

Civil economy as a path towards sustainability: An empirical investigation

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies face a myriad of challenges that require the modification of patterns, ways of living, being and producing. Although climate change is one of the most glaring problems, it cannot be understood merely by environmental aspects. Many of these challenges are interrelated and have their roots in a set of crystallized structures that are obsolete, namely the economic ones. Contemporary capitalism has been proving its limitations and contribution to less fair, harmonious and sustainable societies. Evidence of this is the policy efforts that many organizations, such as the European Commission, are making to promote environmental transitions, the circular economy, and green innovations. This article argues that the concept of civil economy may be complementary to this green policy agenda for reflecting on current social challenges and emphasize the importance of cultural, environmental, spiritual and economic resources operating together. It pays attention to gift-giving as a form of civil economy, defining a framework inspired by positive sociology. The article uses the case study of “Los Portales”, an intentional sustainable community located in Spain, with around 40 inhabitants and more than 40 years of existence. The study is of ethnographic character and based on in-depth interviews with experts on the economic governance of this community. The results show that the principles of the gift economy were crucial to the success and longevity of the community. They also suggest an agency-centred approach in which individuals should engage activities that promote personal happiness, collective happiness and prosperity.

1. Introduction

Contemporary societies have been increasingly confronted with the consequences of the climate crisis and environmental problems. Sustainable development emerges as a proposal that addresses some of these consequences, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an example of this (UN, 2015). They are also an example of the multiplicity and transversality of challenges that show how the United Nations (UN) recognizes current problems and indicates the urgent need for a change in the economic paradigm (Becchetti and Cermelli, 2018).

The hegemony of the neoliberal market economy paradigm has been criticized because a significant number of individuals in contemporary societies are beginning to realize that this system lacks effectiveness, mainly in its ability to respond to contemporary challenges. The dynamics of capitalist market economy induce social inequalities, and the forms of production and consumption translate into various environmental costs (Price et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, new ways of

thinking about the economy have begun to be debated. The “circular economy” (CE) emerges as an alternative to the dominant system and emphasizes the need for environmental protection and the reorientation of development towards more sustainable paths (Schroder et al., 2020). The European Commission has made the circular economy a flagship for achieving an economy that contributes to carbon neutrality and fairer and more inclusive societies (European Commission, 2021).

However, as with the idea of “sustainability” and “sustainable development”, circular economy has emerged as a new buzzword wrapped in certain semantic plasticity. This is common in academic concepts that are absorbed into political discourse. If on the one hand, the emergence of CE as a crucial tool for sustainable transition is a positive indicator of the path that societies have to follow. On the other hand, institutional absorption and the proliferation of research on CE lead to a decrease in its heuristic validity. Kirchherr et al. (2017) identified more than one hundred definitions of CE and concluded that there is excessive heterogeneity. The term has several limitations ranging

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from the focus on a technocentric perspective to the detriment of its actual contribution to current socio-ecological challenges to the implementation difficulties that occur at the levels of public policy, organizations and individual consumers (Corvellec et al., 2022).

The importance of rethinking economic models for the path of sustainability-oriented social change is undeniable. This article argues that this reflection has to go beyond product life cycles and focus more on the motivations that social agents have to be active inducers of such change. It starts from the idea of happiness, self-fulfilment, satisfaction and the “good life” to frame the civil economy as a complete proposal with greater capacities to respond to current social challenges. The basic premise is that happier people make happier societies and that economic practices are an essential dimension in this discussion. Theoretically, this premise frames the gift economy as a form of civil economy. These theoretical proposals converge on the idea of “good life” and mobilize ideas of reciprocity, human relations, community, trust and social value - all of which contribute to public happiness.

Empirically, this exploratory study uses the case study of the Los Portales Community – an Intentional Sustainable Community – with more than 40 years of existence which develops an economic system based on gift and common goods. Using six in-depth interviews with experts in the economic governance of the community, the paper examines their economic practices and individual perspectives on the most desirable trajectories for sustainable transitions, seeking to understand how gifting contributes to individual and collective happiness. Happiness achieved through these economic practices can contribute to the commons and prosperity and thus to sustainability-oriented social change.

2. Civil economy and the gift: Paths to the “good life” and social change

2.1. Sustainability and the emergence of civil economy

Achieving sustainable development is the central goal of contemporary societies. In this paper, sustainable development is understood from a multidimensional perspective that comprises five distinct but complementary directions, namely: environmental sustainability (subsistence of the carrying capacity of ecosystems), social sustainability (promotion of well-being, social inclusion), economic sustainability (efficient use of resources in general, characterized by the harmony of public and private investment flows), and political sustainability (promotion of active citizenship) (Sachs, 1993).

Although sustainable development is recognized as articulating the dimensions mentioned above, the main focus is on the economic dimension as structuring social change. This centrality is due to the emergence of visions that criticize the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism, namely concerning its sustainability and consequences. These criticisms are as old as the history of capitalism itself, as is clear from Marx’s writings. Increased consumption patterns and production of goods and services have led to continued (and excessive) exploitation of natural resources.

Muhammad Yunus emphasized the separation between the economic, the social and the environmental as one of the leading causes and consequences of the dominant economic model (Yunus, 2017). The 2006 Nobel Peace Prize-winning economist states that contemporary societies’ social, economic and environmental problems need a response that enhances the expansion of individuals’ capabilities by promoting their awareness and responsibility, fostering active citizenship at the community level (Yunus et al., 2021).

