local self-sufficiency (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013, pp. 70-71). Additionally, the DPS stands as a critique of the global economy, offering an alternative to the "imperial mode of living" (Brand & Wissen, 2021) – that is, consumption patterns in the Global North which depend upon the exploitation of cheap labour and resources in communities elsewhere.

4. Ethnographic Narrative

Euskara and Political Identity

As the train approached town, I passed through a valley framed by green hills, where *baserriak* (distinctive Basque farmhouses) perched on the slopes; surrounding fields already alive with the activity of morning labourers. The view transitioned to a riverbank, where industrial warehouses and apartment buildings stood. In the distance, I could see factories; their chimneys releasing plumes of white smoke.

This transition from pastoral landscapes to industrial zones underscored the town's dual identity: an agricultural hub and significant industrial centre. The announcement system declared "*hurrengo geltokia…*" (next stop). It was time to alight and enter town.

As a student with limited training in anthropological research – alongside limited knowledge of the Basque language (*Euskara*) – to say I was nervous would be an understatement. Having lived in *Donostia-San Sebastián* for a year, I had grown accustomed to hearing *Euskara* just as frequently as *Castellano* (Spanish). Whereas Gipuzkoa, the province I was in, boasted the highest *Euskara* fluency rates in the entire region (Eusko Jaurlaritza, 2011).

Despite being just a 20-minute train journey away from the provincial capital, the linguistic dominance of *Euskara* felt much more prominent in town, with 60% of residents speaking fluent *Euskara.* Here, you can expect to be greeted with a "*kaixo*" (*hello*) or, as I experienced when being welcomed to town, an "*ongi etorri*" (*welcome*). Walking down the street, any murmurs in *Castellano* seemed out of place. For some residents, conversing in *Castellano* even appeared challenging. This heightened my worries of being a clear "*outsider*," or worse, a confused "*guiri*" – a mildly mocking Spanish term for Northern European tourists, often used to describe those perceived as culturally out of place or lacking local awareness.

During the Franco dictatorship, *Euskara* was banned, and its speakers persecuted, by a *Franquista* regime which envisioned a homogenous *España*. After General Franco's death in 1975, this nationalist dream slowly faded away amidst a relatively peaceful transition to democracy. This transition was marked by the infamous "*pacto del olvido*" (pact of forgetting) which saw powerful actors in the fascist regime evading legal repercussions for the crimes of this 39-year dictatorship, and, in certain instances, retaining positions of power (Tremlett, 2012, pp. 71-76). In this context, the language has emerged as a powerful symbol of resistance against the Spanish state and a cornerstone of the Basque nationalist movement (Urla, 2012, pp. 12-14). Thus, *Euskara*, like all languages, is closely linked to matters of political identity (Späti, 2016, p. 17).

A tour through town vividly illustrated the political role of *Euskara;* namely, its connections to resistance and Basque nationalism. In the main *plaza*, *ikurrinas* (the Basque Country flag)

proudly fluttered from balconies, accompanied by slogans like "*Euskal Errepublika Eraikitzen*" (Building the Basque Republic). As I wandered up the two main streets, the faces of imprisoned *etarras* (members of ETA, the militant Basque separatist group) gazed down from banners; in turn, representing the *Etxerat* movement, advocating for the relocation of Basque political prisoners closer to their families. Continuing my walk, I encountered feminist flags hanging in the *plaza*, Palestinian flags draped over the *ayuntamiento*'s main office, and a feminist and multicultural centre set up by the *ayuntamiento*. Nearby, feminist artwork outside a local bar proclaimed "INDEPENDENCE, SOCIALISM, FEMINISM" (Figure 1), while artwork in the *plaza* expressed solidarity with other independence and liberation struggles (Figure 2). A tourist leaflet highlighted the contributions of women and trans people to the town, alongside a recent decision to open a feminist *plaza*. It is no wonder my guide, Jorge, a senior employee of the cooperative, remarked this was a "special" place with a very politicised population. Jorge's role is related to administration, advocacy, and overall leadership.

This history of Basque resistance lives on through *Euskara*'s speakers. Nestled in a corner of a busy café, one cooperative member – a middle-aged, dark-haired woman called Carla – discussed how her current employer, an engineering company, was founded during the *Franquista* regime; operating clandestinely by conducting research in *Euskara*. Meanwhile, in a lively co-working space, the head of local economic development at the *ayuntamiento* (local government), Fabián, spoke of underground night schools teaching *Euskara.* In evading the reach of the Spanish state, he cited this grassroots resistance as a vital learning process for the development of Basque cooperativism.

With the conversation moving onto cooperativism, Carla recounted her neighbourhood's strong response to the COVID-19 pandemic, painting a vivid picture of the "cooperative spirit" she believes defines the region: neighbours supporting one another, delivering supplies to the elderly, and gathering on their balconies. Across the streets from one another, they would socialise, play traditional Basque instruments, and sing together. She also mentioned her brother's nearby village, where residents unite every Saturday for community work. Carlos, an older cooperative member approaching retirement, highlighted the region's distinctive position – boasting multiple industrial cooperatives – as a testament to this cooperative ethos. Additionally, as a lifelong employee of Mondragón, it is no wonder Carlos alluded to cooperativism being ingrained in the "Basque economic culture" (Larrazabal Basañez, 2009, p. 189). From Mondragón's simple beginnings, founded in an impoverished Basque town amidst the gruelling civil war by a charismatic priest, it is now a federation of 92 autonomous cooperatives, the largest employer in the Basque Country– over 70,000 people – and generates an annual turnover of €11 billion (Mondragón Corporation, 2023). In addition, unlike other cooperatives which drew from socialism and Basque nationalism, the ideological foundations of Mondragón were rooted in a Catholic vision of social justice (Gaminde Egia, 2017, pp. 163-166).

