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### Political practice and dimensions of solidarity economy: a case study from Cochabamba, Bolivia

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I examine the political dimensions of solidarity economy and the example of a grassroots solidarity economy market, ECO Feria, in Cochabamba, Bolivia. I ask how actors practise their political dimensions as part of the solidarity economy movement. I analyse Ecoferia in relation to Gibson-Graham's (2006) framework for community economy and post-capitalist politics and some views on politicisation in the solidarity economy movement. My research framework focuses on solidarity economy that is a concept used in many Latin American countries.

Carneiro (2011) writes about some political aspects of solidarity economy and, for example, Hillenkamp (2014) has approached also political processes of solidarity economy in Bolivia through case studies in El Alto. Solidarity economy literature, however, lacks some of the comprehensiveness about politicisation that Gibson-Graham (2006) offer in their writing about community economy. Miller (2013) juxtaposes community and solidarity economy by treating them both as suggestions for radically democratic economic organising and suggesting that solidarity economy is one possibility for practical implementation of the more abstract ideas of community economy. I have turned to the ideas of post-capitalist politics to shed light on and broaden the discussion on the politicised aspects of solidarity economy. I argue, in the lines of Carneiro (2011), that solidarity economy has a focus on repoliticising economy since one central characteristic of solidarity economy is the attention to both economic and political issues.

In Bolivia, solidarity economy has been gaining interest in the past 20 years. My case analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Cochabamba, Bolivia, where I have spent in total eight months in three periods between 2016–2018. My data consists of interviews, events, observations, and notes on discussions as well as documents and photos. After transcribing hand-written notes and recorded interviews, I have analysed the materials thematically using atlas.ti. I have used both predetermined theory-based and data-based themes in my analysis, but this paper is mostly based on predetermined codes that cover the research participants' motivating factors and values and different aspects of organising and activities in different levels of the society.

This paper presents the first results of my PhD research about solidarity economy activities and their impact on democratisation in Bolivia. With my research, I hope to offer new information about the political nature of solidarity economy in Bolivia by analysing different dimensions of politicisation through Gibson-Graham's framework.

## 2. Politicisation and the political in community and solidarity economy

Boaventura Sousa de Santos (1994: 25) suggests that ecological and democratic utopias are required to be able to overcome the capitalist hegemonic paradigm and the societal change it implies. The ecological perspective sheds light on the controversial situation in which the capitalist economy is expected to grow infinitely even though the Earth's ecosystem is finite. Thus, an ecological utopia would offer us a new paradigmatic relationship with nature. The democratic utopia, on the other hand, focuses on repoliticisation and practising individual and collective forms of citizenship. (Santos 1994: 42.) Here solidarity economy and community economy are examined as these types of utopias.

When dealing with economic perspectives, it should be noted that economy and colonisation have been often understood as equivalent concepts and approaches of development that dismisses the social context (Esteva 1992: 17) and especially capitalism is interpreted to colonise all available economic space (Miller 2004). A general theory, and research in general, concerning grassroots action can often be very violent and colonising, especially in a context

where colonisation and marginalisation of indigenous peoples have been a reality (Smith 2005: 87). The analysis of the democratising and politicising aspects of grassroots activities needs to take this into account. According to Santos (2012), we should rather develop theories together with social movements and turn to bottom-up approaches as an alternative to the top-down approach of a general theory. In addition, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) states that decolonising theory needs a decolonising practice that includes decolonisation of the mind.

## 2.1 Post-capitalist politics of community economy by Gibson-Graham

I approach politicisation based on Gibson-Graham's (2002, 2006, 2008) weak theory of economy and a proposal for a language of diverse economy and post-capitalist politics. Gibson-Graham's weak theory is the kind of theoretical work that has the intention of giving justice to diverse practices of economy that possess the potential for releasing our post-capitalist economic imagination (Gibson-Graham 2006). This type of approach offers the possibility to do the transformative work by decolonising practice and mind and working together with movements to have a bottom-up approach that Rivera (2012) and Santos (2012) encourage.

The idea behind the weak theory of economy is to resist a strong capitalocentric theoretical approach. A capitalocentric approach easily leads to categorising events and activities into pre-existing boxes and to results that were expected in the light of what is already known in the context of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2014.). The active choice to use a language differing from the capitalocentric mainstream allows a politics of language that shines light on ethical economic activities and communities and helps us observe the myriad variety of existing economies (Gibson-Graham et al. 2017: 9). The language of diverse economy acknowledges practices that open possibilities that have been hidden or discarded by a capitalocentric framing (Gibson-Graham 2006: 55).

Gibson-Graham (2008) demonstrates that within economy there are several fields of action that cannot be explained from merely one set of motivations that a capitalist understanding reveals. A capitalocentric interpretation does not yield much hope or opportunity for changes because activities identifying with non-capitalist currents or motivations are seen as insufficient or not presenting a real opportunity for post-capitalism. In some cases, a capitalocentric analysis sees alternative practices as failures because through this lens these activities have already been co-opted by the capitalist sphere. According to Gibson-Graham, the diverse economy framework especially encourages studying and learning from the diversity of different "marginal" or "alternative" practices and treating them as experiments and not as something that is constantly compared to the mainstream or evaluated if it is successful or not. (Gibson-Graham 2008.)

Within the diverse economic thinking, Gibson-Graham (2006) constructs a post-capitalist politics that is enacted through economic alternatives that repoliticise economy. Inspired by the global achievements of feminism, they challenge the idea of big global level insurgencies and mass mobilisation as the only way to economic transformation and, rather, acknowledge the potential of local level political transformation and creativity. In addition to the politics of language, the post-capitalist politics consists of political practices. (Gibson-Graham 2002: 34–35.) These sorts of activities have an emphasis on social dimensions, care, and the experience of interdependence between all beings and economic activities that differentiate them from other interpretations of economic activity. The community practice is built around the negotiation about the key ethical coordinates: survival, producing, distributing and consuming surplus, producing and taking care of the commons. This is the "ethical praxis of being-in-common" that can inform a politics of community economy and create the possibility horizon for post-capitalist politics of community economy. (Gibson-Graham 2006: 88.) The

communities involved in these economies are the groups that are actively participating in said democratic negotiations (Gibson-Graham et al. 2017).