Neoliberal capitalism is not likely to be the “end of history” predicted by Fukuyama, but it contains within itself a double contradiction. For O’Connor and Madge (2001), more than a contradiction between capital and labour, there is a paradox between how the capitalist system induces the over-exploitation of natural resources and its dependence on them to continue legitimizing itself – to produce and extract surplus value.

Ribeiro (2017, p. 118) describes this contradiction by stating that: “capitalism reduces nature, treated as an aggregate set of things rather than a system, to a simple means for the production of commodities and services with mercantile value”.

Soil erosion, rising air and ocean temperatures, sea level rise, soil salinization, deforestation, pollution, extreme weather events, shortage of drinking water, loss of biodiversity, species extinction, and climate change are problems partly generated by capitalism, *i.e.* by the consumption and production patterns of contemporary societies. Faced with the reality of the ecological crisis and the disregard for the limits of the planet’s natural resources, pressure voices began to emerge seeking alternatives.

In this context, civil economy starts to gain prominence as a complementary proposal to think about the economy and in the face of the challenges mentioned. Civil economy is an economic approach whose main objective is to (re)bring the economy closer to its social dimension, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity, the common good, happiness and mutual benefit in economic activities (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007). According to the authors, the central idea of the civil economy is:

(...) that it sees human sociability and reciprocity as core elements of normal economic life. They are neither parallel to, nor prior to or subsequent to, normal economic life. Civil economy shows us that principles other than profit and instrumental exchange can find a place within the economic activity itself. (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007, p. 17).

The basic dimensions on which the concept is based are: reciprocity, public happiness, prosperity, the common good and the “good life”. In this reading, reciprocity is understood as a relationship between group members who share common interests that can be achieved through collective action (Gui and Sugden, 2005). This implies that each social agent is motivated to contribute to this collective action (Martino, 2018). Reciprocity has three main characteristics: 1) individual cooperation is not a necessary condition for other parties to cooperate – although the outcome depends on this cooperation; 2) there must be a bi-directionality of individual actions that contribute to the collective goal; and finally, 3) it is transitive in the sense that reciprocal activity does not need to be directed towards the individual who caused it, but can be directed towards third parties (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007).

Reciprocity is directly related to the idea of public happiness. Happiness is public because individual happiness depends on the happiness of others (Bruni, 2006). When we talk about happiness, we talk about the combination of individual fulfilment and shared well-being (Genovesi, 2005). Positive sociology addresses this idea of happiness by referring to the positive activities that social agents develop to organize their lives so that those lives are fulfilling, satisfying, and sometimes even fulfilling (Stebbins, 2009). Economic activities guided by the principles of civil economy can be considered “positive activities” precisely because they mobilize social agents to act. These agents are motivated by the hope of achieving a desired good (Stebbins, 2020) which is, in this case, shared by a set of individuals and achieved through collective action (Gui and Sugden, 2005).

These positive activities give individuals the feeling of a “good life” and “good living”. Personal fulfilment and human flourishing depend, essentially, on the reciprocal relationships that agents establish to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals (Becchetti and Cermelli, 2018). The feeling of the “good life” is synonymous with individual happiness and, according to Genovesi (2005), individual happiness is proportional to the ability to promote the happiness of others. So in the framework of the civil economy, reciprocity, happiness and “good life” are determinants for the functioning of the economic system (Bruni, 2006), to the detriment of the atomized views of capitalism and the idea of the invisible hand. The goal (individual and collective) is not to generate surplus value but rather prosperity and the common good (Pabst, 2018). Muhammad Yunus’s vision of a “three zeros world” - zero emissions, zero poverty and zero unemployment - consolidates this idea that the driving force of economic action should be redirected towards the possibility of individual action generating collective happiness rather than

profit (Yunus, 2017).

So, for the civil economy, the market can be understood as a space of reciprocal social relations, where individual actions are imbued with happiness and a shared purpose, motivated by collective happiness, prosperity and the common good. However, then, what are the differences between the civil economy and the dominant economy? First of all, the civil economy contradicts anthropological, corporate and welfare reductionisms by advocating that well-being should not be exclusively measured through the flow of goods and services but rather through the availability of spiritual, economic, relational, environmental and cultural goods that a community can enjoy in a given geographical area. (Becchetti and Cermelli, 2018). Furthermore, the civil economy is a proposal that advocates the integration of various actors in economic governance, namely civil society and micro-based social actors (*ibid.*, 2018). Sustainable intentional communities have been experimenting with distinctive ways of experiencing and organizing economic life, such as the gift economy. The following subsection examines this relationship.

2.2. Intentional sustainable communities and gift economy

Intentional Sustainable Communities, also called ecovillages, are models of community social organization that aim to develop daily practices aligned with the principles of sustainability in its multiple dimensions (Nogueira et al., 2019). These communities are founded with an ecological and often sociopolitical or spiritual intention and provide new ways of living to respond to contemporary ecological, economic and social crises (Kunze, 2012). In essence, they represent a set of citizens who intentionally group together around a collective goal - that of developing sustainable ways of living.

These communities develop sustainability practices in the environmental, social and economic dimensions – the latter being the most important for this article. The economic dimension of community life tends to be controversial. Although the cost of living in ISCs is significantly lower, “it takes financial resources to live anywhere on the planet, even if we can trade fish for deerskin. A community [of this kind] is no exception” (Litfin, 2014, p. 77).

