Research article

Redefining success in organizing towards degrowth

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A B S T R A C T

In order to untangle the meaning of success, or rather, thriving, for community-based initiatives (CBIs) that embody and prefigure degrowth, we bring sustainability transition, prefigurative politics, and degrowth scholarships in conversation with group facilitation practice and living systems theory. The article puts forward a model of organizational thriving grounded in the achievement of results while attending to organizational processes and members' needs. We explore the trajectories of five CBIs located in the province of Barcelona (Spain), looking into the ways such model is reflected, performed, and experienced by each of these. A key insight of our nine-year research is that 'care' is core to success. Sustainability transition, and degrowth organizing thus need to acknowledge that 'success' does not only stem from the realization of tangible results but from the consideration of members' needs and the quality of group communication, cohesion, inclusion and decision-making processes inasmuch as reaching targets.

1. Introduction

The emergence and spread of community-led initiatives that grapple with sustainability challenges and social justice has been a subject of much academic quest (Schmid et al., 2021; Kohler et al., 2019; Hossain, 2016). Organic food and renewable energy co-operatives, recycling laboratories, digital commons, bicycle kitchens, libraries of things, intentional living communities, and co-housing initiatives, among multiple others, can be understood and interpreted, using multiple and overlapping lenses and frames of reference. These community-based initiatives (CBIs herein after) can be perceived as embodiments of the *sustainability transition* (Khmara and Kronenberg, 2020; Henfrey et al., 2017; Kunze and Becker, 2015), as manifestations of *place-based grassroots innovation* (Nicolosi et al., 2018; Seyfang and Smith, 2007) and *Nowtopias* (Carlson, 2014), as examples of *social enterprises* (Johanisova et al., 2013) and *social innovation* (Baker and Mehmood, 2015), or as key drivers of the *social and solidarity economy* (Varvarousis et al., 2020). The increasing need for emancipatory visions of the future, instigated by the dystopian images of the present, has further inclined scholars to conceive CBIs as prefigurative practices or as organizational forms that anticipate a future amalgam of possibilities (Törnberg, 2021; Levitas, 2017). In the words of Gibson-Graham (2006), prefiguration aspires to create new worlds that embody 'not-yet futures' through the resources of the existing world and by engaging with the micro-politics of space, time, language, body, and emotion. Community-led initiatives that aim at organizing livelihoods and provisioning around principles of sufficiency, socio-ecological justice, and deeper forms of democracy can be further theorized as an embodiment of the paths and pursuits of degrowth as a subversive utopia and a type of sustainability transition (Kallis and March, 2015).

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Degrowth is a pledge to critically revise the requirement for perpetual economic growth as the quintessential expression of human achievement (Kallis et al., 2018; Demaria et al., 2013). The scholarly field explores the ways radically leaner resource and material use in the North, along with an extensive income and wealth redistribution worldwide, could tackle global social injustice and ensure a good life for all (Hickel, 2020). Degrowth can be further conceptualized as a plethora of pathways pointing towards global ecological justice, all in the making, and rooted in the radical reorganization of communities and societies through acts of care for, and compensation for past damage incurred to human and more-than-human worlds (Schmelzer et al., 2022; Treu et al., 2020; Muraca, 2012). Nonetheless, thinking about ecological sustainability and socio-political transformation without due consideration of the processes, needs, subjectivities, and bodies involved, is bound to create oppressive and opaque structures. Degrowth-minded sustainability transition thus needs to be considered utopian in a *process*-oriented sense (Kallis and March, 2015), as a continuous and critical self-reflection and a strive towards greater inclusion, justice, and fairness (Anguelovski et al., 2020; Dengler and Lang, 2022). In this light, the present article aims to contribute to the emerging literature on organizing *from* and *for* degrowth (Barlow et al., 2022; Vandeventer and Lloveras, 2020; Hinton, 2021; Nesterova, 2020; Lloveras et al., 2018; Schmid, 2018) in zooming at the fundamental role of care ethos in the postgrowth metamorphosis, and sustainability transition.

Sustainability transition has been extensively theorized as goal-oriented, purposive, emerging in protected niches, and located at the interface between technology, economics, business, markets, culture, politics, discourse, and public opinion (Geels, 2011). As argued by Bouzarovski and Haarstad (2019) and others, however, conceiving social or grassroots innovation in the realm of the socio-political through the language and imaginary of 'niches' provides but a limited reading of the relational aspects behind social mobilization and its wider interaction with the spatial and political forces that constitute the current economic regimes (Smith and Raven, 2012). The degrowth literature, on the other hand, theorizes transformative change as a blend of three inter-related strategies: (i) bottom-up action, or the development of new place-based social practices and autonomous structures situated in the 'interstices' of capitalism; (ii) temporary, or prolonged, revolutionary confrontations and acts of dissent; and *iii) non-reformist reforms*, or policies that radically reshape statal institutions and existing economic systems (Barlow et al., 2022, p.23; Schmelzer et al., 2022). In this article, we theorize the first ingredient of a degrowth-oriented sustainability transition - the realm of on-the-ground civic praxis and community-led initiatives. As argued by Schmelzer et al. (2022), (p.254) while institutional changes may provide the conditions for the flourishing, expansion, and replication of nowtopias, community organizing help us imagine, experience, and appreciate collective, self-determined, care- and sufficiency-oriented lifestyles, inspiring thereby further mobilization for profound reforms and political transformation.

Against this background, over the last nine years, we have closely followed the trajectories of five CBIs in the field of food, energy, and housing located in the province of Barcelona (Spain). These initiatives can be conceptualized as 'islands', or as pragmatic landings for the seemingly abstract horizon of degrowth for a number of reasons (Schmelzer et al., 2022, Videira et al., 2014). One concerns the convergence between their organizational aspirations and the conceptual pillars of degrowth. The organizations, for example, manifested: (i) an orientation towards sufficiency and local ecological production and provisioning while taking distance from identitarian and reactionary narratives; (ii) a preference for cooperative and commons-oriented forms of organization and management; (iii) a focus on serving the local community with an appeal to global justice; (iv) elements of horizontal, inclusive and democratic functioning. The second reason is self-identification. Over the years, CBIs members increasingly mentioned the interpretative framework of degrowth as their aspirational horizon.

In order to dive deep into the meaning of 'success' for CBIs that embody transformative futures, we bring sustainability transition, prefigurative politics, and degrowth scholarships in conversation with group facilitation practice and living systems theory (Escorihuela, 2019), putting forward a model of organizational thriving that is strongly grounded in care ethos (Dengler and Lang, 2022). Following Escorihuela (2019), groups are considered successful or effective when they possess and manifest the capacity to: achieve results; sustain fluid, transparent, and inclusive organizational processes; and care for the needs of all members and stakeholders (Escorihuela, 2019). Our article explores the resonance of this model with the realities of CBIs that prefigure degrowth, asking: *In what ways are the pillars of organizational thriving (people, processes, and results) jointly pursued, reflected, performed, and experienced by CBIs oriented towards ecological sustainability and social justice?* We furthermore delve into the grey areas, weak links, and tensions that tend to emerge around the embodiment of such tripartite version of 'success', and the ways these are being addressed.

