Seeds of Degrowth?

The Politics of Scaling and Working in Community-supported Agriculture Co-operatives

By

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Abstract

The pursuit of continuous economic growth as necessary, desirable, and limitless informs governments, businesses, and the social relations amongst people. However, in the face of rapidly accelerating ecological breakdown, intensifying social inequalities, and rising geopolitical tensions, the mantra of infinite growth on a finite planet is increasingly put into question by social movements and scholars across academic disciplines. Grounded in longstanding critiques of growth, discourses of degrowth outline counterproposals on how life could be organised towards ecological and human well-being instead of growth. While recent efforts have been made to understand organisational configurations of degrowth, it still remains largely unclear what degrowth means for organisations and forms of organising. In particular, there is a dearth of knowledge about the social processes of alternative organising and the extent to which these are conducive to a degrowth transformation.

This thesis examines the prefigurative potential of alternative organising in relation to degrowth. Situated within the context of growth-driven agri-food systems, understood as a prominent driver of ecological crises and deteriorating working conditions, this study explores alternative food networks aiming to prefigure more socially just and ecologically sustainable forms of food provisioning. Overall, this research analyses the possibilities and limits of Community-supported Agriculture (CSA) co-operatives in prefiguring degrowth. Accordingly, three sub-research questions are addressed: (1) How do organisational practices within CSA co-operatives interrelate with wider socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth, (2) How do CSAs strategise scaling pathways towards socio-ecological transformation, and (3) How do CSA workers organise, negotiate, and experience work. This research utilises a comparative maximum variation case study design focusing on two CSA co-operatives in Germany. Each case study features semi-structured interviews, online participatory engagement, document studies, focus groups and field visits.

The thesis offers three main theoretical contributions. Firstly, this research shows that degrowth-oriented imaginaries constitute a pertinent influence on organising rationales and objectives of CSA actors. However, such influence remains disconnected from everyday organisational practice. Given the empirical absence of degrowth in alternative organisational practice, this research suggests the need to taking a more

critical and cautious stance when translating multifaceted political economic ideas of degrowth to instances of alternative organising. Secondly, this research posits that degrowth imaginaries, alongside the need to adapt and mitigate to accelerating ecological crises, can constitute seeds of rupture when aiming to scale transformative change. By focusing on strategising processes, this research challenges the relative lack of attention of organisational scholarship on the politics, power dynamics, and contingencies within social processes to negotiating scaling pathways in alternative organisations. Specifically, this research posits that market-insulated co-operatives informed by degrowth imaginaries at the founding stage are at risk of facing overt means-ends tensions more quickly than other types of alternative organisations, because of the enlarged sphere of influence which gives prevalence to political imaginaries. Thirdly, this research adds to nascent debates within organisation studies by foregrounding efforts to countering forces of alienation within alternative food labour as a terrain of struggle on a dynamic continuum between de/re-alienation. While CSA co-operatives can provide an outlet for degrowth-oriented ideas of de-alienated labour, this research challenges perspectives primarily foregrounding the emancipatory characteristics of CSA and co-operative work. In particular, this thesis argues that the extent to which CSA work constitutes a source of de/re-alienation is contingent upon path dependencies emerging from scaling dynamics, rather than direct market forces.

Keywords: Degrowth, Alternative Organisation, Prefiguration, Imaginaries, Scaling, Alienation

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

> ‘Economic growth, although the result of social relations between people, assumes the appearance of an objective necessity and imperative injunction. It is assumed to be essential, the lifeblood of our society. It comes to stand for what our society is and does. Its end, the end of capitalism, would appear as the end of humanity.’
>
> (Gareth Dale, *The Growth Paradigm*, 2012b)

The language of economic growth is omnipresent in contemporary societies, not least within the current conjuncture characterised by multiple socio-economic, geo-political, and perhaps most existentially, accelerating ecological crises. Growth is perceived as necessary, desirable, and ultimately limitless (Schmelzer et al. 2022). Indeed, growth often stands as a placeholder for ideas around human progress, prosperity, development, welfare, and freedom (Antonio 2013; Hamilton 2004; Jackson 2017; Purdey 2010). Since commencing this research in October 2019, the substance of such claim has been exemplified over and over again. When faced with COVID-19 pandemic implications, ubiquitous calls have been made to government officials and corporate leaders to ‘restart’ and ‘rev up’ the *growth engine* (Hunt and Witt 2021; Doherty and Koivuniemi 2020). In the British context from which this thesis is being written, future growth models (Rosamond 2019) and growth plans have been at the heart of debates about how the UK economy can ‘Build Back Better’ in the aftermath of the pandemic and exiting the EU (HM Treasury 2021). Indeed, both major parties agree that what the country now needs is ‘growth, growth, and growth’ (BBC 2022) and ‘long-term plans to grow the economy’ (Prime Minister's Office 2024), while differing only about how to induce it or its intended effects. As the quote from Gareth Dale at the beginning of this chapter indicates, economic growth indeed appears to be the *lifeblood* of our societies and a panacea for whatever the grievance or occasion.

Growth advocates make no secret that businesses are key to generating economic growth. Popular articles and advice abounds with recipes to spur business growth (e.g., Manji 2022). The phenomenon and imperative of economic growth also appears to be rooted, perhaps more than anywhere else, in the curriculum and research of Business Schools. Business and management scholarship is full of references about corporate

growth champions (Jones et al. 2012) and the entrepreneurial spirit necessary for growth (Doepke and Zilibotti 2014), reinforcing the belief in business and corporations as the 'engines of economic growth' (Klein 2000, p. 27). A recent sample of management journals having published 1,200 articles on growth, profit and competitiveness between 2007 and 2018, and only twenty-four articles on climate change (Nyberg and Wright 2022b) is a stark case in point.

Nonetheless, this unitary narrative and largely unquestioned consensus faces increasing scrutiny, highlighting the limits and consequences of infinite growth on a finite planet. Indeed, the mantra of perpetual economic growth which particularly gained traction after WWII (see Chapter 2) has always been contested. From stark warnings and critics in the 1970s (e.g., Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Daly 1972; Hirsch 1977; Mishan 1967; Meadows et al. 1972; Schumacher 1973), to a more recent, second wave of growth-critique under a broad spectrum of post-growth discourses (e.g., Kallis 2018; Raworth 2017; Jackson 2017; Paech 2019), emerging out of intensifying social and ecological pressures, are proof to many that sustained economic growth is irreconcilable with human and ecological well-being. Most comprehensive forms of post-growth critiques and imaginaries for radical socio-ecological transformation have over recent decades been united under an overarching activist and academic agenda around *degrowth* (see Chapter 2). As such, degrowth discourses appear to gain widespread traction within transdisciplinary scholarly debates (Kallis et al. 2018), political circles (Beyond Growth 2023) and public outlets (Kuper 2019; Inman and Bartholomew 2023).

While degrowth has made inroads into organisation and management studies (OMS), research on the relation between alternative ideas on growth and organisations still remains in an early stage and is often marginalised. This is even the case in scholarly fields[1] chiefly concerned with the relation between business and society, sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Kallio 2007; Maier 2024). At large, such absences mirror the relative lack of attention paid within degrowth debates on the meso-level, i.e., forms of organisation, while remaining largely occupied with macro-oriented debates on systemic shifts of growth-dependent economies and societies, or somewhat problematically, on micro-oriented discussions of individual lifestyle

[1] For simplicity, I refer to such scholarship under the broad umbrella of CSR throughout this thesis.

changes. Moreover, despite recent efforts to turn more attention to questions of *how* degrowth imaginaries and strategies may materialise in practice (Barlow et al. 2022; Schmelzer et al. 2022), the question of political and social *organisation* remains, both in theoretical and empirical terms (Banerjee et al. 2021). In other words, it is largely unclear what degrowth means on an organisational level, let alone how degrowth may be organised in the face of increasing backlashes against green agendas. While recent organisational research has sought to address the question of degrowth organisation, research-led interpretations and reconfigurations of degrowth to suit particular audiences, theoretical perspectives, or organisational activities (Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021; Froese et al. 2023) have led to conceptual ambiguities. Moreover, the fragmented literature thus far often appears to focus on a static and narrow application of degrowth principles or economic features in various organisational forms (see Chapter 3). As such, there appears to be a relative lack of attention paid to the struggles of enacting degrowth imaginaries in alternative organisational practice. More specifically, apart from recent efforts (e.g., Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023), studies investigating the social processes of organising degrowth appear largely absent from the literature.

In order to address this empirical and theoretical void in the literature, this research sought to investigate how degrowth is organised, negotiated, and contested within the empirical setting of alternative organisations. Given its existential value for the reproduction of human life, the food system, and agri-food organisations in particular, often stand out as both perpetrating and offering potential solutions for mounting ecological pressures such as the climate crises and biodiversity loss. The credo 'grow-or-die' has become the guiding principle of industrialised and productivist European agricultural development (Paech et al. 2019), which not only threatens working conditions and the existence of peasant and small-scale farmers (Böhm et al. 2020) but also paints a 'desolate' picture for the food security of much of the world's population by 2050 (Perry 2016, p. 129). Thus, voices advocating for a paradigm shift, away from an expansion-driven food system to facilitate a transition to sustainable agrifood systems and food sovereignty in line with postgrowth and degrowth ideas, are growing louder (McGreevy et al. 2022; Roman-Alcalá 2017; Nelson and Edwards 2020). Alternative food networks and movements are often perceived at the forefront of organising alternative forms of food provisioning away from the maxim of endless

growth. In particular, Community-supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives are often characterised as an alternative form of organising food embodying degrowth principles (see Chapter 4), and thus present a suitable empirical context for this study.

Against this backdrop, I have been interested in understanding how CSA actors come to relate to wider socio-political imaginaries around growth and degrowth within social processes of organising and working in CSAs. I wanted to get involved and join in farming activities, to dig my hands into the soil, and work alongside CSA workers on the fields. Unfortunately, such plans had been abruptly cut short due to COVID-19 pandemic implications. Nevertheless, following the online attendance of CSA gatherings and workshops, I began an eight-month engagement with the CSA network in Germany in a working group on co-operatives, as a volunteer and researcher in May 2021. Informed by this embedded online involvement and a brief field visit, I conducted a comparative case study analysis of two CSA co-operatives in order to understand how ambitions for food systems change inform CSA practitioners' collective organising and day-to-day work. Overall, these considerations formed the basis informing the aims and objectives that would guide the research process of this study.

1.1 Aims & Objectives

The main aim of this research has been to understand the possibilities and limits of CSA co-operatives in prefiguring degrowth. To do so, this research aimed to explore how and to what extent degrowth-informed organisations are analytically different from other forms co-operatives. By focusing on the interplay between social and political imaginaries of (de)growth and prefigurative processes within such alternative forms of organising, this thesis has sought to address the overall aim through three interrelated research questions.

Firstly, it aimed to understand how organisational practices within CSA co-ops interrelate with wider socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth. In particular, this research drew on Castoriadian (1987) conceptions of the generative interplay between social imaginaries and social practice, to interrogate how imaginaries of growth and degrowth affect organisational practice in the here and now. This meant exploring the ways in which CSA actors understand and make sense of their material social and ecological conditions at present, while being simultaneously

informed by past experiences and future projections. Given the explicitly articulated ambitions for socio-ecological transformation and systemic changes, this also involved shedding light on how the wider social and ecological conditions of agri-food production shape particular collective imaginations of how to organise for more desirable futures.

Secondly, the research aimed to interrogate how CSA co-ops strategise scaling pathways towards a socio-ecological transformation of the food system. In relation to (de)growth imaginaries, the analysis followed recent work on alternative scaling pathways in relation to degrowth ideas (Colombo et al. 2023). This involved a detailed analysis of conflictual social negotiation processes on how imaginaries of socio-ecological change may be furthered and put into practice within and through CSA organising. By analysing such processes within both CSA co-ops, the thesis sought to explore the extent to which socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth influence strategic orientations and processes of scaling as a terrain of struggle, culminating into organisational ruptures.

Thirdly, this thesis aimed to explore how CSA actors organise, negotiate, and experience work, against the backdrop of imaginaries to transforming agricultural labour as well as distinct scaling processes. Here, this research followed nascent organisational theorising (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Watson 2020; Langmead and Parker 2023) and applied a processual lens to interrogate the potentialities of CSA work in prefiguring de-alienated work. This involved an in-depth analysis of how CSA work is orchestrated and comes into being, while being attuned to the specificities of the day-to-day experiences and struggles of agri-food labour in times of ecological breakdown.

1.2 Thesis Structure

The thesis will start with an in-depth analysis of the relevant literature. This will commence in chapter two, which offers a review of discourses to growth and critiques thereof, resulting in a conceptual framework. It does so by initially outlining the framework along with some theoretical considerations following largely Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) conception of discourse and hegemony, before offering an in-depth analysis of the fundamental ideas, assumptions, and concepts of each discourse. The first section outlines a brief history and the core ideas of what I call *business-as-usual*

growth, before pointing to the ecological and social limits of such approach which accentuate the importance of alternative discursive formations. Subsequently, alternative discourses of *green growth, productivist growth, post-growth,* and *degrowth* will be discussed, while focusing on the primary antagonistic relation between the hegemonic nexus to growth, i.e., business-as-usual growth and green growth, and the counter-hegemonic formation of degrowth. Locating degrowth as offering an alternative, but more precautionary route allowing for possibilities of more sustainable futures through the radical socio-ecological shifts necessary, this thesis aims at contributing to the broader question of how degrowth may be put into practice through collective forms of organising.

Chapter three offers an in-depth interrogation of three core areas of literature in relation to the key analytical themes of this research. First, nascent scholarship on degrowth and postgrowth organisation is reviewed, identifying shortcomings on the often economistic, static, and narrow application of degrowth ideas in a variety of mainstream and alternative organisations. In aiming to address such shortcomings, attention will be paid to the interplay between social imaginaries and prefigurative processes of degrowth, focusing particularly on the politics and processes of organising degrowth in the context of alternative organising. Second, issues of political strategy are discussed by focusing on the intersection between prefigurative degrowth, interstitial strategies of transformation, and commons-based organising. This conception provides the basis for employing a processual and politicised understanding of organisational strategy in relation to growth. More specifically, attention will be given to issues of organisational scaling processes in the context of strategising for socio-ecological change in line with degrowth ideas. Third, a review of the literature on the transformation of work in line with degrowth ideas will be conducted by highlighting diverging schools of thought aiming for institutional and cultural shifts of work. The review then discusses the need to take a broader perspective on work including reproductive and decommodified activities geared towards the reproduction of life beyond growth, before addressing the emergent literature on de-alienated work through a processual lens.

Chapter four sets up the empirical rationale of this research, by situating this study within alternative food networks aiming for food system change. It will first make a case for the applicability of CSA organisations as commons-based forms of organising

in relation to degrowth, before shedding light on the organisational specificities of CSAs. Accordingly, this enables the positioning of research questions in relation to the specific analytical areas of interest.

Chapter five outlines the research methodology. This research builds on relational and anti-essentialist ontological assumptions primarily following Laclau and Mouffe (2014), while drawing on a critical constructivist epistemological understanding, with the overt purpose of investigating the relation between imaginaries and social practices of (de)growth from the perspective of socio-ecological justice. Outlining organisational discourses as unit of analysis and following an abductive logic of inquiry, the collaborative research ethos will be explained before elaborating on the comparative case study design and maximum variation sampling strategy. Subsequently, the reader will be introduced to the empirical setting of selected CSA co-operative case studies in Germany, by highlighting specificities in regard to organisational types, magnitudes, and co-operative regulations. Lastly, the layered stages of data collection will be explained, before outlining the theoretical considerations and procedures of the comparative case study analysis.

Chapter six presents the first part of empirical findings across both CSA cases. This chapter offers a grounded account of Green Ivy Co-op (GIC) and Sunflower Seeds Collective (SSC) actors' experiences of the social and ecological conditions of agri-food production in an age of climate breakdown, before turning to an analysis of how such experiences are projected forward into the future. Such past experiences and future projections offer important insights into transformative ecological, socio-economic, and political imaginaries of CSA actors towards food systems change, which form the basis for the following analysis of findings.

Chapter seven outlines empirical findings on the social processes of scaling within each case. First, the reader will be introduced to the specific organisational context and historical development of the CSA co-ops. Second, conflictual social processes of scaling are outlined in detail, by exploring the negotiation of diverse alternative scaling pathways and outlining how such negotiations culminated in organisational rupture. Third, differing strategic orientations to scaling internal and external transformative change are explored, with each structured around the same three themes. While politicising organisational limits, internal scaling strategies are found to build on ideas

of scaling relationality, consciousness, and solidarity within each CSA. Politicising organisational growth, external scaling strategies are grounded in ideas of pioneering, displacing, and mainstreaming transformative change outwardly. Such strategic orientations are described as forming the underlying rationales informing conflictual processes of strategising for socio-ecological change.

Chapter eight offers a detailed investigation of the organisation, negotiation, and experiences of CSA work within each case. Initially, the reader will be introduced to respective struggles of organising CSA labour processes in the aftermath of conflictual scaling processes, resulting in the dominance of a fast-growth dynamic within GIC, and a slow-growth dynamic within SSC. Subsequently, distinct processes of work formalisation are explained in regard to different forms of rationalisation, divisions of labour, and decision-making, which inform diverging structures of CSA work. Accordingly, the analysis turns to the day-to-day experiences of work with a primary focus on employed CSA workers in each case. The analysis of findings is structured into four distinct categories of workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work, with each containing two distinct dimensions. Overall, findings lend insights into the relationship between the manner in which imaginaries of transforming food labour materialise in practice and respective outcomes of scaling strategies.

Chapter nine offers a comparative analysis of findings across both cases in discussion with the key literature identified in chapter three. Following the structure of the findings chapters, the discussion is organised along three core themes in response to three research questions posed. As such, it offers a comparative reading of the interplay between (de)growth imaginaries, scaling processes, and possibilities of de-alienated work experiences across both CSA co-ops. This enables the overall conclusion to be drawn on the potentialities of CSA co-ops in prefiguring degrowth.

Chapter ten concludes the thesis by summarising the main theoretical and practical contributions of this thesis. Theoretically, this thesis offers three main contributions to the literature. Firstly, this research indicates a disconnect between discursive and macro-oriented political imaginaries of degrowth and their materialisation within daily organisational practice, suggesting a shift from how degrowth has been theorised and utilised in organisational research thus far. Secondly, this research contributes to the

organisational scaling literature by identifying degrowth imaginaries alongside the need to adapt and mitigate accelerating ecological crises as seeds of rupture in alternative organisations. Specifically, this research points to important differences between market-insulated co-operatives like CSAs that are informed by degrowth ideas at the founding stage in facing an overt means-ends tension more quickly than other, more market-dependent co-ops and social enterprises. Thirdly, this research adds to emerging debates within alternative organisational scholarship by foregrounding a dynamic continuum between de/re-alienation within the alternative food labour of CSAs. While providing a contingent outlet for degrowth-oriented imaginaries of de-alienated labour, this research points to path dependencies emerging from scaling dynamics rather than direct market forces. At last, methodological limitations of this research are considered in conjunction with outlining avenues for future research.

Chapter 2 - (Counter-)Hegemonic Formations of Growth

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to different understandings of growth. It does so by offering an analytical framework (Figure 2.1) that maps discursive formations of growth. Initially, this chapter provides a brief analysis of what I refer to as *business-as-usual growth*, i.e., the hegemonic formation of growth. This hegemonic formation of growth has evolved over many centuries and, in particular, within the post WWII era, to stand as the common sense of how social life ought to be organised in contemporary capitalist societies. At the same time, however, the analysis shows that such development has been far from inevitable, by pointing towards the contestations, contingencies, and critiques of growth which have an equally long history. Thus, this chapter gives a brief overview of how the ideological fixation on perpetual economic growth emerged historically, before highlighting the political-economic, socio-cultural, and organisational characteristics of business-as-usual growth. It will then turn to the ubiquitous and well-known ecological and social limits and consequences of such pursuit.

Building on growing discontent about the socio-ecological consequences of the hegemonic formation of growth, a variety of alternative discourses have emerged over past decades. These discourses to various degrees aim to challenge business-as-usual growth and associated forms of social organisation based on patterns of perpetual expansion of production and consumption. By providing an analytical framework which connects the political-economic ideas and assumptions of growth to the question of social organisation, this chapter offers a relational understanding of these discourses. Building on latent growth-critical work within organisation studies (e.g., Schneider and Murray 2024; Banerjee et al. 2021; Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021; Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021), the analytical framework aims at addressing the 'taboo' (Kallio 2007) of discussions around growth in OMS at large. Thus, the framework aims to build further ground to emphasise the systemic relationships organisations are embedded in, which tend to reproduce growth-driven discursive and material conditions. At the same time, alternative discourses to growth are positioned as offering avenues for revaluing this relationship. Accordingly, discourses of green growth, post-growth, productivist growth, and degrowth are outlined in more detail.

At last, theoretical considerations about the relationality of these discourses and the main antagonistic nexus identified within the framework are provided. Overall, this chapter highlights the key ideas, contentions and assumptions underlying each discourse with the intention to provide a better understanding of the politics of growth in relation to organising for socio-ecological change.

2.2 Theorising the Territory of the Growthocene

Theorising about discourses on economic growth, particularly concerning forms of organisation, frequently gives rise to ambiguous conceptions and misunderstandings as to 'what sort of growth' one is referring to. For the purpose of clarity, this chapter thus aims to initially offer clarifications on the underlying ontological and theoretical considerations informing the analytical framework, before delineating what I refer to as *territory* of growth discourses.

Ontologically, the framework presented entails a shift from predominant neoclassical conceptions of 'the economy' which appear to underlie much OMS research. Joining recent calls for a socio-ecological approach which recognises the 'interdependence between environment, society, and business' (Colombo et al. 2024, p. 1), the economic sphere is perceived as embedded within the social sphere, which in turn is fundamentally based on the biosphere (Martínez Alier and Muradian 2015). This means organisations and markets are not closed but open systems which interact with nature and the social sphere. This has profound implications on how we study and conceptualise organisations, as it urges a shift to relational ontologies (Ergene et al. 2020), breaking up the conceptual separation between humans and the natural environment. This shift emphasises the dependence of organisations as being part of, and ultimately shaping and being shaped by, nature and social relations, rather than constituting isolated market entities operating solely on price-driven mechanisms of supply and demand.

Theoretically, the framework utilises Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) politico-theoretical understanding of discourse and hegemony, which supports a relational and politically contested articulation of discourses around economic growth, and alternatives thereof. Such a meta-theoretical frame perceives discourses not only as social practices constituting the world (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), but as being differentiated and constituted in relation to each other, thereby affirming their inherently performative

character which makes discourses intelligible on various social levels. Rather than signifying a 'dematerialised' form of discourse (Willmott 2005, p. 753), discursive practice is perceived as constitutive of social relations in which discourses remain in a constant relational flux based on a system of differences, making ultimate fixation of meaning impossible (Laclau and Mouffe 2014).

While ultimate fixation of meaning can never exist, 'any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, p. 98). This is crucial, as Laclau and Mouffe refer to such privileged points of partial fixations of the social as *nodal points* in an organised system of differences, constructed through articulatory practice. Within this struggle to fix discursive meaning, social antagonisms occur when discourses fail to accommodate each other, thus generating social meaning (Willmott 2005). It is this attentiveness towards a political struggle to fix meaning and achieve an imaginary closure in an ever open, fragile, and precarious discursive field (Iedema and Carroll 2010; Willmott 2005), which necessitates the concept of hegemony. By moving beyond Gramsci's (1971) conception of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (2014) introduce the concept of *democratic struggle*, acknowledging the multiplicity and plurality of political and thus also social spaces (Gilbert 2008). Democratic struggle purports a radical contingency and structural incompleteness of any hegemonic formation (Glynos and Howarth 2007), whose perceived truth value or dominance is only maintained through continuous hegemonic articulation (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Willmott 2005). Consequently, such conception based on the *openness of the social* challenges conventional taken-for-granted assumptions and embraces alternative discourses (Linstead 2015) to growth, which entail possibilities for radically different forms of social organisation and organisational practice.