Despite the challenges associated with the financial resources needed to satisfy individual needs, some dimensions distinguish the practices of these ISCs from those seen in contemporary, mainly western industrialized societies. These ISCs tend to integrate more regularly practices related to the consumption of products/services and the development of activities for the self-financing of the community, such as renting accommodation, selling products/services, and organizing courses and workshops, among others (Mulder et al., 2006).

In many cases, there is an equitable division of land (Nogueira et al., 2022), which means that all community members have equal access to land, but not necessarily to land ownership (Sherry, 2014). Litfin (2014), while characterizing these communities as laboratories for economic experiments, with a multiplicity of hybrid ownership models, combining formats that range from private property to communalism, also states that it is common for there to be a division between land owners and tenants.

Examples of the innovative experiences Litfin refers to are, for example, the development of a complementary currency to be used within the community. However, these types of experiments are still incipient and more common in bigger and older communities, such as Findhorn (with the *eko*), Earhaven (with the *leaps*) and Damanhur (with the *credito*). The least integrated practices by ISCs, in general, are precisely those that represent a rupture with more crystallized structures (Nogueira et al., 2022). The literature reports precisely the difficulty these ISCs present in radically diverging from the predominant forms of economic organization in surrounding societies (Penha-Lopes and Henfrey, 2019). The issue of currency and community financial institutions falls within this difficulty because these communities, in the course of their activities, face significant regulatory and institutional

barriers (Dias et al., 2017).

These communities have been analyzed as laboratories for experimenting with and testing fairer and more socially valuable economic solutions (Price et al., 2020) that comprise a considerable diversity - from the development of currencies to the culture of sharing (of income, goods and services and even infrastructure), to practices of the gift economy. This diversity comprises additional features to markets and non-monetary practices where human needs are met through relational exchanges (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). These relationships, which are both economic and social, are imbued with reciprocity and contribute to the development of social capital (Mulder et al., 2006), the sedimentation of a sense of community (Pickerill, 2016) and the enhancement of well-being and what can be understood as a sense of “good-life” among members of ISCs. In these contexts, motivations are neither individual nor monetary but social, environmental and collective.

This focus on sharing and reciprocity can be understood in the light of the gift economy. In this paper, it is argued that the gift economy can represent a form of civil economy. The gift economy emerges as a scientific concept through the disciplinary fields of anthropology and sociology and refers to the acts of “giving”, namely the obligation to give, receive and reciprocate (Mauss, 1925; Bourdieu, 1979; Putnam, 2000). A gift-based economy develops through exchanges. However, these exchanges are not necessarily monetary and may also be goods, labor and knowledge (Mauss, 1925). One of the main characteristics of the gift economy is that it differs from the simple nature of financial transactions and requires contextual and social skills (Thygesen, 2019).

In practice, within the context of the ISCs, the gift economy refers to a collective financial “commons” where each member contributes according to their possibilities and receives according to their needs (Esteves, 2017). Furthermore, it is also materialized through the set of goods, services and infrastructures that members share among themselves. This is based on a logic of reciprocity and individual action that becomes collective around a common goal - mutual benefit and collective happiness, as verified in the civil economy. In essence, it is a social practice with economic objectives that generate social value, or as Thygesen (2019, p. 500) states:

“Being a community that generates value is a value per se because it offers purpose (why are we together), identity (who are we) and prosperity (what do we create together). Social (and sustainable) ties, then, does not exist outside the economy. It is within economy. Gift economy is, in other ways than the money economy, able to grasp and generate the potential value between people, things and places.”

As already mentioned, one of the premises of this article is that the gift economy represents a form (or a path towards) a civil economy, which can emerge in micro-scale contexts, such as ISCs, and contribute directly to achieving social change based on sustainability. Fig. 1 shows the empirical-conceptual framework that schematizes these reflections.

This scheme makes it possible to understand how to analyze the gift, with a ISC as an empirical experiment, as a form of civil economy. Both “economies” are two sides of the same coin, or rather, the civil economy represents the umbrella that shelters the gift economy and other forms of social economy. Both, in this case, intersect in the idea of “good life” (*ben vivere*) and mobilize ideas of reciprocity, human relations, community, trust and social value – which contribute to public happiness. Stebbins’ ideas of positive sociology are mobilized to correlate the dimensions and to make the link between individual and collective happiness. The argument is that happier people make happier societies and that economic practices (civil and gifting) are common “positive activities” crucial to achieve prosperity and, therefore, sustainability-oriented social change.

