The Commonfare Project.
Designing to Support Grassroots Welfare Initiatives

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Abstract

This contribution presents the Commonfare / PIE News project, funded by the European Commission within the Horizon 2020 framework program, and the commonfare.net platform, which constitutes the main tool and result of the project. The core project objectives include the promotion of alternative and sustainable forms of bottom-up self-management of the resources, and the development of anti-capitalistic economic models and of participated welfare tools grounded in practices of sharing and cooperation by people and communities. To achieve this objective, social sciences and technology design are combined in a way that displays the potential of interdisciplinary work when focusing on collaborative digital technologies.

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We are in a shuttle from Dundee to Edinburgh airport, after two days of intense conversations about the Commonfare project, in which our different disciplinary and political experiences have unfolded through collective brainstorming, tensions, and negotiations. We know that these moments are crucial, the points around which tensions arise are our windows on the world with which we are engaging, our paths to the situated emergence of shared knowledge.

Introduction

The Commonfare / PIE News project is supported by the European Commission within the Horizon 2020 program and was born with the intent to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of a growing part of the European population. According to Eurostat data, in fact, about 25% of European citizens is composed of precarious workers, of people who have left the social protection networks or have never entered them, of those who, despite having a job, find themselves in financial difficulties (working poor), of young people who are no longer involved in the educational system and struggle to find employment (NEETs), and of migrant workers, with both European and non-European origin.

Within this project, we refer to these people as "financial outsiders", to underline the various forms of marginalization and tacit blackmail to which the considered population is exposed, but also to refuse — as we learned on the field, thanks and through the research and co-design activities carried out with these people — any form of labelling (Becker 1963; Gill and Maynard 1995; Pollner 1978) that, although apparently legitimate and well founded (for example on official statistics such as Eurostat), reduces the subjectivity and life of individuals to their financial and work condition. Hence the double name of the project, Commonfare / PIE News, hereafter only Commonfare, since the original acronym, PIE News, stands for "Poverty, lack of Income and un/Employment News" (Botto and Teli 2017). The change of the name is part of a more general rethinking of project and platform communication, stemming from considering the language used in digital artefacts (commonfare.net in the first place) and the disciplinary, cultural, and ideological assumptions it incorporates (Bassetti et al. 2017).
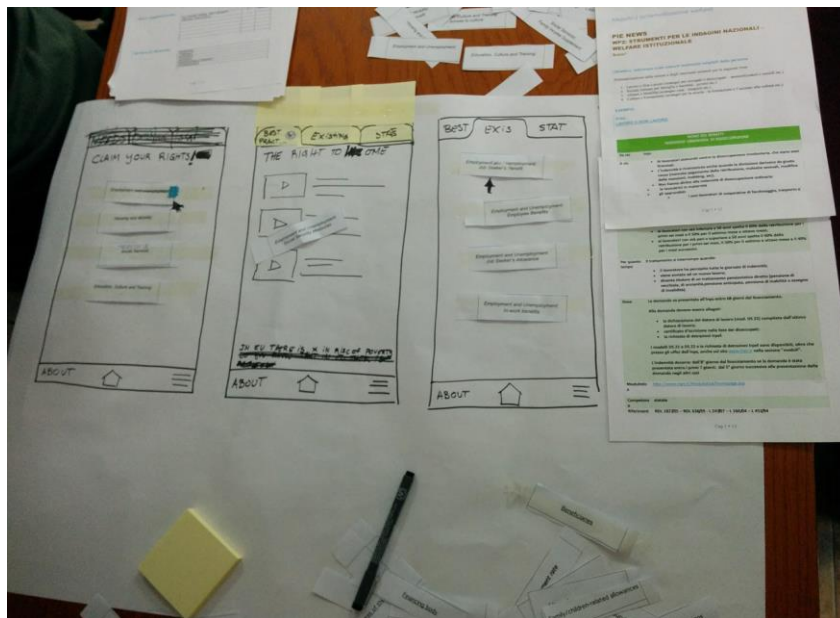

Figure 1. Zagreb, September 2016: early prototyping of the user interface.