Community economies, that Gibson-Graham (2008: 627) understands as ethical practice of economy and one part of the diverse economy, “are simply economic spaces or networks in which relations of interdependence are democratically negotiated by participating individuals and organisations”. A perspective of commoning further widens the scope of political and ethical action because it connects humans to each other but also to the non-human nature. Commons come in different forms of biophysical commons like plants and air, cultural commons of language or art, social commons, like health, and knowledge commons, such as scientific or indigenous ecological knowledge. Commoning carried out in communities includes taking responsibility for a resource, negotiation for common rules that regulate access and use, and sharing the benefits of the common resource to support the wellbeing of everyone and Gibson-Graham suggests commoning as a form of practising post-capitalist politics focusing on the shared present in communities. (Gibson-Graham et al. 2006.)

These types of practices of commoning and enacting political imaginaries already exist in many places around the world in groups, movements, and communities that dedicate themselves to “a politics of possibility” (Gibson-Graham 2006: xxv). These initiatives are ubiquitous and contribute a significant number of working hours to provide livelihoods and, in that sense, they are as global a phenomenon as capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2008: 617). For example, Gibson-Graham and others (2006) point to examples in Australia where different actors have come together to protect the air by facilitating the access to solar power (Gibson-Graham et al. 2006). These types of community economy practices are enabling transformations of thinking and subjectivities in many ways (Gibson-Graham 2002: 33).

This proposal of a transformative politics also requires a worldview in which humans are only players in a team that consists also of the non-human nature and its different species. The agent of change would not only be “a person or a category such as the working class but an assemblage” that would forward “a post-capitalist and posthuman politics located in the shared present – in the becoming of a commoning-community in the here and now”. (Gibson-Graham et al. 2006: 207.) Miller (2013: 527), however, emphasises that Gibson-Graham’s community economy is not a suggestion for a coherent, organised movement but rather an idea of transformation through ubiquity of “ethical exposure and negotiation”. Rather, the assemblage is a loose coalition where humans, non-humans, social movements, grassroots organisations, governments, institutions, firms, animate and inanimate beings are possible members (Gibson-Graham et al. 2006: 207). This described worldview is, of course, not a new one and is similar to the worldviews of many indigenous peoples. That is one of the reasons why many academics, activists and NGOs have turned to indigenous communities for gaining understanding of the world and in the search for sustainable lifestyles.

In conclusion, the cornerstones of the post-capitalist politics of Gibson-Graham are the language politics that allows the opening of economic horizons for ethical practice of local communities, the acknowledgment of the possibility of political reconstruction at the local level, ethical negotiation about survival, production, surplus, and consumption, commoning and ethical practice in general and a new mode of humanity that requires a multispecies worldview. As my research is concerned with solidarity economy actors and the movement, it is of special interest how the solidarity economy forwards these aspects and forms and facilitates the assemblages promoting post-capitalist politics.

In the following, I will examine how the solidarity economy movement is similar to community economy and how it can be combined with the post-capitalist politics.

## 2.2 Politicisation in solidarity economy

Solidarity economy is a social movement based on diverse value-driven practices for organising life. The theory about solidarity economy is also based on the different practices on the ground and rooted in specific contexts (Miller 2004). The idea of solidarity economy rests on the critique of the capitalist system and the purpose of it is to build practical proposals for protecting our planet from economy (Coraggio 2013: 225).

Solidarity economy is in many ways very similar to community economy. Miller (2013) sees both community economy and solidarity economy as approaches for radically democratic economic organising. Solidarity economy could be thought as one practical implementation of community economy's politics, where the ethical negotiation becomes visible and offers a scene for "connection, exclusion, struggle, and active transformation". Community economy provides a framework for such an organising project as well, but Gibson-Graham does not discuss this further. In Miller's view, community economy is a discourse with a counterhegemonic agenda and solidarity economy is an "effort to construct transformative economic networks" and an articulation of community economy's political side. (Miller 2013: 518–520, 527–528.)

Solidarity economy expresses similar attempts than in the post-capitalist politics of community economy in diversifying the capitalocentric economic language. Solidarity economy expands the language of economy to mean more than the mainstream economic ideas of profit-making, accumulation of capital, and economic growth. In solidarity economy, it would not be the market that dictates how the economy works but market would only be one element in the economy (Coraggio 2012). Solidarity economy also replicates the language politics of community economy by creating an umbrella that gathers under it many economic practices and groups with a similar value-basis and aims to politicise the economy. Politics also takes a practical form when many actors supporting solidarity economy attempt to change policies through advocacy, lobbying, and awareness raising, but this is not the only form of politics that takes place among community and solidarity economies. Following Gibson-Graham's (2002) understanding, the political nature of these sort of economies is not only performed through explicit acts aiming at impacting policies or delivering political messages through elaborately defined agendas but can also be found in everyday practices that allow for an expansion in thinking and imagination.

The most common definition of solidarity economy is based on shared values that include principles such as solidarity, cooperation, equity, economic and social justice, self-management, sustainability, diversity, autonomy, and democracy (Alhojärvi et al. 2015, Kawano 2013, Miller 2010). Here, solidarity economy differs from community economy that only demands ethical spaces and negotiation but leaves the more detailed ethical principles undefined (Miller 2013: 528). Gibson-Graham (2006: 97–98) recognises most of the principles of solidarity economy as valuable and relevant but she criticises the unquestioning approach of solidarity economy to have one "direction 'we all' should take"; Gibson-Graham (ibid.: 221–222) sees solidarity economy as a "positive economic ideal" in which local particularities are generalised and that offers a space for ethical negotiation based on certain ethical ideals.

While solidarity economy can be interpreted as a "positive economic ideal", its generalising tendencies are more arguable considering that one of the key principles in solidarity economy is plurality. Solidarity economy embraces giving a space for a plurality of economic organising. Miller (2010) argues that the values building a common ground for organising in solidarity economy are not meant to be rigorously followed, nor can the implementation of these values be objectively assessed or universally applied in different contexts; instead, they are guidelines for ethical negotiation and learning. Miller (2004) also emphasises the evolving nature of the movement by describing solidarity economy as "an economic process, not a plan; it ... starts with our already-present practices and, from there, 'builds the road by

walking.” Solidarity economy does not impose a single path or a form or organisation forward; there are as many roads as there are actors, and solidarity economy gives space for many types of activities that hold ethical values important. Considering this, there can be more similarities between community economy and solidarity economy than Gibson-Graham recognises. In Miller’s view, solidarity economy should at least be treated as a process and not as something that is judged by what it has achieved so far, and we could argue that the political dimension of solidarity economy also develops through a process. Hence, each grassroots actor, in interaction with movements, builds its own political path towards change.