For Fabián, Basque cooperativism cannot be separated from Basque resistance to the Spanish state. This may seem somewhat paradoxical, given that the growth of large industrial cooperatives was accelerated by the autarky of Franco's regime (Altuna & Urteaga, 2014, p. 104). In this autocratic regime, there existed a rare case wherein democracy was confined to the economic sphere in these cooperative structures. The Basque proverb, "*Elkarrekin, indartsuago*" (Together, we are stronger), underscores these converging ideas that portray Basque culture as inherently cooperative. However, these three characterisations emphasise different aspects: community solidarity, economic structure, and political resistance.

Passionately speaking about the *ayuntamiento*'s stance, Fabián outlined its political leanings: leftist, pro-independence, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and feminist. Although EH-Bildu, the party in power here, once had strong ties to ETA, the separatist group's dissolution has ushered in a new political era. This is marked by EH-Bildu's increased engagement in regional and state-wide politics, solidifying their position as the primary

challenger to the PNV (Basque National Party) in leading the Basque nationalist movement (Aguirresarobe, 2024, pp. 2-4). Moreover, the inclusive, socially-liberal identity of the party presents itself as a means of defence from the rising far-right party, VOX, which uses anti-pluralist and anti-immigration rhetoric (de Borja Navarro & Yeh, 2022). Fabián informs me that direct democracy is central to the *ayuntamiento*'s strategy, with initiatives designed to actively involve the community in decision-making. These include *consejos* (councils) for distinct groups such as youth, the elderly, and women, as well as the democratic management of local funds.

Solidarity Economies, Exclusion, and Economic Localisation

A self-sufficient, solidarity economy: a system whereby necessities such as food, energy, and care are provided equitably and sustainably by local cooperatives. Moreover, these cooperatives are interlinked through direct democracy and the use of a digital local currency, referred to as a digital payment system (DPS).

This was the *ayuntamiento*'s ambitious vision for the town, as depicted by Fabián. After all, for Carla and other participants, the dominance of capitalism elsewhere does not mean they cannot strive to create a co-existing alternative. The seemingly isolationist, escapist nature of this vision is wiped aside by Jorge and Fabián's international, long-term outlook; aspiring to connect with similar initiatives and create a "network of networks." Centralising social and environmental objectives through collective, humanised work, and seeking to create alternatives alongside the dominant capitalist system, this vision closely aligns with the solidarity economy model (Utting & Laville, 2021, p. 1), but fits within a pluriverse of "community economies" (Gibson-Graham, 2006). The DPS, therefore, functions as a form of solidarity finance (Utting & Laville, 2021, p. 2).

In the future, the project seeks to extend solidarity beyond the town, transcending an "imperial mode of living" normalised in the Global North (Brand & Wissen, 2021). Here, we see participants adopt a somewhat-global perspective on identity, belonging to the town but also to a broader, boundary-crossing community (Nussbaum, 2010). Among a recent rise in solidarity economy initiatives, this long-termism is not so outlandish (Utting & Laville, 2021, p. 3). However, Maria, a cooperative employee, remarked with irony that "soon you'll be able

to use the DPS on the other side of the world," a comment that underscores the nascent stage of the initiative. The community involved in this solidarity economy is defined by geography, interaction, and identity (Wells et al., 2019, pp. 617-620). Residents of the town engage with local *ayuntamiento*-run cooperatives and/or use the DPS, as well as embracing the cooperative identity of a local solidarity economy.

Back on the main street, I watched as a man with a trolley approached a group of cheery men enjoying *cañas* (beers) in the sun. He asked if they would like to buy some socks he had for sale. They politely rejected his offer but engaged in small talk, showing interest in the man's previous job: abroad, picking fruit. I wondered: *Where does this man fit into this project?*

With an informal economy representing over a fifth of Spain's total GDP – largely made up of migrant workers who are often subjected to social exclusion (Repic, 2010) – this is a pertinent question. It relates to a wider conundrum; namely, the inherently exclusionary nature of radical politics (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). For them, the construction of collective political identities – such as "the people" – requires the formation of boundaries between included and excluded positions. Applying this framework to Gibson-Graham's (2006) concept of community economies – which seeks to reframe economic life as diverse, locally situated, and shaped by ethical negotiation – reveals the tensions between pluralism and boundary-making within solidarity-based initiatives. As Gordon (2016) demonstrates in their study of food cooperatives in Asturias, even economies grounded in democratic and inclusive values can generate new forms of exclusion

As I followed the road up to the top of town, I observed young South American women assisting elderly Basque women. This highlighted the town's connection to broader trends in the Spanish care sector; in particular, its reliance on migrant labour (Sánchez-Mira et al., 2021). Since collective agreements in the care sector are negotiated at the regional and provincial levels (ibid.), focusing solely on local care workers within the cooperative – while potentially empowering those within the cooperative – risks perpetuating the fragmentation of the sector. This approach may inadvertently exclude other care workers across Spain from similar benefits. Essentially, the solidarity economy aims to support care workers it directly

engages with regarding geography, interaction, and identity (Wells et al., 2019, pp. 617-620) – but, in doing so, may leave out those working in other regions of Spain.