The main and most general objective of the project is to promote the emergence of the Commonfare ("Commonfare – Wikipedia" n.d.) as an alternative and sustainable socio-economic model, capable of meeting the needs and desires of people in financial difficulties through several forms of collaborative self-management of the resources. This model differs from the capitalistic

one based on exploitation and accumulation, as it embeds tools of participatory welfare based on solidarity and practices of care that people and communities enact in order to improve the living conditions of everyone. To achieve this goal, we are developing a digital platform — commonfare.net — and a complementary currency — CommonCoin — with the aim of fostering the networking of people, communities and experiences thereby supporting promising ideas, experiments and initiatives of alternative and collaborative welfare.

Figure 2. Zagreb, September 2016: first discussion on events in the project timeline.

Figure 3. Zagreb, September 2016: reporting the local people feedbacks on interface mock-ups.

The project is carried out by a highly multidisciplinary project consortium (some images of partners working together at the beginning of the project in Fig. 1–3, 7), through a research and co-design methodology that leverages participatory design methods (see for instance Fig. 4, 7, 8) to be applied to a multi-sited context, transnational scale, and everyday life (rather than workplace) scenarios. It foresees 3 case studies in 3 European countries — Croatia, Italy, and the Netherlands — and, thanks to the collaboration of local activist organizations, it involves people in financial difficulties with whom commonfare.net is being designed and developed, as well as public administrations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), associations, etc.,

whose collaboration is fundamental for the effectiveness, diffusion and sustainability of commonfare.net.

Commonfare and Commonfare.net

The overarching objective, therefore, consists in promoting bottom-up forms of collaboration for the sharing of resources of several kinds — goods, knowledge, skills, points of view, etc. — through a fair (self-)management and in alignment with people's needs and desires. These are what we call "good practices". Examples range from solidarity buying groups, cohabitation experiences, FabLabs, time banks, co-working spaces, self-managed creches, social cooperatives, ethic banks, urban gardens, popular gyms, initiatives related to free and open source software. Among project activities and outcomes, we mapped such initiatives in the three considered countries, we selected some of them based on five criteria,[1] and we reported selected grassroots collaborative experiences both in official reports (Fumagalli et al. 2017) and on a dedicated section of commonfare.net. They are intended as a source of information and inspiration for other local communities and groups all over Europe.

Figure 4. Croatia, January 2017: participants at the Design Workshop 2.

If it is possible to talk about *platform cooperativism* (Scholz and Schneider 2017), as an alternative and a form of resistance to platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016), it is important to stress that the project has a wider objective than structuring the ownership of platforms in a cooperative way: commonfare.net is to be understood as a space of online interaction aimed at allowing the networking of geographically distant people who experience similar living conditions, but also as a flywheel effect for offline collaboration and sharing activities, hence primarily among local communities. In fact, the highest-level principles that inspire the Commonfare as "the economy of us" (Fumagalli et al. 2017) are reciprocity, solidarity, and conviviality. A real improvement of people's daily life inevitably passes, we believe, by the re-appropriation of forms of sociality that neoliberal capitalism, which makes social interaction a show of debordian memory (Debord 1967; Best and Kellner 1999; Briziarelli and Armano 2017), tends to expunge.

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[1] The criteria are the following: effectiveness in achieving the goals set and a positive impact on the community; sustainability, especially in terms of mid- to long-term financial and managerial autonomy; innovation, intended as the potential to meet emerging needs and desires; reproducibility in similar contexts; transferability to different contexts and sectors.

Figure 5. A story and the Storybuilder in commonfare.net Release 3.