The framework builds on a theoretical understanding of growth in its hegemonic form as a 'comprehensive material, social, and cultural process of mutually constitutive dynamics of expansion' (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 38). In other words, growth entails not only hegemonic ideas about its necessity, desirability and limitlessness, but it also constitutes itself through social and material processes which make human societies dependent on its continuous reproduction. Thus, the framework offered in this section is grounded in an understanding of the interrelation between ecological and social processes, limits, and consequences of growth. Drawing on Chertkovskaya and

Paulsson's (2016) conception of the *growthocene*, the analytical framework outlines two interrelated axes: a) biophysical throughput (Y-axis), and b) capital accumulation (X-axis). The former depicts the growth of matter and energy throughput and enables the positioning of discourses primarily in relation to the ecological dimension. The latter describes the hegemonic logic of capital accumulation and profit maximization, necessary to uphold growth-driven capitalist systems of social organisation (Blauwhof 2012). Crucially, the mutually reinforcing drive for profitable business outlets and the accumulation of capital often reinforces diverse social and ecological injustices in the process of generating perpetual economic growth (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021; Hinton 2020; Schneider and Murray 2024). Accordingly, the mapping of the territory of growth can be illustrated as follows:

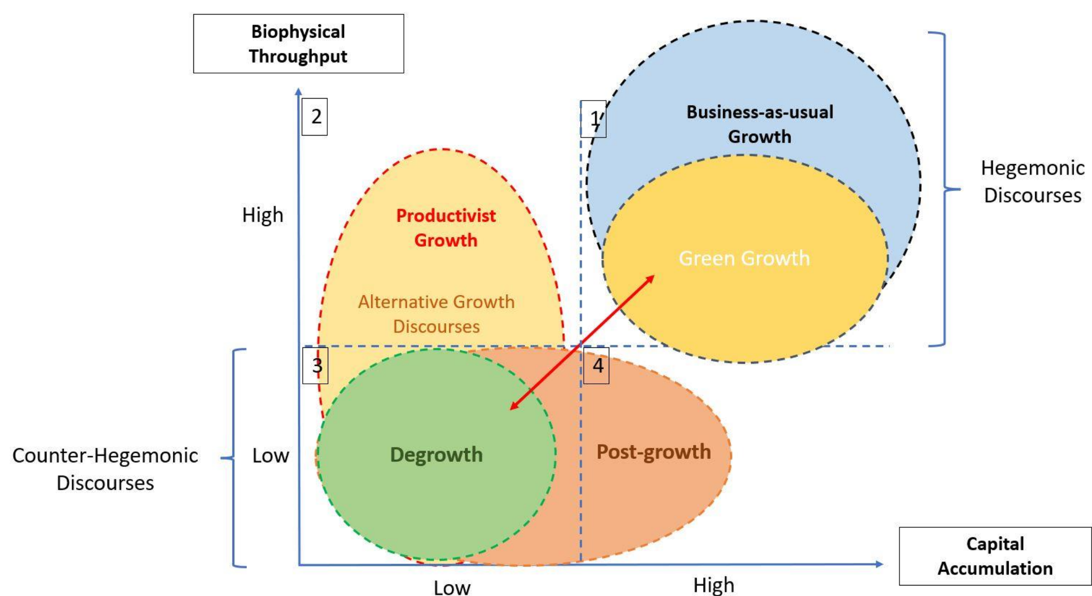

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework on Discourses of Growth

The framework differentiates the lower and higher dimensions of growing biophysical throughput (y-axis) and capital accumulation (x-axis). The interlinked dimensions enable a repoliticisation of discourses to growth, by pointing towards conditions of ecological sustainability, social justice, and human flourishing, indicating perspectives of regulation and radical change (Egri and Pinfield 1999; Rees 1995). In this sense, growth and its elementary assertions can be perceived as a key area of political struggle for more sustainable socio-economic systems and human activity. The hegemonic nexus to growth is represented by business-as-usual growth and green growth in quadrant one. The latter has evolved as a largely stabilising force to business-as-usual growth while aiming to mitigate its negative side effects. Alternative discourses to

growth can be interpreted through what Laclau and Mouffe (2014) termed *discursive exterior*, diverting from the common understandings of pursuing perpetual economic growth. However, as there remains a considerable conflation of ideas and concepts, it is necessary to forward a more nuanced understanding of purported ideas for a re-configuration beyond the hegemonic nexus to growth. Thus, the framework differentiates both post-growth, and what could be termed alternative growth discourses as quadrant-transgressing discourses that overlap in their most counter-hegemonic articulations, in which discourses of degrowth are positioned in the third quadrant.

The chapter proceeds with a brief outline of the historical evolution and main features of business-as-usual growth, before pointing to the ecological and social limits of this discursive formation. Subsequently, ideas and assumptions of green growth discourses are explained in detail before elaborating on the variant of productivist growth, as well as more reformist strands of postgrowth. Finally, degrowth discourses are outlined in more depth, as signifying the prime antagonistic formation to the hegemonic nexus of growth. Overall, the analysis aims to establish an understanding of the main tenets and relations of growth discourses, as well as giving indications about their feasibility and desirability in the face of the multiple crises, by focusing particularly on the antagonistic relationship between quadrants one and three.

2.3 Business-as-usual Growth: From Growthmania to Growing Pains

2.3.1 A Brief History of Growth and its Discontents

The convergence of political and economic thought in the efficacy of economic growth as a major instrument for human development has its origins in the fundamental transformation of social organisation experienced through the industrial revolution.

Understood as the ‘big bang’ of economic growth, technological progress brought by innovations such as the steam engine led to unforeseen levels of productivity rates, material consumption, rises in living standards and life expectancies. The exponential growth experienced through the fundamental shift in productivity lifted people in industrialised societies out of the long timespan before the industrial revolution largely characterised by living conditions at a subsistence and materially deprived level. Indeed, evidence can be found that sustained economic growth over a long time span

is correlated with higher incomes per capita, material affluence, significant declines in child mortality, longer lifespans, as well as overall reduced inequality compared to earlier historical periods (Clark 2007). As these effects were largely absent in less industrialised countries, this phenomenon eventually led to what came to be perceived as the *great divergence* between countries who benefitted from growing economic activity and those that did not (Pomeranz 2000). Such pervasive societal ramifications and success stories still mark the basis for the perceived social efficacy of sustained economic growth.

Classical economists at the time recognised that the principal logic of economic growth in capitalist systems is based on the premise of the self-reinforcing and recurring process of capital accumulation to invest and generate new profits. For Adam Smith (2016/1776), investors' strive for profits famously marked the *invisible hand* of the market, which allows capital to flow between different industries, to be allocated to high-profit sectors where investors can expect profit returns (Brewer 2010). Marx famously termed this self-interested pursuit of profits and capital accumulation the *Money-Commodities-Money cycle* (Bonaiuti 2012; Foster et al. 2010). The accumulation of capital and thus the stimulation of growth was perceived as beneficial for society at large, as it enabled increasing output, employment and material affluence, based on the assumption of never-ending human demand and growing populations (Dale 2012a). The notion of betterment through the development of productive and economic forces also mirrored the enlightenment thought of linear and continuous progress of humankind. From the initial pursuit of expanding human knowledge and qualitative progress, the quest for improving living standards through industrialisation and growth of capitalist production, i.e., quantitative progress (Arndt 1978), also led to conflating growth with human liberation through increasing material wealth (Purdey 2010).

Nonetheless, the unitary narrative of the positive correlation of economic growth and human welfare has historically always been contested. The moral belief of classical economists in the efficacy of economic growth to lifting populations out of poverty through efficient market allocation (Arndt 1978), found its limits in the perception that growth constituted a self-restricting factor inclined to reduction over time (Dale 2012a). While Ricardo (1819) recognised natural limits of productive land as a finite resource for capital accumulation, John Stuart Mill contemplated what ultimate end

point the industrial progress of society was tending towards. Siding with Marx on questioning the desirability of material progress (Arndt 1978), Mill raised concerns about the continuous struggle for economic growth by viewing a *stationary state* as an improvement of the human condition at large (Hamilton 2004). Capitalist expansion has also been observed as historically reliant on the violent reappropriation of land and labour through vast enclosure of the commons within northern and southern hemispheres, or what Marx (1952/1872) referred to as *primitive* accumulation (Hickel 2020a). Along with the artificial creation of scarcity, enclosures created the basis for exploitative structures that forced people into alienating labor markets and factory employment (Hickel 2020a; De Angelis 2017). This process hampered people's abilities to sustain livelihoods and deteriorated social welfare (Polanyi 2001) which can be considered as continuing to this day and age (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021; De Angelis 2017).

Towards the end of the 19th century, industrial processes required larger organisational arrangements for the economical use of novel production techniques that eventually led to Fordist specialization (Paulsson 2019) and corporatization, which further fuelled productivity and hence growth (Easterlin 1998). Thus, the materialization of economic efficiency is still perceived as the primary foundation for accelerating economic growth through knowledge progression about technological production processes (Clark 2007). However, the most profound source for economic growth has arguably been the continuous extraction and utilization of mineral and fossil fuels as a source of energy for machinery. Fossil fuels enabled highly productive manufacturing processes compared to pre-modern times, but also made humanity dependent on it (Easterlin 1998; Fressoz and Bonneuil 2017; Macekura 2017). Capitalism's endless pursuit of accumulation fundamentally depends on what Moore (2015) calls 'cheap nature', i.e., the process of making nature (incl. humans) work for the endless expansion of capital.

Nonetheless, it was not until the end of WWII that economic growth unfolded into an institutionalised hegemonic formation in its mathematical abstraction under the label of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[2]. Since then, the GDP depicts the most important epistemic system of macroeconomic knowledge and political governance

[2] Initially: Gross National Product.

(Fioramonti 2013; Kallis 2018; Speich 2008). Initially, however, it was developed as a measurement for the purpose of counteracting the Great Depression in the US and military-industrial planning for WWII (Coyle 2015; Lefeber 2000; Pilling 2018). Despite warnings of its creator, Simon Kuznets, to not misappropriate GDP measures by including any market activities irrespectively of their contribution to human welfare (Speich 2008), GDP figures have evolved as a surrogate for societal welfare in the post WWII-era. It has become the fundamental statistic to judge the performance of national economies (Fioramonti 2013; Pilling 2018), hailed as a 'measure of the freedom and human capability created by the capitalist market economy' (Coyle, 2015, p. 5). In particular, during the cold war era, economic expansion was perceived as a justification for the ideological superiority of socio-economic systems (Arndt, 1978; Fioramonti, 2013; Purdey, 2010). Increasing international competition on the quest for national power and supremacy manifested itself through growth rate comparisons to other industrialised countries and previously colonised ones, now declared as *underdeveloped* (Macekura 2017; Todaro and Smith 2015).

Marking the era of 'the great acceleration' (Steffen et al. 2015) and the golden years of capitalism (Dale 2012b; Paulsson 2019) in post-war periods, the omnipresence of economic growth ideology or *growthmanship* (Clark 1962), became the defining political means to tackle any form of social grievance. International organisations such as the OECD as a *temple for growth* (Schmelzer 2016), as well as the World Bank, IMF, and WTO played a major role in bestowing the growth paradigm with universal legitimacy (Fioramonti 2013; Purdey 2010). In the belief of muting class conflict and reconciling both rich and poor social classes for both-sided benefits, government policies focused on growing productivity and economic output instead of redistribution (Arndt 1978; Maier 1977). Congruently, development economic approaches to stimulate growth instead of reallocation, came to be understood in the sphere of sustainable development as the universal panacea to alleviate the social grievances of poorer nations (Macekura, 2017; Purdey, 2010). While many earlier economic schools of thought focused on a more equal distribution of the gains from economic growth, the centrality of neoclassical economics erased almost any scrutiny of underlying assumptions around economic growth by disregarding social inequalities and environmental damages as mere *market externalities* (Hamilton 2004; Spash 2015).

2.3.2 Business-as-usual Growth and its Engines

In the current conjuncture, business-as-usual discourses around economic growth constitute the status quo and naturalised approach of pursuing highest possible rates of economic production and consumption in capitalist systems. This hegemonic form of growth can be perceived as a convergence of forces on political-economic, socio-cultural, and organisational dimensions.

Firstly, the political-economic dimension constitutes a convergence of obsolete beliefs and assumptions of neoclassical economic theories and neoliberal ideologies, proclaiming an allegedly value-neutral and apolitical program of market managerial capitalism, largely unquestioned by mainstream organisation and management scholars (OMS). The efficiency of price-regulated allocation of resources through supply and demand is supposedly resulting in market equilibria, which are grounded in unrealistic theories of perfect market competition, the absence of monopolies, and market externalities, often questioned by scholars on historical and empirical grounds (Bonaiuti 2012; Lefeber 2000; Spash 2020b). Technological innovations, efficiency gains, and modernization efforts are understood as drivers of growth and ever-increasing output, and its absence are to be avoided at any cost (Lefeber 2000; Todaro and Smith 2015). Assumptions of objectivising social reality in the name of progress have led to a 'mass flight from reality into statistics' (Mishan 1967, p. 9), underpinning the cultivation of GDP figures as 'universal yardstick' (Schmelzer 2015, p. 263), despite its many well-known critiques (e.g., Antonio 2013; Coyle 2015; Fioramonti 2013; Lepenies 2016; Pilling 2018). Behind the social construction of *the economy* as a coherent and objectified system (Schmelzer 2016) lies the conviction that it can be measured objectively and engineered accordingly through supposedly accurate statistical data of its activities, which depict the growth rate of national economies as proxy for societal well-being (Speich, 2008). However, vastly improved welfare often depended on political struggles, indicating that it is not the arbitrary rise of economic growth (i.e. GDP per capita) per se, but the distribution and investment in public services that improved human welfare (Hickel 2020a; Kallis et al. 2020). Along with the mainstreaming of these economic underpinnings, neoliberal ideology has perpetuated ideas about limitless maximisation of growth through *trickle-down economics*, often leading to more rather than less socio-economic uncertainty (Dale

2012b; Davies 2014), and continuous 'upward redistribution' (Antonio 2013, p. 21) through deregulated markets and privatisation.

Secondly, on a socio-cultural level, the generic neoliberal conflation of individual, political, and economic freedom is based on the understanding that enforcing limits on growth equals limits on human liberation and progress (Purdey 2010), which becomes highly problematic when observing its departure from ethical considerations (Davies 2014). Such beliefs rely on highly contested assumptions of the ever insatiable, 'rational, instrumental, utility-maximising, purely economic human being (homo economicus)' (Prasad and Prasad 2007, p. 51). Free markets and an ever-increasing range of commodities are understood as the solution for individual contentment and the benefit of the wider society (Hamilton 2004; Prasad and Prasad 2007; Welzer 2011), thus translating such assumptions into dominant social relations, values, beliefs and activities of social actors. Business-as-usual growth requires the reproduction of high levels of production and consumption, which in turn are based on relations of competitive individualism (Antonio 2013; Hamilton 2004), the moralisation of work independently of its social value or necessity (Frayne 2016; Gorz 1982; Graeber 2018; Weeks 2011), and a conspicuous and compulsive consumption culture (Hirsch 1977; Soper 2020; Veblen 2007). The centrality of work (Frayne 2016) along with the 'iron cage of consumerism' (Jackson 2017, p. 104) for social recognition, meaning, and identity creation thus contribute significantly to a culturally ingrained lock-in position, tied to business-as-usual growth. Brand and Wissen (2021) have described this notion as the *imperial mode of living* which determines subject positions, imaginaries of 'the good life', and everyday practices as co-constitutive of social structures of growth societies, while concealing its negative social and ecological effects to an often invisible outside. For some, this institutionalisation of the compulsive pursuit of growth has even manifested itself in *mental infrastructures* (Welzer 2011) and lifeworld's of social actors as *growth subjects* (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2017). In addition to a continuous logic of increase and acceleration inscribed in patterns of work and consumption, such growth-oriented subjectivities impede the imagination of organising social life differently.

Thirdly, organisational practices aligned with business-as-usual growth take a non-differentiated stance towards unrestricted biophysical growth and often reproduce social inequalities and injustices in the pursuit of profit (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson

2021; Ergene et al. 2020; Schneider and Murray 2024). Businesses as economic actors can be understood as being at once constrained by the structural dynamics of capitalist economies depending on perpetuated economic growth, while at the same time constituting the agents or 'engines of economic growth' (Klein 2000, p. 27). Rising living standards along with modernization pursuits (Macekura 2017) in the post-war era helped capitalist firms to gain the 'central agency of progress' by providing sustained levels of growth and social prosperity for prolonged periods in western civilisations (Hamilton 2004, p. 101). Through their innovative capacity, businesses came to be understood as the main providers of social value by continuously producing novel commodities and employment opportunities, thus growing both their organisation as well as the economy (Ahlstrom 2010). Growth maintains the competitiveness of businesses and simultaneously acquires societal acceptance through the generation of employment, income and taxes, and is thus acknowledged as benefitting the common good (Dale 2012b). This means, business growth and profitability came to be understood as a win-win premise of organisational advancement and societal progress alike. In business and management practice, growth thus represents an aspirational factor illustrating organisational success, leading to a myriad of studies on how to create a *growth culture*, corporate *growth champions* (Jones et al. 2012), or entrepreneurial *high-growth companies* (Calori 1990).

Competition for growth constitutes the central organising logic of businesses, steering the endless pursuit of capital accumulation (Antonio 2013; Davies 2014). In order to survive in capitalist economies, businesses are subject to the growth imperative and have no other choice but to accumulate capital in the pursuit of profits and expansion (Foster et al. 2010), as failing to do so leads to recession and crisis (Binswanger 2013). Similarly to the dependency of national economies on growth (Schmelzer 2016), businesses that are failing to grow risk being punished by their investors and banks in competitive capitalist markets (Dale 2012b). Drawing on Marx, scholars have long recognized this central logic and the social forces of the *treadmill of accumulation* (Foster et al. 2010) within capitalist modes of production. Thus, currently dominant forms of business operate on what Schneider and Murray (2024) refer to as the *loop of unsustainability*, i.e., a mutually reinforcing relationship between perpetual economic growth and profit seeking behaviour, contributing to a metabolic rift (Böhm et al. 2012;

Foster et al. 2010) which crosses safe biophysical boundaries of the Earth system. Indeed, there exists a systemic relationship between for-profit businesses and the continuous extraction and consumption of material and energy resources in growth-based economies (Hinton and Maclurcan 2017). Business-as-usual forms of profit-driven and growth-oriented economic activity are thus perceived as the main culprit of ecological destruction by many scholars (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021; Hinton 2020; Wright and Nyberg 2017).

Overall, the hegemonic formation of business-as-usual growth represents the common sense of organising societies, economies, and businesses on a discursive level. At the same time, growth underlies social and material processes (Schmelzer et al. 2022) that determine social and ecological relations under capitalism. Crucially, however, growth still remains largely unquestioned and even *tabooed* (Kallio 2007) within organisational scholarship. However, transforming business activity beyond premises of profit maximisation and growth is a matter of Earth systems justice (Schneider and Murray 2024) as the following sections amplify.

2.3.3 Ecological Limits to Growth

As perpetual expansion of economic activity first and foremost reaches biophysical limits, a nearly unified consensus exists amongst natural scientists about the correlation of economic growth and environmental destruction (Spash 2020b). Attempting to ignore and overshoot these limits, as many economists, politicians and business leaders continue to do, has fatal outcomes for life on earth. The growth and acceleration of human activity has altered the natural environment rapidly since the industrial revolution (Steffen et al. 2015), leading scientists to indicate the shift from stable environmental conditions for humanity, denoted as the Holocene, to the ecologically destabilised Anthropocene (Crutzen 2002). Critical of the omission of power relations under capitalism and the structural inequalities producing dire ecological conditions of our times, others instead prefer to speak of the *Capitalocene* (Moore 2015), or the *Growthocene* (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2016). While calamitous consequences are unfolding in an ever more dramatic way, scientists' and activist warnings have been part of the debate for at least half a century (Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo 2015).

First published in 1972, the 'Limits to Growth' report by *The Club of Rome* (Meadows et al. 1972), marked a landmark inquiry into the ecological downsides of the chosen path of unfettered economic development, which gained widespread public awareness (Jackson 2017). Based on scenario modelling that analysed trajectories of central earth system parameters, Meadows et al. (1972) predicted that prolonged exponential growth of economic activity would lead to scenarios of environmental overshoot and the increasing possibility of societal collapse before the end of the 21st century (Sjøvaag 2016). While the scientific method did not involve analyses of existing power relations of capitalist systems, the analysis still pointed towards the need for systemic change (Spash 2020). Around the same time, Nicolas Georgescu-Roegen (1971) analysed the use of energy and matter in relation to the maintenance of the economic processes, demonstrating that there is indeed no infinite growth on a finite planet. Applying the thermodynamic laws of entropy, Georgescu-Roegen proved that economic activities and their perpetual expansion since the industrial revolution are fundamentally dependent upon the exploitation of low entropic[3] and non-renewable fossil energy and matter. However, with continuously increasing production and consumption, entropy increases, resulting in depletion of exhaustible terrestrial stocks (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017). This irreversible depletion results in the fact that more growth makes the extraction of energy and matter more difficult and expensive over time (Büchs and Koch 2017). Thus, Georgescu-Roegen denoted the ignorance of biophysical limits and ideas of sustainable development based on growth as an inherently unjust oxymoron (Georgescu-Roegen 1993) and advocated for a decline of economic activity for the benefit of everyone's well-being (Liegey and Nelson 2020; Muraca and Schmelzer 2017). His student Herman Daly (1972) advocated for the desirability of a steady-state economy, implying the necessity of a process of maturity in which physical accumulation eventually reaches a constant level of material throughput without further growth.

More recently, scientists have defined nine closely interconnected planetary boundaries that 'define the safe operating space for humanity with respect to the Earth system' in relation to their pre-industrial levels (Rockström et al. 2009, p. 472). Despite the authors warnings, the recent update depicts the crossing of six out of nine critical boundaries, suggesting that the 'Earth is now well outside of the safe operating

[3] Low entropy signifies the usefulness as a resource that enables ever growing economic activity.

space for humans' (Richardson et al. 2023, p. 1). Crucially, however, the interrelatedness of these thresholds creates a knock-on effect that increasingly leads to catastrophic environmental degradation, severely threatening life support systems. Examples of extreme weather events over the past years abound and depict the acceleration of events which are making parts of the world increasingly uninhabitable.

Overall, it becomes clear that human activities that necessitate evermore usage of material and energy throughput, i.e. material growth (Kallis et al. 2020), are the major cause of this detrimental evolution. This empirical reality gives a clear message: In our current situation of ecological overshoot and increasing degradation, minimising negative impacts of growing economic activities will not suffice. Instead, respecting the physical limits of nature means humanity needs to drastically reduce its ecological footprint (Hickel and Kallis 2019) and abandon material growth rapidly enough to avoid more catastrophic events to unfold (Ripple et al. 2017). However, as other scholars have noted, these overwhelming scientific insights fall short of the political choices involved in addressing these limits (Kallis 2019; Raworth 2017). After all, ecological boundaries are not purely technical frontiers but are socially constructed in the sense that they urge us to consider what society and world we want to live in. After all, life on a dying planet may still be possible for the ones that can afford to adapt to its conditions, at least temporarily. Maintaining a liveable planet and choosing a good life for all its inhabitants, however, is a political project that needs to address the underlying assumptions, drivers, and power relations of growth-based socio-economic systems. Thus, continuing on the path of destructive growth agendas is deeply connected to social issues.

2.3.4 Social Limits to Growth

In addition to the incompatibility of economic growth and ecological sustainability, scholars have long questioned whether economic growth is in fact *socially* desirable and necessary. When faced with ever more obvious environmental catastrophes caused by rapidly expanding economic activities, growth advocates often point towards the necessity of continuous growth for human welfare and prosperity[4] (as noted by Büchs and Koch 2017; Hickel 2020a; Jackson 2017). However, this narrative of a positive

[4] i.e., to reduce poverty, raise living standards, life expectancy, ensure social equality, happiness, and overall welfare for everyone.

relationship between continuous economic growth (i.e., GDP) and human welfare appears highly questionable when facing material conditions.

Based on growing insights that GDP measures as social indicators of human welfare are highly problematic (Jackson 2017; Stiglitz 2012), several alternative measures like the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) have been developed in the attempt to present a more balanced account of the actual costs and benefits of economic growth (Fioramonti 2013). Despite imperfections, GPI indicators have illustrated a fundamental divergence from steadily increasing GDP rates in industrialised countries from the late 1970s onwards (Kubiszewski et al. 2013). This divergence led scholars to suggest that such alternative indices in fact depict that economic growth has become *uneconomic* (Daly 2013) or negative in the progression of the second half of the 20th century. In other words, the social and environmental costs of growth have long outweighed its benefits (Bartolini 2014; Daly 1996). While some form of growth may be necessary for human development within poorer countries (Jackson 2017), these findings resonate with Max-Neef's (1995) assertion that beyond a certain threshold, more growth does not necessarily add to human welfare. Instead, overall well-being in many countries of the global north appears to deteriorate (Büchs and Koch 2017). Such insights confirm Mishan's (1967) prescient insights that the continued pursuit of what he termed *growthmania*, i.e., growth for its own sake, is more likely to decrease rather than increase social welfare, particularly in advanced economies.

Such societal insights have also been mirrored on an individual level, confirming longstanding moral or philosophical critiques of the pursuit of material affluence above all else. Happiness research has long questioned whether more economic growth equates with higher subjective well-being or life satisfaction. While income increases appear to be correlated with individual happiness in cross-sectional analyses within social groups, the *Easterlin paradox* (1973) asserts that as incomes grow due to economic growth, so do aspirations about material needs. This results in a *hedonic treadmill* and positional competition within which well-being, above the satisfaction of basic material needs, is not associated to rising incomes over time (Jackson 2017; Sekulova 2015). Such insights are congruent with what Hirsch (1977) termed the *social limits* to growth, in which the spread of positional goods throughout society through mass consumption increase social pressure for individual gain and competition to get ahead. Therefore, social limits refer to a *paradox of affluence* in

which the capitalist promise of individual gratification through consumerism, understood to fuel economic growth (Bonaiuti 2012; Hirsch 1977), is essentially an impossible venture (Spash 2020). Instead, the resulting inequality tends to increase the importance of social status, leading to deteriorating social cohesion and sense of community (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), as well as increasing stress, exhaustion, and loss of meaning (Hickel 2020a; Kallis et al. 2020; Trainer 2010).