A central element for the politicisation through solidarity economy is the attention to the forms of democratic management and autonomy and especially the development of practices of self-management. Godoy (2011: 117) outlines self-management as one of the main principles of solidarity economy and self-management is “the exercise of participatory practices of self-management in the work processes, in the strategic and everyday definitions of the enterprises, in the management and coordination of the actions in their diverse steps and interests”. Management as self-management in the context of solidarity economy is defined in the broad sense: in addition to the management of all the needed resources for the enterprises’ operations, it also concerns the well-being of producers, founders, and operators of the enterprise (Núcleo de gestão 2007, Singer 2007).

Solidarity economy is often seen as an emergency response to ensure the availability of minimum requirements for survival. In this sense, solidarity economy is disregarded as an alternative because it is seen as the economy of the poor. This narrow understanding would mean that individuals acting in the private space to ensure their own means of survival would also be responsible for their own development. (Carneiro 2011.) However, in many cases solidarity economy is described as more than mere survival and the commonly mentioned goal of solidarity economy is the wellbeing of both the people and the planet. The objective in solidarity economy could then be defined as the possibility of everyone to live “care free, in a way that allows one to live more humanely, without the daily preoccupation of survival” (Boff 1980: 221 in Esteves 2014). In addition, in solidarity economy the survival of the planet is a priority that needs to be paid attention to alongside fulfilling people’s needs.

Carneiro emphasises that solidarity economy also carries a meaning that allows for the politicisation of survival. This takes into account the activities happening in private spaces as having political potential and expands the political action also outside the public space where it is commonly seen as legitimised. Solidarity economy can, thus, serve as a framework for recognising the political aspects as essential elements of the economic activity in other spaces, like the home or the market. Carneiro argues that solidarity economy should be considered as resistance to unequal relations instead of an emergency response and it is here where solidarity economy possesses potential for transformation. (Carneiro 2011.)

In addition to paying attention to material and socioeconomic distribution, solidarity economy’s scope reaches out to the feminist, ethnic, indigenous, and environmental issues and movements. Carneiro states that the analysis of the solidarity economy movement needs to consider its nature as a movement connected to multiple other movements and actors. The solidarity economy movement comprises a field consisting of the diverse interests and efforts of these movements and actors. (Ibid. 2011: 106–109.) This can be seen, for example, at the World Social Forum that gathers together activists, organisations and networks that work on different dimensions of feminist, economic, ethnic, indigenous, educational and social and environmental justice issues. The World Social Forum has had a notable meaning for the Brazilian solidarity economy movement’s organisation (see Esteves 2014: 84), among other things, and serves as one global platform for the networking and strategising of the solidarity economy movement and its various actors. The existence of connections between different fields and movements are also vital for solidarity economy as a learning movement that evolves through social interaction.

Some writers also propose solidarity economy as a contribution to the post-development discussion. On one hand, solidarity economy offers practical solutions to practical problems (like covering basic needs) but also depicts a holistic picture of a transformative change through a bottom-up, equal and democratic process. This advances through, for example, demercantilisation of nature and land and other commons as we can see happening in indigenous and ecological movements that include also non-human nature in the concept of social justice (Esteves 2014). This view of solidarity economy could therefore be analysed as post-development based on its emphasis on changing the power structures through emancipation and diversification of economy, the importance of cultural diversity and the attention it gives to wellbeing nature and taking care of the commons compared to the dominant system.

In conclusion, political practice of solidarity economy appears as democratic, plural, and self-managed activities aiming at politicisation of different spaces. Solidarity economy's political dimensions include ecological, democratic, feminist and cultural objectives and activities in cooperation with other movements. The political practice of solidarity economy can be placed on a level with community economy because they share practices focusing on common, ethical practices that involve negotiation and self-management, an objective of expanding the language of economy and ideas about cooperation of actors through movements or the kind of assemblages that Gibson-Graham and other describe.

In the next chapter, I offer a brief overview of the Bolivian context relevant to solidarity economy discussion.

### **3. Bolivian society and solidarity economy**

In Bolivia, solidarity economy is strongly influenced by community economy (*economía comunitaria*) that indigenous peoples have practised for centuries and that continues even today. As a concept, solidarity economy has been discussed for about 20 years now and apart from the indigenous practices it also has influences from syndicalism and cooperativism (Hillenkamp 2014: 83). The solidarity economy movement in Bolivia gathers together people working mostly in small scale production, organic agriculture, and crafts but also recycling initiatives and environmental education. The institutionalisation and organisation of these alternative economic sectors started already in the 1990s but has developed further in the 2000s inspired by international movement of another economy that gathered people together at the World Social Forums (Wanderley et al. 2015). The main three umbrella organisations for solidarity economy actors have been RENACC (*Red Nacional de Comercialización Comunitaria de Bolivia*), CIOEC (*Coordinadora de Integración de Organizaciones Económicas de Bolivia*), and MESyCJB (*Movimiento de Economía Solidaria y Comercio Justo*) (Hillenkamp 2014).

The window of possibility for transformative social change was opened in Bolivia through vast collective actions in the beginning of the 2000s. In widespread social mobilisations between 2000–2005, the Bolivian people organised collectively in the Water War and the Gas War to regain social control over natural resources. Mass mobilisations took place on city streets, local public assemblies, and blocked highways; they expressed aspirations to create initiatives of direct democracy and self-governance and opened a possibility to end the neoliberal politics in the country. During the uprisings, a party called Movement towards socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS) gained a political momentum for the country's elections. (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2014.) These events and other movements led by indigenous groups in Bolivia enabled the rise of Evo Morales to power and to become the world's first indigenous president in 2006.

After MAS had gained the political power in the country, CIOEC and RENACC, stepped up as political actors with an agenda of solidarity economy. In 2007, they reinforced their cooperation by creating a new platform for the promotion of solidarity economy and Fair Trade. The Platform later became MESyCJB. The political character of solidarity economy initiatives in Bolivia has been formed mostly through these three umbrella organisations. (Hillenkamp 2014.) When Morales' government started a process for renewing the country's constitution, both the Platform and CIOEC put forward their ideas to the Constituent Assembly that was working on the new constitution (Wanderley et al. 2015). The proposals of these organisations concerned a national certification system for fair trade, channels for solidarity finance, the creation of a governmental institution for solidarity economy and fair trade and the legal recognition of collective property and ethical principles of operation in the field of solidarity economy (Hillenkamp 2014).