Moreover, universalist inclusion of residents is intertwined with a systematic exclusion of non-residents (Bader, 1995, p. 212). This self-determination within the solidarity economy may exclude those who are still affected by it, such as those who commute. Sergio, a bubbly owner of a local shoe store, touched on this. He noted certain customers wanted to join the cooperative, but were unable to do so as they did not reside in the town.

Fabián proudly underscored the *ayuntamiento*'s initiatives of radical democracy: effective mechanisms for foregrounding economic "being-in-common" within the solidarity economy (Gordon, 2016). However, he lamented about low participation in the *consejos* and self-interested voting habits in the democratic management of funds. Carla noted a lack of engagement on the part of those who are averse to left-wing politics – similar to observations with regards to the Lewes Pound (Graugaard, 2012, pp. 254-255). This suggests exclusion along lines of political engagement is a possible risk to this solidarity economy project.

Exclusion could be further amplified by the dominance of *Euskara* in social and political life. Although the multicultural centre set up by the *ayuntamiento* hosts integration initiatives, *Euskara*'s linguistic distinctiveness (in comparison to other regional dialects) can prove a severe obstacle. *Euskara* bears no clear connection to any other language, local or otherwise (Vasiloudis, 2024). Moreover, the choice to have *Euskara* as the medium of instruction in schools (Ahmad & Guijun, 2022) demonstrates the influence of language ideology; the tension between linguistic preservation and inclusivity. I witnessed this first-hand during my time teaching English in a Basque secondary school. Children coming from other parts of Spain had to devote many out-of-school hours to learning *Euskara*, despite being native Spanish speakers. Nevertheless, it must be noted that – despite the policy of affirmative action and a favourable language regime (Sonntag & Cardinal, 2015) – *Euskara* remains a minority language in the region.

Though 80% of survey respondents indicated alignment with the cooperative's values, there is a notable lack of consensus on key issues, including: local resource management; the extent

of local production; fund distribution; interest rates on loans and savings; the potential for economic growth, and balance between leisure and work. In future assemblies these conflicting opinions will have to be confronted. With 75% of respondents having never attended cooperative meetings, efforts to increase member engagement will be crucial. Nonetheless, the involvement of 60% of survey respondents in community volunteering suggests the situation does not reflect a potential decline of social capital, as in the USA; itself outlined in Putnam's influential work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). Social capital relates to "connections among individuals," and the "social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 17-19). Key indicators of social capital include: trust; formal and informal social networks; group membership; reciprocity, and civic engagement (Harper, 2001, p. 2). Putnam's key finding is that Americans are less engaged in civic life than in previous decades. This includes lower participation in clubs, church groups, unions, neighbourhood associations, and even family dinners. As will be discussed later, qualitative findings suggest high levels of social capital in the town.

As I entered a co-working space set up by the *ayuntamiento* – a large yellow building adorned with feminist artwork – I am informed by Fabián that this is a catalyst for collaboration between the *ayuntamiento*, the cooperative, and local *asociaciónes*. This "collaboration hub" leverages trust to foster cooperation and relationships in the interest of the community (Kojo & Nenonen, 2016; Kozaman Aygün, 2022). It embodies the collaborative spirit necessary for economic localisation, as was leveraged by the East Asian economies, such as South Korea and Japan (Amsden, 1992; Wade, 2010; Wade, 1992; Amsden & Singh, 1994). The "principle of reciprocity" between the Korean state and business (Amsden, 1992, p. 8) acts as a guide to the necessary relationship between the *ayuntamiento* and local businesses. Moreover, similar to how state-owned banks directed funds to capital accumulation in the Korean case (ibid., pp. 16-17), accumulated *cashback* by the cooperative is directed to socially and environmentally conscious *asociaciónes.* In turn, the *ayuntamiento* invests in building the necessary economic infrastructure. According to Fabián, the overarching Basque independence movement brings together all groups, mirroring the *Saemaul* (New Community) movement's role in South Korea's nation-building process (Wade, 2010, p. 158). As proclaimed by Jorge, "economic self-sufficiency means independence"; to some, the

project represents a path towards an independent *Euskal Herria* (Basque Country) for pro-independence residents.