One of the underlying premises of our research is that the means to understand the success of the CBIs that set the stage for socially just and ecologically mindful futures requires going beyond singular and results-oriented metrics, moving onto the realm of qualitative and non-instrumental parameters (Aiken, 2015). While the notion of success suggested here could possibly extend to other types of organizations, we opt for building our analysis around initiatives that operate and serve the needs of their communities in a way that is respectful of, and caring for the human and more-than-human worlds, and whose practice embody and prefigure a palette of degrowth futures (Videira et al., 2014). To this aim below we firstly situate the discussion on how success is being interpreted in the literature on socio-ecological transition (Section 2). Next, we outline a theoretical framework of success, or thriving, which is particularly apt for organizing towards degrowth (Section 3). Upon presenting the methodological approach pursued in this research, Section 5 provides an exploration of the core achievements, difficulties, and moments of friction for the CBIs in our study pool from the optics of the framework of organizational thriving (Escorihuela, 2019). In the *Discussion* we unpack the key insights and trends from the preceding section. The *Conclusion* then wraps-up the paper's core findings, while situating these in the sustainability transition literature.

2. Representations and accounts of CBIs' success in the literature

A common yardstick for measuring, or understanding, the success of CBIs aiming at sustainability and social justice, concerns the extent to which they reach particular objectives (De Haan et al., 2019; Aiken, 2015). These can be related to the democratization of

(cleaner) energy production and distribution (Mulugetta et al., 2010), achieving carbon reduction gains (Aiken, 2015), the collective ownership of energy systems (Gunderson et al., 2018; Kunze and Becker, 2015), or more generally to the promotion of sustainable lifestyle solutions in a way unattainable by top-down policies (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Yet, while the desire to act upon global socio-environmental challenges is common among CBIs' members, valuing community action *solely* through the targets, and tangible results, that it can eventually achieve, tends to produce and reproduce an instrumental logic, one that undermines and crowds out the relational, motivational, and foundational aspects and factors that underpin the very existence of local groups (Aiken et al., 2022).

Moreover, CBIs' success is frequently described through quantitative benchmarks such as size, budget, members, clients or activity span (Warbroek et al., 2019; Aiken, 2015). Resting upon measurable metrics of success for community-based initiatives may, however, go against their very *raison d'être* (Smith, 2019; Celata and Coletti, 2018; Dinnie and Holstead, 2018*)*. The initiatives labelled as innovative and successful along such monolithic terms eventually reaffirm lock-ins within growth-based institutional structures, creating rigidity and eventually strengthening perverse system dynamics (Antadze and Westley, 2012). As argued by Aiken (2015), once the strive towards reaching quantitative targets becomes a central tenet of community success, belonging, togetherness and justice tend to get side-tracked.

Community initiatives' achievement has also been theorized as the extent of their up-scaling and spread onto the mainstream (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012). CBIs are entrenched in a growth-laden socio-economic context where the achievement of visible, material, and fast results is the routine way to accomplishment. Capitalist dynamics permeate and frame the lived realities of sustainability-minded organizations (Feola, 2020), where competition, market-based innovation, commodification, and credit-expansion constitute a barrier to the transformative capacity of small-scale, non-for-profit, cooperative and socially-oriented formations (Rommel et al., 2018; Hess, 2013). While up-scaling is one of the primary channels to project influence and leverage for socio-ecological transition, the literature on how sustainability-oriented initiatives spread out and amplify their impacts (Lam et al., 2020) is increasingly showing that socio-political influence is not constituted only in the hierarchical trespassing of scales, and numerical growth (Bouzarovski and Haarstad, 2019; Aiken et al., 2022).

Pursuing success through the metrics of organizational growth CBIs tend to reproduce the very logics and dynamics they seek to replace (Törnberg, 2021; Hargreaves et al., 2013; Mulgan et al., 2007). For example, when focusing primarily on expansion, groups may eventually need to compromise their radical or socially-transformative visions (Nunes and Parker, 2021; Bergman et al., 2010; Hielscher et al., 2011; Johanisova et al., 2013), or risk co-optation (Feola and Nunes, 2013; Hess, 2013). In the same way, while public funding may bring opportunities for expansion and consolidation, excessive dependence on external donors tends to crowd-out initiatives' volunteer or membership base, leading to a loss of autonomy and transformational capacity (Dinnie and Holstead, 2018; Celata and Coletti, 2018; Aiken, 2014; Jing and Gong, 2012). This is especially the case when workload is taken up by few committed, 'hard-pressed', and poorly paid-staff or volunteers (Nunes and Parker, 2021; Aiken, 2015; Wells, 2011). Furthermore, scaling-up a CBI without appreciating the so-called 'non-scalable', or social, aspects that form the backbone of the group, such as place-attachment, face-to-face encounter, commitment, passion, or disappointment, may end up eroding the very mission of community initiatives (Aiken et al., 2022). This said, pragmatic actions that ensure survival and remaining afloat need not be confounded with apolitical stances, alignment with neoliberal approaches, or with the absence of ethical principles altogether (Nunes and Parker, 2021).

Nonetheless, CBI's success can also be approached in qualitative terms through the assessment of the transformative capacity of the group across a range of features such as inclusiveness, autonomy, reflexivity, social learning and transformative leadership (Wolfram, 2016). New and diversified perspectives on CBIs' successes have been emerging, where the quality of organizational processes and relationality are clearly featured (Aiken et al., 2022; Grabs et al., 2016). These entail the capacity of the organization to facilitate group communication (Polk, 2013), address conflicts and tensions (Sekulova et al., 2017; Cardona, 2010), embrace members' needs for community belonging and participation (de Haan et al., 2019; Feola and Nunes, 2013), and foster democratic decision-making processes (De Haan et al., 2019; Ornetzeder and Rohracher, 2013; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Organizational achievement has also been conceptualized as the strength of inter-personal channels and communication networks that expand beyond the bubble of the sustainability 'converted' (Shawki, 2013; Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012; Smith, 2011; Wells, 2011; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010).

3. Organizational thriving: Theoretical framework

Inspired by the capacity of living systems to self-organize Arrow et al. (2000), and later Escorihuela (2019), put forth a model of organizational thriving where proposals for change come from anywhere in the system, and get supported, reinforced or inhibited in cycles of positive and negative feedback. Self-organization in living systems is based on the continuous flow and management of information and energy, in accordance with rules generated and modified through incessant cycles of interaction, where none of the part has the power to impose rules without the agreement of the rest (Escorihuela, 2022). While human systems generate their rules for the benefit and under the influence of a fraction of the socio-political spectrum, rather than from its entirety, and without series of ample feedbacks, a living systems approach to organizations is particularly apt for theorizing CBIs that foreshadow degrowth futures. Firstly, the ability of a living system to integrate its differentiated elements, so that all parts are heard, and recognized in their values and potential complementarities, is highly instructive for groups that simultaneously strive for organizational effectiveness and horizontality, or inclusivity. Secondly, the model foregrounds the role of care, understood as attention to people (members) and processes, as a core feature of organizational thriving. Upon these premises, groups are considered successful, or thriving, when they possess, embody and manifest the capacities to: *(i)* achieve (tangible) results; *(ii)* maintain and improve group functioning through fluid, transparent and inclusive processes and organizational structures; and *(iii)* attend to the needs of (e.g., for participation, belonging, recognition, affiliation, appreciation, achievement, realization, empowerment, and material security) individual group members (Fig. 1).