The programme of MAS was vocally anti-neoliberal from the beginning (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2014: 91) and its official policy is now advancing a plural economy along the lines of the indigenous idea of *vivir bien* (originally *Sumak Kawsay* and *Suma Qamaña* in indigenous languages) and divided into four different sectors: state, private, cooperative and communitarian sector. The constitution supports the ethical and value basis of the solidarity economy and mentions its core ideas such as reciprocity, redistribution, another route of development, harmony with the nature. The government has also created frameworks for advancing a plural economy that could give more space also for community-focused economic practices. Although the solidarity economy actors have been able to make themselves heard, this has mostly been due to specific favourable circumstances. For example, a prominent leader of the movement, Antonia Rodríguez, was asked to join the executive branch as a minister of economic development and plural economy and held the post in 2010–2011. During her time in the ministry, a resolution about a national strategy on solidarity economy and fair trade was issued but as soon as she left the ministry, the resolution and the strategy have been forgotten. (Wanderley et al. 2015.)

Eventually, it has become clear that the MAS regime is not radically different from the previous ones. The politics of plural economy have been more invested in state-led economy and left aside the initiatives furthering grassroots organisation and democratising the lives of Bolivians (ibid.). For example, the government has a tendency to privilege businesses and to support the extractivist industry and the regime based on extractivism over actions that would advance the rights of marginalised indigenous groups (Radhuber 2015: 92). This has sometimes been done at the expense of locally organised initiatives and small producers have felt they have been forgotten (Wanderley et al. 2015).

Macroeconomic politics and the strategic sectors are still immune to the principles of the plural economy. As a result, there is a big difference in the management of economic policy and the normative frameworks. State, private, and cooperative sectors of the economy still function within the parameters of a capitalistic economy and the fourth, communal sector of the plural economy, is seen as a tool for mercantilisation of land and for capitalistic rural development project. (Ibid.) The bureaucratic practices have been a barrier for transition to more democratic governing and the *vivir bien* politics have not been much implemented. In fact, Ranta found that it has been in the interest of many state officials to continue functioning on the basis of neoliberal practices. (Ranta 2014.) According to Wanderley and others, apart from reducing poverty and social exclusion, the MAS government has not taken steps to make real structural changes to support their goal to move to a more sustainable and plural economy that would support some kind of alternative development model (Wanderley et al. 2015).

Meanwhile, the initiatives promoting community and solidarity economy have become more fragmented and more dependent on the government. The fragmentation of the movement has happened because of the heterogeneity among the involved economic organisations; they are very different in their legal forms and type of activity. There are also differences between rural

and urban zones and different regions in the country. (Ibid.: 106.) The fragmentation has decreased their potential for political impact. Hillenkamp (2014: 316) states that the potential for solidarity economy will only be realised if the umbrella organisations can step up their advocacy work to promote solidarity economy as a legitimate actor for public policy building.

The hope that was cherished after Morales rose to power is long gone and Morales is running for president again in 2019 after abolishing the constitutional term limits for the presidency (see BBC 2017). The political agenda of solidarity economy actors is fragmented and the relationship with the government is weak. The connection with the government works through direct and personal relationships and not through the construction of public spaces, which limits democratic legitimacy and political impact. (Hillenkamp and Wanderley 2015: 10.) The movement has suffered from disputes over terminology, such as the differences between the concepts of community economy and solidarity economy. This has affected the process of building a project based on common interests to strengthen another economy. (Wanderley et al. 2015: 106.)

Despite the fragmentation of solidarity economy actors, on the ground level people are still mobilising. There have been some attempts to build transformative political networks of activists and academics (Ferrel 2017), indigenous groups have mobilised to resist megadam projects that would harm the environment (Achtenberg 2017), and the feminist *Ni una menos* (“Not one (woman) less”) movement has also gotten a good response in order to create awareness of the patriarchal society and its severe consequences through the high number of feminicides. In addition, the grassroots economic activities have not ceased to exist even though the mobilisation of the movement is suffering from a low season.

In Cochabamba where my fieldwork has taken place, only CIOEC has a presence and partakes in the discussions about solidarity economy. On the other hand, Cochabamba’s grassroots actors are not in contact with RENACC and MESyCJB, which reflects the difficulties the networks have in spreading their membership to all the nine regions of Bolivia.

In the following chapter, I introduce the group that is the focus of this paper and is an example of a solidarity economy group consisting of subsistence and small-scale producers that have similar interests in environment, agroecology, and healthy food.

#### **4. Ecoferia’s political dimensions and practice**

Ecoferia is a marketplace for small-scale and subsistence producers. The market was started in the early 2000s when there was a need for a space for ecological products and creating this type of space at one of the bigger local markets failed. In this weekly fair, the selection varies from organic vegetables, processed food products, and cereals, to handicraft, beauty products, baked goods, and stands serving lunch. The participants in the market are organised in many ways: some are small registered businesses or associations, others have a family enterprise, but many have not registered their activity in any way. In autumn 2016, the fair had 22 members. In addition, there was a varying number of postulants willing to become members and irregular and seasonal participants; weekly there are 20–30 vendors present.

The market takes place in a park in the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia, once a week on Wednesdays. The market is open from morning until lunch time when many people visit the market to grab lunch from the stands and buy other things at the same time. Over the years, Ecoferia has had several challenges related to the physical spaces where it has operated. They have had to change location several times and finding a new place always includes negotiations with local authorities. In 2010, they were finally settled in the current location, but their contract has to be renewed every three years.

The economic importance of the market to the participants varies. Some gain a significant portion of their income at the weekly market, and others rather benefit more from the

opportunities arising from the visibility that participation in Ecoferia offers them. Many of the participants are motivated to participate at Ecoferia because of its special characteristics: apart from being a market space it also offers a social environment where to socialise and forward environmental awareness.

In this chapter, I analyse different aspects of Ecoferia's activities from the perspective of politicisation in community and solidarity economy.