3. Research design and method

This article aims to understand how civic economy practices can

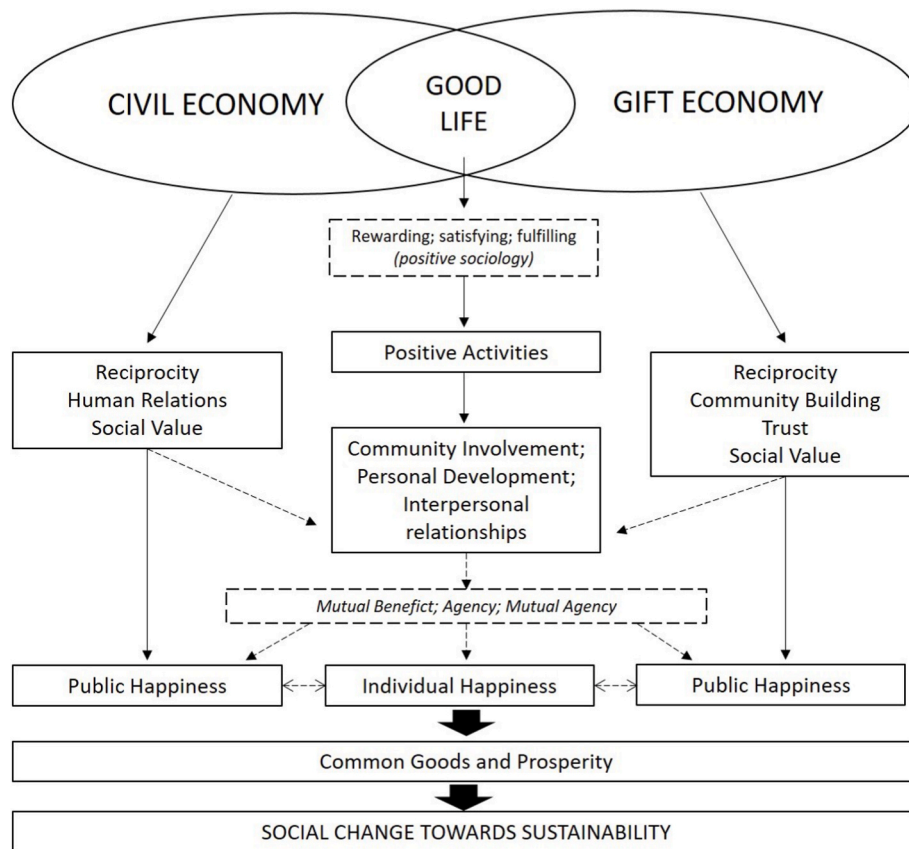


Fig. 1. Gift Economy, Civil Economy and Good Life: An empirical conceptual framework (Source: Own Elaboration).

foster the green policy agenda and sustainable transition. To this end, a set of research questions are raised: which principles of the civil economy can be found at the micro-scale?; can Intentional Sustainable Communities be a privileged *locus* for the emergence of civil economy practices?; and how can civil economy principles foster sustainability?

Since this article is based on a micro-approach Los Portales is used as a case study to analyze how the gift economy can be understood as a form of civil economy and as an important tool for the process of sustainability-oriented social change. A case is a phenomenon or event chosen, conceptualized and empirically analyzed to demonstrate a more comprehensive class of phenomena or events (Gerring, 2006). Using case studies for this research relates to the need to analyze the complexity associated with economic practices and their contribution to social change and sustainable transitions. This approach is justified by its ability to go beyond descriptive statistical measures to understand individual motivations (Della Porta, 2008) deeply. This means that it was sought to understand to give voice to the specificities of community life. Therefore, in this study, we use the interpretative case study approach by using theoretical referential to explain particular cases, leading to an evaluation of theories (Yin, 2014).

In essence, we face an ethnographic approach within a particular case study, or as Fusch et al. (2017) call it: a mini-ethnographic case study. To reduce possible biases that may emerge in this type of research, we used two triangulation techniques: data triangulation - which refers to data collection using different sources and theoretical triangulation - where different theories are used to understand a set of data (Denzin, 1989). More specifically, theoretical triangulation emerges from the combination of the assumptions of civil economy, gift economy and positive sociology. Furthermore, data triangulation refers to the combination of primary data (semi-structured interviews) and secondary data, such as analysis of the information contained in the community's website and other studies that worked on similar

dimensions to those analyzed in this article, although from other perspectives.

Secondary data reveals that Los Portales is a community with high levels of integration of economic and social sustainability practices (Nogueira et al., 2022). In addition, other studies have analyzed this community as an example of good practices at the level of economic, social and environmental strategies that contribute to social transformation (Moyano-Fernández et al., 2022) and as a community focused on personal development (Silvestri Lombardo, 2015). The combination of these three dimensions – social, economic and personal development – comes in direct line with the dimensions analyzed in the literature that are characteristic of the civil and gift economy: reciprocity, community involvement, common goods and collective happiness.

To understand the specificities of the gift economy as a social practice and grasp the importance of these dimensions for prosperity and social change, we use the semi-structured interview as a primary data collection technique. The primary purpose of a semi-structured interview is to allow the interviewer to understand how their interlocutors perceive specific dimensions of the research and flexibility in conducting the conversation (Kvale, 1996).

A total of six in-depth interviews were conducted with members who were experts in the economic governance of the community, which represents the particular participants who have the knowledge, skills, and expertise to answer the research questions (Abrams, 2010). Members were selected through direct contact with one of the founders, who identified all individuals who had in-depth knowledge of the community economy. All identified members were interviewed: three men and three women from Belgium, Germany and Spain. The average age is 56, with the oldest interviewee being 68 and the youngest 38. Half of the interviewees have lived in the community for 38 years, and the others for approximately 10 years. Academically, all interviewees have higher education qualifications. The interviews were conducted in April 2022

and had an average duration of 1 h and 17 min.

Due to the post-pandemic context and to avoid possible feelings of insecurity, given that these communities function as tiny bubbles, we conducted the interviews online through the zoom platform. Although there are some disadvantages to conducting online interviews (Bryman, 2012), it is considered that the quality and veracity of the results obtained were not compromised. There are also several advantages to using this model (ibid., 2012). First, it is a more economically accessible process. Another advantage is the greater ease in scheduling the interviews with fewer constraints on the participants' schedules. Due to the sensation of distance, the online context makes people feel more comfortable discussing specific issues. No recorder "on the table" also facilitates the process. When interviewees are online at home, they end up in an "anonymous, safe and non-threatening environment" (O'Connor and Madge, 2001, p. 11), which can be especially helpful.