Another relevant feature of the model is that, the capacities to achieve results, to maintain fluid and inclusive group processes, and to attend to people's needs, are not stand-alone, but rather intermingled in a way that each one influences, and is influenced by, the others (represented by the three corners on Fig. 1). For example, if a CBI focuses solely on achieving its objectives without heeding to members' needs and processes, it will eventually be confronted with a tense relational environment, undermining long-term results. Alternatively, if a group is primarily concerned with attending to organizational processes or individual needs, its results are likely to stagger, putting organizational existence at stake.

The three denominators of success are then also influenced by, and potentially influencing, the socio-political, cultural and economic contexts in which CBIs emerge and thrive. Community initiatives tend to materialize and thrive in 'fertile soils', characterized by a shared history of social organizing, values of cooperation, trust, and concern with justice and sustainability (Sekulova et al., 2017). Some of the contextual features that help these organizations emerge and thrive in the 'interstices of capitalism' (Wright, 2010) have to do with their local, cultural, and community-embeddedness (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Feola and Nunes, 2013). At the same time, the cultural, historical, and social (micro)context of each organization feeds into its organizational dynamics, and tends to tilt the prioritization of success toward one of the three verges of the triangle (results, people or processes).

The tripartite notion of organizational success is furthermore well-placed in tying the different branches of degrowth theory together (Demaria et al., 2013). Upon the canvas of degrowth, achieving results would involve remaining within the biophysical boundaries of our planet through leaner and equitably distributed material throughput in a strive to move beyond uncapped profit seeking (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Caring about processes would correspond to ensuring democratic, equitable and inclusive means of taking decisions, while attending to differences and marginalized voices, through acts of decolonial reconstruction of oppressive realities (Nirmal and Rocheleau, 2019; Zografos, 2019; Deriu, 2012; Murcara, 2012). Care for people then corresponds to ensuring human and more-than-human well-being and thriving (Sekulova, 2014).

4. Data and methodology

Data for this research has been collected over a period of nine years, throughout which we interviewed, participated in, and observed five CBIs (Table 1). We aimed at exploring well-known and well-networked CBIs in the province of Barcelona, ones that are representative of local production and provisioning along a range of sustainability axes. To this aim we applied a purposive (selective and typical) case sampling technique (Palys, 2008) starting with one of the oldest and well-known food cooperatives in Barcelona, where one of the authors had been participating for years. In searching for the relevant and well-established community-based initiatives in the fields of organic food, renewable energy, and co-housing we further chose two organic vegetable farms (of 3 to 4 ha productive land each), which were particularly suitable for their historical trajectory as providers for, and enablers of, various food cooperatives in the province. Next, we selected the (currently) largest renewable energy cooperative on the territory of Catalonia, which was in its nascent phase in the initial stages of our research. Finally, we included a reference project in the field of housing, a living community of about 30 people situated on the verges of Barcelona, known for its social organizing and explicit degrowth affinity.

In the selection of study cases, we assembled a group of initiatives favouring their complementary, rather than their comparability. We eventually had three initiatives in the food axis, one on the receiving end (a consumer coop), and two on the productive side which were its current or past providers. The three CBIs in the domain of food were hence related. The two farms were included as one was a
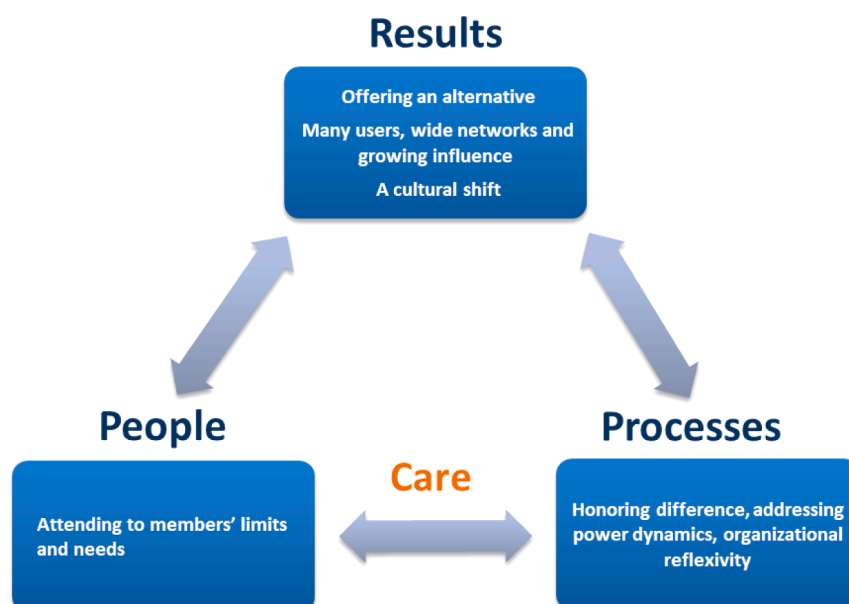

Fig. 1. The triangle of organizational thriving (an adaptation from Arrow et al., 2000).

Table 1

A short description of the five CBIs studied in their (intentional or not) alignment with degrowth.