While growing economies are often assumed to reduce overall levels of inequality, Piketty's (2014) seminal research showed that the gains made from economic growth over the past 40 years largely went into the pockets of a minority of the richest inhabitants of advanced capitalist societies. Poverty levels in the global south remain high and inequality appears to widen within countries of the global north (Büchs and Koch 2017; Institute for Policy Studies 2020). Not surprisingly then, high levels of income inequality are correlated with low levels of well-being and poor health, as well as overall decreased social and political stability (Bartolini 2014; Jackson 2017; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). Crucially, however, growing GDP figures disguise such developments entirely (Douthwaite 1999), thus failing to deliver on the promise that 'the rising tide will lift all boats' (Trainer 2012, p. 593) but instead legitimize increasing social ills and perpetuate inequality.

Consequently, it becomes clear that the ecologically questionable pursuit of growth is also a question of social justice (Reichel 2018). In particular, this can be exemplified by major negative impacts on livelihoods of people who have contributed least to accelerating ecological degradation, particularly in the global south (Büchs and Koch 2017; Fotopoulos 2007; Wiedmann et al. 2020). The unbridled pursuit of economic expansion appears to do the opposite of its intended aim, contributing to deteriorating social structures and well-being, while often prolonging inequality and forms of exploitation (Kallis et al. 2020). This indicates that the main tenets of growth are no longer socially desirable but inappropriate as an overarching goal, thus urging the development of various alternative discourses.

2.4 Alternative Discourses of Growth

2.4.1 Green Growth

With rising awareness about looming ecological catastrophes, discourses around green growth have evolved as the primary strategy underlying environmental governance and international policies (Hickel and Kallis 2019; OECD 2015; Parrique et al. 2019; Stoknes and Rockström 2018). Previously referred to as *sustainable, inclusive* or *smart* (Jackson 2017), green growth discourses are positioned within the first quadrant of the framework, forming the hegemonic nexus together with business-as-usual growth (see Figure 2.1). While aiming to decrease biophysical throughput (y-axis), by decoupling it from growing economic activity, green growth approaches maintain the unrestrained pursuit of profit and capital accumulation (x-axis) in their forms of organising. It is within green growth approaches, albeit often unacknowledged, that much of the CSR literature can be located.

Green growth advocates attempt to offer attractive win-win strategies (Bowen and Fankhauser 2011; Stoknes and Rockström 2018; Wijkman and Rockström 2012) through 'scientific insight, engineering sophistication and managerial smartness' (Dale et al. 2016, p. 12), aimed at simultaneously fighting ecological ills whilst increasing human welfare by growing economies. Corporate business, seen as growth enabling and stimulating 'champions' (Spash 2020a, p. 13), are considered part of the solution, by offering technological and managerial solutions to fight ecological crises through prevalent market mechanisms. In line with a growing dominance in public, corporate and institutional settings, green growth signifies the politically established solution to socio-ecological crises by *greening* the expansion of economies through eco-modernist strategies, while holding on to capitalist modes of social organisation (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021; Dale et al. 2016; Hickel 2020a).

The key rationale of green growth discourses proclaims that reconciling the existing economic system with the environment is possible and that negative environmental side effects of uncontrolled economic expansion can be mitigated, through policy frameworks, technology and managerial solutions (OECD 2015; Stoknes and Rockström 2018). At the same time, continuous economic growth is seen as inevitable and necessary to ensure human welfare, progress, sustainable development, and job creation, by accumulating enough surplus from economic activity to spur

technological progress and innovation. This surplus then enables the offsetting of the negative effects of growth through cleaner energy and more efficient resource use, perceived as the prime levers of transforming into a green economy. Such insights are largely based on the economic conviction denoted as *Environmental Kuznets Curve*. The Environmental Kuznets Curve posits that as economies grow and mature, resources are not only being used more efficiently, but environmental awareness rises as incomes grow, and this eventually leads to an overall dematerialisation (Büchs and Koch 2017; Dale et al. 2016).

In this regard, green growth advocates maintain the central tenet that increased economic activity as measured in monetary value, can be *decoupled* from material and energy resource flows, most prominently environmental pollution through CO2 emissions (Wijkman and Rockström 2012). This *decoupling hypothesis* entails the conviction that technological innovation and efficiency gains will enable governments and organisations to continue much of their activities, while adapting to greener technologies and production processes (Dale et al. 2016; Jackson and Victor 2019; Mathai et al. 2018). Nevertheless, some argue for the necessity of linking these strategies to concrete science-based targets to account for various planetary boundaries, i.e., through carbon-productivity rates (Stoknes and Rockström 2018).

One of the most prominent proposals to achieve effective decoupling constitute ideas around a circular economy, revolving around a predominantly technocentric discourse to decarbonise and dematerialise growth (Calisto Friant et al. 2020). By acknowledging the longstanding problematic relationship of expanding economies with linearly expanding material and energy flows, circular economy concepts attempt to abolish wasteful 'take-make-dispose' economic patterns (Ellen McArthur Foundation 2013, p. 2), understood to fuel excessive consumption cultures (Wijkman and Rockström 2012). Behind such ideas is the assumption that product lifecycles could be extended by mimicking processes of the natural environment, operating in circular cycles and resulting in, for instance, *cradle to cradle* approaches (McDonough and Braungart 2002). Circular economies could thus make economic production 'not only more efficient but essentially waste-free', by closing loops of biophysical throughput (Wijkman and Rockström 2012, p. 164), or enabling a shift to offering services instead of products (Stahel 2016). To achieve circularity within industrialised systems, various technological innovations and business models are put forward

around recycling, reconditioning, refurbishing, and reusing previously utilised materials (Korhonen et al. 2018). Promoted by a considerable amount of corporations, circular economy concepts are often endorsed as game-changing solutions, understood to enable an overall decoupling of material and energy throughput of growth-based economies while delivering on promises of job creation and business profitability (Wijkman and Rockström 2012).

Nonetheless, discourses of green growth are littered with overly optimistic assumptions and wishful thinking. Firstly, theoretical assumptions of the Environmental Kuznets Curve have been widely refuted by growth critical scholars for purporting the misleading supposition that the more wealth is accumulated, the easier it would be to clean up the accumulated destruction of the environment. Such 'blind guide' (Daly 1972, p. 951) not only affirms growth as necessary to ease environmental pressures, but also fosters a problematic belief that nation states and businesses could grow their way out of ecological crises (Parrique et al. 2019), proclaiming a logic of 'grow now, clean up later' (van Alstine and Neumayer 2008, p. 57). On top of this, such rationale entirely ignores the dependence of advanced and richer economies of the global north on low-income countries of the global south for extractivism, pollution and the relocation of dirty manufacturing (Martinez-Alier 2014; Mathai et al. 2018). Thus, it glosses over the responsibility of economically affluent parts of the world in perpetrating global ecological pressures and injustices.

Secondly, the *decoupling hypothesis* prompts many questions on empirical and ethical grounds. Considering the consequences at stake, decoupling needs to happen on an unprecedented and sufficiently rapid, global, and permanent scale for green growth to be both desirable and feasible (Parrique et al. 2019). However, there is increasing evidence that optimistic studies of decoupling tend to neglect that indicators need to be consumption-based and on an absolute scale[5], to judge its efficacy (Dale et al. 2016; Hickel and Kallis 2019; Jackson and Victor 2019; Parrique et al. 2019). There not only appears to be a growing consensus that there is no empirical basis for sufficient absolute decoupling, but forecasts also judge that the likelihood of this being achieved

[5] Consumption-based, as opposed to production-based decoupling includes actual consumption patterns of a country, taking into consideration the cost-shifting, i.e., from offshore production into low-wage countries. Absolute decoupling constitutes the actual decline of overall material and energy use, despite a growing economic activity, in contrast to relative or weak decoupling, referring to the decline in material and energy intensity of economic output (Jackson 2017; Paech 2019).

through green growth efforts, as essentially non-existent. In other words, global emissions and resource use are in practice still rising sharply due to increased consumption (Hickel 2020a; Mathai et al. 2018). Instead of greater efficiency, a re-coupling effect of GDP growth with material and energy throughput is detectable during the 21st century, even with large shifts to service industries, which themselves cannot function without biophysical throughput (Hickel and Kallis 2019; Jackson 2017; Paech 2019; Parrique et al. 2019). The excessive focus on eco-efficiency thus often neglects longstanding insights of rebound effects better known as *Jevon's paradox*. This phenomenon posits that more efficient energy and resource use leads to lower costs of produced goods, which in turn increases output, consumption, and profits, thus consistently reversing gains made (Foster et al. 2010; Jackson 2017; Paech 2019). Furthermore, in the unlikely case that sufficient decoupling would occur, the mitigation of social injustices (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017) and threats of overextraction remain unaddressed, which only shifts the problem rather than addressing its root cause (Hickel 2020a; Paech 2019; Parrique et al. 2019). While future absolute decoupling is theoretically not entirely impossible and technological advancements are certainly needed, the green growth inclined literature in part rests on speculative eco-modernist assumptions of future technological salvation, which appears highly unethical given the dire consequences of failure.

Thirdly, despite promising advancements, the circular economy literature has been subjected to considerable criticism, with much of the work remaining on conceptual and theoretical (Kirchherr and van Santen 2019) or ambiguous levels (Rödl et al. 2022). While it is unquestionable that a fully circular economy is in principle desirable, its practical implementation appears problematic from a thermodynamic perspective (Georgescu-Roegen 1971), in particular *within* growing economies. Even if economic activity and production would be fully powered by renewable energy with high recycling rates, some energy and matter would always be lost in conversion (Kallis 2018; Korhonen et al. 2018; Paech 2019). A transition to higher rates of circularity would require material and energy throughput on unprecedented scales for converting manufacturing, resulting in large-scale environmental and social problem shifting in time and space (Paech 2019). In addition, issues of governance, socio-environmental justice, and cultural change are lacking throughout circular economy discourses, which remain a predominantly technocentric (Calisto Friant et al. 2020), depoliticised

(Valenzuela and Böhm 2017), and managerial issue (Rödl et al. 2022). Nonetheless, circular economy concepts essentially remain contested (Corvellec et al. 2020), not least in relation to their potential compatibility to growth-critical paradigms.

Translating discourses of green growth into organisational practice signifies a win-win market managerialist approach, in which businesses are incentivised to gain a competitive advantage by increasing energy efficiency, recycling, waste reduction and selling greener products (Ergene et al. 2020; King and Pucker 2020). The focus of green growth discourses on providing a 'psychologically supportive win-win frame for engaging a broader audience' (Stoknes and Rockström 2018, p. 42) ultimately reinforces problematic perspectives that technocratic solutions only lack the necessary political support, which eventually justifies an overall destructive system through minimal optimisations (Paech 2019). This resembles earlier proposals of, e.g., lean-green, environmental and financial performance-based approaches, primarily concerned with enhancing competitiveness, financial benefits and business growth by 'going green' (e.g., Dixon-Fowler et al. 2013; Lartey et al. 2020; Surroca et al. 2010).

The roots of green growth lie in the agenda for *sustainable development* and its institutionalisation of economic development through market expansion (Dale et al. 2016; Fletcher and Rammelt 2017, Hickel and Kallis 2019). Prominent manifestations of green growth, i.e., within the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, Goal 8) include strategies of decoupling (Parrique et al. 2019) and thus blend in well with common ways of organising as a seemingly apolitical and pragmatic project (Dale et al. 2016). Green New Deal policy proposals, most prominently in the US and EU signify a continuation of green growth proposals, largely determined by neoliberal ideas (Adler and Wargan 2019), in which businesses are set to profit from a green transition. Large parts of CSR scholarship have uncritically aligned themselves to this growth-driven agenda, aiming to contribute to a *business case* for sustainable development (Eden 1994; Moon 2007). Given the reasons outlined above, the seemingly contradictory commitment of the SDGs has been critiqued abundantly (Fletcher and Rammelt 2017; Hickel 2019; Robra and Heikkurinen 2019; Schöneberg and Häckl 2020), yet less so within CSR scholarship. Significant contributions within CSR scholarship, including those laying out future directions of research or calling for a substantial turn appear to remain silent on this fundamental contradiction (e.g., Aguinis and Glavas 2012; Brown et al. 2022; Garriga and Melé 2013; Gond et al.

2017; Matten and Moon 2008; Palazzo and Scherer 2008). Despite Carroll and Buchholtz's (2009, p. 615) question whether businesses should 'continue to focus on unlimited growth', and recent promising advances (Schneider and Murray 2024), the overwhelming majority of the CSR scholarship appears stuck within green growth discourses, thus neglecting a discussion of alternatives.

Overall, green growth signifies a shallow transformation of the economy while in fact holding on to business-as-usual approaches of prolonging the capitalist growth economy (Sandberg et al. 2019). Rather than constituting an apolitical venture, green growth discourses signify a top-down normative project that stabilizes the hegemonic nexus of growth. Neglecting the weaknesses of green growth discourses increases the danger of co-opting its strategies as greenwashing business-as-usual growth approaches, which are set to intensify rather than mitigate environmental destruction and social injustices. Considering these arguments, it not only seems like a risky speculation but also highly irresponsible to solely bet on proclaimed win-win green growth strategies as an agenda for socio-ecological transformation.

2.4.2 Productivist Growth

Productivist discourses to growth demarcate themselves clearly on the left spectrum of the framework (see Figure 2.1, quadrant 2) within overarching alternative discourses to growth. With the lower end of the spectrum of alternative growth discourses somewhat overlapping with degrowth (quadrant 3), this brief analysis will focus on the upper part of the spectrum in quadrant two. Productivist growth discourses revolve around critiques of, and aim to divert from, hegemonic pursuits of profit-maximisation and capital accumulation (x-axis), yet not necessarily of productivist logics that increase biophysical throughput (y-axis).

While capitalist forms of social organisation require continuous accumulation and expansion of capital for survival, it does not necessarily follow that other economic models simply work without growth-centric imaginaries of what the good life should be, as for instance, experienced in the former soviet context (Chertkovskaya 2019). Several postcapitalist imaginaries are built around ideas to increase and accelerate the automation of industrial production (Mason 2015; Rifkin 2015), geared towards, e.g,. inventing a tech-driven utopia which would allegedly abolish work (Srnicek and Williams 2016), or what others perfer to call *fully automated luxury communism*

(Bastani 2019). What unites such *accelerationist* (Soper 2020) proposals is a strong belief in the revolutionary capacity of information technology to deliver material abundance alongisde an entire overhaul of capitalist forms of socio-economic organisation, and the widespread alienation and immiseration they cause. Variously referred to as 'modernist-rational left' (Eversberg and Schmelzer 2018, p. 261), 'left productivism' (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 7), or socialist eco-modernism (Holgersen 2023), such discourses primarily focus on the just distribution of resources, often through centralised forms of organising, i.e., state planning.

Nevertheless, state-driven socialist modernisation projects can be just as environmentally damaging, as can co-operative or collective forms of organising, if they fail to reckon with problems of growth-driven productivist development. Perhaps most problematically, major questions about the enormous amounts of resource extraction and energy use for such technological developments (Vidal 2017), materialist lifestyles (Soper 2020), and hierarchical structures of ownership and control, which faciliate alienation and exploitation (Schmelzer et al. 2022), still remain in productivist growth discourses. Thus, imbalances between issues of social justice and ecological sustainability are not sufficiently addressed within productivist growth discourses. As others rightly point out (e.g., Schmelzer et al. 2022; Soper 2020), automation does not lend itself to all sectors of (re)production and its desirability can be questioned if the ends of such process do not lend themselves to productivist logics, e.g., in the care sector or sustainable agriculture. From a critical organisational perspective, such *productivist* managerial philosophies can be understood as neglecting and transgressing both the limits of the environment and human beings through measuring productivity and growth as the purpose of organisational activity (Heikkurinen et al. 2019). Overall, productivist growth discourses thus arguably remain stuck within productivist ideals and assumptions around socialist modernisation (Weeks 2011) by envisioning postcapitalist societies that ultimately fail to reckon with biophysical limits of growth. Questioning such productivist philosophy and making an *ecological case* for business (Ergene et al. 2020), necessarily entails abandoning the logic of ever-expanding production as an end in and of itself.

Rather than advocating for a return to the stone age or a complete denial of any form of growing production or productivity, questioning productivist philosophies thus calls for a careful differentiation of socially necessary production in line with social and

ecological limits to growth. Such aspects appear most pronounced in post-growth and degrowth discourses.

2.4.3 Post-Growth

As the overarching umbrella for growth-critical ideas, post-growth discourses contain quadrant-transgressing characteristics and are firmly positioned within the vertically lower spectrum of the framework (Figure 2.1). Taking issue with the fallacies of overly optimistic green growth ideas, post-growth aims to offer pathways to reduce the biophysical throughput (y-axis) of economic activities significantly and to decouple human welfare from the fixation of growth. While depicting a wide and diverse set of ideas, this section will primarily focus on post-growth positions that avoid a direct confrontation or remain ambiguous about systemic logics of capital accumulation (x-axis), which can be mapped within quadrant four of the framework.

Post-growth posits the empirical reality of shrinking economic growth figures at present and in the future, i.e., the basic understanding that a post-growth economy will materialise sooner or later. Accordingly, the essential question is whether such change would come 'by design, or disaster' (Le Monde diplomatique 2015, p. 3), i.e., planned in a desirable fashion or through abrupt and severe crises. As such, post-growth discourses encompass an increasing politico-economic criticism of growth within various political camps, emphasizing different problematic nexuses[6] (Reichel 2018). These positions include some of the most prominent and important contributions to post-growth thinking, however, to various degrees they often deliberately appear to abstain from addressing capitalist relations of power. Thus, the following primarily pertains to what may be referred to as *social reformative* strands of post-growth thinking, which largely conform to existing political and institutional conditions, attempting to tame green capitalism (Bierl 2015; Reichel 2018).

Post-growth proponents have forwarded a host of alternative future pathways, diverting from destructive pursuits of growth in the 21st century (Buch-Hansen 2014). Daly's (1973) vision of a steady-state economy constitutes the most significant reference point under this spectrum. A steady-state economy signifies a stationary state aimed at respecting the earth's biophysical limits through stable levels of material and

[6] This is particularly the case within the German context, see Schmelzer (2014) for a good overview.

energy throughput, while allowing for qualitative social development (Daly 1972). More recently, Jackson's (2017) ideas to rethink *prosperity without growth*, as well as Victor and Rosenbluth (2007) LOWGROW macro-oriented scenario model, proved influential in the anglophone world in suggesting the feasibility of managing developed economic systems without growth. While articulating a critical stance towards overconsumption in advanced growth-based societies, such accounts highlight the growing disconnect between materialist lifestyles to improved human well-being (Daly 1972; Jackson 2017; Victor and Rosenbluth 2007). Congruently, calls for a-*growth* fall under this spectrum[7], maintaining that growth and its imperfect measure of GDP indicators are entirely insignificant and should therefore be ignored to elicit the necessary socio-ecological transformation. Instead, the rejection of such indicators leads a-growth proponents to argue for largely state-driven and partially market-based environmental regulations through, e.g., taxes, permits, and incentives (van den Bergh 2011), as well as the disentanglement of social security and welfare systems from a growth-centred economy (Schneidewind et al. 2013; Seidl and Zahrnt 2010).

Other post-growth-compatible proposals constitute Raworth's (2017) *doughnut economy* and Felber's (2012) proposal of the *economy for the common good.* Both aim to strike a balance within planetary boundaries and encouragingly have been adopted[8] by businesses and public institutions on a municipal level. While the former advocates measures to firmly ground economic activity in a safe and just space for humanity, along with an agnostic approach to economic growth (Raworth 2017), the latter draws on novel accounting mechanisms and regulation of businesses according to social and ecological principles (Felber 2012). Representing thoughtful and critical proposals to depart from the hegemonic nexus of growth, such proposals signify visions for alternative initiatives and forms of organising. Yet, both remain initiated as a top-down approach of regulating economic activity within existing institutional frameworks. Moreover, both seemingly remain ambiguous or deliberately abstain from explicitly

[7] First coined by Latouche (2009), A-growth (as in Atheism) takes a disbelieving stance towards growth.

[8] See, for instance, applications of the doughnut economy in Amsterdam (https://blog-isige.minesparis.psl.eu/2024/03/05/doughnut-economics-in-action-the-city-of-amsterdam-embracing-the-model/) and Economy for the common good companies, in particular, in German-speaking countries (https://www.ecogood.org/who-is-ecg/ecg-companies/).

critiquing power structures and mechanisms of the prevalent political-economic system.

Any circumvention of inevitable confrontations with established growth-based institutions, and the concentration of economic power within hierarchical forms of society, by merely attempting to reform them (Fotopoulos 2007; Schmelzer 2014; Trainer 2012), thus appears to lack a transformative agenda aimed at widespread systemic and cultural change. Doing so would require not only to challenge underlying drivers of the hegemonic nexus to growth through institutional change, but also the development of bottom-up initiatives that may elicit a wider social force to prefiguring postgrowth societies.

2.4.4 Degrowth

Degrowth discourses are positioned within the third quadrant of the framework (Figure 2.1) as diametrically opposed to the hegemonic nexus of growth, thus signifying the primary antagonistic relation within the framework. With roots in limits-to-growth debates of the 1970s (Meadows et al. 1972), degrowth has been revived as an activist slogan at the beginning of the 21st century (Demaria et al. 2013; Liegey and Nelson 2020) igniting a second wave (Reichel and Perey 2018) of radical growth critique. As the most pronounced counter-hegemonic articulation to discourses of growth, degrowth forms itself in direct relation to productivist growth and post-growth discourses, as elaborated on above. Overlapping with the 'greener' spectrum of alternative growth discourses, degrowth signifies the most radical variant of post-growth thinking[9]. While seeking to radically reduce the biophysical throughput (y-axis) of societies, degrowth discourses posit that such pursuit necessarily relies on overcoming logics of capital accumulation (x-axis) and capitalist modes of production.

First and foremost, degrowth discourses revolve around a fundamental critique of the unsustainability and injustices perpetuated by hegemonic formations to growth, as well as the infeasibility of forwarded solutions from solely regulative and top-down discursive formations of productivist growth and post-growth. Such critique builds on the conviction that capitalist economies 'either grow or collapse' (Kallis et al. 2015,

[9] While the interchangeable and somewhat confusing usage of post-growth and degrowth (e.g., Wiefek and Heinitz 2018; Schmid 2018; Gebauer 2018; Johnsen et al. 2017) has already been problematised by others (Vandeventer and Lloveras 2020) this thesis intends to forward a somewhat more nuanced differentiation based on prevalent assumptions and connotations within each discourse.

p. 5), as well as the recognition that it is impossible to grow further without destroying environmental and social structures. Generally, discourses of degrowth do not only contest arbitrary concepts of growth per se, but the ideologically-informed proclamations of the inevitability and desirability of growth, along with their material consequences (Demaria et al. 2013; Fournier 2008; Muraca and Schmelzer 2017). At the same time, degrowth also posits visions for a better and more desirable future (Schmelzer et al. 2022). As such, degrowth constitutes a 'decentralised, multidimensional and open' activist-led network (Liegey and Nelson 2020, p. 49) aiming to re-politicise economic growth (Fournier 2008) in relation to struggles of global social-ecological justice, on an intersectional and intergenerational level. Broadly, degrowth discourses can be perceived as revolving around institution-oriented, sufficiency-oriented, commoning/alternative economy, feminist, and post-capitalist currents, which themselves remain contested across the network (Schmelzer et al. 2022). While degrowth as a concept emerged in Europe and is explicitly targeting affluent countries of the global north (Hickel 2020b; Martínez-Alier et al. 2010), its principles draw on what many perceive as natural allies of social movements from the global south (Kallis et al. 2020; Muraca and Schmelzer 2017; Paulson 2017). Degrowth is thus perceived as *one* element of a common framework for radical socio-ecological change, which seeks to cross-fertilise emancipatory strategies within a *pluriverse* (Kothari et al. 2019) or mosaic (Burkhart et al. 2017) of social movements that challenge forms of power and domination.

As comprehensive overviews of nearly five decades of growth-critique exist (e.g., Hickel 2020a; Kallis et al. 2018; Schmelzer et al. 2022) this section focuses on the broad themes. As recently categorised by Schmelzer et al. (2022), formations of degrowth comprise critiques of growth on ecological, cultural, socio-economic, feminist, capitalist, and South-North (i.e., colonial) dimensions, as well as critiques of industrialism. Such categorisation builds on an earlier identified confluence between theoretical, activist, and political pillars (Martínez-Alier et al. 2010), within which the debate can broadly be distinguished between technical-economic and socio-culturalist literatures (Demaria et al. 2013; Muraca 2013). While technical-economic contributions largely overlap with post-growth discourses on the infeasibility of perpetuating growth without increasing biophysical throughput, degrowth advocates are somewhat more adamant about the necessity for a declining state of the economy,

i.e. physically downsizing economic throughput (Kallis 2011), by overcoming logics of capital accumulation. This means, degrowth transcends Daly's SSE theories (1972) by arguing for radically lower levels of production and consumption in the Global North, to ensure ecological sustainability (Georgescu-Roegen 1971; Kallis 2011). Given the advanced stages of the ecological crises, degrowth advocates thus take the debate a step further by arguing for more fundamental changes to the way economies and societies are organised (Paulson 2017; Sandberg et al. 2019; Schneider et al. 2010). However, others argue for a complementary combination within which degrowth signifies a transitional phase or transformational process towards a more sustainable destination like steady-state economies and post-growth societies (Büchs and Koch 2017; Kerschner 2010; O'Neill 2012). Moreover, rather than downshifting all kinds of human activity altogether, degrowth proponents argue for a political, democratic, and ethical debate on what needs to degrow and what human activities can and should thrive instead (Kallis 2011; Kallis et al. 2020). In other words, degrowth 'seeks to scale down ecologically destructive and socially less necessary production […] while expanding socially important sectors' (Hickel 2020b, p. 4). Nonetheless, such imaginaries of radical transformation pose pressing questions on *how* ecologically necessary degrowth can be achieved in socially just, ethical and sustainable ways.