#### 4.1 Democracy and self-management

Democratic and autonomous management is a central element for solidarity economy (Alhojärvi et al. 2015, Miller 2013) and Ecoferia's story has also developed towards a greater independence throughout the years. Ecoferia started as part of the activities of a foundation called Agrecol Andes that works on agroecology. Since 2012 Ecoferia has been a self-standing entity as an association and has developed its self-management practices for the past years. Ecoferia has not abandoned the cooperation with Agrecol Andes; they continue working together on matters of a participatory certification of ecological products and some other occasional projects. The autonomous position of Ecoferia has given it more possibilities to develop its independent stances regardless of their previous sponsor and founder.

Ecoferia has established its own community of members and other vendors among which to practise the ethical negotiation described in Gibson-Graham's (2008, 2006) community economy. Since becoming an association Ecoferia has had its own outline of what it is and what it wants to be, what kind of products they can include, and what is expected of the members. The community gathers in the same place once a week on the market day and the vendors discuss timely matters during the last market day of most months. Apart from that, the board runs weekly issues and there are annual general meetings once or twice a year and they follow the idea of rotation for board positions. Between the meetings, the board members inform and consult with the members if there are issues to solve.

They have also established visible elements for a common Ecoferia identity with uniform tablecloths and aprons and vests that some wear. In terms of organisation they also intend to maintain a common identity; they participate to other market events as a united Ecoferia block although they offer very different types of products. Keeping together helps them to promote their similarity with a similar background ideology that one Ecoferia participant here describes:

*Interviewee: And the idea of starting the association was also because the idea of being Ecoferia was not only intended to be a place where you sell your products, but it is a space where people converge, people who want to offer healthy products, but also people who want to be included, participate as a consumer. It is like another concept.<sup>1</sup>*

Ecoferia participants pay a weekly fee for the participation at the market. The fees are a type of surplus and a common resource of the group and the negotiation over its use is an example of the negotiation processes of community economy. These fees feed into a common fund that is mainly used for the administrative costs of the organic certification system (Participatory Guarantee System, see 4.5) Ecoferia uses. Another surplus negotiation happens after each weekly market when the producers barter<sup>2</sup> over their leftover fresh produce. Many of the producers regularly exchange products with some of their fellow vendors at Ecoferia, so these relationships are based on negotiations that might have happened a while ago.

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<sup>1</sup> The translations of the quotes in this paper from Spanish to English are my own.

<sup>2</sup> The bartering practice in Latin America is called *trueque*.

The fees of Ecoferia have also a connection to negotiations over production. The collected fees have helped Ecoferia to open a rotational fund for its members who use the money for improving their production. Thus, it is an important discussion when the members negotiate whose turn it is to benefit from the fund. The fund has also supported members that have been sick and sometimes other members have also offered solidarity gifts to the ones who have not been able to attend the market for a while. These acts reflect the willingness to negotiate within the community as they have several practices that involve decision-making about common issues. The solidarity to missing members also demonstrates that there is a recognised value of taking care of each other's' wellbeing, which is central for the self-management idea of solidarity economy (Núcleo de gestão 2007, Singer 2007).

#### 4.2 Agroecology, environment, and health

Since the founding of Ecoferia, agroecology has been the main underlying idea for the functioning of Ecoferia. Solidarity economy has been acknowledged in their activities more recently. Agroecology is a scientific research approach, a set of principles and practices, and a socio-political movement (Silici 2014) that shares goals with solidarity economy concerning, for example, food sovereignty, cooperation, gender equality, and respect for local knowledge. Agroecology seeks to provide viable alternatives to industrialised agriculture through cherishing local knowledges, paying attention to ecological aspects, respect of nature, and providing a sustainable perspective of development (Tapia 2002: 23–24).

In addition to agroecology, Ecoferia has started to use the term social and solidarity economy in recent years to describe their activities and to allow more vendors to join the market. The fair started with selling food products in the beginning of the 2000s but has since then expanded the selection. After the expansion in terminology and in the number of vendors, artisans selling handicraft and food vendors, that sell native dishes, have joined the market.

Agroecology and solidarity economy can both be interpreted as language of community economy that expands our understanding outside the capitalocentric economy. They foster activities that see value in economic diversity, sustainable practices, local knowledge, and culturally relevant ideas and products and this is also cherished at Ecoferia. The creation and perseverance of such a space for over 15 years is already transforming the image people have of production, food, and economy in a context where ecological produce has not been well known. Ecoferia can, thus, be seen as an example of engaging with a language that Gibson-Graham (2006) highlights as a central element for building practices of community economy and post-capitalist politics.

The market's main political claims relate to environmental issues through agroecology. Many people at Ecoferia are deeply impacted by climate change and environmental issues are important to many participants. Bolivia suffers from rising temperatures, retreating Andean glaciers, and the resulting water scarcity (Buxton et al. 2013). The cultivation of vegetables is highly dependent on the climate; weather and rain, dry seasons, and cold weather have a significant impact in the production.

*Interviewee: [W]ith respect to agricultural production, we are mainly suffering a little with the water. We are not able to produce because, of course, it has not rained, and we cannot sow.*

Ecoferia's rules consider protection of nature, environment and natural resources and the respect of all living beings as part of their mission. They advocate an organic and agroecological approach to food production, and their regulations state they are committed to ecological agriculture, taking care of the environment and protection of natural resources as well as offering products free of toxic chemicals and GMOs. Contamination of the environment is a driving force for Ecoferia participants because they want to contribute to recycling and

improving people's attitude to taking care of the environment. My data shows that Ecoferia participants consider environmental goals important to their activities. These goals include taking care of water, land, and the planet, finding alternatives for the use of agrochemicals, not contaminating, making people recycle, eating healthy, and producing healthy food.

Ecoferia participants are especially motivated by the health benefits for themselves and the consumers and there are wishes to make also other people part of what they are doing. Health is one of the most often discussed aspects that the vendors and producers at Ecoferia regard important alongside and as a part of agroecology. Health of the ecosystem is the core objective of agroecology and practices to ensure health include avoiding agrochemicals and other substances or practices impacting the health of humans or the environment (Silici 2014).