Name	Short description	Alignment with degrowth
Farm 1	A vegetable-based organic farm of about 3 ha land located 20 km away from Barcelona, providing grocery for food cooperatives and households in Barcelona and the nearby towns. The farm is a small-scale social enterprise launched in 2010 by two individuals with a long experience in the food cooperative movement. It regularly organizes social events for its clients on its premises.	Local and diverse organic farms, with relatively low use of, and reliance upon heavy machinery form the base of degrowth-inspired food provisioning. The provision of decent and sustainable employment, especially for migrant workers is another key aspiration. Conviviality, through festive forms of social organizing, for example is a central degrowth practice.
Farm 2	An organic farm of about 6.5 ha located 35 km away from Barcelona, providing grocery for cooperatives and households in the province. The farm is a small-scale social enterprise launched in 2000 together with one of the first food cooperatives in Barcelona as a form of community-supported agriculture. It is a pioneer agroecological project in Catalonia, known for its socio-ecological approach, activist stance and appeal to horizontality in organizing.	Same as above
Food cooperative	One of the first food cooperatives in Barcelona, launched in 2001. The coop went down from 30 to 20 member units (2023). The CBI purchases weekly grocery baskets from Organic farm 1, based on their seasonal availability, (and buys in bulk organic food elsewhere). It is self-organized, and members self-appoint to commissions taking care of food distribution, space, administration, and membership coordination. The CBI is located in a multicultural, centric & gentrified neighborhood.	The process of commoning in the field of food distribution is one of the baseline proposals for local degrowth-inspired provisioning. The coop opted for being an informal group of consumers who get together to use their purchasing power in order to support local organic smallholders and avert/subvert, the agro-industrial model of food production. Making local, organic and healthy nutrition accessible and applying direct democracy principles through non-for-profit organizational structures is another basic premise of degrowth.
Energy cooperative	A renewable energy consumers' cooperative founded in 2011 in Girona, (Catalonia) that gained 83,000 members and 120,000 contracts in 10 years. This expansion has been achieved thanks to a large number of local groups, (composed of hundreds of volunteers), steered by a governance council and a professional team of employees. Participation of members takes place, through: an online platform, an annual summer school, and (general and local groups') assemblies.	The process of commoning for basic service provisioning is a key tenet in degrowth organizing. A complete shift to renewable energy, also used as a way to lower absolute consumption levels, is one of the primary vehicles for achieving climate stabilization for degrowth researchers.
Intentional living community	A 30-member living community with productive land and social center, located in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The project has been active for more than 10 years, and produces about 20% of its vegetables, while organizing regular events that cater for the socio-political needs of the metropolitan city.	The project combines many features and traits of degrowth-imagined utopias, among which: self-organization, co-housing, re-commoning and repurposing abandoned of buildings, agroecological production, high degree of sharing, political organization, and awareness raising.

pioneer project and a reference for the agroecological movement in Catalonia, and the other-relatively new, though steadily growing. Such a coverage gave us a nuanced picture of CBIs' thriving, and allowed for more complexity in our understanding of their trajectories. To an extent we could also relate and contrast the energy with the food cooperative, which are both purchasing a "sustainable" good together, regardless of differences in their size and organization. Having two producer, and two consumer groups gave us space for understanding a variety of trajectories, institutional set ups, pathways, and constraints. The living community stood on its own, but provided a highly relevant perspective (on shared/community housing) from a degrowth stance.

We started our research in 2014 conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with founders, members, and users of the CBIs (n=18). Questions revolved around the group's aspirations, establishment, evolution, moments of inflection or difficulty, sense of achievement, and overall trajectory. We triangulated findings identifying and interviewing members located at different organizational levels, and having different degree of involvement within the CBIs.

While providing a sense of direction at the initial phases of the research, interviews alone gave us a limited glimpse of the initiatives' realities. Hence, we extended our research with participant observation and ethnographic field work. Ethnography gave us greater contextual depth and width, and a glimpse into less visible organizational dynamics. In practical terms, this entailed participation in events and activities, informal conversations, and immersion in the day-to-day realities of the CBIs. Nine years later (in 2023), we went back to conducting semi-structured interviews with staff of the energy cooperative, a member of the living community, and workers of the two organic farms and their extended network of collaborators. In these we interrogated the relevance of the three pillars of organizational thriving for the realities of the respective organizations. We further inquired into the extent to which interviewees considered their initiatives part of a degrowth-oriented transition.

Concerning the extent to which the selected CBIs aspire at, or prefigure degrowth, in the beginning of our study we inscribed its relevance from their functioning (democratic orientation, local ecological provisioning with a global justice appeal) and ambitions for socio-political transformation. The transition that CBIs' members aspired at, for example, entailed overhauling industrial food production, scaling down mining and fossil fuel extraction, dismantling corporate forms of economic organization, while resting upon cooperative, sufficiency-oriented, and solidarity-based structures for organizing care, production, and provisioning. While in the first years of our research the word 'degrowth' emerged little in our conversations, over time CBI's members started referring more frequently to the term. In 2023, when explicitly asked whether they perceived degrowth as the aspirational horizon of their organizations, most interviewees responded affirmatively. The energy cooperative, for example, organized a session for all interested

members, on the relevance of degrowth for their vision and future operations, while members of the local agroecological projects saw themselves as a part of a degrowth-oriented trend.

Interviews were fully transcribed and coded with NVivo. Analysis was dynamic and iterative with an initial phase of data coding using grounded theory techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000), and a number of follow-up phases when recurrent concepts such as success, people's needs, process, results and aspirations were brought in the research inquiry. The analytical (interview) material has been coupled with extensive field notes from informal exchanges, activities and conversations with various members of the initiatives.

Certainly, the tendencies and embodiments for success listed below represent just one interpretation, or one reading, of the fieldwork and data, largely influenced by the authors' subjectivities and white female, middle-class, South- and East-European positionalities. Notably, we have been building our narrative, understanding and analysis upon our experiences from within, being members or collaborators of the food cooperative and the two farming projects. Hence our involvement with some of the CBIs was not primarily, or only, driven by our research interests. While our subscription to the organizational goals and praxis of the initiatives has given us a deep, internal and nuanced view of their trajectories, our analysis obviously entails a degree of normativity and subjectivity (in terms of accentuating particular aspects of care, for example).

5. Organizational thriving in practice: Insights from the field

Here we explore the extent to which the 'people-processes-results' model of organizational thriving is experienced, performed and embodied in the studied groups, while identifying barriers, tensions and enabling factors along the way.

5.1. Attending to members' needs

The creation of socially just and ecologically sustainable organizational structures in an economic, or institutional context which is neither welcoming, nor appreciative, where threats of co-optation or suspension abound, requires continuous self-strain and exertion. The implications and significance of such continuous efforts, however, often become visible at relatively late stages, or in times of organizational rupture and members' burn out.

> "*I exploited myself a lot in the past. You devote yourself to something you love …until one day you feel like an idiot; …you dedicate so much of your time and no one recognizes your work, no one pays you.*" D., a member of the Energy Cooperative, (2014).

In the early years of the Energy Cooperative, local volunteers' groups took-up a substantial load of outreach work. When organizational resources and attention were primarily directed to achieving objectives like the expansion of contracts and renewable energy generation capacity, however, the lasting engagement of people started to dwindle. While the physical and emotional endeavour on the side of few overcommitted volunteers had been vital for achieving the common goals of the CBI in its launch face, over the years members' aspirations to contribute to a much desirable social change started to crash with their personal limits. Whenever members' needs for support, care, and recognition were left unattended for long this resulted in burn outs and eventual group break-down. Moreover, the legislative changes in the energy sector which Spain started introducing in 2019, and earlier, required large-scale administrative restructuring over very short time frames. The shift substantially augmented the administrative burden of work, and eventually exhaustion, for the cooperative's employees. In the words of one of the workers, "*while the will to care for each other is there, the resources for doing this are limited*".

While the uneasy and sometimes missing balance between attending needs and reaching targets traversed all initiatives, it was most notable for those in the agriculture sector. For the two organic farms, initiating a small-scale, locally-targeted, diverse-crop, productive project from a scratch in a context of fierce competition with the existing agro-industrial complex has implied an exceptional and continuous strain.

> "*I still have not managed to stop working so much, after all these years (…) Persistence and resistance have a very high price, in terms of human exhaustion, and sacrifice*". N., founder of Farm 2 (2015).