Commonfare.net is a multi-channel (*responsive design* starting from a *mobile first* approach) and multilingual (Croatian, Italian, Dutch and English) digital platform that makes extensive use of *open source* components. More specifically, it is proposed as a digital space for:

- *informing*, through the aggregation and organization of useful information related to the welfare measures available in the three considered countries, where these measures are both institutional (national, regional and/or municipal – "Public Benefits" on commonfare.net) and self-organized ("Good Practices");

- *storytelling and sharing* personal and community experiences, local experimentation with bottom-up autonomous management of resources, and events and initiatives as told and presented by those who participate to commonfare.net ("Commoners' voices" and groups of Commoners, mostly already existing offline, i.e. local communities);

- *promoting and sustaining* grassroots experiences and bottom-up welfare initiatives, thanks to their circulation and the support provided by tools that foster interaction and resource-sharing ("CommonShare" and "Commonplace"), including a monetary circuit alternative to that of the Euro and other national currencies ("CommonCoin").

Whereas the first objective has been achieved thanks to the research work and systematization carried out within the project consortium, the second largely rests on the involvement of people and communities. In this sense, the design and development effort has been oriented towards digital storytelling tools capable of fostering such an involvement and the visibility of the experiences narrated through the provision of guided storytelling procedures (Fig. 5). The aim is to support less experienced narrators and storytellers in creating "beautiful" stories (Fig. 6). Moreover, following a transmedia approach, storytelling tools have been designed to circulate what is told even outside commonfare.net, in other digital spaces, and above all in the offline material world. One example is the foreseen possibility of automatically creating posters, stickers or business cards following the sharing of an initiative or a community experience on the platform.

Figure 6. One of the Commoners' Voices.

Figure 7. Amsterdam, June 2017: project partners at the at the General Assembly 3.

On the other hand — and crucial to the achievement of the third objective — particular attention is devoted to the analysis of network dynamics and to the development of a trust building mechanism that, in distancing itself from the reputation systems in use on commercial platforms (such as Facebook, eBay or Airbnb), supports involvement and participation thereby creating the basis for the widespread use, hence the effectiveness, of the CommonCoin circuit and for the maintenance of a critical mass of participants in commonfare.net (*Commoners*) able to guarantee long-term sustainability thanks to the emergence of a recursive public. The challenge, in this sense, is to develop a monetary circuit and an economic system — inevitably based on trust — within a digital space designed with great attention to the privacy of those taking part (*privacy by design*). The approach adopted aims to create a completely transparent system for those who work inside, but completely opaque for those who look at it from the outside. Mutual trust is supported by the *CommonShare* tool, a measure — based on the analysis of network dynamics — of the individual and collective (*Commoners* and groups of *Commoners*) contribution to the strength and density of the network developed around commonfare.net and, ultimately, to the diffusion of the Commonfare as a socio-economic model and a social lifestyle.

The analysis of network dynamics performs two other functions. On the one hand, it is used to monitor any speculative dynamic within the *CommonCoin* circuit, which instead is intended to be characterized by the absence of any form of speculation and accumulation. It is also important to underline, from this point of view, that the Commonfare digital wallet has been conceived and designed as an instrument to offer an alternative source of *unconditional income* for anyone participating in commonfare.net. On the other hand, network dynamics analysis provides a tool for monitoring, evaluating and analysing emerging needs, living conditions, wishes and interests of the participants. This is expected to impact the informing objective of the considered digital space, and to be of particular interest for institutions and organizations that work with and for people in financial difficulties or who deal in various ways with welfare, labour policies, and (digital) social innovation.

Research and Co-Design

The involvement as well as the active and repeated participation of people, groups and communities are therefore fundamental elements both for conducting the considered research and co-design project and for its success in terms of social innovation (or social change, to identify our objective without resorting to a currently abused word such as innovation). Hence the centrality of the three pilot studies conducted in Croatia, Italy and the Netherlands, thanks to the mediation of three partner organizations of the consortium. Each national study involves different categories of people and focuses on some cities. In particular: Museu de Crise (MdC) operates in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague, and works with freelancers, welfare recipients and non-European migrants; Basic Income Network Italy (BIN) is an association active in Milan and Rome and focuses on precarious workers and young and unemployed youths; finally, the Centar za Mirovne Studij (CMS, centre for peace studies) works in Croatia, especially in Zagreb but also in Rijeka, Split and Osijek, with the so-called NEETs.