In practice, Ecoferia forwards its environmental goals through offering a selection of ecological and environmentally friendly products and raising awareness. Ecoferia, for example, supports agroecology, incentives encouraging recycling and reduction of waste. Ecoferia has also participated in campaigns against contamination of the River Rocha that goes through the city of Cochabamba and suffers from severe contamination. Ecoferia also fosters the idea of biodiversity and the diversity of crops and seeds and there are initiatives to widen the selection of native crops in order to create resilience against climate change and combat the growing threat to biodiversity posed by GMO products.

Ecoferia has acknowledged the impact humans have on their surroundings and vice versa and Ecoferia has started to carry a responsibility over the surrounding biophysical commons and people's health. As the Ecoferia producers are spread in different places around the city of Cochabamba, they are not creating a daily practice for commoning for shared resources, but instead they are part of the wider community and a movement that wants to protect the global environmental commons of climate, air, water, and health, like in the Australian case of creating assemblages to protect the air (see Gibson-Graham et al. 2006).

#### 4.3 Consumption and knowledge-sharing

Aiming at changes in people's unsustainable consumption patterns is important for transforming the economy, and sustainable consumption is also one of the key aspects of community economy. One of Ecoferia's central goals is to change the way people consume. In order to do so, Ecoferia raises awareness about environmental issues and health aspects of food. The direct interaction between producers and customers at the market enables a knowledge flow about basic environmental issues regarding food, diet, and production. Consequently, Ecoferia has been able to change consumption patterns and food relations of their customers. Ecoferia makes food their politics. Consumption of healthy food defines Ecoferia's political stance as one of the senior members of Ecoferia defines it:

*Interviewee: The political position, what I always say, is what you eat. This already is politics, I think. The critique of Ecoferia must be an agroecological politics. This, healthy alimentation, that is, [means] you cannot support a product of Nestlé or a fumigated tomato. [--] The five dimensions of the Participatory Guarantee System are the politics. Ecology, economy, social, cultural and environmental. These are the five fundamental aspects; these already are a politics that we must cultivate daily.*

Ecoferia implements a few campaigns a year to raise awareness of important issues to them. The global concern over the plastic pollution in the ocean shows at Ecoferia as well. They have been acting to reduce the amount of plastic waste by not offering plastic bags for customers and encouraging them to bring their own bags and containers for their purchases. The plastic reduction campaign has had results and many customers come to Ecoferia with their own bags nowadays. Some other campaigns have been spreading awareness about about pesticides, seed diversity, the international year of vegetables, water, corn, and resisting

GMO products. They, for example, organised an informative Ecoferia about the pesticides used in the cultivation of strawberry, tomato, and *locoto* pepper. The result was that many customers became more willing to buy organic tomatoes. Ecoferia has also invited nearby schools to visit the market and some teachers have accepted the invitation and have visited with their pupils to get to know organic farming and products.

In general, the awareness about environmental issues seems to be on the rise in Bolivia but still many people lack information about issues relating to health and environment. Many members are motivated to intensify the awareness-raising efforts to create more consciousness about recycling, reducing plastic waste, organic productions, and healthy diet and they hope the government also takes steps towards supporting ecological food. Ecoferia is sometimes in the media through newspaper articles or radio programmes but the members want more exposure for organic food, healthy nutrition, and protecting the environment.

The awareness-raising efforts would not be possible without the solid knowledge base of the Ecoferia participants. They come from very different backgrounds and the knowledge pool within the group is vast: there is knowledge about different native Andean varieties and crossover of potatoes, natural pesticides, health and environmental issues related to different products, agroecology, natural medicine, and multiple different languages (at least Spanish, Quechua, Aymara, French, Italian, Dutch, and English). Some of the participants have university degrees in fields related to food production, engineering or environment and some are self-taught or follow in the steps of their parents and ancestors in growing and producing food. Heterogeneity of the membership is a strength and benefits learning processes of the members.

*Interviewer: And what do you think are the strengths of Ecoferia and the association?*

*Interviewee: Let's see. [-] This is one, there are people who, in the organic production part, for example, there is knowledge that is shared, for example, a lady was explained how to make her tomato not to get sick, things like that, I think there is a space where some knowledge converges. It can be shared.*

Ecoferia acts as a learning environment for peer-learning and, in the words of a long-term Ecoferia member, it could also be described as a pedagogical space. People have found new vegetables and varieties to eat and to cultivate and learned from each other about intellectual and practical things. Ecoferia participants are open and willing to share of their own knowledge and knowhow. This is an issue that has much potential if it was encouraged more.

Ecoferia's participants' shared knowledge is an essential commons for them because it ties them closer together as a community when people share their know-how to help others in their production and it also enables the continuity of the market space when newcomers are able to benefit from the knowledge of members that have been producing for long time already. According to my understanding, even though the knowledge of the participants is acknowledged as an important factor for their activities, the knowledge commons is not consciously managed at Ecoferia. Previously, they used to organise workshops among themselves where producers shared information, for example, about natural pesticides. This could be a practice to revive in order to have an ongoing community process of knowledge-sharing.

#### 4.4 Gender equality

Gender equality is recognised as one of the main principles of Ecoferia: they aim at eliminating inequalities between men and women to ensure their equal participation. Women have a good chance to participate in the Ecoferia and, in fact, most of the participants are women. Among

the participants there are also some all-female groups that advocate women's economic empowerment and combatting gender-based violence.

Most of the women at Ecoferia have children. Some women at the Ecoferia are economically independent and university educated. These women have been able to start their own businesses that they now promote at Ecoferia. Other women are in more precarious positions: they are single mothers or dependent on their husbands or relatives. Ecoferia has had a positive economic impact for them as income-generation through selling products of small plots and gardens and cooking native dishes improves the incomes of these women. Ecoferia offers women from different backgrounds a possibility of working at home and selling products outside of home and gaining an income. Some of the women's enterprises have been able to also grow since they have joined Ecoferia.

*Interviewee: [O]ur enterprise was small, I mean, I think that thanks to Ecoferia I have accomplished to adjust the enterprise and also it has helped me a lot in personal growth. Also, to the growth of the enterprise because first, I didn't have many machines, only a small oven that my grandmother had given me. Now I have a semi-industrial oven, a kneader, I have the dough laminator. [--] So, that has helped my company grow and I can also dedicate myself to my study, to my family, because I always work at home, my workshop is at home and I am always there at home.*

In the decision-making, the women are also represented, and women make up more than half of the board. Women also take actively part in the discussions in the monthly meetings although some are shyer to participate and some of the women have difficulties in the discussions had in Spanish, because their mother tongue is the indigenous language of Quechua. In addition, the two chairpersons have been men, and in relation to women's numbers at the fair, women are still underrepresented.