Beyond the issues related to the exclusionary nature of the politics of solidarity economies, there are other, specific obstacles to this economic localisation project. Fabián outlined how Spanish laws dictate that *ayuntamientos* must purchase energy from the international market, complicating their efforts to develop a local energy cooperative. Such political barriers are common (Marshall & O'Neill, 2018, p. 273). Additionally, the logic of the market can be tempting – with cheaper alternatives and greater choice drawing customers away from local businesses towards larger corporations, as remarked by one customer at a food cooperative store. Moreover, the *ayuntamiento* realises the economic viability of certain local businesses threatens the success of the project; a worry recognised by local businesses, too. Cristina, a young student working part-time, explained to me how her father, Sergio, does not want her to take over his shoe store due to a bleak outlook for such businesses. The long-term nature of this project requires a necessary degree of idealism, especially on the part of cooperative members, to continue using the DPS while the economic localisation process unfolds (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 213). Nearing retirement after a lifetime at Mondragón, Carlos embodied this spirit of idealism, remarking that all cooperatives are, in some sense, utopian ventures – ones that often demand personal sacrifice, as when he worked unpaid hours during periods of hardship. In turn, he demonstrated the "civic virtue" necessary via participants for such a project (Putnam, 2000, p. 17); in his case, volunteering in *ayuntamiento*-run initiatives for a just energy transition and integration of immigrant care workers. To ensure the success of this project, it is fair to conclude this attitude will need to be commonplace among a significant-enough proportion of participants.

Overall, despite the possible exclusions highlighted through this analysis, the *ayuntamiento*'s close relationship with other local groups and connections to Basque nationalism suggest a favourable climate for a solidarity economy to thrive. Economic localisation is accompanied by its own hurdles, specifically those related to the DPS' adoption in this case; however, subsequent analysis of local consumption and social capital reveal some promising developments.

The DPS: Strategy, Local Consumption, and Symbolic Interactionism

I sat with María in a quiet café garden, sipping a *cortado* as she spoke about her role in the cooperative – building business relationships and encouraging new vendors to accept the DPS. She neatly summed up the task at hand: "the goal is that people can buy everything they need right here in town, using the DPS." The DPS is integral to this economic localisation project, providing a financial incentive to source locally. Maria further informed me the cooperative's initial focus in involving local business was on 'essential' stores – greengrocers, butchers, bakeries, fishmongers, health stores, and pharmacies. Afterwards, they targeted bookstores, bars, restaurants, appliance stores etc. This strategy had been very effective: Cristina noted she can get everything she needs with the DPS.

With 120 businesses signed up, I was impressed by how many stores on the main street proudly advertised they accepted the DPS in the window. However, Fabián understands there are no local suppliers for certain products. Daniel, a young man who co-owns Green Café with his girlfriend, told me they try to source as many products as possible locally – using the DPS – but that the choice is limited. This is not an isolated case; in similar initiatives elsewhere, economic localisation efforts have been restricted by wider institutional or political barriers and insufficient economic infrastructure (Graugaard, 2012, pp. 254-255; Marshall & O'Neill, 2018, p. 273). This has led some to conclude that efforts would be better directed at campaigning for government policy change instead (Marshall & O'Neill, 2018).

However, I posit that the specificity of this case – with a socio-economic background of industrial cooperativism and high-quality social capital – merits an optimistic outlook on the potential for economic localisation. Moreover, as will be discussed, the community benefits of such initiatives are desirable, in and of themselves. (Ibid.).

One afternoon, Jorge, Maria and I gathered in the cooperative's small office tucked away at the top of town: a simple room with a couple of desks, chairs, computers and a printer. Jorge explained they set up here to always be available for in-person contact. This move seemed astute: direct engagement with community members fosters trust and forges friendships, thereby building social capital (Öz & Aksoy, 2019, pp. 305-310). Here, Jorge further expanded on their strategy for promoting the DPS. He clarified how it is grounded in pragmatism:

cultivate a positive reputation for the DPS among residents by offering money-saving discounts and promoting the straightforward message of "keeping money local." This messaging appears effective: 80% of survey respondents agreed that keeping money local is important. Moreover, discounts have proven to be an effective promotional tool in similar initiatives (Ključnikov et al., 2020, pp. 239-242).

Jorge emphasised that similar initiatives failed due to an overemphasis on social aspirations; for him, the priority is making the system functional and instilling habits of shopping locally. This perspective may raise concerns about the “overjustification effect” (Deci et al., 1999); whereby financial incentives diminish intrinsic motivation. However, responses to the survey suggest otherwise: financial security and obtaining discounts were the least important factors for joining the cooperative. DPS use appears habitual: 85% of participants used it on at least a weekly basis. Nonetheless, a social desirability bias could be influencing these results, with respondents over-estimating their use.

For businesses, the DPS offers a clear advantage: increased foot traffic and access to a socially conscious customer base. As more people use the DPS, more money circulates within the local economy, strengthening both small businesses and community initiatives through the social capital fund. This creates a virtuous cycle – residents see real benefits in the form of thriving local shops and a growing number of community events and projects.

The habitual use of the DPS might be linked to improved relationships between customers and shopkeepers, an effect noted by 45% of survey respondents – or, to the sense of purpose it provides (also cited by 45%). However, I argue that the stronger motivation is an affinity for the local economy and its perceived role in fostering community and social life. Indeed, 60% of survey respondents ranked supporting local businesses as either the most or second-most important reason for using the DPS; building a sense of community followed closely behind.