Figure 8. Milan, March 2018: visiting "Rimaflow" during the Design Workshop 4.

Starting from October 2016, multi-sited research and co-design activities were conducted in the three countries through interviews, focus groups and design workshops. To date, over 250 people have been involved and over 50 collective meetings have been held between focus-groups and workshops in the various local communities. With most of these communities, the researchers, designers and developers belonging to the other partner organizations of the consortium have come into contact on various occasions. Indeed, partner organization include also the University of Trento (Italy) as project coordinator, the Abertay University (Scotland), the Madeira Interactive Technologies Institute (Portugal), the Bruno Kessler Foundation (Italy) and

Dyne.org which is a "free software foundry" based in Amsterdam. A pilot case study for the CommonCoin was conducted in Milan, with the self-managed group *MACAO – New Center for the Arts, Culture and Research*.
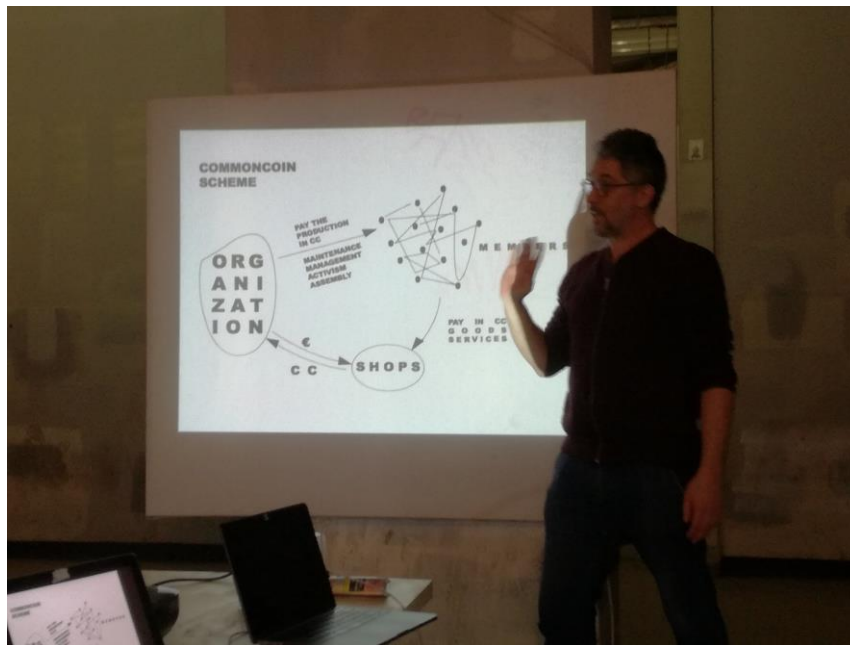

Figure 9. Milan, March 2018: participants in "Macao" explaining us how the Commoncoin as piloted in their Good Practice works.

As we mentioned, the adopted approach has its roots in the tradition of *participatory design*, with which it shares the attention to the endogenous practices of the considered context, the qualitative methods of ethnographic imprint, as well as the idea of an open and "endless" design process, based on the sharing of information and knowledge and on collective action. However, where this approach deals with small-scale projects, generally in workplace contexts, the *public design* at the centre of the Commonfare project is oriented towards large-scale actions, in distributed and transnational contexts that, as such, are multilingual and multicultural. The challenge is therefore to bring processes and results of local co-design activities at the supra-local, transnational level, to lay the foundations for the circulation of information and the sharing of knowledge beyond the borders of the local communities of research participants. It is not by chance, we believe, that one of the current trends in the scientific community of reference — namely, infrastructuring— does not aim at producing tools capable of serving the specific needs of a single community, but at providing tools that are flexible enough to be appropriated and customized by different communities according to their respective needs and desires, and considering also that these can change over time.