Invitations for the interviews were made by email, allowing some prior conversations with interviewees to build mutual trust and a sense of commitment. The questions were not sent in advance, but we provided information about the dimensions and topics to be addressed during the interview. The lack of physical contact was partially compensated by the use of video and audio, which allowed researchers to check possible facial expressions that were important for conducting the interview. In short, after weighing the disadvantages and advantages, we tried to reproduce the "face-to-face" interview environment as far as possible, using a synchronous model and video.

After transcribing the interviews, we began the process of analyzing the information. The coding process was done using the NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QSR International Pty, Ltd., version 11.1, 2015). Content analysis was conducted in two ways: on the one hand, a directed analysis was performed based on categories suggested by the literature review (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), and, on the other hand, conventional analysis procedures based on open categories were followed. The identification of categories was made through coding processes. Coding is considered the starting point for qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2012) and a mechanism that allows thinking about the meaning of data and reducing their quantity (Namey et al., 2008). The categories that guided the analysis were inspired by the literature review and are identified in Table 1.

After the codification process an exploratory analysis was developed to understand to which dimensions of analysis interviewees attach more importance (Namey et al., 2008) and, consequently, to determine the trend of their views concerning representations about the topics addressed. This exploratory analysis consists in counting the codified references (through the interviewees' speeches) in each of the dimensions and categories under analysis, providing an idea of the prevalence of a given category in another (Namey et al., 2008). This process enables the creation of maps that ranks the categories under analysis, from the most to the least referenced.

The number of occurrences in a given category is, however, a limited quantitative indicator, mainly because it can be inflated by several

factors, the main one being the repetition of an idea by the same interviewee. Nevertheless, it is an additional analysis element that suggests the amplitude and relevance of a given theme for the interviewees (ibid., 2008). To check the prevalence of specific categories, we used the ratio of specific occurrences to total occurrences (by category or by subgroup) to compare different preferences in the analyzed dimensions (ibid., 2008). The interpretation of this accounting should be made with some reservations. It should not be understood as a precise quantitative indicator of any preference or behaviour but rather as an exploratory clue.

This research has no pretension to make generalizations or transferability. However, aspects that ensure the reliability and validity of qualitative research have been considered. To this end, an audit approach (Bryman, 2012) was adopted, which materialized in the complete and accessible recording of all stages of the research process - problem formulation, selection of research participants, notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions - on which the research team worked carefully.

4. Gift economy and common goods at Los Portales

4.1. Case description

Los Portales is an intentional community located in Andalusia, Spain, about 55 km from Seville. This ISC is located in a rural territory of about 200 ha and currently has 40 members living full-time. It is a private non-profit association aiming to be a place of development, constant evolution, and restructuring towards sustainable lifestyles. Its primary mission is to be flexible enough to respond to global and individual needs for change. In this sense, the *modus operandi* of the community lies in three main dimensions: environmental, social, and personal development.

Although the community was founded in 1984, the preparatory work for its formalization began in 1977 in Brussels. At that time, a group of citizens started to work on their personal development. Inspired by Jungian psychology they began to develop joint therapy sessions based on "dream analysis". The community's founder was a therapist of Jungian origin who had travelled and visited several tribes that worked with dreams and had been studied by anthropologists. The founder realized that these tribes tended to be more peaceful because this work with dreams had an emotionally regulating effect on the group. This work with dreams had not the purpose of creating a ISC but rather to build a circle of work for personal development.

The founders of this ISC believe that the collective sharing of individual dreams allows the identification of fears, worries and potentialities that manifest in the unconscious. Individuals perceive this sharing as a way of presenting themselves to the collective, which helps the other members better understand certain attitudes and behaviors - crucial for the community's wellbeing.

The foundation of the community arose then as a way to "test" the individual and collective work they were developing in Belgium. Sharing a physical space and living together attested the importance of the sedimentation of interpersonal relationships that had been created previously. In the search for the space where they would build the community, they found a plot of land in Spain and started the construction of the main building. One of the particularities of this ISC is that all spaces are shared, there are no individual houses, and all members live in the main building (Fig. 2), where the kitchen and collective leisure spaces are also located.

Los Portales appears as the materialization of an objective and a way to continue, more deeply, the work developed in Brussels. Initially, they assumed a closed community posture to focus on developing these objectives and begin the phase of infrastructure construction, ecosystem regeneration and land treatment. As the years progressed, they realized that the community was consolidated from a personal and collective point of view and that there was little risk in opening up the community

Table 1
Analytical categories.

Category	Code
Sustainable Practices of the Community	Social
	Economic
	Representations on sustainability
Personal Development	Trust
	Happiness
	Practices
Common Goods	Sharing goods, services and infrastructure
	Gift
Social Change	Reciprocity
	Economic
	Environmental
	Community
	Prosperity



Fig. 2. Los Portales Community (Source: Provided by the community).

to other members and visitors.

4.2. Gift economy and sustainable practices at Los Portales

Los Portales develops several sustainability practices in environmental, social and economic dimensions. Although the article focuses on the economic dimension, it is important to briefly describe which other practices are developed – mainly because the gift economy (as a form of civil economy) is interrelated with social value and is understood as a contribution to sustainability. After consolidating the collective and individual work, the community started to focus on developing activities in the other dimensions of sustainability. It is a well-established community that develops practices in organic agriculture, education, psychology, inclusive governance, art, alternative energies and an economy based on sharing.