The counterpart to such ecological necessity form the social limits and consequences of growth, under which the socio-cultural desirability of degrowth is asserted, even if infinite material growth on a finite planet would be theoretically possible (Kallis et al. 2020; Liegey and Nelson 2020). Signifying the most ambitious visions for radical socio-ecological change on the introduced terrain of growth[10], degrowth is seen as both ecologically necessary and *socially desirable* by its advocates (Fotopoulos 2007). Such conviction draws on a multitude of sources[11] and has its conceptual roots within some of the most pronounced critiques of the pursuit of human progress based on the western development paradigm, raised by for instance, Gorz (1982), Illich (1975), and Castoriadis (1987). Respectively, their calls for autonomy, conviviality, and direct democracy provide fertile ground for degrowth to imagine radically different socio-

[10] This review explicitly focuses on discursive articulations prevalent in the global North given the chosen empirical case study and the historical responsibility of advanced industrial economies in the unfolding ecological crises. Future research could extent the mapping by analysing longstanding alternative discourses to the growth paradigm within the Global South (for a good discussion see Kothari et al. 2019).

[11] See Demaria et al. (2013) for a good clarification.

political realities. Hence, degrowth discourses put a strong emphasis on questioning systems and dynamics of culture and power, understood as re-producing prevalent logics of growth-based capitalist societies alongside unjust social relations (Muraca and Schmelzer 2017; Paulson 2017). The emphasis on cultural change and socio-ecological justice perhaps represent the most distinguishable features of degrowth compared to discourses outlined above, shifting the focus to social relations and dynamics within forms of human organisation.

Opposed to the hegemonic nexus to growth, the key rationale of degrowth is based on the recognition that the acceleration of multidimensional crises necessitates a renunciation of pursuing economic growth at all costs, and instead decouple human and ecological well-being from its pursuit (Demaria et al. 2013; Schneider et al. 2010). Thus, Degrowth constitutes a multidimensional discourse that intends to liberate or *decolonise imaginaries* of growth (Latouche 2009), i.e. to deconstruct imaginaries of contemporary societies through a radical critique of growth in the material, cultural and political sense. This points towards 'escaping routes' (Fournier 2008, p. 541) from the perpetuated drive for expansion and acceleration through a reorientation towards ecological and human well-being (Hickel 2020b; Kallis et al. 2020; Latouche 2009; Liegey and Nelson 2020). As such, degrowth not only requires shifts in ontological conceptions and value systems, but also a fundamental reconfiguration of social relations, practices and forms of organising to further an emancipation from growth-based cultural conceptions (Kallis et al. 2020; Paulson 2017). For instance, degrowth advocates often accentuate principles of frugal abundance, sharing, care, conviviality, slowing down, downshifting, self-limitation, open re-localisation, and commoning (Kallis et al. 2015; Liegey and Nelson 2020). Nonetheless, it often remains unclear how such socio-cultural reconfiguration in line with degrowth principles could materialise within social practice.

Therefore, such ideas point to the flipside of the well-pronounced critique of hegemonic formations of growth: The ongoing quest for alternative strategies and forms of organising on multiple societal levels, which only recently spurred larger debates amongst degrowth advocates (Barlow et al. 2022; Chertkovskaya 2020; Schmelzer et al. 2022). While degrowth has proliferated widely within academic circles over recent decades (Kallis et al. 2018), it remains the fundamental challenge to reach and eventually convince wider society and, in particular, large parts of affluent

societies of the Global North of its agenda. Popular misconceptions, e.g., as constituting a recession and spurring widespread human misery (e.g. Harford 2020; McAleenan 2020; Paul 2020) as commonly experienced under growth-centred capitalism, aggravate such undertaking. Moreover, even many sympathetic voices find it difficult to comprehend the meaning of the multifaceted discourse of degrowth as *a concept* (as noted by Cosme et al. 2017) positioned as being unable to attract widespread followers, particularly amongst working classes (Schwartzman 2012). While often characterised as a disruptive *missile slogan* (Hickel 2020b), controversial debates about whether the terminology is politically appealing or linguistically appropriate to challenge the hegemonic formation of growth represent a continuous companion of degrowth (e.g., Drews and Reese 2018; Raworth 2015; van den Bergh 2011). Moreover, contrary to the importance of local experiments and bottom-up approaches in line with degrowth (Demaria et al. 2013; Kallis et al. 2020), the majority of studies thus far have focused on government policy and top-down driven implementations of degrowth (Cosme et al. 2017). Furthermore, critical voices from degrowth-sympathetic social movements have raised concerns about a predominantly theoretical character of the discourse, somewhat neglecting local strategies and actors (Hörisch 2015; Jordan 2017; Kliemann 2017). Some scholars have thus lamented the little developed transformative strategies and the apparent gap between the material 'necessity and the impossibility' of what the degrowth discourse brings forward from an institutional, socio-cultural and political perspective (Blühdorn et al. 2018, p. 5). Essentially, the question thus remains on how social processes of a degrowth transformation could actually be induced and realised in a desirable manner.

Overall, degrowth appears to provide the most ambitious agenda and political imaginary for socio-ecological transformation, which appears desperately lacking in the wider socio-political sphere. Indeed, degrowth may provide fruitful avenues to counter the political deadlock of meeting the intensifying socio-ecological crises of our times. Nonetheless, its critiques essentially point towards the need to concretise such strategic avenues that combine social actors on multiple societal and institutional levels, geared towards a systematic transformation of social organisation. In other words, it urges proponents to shift from answering *why* degrowth may be desirable and necessary to *how* it could be organised (Barlow et al. 2022) in practice.

2.5 Conclusion

The analytical framework presented in this chapter offers an understanding of hegemonic and alternative discursive formations of growth. While business-as-usual growth still assumes a certain degree of hegemonic totality, the framework shows that destabilising social and ecological conditions increasingly elevate alternative discourses to growth that challenge this dominant position. Green growth discourses constitute top-down approaches relying primarily on technological market fixes which have thus far failed to avert environmental degradation, let alone mitigate mounting social pressures generated through growth. By largely adopting and building on understandings of perpetual capitalist expansion, green growth ultimately stabilises business-as-usual growth and reinforces the hegemonic nexus to growth. Solely relying on green growth approaches thus not only appears a risky speculation but a highly irresponsible bet on proclaimed win-win strategies from within the hegemonic nexus to growth. However, many of the underlying assumptions discussed here still remain largely unquestioned within organisational scholarship, which thus runs the risk of perpetuating unsustainable organisational practice.

Turning to alternative discourses and shedding light on what was identified as the counter-hegemonic nexus to growth thus opens up the field and provides ample ground for a much-needed debate within OMS. Degrowth discourses are positioned as taking shape through an antagonistic relation to the hegemonic nexus of growth, i.e., formations of business-as-usual growth and green growth. Degrowth transcends both, postcapitalist imaginaries of productivist growth as well as solely reformist post-growth approaches. Productivist growth has been positioned as building on techno-optimist visions which largely build on socialist state planning and a fairer distribution of growth, while neglecting the biophysical downsides and injustices of such undertaking. Reformistic post-growth approaches, take such biophysical fallacies serious by offering much needed institutional and policy-induced changes to move away from the hegemonic growth nexus. Often, however, such proposals appear to abstain from addressing capitalist power relations and to some extent neglect bottom-up socio-ecological change. As the more radical post-growth variant, degrowth may be perceived as deterring a broader hegemonic alliance to address the multidimensional crises. However, considering arguments put forward within each discourse and the stakes at play, degrowth may indeed constitute a more precautionary

route allowing for alternative possibilities of the necessarily radical socio-ecological changes to take place, in order for human societies to move beyond growth-dependent forms of social organisation.

Far from downplaying the major social changes such a paradigmatic shift towards degrowth would entail, following such line of thought poses challenging questions for organisational researchers. While the role of businesses as *engines* of economic growth has been highlighted above, it should be clear that alternative forms of organising social provisioning and re-production cannot happen on a large enough scale without systemic change. At the same time, however, a degrowth transformation necessitates an exploration of how life could be organised without following hegemonic patterns of ever-expanding production and consumption. Next to required technological solutions predominant within green growth and productivist growth discourses, and the institutional reforms prevailing within post-growth, degrowth discourses thus offer fertile ground for alternative organisations and social practices from a bottom-up perspective. Exploring degrowth approaches in relation to alternative organisational practice thus signifies an essential and pressing issue for the task of organising socio-ecological transformation.

Chapter 3 - Organisation and Work in Degrowth

In recent years, discourses around degrowth have re-entered centre stages of academia (Kallis et al. 2018), political circles (Beyond Growth 2023), as well as wider public outlets (Kliemann 2014; Kuper 2019). Given the acceleration of socio-ecological crises, it appears degrowth is increasingly challenging the unviable hegemonic nexus to growth. Nevertheless, despite widespread acknowledgement that business activity constitutes a key driving force generating economic growth (Buch-Hansen 2014; Hankammer et al. 2021; Rätzer et al. 2018), research on forms of organising compatible with ideas and principles of degrowth still remain in its infancy. While scholarly work and communities around degrowth organising are beginning to take shape, research output spans disciplinary boundaries with strongholds in ecological economics, human and economic geography, and increasingly organisation and critical management studies. As such, the topic has seen a steady growth over the past five years (Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021; Froese et al. 2023). Given this interdisciplinarity, however, the literature remains diverse, fragmented, and ultimately divided on the question on what degrowth means for organisations.

Building on the macro-discursive lens applied to map discourses of growth in the previous chapters, the purpose of this chapter is to critically review scholarly work that bears more specific relevance to forms of organisation and work in relation to degrowth. Thus, the following sections engage with literatures on organisational practice, issues of strategy and scaling, as well as conceptions around work, in relation to degrowth agendas. Overall, the review emphasises the central importance of translating imaginaries of degrowth into prefigurative organisational practice. It highlights the significance of strategising as a social process and outlines alternative scaling strategies to impact transformative socio-ecological change. Lastly, it sheds light on the importance of broader conceptions of work for degrowth agendas, to countering alienated and commodified forms of labour. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview, the review aims at revealing some of the shortcomings of scholarly work thus far and to position the present thesis within the eclectic organisational literature in relation to degrowth.

3.1 Organising Beyond Growth: A Conceptual Ambiguity

This section intends to offer a critical reading of the current literature on degrowth organising. It looks at the bigger picture of scholarly work relating degrowth ideas to sustainable business, before turning towards critical perspectives. By identifying an analytical void about the social processes of degrowth organising, this section draws a theoretical connection between social imaginaries and prefigurative practice.

3.1.1 Moving Beyond Business-as-usual?

Research on the application of degrowth ideas to issues of organisation has pointed to a persisting conceptual obscurity. Previous studies have introduced the wider umbrella term of 'post-growth organisations' to include diverse organisational approaches that both capture 'fissures of the growth narrative' within capitalism as well as 'utopian energies of alternative forms of work and organisation' (Rätzer et al. 2018, p. 196). Others have pointed to the general ambiguity (Parrique 2019; Schmid 2018) and the lack of 'precision' or 'archetypes' (Hankammer et al. 2021, p. 3) of degrowth-conform businesses and organisations more broadly. As Froese et al. (2023) note in a comprehensive review of degrowth-related case studies, research regularly reveals that only few organisations can be considered fully and explicitly degrowth-oriented. More important than such labelling activity, they note that 'degrowth typically refers to individual areas of organisational activity' (ibid, p. 2), often assigned retrospectively by researchers rather than organisational actors themselves. Analysing that 'there is no consensus about a single correct interpretation of degrowth in OMS', Vandeventer and Lloveras (2021, p. 9) conceptualise degrowth as a boundary object in their review on how degrowth is enacted and (re)configured across different epistemic communities. They identify a set of different practices aimed at *stabilising* or fixing specific understandings of degrowth to meet contextual needs, *reconfiguring* degrowth to reach particular audiences, as well as *projections* in which degrowth and OMS ideas are relationally mapped onto each other. Such insights point to significant ontological tensions in the understanding of degrowth in relation to organisational research, as 'the choice between possible degrowth(s) becomes a political one' (Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021, p. 362). In particular, such practices are problematic when shedding complexity in favour of trying to fix a particular version or reconfigure degrowth to fit given hegemonic realities of business and management.

One attempt to address this persisting ambiguity is to make degrowth operational on an organisational level by relating it to business models for sustainability. Early proposals, such as those of Reichel and Seeberg (2011, p. 6) consider ecological CO2 allowances as an 'absolute yardstick' to 'right size' businesses and to construct a case for 'corporate degrowth'. However, such case entirely focuses on the ecological side of degrowth while missing out on fundamental aspects of social justice and participatory democracy. Others, like Khmara and Kronenberg (2018) provide a framework with seven broadly synthesised criteria to assess 'whether a company follows the degrowth paradigm' (ibid, p. 724), in application to the multinational clothing manufacturer Patagonia. While framing degrowth 'as a specific business model for sustainability' (ibid, p. 730), they argue 'degrowth needs to be operationalised for more typical business activity' (ibid, p. 723) to be attractive and practical for corporate actors. However, such efforts often fall short of offering conceptual clarity by losing, or consciously omitting, some of degrowths principles in order to adapt degrowth to specific business contexts through a somewhat arbitrary and disintegrated selection of principles. Extending such research, Hankammer et al. (2021) perceive degrowth-approaching principles as successfully implemented in a variety of Benefit Corporations (B-Corps) within the current capitalist system. Building primarily on secondary data and interviews with CEOs, the authors purport a holistic framework by forwarding eleven principles perceived as 'guidelines for organizations approaching degrowth' (ibid, p. 4). Nonetheless, as the authors later admit, none of the organisations appears to fully cover the forwarded degrowth-principles but rather appear to 'approach green growth' (ibid, p. 14). Although such research points to much needed seeds of radical changes to the corporate firm, it often appears to accentuate the inconsistencies and contradictions which increase rather than reduce the confusion surrounding degrowth organising. Moreover, a selective pinpointing of organisational principles taken at face value rather than interrogating their materialisation in practice, often appears to offer little of analytical value.

Taken to the extreme, other scholars proclaim that businesses ought not to be *scared* of degrowth after all. In a well-meaning article Roulet and Bothello (2020), argue that degrowth can in fact offer 'new bases for competitive advantage' if steered successfully by business leaders who will be able to 'handily outmanoeuvre their competitors'. They see indications of 'consumer-driven degrowth' in which firms are

able to adapt their product design towards more longevity, value chains to incorporate stakeholders, and, like Patagonia, set standards in offering free repairs to an increasing market segment of environmentally conscious consumers. Thus, the authors imply that firms are able to further their resilience and adaptability through tweaking their existing business models, thereby furthering a 'business-as-usual desire to exploit new markets' (Nesterova et al. 2020) and willingly neglect the growth-compulsion inherent in capitalism. Somewhat more promising efforts of reconfiguration profess the adaptation of degrowth ideas to manufacturing (Hankammer and Kleer 2018), techno-business model innovation (Wells 2018), corporate values vis-a-vis a common good orientation (Wiefek and Heinitz 2018), or by arguing that 'there can be a good business case' for sufficiency-driven business models (Bocken and Short 2016, p. 41). While offering insights into the importance of, e.g., moderating overall resource consumption, more democratic governance structures, localisation, improving employee work-life balance, and a reduced focus on organisational growth, however, such work often tailors degrowth to existing managerial logics and theory, without sufficiently challenging broader political-economic growth dynamics. The aim to making a business case for sustainability (Ergene et al. 2020) often builds on an inflated belief in the power of green consumerism and entrepreneurs *leading the way* (Johnsen et al. 2017; Speth 2009), thus remaining trapped in capitalist imaginaries (Wright et al. 2013), or indeed, viewing degrowth as a *strategy to sustain the capitalist system* (Özcan and Demir 2023). Ultimately, such attempt reduces the 'paradigmatic re-ordering of values' degrowth entails (Fournier 2008, p. 532) to an often narrow and easily co-opted set of business principles, thereby detracting from deeper and more radical changes to economic activity and social provisioning.

In opposition to the dominant shareholder-based corporation, another strand of research connecting degrowth, and often a wider post-growth[12] framing, to more sustainable business models, focuses on limits to the organisational size and geographical scope (Hinton 2021). This large body of literature focuses on small, slow-growing, growth-averse or growth-independent businesses (e.g., Gebauer 2018; Liesen et al. 2015; Leonhardt et al. 2017; Nesterova 2019; Souza and Seifert 2018). While acknowledging that a macro-level analysis of growth critique cannot simply be

[12] While this thesis differentiates degrowth and postgrowth, many scholars use both terms synonymously, in parts, due to linguistic difficulties of translating degrowth. For instance, German-speaking countries predominantly talk about *Postwachstum* which literally translates into post-growth.

translated onto micro-organisational levels, such research seeks to challenge how growth is understood in firms and to reconfigure pathways for more collaborative and qualitatively-oriented business development compatible with a transition beyond growth (Cyron and Zoellick 2018). For Liesen et al. (2015, p. 4) 'successful non-growing companies' can be characterised by a disregard for 'traditional management indicators such as sales, market share, profit, or employee numbers' but instead prioritise the maintenance of a constant size. Others share such emphasis on an alternative understanding of organisational success instead of growth by, for instance, prioritising ideas of craftmanship and work satisfaction (Souza and Seifert 2018). Here, many scholars emphasise an entrepreneurial orientation on sufficiency (Bocken and Short 2016; Paech 2007) rather than the drive for greater efficiency associated with rebound effects in the degrowth literature. Part of such endeavour is to keep social relations at a manageable scale, understood to facilitate participation, trustful co-operation, shared responsibility, solidarity and conviviality in an organisational setting (Froese et al. 2023; Gebauer 2018; Nesterova 2021). Moreover, maintaining or regaining autonomy and control over the business is often a paramount factor in defying growth pressures, e.g., from investors or banks (Gebauer 2018; Souza and Seifert 2018).

In contrast to large corporations perceived as the main culprits of perpetuating the growth hegemony (Buch-Hansen 2014; Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021), others perceive small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) as potential allies and agents for a degrowth transition (Gebauer 2018; Nesterova 2021). Parrique (2019, p. 546) contends that degrowth businesses need to be small 'enough' in *power*, i.e. to avoid market domination, *size*, i.e., to limit the number of employees, and *scale*, i.e., to limit the geographical span. Others go even further by arguing that a downscaling of production and consumption would necessarily also shift and magnify subsistence and amateur economic activity (Nørgård 2013), as well as production in small enterprises within neighbourhoods and backyards (Trainer 2012). Such shift is envisioned to decentralise economic activities towards craft and needs-based forms of localised provisioning. While this does not mean that larger enterprises ought not to exist within a degrowth society, e.g. for larger infrastructural projects (Trainer 2012), the large majority of social provisioning is perceived at odds with large-scale structures of individual businesses. Nevertheless, while 'smallness' and a critical stance towards

unlimited growth of organisations and economic activities is certainly in line with degrowth thinking, e.g., to facilitate a culture of limits (Kallis 2019; Max-Neef 1995; Schumacher 1973), it does not depict a sufficient one (Gebauer 2018; Nesterova 2021). Indeed, a mere reduction or limit of business growth within capitalist market environments appears a misguided attempt of contributing to a degrowth transformation. Despite the often-mentioned consumer or employee empowerment, for instance, studies appear to neglect the disconnect of many small and growth-independent firms from collective forms of ownership and more participatory forms of democracy, seen as a vital ingredient of degrowth organising (Asara et al. 2013). At times, the focus appears to be on the subordination of business expansion to 'foster resourcefulness and the emancipation of market participants' (Cyron and Zoellick 2018, p. 222), which in some cases overemphasises managerial agency while de-emphasising the normativity of a degrowth transition. Therefore, such research to some extent appears to elevate the voluntary choice and managerial solution of refuting growth pressures by disregarding competitive political-economic contexts and dynamics compelling market-based firms towards growth. As others have noted, a sole focus on the level of the individual firm thus often leads to 'piecemeal critiques' and solutions (Hinton 2021, p. 2) neglecting structural dimensions impacting the behaviour and frame of possibilities of business actors under capitalism.

Overall, emerging strands of literature attempting to operationalise and clarify the role of degrowth for sustainable business, SME's and growth-averse organisations, appear to be largely focused on transferring degrowth principles narrowly onto individual organisational levels or actors. Often, however, such attempts fall short of sufficiently considering capitalist power relations, accumulation structures, and the politics of a systemic degrowth transformation. In other words, such shortcomings point to the lack of a more critical organisational and political-economic lens.

3.1.2 Critical Perspectives on Organising Degrowth

In contrast to the above, another strand of literature takes a more critical stance towards the role of business, its complicity in the political economy of growth-based capitalism, as well as taken-for-granted assumptions viewing a mere reform of conventional business as sufficient for a degrowth agenda (Banerjee et al. 2021; Böhm et al. 2012; Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021; Johnsen et al. 2017; Nyberg and Wright

2022a). By and large, such research calls to re-politicise economic activity and forms of organising in relation to degrowth (Fournier 2008). At a larger level, Chertkovskaya and Paulsson (2021) point to the 'corporate violence' inflicted on humans and ecosystems as an inherent feature of capitalist modes of production. From a Marxist perspective, they emphasise the destructive forces of capital in which corporations systematically engage in primitive accumulation and unequal ecological exchange resulting in alienation, oppression, as well as the exploitation of land and labour that destroys the social metabolism between nature and society (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021). In particular, such work problematises the competitive drive for profits and capital accumulation as the key driver behind the destructive forces of economic growth on an aggregate level. Processes of capital accumulation are understood to not only create multiple dependencies between businesses and various stakeholders, but also spur continuous environmental degradation and widen inequality (Banerjee et al. 2021; Foster et al. 2010; Jackson 2017; Kallis 2018). Thus, for-profit businesses are understood as systematically driving unsustainable social and ecological dynamics, ultimately preventing a transition beyond growth (Hinton 2020, Schneider and Murray 2024). While much research on business models for sustainability and degrowth appears to take privately-owned companies and the pursuit of profits for granted[13] (e.g., Gebauer 2018; Khmara and Kronenberg 2018; Wells 2018; Wiefek and Heinitz 2018), Hinton (2020) argues balancing profits can merely slow down unsustainable patterns and behaviours driven by feedback loops. Thus, many studies not only take the obsolete *triple-bottom-line* (Elkington 2018) approach for granted, but they also reproduce economic orthodoxy assuming 'the market is necessarily driven by profit' (Hinton 2020, p. 238). In addition to being collectively owned and small enough to be democratically managed, several degrowth scholars thus argue that in order to be considered compatible with degrowth, organisations need to be not-for-profit[14] (Hinton 2020; Johanisova et al. 2013; Parrique 2019; Trainer 2012). Instead, critical researchers make a case for 'for-benefit' business activities in line with commons-based organising (Kostakis and Bauwens 2014) and not-for-profit

[13] Although often with a note of the reduced significance of profits for business success.

[14] Hinton's (2020) case for not-for-profit businesses incorporates a legal reframing to sharing financial surplus, e.g., generated through sales, with no possibility to distribute money to private individuals.

businesses[15] geared towards redirecting all efforts to a social benefit purpose instead of privatising profits to better facilitate a post-growth economy (Hinton 2020; Hinton and Maclurcan 2017). Overall, such work directs attention to building grassroots alternatives in alliance with social movements in order to establish a post-capitalist degrowth society (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson 2021; Rätzer et al. 2018).

Accordingly, another segment of scholarly work on degrowth focuses on, and advocates for, alternative modes of organisation and work as constituting a potential social force towards a degrowth transformation (Rätzer et al. 2018). Such research encompasses an amalgamation of diverse forms of organising such as eco-social enterprises and commons (Johanisova et al. 2013; Johanisova and Fraňková 2017), not-for-profit businesses (Hinton 2020/2021; Hinton and Maclurcan 2017), community-based initiatives (Sekulova et al. 2017; Sekulova et al. 2023), and particularly co-operatives (Buch-Hansen and Carstensen 2021; Cunico et al. 2022; Johanisova et al. 2015; Kunze and Becker 2015; Novkovic and Webb 2014). By operating through shared ownership rules, democratic governance structures, using money as means not an end, and by being rooted in a place, co-operatives are seen as 'well-placed to defy market logic[s]' and thus, generally perceived as compatible with a degrowth ethos (Johanisova and Fraňková 2017, p. 513). In the best case, co-operatives avoid a 'growth-for-growth's sake' approach and focus their organisational activity on a 'mutual-aid needs-satisfying logic' (Johanisova et al. 2015, p. 153). Moreover, the values of social justice, co-operation, solidarity, reciprocity and trust underpinning co-operative activities, are understood to bearing potential for an ideological shift to foster human and ecological well-being in line with degrowth principles (Novkovic and Webb 2014). Some even see the emergence of 'degrowth co-operatives' as a specific empirical manifestation of a distinct co-operative form (Cunico et al. 2022) explicitly trying to embody and diffuse degrowth principles, as well as limiting their organisational activities to a local level. Providing a functionalist account of causal relations within co-operative organisational dynamics, however, Cunico et al.'s (2022) study explicates findings from an economistic perspective, e.g., focusing on monetary circuits, growth, and members' income rather than offering a more nuanced analysis of social relations and contingent processes. Moreover, the

[15] Maclurcan and Hinton (2018) distinguish not-for-profit *businesses* seeking to be financially self-sufficient through trade and generating revenue through the sale of goods and services from not-for-profit *organisations* relying mostly or entirely on philanthropy, grants, and donations.

analysis appears to largely 'resemble traditional co-operatives' (Cunico et al. 2022, p. 12) in its organisational dynamics and social challenges, constraining a degrowth ethos to limiting organisational expansion and growth. Thus, the label of 'degrowth co-operatives' remains somewhat devoid of meaning and analytically questionable.