Social and psychological empowerment is a one outcome for many of the women who have participated at Ecoferia. Many Ecoferia participants, but especially women, emphasise the importance of the social dimension of their activities at the market; they come there to relax and enjoy each other's company. Their experience at Ecoferia has made them see their own potential and helped them gain more self-confidence.

*Interviewee: So, of course when I started to go out of the house, there was certain resistance in my own house, right? Because they were used to having me the whole day, for every moment, for all their needs instantly. And I started to go out more and they didn't like it, but it boosts me. I can share with other people what I do, what I have and it's a very gratifying satisfaction to see that other people like what I do, and other people come searching for it and it is productive. I feel productive.*

At Ecoferia, there is an understanding of the necessity of supporting especially women's possibilities for income-generation and some economic empowerment among the women is visible. Women have also had the chance to access credit for improving their production from the rotational funds of Ecoferia. Some members have received training in gender issues. Ecoferia creates an opportunity for people to gain an income even from subsistence production and other production not oriented to a mainstream, capitalist market. They, thus, acknowledge the possibility of an economy that is not based on large-scale market-oriented production. The identities of the women have a chance to reform in a permanent space for another type of economy. However, there is no holistic gender perspective at Ecoferia and more awareness raising on the topic would be much needed for all the participants and in order to reflect more on different issues of inequality.

#### 4.5 Participatory certification

Ecoferia uses a peer monitoring system to monitor and certify ecological products. The Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is an important part of the political dimension of Ecoferia's activities. The guarantee system is used to control the status of organic production and it is based on peer monitoring of the quality and diversity of production as well as paying attention to well-being and social aspects. Ecoferia was among the first actors in Bolivia to start using this type of a participatory guarantee system for organic products after the law 3525 about the control of ecological production was passed in 2007. Also, Ecoferia was one of the founding members of the Latin American forum for Participatory Guarantee Systems around 15 years ago.

The PGS is a tool that emphasises the aspects of participation, transparency, trust, horizontality, and learning. This kind of social control system is often a good option for small agroecological producers because it shares similar goals with agroecology and is inexpensive compared to certificates offered by outside evaluators. This certification model relies on a relationship of trust between producers and consumers and the producers' values are also reflected in the means of social control. (Sanchez 2017.)

Ecoferia members are receiving training within the PGS model. Agrecol Andes, that fostered Ecoferia's activities during its first years, now supports Ecoferia in implementing the PGS by offering them training and help with documentation and administration. When Ecoferia was starting to use the PGS, everyone was trained to understand the different aspects of the system. The PGS evaluators, that are chosen among Ecoferia participants and consumers, are trained for the task annually. The PGS can be seen as a pedagogical tool because it implies participation from many differentiating it from a system in which an outsider comes to visit the production to undertake an evaluation. This is one of the reasons why Ecoferia wanted to start using the PGS: it is inclusive.

*Interviewee: The PGS is our certification, our ecological certification. It is constituted of, participatory system means that it is formed by the producer, the evaluator, [--] consumer, evaluator committee [--] that is, it is a transparent system where they visit the production unit and, that is, I can go after the evaluation, the place is open so that if I as a consumer have the doubt of something and the person who has gotten his certificate, has his certificate there and [-] it is like the door is open to the production unit, so that I can go and determine and verify if it is true that it is produced like this.*

The PGS certificates are often openly visible at the market on the certified vendor's stand. This improves transparency and shows the customers the type of certification system behind Ecoferia's producers. It is also possible for consumers to visit the farms themselves as the PGS encourages openness in many ways.

In conclusion, the PGS is intended to be a tool for democratising the certification practice; it offers a possibility for participation for both the producers and consumers making them both part of the process of validating the origins and sustainable and ecological cultivation methods used in the production. This sort of a tool enables community negotiation even outside the producer-community and is based on relationships of mutual trust and ethical negotiation about the production processes.

#### 4.6 Movement and networks

According to Carneiro (2011), it is typical for solidarity economy actors to be active in more than just economic issues through different movements, organisations and other actors. Ecoferia and its members are not institutionally attached to any of the main umbrella

organisations of solidarity economy in Bolivia. However, Ecoferia has networks with other local, national, and regional actors and organisations.

In Cochabamba, Ecoferia has established connections with local actors. Their long-term supporter, Agrecol Andes, is still strongly connected with Ecoferia and they regularly work on common projects through which Agrecol's administratively experienced staff have been directing funds to Ecoferia to raise awareness on issues like the contamination of Rio Rocha in Cochabamba. Through Agrecol Andes, Ecoferia has also participated in projects in which Agrecol has worked together with CIOEC, one of the bigger Bolivian solidarity economy organisations.

Ecoferia members also attend other events that relate to their interests. In 2017, they visited an event resisting a transnational GMO company Monsanto and, in the event, they established a contact to a seed bank organised by a group called *Llajta Cultiva*. The seed bank now participates at Ecoferia on a monthly basis. Another collaboration partner of Ecoferia is the local public university, Universidad Mayor de San Simón. Ecoferia participants are often invited to speak at university events and there have also been workshops and similar events at the university where Ecoferia members have taken part as participants and have been able to get to know more people working on similar issues. Some university courses have also cooperated with Ecoferia making analysis of Ecoferia's activities or producing materials about Ecoferia.

There are also many potential solidarity and community economy actors with whom Ecoferia members recognise they could collaborate. These include unofficial groups that are loosely organised: a group that advocates improved bicycle access and routes in the highly contaminated city, a barter fair that strives to maintain the tradition for bartering (*trueque*), and a movement resisting the reduction of the number of trees in the city.

On a continental level, Ecoferia representatives participate in two Latin American networks that focus on agroecology and on the participatory certification systems of organic products. The Agroecological Movement of Latin America and the Caribbean (MAELA) has objectives that include food sovereignty, gender equality, access to land, and strengthening both local markets and solidarity economy principles. MAELA has offered training members of Ecoferia focusing, for example, on capacity for political advocacy and talking about themes, such as, solidarity economy, indigenous peoples, gender and feminism, communications, seed diversity and agroecology. Ecoferia is also central actor at the Latin American forum for Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS). Ecoferia participates in the international meetings and trainings of MAELA and the PGS forum in different countries. The benefits of these collaborations include exchange of information, peer learning, learning from other's examples and experiences with policymaking.