On an ecological level, the community has an extensive production of vegetables, fruit, olive oil and cereals, achieving food self-sufficiency of about 75%. They have several animals and all the cereals needed to feed the animals are produced in the community. In addition to production, the community also focuses on processing products, something fundamental to their self-financing. They produce cheese and yoghurt, wine, honey and olive oil (made in an old stone press) and transform various plants into cosmetics and medicinal products. Most of the 200 ha remain in their natural state, intending to preserve the local ecosystem.

Los Portales also has many ongoing activities aimed at regenerating the land and landscape, such as a reforestation project and the creation of a water retention landscape. One of the distinctive characteristics of Los Portales is that it is entirely independent of public supply networks (off the grid), both for energy and water. They have solar panels, homemade wind turbines and a hydraulic turbine to meet their energy needs.

Los Portales is a community that privileges the social dimension. Besides the work with dreams as the primary tool and a deepening of spirituality, they use sociocracy for decision-making and conflict resolution. Sociocracy as a governance method implies that the community is organized in circles to manage the different areas, with each circle managing its area autonomously. There are several circles in the community: administration, visits, agriculture, finance, communication, landscape, environmental protection, housekeeping (management of cleaning, cooking, etc.), maintenance (buildings, technologies, etc.) and education. Finally, there is the general circle, with two representatives from each circle acting as coordinators or “double links”. These coordinators meet monthly to present progress and take decisions beyond

a certain circle’s scope (such as allocating budgets).

The sociocracy system is flexible enough to adapt to the reality and vision of the community and to changing needs. The decision-making process, for example, has some adaptations of the basic principles of sociocracy. In Los Portales, the decision-making process has to be by consensus and not by the majority. This means that all members must be involved in the process; if they disagree with a decision, they can object. When an objection is raised, there is a negotiation process to understand what the individual concerned needs to withdraw his or her objection until everyone agrees. This is an aspect that, according to the interviewees, distinguishes the community reality from democratic forms of social organization:

“Everyone must participate in decision-making. In sociocracy, someone can say: It’s not what I would have decided and I have an objection that I want us to work on, so that I can accept the collective decision. In democracy, the majority imposes its decision and the fight continues with the opposition” (interviewee 5).

On an economic level, Los Portales was founded on the principle of the gift economy. According to this principle, each member contributes according to their possibilities and gets from the group according to their needs within a collectively agreed framework. All property is shared and held by all members. This is a principle that has been maintained since the beginning of the foundation.

“From the beginning, we worked with the gift economy: each person put all the money they had in a common box, and each one took out what they needed, no matter how much they put in or if they did not put anything in because they did not have any, you know? However, if you needed some money you could go to the box and take it out. It forces us to get rid of our materialism and to trust in the collective intelligence, in the wisdom of the community “field”. (...) we are all equal” (interviewee 1)”

This direct citation reveals the importance of trust and community ties in the gift economy (Thygesen, 2019). This collective management of community finances and the idea of providing according to possibilities and using according to needs is only possible because of close ties of trust. These bonds give rise to deep convictions that these economic practices are contributing to the communal good and collective happiness (Genovesi, 2005).

Reciprocity in Los Portales does not necessarily take place through money and finance. Nevertheless, as identified in the literature, reciprocity implies some form of retribution, which may not be proportional (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007). The practices of reciprocity in this community are developed at various levels: from the exchange of services and knowledge to the sharing of private goods that become collective. Individuals unable to contribute financially to the community budget still feel comfortable using that money when needed. This happens because, in addition to the bonds of trust, an individual sense of reward and satisfaction emerges from a range of other activities they do for community well-being – contributing to personal fulfilment (Becchetti and Cermelli, 2018). This case study presents a reciprocity with bidirectional and transitive characteristics (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007).

In fact, the members of Los Portales consider that sociocracy and the gift economy complement each other because more than practices “this is a lifestyle that fulfils us and it doesn’t make sense for us to live any other way because that is how we are happy” (interviewee 6). These data reinforce the vision of the economy as a way to achieve happiness (individual and collective). In this reading, economic practices are a civic action in which each agent is simultaneously responsible for satisfying its needs and for the prosperity and survival of the common goods (Pabst, 2018). This accountability can be interpreted by what respondents identify as a “lifestyle” because it represents a long-term commitment to sustainability.

These economic principles are also applied at the moment when a member decides to leave the community. The members who intended to

leave, regardless of the amount they had introduced in the community common economy, received the equivalent of three minimum wages to structure their life outside the community. However, this being a community in constant evolution, this procedure was changed. The change is related to the age of the members who intend to leave the community. While young people of working age could organize themselves with this value until they found a job, members aged 60 or closer to retirement saw their difficulties increase.

The gift economy is more than a civil and collective action (Genovesi, 2005); it must be permeable and adaptable to changes in context (Bruni, 2006). This flexibility is crucial to meet its objectives of meeting social needs and contributing to collective goals – which are also constantly changing in today’s world. The common variable and which was verified in Los Portales is the search for happiness and the “good life” (Bruni, 2006) or as interviewee 2 states: *“everything we do here has a greater purpose than the self or the other, it focuses on the we, the community and the environment. And as long as our life is good it is a sign that what we are doing is on the right track, no matter how much society does otherwise”*.