Most research on co-operatives in relation to degrowth appears to ground their arguments on the potential of co-ops to displace the neoclassical approach to capitalist business in a competitive market environment, rather than growth-based capitalism itself. However, collective forms of ownership and democratic structures of co-operatives are not automatically facilitating degrowth (Banerjee et al. 2021). Instead, some authors point to the need for expanding conceptions of economic activity to non-monetised spheres as important sites for a degrowth transition. Such broadening includes reproductive and caring activities as well as co-operative entities[16] that elude market logics to some degree, by operating in a liminal zone between monetised and de-commodified economic spheres (Johanisova et al. 2013; Johanisova and Fraňková 2017). Overall, however, much research on degrowth and co-operatives appears to focus on static organisational configurations and economic features, rather than offering in-depth analyses of the social processes of organising degrowth. In particular, there appears to be a lack of investigations of the 'ongoing and sometimes painful struggle' (Rätzer et al. 2018, p. 198) in enacting degrowth-compatible forms of organisation within, alongside, and against hegemonic formations of growth-driven capitalism (for notable exceptions see, e.g., Schmid 2018; Sekulova et al. 2017).

While offering promising avenues for organisational practice in line with degrowth, many authors point to the fragility and vulnerability of co-ops operating largely from *within* a global growth-driven political-economic system. Thus, scholars highlight the power dynamics and forms of resistance which are to various degrees present in alternative organisations, often forming themselves as *a result,* and *despite* of, crises within growth-based capitalism (Johanisova and Fraňková 2017; Sekulova et al. 2017). By and large, such work takes the perspective that economic activity, its

[16] I deliberately refrain from using the broad and somewhat vague term 'social enterprises' in line with Houtbeckers (2018) and Johanisova and Fraňková 2017 (p. 509) who note the 'lack of a deeper critical approach to the mainstream underlying economic ontology' as well as many texts that 'accept the capitalist growth paradigm and its theoretical underpinnings' in the literature on social enterprises.

impacts, and by extension, degrowth organising, are inherently political (Froese et al. 2023; Kunze and Becker 2015; Schmid 2018; Sekulova et al. 2023). Thus, on the one hand, authors critique the increasing commodification, competitive dynamics and hierarchical power relations within and across growth-based capitalist businesses. On the other, organisational actors are perceived as enacting their politics through their social practice within the organisation. For Schmid (2018, p. 283) the enactment of such politics involves moving beyond attempts to implement more sustainable modes of production and consumption 'insofar as they challenge economic discourses and practices more broadly'. Overall, this strand of research foregrounds the enactment of alternative economic and counter-hegemonic organisational practices in line with degrowth imaginaries (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023; Sekulova et al. 2023; Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021). Invariably, such perspectives point to the importance of prefigurative organising processes in bringing degrowth imaginaries into being.

3.1.3 From Social Imaginary to Prefigurative Practice

Degrowth discourses intersect with a growing body of organisational literature focusing on alternative organising and prefigurative practice (e.g., Reedy et al. 2016; Skoglund and Böhm 2020; Zanoni 2020). However, despite notable exceptions (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023; Schiller-Merkens 2024) little scholarly efforts have thus far been dedicated to connecting both bodies of literature beyond signalling their mutual relevance and complementarity in theory and practice.

In order to undo or *decolonise* social imaginaries from capitalisms endless pursuit of growth (Latouche 2009; Varvarousis 2019), degrowth signifies a utopian venture of radical socio-ecological transformation involving struggle and conflict in a process-oriented sense (Kallis and March 2015). As such, the quest to 'escape' from the growth economy is 'as much a question of decolonising the imagination as one of enacting new practices' (Fournier 2008, p. 534). Degrowth scholars often emphasise *prefigurative* 'concrete utopias' (Bloch 1978) and 'nowtopian' projects (Carlsson 2008) that offer grounds to both imagine as well as enact, embody and perform degrowth alternatives in the present, in a self-critical and open-ended *process* (Kallis and March 2015; Schmelzer et al. 2022; Sekulova et al. 2023). Both degrowth and prefigurative organising broadly correspond to what Gibson-Graham (2006) frame as diverse economic experiments towards post-capitalism and an ethical practice of

becoming through cultivating alternative organisational practice in the present. In other words, translating imaginaries of degrowth as a project of radical socio-ecological transformation into prefigurative organisational practice is considered of central importance.

Social Imaginaries

The degrowth literature largely follows a Castoriadian (1987) conception of social imaginaries (Asara et al. 2013; Latouche 2009; Varvarousis 2019). From this perspective, social imaginaries attached to ideas of economic growth bestow hegemonic power to the project of endless expansion in all organised contexts of life. Analytically, social imaginaries or social imaginary significations (Castoriadis 1987) constitute a form of cultural beliefs or ethos which are distinct from person-centred understandings of 'imagination' as an individual faculty (Bottici 2019; Strauss 2006). In other words, social imaginary significations incorporate the socialisation process of individuals into cultural beliefs and social contexts which precede the formation of individuals and their imagination (Bottici 2019). While such imaginary significations, e.g., hegemonic ideas around growth, institute society, individuals and collectives are simultaneously constitutive of existing social imaginary significations and possess the power to create and shape new social imaginaries through what Castoriadis (1987) referred to as the *radical imaginary* (Asara et al. 2013). Radical imaginaries can function as a creative resource for new or alternative forms of organising life, i.e., through projecting ambitions for, and striving towards, social change. Here, Castoriadis' (1987) conception diverts from Lacanian perceptions which view imaginaries as illusory fantasy, and Anderson's (2006) imagined communities, perceived as shared cognitive schema (Strauss 2006). In particular, Castoriadis conception differs from Lacanian imaginaries in constituting a 'generative force' that is open for transformation (Varvarousis 2019, p. 499).

It is particularly this shift from the focus on the individual to the social that makes Castoriadis' work relevant for degrowth-oriented social processes to liberating imaginaries of growth, which remains largely unexplored in empirical contexts (Varvarousis 2019). While some commentators critique Castoriadis' conception for putting emphasis on a single social imaginary understood as central for a given society, suggesting homogeneity and fixity (Strauss 2006), such centrality should rather be understood as dominance without excluding the existence of other, contradictory

imaginaries (Varvarousis 2019). Hence, this thesis mobilises Castoriadis' theoretical conception through what may be referred to as political imaginaries (Adams 2012), characterised by multiplicity and antagonism rather than unity. Various competing social or political imaginaries can be understood as underlying or informing hegemonic formations in organised contexts. Such conception is close to Taylor's (2002, p. 106) theorisation which posits ordinary people as making sense of their social existence through imaginaries, which carries a sense of 'how things usually go […] and how they ought to go', often implicitly learned and expressed through practices, images, and stories. In other words, such view implies an analytical focus on 'people's imaginaries', i.e., social groups, not '*the* imaginary of a society' (Strauss 2006, p. 323).

Thus, within the space of alternative organising, this thesis views social imaginaries as an important normative precursor to prefigurative organisational practice in relation to how a broader socio-ecological transformation may be furthered. While links between Castoriadian imaginaries and social practice tend to be neglected in the literature (for an exception, see Adams 2012; Varvarousis 2019), imaginaries and social practice can be regarded as co-constitutive (Taylor 2002). In other words, social imaginaries both enable 'practices of a society' (Banerjee et al. 2021, p. 342), while in turn being defined through social practice, shared discourses and symbols (Strauss 2006). Whereas social imaginary significations manifest the status quo and institute society, the generative capacity of imaginaries in the Castoriadian sense always incorporate the potential to imagine the 'things to come' (Zanoni et al. 2017, p. 580).

It is this generative capacity of imaginaries which most clearly corresponds to a generative temporal framing of prefigurative practice (Gordon 2018), in which current practices produce a path dependency towards a contingent future. From this perspective, prefigurative practice constitutes a process of anticipating and shaping desirable futures out of the present, thereby effecting a slow and incremental process towards wider cultural and societal change (Monticelli 2022; Schiller-Merkens 2024; Yates 2015). Following sociological theorising which argues the production of a variety of desirable futures is to be realised through forms of human action in the present (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), thus foregrounds the role of social imaginaries in simultaneously informing, and being informed by, prefigurative practice. For Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 962) social engagement or practice in the present (*practical evaluation*) is simultaneously informed and acted upon, by an orientation to

the past (*iteration)* and future (*projectivit*y). Similarly, Kallis and March (2015, p. 361) argue degrowth is not to be mistaken with a call for 'a return to a past that never existed, but for a simultaneous production of the present by the past and the future'. In other words, the way people interpret and imagine their relationship to the past and future informs practice in present structural, historical, and collectively organised social contexts, as well as possibilities to act upon them in reproductive or transformative ways (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). This conception lends itself to Castoriadian social imaginaries which entail possibilities of both reproducing society and transforming it, e.g., through prefigurative practice in alternative organisations aiming for wider socio-ecological change. In other words, the negotiation and contestation of social imaginaries on how change ought to be created within and through alternative organisations, constitutes an important, yet often neglected aspect of prefigurative organisational practice.

Prefigurative Politics

In its emphasis on imaginaries and prefigurative *processes*[17], degrowth coincides with political strategies and practices of other social movements[18], in enacting envisioned forms of social relations and organising in the *here and now*, rather than projecting them into a distant future (Maeckelbergh 2011; Raekstad and Gradin 2020; Yates 2021).

Originating in anarchist thinking, prefigurative politics refer to a consistency between the means and ends of organising, i.e., the employment of practices and actions commensurate to the ultimate political objectives (Raekstad and Gradin 2020; Wilson 2014; Yates 2015). Both the path(s) and goal(s) of prefiguration are necessarily open-ended and not predetermined but developing through ongoing processes of organising (Gordon 2018; Maeckelbergh 2011), thus reflecting the ethos and multiplicity of degrowth. The 'substitution or supplanting of dominant institutions with alternatives', constitutes the first and most vocally articulated strategic function of prefiguration (Yates 2021, p. 1047). While prefiguration thus entails both the *negation* of the present as well as the affirmation of alternative possibilities, envisioned 'concrete utopia'

[17] Interestingly, the resurgence of prefiguration within the last 15-20 years after initial debates on socialist strategy from the 1970s onwards (Du Plessis and Husted 2022; Yates 2021) mirrors a similar trajectory and revival of degrowth discourses as a second wave of growth-critique as argued above.
[18] Most commonly associated with the alter-globalization movement, see Maeckelbergh 2011.

necessarily operate ‘within, against and beyond the social relation of capital and its institutions’ (Dinerstein 2016, p. 52). Hence, prefiguration is always characterised by processes of struggle. Within social movement studies and practice, prefiguration often denotes an ethos of anti-authoritarianism and practices of direct action, horizontality, diversity, and consensus-based decision-making, combined with network-based organisational structures that prefigure alternative political imaginaries (Gordon 2018; Maeckelbergh 2011). Equally, such political practice also mirrors a myriad of more durable efforts of ‘building alternatives’ (Yates 2015, p. 2), i.e., alternative organisational practices of (re)production in the social and solidarity economy (Monticelli 2022; Schiller-Merkens 2024; Yates 2021).

While much confusion appears to prevail as to what prefigurative politics entail, Raekstad and Gradin (2020) make a convincing case for a broader understanding. In contrast to a narrower understanding focusing primarily on horizontal organising and decision-making structures, the authors argue that the focus of prefigurative politics has expanded to include the ‘broader organisational culture, social relations, and everyday experiences’ (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, p. 31), following Boggs (2021/1977) original definition. Influenced by the feminist conviction that ‘the personal is political’, they argue prefigurative politics emphasise the interrelation of people’s powers and capacities, their drives, wants and needs, as well as forms of consciousness developed through human activity, as important for social change. The ongoing political practice of prefiguration thus reflects an understanding that currently dominant norms and habits need to be ‘undone and consciously replaced with new values’ (Wilson 2014, p. 181). In other words, the cultivation of new social relations, identities, forms of consciousness and decision-making (Swain 2019; Yates 2021) is geared towards ‘new forms of life’ (Monticelli 2022, p. 24). Accordingly, writers of prefiguration emphasise the interconnectedness and dynamic interplay of political change processes on individual and collective levels, geared towards building capacities for self-determination, empowerment, and emancipation (Monticelli 2022; Wilson 2014). Prefiguration thus denotes an evolutionary process of organising social change, or in other words, the ‘planting and nurturing of the seeds of the future society within the soil of the old’ (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, p. 70).

Degrowth as Prefigurative Process

Empirically, organisational research has applied concepts of prefiguration in a variety of organisational settings, prioritising different levels of analysis, and emphasising different epistemic qualities of prefigurative politics (e.g., Kokkinidis 2015; Reinecke 2018; Skoglund and Böhm 2020). As of now, however, there appears to be little investigation of prefigurative processes in relation to degrowth.

In a recent analysis, Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese (2023) introduce the 'act of (de)growing' as a prefigurative practice. Here, individuals are perceived to disentangle from organisations and workplaces governed by growth through *degrowing*, i.e., by consciously *regrowing* alternative places they inhabit through practicing alternative ways of securing their livelihoods. Such prefigurative change processes are seen as initiated through a sense of dissatisfaction with the larger system, creating the motif to disentangle from growth-driven organisational spaces. In addition, *degrowing* entails a horizontal reconnection of (non-)humans beings, e.g., through translocal networks of community support, creating the conditions for de/regrowing organisational landscapes and the emergence of alternative, more-than-human subjectivities. Importantly, the authors foreground the continuous struggle of *degrowers* in the act of disconnecting oneself from growth-driven spaces while prefiguring alternative livelihoods. The study puts an explicit focus on personal transformative trajectories of change in subjectivities and desires within prefigurative processes of socio-ecological change to 'bringing place-based degrowth worlds', i.e., imaginaries, 'into being' (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023, p. 1742).

Such work mirrors other studies emphasising transitional degrowth processes as being initiated by profound ontological shifts through a 'metamorphosis in being' (Heikkurinen 2019, p. 528). Vlasov et al. (2023) argue such shift is often prompted by an inner revolt against psychological suffering experienced as an effect of exploitative structures of growth-driven capitalism, which leads to a moral awakening to explore alternative modes of organising in line with degrowth. While providing insightful cases, however, arguably such processes of degrowing primarily pertain to individual-level 'escapism' of people dropping out of full-time employment within urban spaces, governed by hegemonic formations of growth, to prefigure more self-sufficient

provisioning of livelihoods off the land[19]. By focusing primarily on processes of *personal* rather than *social* prefiguration (Wilson 2014), there appears to be a lack of research on how more collective prefigurative processes of 'degrowing' may be organised, negotiated, contested, and experienced. This research takes the theoretical and empirical void on studying prefigurative organisational processes in relation to degrowth as a starting point.

Organisational scholars have recently drawn attention to the pitfalls on how prefiguration is conceptualised and utilised in organisational studies (Du Plessis and Husted 2022; Parker 2021; Schiller-Merkens 2024). Often research on prefiguration appears to suffer from circular reasoning, i.e., when conflating means and ends of organising (Du Plessis and Husted 2022), while frequent tensions about the selective prioritisation of a multiplicity of means and ends appear to exist in practice (Yates 2015). As such, the focus on means-ends congruence does not necessarily imply a superiority of a particular end, i.e., particular political ideals as to what a future society should look like (Du Plessis and Husted 2022; Parker 2021). Thus, some argue for the need to differentiate *formal* and *substantive* forms of prefiguration, with the latter incorporating a substantive value content in contrast to a purely means-end alignment (Gordon 2018). Referring to Boggs (2021/1977), Parker (2021, p. 7) thus maintains that 'the crucial issue is the relation between' means and ends 'not collapsing one into the other as if they were the same'. Essentially, such interventions highlight the complexity and dynamic struggle of prefigurative praxis, often involving negotiation and compromise between means and ends.

Moving beyond a mere means-ends equivalence, Schiller-Merkens (2024) problematises the often-unclear distinction between alternative and prefigurative organising, with both concepts being frequently used interchangeably. In contrast to an intra-organisational focus on *autonomy*, *solidarity*, and a future-oriented *responsibility* as broad defining principles of alternative organisations (Parker et al. 2014), the 'outside' of alternative organisations is considered fundamental to what Zanoni (2020, p. 7) calls the 'prefigurative power of alternative praxis'. Thus, prefiguration not only involves the rejection of undesirable forms of organising and

[19] This accounts for prefiguration in respect to human beings. Indeed, the Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese's (2022) study makes a very important case for prefigurative practices of degrowing that creates, and is created by, organisational landscapes in extension to more-than-human nature along the lines of multispecies commoning.

the creation of alternatives that embody alternative moral principles, but also political ambitions to contribute to wider social change through diffusing 'alternative practices, beliefs, and values' (Schiller-Merkens 2024, p. 465). Thus Yates (2015, p. 15) distinguishes prefiguration from mere alternative or countercultural projects which lack 'a collective vision or preparedness to act in order to change wider society', i.e., the consolidation and proliferation of alternative ideas and practices. Accordingly, Schiller-Merkens (2024) points to various forms of struggle emerging from sources internally and externally to the organisation. Particularly in regard to internal forces of prefigurative organising, Schiller-Merkens (2024) argues that diverging perspectives about appropriate strategies to instigate wider social transformation can constitute a major source of struggle within prefigurative organisations. Often, struggles are induced by a wide heterogeneity of 'degrees of *alternativeness'* (Schiller-Merkens 2024, p. 468) of prefigurative organisations, which underlie constant social negotiation processes about diverse perspectives, beliefs, and ideas of organisational actors.

Despite the emphasis on such contestation about how to instigate wider social transformation across society, however, there appears to be little empirical investigation about how actors within alternative organisations negotiate prefigurative strategies, in particular, from a degrowth perspective. It is such focus on forms of prefigurative strategising within degrowth that this chapter will turn to next.

3.2 From *Why* to *How:* Strategising and Scaling Degrowth

The previous section identified the need to further the understanding about prefigurative degrowth strategies to instigate a wider socio-ecological transformation. This section will initially focus on the level of political strategies at the intersection of degrowth, prefiguration, and commoning, before problematising common understandings of organisational strategy from a critical perspective. Situating this study in a processual understanding of strategy, the last part of this section focuses on recent work highlighting the diversity of scaling processes in relation to degrowth.

3.2.1 Political Strategy: Prefigurative Degrowth

As the previous section has shown, prefigurative politics converge with imaginaries of putting degrowth into organisational praxis in the here and now. However, critiques of

prefigurative politics abound[20] denoting it as ‘politically naïve, ineffective, apolitical or non-strategic’ (as noted by Yates 2021, p. 1034). In particular, critiques highlight that within prefigurative projects, puritan ethics may create situations of withdrawal from wider society in which prefigurative practices operate in small-scale bubbles with exclusionary tendencies, or too strong of a focus on the present (Du Plessis and Husted 2022; Gordon 2018; Monticelli 2022; Reinecke 2018; Wilson 2014). Such withdrawal can be spurred by, or leading to, an unwillingness to engage with existing institutions, thus, e.g., leaving the door wide open for authoritarian groups to take control of the state (Mouffe 2009; Parker 2021). Indeed, one might argue truly autonomous zones cannot and do not exist in full independence form social forces of the state and capital but are always in a complex and interdependent relationship to it (Böhm et al. 2010; De Angelis 2017). Other critiques emphasise the often-privileged socio-economic background of activist engaged in prefiguration as a form of ‘private liberation’ (Smucker 2014) and ‘luxury that only people with enough time, health, energy and wealth can afford’ (Monticelli 2022, p. 23). Moreover, one may argue the presenteeism and relatively slow process of social transformation advocates of prefigurative politics favour is running out of time, given the acceleration of planetary crises (Du Plessis and Husted 2022; Gordon 2018). Against such allegations, contemporary writers on prefiguration maintain its significance as an important part of any political strategy, yet one that works best in combination with others to effect radical social change (Dinerstein 2016; Maeckelbergh 2011; Monticelli 2022; Raekstad and Gradin 2020; Yates 2021). After all, ‘prefiguration is not the answer to every question’ (Parker 2021, p. 6). For Maeckelbergh (2011) prefiguration thus necessarily entails a reconfiguration of what is commonly understood under ‘strategy’ for social change, such as having predetermined and singular goals. Yates (2021, p. 1049) thus maintains that the focus for research should no longer be whether or not prefiguration is strategic, but the applied strategy within social processes to discern ‘how different strategic projects and priorities are negotiated within movements, and to what effect’.

In a similar vein, the degrowth movement has been critiqued for its strategic indeterminacy, seemingly resulting out of the plurality and openness as an all-encompassing umbrella term (Barlow and Herbert 2020). In response, debates on

[20] For a more in-depth discussion of critiques of prefiguration, see for instance: Yates 2021, Du Plessis and Husted 2022, or Parker 2021.

degrowth have in recent years taken a 'strategic turn' in aiming to move beyond just making the case for degrowth and focusing on *why* a degrowth transformation is necessary and desirable (Kallis et al. 2020). Instead, a growing emphasis is placed on seeking strategic pathways towards *how* such radical socio-ecological change can actually materialise in practice (Barlow et al. 2022; Schmelzer et al. 2022). In the eponymous book, Barlow et al. (2022) have started to outline the contours of how *degrowth strategies* may translate into a selection of key social provisioning sectors and an overall political-economic re-organisation of social organisation. Within this collection, Chertkovskaya (2022) provides a useful adaptation of Wright's (2010) triangular modes of transformation as a theoretical lens to analyse and develop degrowth strategies in practice. Alongside *symbiotic* transformations, i.e., changing existing institutions and the system from within, as well as *ruptural* transformations, i.e., seeking direct confrontations or breaks with existing institutions and social structures, Chertkovskaya (2022, p. 58) argues *interstitial* transformation are 'crucial for degrowth as a movement and might be seen as its basis'. Interstitial transformations designate direct democratic bottom-up initiatives which both resist capitalist structures and those that build alternatives to business-as-usual logics prioritising growth and capital accumulation above all else. As Monticelli (2022, p. 20) highlights, interstitial system change through social and solidarity economy collectives and cooperatives 'is the mechanism most aligned with prefigurative politics'. While degrowth scholars emphasise the complementarity and contingency of all three of Wright's (2010) political strategies to work in tandem (Barlow et al. 2022; Schmelzer et al. 2022), an understanding thus appears to prevail which assigns heightened importance to the embodiment of degrowth at the interstices of capital. Accordingly, prefigurative degrowth strategies can be perceived as one crucial, yet in line with most writers on prefigurative politics, not a comprehensive political strategy towards a *radical emancipatory socio-ecological transformation* (Brand 2022) in line with degrowth.

In line with prefigurative degrowth strategies, scholarship has increasingly pointed to non-capitalist social relations and processes of *commoning* as a way to reducing the dependence of livelihoods on capitalist market relations (De Angelis 2017; Euler 2018; Helfrich and Bollier 2020). Building on Ostrom's (1990) seminal research on historical commons, governed through self-organised institutional arrangements and collectively defined rules, research on commoning diverts from the naturalised or resource-based

view, by focusing on the social and political dimension of commons (Euler 2018). Social practices of commoning can be understood as a dynamic social process of human activity in *making* the commons as a form of social organisation (Euler 2018; Fournier 2013; Linebaugh 2008), which in contrast to capitalist commodification does not rely on perpetual growth (Euler 2019). Commoning involves the negotiation, deliberation, and mediation of common rules and forms of organising by voluntary participants on an equal footing, i.e., a community of commoners aiming to satisfy their needs through tangible or intangible commons (De Angelis 2017; Euler 2019). Commoning thus 'refers to a vivid social process within which people self-organise and satisfy their needs [collectively]', beyond state and market relations (Helfrich and Bollier 2020, p. 7). The literature differentiates between 'traditional' commons, e.g., the cultivation of a forest in communal property, and newer or 'emerging' commons, such as community-supported agriculture (Euler 2019; Fournier 2013). Nonetheless, as Euler (2019) highlights such newer forms of commoning still operate in contradictory relations to market and state forces, e.g., through the need for people to generate income and the usage of money to participate in emerging commons like CSAs. Any contemporary form of commoning thus necessarily remains incomplete and compromised as a 'seed form' in a social setting dominated by antagonistic capitalist relations (Meretz 2014), i.e., an embryonic, prefigurative form of a society characterised by a different systemic logic (Caffentzis and Federici 2014). Nonetheless, as De Angelis (2017, p. 256) underlines, denoting something as a commons despite its inevitable shortcomings 'helps to define the journey that is necessary to undertake to turn it into one', thus emphasising the continuous struggle of commoning under current societal arrangements.