Why, one might ask, to choose qualitative research for a transnational project that aspires to become European or even international? Firstly, because it allows us to better understand and to analyse in depth aspects and dynamics of the problem (i.e., financial difficulties and forms of marginalization) that have to do with people's daily lives, involving their subjectivities and experiences, and that remain largely hidden, opaque, when the question is dealt with exclusively quantitative methods (which also find space in the project). An example of this is the rejection of reductionist labels that we mentioned at the beginning of this article. Secondly, the use of qualitative methods makes it possible, *de facto*, to directly link people and communities from different social worlds, and thus to encourage the circulation and sharing of knowledge, experiences, points of view on the world, conceptualizations of social living, and so on. This opens up to forms of sociality oriented towards conviviality, reciprocity and solidarity, thereby laying the foundations for a real process of collaboration and autonomous co-management. Moreover, and finally, by giving voice to this multiplicity of points of view and experiences, ethnographic research enriches and enliven the public discourse around the considered issues.

Conclusion: Designing for Political and Social Aims

We would like to close by giving voice to some of these experiences and subjectivities. This is the fundamental provocation of a research and design project as Commonfare: different disciplinary and political backgrounds converge, diverge, and change in a self-reflexive way when the encounter with people, good practices, and the empirical world happens. From this point of view, we would like to focus on two aspects in which the practices of a multidisciplinary consortium relate to the life of people in such knowledge-generative process: the emerging needs and desires of the people encountered on the field, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the role and value they assign to their interactions and social relationships.

Regarding the first aspect — limiting to a brief overview and referring, for further details, to the aforementioned research report — it seems important to underline how, alongside needs that could be defined primary, as well as primarily "material" in nature, such as (guaranteed) income and housing, we find needs of a personal nature, such as psychological support and autonomy in time management, and, of particular interest in our opinion, a set of requirements for design linked to the need to connect, meet and interact with other people, to share and collaborate, to maintain and nurture relationships: examples are free mobility, free internet access, sharing of experiences, training and learning.

It is not by chance that, from the point of view of the different people who have participated in the process of research and co-design so far, social relationships represent one of the most important assets. The ability to find spaces, time and resources to interact with those who already belong to one's network and to know new people is deemed fundamental. From this point of view, digital artefacts are considered useful tools as long as they support the (re)configuration of social relations, thereby favouring, as we mentioned at the beginning, the supporting and infrastructuring of co-present, face-to-face social interactions — that is, of life in common.

These two elements are, in fact, consistent with an understanding of digital technologies as supportive of individual experiences and collaborative practices. This is part of a set of assumptions implicitly brought forward by the consortium members and that has been made explicit, and empirically consistent, by the extensive research they conducted. By writing the present text – a provocative practice for our thinking in the age of academic speed – we came to better realize how investigating the subjective perspectives of the people we interviewed, engaged in workshop and focus group, and involved in commonfare.net brought us to a wider understanding of their diverse desires. We also see how people's desires, although differing, align with the objective of the project consortium as summarized in the outcome of one of the first interdisciplinary design activity we conducted among project partners by using a specific design tool, the so-called "positioning cards" (Teli, De Angeli, and Menéndez-Blanco 2017). Indeed, the results of such an activity pointed to our own desire for individual self-determination within a collaborative environment. All the tensions and negotiations that are part of this ambitious design project (described in, e.g., Lyle, Sciannamblo, and Teli 2018), can be reduced to a main, crucial tension: that between the assumptions of the researchers-designers – with all their disciplinary differences – and their common desire to value and care for the voices of the people involved – which is our main political act.

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