To analyse behaviour related to the DPS, I employed a theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), positing that behavioural decisions are influenced by three factors: people’s attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

Attitudes towards the DPS were overwhelmingly positive among cooperative members and business owners/employees alike. The former group commonly cited “supporting local businesses” as their key motivation for using the DPS; the latter group often noted a desire to “help people shop locally.” Conversations consistently highlighted a connection between a thriving local economy and a vibrant social life.

Carlos shared this sentiment, arguing that a thriving local economy means a better quality-of-life for residents. Meanwhile, Isabella, an employee at a wellness store, expressed concern that, without local businesses, the town would become a “*barrio dormitorio*” (a commuter town).

Interestingly, Daniel noted that community involvement was a key motivation for opening their business. Participating in the local economy presented an opportunity to engage in community life, not just support it. From a symbolic interactionism perspective (Hewitt, 2000), the use of the DPS can be seen as symbolic consumption (Armstrong, 2007): representing a conscious effort to revitalise the community. Given we cultivate our own identity over time (Haggard & Williams, 1992, p. 8), symbolic consumption with the DPS may be tied to the pro-independence political identity elaborated upon earlier; thus, serving as a means to achieve economic interdependence locally towards the ultimate goal of political independence.

The convergence of motivations among DPS users and local businesses reveals a shared, subjective norm: using the DPS – and, therefore, shopping locally – is socially desirable. Walking around town to find most people enjoying locally-produced and traditional food and drink – like *sidra, txakoli,* and *pintxos* – reinforces this norm: directly relating consumption to the cultural identity of the town. Moreover, residents with collectivistic values – which appeared prevalent in town – tend to view buying local foods more positively (Zhang et al., 2020, pp. 2-3). By humanising local producers, the food cooperative store further encouraged this trend towards local food consumption (Kumar et al., 2021, p. 1); thus reinforcing a notion of “locavorism” that presents local food as beneficial to the community (Zhang et al., 2020, pp. 2-3).

As discussed previously, I posit the DPS' use has become synonymous with improving the local standard-of-living and community life. By contrast, not using the DPS means a dying high street: for Carlos, it means a town full of boarded-up shops. He cited their alternative: how a thriving local economy means people outside, socialising, kids playing in the street etc. Intrinsic to this is the implicit assumption that not shopping locally means buying from multinational corporations: 90% of respondents considered this a threat to local forms of life. This was connected to a broader, anti-globalisation sentiment: only 5% of respondents perceived a positive impact of globalisation on the community.

Carla expressed worries about how globalisation brings consumerism, in particular, digital devices which, she claims, wear away at the family collective, as children lock themselves away in their rooms. Julia, the owner of a local café for the past twenty-two years, echoed this concern in a conversation with her customers. The connection between consumerism, globalisation, and the disintegration of the collective is an interesting one. Much like Polanyi's (1944, pp. 171-172) analysis of how social institutions, such as cooperatives, protect workers against the unrestrained market (Bilewicz, 2018; Wells et al., 2019), could the DPS, with its emphasis on the local, be interpreted as a "form of defence" against the force of globalisation?

The DPS, by reducing prices, gives residents a stronger senser of agency as they are less restricted by financial constraints. This makes it easier for people to shop locally. Jorge recounted how a friend's husband – who used to shop in Donostia for convenience – now shops locally to save money. However, challenges remain: for instance, the lack of local suppliers, alongside modern consumption preferences – both of which sometimes conflict with the DPS' goals. Daniel noted that, while he would prefer not to offer avocados for sale due to the environmental impact of their production, they are a crucial revenue source for his café. Such conflicts between pro-social and financial goals can occur in social enterprises (Young & Lecy, 2014, p. 1313).

With regards to consumption patterns, Carlos stressed the need for these to shift. Jorge, Maria, and Fabián all noted a temporary-but-unsustainable change in consumption patterns through excessively high *cashback.* This is due to users making all their purchases at the

start of the month before the *cashback* allowance runs out. moreover, although technological illiteracy can impede the adoption of systems like the DPS (Ključnikov et al., 2020, pp. 239-242), the cooperative has introduced a physical 'QR code' keyring for in-store payment and top-up – as one elderly lady did in Sergio's shoe store when I was there. However, awareness of this option appears limited: Julia mentioned that many older residents avoid the DPS because they struggle with modern, digitally-enabled echnologies. Finally, the town is very walkable, which has been positively linked with use in similar initiatives (Kwon et al., 2017).

In summary: participants are motivated to shop locally using the DPS, for two primary reasons. First, there is the positive financial incentive. Second, cultural and political factors drive a strong association between a vibrant local economy and a thriving community; which, in turn, enhances overall quality-of-life. A deeper analysis reveals these forces not only drive DPS adoption, but also significantly impact social relations. The main barriers to broader adoption are the inability to source certain products locally, entrenched modern consumption preferences, and a lack of awareness about the DPS.

Social Enterprise, Craftivism, and Community Economic Development

Inside the food cooperative store, I browsed the wide selection of food and health products – the former products clearly marked with 'place of origin'. I struck up a conversation with David, an employee, who stocked shelves while we chatted.