Indeed, commons have an ambivalent relation to capitalism, operating simultaneously outside and against market relations to various degrees, while being essential for capitalist development in moments of re-appropriation, enclosure, and co-optation (De Angelis and Harvie 2014). Due to mounting social and environmental costs of capitalism, it is suggested that while a 'commons fix' is essential for the reproduction of capitals endless drive for growth (De Angelis 2013), commons also constitute a basis for anti-capitalist organising (De Angelis and Harvie 2014). As a social force vis-à-vis capital and the state, De Angelis (2017) describes commons as an autopoietic social system which is both, reproduced by the social activity of commoning, i.e.,

doing in common, and reproduces the social subjects doing the commoning, i.e. the community of commoners. To De Angelis (2017) commoning thus constitutes the most important element of commons systems, as it generates the system on an organisational level, including the social relations, governance rules, affects, decisions, and cultures. Ultimately, commoning is thus not only geared towards dissolving the prevalent distinction within capitalist social relations between producers and consumers, but also production and reproduction of both human and non-human nature (Euler 2019, 2018; Caffentzis and Federici 2014; Schmelzer et al. 2022). While commoning can 'only be approached but not achieved in the here and now' (Euler 2018, p. 15) it nonetheless provides a useful conception relevant for prefigurative strategies aiming to instantiate degrowth.

Perceiving the enclosure of commons as a continuous socio-political process of commodification (De Angelis and Harvie 2014; Fournier 2013) and a necessary precondition for the hegemonic formation of growth, degrowth scholars perceive commons as 'an antidote to the growth imperative' (Hickel 2020, p. 98). A re-organisation around commoning thus constitutes a 'central component' (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 217) and interstitial pathway to putting degrowth into social practice in line with a larger shift to a democratic, co-operatively organised, and solidarity-based economy (Chertkovskaya 2022). Conversely, some commons-oriented scholars perceive the commons as a 'social form that allows for degrowth' (Euler 2019), commoning experiments as 'just-transitions towards degrowth' (Garcia-Lopez et al. 2021, p. 1210), and commoning as 'the central social relationship of a degrowth economy' (Wittel and Korczynski 2023). Indeed, as Brownhill et al. (2012, p. 96) contend in an early critique of degrowth, the 'degrowth of capital is accomplished through the regrowth of commoning'. Despite such mutually assigned significance of complementarity, however, little attention has thus far been paid to the relationship between degrowth and 'commons-organisations' (Euler 2018, p. 16) in practice.

3.2.2 Rethinking Organisational Strategy and Growth

Within organisation and management theory, conceptions of strategy and strategic management traditionally privilege competitiveness, efficiency, and growth (Penrose and Pitelis 2009), often sidelining considerations for social or environmental values (Levy et al. 2003). Indeed, strategic management can be perceived as having 'annexed

economic development' and its core ideas of economic growth and progress (Greckhamer 2010, p. 843). Levy et al. (2003) thus denote strategy as the most 'managerialist' discourse in the field of management, emphasising its ideological dimension imparting strategy as an object of manifesting power structures and hierarchical economic relations. In addition to being a primary legitimising force for corporate hierarchies (Blom and Alvesson 2016), the military heritage of 'strategy' appears to make the concept 'alien to the degrowth vision' (Barlow et al. 2022, p. 16). However, due to its forward-looking and power-imbued character (Blom and Alvesson 2016) degrowth organising cannot dismiss questions of strategy altogether.

Critical organisational research has pointed to the shortcomings of an instrumental, technocratic, and depoliticised view of strategy, often marked by vagueness and used as signifier for grandiosity (Blom and Alvesson 2016; Greckhamer 2010; Levy et al. 2003). The managerial privilege of constituting the legitimate organisational actors to determine strategy masks how the strategic process is conditioned, and contributes to, wider political economic structures extending beyond individual organisations. Instead, a critical understanding focuses on strategy as an organisational process 'that has significant political ramifications within organisations and in the broader society' (Levy et al. 2003, p. 87). Such approach perceives strategic processes as inherently political, questioning the apparent consensus of organisational ends by paying 'more attention to means and values' (Levy et al. 2003, p. 98). Strategic processes can be understood as a hegemonic struggle, i.e., a 'terrain for strategic contestation' in which organisational actors attempt to shape 'economic, ideological, and organisational forces that regulate, stabilize and constitute social worlds and identities' (Levy et al. 2003, p. 94). This also includes a focus on the (non-)material social and ecological effects of strategic processes (Blom and Alvesson 2016). Such perspective of strategy appears particularly useful for counter-hegemonic forces and alternative organising, i.e., co-operatives or collectives, contesting the social order and aiming for social change (Levy et al. 2003; Spicer and Böhm 2007). Thus far, however, critical research on strategic processes has dedicated scarce attention to the relationship between strategy and growth.

Various studies in Geography suggest that strategising processes for wider socio-ecological change constitute a key area of tension within community-based initiatives. Sekulova et al. (2017, p. 8), for instance, highlight the frequent tensions, dilemmas,

and conflicts characterising community-based organising, which are 'often perceived as clashes between two mutually exclusive strategies or realities'. Studies on Transition Towns identified similar tensions between imaginaries of community members prioritising an 'inner transition' as opposed to those looking 'outwards to the appeal of pragmatism' (Barr and Pollard 2017, p. 59). Rather than constituting binary choices, however, it is argued that such conflicts can contain the 'seeds, or codes' to finding more resilient and sustainable pathways to fulfilling socio-political objectives if given the appropriate space (Sekulova et al. 2017, p. 8), often necessitating 'a balance between ethical congruency and transformative pragmatism' (Schmid 2021, p. 199). Essentially, such studies indicate the need for a reflexive navigation between a plurality of transformative strategies to effect wider societal change.

Given its focus on organisational purpose and objectives, issues of strategy tend to be a major focus of literature on degrowth organising, especially in relation to questions of organisational growth and scaling (Hinton 2021), as highlighted above. Thus, Hinton (2021, p. 3) argues 'the desire to grow or not, as a business goal, can be seen as a normative or cultural institution' which signifies an important strategic consideration connected to prevalent norms and beliefs within an organisation. In this sense, scholars have pointed to the necessity of a 'fundamental revision of predominant notions of strategy and strategic management' in opposition to the domination of market managerial logics and common conceptions of organisational growth (Cyron and Zoellick 2018, p. 223). In the literature, scaling up alternatives remains a privileged strategy to increasing influence, popularity, political leverage and socio-economic benefits of alternatives, through a growth in membership (Kunze and Becker 2015; Sekulova et al. 2017). Nonetheless, both commons and degrowth literatures place high importance on personal relationships on a human scale (Schumacher 1973), characterized by mutual trust and direct reciprocity (Euler 2018). Instead, organisational growth is understood to lead to 'diseconomies of scale' due to increasing hierarchies and bureaucratisation, ultimately impacting social relations negatively within organisations (Cyron and Zoellick 2018, p. 212). Thus, the normative equation of scaling with organisational growth as necessary, desirable, and potentially infinite is increasingly put into question as limiting strategic options for transformative change in line with degrowth (Colombo et al. 2023; Hinton 2021; Pansera and Fressoli 2021). However, this also points to a common dilemma known

as the ‘problem of scalability’ (Euler 2019, p. 167) between achieving economic stability and accessibility through growth of commons-based organising and intentions to limiting the organisational size, in favour of more horizontal political ethics as well as direct and trustful relations.

Much research has been dedicated to this dilemma, most widely known as *degeneration thesis*, in which co-operatives are succumbing to capitalist market pressures and revert to a mainstream organisational model through expansion (Cheney et al. 2014). Perhaps most prominently, Michels (1989) *iron law of oligarchy* describes tendencies within expanding co-operatives in which small managerial elites accumulate specialised knowledge, decision-making power, and the desire to preserve power, to the detriment of participatory structures (Hartz et al. 2019). Such research points to adverse effects in which growing co-operatives risk compromising transformative objectives and sacrificing their democratic ethos for, e.g., growth, profit, competitiveness, and hierarchical managerial structures (Johanisova et al. 2013), i.e., reproducing the very social dynamics and logics they seek to overcome (Sekulova et al. 2023). Accordingly, growth could lead to ‘an expansion through mainstreaming and eventually collide with the initial (radical) vision of the group’ (Sekulova et al. 2017, p. 13). This dilemma has been well-documented, for instance, in European agricultural co-operatives. Here, pressures of international competition, growth and efficiency led to a process of ‘mainstreaming’ and gradual co-optation of farming co-ops into a productivist paradigm, with small farmers increasingly losing their voice (Ajates 2020). While some ‘opt out of mainstreaming by scaling their impact beyond the converted while keeping a right-small size’ (Sekulova et al. 2017, p. 13), such strategy often results in high levels of precarity. Thus, many self-governed and participatory agri-food projects face the choice of sacrificing their socio-ecological ambitions for more ‘professional and market-oriented’ forms of organising or disappear altogether (Paech et al. 2019, p. 130). In contrast, others remark that such processes are not an inevitable phenomenon in growing co-operatives, by pointing towards organisational strategies which help to resist degeneration or even initiate processes of regeneration. Such studies emphasise that ongoing job rotation, continuous reinforcement of internal democratic practices, negotiations between individual and co-operative values, as well as entanglements in social movements, can maintain a shared co-operative understanding alongside a committed membership

(Cornforth 1995; Langmead 2017a; Pansera and Rizzi 2020). While focusing on co-operatives under direct influence of market forces like worker co-operatives, such research essentially points to the need for strategies of balancing organisational growth and socio-ecological ambitions in order to avoid degenerative processes.

Several degrowth-oriented scholars have offered strategic pathways on how such balance may be achieved. From an economic perspective, several scholars point to the need for degrowth-inspired co-operatives to reach a certain size to remain economically viable and socially stable in the long run (Cunico et al. 2022; Paech et al. 2019). Focusing on CSA initiatives, Paech et al. (2019, p. 130), describe such strategies as a 'balancing act' of navigating a development corridor in a 'trilemma' between economic, social, and ecological factors. Navigating such corridor between a necessary minimum organisational threshold to ensure cost coverage and an upper social ceiling to personnel and membership is ultimately geared towards an 'optimum size', facilitating social and economic stability while preserving the 'transformative character' of the organisation (Paech et al. 2019, p. 130). While primarily focusing on economic efforts to 'transformative size management', the authors consider a variety of strategies for social stability, e.g., the level of informal participatory work structures and democratic decision-making processes. However, despite pointing to potentially conflicting goals, e.g., between democracy and hierarchy, such processes are not further discussed. More attuned to such conflicts, Sekulova et al. (2023), introduce a similar tripartite framework when emphasising an ethos of care as a means for prefiguring degrowth. Through a conception of 'organisational thriving' which extends a singular focus on tangible organisational success, care is understood as a relational dimension in regard to the attention to people, i.e. members' limits and needs, as well as organisational processes, i.e., ensuring democratic, inclusive and equitable means of participation and decision-making. While such research points to the importance of democratic and caring processes in human-nature relations within forms of organising prefiguring degrowth (Barca 2020; Dengler and Lang 2022) balancing such degrowth-oriented efforts in a growth-driven system remains a 'colossal task' (Sekulova et al. 2023, p. 11). The conflictual potential inherent in such processes of balancing growth with political aspirations of alternative organisations points to alternative strategies of scaling transformative impacts.

3.2.3 Strategising and Scaling Transformative Change

The question on how to scale prefigurative ideas and practices of alternative organising signifies a key area of research for degrowth (Kallis and March 2015). A growing list of authors highlight the diversity of scaling strategies in alternative organisations, some with an explicit degrowth orientation (Colombo et al. 2023; Bauwens et al. 2020; Pansera and Fressoli 2021; Sekulova et al. 2017).

Theorisations around issues of scale have a long history in human geography (MacKinnon 2011; Marston 2000). Here, scale can be perceived not as a fixed and essential category but as ‘contingent, contested social constructs that are continually being made and remade’ (Moore 2008, p. 208) through social processes (MacKinnon 2011). Such processual construction of scale has proven influential for organisational research. Scaling has been described as a specific type of organising practice (Goworek et al. 2018), involving political contestations about spatial scales in relation to organisational logics (Spicer 2006), and a method that bears significant implications for addressing issues of ecological sustainability (Papazu and Nelund 2018).

Nonetheless, across much of the social entrepreneurship literature, a normative link between scaling and organisational growth appears to remain (Colombo et al. 2023), e.g., by focusing on ‘barriers’ to social enterprise growth (Davies et al. 2019). Indeed, scaling *up*, understood as a quantitative process in which social entrepreneurs ‘maximise their social impact’, by spreading their products or services geographically, might even be considered at the ‘heart of social entrepreneurship’ (André and Pache 2016, p. 660). However, there appears to be a growing interest in how social enterprises purposively favour different strategies to increasing their social and environmental impact (Bauwens et al. 2020; Vickers and Lyon 2014), and to scaling social innovations beyond niches towards larger systemic change (Moore et al. 2015). As others have noted (e.g., Colombo et al. 2023), however, the literature on alternative scaling strategies in social enterprises remains largely disjointed and filled with a wide variety of overlapping and sometimes contradictory typological connotations, e.g., scaling ‘out’, ‘deep’, ‘wide’, ‘with’, ‘across’ (André and Pache 2016; Bauwens et al. 2020; Desa and Koch 2014; Moore et al. 2015). Emphasising the hybrid character of social enterprises in blending commercial, social and/or environmental objectives, such studies often focus on how various forms of scaling serve the overarching mission

or lead to 'mission drift' (Bauwens et al. 2020; Kannothra et al. 2018; Ometto et al. 2019). Here, social enterprises experience ethical tensions when scaling up, for instance, by sacrificing ethics of care through increasing rationalisation efforts (André and Pache 2016), and between slower growth orientations in line with community relations as opposed to fast growth pressures emerging from client orientations (Kannothra et al. 2018). By and large, such tensions mirror the aforementioned literature on degeneration in competitive market environments.

Others emphasise the significant impact of the values and capabilities of founders and core members (Vickers and Lyon 2014), also understood as 'imprint', on initial strategic choices that bear implications for scaling strategies and evolutionary processes of social enterprises (Bauwens et al. 2020). At the same time, such studies often point to diverging inner-organisational strategic orientations to effecting impacts within and beyond the organisation. Similarly, Moore et al. (2015) draw on strategic niche management, to offer six different strategies of how social innovations may increase their transformative impact to effect large scale system changes. To the authors, impacting systemic changes necessitates at least a combination of three scaling strategies: scaling out (replicating innovations or spreading principles), scaling up (legal change), and scaling deep (transformative learning processes and lasting changes in cultural norms) (Moore et al. 2015). However, the study follows a rather narrow definition of system change by taking capitalist market relations for granted as a landscape factor (Feola 2020; Schmid 2021) and by drawing on the sample of charitable initiatives, which arguably reduces possibilities of scaling transformative change to philanthropic goodwill. While some studies point to latent tensions about different priorities within negotiation processes about scaling strategies (Bauwens et al. 2020; Kannothra et al. 2018), most studies appear to overemphasise individual traits and aspirations of founding entrepreneurs, typologies of growth orientations, and managerial solutions to hybrid objectives in competitive environments. Overall, such studies thus remain largely depoliticised and somewhat detached from social processes of scaling strategies.

From a degrowth perspective, strategies of scaling out through replication, i.e., spreading organising principles and establishing more smaller co-ops in order to maintain horizontal organising ethics, are often highlighted as preferable over scaling up one larger co-op, (Dengler and Lang 2022; Johanisova et al. 2015; Pansera and

Fressoli 2020; Sekulova et al. 2017). Nonetheless, such strategies can differ widely in relation to degrees of dependence the replicated initiative has to the 'mother co-operative'. Exact replications appear neither possible, nor desirable, but offsprings need to adapt to different local contexts (Sekulova et al. 2017, p. 14; Sekulova et al. 2023). Nonetheless, favoured prefigurative strategies of multiplication in on of themselves appear unlikely to suffice to generate a powerful social force for wider societal change (Michel 2020; Parker 2021).

From a social movement perspective, several scholars thus highlight the interconnectedness of scaling strategies in which prefigurative alternatives can contribute to wider social change processes through expanding and consolidating networks (Bonfert 2022) and to achieve an upward *scale shift* (Schiller-Merkens 2020). Here, upward scaling is understood as a process that extends such networks to a 'new coordination at a higher level', beyond the horizontal connection of prefigurative initiatives, including state actors (Schiller-Merkens 2020, p. 13). Alongside *up*-scaling, i.e. institutionalisation, *out*-scaling, i.e., replication and alliance building, as well as *deep*-scaling through politicisation (Bonfert 2022), a mix of relational, e.g., horizontal diffusion of prefigurative alternatives across movements, and non-relational, e.g., furthering a new common sense and cultural change through media outlets (Schiller-Merkens 2020), may offer promising scaling pathways.

Addressing the fragmentation of scaling strategies across diverse literatures, Colombo et al. (2023) draw on an empirical sample of agricultural co-operatives to identify nine different scaling routes, in a wider post-growth context of scaling transformative impacts towards system change[21]. The authors differentiate between impact on organisational dynamics (scaling *inwards*) and societal dynamics (scaling *outwards*) to aggregate the typology of nine scaling routes to five overarching categories: scaling up, scaling out, scaling deep, scaling with, and scaling down. Apart from the latter, each category entails inward and outward dynamics, emphasising the variety of effects of scaling strategies on the internal organisation and wider society. As such, scaling up *inwards* refers to organisational enlargement (i.e., vertical organisational growth) through strategies of seeking new resources, people and assets, whereas scaling up

[21] This thesis follows Colombo et al.'s (2023, p. 3) definition of *scaling* as 'the process allowing an organization to fulfil the needs it was constituted to address, while undertaking its vision of system change'.

outwards entails the impact on policies through mechanisms of legal change. Scaling out *inwards* entails organisational geographical expansion (i.e., horizontal growth) through franchising, while scaling out *outwards* describes a strategy of multiplication through deliberate replication of an organisation and its principles. While scaling deep *inwards* denotes influences on the organisational culture, for instance, through education and storytelling, scaling deep *outwards* focuses on impacting societal culture though similar or other strategies beyond the bounds of the immediate organisation. Scaling with *inwards* refers to a process of aggregation of existing organisations through, e.g., catalysing, building networks, and partnerships, whereas scaling with *outwards* denotes processes of diffusion through which new self-determined organisations emerge. As such, the latter category emphasises a relational dimension in which postgrowth organisations are understood as embedded in wider socio-ecological system in which they may act as 'enabler' for organisational ecosystems, while being constrained by ecological systems. Taken together, the authors emphasise that all scaling strategies constitute a 'dynamic and interconnected web of relations' and locate the generation of impact in their 'synergistic interaction', i.e., scaling strategies can completement each other to facilitate wider systemic change. Importantly, however, Colombo et al. (2023, p. 17), attribute great importance to strategies aiming to influence societal culture (scaling deep *outwards*) as prime mechanisms for systemic change, in which scaling entails the potential to constitute an emancipatory process 'in which critical consciousness plays a key role'.

Scaling Strategies	**Organisational Dynamics**	
	Inwards	*Outwards*
Scaling up	Organisational Enlargement: Seeking new resources, people and assets	Impact on Policies: Legal change
Scaling out	Organizational geographical expansion: Franchising	Multiplication: Deliberate replication, spreading principles
Scaling deep	Impact on organizational culture: Cultural change at an organizational level, e.g. through education and storytelling	Impact on societal culture: Cultural change at a societal level, e.g., through education and storytelling
Scaling with	Aggregation of existing organizations: Catalyzing, building networks and partnerships with stakeholders	Diffusion: Deliberate replication, spreading principles
Scaling down	Organizational downscaling: Restructuring the organization as lighter/smaller	

Table 3.1: Scaling Strategies adapted from Colombo et al. (2023)

Overall, most research primarily focuses on systematising various scaling routes available to alternative organisations to contribute to desired systemic changes. While Colombo et al.'s (2023) typology provides fertile ground for analysing scaling strategies within prefigurative degrowth organising, there appears to be a neglect of how organisational actors negotiate, make sense of, and attach value to diverse strategic priorities across large parts of the literature. Thus, a processual lens can shed light on the antagonisms, contingencies, and conflict potential inherent in strategising processes of scaling in relation to transformative agendas like degrowth.

3.3 Working out Degrowth: Transforming Social Labour

In addition to scaling processes, work constitutes another essential organisational element in relation to degrowth agendas. This section first provides an outline about broader degrowth debates around institutional and cultural reconfigurations of work. It will then discuss the contours of a cultural shift on the quest for prefiguring alternative ways of working, before positioning this study in relation to processual perspectives on potentialities of de-alienated labour in alternative organisations.

3.3.1 Degrowth Work: An Institutional and Cultural shift

At the backdrop of seminal ideas of Gorz (1982) and Illich (1975), critiques of work and its centrality in modern capitalist societies can be seen as the *roots of degrowth* (Hoffmann et al. 2024). The reinvention and transformation of work and labour[22] is thus perceived as a crucial element of radical socio-ecological change, which has regained traction within degrowth debates in recent years (Barca 2019b; Hoffmann and Paulsen 2020; Kreinin and Aigner 2022; Saave and Muraca 2021; Vincent and Brandellero 2023). However, as Kreinin and Latif (2022, p. 332) aptly put it '*what* kinds of work should be transformed, *why, how,* and *who* should do the transforming (as well as *what* counts as work) remain a terrain of debate and struggle'.

Most studies and arguments within degrowth discourses appear to centre on macro-(economic)-level analyses of work, often advocating for policy-led changes through,

[22] As others have noted, both terms are used differently in the literature. Saave and Muraca (2021b, p. 744), for instance, refer to 'work as a general term referring to socially necessary activities', while 'labour indicates the specific form of work under capitalism aimed at generating income and profits'.

e.g., work-time reduction, to facilitate less environmentally harmful production while prioritising more free time, well-being, and social relationships (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022). Often, such proposals are accompanied by calls to decouple wage labour from the provision of basic needs, e.g., through the introduction of universal basic income or services (Kallis et al. 2020; Liegey and Nelson 2020), or conversely by decoupling work and income through a political right to work via a job guarantee (Alcott 2013). In contrast, more sceptical voices argue that a degrowth scenario would necessarily involve more instead of less work, particularly if the goal is to maintain current levels of material affluence in a resource and energy scarce world (Sorman and Giampietro 2013)[23]. Such shift can be inferred, e.g., by looking at previous trends in metabolic patterns of agriculture in early industrialised countries, in which mechanisation replaced around 60-70% of wage labourers (Sorman and Giampietro 2013). This implies a reverse shift for degrowth scenarios, for instance, in growing an ecologically skilled workforce for sustainable forms of agriculture (Carlisle et al. 2019). Due to biophysical and social dynamics, some thus suggest that we would work in less productive ways but indeed more, particularly for the social good (Mair et al. 2020). Work sharing and a general shift of labour to low productivity jobs, e.g., in care and social service sectors (Jackson 2017; Jackson and Victor 2011) or the 'amateur' economy (Nørgård 2013) are thus seen as a desirable transition to decoupling work from growth and high energy-intensity. Indeed, spending more time in less productive, informal and amateur activities could make work more meaningful, convivial, and autonomous, thereby facilitating *time prosperity* and a slower pace of life (Soper 2020), while increasing overall well-being (Nørgård 2013; Sekulova et al. 2013).

Nonetheless, degrowth scholars generally argue for a drastic reduction of wage labour in favour of what Gorz (2005) referred to as *real* work, i.e. the creative human activity not necessarily oriented towards production (Saave and Muraca 2021). Ultimately, such decoupling of work from capitalist labour processes is geared towards a politics of creating the conditions and social relations for socially useful production and consumption. In a transition phase to de-commodified forms of work focusing, e.g., on subsistence, care, reciprocity and community work, degrowth scholars advocate for

[23] In response, most degrowth scholars such as Kallis (2013) would counter that such proposal disregards that 'under conceivable conditions we might be equally happy with less work, less energy and less material affluence (for an insightful analysis, see Saave and Muraca 2021b).

a mixture of paid and unpaid labour (Andreoni and Galmarini 2014; Kallis 2013; Nierling 2012). Accordingly, Barca (2019a, p. 176) speaks of the dominant perspective within degrowth advocating for a liberation *from* wage work as much as possible, following Gorz's vision of a post-work[24] society in line with the *refusal of work* or a work-centred society as a 'precondition for realising alternative work practices'. At the same time, Barca argues for the relevance of adopting a perspective that furthers the liberation *of* work, i.e., within wage relations. Such vision incorporates 'reach[ing] out to and mobilis[ing] waged workers and their organisations' to elaborate on a vision of work liberated 'from the treadmill of production' and its concurrent metabolism (Barca 2019a, p. 182), to counter the intensifying alienation and exploitation of both labour and non-human nature. To this end, Barca (2019a) convincingly argues for a convergence of labour and degrowth[25] politics, with the latter needing to take workers' conditions, needs, but also dilemmas vis-à-vis ecological matters seriously. Next to broader calls for working-class environmentalism and an eco-socialist just transition, the author thus calls for the need to *occupy production*, both through struggles for workers' self-management through reclaiming abandoned factories but also within co-operatives and social enterprises. Ultimately, such path is intended as a struggle for *de-alienated* work, to alter power relations within wage relations by enlarging workers' control over production and its social metabolism, thereby aiming to make wage work more sustainable and conducive to (non-)human reproduction (Barca 2019a).

Several strands of degrowth thinking theorise diverse pathways to reconfigure the importance of wage labour and the meaning of work from reformist to more radical proposals (Saave and Muraca 2021). From a sufficiency-oriented perspective, the re-localisation of production and supply chains, along with an individual focus on frugality along the lines of a *proximity economy* (Paech 2019) would result in a reconfiguration of work in line with the needs of local communities. By re-focusing work on subsistence and a reduced focus on wage labour, work could become more socially useful and creative. Compatible with a focus on small and localised organisations, such vision also calls for the large-scale upskilling towards improved

[24] Such conception of post-work is often at odds with the 'accelerationist' understanding of post-work, advocating for increasing automation complemented by a UBI (for a good overview, see Chatterton and Pusey 2020).