*Interviewee: We have been invited to some conferences like the MAELA. And you have the opportunity to exchange experiences with people not only from your region, but from everywhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, in the way of the visualization they have of your country and all that. We have made many contacts in social networks with them and I also have several acquaintances through this with whom I interact. And I have this problem, help me and, or I want some advice with people who have already a long road behind them.*

Ecoferia has networks especially in the area of agroecology. These networks, grassroots organisations, institutions, NGOs, and social movements of Ecoferia constitute some parts of their own assemblage that Gibson-Graham and others (2006) talk about but they are even a better example of the political networks that solidarity economy is attempting to build. Through the recognition of new potential groups for cooperation, Ecoferia seems to be aware of other actors that share similar goals with them; apart from the environment they appreciate also

health, well-being, and cultural values and they want to revive traditional non-monetary transactions and recognise possibilities of non-capitalist economy.

## 5. Conclusions

I have approached Ecoferia with the idea of Gibson-Graham's (2006) weak theory of diverse economies to shed light on non-capitalist economic activities. This analysis about Ecoferia has covered dimensions of ecology, democracy, health, and gender whereas broader analysis of the dimensions of culture, indigenusness, and others have been left out. A capitalocentric reading might have led to a conclusion that Ecoferia is not significant, politically important, or that it should not be considered seriously as a small initiative of up to 30 producers. The alternative reading of diverse economy, however, shows us that Ecoferia has potential in many aspects and it illustrates a diverse set of grassroots political activities.

In Ecoferia's case, social solidarity economy acts as a complementary attribute to agroecology. In the previous chapter I have demonstrated that, apart from being an economic actor, it also forwards environmental, health, and gender equality goals. Ecoferia implements a language politics of diverse economy through the ideas of agroecology and solidarity economy that are advanced both in daily practice and in networks. Solidarity economy has a special focus on fostering activities that take care of the needs of people and the environment and spark change in different spaces including the market and home. Additionally, the language of agroecology offers an alternative to the mainstream economic thinking because agroecology holds ecology, food sovereignty, and local knowledge as its central ideas. Ecoferia is also networked with other actors and collaborates with them to advance some of these objectives. By creating awareness of the existence of ecological products and by giving them a name through ecological and agroecological labelling, Ecoferia is acting to diversify the language and understanding of markets and economy, and this can create new possibilities for other actors with similar objectives to thrive.

Ecoferia is an example of the possibility of creativity and co-construction at the local level. Their activities started during a time when there were no other collective spaces available for selling ecological products. Creating such a space and maintaining it for more than 15 years can be considered a political act as such. The existence of such a market was not ordinary when it started, but nowadays ecological products are already more easily available. Ecoferia has been an important actor in facilitating access to local ethical production in Cochabamba and this has been a process to politically reconstruct consumption and production in people's minds. The expansion from agroecology to solidarity economy also opened Ecoferia's doors to food stands that support the preservation of native crops, dishes, and cuisine that are both environmentally and culturally important accomplishments. The variety among Ecoferia participants, in their backgrounds, and organisation forms of their economic activity is an example of the plurality characteristic for solidarity economy and is an importance of the ability to cooperate their common existence together.

Democratic practice at Ecoferia takes place at monthly meetings and annual general assemblies. Ecoferia has established a status of an association after starting the activities under the wings of an NGO and it has been developing self-managing practices along the way. The Participatory Guarantee System acts as a democratising practice at Ecoferia because it is essentially intending to be inclusive and pedagogical. The inclusive element of the PGS aims at building trust between producers and customers which can help broaden and strengthen the Ecoferia community even further in the future by the organising of consumers alongside the organic producers. This could also reinforce the democratic ideas of community negotiation if producers and consumers could support each other through these negotiations that Gibson-Graham (2006) identify as a central element for community economy.

Gibson-Graham's (2008) interpretation shows that diverse economic practices are backed with diverse motivations. Similarly, Ecoferia producers and vendors have environmental objectives that create a common space where their activities serve various goals and not only seek income creation. Ecoferia participants are creating practices of commoning for air, environment, and water when they aim at reducing contamination and waste, foster environmentally friendly practices, campaign about environmental issues, and participate in water conservation. Commoning is also present in the everyday practices of learning and sharing between the producers and consumers.

Miller (2004) describes solidarity economy as an evolving process and also Ecoferia finds itself evolving constantly. They have an ongoing process of implementing their politics through their everyday work with producing, selling, and communicating about their products. Recently, Ecoferia actors expressed a will to further strengthen, through self-reflection and mutual planning, the political dimensions of their activities. One way to strengthen their organised political dimension could be to better exploit the networks and resources of actors, such as MAELA, reinforcing the connections with movements related to solidarity economy. These steps could be some among many in the ongoing learning process helping them navigate forward.

In conclusion, Ecoferia is a solidarity economy actor that advances political goals related to environmental issues, health, gender equality, and economy. The everyday practices at Ecoferia demonstrate that political activity can, for example, showcase itself through learning and sharing, enabling access to ecological and healthy food, and empowering women through economic activity. Ecoferia is maintaining itself as an economic activity but the market action has many more dimensions outside and related to the economic operation and is an example of solidarity economy's political potential. In Bolivia, the political conditions may not be favourable, but grassroots actors like Ecoferia are motivated to advance another economy and create an income for themselves despite the situation in the country.

Like Miller (2013) states, Gibson-Graham promotes a transformation through the extensive presence of ethical negotiation practices but her writing does not imply certain ways of organising for the community economy. However, solidarity economy implies more concrete organising in terms of networks, organisations and structures, organisations, agendas, also practical political lobbying that is guided by ethical principles. Some of the political implications of solidarity economy that have been examined in this paper are more subtle: changing of discourse, slow raising of awareness of healthy eating habits and consumption, solidarity activities between local community members and willingness to bring back bartering. These are some of the ways of practising post-capitalist politics of commoning, politics of language, ethical negotiation, and co-construction that Gibson-Graham suggests in her writings. These political dimensions and practices of solidarity economy can be interpreted as localised activities of global processes of democratisation. Solidarity economy practitioners similar to Ecoferia participants can, therefore, be part of the post-capitalist politics in their everyday activities.

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