I browsed the refillable section of the store where customers could buy grains, nuts, and other raw foods, above sat photographs of different families huddled together in front of farms. I enquired about the photographs. David enthusiastically explained that these are local producers. He pulled a block of sheep's cheese and *membrillo* out of the fridge; pointing to one of the photographs, he explained these products come directly from this local farmer. David then showed me a section containing onions, lettuce, and other vegetables produced in the vicinity of the town. He noted that all profits and price-setting power ultimately go to the suppliers of these products.

Back at Green Café, Daniel characterised he and his girlfriend's venture as "more than a café": that it represented a way to connect people with the land via local, ethically-sourced food and coffee. Moreover, Daniel pointed at my coffee mug and explained he had made it in a ceramics workshop, as with all the crockery. He then pointed to the cushion I was sat on: this, too, was handmade by a cousin. Almost everything, crockery, upholstery, artwork, furniture, was made by friends or family, a fact he took pride in. Gifts were integral to building this café.Encouraging such craftivism (as backed by green technologies) – which constitutes a personally rewarding form of labour – could contribute to building a post-consumerist political imaginary (Soper, 2020, pp. 102-106). This could encourage circulation of goods (sometimes as gifts), freed from the commodity logic inherent to capitalism. Such a 'gift culture', upheld by close personal relationships, can be beneficial to the economic localisation project noted previously; resourceful community members, creating things for one another which would otherwise be purchased via the global economy. As Fabián stated, these kinds of social enterprises, grounded in locality and social objectives to contribute to the wellbeing of the community (Kay et al., 2016), are integral to the success of a solidarity economy.

Studies have confirmed significant contributions of social enterprises to community economic development (Wallace, 1999). They can support social and political cohesion. (Ibid.) Although community economic development is rooted in 19th century African-American resistance to segregation and discrimination (ibid., p. 156), this case mirrors a similar resistance-oriented nature; however, instead of segregation and discrimination, the enemies are harmful environmental and labour practices used by corporations.

Reflecting on the particularly humane nature of these businesses, I posit that they contribute to the socialisation of economic relations; their very ethos represents an intertwining of the social with the economic. Moreover, as demonstrated by Daniel's unwavering commitment to use the DPS as much as possible, they can represent the necessary idealism for such a project's success, as mentioned previously.

Social Capital and the Interplay of the Economic and the Intimate

I encountered a lively social scene in the town: *plazas*, bars, and cafés bustling with people. I observed people shouting "*kaixo*" (*hello*) and "*agur*" (*bye*) upon entering and leaving

businesses, respectively. Most other customers would respond in kind, regardless of whether the speakers personally knew one another. It truly seemed to be a town where "everyone knows everyone," as Carlos put it. Cristina enthusiastically relaye (d the events of the prior week's festivities – *las fiestas patronales* (*festivities in honor of the town's patron saint)* – with streets full of people of all ages, celebrating together. According to Cristina's father and shoe store owner, Sergio, this social life is one reason many young people return here to settle. Indeed, an interesting aspect of the town was its intergenerational populace. I observed one *plaza* that hosted young children engaged in organised games. Nearby, elderly individuals on benches watched on happily. Another *plaza* hosted parents drinking coffees and *cañas* while their children played in various recreational areas, including a *pilota* court. Maria highlighted an intergenerational socialising spot to me: a *taberna* connected to a retirement home, fostering interactions between the elderly and younger generations.

Intergenerational activities have been praised for their ability to not only meet the developmental needs of both young and elderly people, but also for community cohesion (Gruenewald et al., 2016, p. 3). Perhaps this intergenerational connectedness explains the community's display of togetherness during the COVID-19 pandemic; wherein individuals of all ages delivered products to the elderly, as recounted by Carla. It seems clear that he intergenerational aspect of the town is conducive towards realising the goals of the *ayuntamiento*.

As underscored in these observations, local businesses I visited were often hubs of social life, or had distinctly pro-social goals. In turn, this prompted a question: *Could this be why participants continuously made a connection between a thriving social life and a healthy local economy?*

To explore this, I employed the overarching concept of social capital and Zelizer's *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2005), to narrow down on the interplay of economic and intimate aspects of social relations, and effects of the DPS on such relations.

Social capital refers to the social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity that arise from connections among individuals (Putnam, 2000). Since economies are embedded in social

relations (Polanyi, 1944), social capital is closely tied to the local economy. Its key indicators include trust, social networks, group membership, reciprocity, and civic engagement (Harper, 2001). However, these resources of social capital can be easily confused with the consequences (Hyyppä, 2010, pp. 22-23). Moreover, the cultural context of social capital is important (Harper, 2001, p. 3); thus, I connect analyses back to the political identity of the town.

As will be outlined, existing social capital is mobilised to expand the DPS's success; meanwhile, the DPS itself presents an opportunity for improving social capital, as has been noted in similar initiatives (Oliver Sanz, 2016). Importantly, social capital can deplete – hence, this project is also about the maintenance of social capital (Harper, 2001, p. 7; Wahl, 2016, p. 69). Additionally, the depletion of social capital has adverse consequences for the DPS.