[25] Along with other 'alter-globalisation and counter-hegemonic movements (e.g., ecofeminist, decolonial, environmental/climate justice, peasant, commoning)' (Barca 2019a, p. 184).

manual proficiency across local communities (Paech 2019). Another line of thinking challenges the dependence of welfare and social security systems on growth, by aiming to reform wage labour. Proponents propose the shift from wage taxation to pollution, as well as property, capital, and wealth (Seidl and Zahrnt 2010). In contrast, Saave and Muraca (2021, p. 754) posit what they frame as a more transformative line of inquiry to 'address the very idea of work and its symbolic meaning for modern societies', e.g., by questioning underlying assumptions about separating (re-)production and consumption/use. Such perspective turns against the very social order assigning 'intrinsic value to an abstract, generalised idea of *work*'[26] while turning the focus to a qualitative revaluation of work as a social activity as well as the analysis of workable alternatives and experiments (Hoffmann et al. 2024, p. 56). To this end, Hoffmann et al. (2024) argue that much degrowth research appears to uncritically embrace wage labour and the cultural significance of a work-centred society. Others like Kreinin and Latif (2022) argue for the necessary combination of symbiotic, i.e., more reformist changes to the structure of work, and interstitial strategies, i.e., alternative forms of work undermining the logic of capitalist production, to transforming work towards degrowth. In addition to (1) changing the actual work that is done (from environmentally destructive to socially useful), they emphasise transforming the (2) character of work, and (3) transitioning to more democratic workplaces, as key dimensions of such strategies (Kreinin and Latif 2022).

Overall, however, most degrowth research discusses alternative work imaginaries on a theoretical basis (Vincent and Brandellero 2023). In their synthesis of literatures on degrowth, postgrowth, post-capitalism, and craft labour, Vincent and Brandellero (2023) identify autonomy, de-alienation, and alternative forms of value creation as common imaginaries for a transformation *of* work, but also *through* work. As such, they underline a 'substantial gap' (ibid, p. 4) in empirically grounded explorations of how such alternative imaginaries to capitalist work may materialise in practice. Asking how work should be 'performed differently under degrowth scenarios?' (ibid, p. 4), and focusing on the 'lived experiences of workers in different industries' (Vincent and Brandellero 2023, p. 8) may thus provide important insights of how work could be

[26] As the authors highlight, work in this sense is labelled as 'its specific modern meaning and organisational form as commofidied employment, with its associated norms and institutions'. Such definition includes wage labour as well as a work-based society as a whole.

organised in line with a degrowth transition. Essentially, such insights are pointing towards a cultural shift of prefiguring alternative work relations in practice.

3.3.2 Prefiguring Alternative Work Relations

In general, degrowth imaginaries of transforming work relations necessitate a broader perspective, focusing on 'the entirety of work', incl. subsistence, care, community, and voluntary work (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 232). By overcoming the hierarchical dichotomy between commodified work and 'invisibilised' work of socio-ecological provisioning (Dengler and Lang 2022, p. 1), degrowth foregrounds feminist perspectives that put the reproduction of life, or what Barca (2020) calls *earthcare labour* at the centre of social organisation. This perspective builds on longstanding feminist insights highlighting the dependence of 'productive' wage labour on reproductive processes of (non-)human nature and care work which are 'not typically coded as labour within a capitalist economy' (Saave and Muraca 2021, p. 757).

In line with the emphasis on reproductive activities, degrowth perspectives are attuned to overcoming productivist ethics and orientations to work through a focus on care, well-being, and more sustainable labour processes (Biesecker and Hofmeister 2010). Critical organisational scholars have also started to pay more attention to the relationship between the organisation of work striving for relentless productivity growth and the negative consequences on people's well-being (Heikkurinen et al. 2019; Watson et al. 2023). As such, the win-win 'happy-productive worker hypothesis' in which instrumental managerial versions of individualized well-being are geared towards the end of greater output and efficiency, while masking structural inequalities, are increasingly scrutinized and met with resistance (Watson et al. 2023, p. 443). Heikkurinen et al. (2019b, p. 22) perceive both environmental overshoot and work-related mental burnout as rooted in *productivist* philosophies of management in growth and accumulation-driven societies that deny limits of 'human and natural resources'. While both the human psyche and the environment need time for recovery, the authors maintain 'recovery begins when production slows down' (Heikkurinen et al. 2019b, p. 33). Such research points to the need to taking a more holistic and processual view on the relation between organisations and ecological processes, in which the production of goods and services is moderated in the interest of care for (non-)human needs (Heikkurinen et al. 2019b). Similarly, Vincent and Brandellero (2023, p. 7) argue

that the consideration and incorporation of reproductive labour in degrowth entails 'accounting for slower rhythms' of work, e.g., associated with caring for children and elderly people. While such work generally emphasizes care and well-being within and outside of formalized work in relation to the amount, quality, and temporalities of labour, others question the very assumptions of dominant productivist, protestant work ethics (Foster 2017; Nørgård 2013). Indeed, Foster (2017, p. 633) argues that 'the kinds of culturally embedded relationships to work that are complementary to a degrowth agenda' are already (or still) in existence, in opposition to capitalist-expansionist orientations to work. As work in degrowth is expected to de-emphasise productivity in favour of more well-being and care-intensive labour (Nesterova 2021; Sekulova et al. 2013), further empirical investigations are needed on people's orientations and relationships to work and how they may constrain or enable degrowth (Foster 2017).

In line with such perspectives, the reproduction of life necessarily entails processes of decommodification (Azzellini 2018), i.e., a large shift to non-commodified and unpaid labour practices. The narrative that the commodification of labour is all-encompassing and irreversible under the historical development of capitalism, has long been questioned by scholars who point to alternative economic possibilities (Gibson-Graham 2008; Williams 2014). At the same time, however, commodified and non-commodified labour practices are often not entirely separable, but the lines remain 'fuzzy and blurred' in practice (Williams 2014, p. 107). Such work interlinks with the de-commodified social labour of commoning (Azzellini 2018; De Angelis 2017; Korczynski and Wittel 2020), understood by some as an essential element of degrowth to reverse processes of alienation (Brownhill et al. 2012). Others point to the necessary incorporation of reproductive activities within commoning (Euler 2018) or indeed, the 'commonisation of care' (Dengler and Lang 2022, p. 3), i.e., communal labour and largely unpaid modes of reproduction, as key for a degrowth-oriented work transition. In this vein, degrowth authors emphasise the significance of alternative modes of value creation through integrating production and consumption in which end-users are engaging in sufficiency-oriented prosumption or co-production (Bloemmen et al. 2015; Froese et al. 2023; Hankammer and Kleer 2018). In their comprehensive sample of degrowth-oriented case studies, Froese et al. (2023, p. 10) argue an 'overall inclination towards conviviality and participation stands out', often above concerns for

ecological sustainability. Generally, it is thus understood that the direct involvement of ‘prosumers’ in production processes initiates de-commodified processes of needs satisfaction (Bloemmen et al. 2015; Gerber and Gerber 2017; Schmid 2018). The shared access to the means of production, e.g., through collaborative peer production, is geared towards enabling participatory appreciation and the co-production of knowledge (Kostakis et al. 2018; Robra et al. 2020). At the same time, alternative experiences of individual recognition through demonetised work are perceived as necessary precondition to a societal revaluation of work and to refrain from the growth economy (Heikkurinen et al. 2019a; Nierling 2012b).

Contrasting such ideas on how work ought to be shifted towards reproduction and decommodification under degrowth, several scholars highlight the obstacles of such transition under current societal arrangements. Those perspectives underscore that not many people have the privilege to work unpaid, which to degrowth scholars urges strategies to ensure social provisioning and security (Nierling 2012) in ‘intersectional-transformative ways’ (Dengler and Lang 2022, p. 3). Such strategies appear all the more important as informal non-waged and community-based labour often become sites of increased precarity and exploitation (van Dyk 2018). As such, van Dyk (2018, p. 529) argues community-based forms of labour such as commoning can form a new basis for ‘value extraction, appropriation, and exploitation’ under *community capitalism*. Similarly, Caffentzis and Federici (2014, p. 97) highlight that ‘communalism is also the jargon used to recruit unpaid labour’ in the face of increasing austerity cuts in social services, thus reducing costs of social reproduction. Thus, an idealised ‘romance of community’ (Joseph 2006) and commoning can indeed obscure structurally exploitative relations of post-wage work if decontextualised from wider social forces in which unpaid work constitutes the ‘lifeblood’ for capital (Dowling and Harvie 2014, p. 882). While often perceived to enhance food sovereignty, the advent of the ‘prosumer’ in food labour processes, for instance, often constitute a ‘double-edged sword’ (Galt 2013) that feeds of self-exploitative tendencies due to the embeddedness within communities (Böhm et al. 2020; Paech et al. 2019).

Overall, there appears to be a lack of empirical examples on how reproductive and decommodified work can be ‘prefigured and institutionalised’ (Vincent and Brandellero 2023, p. 7) in alternative organisations without reproducing existing

inequalities. Such work thus points to the extent to which degrowth imaginaries of de-alienating work experiences can indeed materialise in organisational practice.

3.3.3 De-alienated Work: From State to Process

In addition to a cultural shift of work, degrowth researchers generally emphasise the need to 'defend and strengthen non-alienated, socially meaningful, self-determined, and dignified work as a central component of human life' (Schmelzer et al. 2022, p. 236). In this vein, the degrowth literature highlights the significance of autonomous labour, i.e., collective self-provisioning to satisfy individual and community needs (Foster 2017; Nørgård 2013), in relation to a variety of provisioning sectors, such as food (Nelson and Edwards 2020). Enlarging such forms of autonomous provisioning is seen as a precondition to 'counter the alienation of labour' (Vincent and Brandellero 2023, p. 6). Nonetheless, empirical investigations on non-alienated labour in relation to degrowth remain scarce.

In the Marxist tradition, alienation is understood as the inevitable outcome of capitalist labour conditions in which work is commodified, leaving the worker without control over the means of production and feeling estranged from the labour process, its products, co-workers, and oneself (Tucker et al. 1978; Watson 2020). The capitalist labour process dehumanises and estranges workers from the process of meeting their basic needs through free and conscious activities (Watson 2021). Building on Braverman's (1976) groundbreaking study, most research on alienation has focused on the increasingly impoverished experience of work within capitalist labour processes, in what is commonly referred to as Labour Process Theory. The tendency towards growing divisions and specialisations of labour is understood to lead to a 'deskilling' of workers, thus increasing a sense of powerlessness, self-estrangement and a lack of meaning in labour (Braverman 1976). As such, alienation can be detected within contemporary capitalist workplaces through, e.g., a lack of voice, person-job fit, and meaningfulness, which can materialise in increased emotional exhaustion and low levels of well-being amongst employees (Shantz et al. 2014). To Watson (2021), a post-capitalist future which facilitates human needs and well-being instead of alienation thus points to the empirical investigation of social practices outside of wage labour and the production of use value beyond the logics of capital.

Critical theories have long highlighted the compensatory mechanism of consumerism as a way of escaping alienating experiences of work (Gorz 1982; Soper 2020). More recent work has pointed to a fundamental shift in how value is produced in contemporary societies which goes beyond the immediate employment relationship and labour process in traditional workplaces. Such perspective points to a broader conception of work and labour to containing all value-creating activities, including, but not limited to, social processes of reproduction and consumption (Böhm and Land 2012; Gabriel et al. 2015). Following such line of thought, forces of 'universal alienation' can be understood as operating not only in workplaces and wage labour, but value producing activities across society more broadly under capitalism, through increasing competition, commodification, and monetisation (Harvey 2018). Thus, to Harvey (2018, p. 424) alienation abounds in today's world and dominates not just work in production and spheres of consumption, but 'much of politics and daily life'. From such perspective, alienation takes an objective character with 'subjective consequences', enforced by global capitalist hegemony (Harvey 2018, p. 438). In other words, alienation refers to the state of a broader social diagnosis of work-centred societies, as well as a subjective perception of indisposition (Jaeggi 2014).

In relation to alienation, many social theorists have pointed to the widespread meaninglessness of contemporary jobs (e.g., Graeber 2018; Harvey 2018). Perhaps most prominently Graeber's (2018) concept of 'bullshit jobs' highlights the widespread sentiment of meaninglessness in often well-paid and reputable wage labour, across 'advanced' economies. In addition, Hansen (2019) identified 'batshit jobs' as not only lacking meaning, but as actively harmful to ecological and human conditions. While such work reaffirms the notion that work is fundamentally alienated under capitalism, the quest for meaning remains an ongoing endeavour within wage labour (Voswinkel 2020). Thus, organisational studies on meaningful work have skyrocketed in recent years, particularly in relation to opportunities and threats posed by rapid technological development and socio-demographic changes in debates on the 'future of work' (Laaser and Karlsson 2022; Lysova et al. 2023). Nonetheless, many scholars argue that little consensus exists about what meaningful work entails (Bailey et al. 2019b; Laaser and Karlsson 2022). While some previous studies attribute meaningfulness as the opposite of alienation, little scholarly evidence supports such claim (Bailey et al. 2019a). Instead, diverging conceptions of meaningful work appear

to prevail, often emphasising either subjective properties of an 'authentic connection between […] work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self' (Bailey and Madden 2017, p. 4) or objective job characteristics (Laaser and Karlsson 2022). In relation to the former, studies have shown that the notion of 'deeply meaningful work' can be a 'double-edged sword', i.e., when work is perceived as a *calling* and moral duty while sacrificing pay, working conditions, and private life (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Symon and Whiting 2019). By contrast, Yeoman (2014) frames meaningful work as a fundamental human need for experiencing autonomy, freedom, and dignity, before individuals can attach subjective meaningfulness to it. Based on such conception the bulk of modern workplaces appears devoid of meaningful work (Yeoman 2014). Yet others maintain that making a positive societal contribution constitutes a central component of meaningful work, while a lack thereof constitutes a form of alienation (Martela 2023; Silver 2023). However, what is deemed meaningful by individuals can be perceived as based on discursively regulated norms of worthiness within wider societal and cultural contexts (Michaelson et al. 2014; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017), thus also opening meaning making processes to normative control over workers (Bailey et al. 2019a).

Nevertheless, a growing consensus appears to be emerging amongst organisational scholars arguing for a need to overcome the dichotomy of privileging either subjectivist or objectivist perspectives of meaningful work, by emphasising their dynamic interplay (Bailey et al. 2019a; Laaser and Karlsson 2022; Mortimer 2023). Thus, Laaser and Karlsson (2022) argue the quest for meaningful work entails the creation and maintenance of spaces of autonomy, while being recognised for ones efforts and treated with respect and dignity in the labour process, against broader societal structures. The authors attribute key significance to the interplay between the formal and informal organisation of work vis-à-vis the 'power of labour agency for meaningful work' (Laaser and Karlsson 2022, p. 801), by emphasising both the limits and opportunities for resistance of exercising this agency within capitalist labour processes. Moreover, several studies point to the processual, fluctuating, and contested notions on how conceptions of meaningful work change over time, thus calling for more research on temporal understandings and how workers respond to changing environments (Bailey and Madden 2017; Lysova et al. 2023; Mitra and Buzzanell 2017). Nonetheless, the majority of organisational scholarship on meaningful work

appears decoupled from wider political-economic issues (Lysova et al. 2023) and critical sociological perspectives interrogating the politics of work remain scarce (Bailey and Madden 2017; Laaser and Karlsson 2022). In particular, the implications of rapidly worsening ecological conditions and related political tensions on meaningful work remain largely unexplored (for an exception, see Mitra and Buzzanell 2017). While retaining a positive outlook on the possibilities of meaningful work within capitalist workplaces despite conflicting interests of workers and managers, the literature largely appears to entail a narrower focus than more politicised concepts of alienation. Within the context of this research, it may be argued that possibilities of meaningful work are determined by wider socio-political forces and ecological conditions that enable or constrict non-alienated labour.

In this regard, an emerging strand of organisational scholarship has paid renewed interest in possibilities to counter and resist alienation under capitalism through de-aliened, non-alienated, or disalienated labour within alternative organisations (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Langmead and Parker 2023; Watson 2020). Such research builds on the often-implicit notion that alternative organisations contain an emancipatory potential for less alienated forms of work (Kokkinidis 2015; Parker et al. 2014). While this line of thought is broadly in line with what Marx viewed as 'the affirmative and reciprocal characteristics of labour' (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021, p. 953), these studies appear to build on different epistemological conceptions. In contrast to structural perspectives viewing alienation as an insurmountable state under capitalist relations of production, such research often emphasises the dynamics of alienation as an ongoing process open to possibilities of contestation and inversion (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Langmead and Parker 2023).

In their study on Polish co-operatives, Kociatkiewicz et al. (2021) take an optimistic stance towards *disalienated* work within co-operatives, facilitated by alternative forms of ownership and control, as well as collective participation. While incorporating meaningful work, the authors argue disalienation offers a broader concept which cannot be reduced to meaning alone. Mobilising the metaphor of feeling 'at home' at co-operative workplaces, which carries both 'a sense of belonging and responsibility, […] but also bearing obligations' which make it difficult to distance oneself from work, the authors describe purposeful disalienation processes (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021, p. 951). Thus, 'home' contains the potential to develop relationships and skills

that further disalienating processes by enhancing agency and meaning, while simultaneously encompassing difficulties and conflicts emerging in disalienating processes. Taking a similarly optimistic stance, Watson (2020) argues that the alternative organisation of labour in CSAs contains potentials to counteract experiences of alienation under capitalism. However, the author qualifies their argument by distinguishing between *distributive* CSA share models with no labour commitment and *working* CSA share models incorporating at least some work contribution by members (Watson 2020), when arguing the latter entails more possibilities to countering the alienation experienced from separating production from consumption. Here, everyday CSA practices and the contribution of membership labour are understood as enhancing collective agency to transforming food systems as a common good, which facilitates de-alienating experiences, by de-commodifying and decoupling labour and food exchange from the logics of capital (Watson 2020). As such, CSA practices 'can be considered prefigurative in their attempt to construct alternative organisations of labour guided by different value priorities' that foster non-alienated forms of production, through focusing on use value as key organising principle (Watson 2020, p. 292). Nonetheless, Watson's (2020) analysis appears to primarily focus on experiences of non-alienated labour amongst members and disregards the particular experiences of employed labourers ('growers') and the social relations between various participants. In contrast to such perspectives, Langmead and Parker (2023, p. 3) point to the inherent antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies within their study of worker co-operatives, which they argue are 'sites of both alienation and disalienation'. By focusing on wage labour as a key site of struggle, the authors show that while internal structures of collective ownership and control may not be able to counter universal alienation altogether, co-op members were able to challenge and negotiate exploitative mechanisms embedded in wage labour. As such, the authors highlight various acts of collective refusal emerging from ongoing democratic and deliberation processes as contesting alienating forces encountered through market pressures. Thus, Langmead and Parker (2023) position their study on a middle ground between optimistic perspectives on the de-alienating potential of co-operatives and paralysing Marxist diagnosis discarding any possibility to resist alienating tendencies under capitalism.

Overall, these studies emphasise that de-alienating processes require the continuous cultivation and active participation in prefigurative practices and inclusive workplace democracy, while diverting on the emphasis on organisational tensions in the process. Moreover, thus far, research appears to neglect larger forms of co-operative organising, as well as potential influences of scaling processes in mediating possibilities of de-alienated work. As research on efforts to resist alienation in alternative workplaces still remains scarce across the organisational literature, such questions represent ample ground in need of further investigation (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Watson 2020).

3.4 Concluding Remarks & Research Aim

Overall, the review of the literature indicates ample need for empirical and theoretical research into the prefigurative processes of alternative forms of organisation in relation to degrowth. While conceptual ambiguities remain, the fragmented literature suggests possibilities for degrowth to be instantiated in a variety of mainstream and alternative organisations. However, much research appears restricted to static and often narrow organisational configurations, economic features, and principles. Moreover, there appears to be a relative lack of attention on the struggles of enacting degrowth-compatible practices in everyday organisational life. Therefore, this study is taking a critical perspective to investigating how degrowth-compatible imaginaries are being put into practice, in paying attention to the politics inherent in prefigurative social processes aiming to instantiate counter-hegemonic practices in alternative organisations. Specifically, this research aims to shed light on how collective prefigurative processes are organised, negotiated, and contested, by taking the theoretical and empirical void in relation to degrowth organising as a starting point.

In addition, the study aims to zoom in on prefigurative strategising processes to understand how organisational actors in commons-based organisations aim to bring about a socio-ecological transformation compatible to a degrowth agenda. Employing a processual and politicised understanding of strategy, strategising processes are perceived as hegemonic struggles within prefigurative organising. Specifically, this study draws on nascent research highlighting the plurality of scaling pathways to contribute to systemic change processes in line with degrowth on an organisational level (Colombo et al. 2023). While most research on scaling remains depoliticised, e.g., by focusing on typologies and managerial solutions, the present study aims to

augment how organisational actors negotiate diverging strategic priorities in practice, by paying close attention to the conflict potential in social processes of scaling.

In addition, this research aims to investigate the organisation and experience of work in relation to prefigurative degrowth organising. Taking the substantial gap of empirical investigations of degrowth-oriented alternatives to capitalist work (Vincent and Brandellero 2023) as a starting point, the study aims to shed light on the lived experiences of work in alternative organising. Such research necessarily takes a broader perspective of work to include reproductive and decommodified activities geared towards care, well-being and the reproduction of life beyond growth. Rather than taking a statist perspective of alienation under capitalist forms of production, this research follows a processual line of inquiry which is more attuned to changing patterns of (de-)alienated work in alternative organisations. Such research can give vital insights into the socio-political processes and politics of work in the face of rapidly worsening ecological and human conditions under growth-driven political-economic contexts.

Following others (Heikkurinen 2019; Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021), this thesis takes the perspective that degrowth organising cannot, nor should it be, limited or fixed to a single correct ideal organisational form or activity. However, nor should the prevailing ambiguity around forms of organising in relation to degrowth give grounds for an approach of 'anything goes', in line with a misinterpreted notion of plurality that easily slips into dilution or misrepresentation of radical ideas. Rather, following previous calls for affirmative critique (Parker and Parker 2017) and a form of 'mutual projection' (Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021), this thesis aims to simultaneously challenge and rethink OMS concepts and degrowth ideas.

Chapter 4 - Empirical Rationale: Commoning Food for Degrowth

Building on the identified research aims emerging from the literature, this section will outline the empirical rationale for situating this study within food systems change.

Critical scholarship has increasingly emphasised the elementary role of the agri-food system within a broader hegemonic formation of capitalist growth, highlighting its fundamental unsustainability and injustices, as well as struggles of resistance (e.g., Böhm et al. 2020; Guerrero Lara et al. 2023; Notes From Below 2023). At the same time, voices advocating for a paradigm shift towards postgrowth and degrowth to facilitate a transition to sustainable agrifood systems and food sovereignty are growing louder (McGreevy et al. 2022; Nelson and Edwards 2020; Roman-Alcalá 2017). Given the existential significance of food for human survival, organisational scholars have echoed the call to scrutinise the role the industrialised and expansion-driven food system plays in simultaneously contributing to, and being threatened by, accelerating socio-ecological crises, particularly through exploitative work relations and climate breakdown. Strong appeals are made to paying more attention to the relations, transitions, and alternative forms of food labour in challenging the expansion-driven global food system (Ajates 2020; Böhm et al. 2020; Michel 2020; Watson 2020). In particular, Böhm et al. (2020, p. 202) stress the importance of alternative approaches to organising agri-food systems, e.g., through new co-operatives, when arguing 'their implications for work and labour remain under-explored'.

The social provisioning sector of food thus provides a crucial avenue of putting degrowth strategies into practice (Nelson and Edwards 2020; Plank et al. 2022). As such, most research on food alternatives thematised in the degrowth literature focus on the practices of local initiatives trying to 'escape capitalist structures', by building interstitial and prefigurative alternatives (Guerrero Lara et al. 2023; Plank et al. 2022, p. 201). In their seminal work on *food for degrowth*, Nelson and Edwards (2020) link what is commonly referred to as an umbrella of alternative food networks (AFN) to degrowth principles. While productivist ideologies[27] have long dominated European agri-food policies and agendas degrading (non-)human well-being (Wilson 2001),

[27] Productivist agriculture is generally understood as industrially-driven and expansionist, through the application of ever more intensive farming methods and managerial practices aiming towards maximising output and efficiency, while neglecting its socially and ecologically destructive effects (Wilson 2001).

AFN's are understood as holding potential to enacting an ethos of care as a central organising mechanism for a paradigmatic change of food systems (Beacham 2018; Pavlovich and Roche 2024). As grassroots forms of organising, AFN's are thus often hailed as offering promising avenues and effective responses to looming food insecurities, spurred by increasing ecological catastrophes and socio-political instabilities (Antoni-Komar 2019).

4.1 The Case of Community-supported Agriculture

In the face of accelerating ecological crises, Community-supported Agriculture (CSA) organisations constitute a prominent AFN example. This section provides the rationale for positioning CSA as a suitable research population for this inquiry.