The dynamics of sustainability analyzed here distinguish the lifestyle of this community from mainstream contemporary societies. These sustainability practices can be understood as “positive activities” that format the “good life” felt by community members and, consequently, individual and collective happiness. So for this community the economic dynamic is a path to the social change they want to see in the world.

4.3. Perspectives on social change for sustainability

These sustainability practices are, both cause and consequence, of how Los Portales members perceive sustainability and the social changes necessary for sustainable transitions. The idea of sustainability and its semantic plasticity can give rise to different understandings of sustainability. The interviewees were asked to reflect on the role that ISCs could play in the process of sustainability-oriented social change.

As mentioned in the methodology section, an exploratory analysis was performed to understand the dimensions of analysis interviewees tend to emphasize in their speeches (Namey et al., 2008). The hierarchical map below (Fig. 3) is based on the ratio of coded references to create areas that are proportional to the total number of occurrences in each category (via NVivo software). Fig. 3 allows us to understand that from all the information mentioned by respondents within the

dimension “representations about sustainability”: about 27% of the total of these references were coded as “negative views” and “alternative discourses”, 20% were classified as “minimalist living” and 13,3% are associated with “basic needs” and “ecosystem capacity”.

Some perceptions relate sustainability to sustainable development and describe it as a way of maintaining the capacity of ecosystems, in a logic of durability and ensuring that future generations can continue to meet their needs (CCMAD, 1991). This is a more formal view and is aligned with conventional definitions of sustainable development.

The representations categorized as “negative views” associate the idea of sustainability with the possibility of sustaining and maintaining a system that is crystallized and inflexible to social change. Examples are the private property system, the capitalist economy, production and consumption patterns, carbon emissions and even the democratic system itself. The interviewees consider that using sustainability as a goal or sustainable development as a possible paradigm is counterproductive as it does not contribute to changing the trajectory of these regimes and therefore does not favor social change. In this case, the emphasis of sustainability is placed on survival and not on change:

“Okay, sustainability, for us it’s like it’s the minimum that can happen, it’s like we want more than that system, it is just not to destroy yourself, to be sustained to sustain something, so it’s just like okay this is surviving, we want to thrive, so we want to bring the other level.” (interviewee 4)

For the members of Los Portales, sustainability will not allow prosperity, and social change requires a revolution. These contributions are directly related to a mentality change through minimalist living based on collective social and environmental consciousness and to the emergence of alternative narratives focused on regeneration. In this sense, Los Portales members consider that the priority change in the process of transition to sustainability is, precisely, a change of mentalities. The interviewees highlight the importance of individual accountability and empowerment. For example, interviewee 2 states that: *“(…) for me the key is in the personal empowerment”*, and interviewee 6 states that the *“personal work is the process, in general, I think it is the priority because the rest comes after”*.

The gift economy also contributes to a strong sense of belonging and social cohesion. Another change that interviewees consider a priority is to rescue the community experience and the sense of community, in the

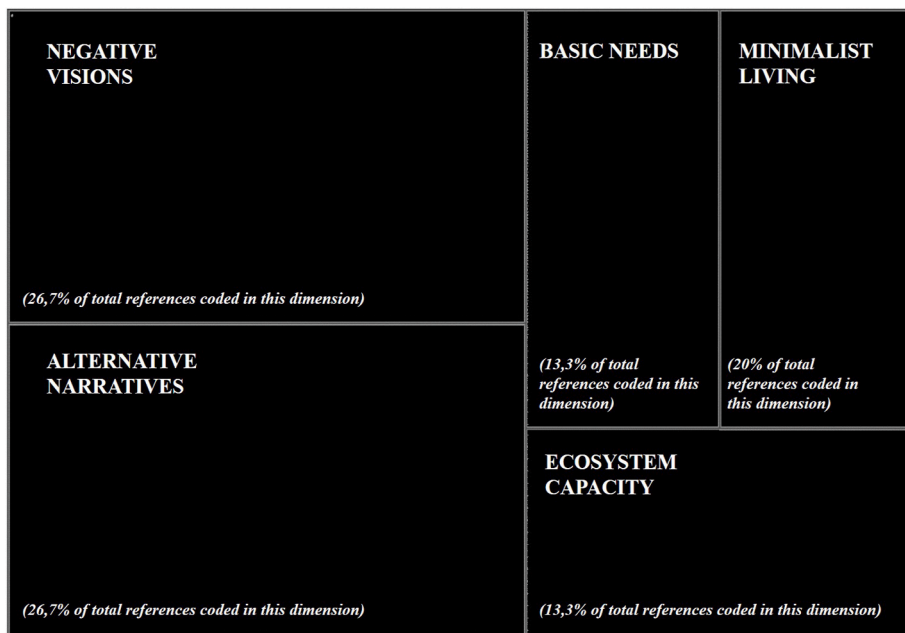


Fig. 3. Representations of Sustainability in Los Portales (Source: Own elaboration using Nvivo11).

sense of strengthening the relationships of connection, not only between individuals but between them and the environment:

“For me, a process that is taking place is a process of community, but in the broad sense of the word community, in the sense of connection. To change individualism, competition, separation and to go on for more connection and more community at all levels Connection, connection and connection is what we need, in my opinion, at the human level and at the level of connection with the planet.” (interviewee 5)

These social changes considered as priorities fall precisely on the main characteristics of the gift economy and the civil economy - reciprocity (connection), community involvement (connection), trust and social ties (connection). To change the way we think about the economy, we must ensure that social actors have, individually and collectively, the necessary skills and values to bring about other paradigms.