On the first day of my research, Maria took me from store to store, making introductions to shopkeepers. They all seemed happy to see her; and despite Julia's characterisation of the town as "closed," they all agreed to participate in the study. As we wandered up and down the town's two main streets, Maria was stopped and greeted several times. It was clear she was a well-known local, and Jorge remarked this is what makes her so good at her role: signing up new businesses for the DPS and maintaining relationships with participating ones. For Maria and Jorge, trust is the essential ingredient for the DPS to succeed. As demonstrated, transitive trust (*I trust her and she trusts you, so I trust you*) was being leveraged by the cooperative to spread the DPS. This was a prominent motivation: Carla and one survey respondent explained they signed up at the advice of shopkeepers. Similarly, one shopkeeper signed up after persuasion from another.

As we sat down in a booth at Daniel's café, he remarked, "I have a lot of trust in the community." He allowed customers to leave without paying when the app was malfunctioning, trusting them to pay when they get home. This trust was mirrored by Julia, owner of Garden café, who had no qualms with a customer taking a carton of milk from behind the counter without permission. An open wooden hut in the main *plaza* – functioning as a community book exchange – stood as a further testament to this trusting environment within the community.

This community trust extends to the *ayuntamiento*, which Carlos explained had a "close relationship" with residents. Meanwhile, Cristina explained that they listen to the people: "you can go to them with any ideas, any concerns, and they will listen." Although political polarisation has been claimed to have reduced social trust in Spain (Torcal & Thomson, 2023), this town appears to be an exception.

Returning to the idealism required for the DPS to thrive, it becomes clear that this is closely linked to questions of trust. Do people place trust in the system because they are inherently trusting – or because they believe the person on the other side of the exchange is trustworthy? The former relates to preference-based trust, while the latter is belief-based trust (Alia & Spiegelman, 2020). A similar initiative found the majority of cases to the be the former, which allows for a more resilient model, since the users require fewer external guarantees to participate. The case of Daniel trusting customers to leave without paying – and the idealism deemed necessary by Carla and Carlos – suggested this is also the case for this initiative.

Having owned her café for twenty-two years, Julia knows most of her customers. Every time I went in, she was in lively conversation with customers at the bar. In Green Café, it was a similar story. A friendly relationship between customers and shopkeepers was also observed in the food cooperative store and shoe store, respectively. Moreover, 45% of survey respondents said they were friends with local shopkeepers and employees. Elena, an employee at a health store, explicitly stated that having a personal relationship with the people who work at local shops is important for her quality-of-life. It can be observed, then, that through close relations and trust between business owners and customers, we can begin to see the dual nature of social relations theorised by Zelizer (2005); namely, an intertwining of the economic with the intimate.

In fact, no survey respondents recorded a worsening of their relationships due to a commercial aspect; thus, upholding Zelizer's belief that economic activity maintains such relationships (ibid., pp. 1-2). This is further substantiated with 35% of respondents having noted business owners occasionally gave them discounts out of 'good will'. Furthermore, *cuadrillas* (close-knits groups of friends) often pool resources together to co-own local

businesses in town, as outlined by Carla, demonstrating the prevalence of the interplay of intimate and economic relationships in Spain. However, representing bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), such *cuadrillas* could explain why the town appears "closed" (Fieldnotes, 4/7/24), leading to exclusivity and social closure – meaning it's harder for "outsiders" to integrate or feel included. This is because strong in-group loyalty can unintentionally create out-group barriers, and social life often revolves around established circles.

Although it is acknowledged that social relations can be transformed by media (in this case, the DPS), the media can sometimes merely be representative of a change that has already occurred (Zelizer, 2005, p. 37). This begs the question: *is the DPS transforming social relations?*

It appears so – and I go on to argue it is rewriting the practices and obligations which connect customers and business owners.

This transformation is dependent on "culturally meaningful institutional supports" associated with the DPS (ibid., p. 36). I posit these 'supports' are three-fold. Firstly, there is the backing of the *ayuntamiento*, which, according to Jorge, adds credibility. Given the trust in the *ayuntamiento* previously discussed, this serves as an example of a strong support. Additionally, the *ayuntamiento* offers an option for local businesses to convert their funds into *euros* in times of need. Lastly, the cooperative's democratic assemblies include members in the direction of the DPS.

This suggests the DPS transforms social relations in several ways. First-and-foremost, as discussed previously, consumption through the DPS is symbolic (Armstrong, 2007). Doing so demonstrates a collective commitment to community revitalisation: thereby, fostering a healthy, town-based local patriotism (Richey, 2007). This could also explain why 45% of survey respondents noted an improvement in their relationships with shopkeepers/employees since using the DPS. In this regard, the DPS becomes a common cause social driver, bringing people together towards a shared goal. This also suggests why similar initiatives have been found to increase community trust (Ruddick, 2015; Littera et al., 2017; Alia & Spiegelman, 2020; Richey, 2007); as such, contributing to social capital formation. The importance of action in building

trust can be effectively encapsulated in the Basque proverb "*Hitzak ez du balio, egintzak baizik*" (words are worthless, actions speak louder). However, it is important to highlight the potential negative reputational impacts on community trust if users exploit the trusting attitude of certain business owners (Alia & Spiegelman, 2020).