The exhaustion of founders and workers, however, eventually renders CBIs vulnerable to external and internal changes and shocks. The only productive project run by women in the network of producers of Farm 2, for example, had to close down simply *because* its founders became mothers. Reconciling care work with small-scale organic farming in Spain resulted impossible. Attendance to the reproductive, mental, and bodily load and cost of such continuous strain is thus not only a baseline condition for organizational thriving, but a factor that merits attention on its own.

In the context of the Food Cooperative and the Living Community a common motivational factor that underpinned participation was the need for relatedness, conviviality, and being part of a community.

> "*To be part of the local coop while living in this neighbourhood increases my quality of life.… I feel very grateful for the relations with the people there. I feel part of the neighbourhood. Also, for the joint activist resistance that we create in this district…*" X., member of the Food Cooperative (2014).

Whenever the social and convivial elements and structures which held the group together and strengthened the sense of community belonging were undermined, conflicts and membership drop-off were more common.

An explicit recognition of attending to personal needs and limits was glaring within the Living Community. One interviewee from the community argued that whenever achieving socio-political targets (such as organizing events, for example) started to matter more

than attending to members' needs for rest, peace, and relatedness, the project was deeply unsettled. Indeed, over the last years the project experienced one major perturbation, partly associated with the mismatch between accommodating members' needs with achieving socio-political goals. This disenchantment resulted in the group's overhaul and departure of many long-term dwellers.

Overall, evidence was ample that the CBIs' thriving was intrinsically related to, and contingent upon, the ways care, as attention to personal needs, got acknowledged and practiced by the entirety of the group. The distribution of care work within the CBIs was furthermore not gender-neutral. In almost all groups, female members were the ones that fostered the culture of recognizing and gratifying care work (understood as attention to people's needs), by organizing spaces for reflection, for example. At times this required that groups slow down and redirect attention from results towards the needs of those disproportionally loaded with common tasks and feeling excluded, unprivileged or negatively affected by group dynamics.

5.2. Success as care for group processes

When looking at the organizational dynamics of CBIs one may (mistakenly) presume that initiatives that prefigure degrowth futures are traversed by more conflict than strictly hierarchic, growth, and profit-oriented organizations (Cunico et al., 2022). Deepening democracy, however, necessarily goes along with amplifying the representation and heterogeneity of social actors and the diversity of voices. This implies that differences which are normally silenced away, or cornered, in hierarchical structures surface more easily. Below we identify three of the multiple process-oriented landmarks of success or organizational thriving that emerged in our research.

5.2.1. Honouring difference as a source of strength

The Energy Cooperative had multiple local groups (assemblies), a governance council (decision-making body), and a professional office consisting of employees handling daily management and technical works around the production and commercialization of energy. The cooperative was initially conceived as a space open for, and highly dependent upon, volunteer contributions, attracting lawyers, graphic designers, engineers, and environmental activists alike. Over time, however, participation started to wane and certain homogeneity of profiles across all levels of governance got established.

> "The common member profile we have had for long has been: white, male, elderly, or retired, engineer" Q., member of the technical office of the Energy Cooperative (2023).

The relative uniformity of profiles then implicitly imposed behavioural codes that acted as a barrier to the entry for non-male, or non-energy-expert, members. Upon the influence of office employees with skills, knowledge, and experience in the field of horizontal organizing, group facilitation and eco-social transition, a number of strategic decisions around the need to diversify volunteer and membership base were taken. One of these concerned the cooperative's language and discourse around the role and significance of diverse knowledges, skills, and member profiles. The cooperative set-up an organizational department dedicated to expanding and diversifying participation and community-building as one of its strategic lines of operation. It organized series of trainings and facilitated workshops on eco-feminism, socio-ecological transition, and degrowth which attracted members and collaborators with different profiles. As a result, the membership base of the cooperative diversified, while relationality and social-cohesion improved.

Not all CBIs in our sample were able to address and integrate differences in visions and needs. The producers' cooperative, which Farm 1 formalized along with thirteen other producers from the area had a major break down a couple of years upon its launch. The formal cooperative drew on ten-year collaboration between the local ecological farmers, and aimed at making vegetable exchange, joint fruit ordering, and distribution between members more efficient through the employment of new facilities and staff. The formalized cooperative, however, spent little time on building deeper forms of group cohesion, developing conflict-resolution strategies, and clarifying members' expectations and visions right from the start. The lack of attention to communication and decision-making processes, trust-building, and vision-aligning created an increasing rift between members, along with fears that their commercial interests did not align well with the ones of the cooperative. Eventually the rupture rendered the formalized cooperative dysfunctional, upon the closure of the centre for joint dispatching and laying off its workers.

> "In cooperatives of the kind, cohesion and mutual care between the members are the baseline. This was never acknowledged in our attempt to create and run a producers' cooperative", L. worker of Farm 1 (2023).

5.2.2. Addressing power dynamics

The question of power transcended all groups, both implicitly and explicitly. It was sometimes manifested in the different positionalities between newer and older group members, or between those with more experience, knowledge, or eloquence than the rest. The Food Cooperative, for example, was organized horizontally and decisions taken at a general assembly in search for consensus. Entry was granted to anyone able to pay the weekly food basket and commit to the common tasks. Over time, however, more experienced (mostly male) members of the Food Cooperative were taking a lot of (verbal) space in assemblies. Here, a sudden attention to group processes, initiated by a female member, incited a subtle shift. The cooperative undertook a number of facilitated events where critical self-reflection was encouraged and questions of rank, power, and gender justice discussed. The improved facilitation in meetings revealed current gender and power dynamics, where existing roles and ranks were attested. This practice further involved the adoption of a more caring approach in engaging new people right from the start through socializing, networking, and social bonding.

Likewise, in the initial years of the Energy Cooperative, men were taking up most of the managerial positions at the technical office, and women-the communication and secretary jobs. Over time women in the office started reclaiming gender roles in a number of ways, and amidst increasing societal attention to gender justice, initiated series of power-and-privilege-awareness sessions, facilitated by

external consultants. Eventually the cooperative organized a number of workshops around the thematic of new masculinities, developed written protocols on gender equity and harassment and started to actively promote the entry of women in its governance. This led to substantial improvement in the representation of female members in the governance council.

Many interviewees have also suggested that identifying power imbalances, and attending to, and learning from, minority voices, needed to be a core organizational praxis for CBIs. In addition to impromptu meetings to address temporal crises, a great deal of the power imbalances within the organizations required structural transformation, including the designattion of spaces for hearing those excluded, or less outspoken.