5. Conclusion

This article provides an in-depth view of how gift economy can be understood as a collective civic action that contributes to prosperity, individual and collective happiness and is, therefore, a valuable tool to foster the process of social change towards sustainability. The results presented here show how Los Portales has developed the gift economy through practices and principles of reciprocity, social value creation and mutual trust.

We contribute to the literature on civil economics by developing a conceptual framework that combines approaches from the disciplinary fields of economics and sociology. This makes it possible to overcome dichotomies between fields of knowledge and translates into an integrated vision between the economic dimensions and the individual motivations of social agents. The gift as a pathway to the civil economy shows the importance of trust, social value, social relationships and reciprocity for prosperity (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007; Thygesen, 2019). Stebbins' (2009) positive sociology links the two approaches and allows us to understand how individual motivations give rise to positive activities that bridge individual and collective happiness.

This case study has also allowed us to perceive that reciprocity, in this community context, is somehow a process of the collective unconscious. In both the civil and gift economy frameworks, reciprocity implies a cooperative, bidirectional and transitive exchange (Bruni and Zamagni, 2007). When mediated by gift giving, these exchanges mean that “a gift” cannot be considered a “gift” in the sense that it does not imply a return (Thygesen, 2019). This means that despite these principles, the non-requirement for a return shows the existence of forms of gratuitousness that are essential and unmissable in a civil society.

The Los Portales study presented in this paper shows just that - a community experience imbued with principles of cooperation, bidirectionality and transitivity imbued with values of explicit non-return - meaning that those who “give” should not feel obliged to “receive” and those who “receive” should not feel obliged to “give”. According to anthropology, in the collective unconscious of human beings, receiving implies later giving, i.e., the counter-giving is always deferred and may not be made to the same person (which creates circularity). This is so even if, from the ‘rational’ perspective of the agents, there is no need for it because they usually do not associate the “gift” given today with a “gift” they received previously.

This is where a structural dimension for understanding the gift economy comes in. The idea of individual motivation that enhances action towards achieving collective goals is crucial for developing the community feeling. Through these individual motivations, agents feel committed to engaging in positive activities that bring them happiness, satisfaction and self-fulfilment (Stebbins, 2009). In essence, although the case study is a community and the common good and collective prosperity are the primary goals of these activities, we are faced with a process that focuses on the agency. It is through this individual sense of

the “good life” that collective happiness is achieved (Becchetti and Cermelli, 2018; Genovesi, 2005). The community scale, especially in intentional communities, is privileged for the emergence of these types of feelings, actions and relationships because there is, from the outset, a common goal shared and known by all members who choose this lifestyle.

It should, however, be noted that the community scale is not exclusive for the emergence of these kinds of feelings, much less that physical proximity is a necessary and sufficient condition for the development of trust and reciprocity (Bruni and Héji, 2011). This article argues that the principle of intention is a crucial dimension. Being a member of this type of community, ISCs, is not an inheritance or a coincidence but a choice. This intentional choice makes these individuals share the same common goal - in this case, a sustainable lifestyle supported by trust, reciprocity and collective happiness. In essence, the consolidation of the principles that guide civil economy activities in Los Portales takes place through a robust shared culture inherent to the lifestyle practiced in this community rather than exclusively physical proximity.

In this sense, there are greater chances of success in developing gift economy practices at these specific examples of micro-scale initiatives, like intentional sustainable communities, because it implies a set of shared values and objectives that allow reciprocity, social relations, and trust to be fostered. Starting from the argument that the gift economy is a form of civil economy and reflecting on its potential to meet the structural challenges that societies go through, it is possible to conclude that there are operational gaps. At the macro scale, it is difficult to sediment relations of trust and reciprocity - at least in the structural form that the civil economy needs to be operationalized. Proximity (geographical, relational and above all cultural) is a key factor that is difficult to achieve in globalized societies where solidarity is scarce and where and polarization is increasing.

This does not mean that the civil economy is a proposal doomed to failure in contemporary societies. On the contrary, it brings to the center of the debate a set of values that have been weakened but need to be rescued. Although there is still a long way to go, the civil economy can be one of the catalysts for a paradigm shift, which is particularly necessary for the context of the quest for sustainability. This paradigm implies changes in three main dimensions (Becchetti and Cermelli, 2018, 2022). Firstly, individuals seek a life purpose based on the added value of relationships, cooperation and trust to solve social problems and generate superadditivity. Secondly, it implies a shift from an exclusively profit-based corporate vision to one emphasizing social value and environmental and civic responsibility. Finally, going beyond traditional metrics (such as GDP) and highlighting the importance of the stock of spiritual, relational, economic, and environmental goods that a community can enjoy in a given area is the root of well-living.

The social challenges and the sustainability of future generations rely on this transition and the urgency to rethink the values and principles that manage and guide individual actions at macro, meso and micro levels. As it was also possible to perceive through the perceptions that Los Portales members have about social change, we can conclude that approaches to economic thinking lack a more systematic, inclusive, fair, sustainable and multidimensional approach that can only be established through a change in individual mentalities. This also places the burden of responsibility on individual agents who must not resign from their civic roles.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Carla Nogueira: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data Collection, Formal analysis. **João Filipe Marques:** Writing – review & editing, Writing, Reviewing, Supervision. **Hugo Pinto:** Writing – review & editing, Writing, Reviewing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

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