Moreover, the DPS revitalises a gift culture. Given the *cashback* offered by the *ayuntamiento* and businesses is unconditional, it represents a gift – as do the monthly donations to *asociaciónes*. Gifts, as discussed in Mauss' seminal work (2016, p. 61), bring an obligation of reciprocity. Thus, people feel a need to continue participating in the project in order to reciprocate. This gift culture is substantiated by the aforementioned fact that 35% of survey respondents stated local businesses occasionally gave them discounts in good will. In fact, the perception of gift culture (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 126), "your good fortune is my good fortune, and your loss is my loss," is embodied through participants' shared recognition of the local economy being important to quality-of-life. After all, gifts are social in nature (ibid., p. 242).

Carla expressed a desire to expand the town's culture of gifting by introducing a platform to facilitate service exchange – such as a time bank – which she felt would benefit the community. Repeated interactions among community members help construct social norms (Young, 1993), so facilitating more exchanges through tools like the DPS or a time bank could reinforce a norm of cooperation. This, in turn, fosters generalised reciprocity, as will be discussed later. Crucially, when people identify with one another — as is often the case within cooperatives — they are more likely to cooperate (Titlestad et al., 2019), further strengthening the social fabric that underpins such initiatives.

Although the DPS appears to represent specific reciprocity (*you did this for me, so I will do this for you)* through *cashback*, I posit that the ideals and traces of generalised reciprocity are present. Generalised reciprocity is the conviction that, "I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 17-19). Eisenstein (2011, p. 18) viewed this as an internal change, whereby the concept of your "self" expands to include others.

Carlos and Carla both highlighted the need for this psychological shift; a collective recognition that helping the community means helping oneself (Fieldnotes, 2/7/24; 5/7/24). This mindset may influence Carlos's high involvement in community activities, as outlined previously. Daniel also stated he feels a lot of responsibility to the community, aligning with a sophisticated gift culture characterised by a willingness to be in the debt of the community (Eisenstein, 2011, p. 244); therefore, he also embodies generalised reciprocity. If shared by other cooperative members, this sentiment could explain why 60% of survey respondents are involved in some form of community volunteering. Furthermore, the abundance of local festivities and events – mentioned previously by Cristina – are important forms of cultural capital that buttress social capital (Harper, 2001, p. 7). Linguistic capital further builds on cultural capital, with *Euskara* reinforcing the identity of the town, particularly in relation to cooperativism and independence (Bourdieu, 1991). Given that people's sense of reciprocity co-evolves with their economy's structure (Raworth, 2017, p. 106), I posit the establishment of a solidarity economy will continue to expand this norm of generalised reciprocity.

Factors threatening social capital include use of technology, greater mobility, and the fast-paced nature of modern lives (Harper, 2001, p. 10). The recorded worries among participants about the first factor suggest this could decrease social capital. Meanwhile, the common occurrence of people living in town but working in other bigger towns/cities (e.g. Irun or Donostia) reflect the point about greater mobility. Lastly, Fabián and Carla both recognised that financial stress and work culture impede people's ability to engage in community initiatives. Social capital also has its drawbacks (Harper, 2001, p. 3). Connected to the matter of exclusion noted earlier, bonding social capital can lead to social relationships controlling decision-making – thereby concentrating power in the hands of the most well-connected individuals (Portes, 1998, p. 15; Wang et al., 2019).

Overall, social capital is an interesting factor for examination. Initiatives like the DPS simultaneously contribute to the formation of social capital (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013, p. 68) – bringing individual and collective benefits in the community (Putnam, 2000, pp. 17-19) – while also depending on pre-existing social capital for success (Portes, 1998, p. 18; Putnam, 1993, pp. 35-36). For example, high levels of social capital have been found to improve local government effectiveness (Harper, 2001, p. 9); therefore, such an environment supports the

ayuntamiento in its aims for building a solidarity economy. Meanwhile, the growing complexity of the solidarity economy will require the leveraging of social capital for effective governance, especially with regards to the commons (Ostrom, 2015, p. 190).

Conclusion

In Borges' "*Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*" (1962), the meticulous description of an idealistic society eventually alters reality in its image/ It illustrates how detailed conceptualisations can reshape the material world, not just our understanding of it. Similarly, rewriting our “story” of money can transform the wider economic system (Eisenstein, 2011, pp. 12-13). This initiative, alongside others, is key to writing the first pages of this new story. With a contemporary monetary system – underpinned by positive interest rates, and which perpetuates a cycle of debt, inequality, and ecological degradation (ibid.) – it is not hard to imagine a better system. However,realising such a system will be a laborious task; one demanding engagement, flexibility and a willingness to learn from everyone involved.

Delving into the intricacies of this promising initiative – with all its particularities of Basque nationalism, *cuadrillas*, and an intrinsic “cooperative culture” – reminds us that each and every localised postcapitalist future will be grounded in its unique time, place, and culture. Leveraging the local language ideology’s ties to Basque independence and existing forms of social capital, this initiative builds on, and within, its socio-political context. A more holistic approach could have uncovered the ecological history of the area, exploring the possibilities afforded by sustainable use of local resources. Unfortunately, I lacked the research support, financial resources, and time to expand my research to this domain. However, I hope this study contributes to a better understanding of how we can co-construct singular units of a wider pluriverse of community economies going forward, as envisioned by Gibson-Graham (2006).

Conflict of interest

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Ethics

All names and places have been anonymised for ethical reasons.

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