5.2.3. Holding space for collective organizational reflexivity

Success in process-oriented terms further implies establishing and sustaining spaces for self-reflection, difficult conversations and continuous organizational and structural adaptation. The initial phase of the Food Cooperative, for example, was charted by enthusiasm and entry of numerous members with a lot of initiative. Joining the Food Coop implied commitment to: maintaining the space; collaborating with the accounting, organizing and distributing food orders; managing communication with providers and scrutinizing ethical consumption criteria. Over time, belonging to the coop, however started to lose traction. The increasing popularity and supply of organic food in commercial stores marked a turning point for many food cooperatives in Barcelona, and elsewhere. This contextual dynamic set the stage, and need, for rethinking the Food Coop. Some of its members, for example, felt they would contribute more to society if they bought organic food from small commercial stores, and redirect the time invested in the Food Coop to social and political mobilization. Maintenance tasks eventually started to weigh upon fewer committed members causing friction, conflict, and accelerating membership loss. While the consumer group in our sample found a survival formula and remained afloat, similar dynamics forced other cooperatives in the province of Barcelona to close down. Some of their active members, however, reflected upon the contextual changes along with the regimes and boundaries of volunteer work, and drawing upon decades of organizational experience, started establishing cooperative supermarkets for local ecological produce. All membership-based ecological supermarkets (with more than 100 members) that emerged in Barcelona, and nearby cities like Mataro, Granollers and Cardedeu stemmed from, and drew upon the organizational learning experience and dissolution of previous food cooperatives.

Organizational reflexivity has been fundamental for Farm 2, now existing for more than twenty years. Its foundational times were marked by the application of horizontality and direct democracy, where the voices of experienced workers had an equal weight with the ones of new entries. Throughout the years, however, the time invested in horizontal organizational process slowed down productive work, making the farm prone to multiple trial-and-errors. Such dynamics raised the cost of production, generating complaints among food cooperatives and putting the economic viability of the project at stake. The strategy to keep the project alive and thriving, sought through a number of facilitated sessions, was to acknowledge the existence of ranks associated with the degree of experience, project implication and economic responsibility. These processes led to organizational restructuring. Providing experienced leaders with more space and decision-making power improved organizational effectiveness, but perpetuated and locked-in their continuous self-exertion, creating further complexity within the group.

The Energy coop, on the other hand, required fast and efficient decision-making which, in the initial years of its existence, sometimes clashed with the slower and more reflective pace or sometimes more radical visions of local groups. Tensions also emerged between the different organizational levers, such as the governance body (council) and the technical office. Balancing between horizontality and verticality is perhaps one of the most common hurdles for CBIs with an appeal to horizontality, especially when they enter a phase of expansion. Bringing the conflicting sides of the organization together in a space where experiences, frustrations, roles, and positionalities can be safely expressed has shown to be fundamental here. Developing authentic mutual understanding, however, required time and persistence, attention to multiple subjectivities, and addressing questions of power, privilege, and intersectional vulnerabilities, across gender, class, and ethnicity among the rest.

Moreover, despite its huge success as one of the first cooperatives that sell renewable energy, the organization came under severe financial pressure associated with the price hikes in the context of the war in Ukraine. Overtime its relatively accessible energy-provisioning service became less economically competitive especially as the largest energy companies in Spain started to offer 100% renewable contracts, and sometimes at lower prices. The changing contextual regime made members and employees reflect profoundly upon the CBI's role, and increasingly appreciate and acknowledge the value of its cooperative structure, personalized service, social base, and mission. In view of the harsher market competition, members realized that the major difference and advance of the cooperative (in comparison with other commercial providers) was its pledge for socio-ecological transition and social justice, manifested in its educational outreach and critical reflection.

> *"The Energy Cooperative as a tool for social transformation needs to continuously question its role and mission (…)We cannot survive and grow without valuing and putting forth our mission as a transformation and transition project, having a social base and an appeal to diversity", X a worker of the Energy Cooperative (2023).*

We have seen above that ignoring the need for group cohesion and reflexivity, or for transparent and inclusive communication, could place CBIs' existence at stake. The success, or thriving, of the groups we engaged with, was also driven by their organizational reflexivity and capacity to voice and address oppressive dynamics (associated with ranks and privilege), while making sure that the voices of those overworked, excluded, or negatively affected by certain group processes, have been expressed, heard, shared, and taken into consideration in decision-making and transformation processes.

5.3. Success as achieving results

5.3.1. Making alternative provisioning possible

Most of the CBIs we engaged with were facing huge administrative workload, involving certification, permits, taxation, inspections, audits, along with fierce market competition with either large-scale organic producers and retailers, or giant energy enterprises. Many informants thus saw success as simply 'being there', and resisting take-over by hostile socio-political and economic arrangements, and henceforth making an alternative mode of provisioning possible amidst mass industrial productive structures. Bent by mounting external pressures and members' burn out, what respondents often valued was their initiatives' 'existence'. As argued by a founder of Farm 2: *"If you ask me about the key to success, I will talk to you about the key to resistance"*.

Consequently, in a context of harsh market pressures, the basic means to resist required economic sustainability and solvency. In view of the heavy regulatory and material barriers in the energy sector (Pinker et al., 2020), solvency and economic consolidation for the Energy Cooperative implied that employees had their salaries paid while generating sufficiently large financial buffers to absorb for unpaid bills and generate the mandatory volume of liquid cash, which with the war in Ukraine swelled from 2 to 15 million Euro. In view of the sudden external shock associated with the higher liquidity requirement, the cooperative could maintain its foundational ethics, resist, and remain afloat thanks to its cooperative structure, network of collaborators and support by ethical finance.

The struggle to remain alive was also present in the Food Cooperative, located in a centric neighbourhood, with an excessive tourist exposure, gentrification trends, and declining numbers of long-term residents. Here, the maintenance of a physical space of encounter based on cooperation and mutuality around ecological food production and distribution was seen as a main accomplishment.

> *"Actually, the Food Coop is an example that works because it is kept small (…) because of the way we work and organize ourselves. There is not so much money involved, nor do we make money out of being part. These are some of the fundamental issues that make it successful…These small initiatives that are local and grass-roots are examples of projects to learn from…" X., member of the Food Cooperative (2015).*

5.3.2. Growth in members, networks, replication and influence

It might seem counterintuitive to pursue growth in the context of initiatives that prefigure degrowth. Yet organizational growth has meant influence, popularity and political leverage for the modes of provisioning that align with notions of socio-ecological justice (Kunze and Becker, 2015). A number of interviewees perceived a subversive touch in the growth of sustainable cooperative food and electricity production/retail for shifting sales away from corporate economic structures. Cunico et al. (2022) for example, argue that if degrowth-inspired cooperatives do not reach certain size they may end up unviable in the long term. Nonetheless, after reaching a certain threshold size, in-build dynamics such as orientation towards the local scale, sufficiency and democracy tend to limit CBI's organizational growth. Indeed, a number of energy communities in the UK have deliberately decided to limit their expansion due to the time, stress, resources, and disconnection from the local context and social base that growth might entail (Hobson et al., 2016).

Such dynamics were somewhat present in the Energy Cooperative. One of its key organizational objectives in 2014 was to reach 100,000 contracts and 100% own generation of the renewable energy sold. A member of the governance council at that time shared that: *"The key success has been our growth in such a short time, without dying along the way… the first year we had 1200 members, in the second 5000, in the third 12,000…"*. Nine years later the cooperative reached 83.000 members and 120.000 contracts amidst null state support and multiple bureaucratic hurdles. Interviewees attributed the initial membership growth to the relatively low pricing of the energy sold by the cooperative, driven by the tiny margin between the purchase price obtained at the general market and what members were charged for. Growth in contracts further meant that more funds got invested in own generation, influencing the total energy mix of the country, and cracking existing oligopolies. Over time, however, the growth started to generate a number of hurdles. In the context of the volatile energy prices in 2022, the cooperative had to cease signing new contracts. Amidst continuously rising energy prices (and energy insecurity in general), growth simply meant that the cooperative could not have the liquidity to supply all the energy demanded and contracted over the next year.

> *"Our growth is a debate and a tension that we will never resolve. …. It is, however, this very tension between growth and internal communication and care, that is helping us go forward… Unless we perceive and appreciate the learning experience associated with the conversations generated by this tension, we are losing our time….", L., worker of the Energy Cooperative (2023).*

Reaching a "right" size, one that is sufficiently large to pay the costs, and sufficiently small to manage production in socially and environmentally considerate ways, has also been key for the existence of the two organic farms. Both of them started producing for about 40 households, and gradually grew by providing for more groups and households (reaching a production of 1 tone of vegetables p/week in the case of Farm 1). The two farms' survival and growth, however, has been directly dependent on their efficiency and capacity to cooperate and network with other producers. This is the reason why both farms contributed to the creation of networks of producers that exchanged vegetables, ordered, and dispatched together. Such practice allowed each farm to provide a larger food offer with a local socio-ecological stamp and eventually serve more people, while cutting on transport costs and emissions, and making their projects more visible and enduring.

Other informants saw replication as an equally important achievement. For example, the Energy Cooperative's model has been replicated by 12 energy initiatives across Spain, which adopted its organizational blueprints, while adjusted to the specificities of local geographies. Likewise, up until 2013–2015 food cooperatives in the city of Barcelona tended to replicate, rather than grow. The Food Cooperative did not contemplate growing beyond 30 household units, and when a sufficiently large pool of people got on its waiting list (of future members), it facilitated the establishment of new consumer groups, transferring know-how, and contacts. In the same

fashion, the Living Community experience and practices inspired the start of multiple other intentional communities across Catalonia. According to informants such a replication has facilitated socio-ecological mobilization and transition across different geographies.

5.3.3. Fostering a culture of civic empowerment for an ecological and socio-political transition

A number of interviewees were seemingly coming to terms with what they perceived as the limits of their initiatives to challenge the dominant industrialized model of provisioning, and aspired to direct more attention towards awareness raising and political mobilization. Several informants saw the existences of the CBIs as springboards for mutual learning, cooperation, and socio-political mobilization. Participation was perceived as an immersion into a culture of political reflection, and getting hands-on experience with the praxis of collective and horizontal mobilization around issues of agroecology, feminism, and postgrowth.

> *"To justify your produce, you need politics and awareness-raising. We have had to do a lot of education to explain that what we offer is not just 'organic vegetables', but the production, or generation, of social and relational value, and of a local economy". C. a farmer, member of the network of producers of Farm 2 (2023).*

Likewise, the birth of the Energy Cooperative, for example, was facilitated by the formation of local groups that espoused and disseminated its ideas in various public fora. For some interviewees, one of the biggest achievements of this cooperative was the local groups' capacity to debate and defend an alternative, radical and justice-oriented energy model. Others argued that the formation of the Energy Cooperative brought people together in a nurturing and stimulating space of learning and political organizing, beyond what is required for running the initiative. In its early years, the Food Cooperative members also aspired at contributing to the socio-political and ecological struggles around touristification, housing rights, and gentrification at the level of the neighbourhood. One successful action that informants frequently pointed out was the organization of annual multi-ethnic football tournaments in collaboration with immigrant associations. However, engaging with social and political struggles required time and energy, which a decreasing fraction of the food and energy cooperatives' members were able to afford. Over time, the CBIs had less capacity to participate in, and contribute to neighbourhood struggles or political mobilization.

> "*When we started off as ecological farmers, many of us were driven by the desire to change the world. I have always argued that for me being a small local ecological farmer is a kind of political activism. For example, I have 100 households that do not buy vegetables at Carrefour… But the agriculture profession is smashing you, and you end up burned out. If on top of that you have assemblies, and political activism you just collapse. So, you eventually decide to be 'only' a farmer…" C. a member of the network of producers of Farm 2 (2023).*

While balancing between resistance, existence, growth and contribution to broader socio-political struggles might seem doable, evidence shows that these goals tend to walk uneasy together within the same organizations, if not even undermining each other. Some initiatives got forced to focus on survival, slowing down on public participation and social mobilization. In turn, such twists might be fertile for reinventing organizational expressions (as in the case of the Energy Cooperative) and the paths to wider and radical socio-political transformation.

6. Discussion: rethinking success for community-based initiatives that prefigure degrowth futures

The first observation from the earlier section is that the three edges of the triangle of organizational thriving (the achievement of results and attending to members' needs and group processes) were manifested, enacted, and experienced differently in all CBIs. While achieving results was explicitly recognized and pursued by each group, the latter two aspects of success were somewhat obscure. Caring about processes implied that the information and resources that traversed each group were regulated well and that task-distribution was equitable and effective, while decisions taken in view of differences in visions, positionalities and subjectivities. In turn, care for members' needs required recognizing and honouring personal limits and the multiplicity of personal motivations and life-circumstances that framed participation and membership. The edge of the triangle (Fig. 1) associated with members' needs and limits, was least attended and performed. This said, and far from reinvigorating the strong hold of individualism in Western societies, we have seen that by being aware of members' fatigue, burn out, needs, and limits, CBIs were in a better position to achieve their long-term ambition and to thrive altogether. As per processes, we saw that the vitality of many initiatives sprang from their capacity to learn, adapt and transform, which was materialized when they could attend to the "invisible", and the "invisibilized" tensions, or members. When the organizational culture and place-based embeddedness of groups allowed for hidden dynamics to surface in 'safe spaces', they discovered and manifested versatile, apt, and adaptive responses to the changing socio-economic and political realities. This however required time for reflection, search and confusion, slowing pace, and being less ferrous about reaching set goals at all costs.

Care, as the line that connects and underpins the two bottom edges of the triangle (Fig. 1) was the fundamental ingredient to organizational thriving. It was the baseline 'texture' that interwove the three dimensions of success into one interconnected, symbiotic and dynamic whole, meaning that attention to people's needs and group processes formed the basis from which results unfolded. Stated differently, results for CBIs with an appeal to sustainability and degrowth were hard to achieve and sustain without considering needs and processes, hence reproductive and care work (Mies, 1997).

Second, and just like in living systems (Escorihuela, 2019), the results-people-process triangle does not suggest a hierarchic structure, or a superior dimension of, success. In each group success was a unique, rather than a proportional, or symmetric, mix between the different axes. The three edges of thriving were interrelated, but did not always come easily together, especially when the resources and time (for care, conviviality, and communication) were limited. We furthermore saw that maintaining an equilibrium, or

dedicating an equal share of effort towards results, needs, and processes was a colossal task. On some occasions, focusing mainly on the pursuit of tangible and instrumental results drew energy away from building a social base, trust, and cohesion, which eventually debilitated the initiative and rendered it dysfunctional. In other cases, process-oriented measures like diversifying member profiles, language and discourses, and attending to power dynamics at various levels, helped the organization remain afloat and eventually thrive. Moreover, the relevance of attending to human needs and organizational processes often got visible in times of inflection, difficulty, or crisis. Organizations are dynamic, living systems where balancing points are temporal, and discrepancies could become fertile if carefully unfolded (Sekulova et al., 2017). As argued by a worker of the Energy Cooperative, *"We live in the constant tension between the three edges…and it is not the resolution of this tension, but the dialogues that we have around these which help us advance"*.

Third, the question of who provided the care for the groups' processes and members, and the ways caretakers' roles were reshuffled over time (Kotsila et al., 2020) was pertinent to all CBIs. The acts of identifying, and acting upon tensions and exclusion, or addressing power dynamics were mostly gendered, or performed by women. Placing 'care' for people and organizational processes as a strategic element of organizational success, may hence not only contribute to organizational thriving, but do justice to those overwhelmingly dedicated to reproductive work (Mies, 1997).

One may further ask whether these initiatives have actually contributed much to a justice-tuned sustainability, given their largely middle-class appeal (Argüelles et al., 2017). Reviewing community-energy projects across Germany Rommel et al. (2018) argue that while many projects have familiarized thousands of people with alternative economic models, there is little evidence of a general change in attitudes towards techno-fixes, lower consumption modes, or social justice. These findings actually illustrate how a single metrics of success, such as upscaling renewable energy generation, can hardly trigger shifts across the economic system, unless grounded in care ethos, and hence accompanied by actions directed at diversifying membership and reflecting upon inclusion, privilege, and power in CBIs and beyond.

In the preceding analysis we also noted the heavy semantic load of 'success' as a notion and a term. Success in sustainability transition and wider literature is frequently attached to an orthodox set of ideas associated with the achievement of quantifiable results, or organizational growth. Hence, why talking about success at all? As one of the founders of Farm 1 shared, …*"success is a terrible word. I would never use it beyond the day-to-day little successes, it reminds me so much of business-as-usual. Success as a milestone does not work for us."* While we prefer the term 'thriving' to 'success', our intention is to shuffle and extend the very connotation of the latter term. Researchers, planners and policy-makers engaging with sustainability transition need to acknowledge that 'success' is not only nested in the realization of tangible results but in dealing with the needs of members and the quality of their relatedness, communication, and decision-making. Organizing towards degrowth needs the time and space for unfolding internal group processes and the attendance to participants' needs, even if this seemingly implies placing the search for tangible results on hold. In other words, the ethos and performance of care need to be factored in as a lever of, or a proxy for, degrowth organizing.

7. Conclusion

We have argued above that while reaching targets is undoubtedly essential for CBIs that embody and prefigure degrowth, evaluating organizations solely through the lens of achieving tangible results reproduce outdated, productivist, and deeply exploitative logics, even if subscribing to a sustainability jargon (Büchs and Koch, 2019). Care for members' needs and organizational processes is not a routine benchmark of 'success' in the sustainability transition literature, though clearly recognized as such in various strands of feminist writing (Kotsila et al., 2020; Mountz et al., 2015). In this vein, we have conceptualized CBIs as living systems, whose thriving is premised upon their simultaneous achievement of results and performance of care for members and organizational processes (such as communication, negotiation, conflict-resolution, and decision-making).

Upon nine years of engagement with CBIs in the province of Barcelona, we saw a great diversity in the ways that results-oriented approaches to success were experienced and manifested: from the very existence of socially and ecologically mindful alternatives to industrial capitalist provisioning, to their socio-political influence, spread, leverage, and outreach. The needs and process-oriented perceptions and manifestations of success, or thriving, were, however, less explicit and, at times, harder to concurrently accomplish.

Our findings demonstrate that 'care' is a means, and a landmark, of organizational thriving and degrowth organizing. While attaining visible results is fundamental for organizational existence, missing on the intangible aspects that ensure the effective functioning and reproduction of organizations may undermine their transformational potential and long-term survival. The initiatives that could welcome a diversity of voices and hold spaces for collective organizational reflexivity, while ensuring that the voices of those excluded and disproportionally loaded with common tasks were taken into consideration, managed to remain afloat in times of difficulty and to thrive over time. Likewise, attending to members' needs formed the backbone of the CBI's capacity to survive and achieve results. Nonetheless, this was the least visible and performed edge of success, and the one recognized most frequently in times of crises, member burn-outs, and group break-downs.

That said, attending to individual needs and organizational processes is a tough quest, or a privilege, as it requires redirecting energy and time away from immediate survival. Community-led initiatives are confronted with mounting socio-economic pressures of a neoliberal productive system and cannot easily afford to slow down and attend to internal processes and people's needs. Ingenuity may thus lie in imperfectly and creatively manoeuvring between and beyond the interstices of capitalism, within the accidental, imperfect, and the imminent space of daily realities and reconstructions. Organizational thriving lies not in a fixed or given formula, but in the continuous, unique, situated and careful navigation of the tension between achieving results and attending to members' needs, amidst effective organizational processes.

We explored the five organizational experiences as unique and geographically bounded, or determined. In other words, the cultural and socio-political landscape of the five CBIs has left a strong imprint on our findings. That said, looking at the wider literature, it may

be the case that the trends identified above-namely that downplaying care is likely to block organizational thriving in self-organized communities striving at sustainability-are not unique for the South European geographies (Cunico et al., 2022; Aiken et al., 2022; Kunze and Becker, 2015).

Finally, just as for each CBI 'success' was a unique, rather than evenly proportional, mix between results, needs and processes, the biophysical, anthropological, cultural, psychological, and political roots of degrowth thought come together, embrace, support, and build upon each other (Demaria et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the central tenets of degrowth, might end up being a risky undertaking without considering the multiple subjectivities and personal needs entailed in the envisioned transition, or without enhancing and practicing inclusive, decolonial, deeply democratic, and emancipatory organizational processes (Nirmal and Rocheleau, 2019). Undoubtedly, sustainability transitions and its degrowth strand require strategic action along multiple levers of social order (Barlow et al., 2022). Yet, such transformation needs to be accompanied with acts that cultivate the capacity to engage with self-inquiry as a means of incarnating a reflexive, care-based, and care-full organizational culture (Dengler and Lang, 2022), one that is slightly less troubled with visible achievement, and more concerned with the reproductive base of the desirable social change. In other words, organizing towards degrowth, or radical political transformation, requires that care (for group processes and the needs of those who take part, or are impacted and concerned) is not only theorized, but actually foregrounded, embodied and hardwired at the level of the praxis.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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