In general, CSAs re-localise, decentralise and communalise food provisioning in line with ethical concerns around food sovereignty, the betterment of agricultural labour conditions, and ecological production. While many organisational varieties exist, at a basic level, CSA signifies an alternative form of organising food provisioning through self-organised and community-based initiatives, by bringing together production and consumption. The direct relationship between producers and consumers is geared towards facilitating needs-satisfaction, building mutual trust, resilience, solidarity, and 'prosumer self-efficacy', by sharing the economic risks of food production through pooling monetary contributions, as well as labour commitments (Paech et al. 2020, p. 48). Moreover, by securing incomes and livelihoods of agri-food producers insulated from capitalist market pressures, CSA initiatives operate on the basis of sufficiency and to some extent 'escape the growth imperative' (Bendix et al. 2019, p. 136). While CSAs operate on a monetary basis and to various degrees depend on wage labour, such logics are understood to not dominate social relations, but many indeed aim to overcome them (Euler 2018). Despite necessary compromises emerging from alternative value practices vis-à-vis social forces of the market and state (De Angelis 2017), CSAs can thus be perceived as a new form of commons and commoning (Bendix et al. 2019; Cameron 2015; Euler 2018; Helfrich and Bollier 2020).

As commons-based initiatives, CSAs constitute a counterexample against the immanent *grow-or-die logic* (Paech et al. 2020) of industrialised agriculture, which is exploiting land and labour for the sake of endless economic expansion and the accumulation of profits. Such grow-or-die logic constitutes the bedrock of European

agri-food production, in which the drive for profits, efficiency, and mechanisation has drastically reduced small farms and the number of farmworkers in favour of large agri-business (Watson 2020). This development has also been spurred through area-based subsidies, which primarily benefit a corporate food regime to the detriment of smallholders in the global North and South, the latter being particularly vulnerable through 'world market dumping of surplus food' coming from the former (McMichael 2016, p. 5). In contrast to large, technology-driven agricultural structures, CSAs are seen as holding potential to dissolve conflicts between economic efficiency and ecological production, autonomy, resilience, and meaningful activity (Paech et al. 2020). Commentators often emphasise the socially innovative potential of CSAs in enabling decommodification processes through solidaristic practices of co-production, as a response to various crises dynamics of growth-based market logics (Bendix et al. 2019; Blättel-Mink et al. 2017). Optimistic voices thus describe CSA as a grassroots counter-hegemonic activity which has the potential to develop 'new cultural relationships' amongst farmers, communities, and the land, signifying no less than a paradigm shift (Ravenscroft et al. 2013, p. 631).

In line with such accounts, many authors underline the transformative potential of CSAs as prefigurative economic practice (Schiller-Merkens 2024) embodying degrowth principles (Bloemmen et al. 2015; Cristiano et al. 2020; Johanisova et al. 2015; Nelson and Edwards 2020; Paech et al. 2020; Schmelzer et al. 2022; Spanier et al. 2023; Tschumi et al. 2020). Indeed, the practiced mutualism and decommodification of food in CSAs may be perceived as 'degrowth food' (Cristiano et al. 2020, p. 92). However, as Spanier et al. (2023) found in their study on CSA networks in Germany, the CSA movement at large does not reciprocate the apparent interest of the degrowth movement, given the latter's focus on often abstract critiques of growth economies, in contrast to the practical orientation of the former. Given their political complementarity and existing social ties, the authors thus argue for strategic coalition building which could fruitfully combine practice and discourse-driven social change. By arguing that many newer CSAs appear to identify more explicitly with the language of the commons, they argue the commons movement could effectively act as a 'bridge builder' between degrowth and CSA networks (Spanier et al. 2023, p. 14).

Overall, however, empirical research on CSAs and degrowth tends to privilege economic perspectives (e.g., Bloemmen et al. 2015; Paech et al. 2020; Tschumi et al.

2020). Organisational research has thus far paid only limited attention to the particularities of CSA as an alternative form of organising in its many varieties (Watson 2020; Beacham 2018). In particular, studies investigating organisation and work processes within CSAs in relation to their potentialities to a degrowth transformation remain scarce[28].

4.2 Organisational specificities of CSA

The concept of CSA traces back to its embryonic form in the Japanese *teikei* system (Helfrich and Bollier 2020), its instantiation in Switzerland and Germany in the 1970s (Douthwaite 1996), and as a response to neoliberal deregulation evoking a nation-wide farming crisis in the US in the 1980s (Bendix et al. 2019). Due to democratic governance structures, CSAs can generally be viewed as co-operative forms of organising, akin to producer-consumer co-ops (Antoni-Komar 2019; Watson 2020).

Despite wide heterogeneity, CSAs concur on some basic organisational configurations which distinguish them from other co-operative forms of organising. From an economic perspective, CSAs fund their operations through members[29] acquiring harvest shares of a local farm's production, by pooling monetary contributions at the start of each growing season. Through a variety of practices, ranging from fixed lump sums to solidarity-based contributions or anonymous 'bidding rounds' in which members are free to decide on their contribution based on personal means, such pooling of money guarantees farming operations on a cost-covering basis for each year. This enables individual farmers or a team of producers to secure their livelihoods independently of harvest losses or market forces, as well as members to gaining consciousness about production processes while being recompensated through the produce of the farm on a weekly basis (Bendix et al. 2019; Helfrich and Bollier 2020; Ravenscroft et al. 2013). Inspired by such practice, Helfrich and Bollier (2020, p. 26) speak here of 'pool, cap & divide up' as an important pattern of commoning. Furthermore, the organisation of labour in CSAs to various degrees depends on the active participation of members in the value creation, i.e., in production processes, as well as in CSA governance through diverse forms of participatory democratic forms of decision-making (Bendix et al. 2019; Paech et al. 2020). Studies have also pointed

[28] For a notable exception on a network-level, see Spanier et al. (2023).
[29] E.g., as individual members, households, or community.

to the transformative potentials of organisational (un)learning processes through formal educational opportunities but also within participatory processes, e.g., through solidarity payments (Paech et al. 2020; van Oers et al. 2023). Due to the labour-intensive and participatory form of organising, CSAs are understood to open up possibilities for more meaningful and less alienated forms of work, which in turn increases organisational resilience due to increased labour forces (Bendix et al. 2019; Paech et al. 2020; Watson 2020). At the same time, however, the integration of members in CSA labour processes is not without problems and necessitates ongoing negotiation processes and coordination efforts to avoid, e.g., frustration through lengthy decision-making processes, unclear responsibilities, work overload, or burnout (Galt 2013; Paech et al. 2020).

While CSAs constitute what some refer to as a community market (Douthwaite 1996) which to some extent 'bypass[es] the mainstream economy' (Johanisova et al. 2015, p. 153), limits and critiques abound as to its transformative efficacy. Many scholars point out that members in many ways still remain embedded within capitalist relations of production, e.g., for income from wage labour or to source other foodstuffs (Watson 2020). Moreover, due to the membership composition of many CSAs, it is often described as relatively privileged and somewhat exclusionary middle-class pursuit (Luetchford and Pratt 2011). Nonetheless, as Watson (2020, p. 305) put it, 'it is the extent to which the practices of the CSA counter or reify the capitalist mode of production which is at issue not just the identity of those participating in these practices'. From a community economies perspective, Cameron (2015) highlights the ongoing struggles of negotiating and maintaining the enactment of ethical commitments within CSAs in relation to growth pressures, such as ensuring fair remuneration for labour contributions. As such, ambitions of fair pay often fall short of expectations, not least due to inhibition of CSA farmers to clearly articulate their actual needs out of fear of negative repercussions from the community (Erben and van Elsen 2019). Moreover, despite aligning to the paradigmatic change of agri-food systems, CSA initiatives can vary greatly with regard to dominant political ideologies and thus, the identification of problems and imaginaries of social change the organisation strives to address (Blättel-Mink et al. 2017; Gruber 2020; Spanier et al. 2023). Spanier et al. (2023, p. 7), for instance, distinguish between 'biodynamic', 'large', 'small', and 'radical' forms of CSA organising, each connected to diverse

political strategies and action repertoires which can spur inter-organisational tensions. While larger CSAs struggle against reproaches of capitalist co-optation and questions of compatibility to transformative CSA principles from within the network, radical CSAs are often perceived as negotiating tensions between various ideologies (Spanier et al. 2023). Nonetheless, as others have argued, despite being embedded within, and to various degrees positioned in antagonism to capitalist relations, critical reflections about limitations of CSAs should not overshadow their transformative potential (Gibson-Graham 2006; Watson 2020). Overall, CSAs are thus well positioned as a suitable research population allowing for an in-depth empirical investigation in line with the research aims of this study.

4.3 Research Questions

CSA organisations provide ample ground for exploring prefigurative processes of putting degrowth imaginaries into organisational practice. Following from the research gaps identified in chapter three, this research aims to answer one overall research question and three sub-research questions:

What are the possibilities and limits of CSA co-operatives in prefiguring degrowth?

1) How do organisational practices within CSA co-ops interrelate with wider socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth?
2) How are CSA co-ops strategising scaling pathways towards socio-ecological transformation?
3) How do CSA actors organise, negotiate, and experience work?

Chapter 5 - Research Methodology

5.1 Introduction

Following the empirical rationale and research questions, this chapter outlines the research methodology of this study. It will proceed as follows: First, the philosophical underpinnings of this research will be clarified, situating this study within a post-structuralist paradigm encompassing a relational and anti-essentialist ontology as well as taking a constructivist epistemological stance. Second, methodological considerations about organisational discourses as the unit of analysis, as well as the abductive logic of inquiry, will be outlined. Third, the case study research design will be discussed in greater depth by initially elaborating on the collaborative research ethos of this study, before explaining the rationale for adopting a comparative maximum variation sampling strategy. Fourth, the empirical setting of CSA co-ops in Germany will be outlined in greater detail. Fifth, the layered data collection strategy will be explained alongside various techniques of inquiry, before outlining theoretical considerations and procedures of the iterative data analysis. Finally, issues of ethics and reflexivity will be considered.

5.2 Post-structuralist Research Paradigm

A research paradigm describes a set of basic beliefs of the researcher which guide any inquiry. It incorporates ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions (Denzin and Lincoln 2017; Guba and Lincoln 1994). These assumptions fundamentally shape the understanding of the researcher about the nature of reality, what constitutes knowledge and how it can be gained, as well as the extent to which the researchers' values influence the research process (Blaikie and Priest 2019; Creswell and Poth 2018). Therefore, a discussion about these underpinnings is essential to construct a consistent research methodology, design and strategies of inquiry (Saunders et al. 2019).

Following primarily the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014) this research is situated within a post-structuralist paradigm. While post-structuralism may be classified under a heterogeneous umbrella of critical schools of thought (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Kelemen and Rumens 2008; Leavy 2017), it is understood and utilised as a distinct paradigm in the context of this thesis. While stressing the political nature of

organisational life in relation to growth has affinities with Burrell and Morgan's (2000) radical humanist paradigm (e.g., critical theory), drawing on post-structuralist insights of discourse and hegemony arguably transcends binary distinctions between nominalist and realist analysis (Willmott 2005). Following constructivist insights, post-structuralism moves beyond a regulatory sociology, as attributed by Burrell and Morgan (2000), by emphasising the performative role of language within relations of power (Belsey 2002; Prasad 2017). Thus, the paradigmatic understandings of post-structuralism have been subject to considerable criticism for a perceived 'dynamic blurring of the boundaries between ontology and epistemology' (Linstead 2015, p. 181), particularly on the question of discourse (Grant et al. 2009). The following sections address this criticism, by expounding and differentiating how my assumptions about such philosophical questions shape my understanding of what constitutes reality and how knowledge can be gained in relation to the phenomena under investigation.

5.2.1 Relational & Anti-Essentialist Ontology

Ontology may be described as an *underlabourer* for understanding and conceptualizing the phenomena under investigation (Al-Amoudi and O'Mahoney 2015). Here, I will elaborate on what may be described as a *relational* and *anti-essentialist* ontology by drawing on a distinct materialist conception of discourse.

Specifically, I ground this thesis in the perspective that reality is socially constructed through language (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002) and thus, dependent on how social actors experience and interpret it intersubjectively (Saunders et al. 2019). However, what we perceive as reality is shaped through forms of social, political, and cultural constructions (Kelemen and Rumens 2008). For instance, how we make sense of, and relate to, *nature, the economy,* and *organisations* as separate entities does not rely on pre-existing realities but depends on particular historical and cultural constructions (Escobar 1999; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). This implies that I reject positivist ontologies of an objective reality that is subject to universal laws (Al-Amoudi and O'Mahoney 2015, p. 17) and which exists 'independently of people's perceptions'.

Far from simply constituting an abstract macro-economic concept with a common-sensical social necessity, economic growth can thus be perceived as a product of 'social relations between people' (Dale 2012), containing ecological, socio-cultural, and political implications and consequences. Thus, assumptions and beliefs around growth

are traversing across all societal levels, from the macro (i.e., national economies and global markets) to meso (institutions and organisations), and the micro (individual human beings). Nonetheless, I do not perceive economic growth as an inescapable ideological (super)structure, nor as a construct that relies solely on agencies of social actors. Questioning such dualist conceptions between structure and agency urges a meta-theoretical conception that transcends such separable and ultimately reductive distinction. I am thus drawing on a post-structuralist reading of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 2014) in order to make sense of the 'constructed and political character of social objectivity' (Glynos and Howarth 2007, p. 11) surrounding notions of economic growth across multiple societal spheres.

Discourse theories have been utilised from various research traditions (Howarth 2000; Torfing 1999) and thus imbue a variety of paradigm-specific meanings (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Prasad 2017). What appears to unite theories of discourse is that 'they call into question how we are, think and act, by framing these matters as constituted in and from relations' (Iedema 2015, p. 87). In the post-structuralist tradition, and from a Foucauldian (1980) perspective in particular, researchers have applied theories of discourse 'to traverse from the micro to the macro and from the global to the local and back again' within their analysis (Prasad 2017, p. 286). That is, discourses are perceived as social practices constituting the world (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), hence they are simultaneously present at various levels of social spheres, e.g., connecting organisational with political-economic discursive articulations.

Significantly, however, rather than merely signifying linguistic instances, such conception may include 'any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role', thus giving meaning to any social configuration (Laclau 2018, p. 49). Following Laclau and Mouffe (2014) such elements may be both discursive and non-discursive (i.e., words and actions), including 'all practices and meanings shaping a particular community of social actors' (Howarth 2000, p. 5). The identity of such elements is differentiated and thus constituted in relation to other elements, thereby affirming the inherently performative character of any discourse on various levels of society. As Willmott (2005, p. 753) argues, rather than signifying a 'dematerialised' form of discourse, such 'critically constructivist' understanding perceives discursive practice as constitutive of social relations. Consequently, discursive elements do not merely describe a pre-existing social reality but have a constitutive role in ascribing

meaning to any object, experience, expression or behaviour (Gilbert 2008; Prasad 2017). Laclau and Mouffe's conception of discourse can hence be described as purporting a distinct 'radical materialis[t social ontology] as a social constructionist alternative to both idealism and realism' (Howarth 2000, p. 112).

While such understanding implies a broadening and materialisation of discourses into social practices (Grant et al. 2009), discourses remain fundamentally incomplete as they are inherently subverted by an excess of meaning (Iedema 2015). In this sense, discourses are seen as 'systems of differential entities' (moments), whose meaning can never be entirely fixed (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, p. 97) due to the instability of language (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In other words, discourses remain in constant relational flux based on a system of differences, which makes ultimate fixation impossible. While rejecting realist conceptions of reality, this view has also been described as *negative ontology*, conceptualising discourses as 'the basic system of differences through which categories become positive, knowledge becomes objective and statements become meaningful' (Al-Amoudi and O'Mahoney 2015, p. 21). However, as other commentators acknowledged, Laclau and Mouffe do not deny the existence of social realities prior to discourse: here, *the social* is brought into being through discursive 'production, reproduction, transformation and representation' (Willmott 2005, p. 751). This means that, e.g., what we perceive as *nature* or natural depends on particular historical and cultural constructions (Escobar 1999; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). From such an anti-essentialist stance, any object is discursively constructed, and all identity is relational (Gilbert 2008).

Notably, while ultimate fixation of meaning can never exist, 'any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 2014, p. 98). Laclau and Mouffe refer to such privileged points of partial fixations of the social as *nodal points* in an organised system of differences constructed through articulatory practice. Within this struggle to fix discursive meaning, *social antagonisms* occur when discourses fail to accommodate each other, thus generating social meaning (Willmott 2005). From this perspective, business-as-usual discourses around economic growth and degrowth can be perceived as made up of a variety of nodal points which are signified through antagonisms. Being in a constant relational flux under which the latter contests the privileged position and meaning of the former, antagonistic articulations prevent a stabilisation of the discursive formation around

economic growth, thus increasingly exposing its limits. This attentiveness towards a political struggle to fix meaning and achieve an imaginary closure in an ever open, fragile and precarious discursive field (Iedema 2015; Willmott 2005) also enables a theoretical conception of *hegemonic formations* in relation to alternative discourses to growth (see Chapter 2).

5.2.2 Critical Constructivist Epistemology

Social science research, and the field of organisation studies in particular, underlie a variety of competing epistemic systems, with each following different reasonings and assumptions about how knowledge can be gained (Scherer et al. 2015), and indeed, the very possibility of true knowledge (Calás and Smircich 1999; Hammersley 2012). This research is based on constructivist epistemological assumptions (Phillips and Hardy 2002), which constitute the foundation for acquiring and developing knowledge within this research project (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

In line with Scherer's (2003) distinction and based on the discussed ontological assumption of a multiplicity of discursively constructed, but always contested reality, I consider social processes and interaction, rather than cognitive processes of allegedly autonomous individuals as the *primary source of justification* for knowledge claims. Due to the constitutive character of language in the formation of discursive constructions, and hence the social world (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), I discard assumptions of knowledge being a product of independently existing and coherent subjects (Hammersley 2012). It follows that access to organisational life can be gained through language accounts and processes of collective meaning-making of research participants who draw on available discourses. Therefore, the social and organisational world of research participants can best be discovered from the *inside* (Blaikie and Priest 2019), exploring the multiplicity of discursive practices (Hammersley 2012). Following Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) broad conception of discourse, this collective meaning-making may also be expressed through any form of social practice. Importantly, such accounts always remain socially situated within relations of power and domination and thus cannot provide objective accounts of reality (Denzin and Lincoln 2017; Saunders et al. 2019). Rather, discursive construction processes enable insights into how particular organisational realities, rather than others, are (re-)produced and rendered meaningful (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Given the instability of language and the *openness of the social* that a post-structuralist view of discourse entails (Laclau and Mouffe 2014), however, ultimate truth can never be attained (Johnson and Duberley 2000). This view contains a relativist perspective and inherent scepticism towards developing knowledge that is considered to have a permanent and universal truth value (Blaikie and Priest 2019; Calás and Smircich 1999; Hassard and Wolfram Cox 2013). Instead, the way discourses come into being and dominate depends on the inherent power dynamics of social settings. Therefore, the justification of beliefs needs to be judged against their discursive coherence instead of adhering to foundationalist views of assuming the pre-existence of law-like basic beliefs about the phenomenon under investigation (Scherer et al. 2015). Such perspective appears particularly pertinent within this study, as calling meta-narratives of economic growth into question on socio-ecological grounds fundamentally challenges taken-for-granted basic beliefs, e.g., about human nature, progress, and rationality. However, as Calás and Smircich (1999) remark, what is being said or written always includes choices of what not to say or write, hence legitimising some forms of knowledge while excluding others. Accordingly, the process of knowledge production and decisions about what constitutes knowledge also incorporates power dynamics that inevitably influence the research process and its outcomes (Calás and Smircich 1999; Putnam 1996).

Such consideration urges a discussion on the uneven relationship between the researcher and the researched, whose interaction inevitably shapes the research process and creation of knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). That means, the researcher constructs knowledge outputs through intersubjectively mediating the everyday language of research participants with theoretical conceptions (Blaikie and Priest 2019), leading to questions of whose reality is being described (Langmead 2017b). Thus, the researcher commonly resides in the position of authority of what counts as legitimate knowledge, subordinating the researched (Wray-Bliss 2003). Putnam (1996, p. 386), therefore, argues for a more reciprocal engagement of knowledge co-production:

> 'Organisational researchers need ways to open up text for multiple readings; to de-centre authors as authority figures; and to involve participants, readers, and audiences in the production of research.'

While I do commit to such call in principle, the privileged authorship position to legitimise forms of knowledge in the last instance cannot be entirely mitigated within this research project. Nonetheless, it is important to be attentive to the *politics of representation* inherent in processes of knowledge production (Linstead 2015; Putnam 1996). The politics of representation incorporate the recognition and responsibility of the researcher of one's constitutive role in the process of co-constructing organisational realities, i.e., particular forms of knowledge (Hammersley 2012). In this sense, this research endeavour can be perceived as a 'performative ontological project' (Gibson-Graham 2008, p. 613). In other words, by aiming to '[bring] degrowth alternatives into being' (Demmer and Hummel 2017, p. 610), such stance implies that the researcher is involved in *ontological politics* by discursively co-constructing certain social realities over others. Building primarily on Butler's performativity of discourses (Gond and Cabantous 2015), critical management scholars have echoed such considerations through controversial debates about the possibilities and limits of *critical performativity* (Fleming and Banerjee 2016; King and Land 2018; Spicer et al. 2016). While embracing the invitation for an affirmative engagement with organisational practitioners as opposed to mere ivory tower critique, my intention is to shift the focus from conventional sites of inquiry to 'social and environmental activists' and to 'interconnect […] with social movements' (Fleming and Banerjee 2016, p. 270). Therefore, this research intends to contribute to a socio-ecological transformation through critically engaged and collaborative organisational research by furthering knowledge generation within a 'library of alternative case studies' (Parker and Parker 2017, p. 1382). This means, this study seeks to be both *critical* in its empirical exploration, analysis and theorising as well as *performative* in its intent to spur discussions amongst practitioners, activists, and scholars to challenge dominant assumptions about the economy, organisation and work in relation to growth.

Therefore, in contrast to positivist assertions of value-free and objective scientific knowledge, this view implies an ethical stance regarding the value-laden development of knowledge, based on the critique of wider societal conditions and the aspiration to change these (Guba and Lincoln 1994; Prasad 2017; Scherer et al. 2015). Accordingly, this research is grounded in, and essentially motivated by, personally held values and fundamental concerns about ecological sustainability and global social-environmental justice, which led me to this particular inquiry and inevitably influenced the research

process (Duberley and Johnson 2015). Calling into question the naturalised pursuit of economic growth based on socio-ecological grounds within organisation and management studies hence contains an explicit ethical stance geared towards emancipatory change (Willmott 2005). Overall, this research is situated within the field of critical organisational and sustainability studies under a broader umbrella of critical management studies (Alvesson and Deetz 2000; Kelemen and Rumens 2008), highlighting what I perceive as a shared commitment of critical management studies and degrowth communities towards socio-ecological justice. While such considerations open up avenues for activist research (Kieser and Leiner 2012; Martinez-Alier et al. 2011), many critical scholars have pointed out the necessity of *reflexivity* in relation to the productive role of the researcher within processes of knowledge creation (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018; Fournier and Grey 2000; Kelemen and Rumens 2008). I will return to this discussion at the end of this chapter.

5.3 Methodological considerations

Following the philosophical positioning of this thesis, this section outlines the methodological considerations of this study. Before elaborating on the abductive logic of inquiry, it is first necessary to discuss how the philosophical assumptions discussed above impact the study of organisations as the unit of analysis of this research.

5.3.1 Unit of Analysis: Organisational Discourses

Embedded within and ultimately dependent on the biosphere, as well as the social and economic sphere (Martínez Alier and Muradian 2015), organisations constitute the actual unit of analysis of this study.

This research follows an understanding of organisations as being discursively constructed within and through systems of power. Rather than taking a pre-discursive *entitative* view of organisation, such perspective follows Chia (2000), who emphasises the performativity of discursive constructions which bring forms of organisation into being in a particular social environment. In other words, Chia (2000, p. 514) notes:

> 'The apparent solidity of social phenomena such as 'the organisation' derives from the stabilising effect of generic discursive processes rather than from the presence of independently existing concrete entities.'

This means that instead of perceiving organisations as independently existing and fixed entities subject to generalisable laws (Al-Amoudi and O'Mahoney 2015), such conception focuses on language as shaping organisational life. In accordance with my epistemological stance, knowledge about organisational phenomena can thus be gained through investigating social processes, interactions, and practices through which organisational members produce and contest certain realities (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). However, this view does not neglect the material and physical aspects of organisations, such as buildings, land, or people, but rather sees them as brought into being through discursive processes that enable a partial fixation of what we may perceive as organisation or organisational practice. In other words, from this perspective *organisation* derives its meaning and becomes a partially stable object through processes of *organising*, i.e., organisational action (Chia 2000).

Instead of applying a functionalist understanding of organisation, this perspective is influenced by Parker et al.'s (2017, p. 538) understanding that 'organisation is politics made durable', which highlights the contingency of organising in relation to socio-cultural, economic and ultimately political articulations. This means that organisational practices can be understood as created through micropolitical discursive processes (Gilbert 2008) constituting organisational reality. Such understanding draws on post-structuralist insights arguing 'that things could be otherwise than they are', but also that 'things are already otherwise than the ways in which they are represented' (Linstead 2015, p. 171), thus shedding light on alternative forms of organising. On the one hand, this implies a radical contingency of organisational life and processes of organising, which are being made meaningful through discursive practices of organisational members. On the other hand, and particularly in relation to discourses of socio-ecological transformation, forms of CSA organising are embedded within larger discursive formations, e.g., hegemonic discourses of economic growth and critiques thereof. Accordingly, this stance enables research into the relation of wider discourses, e.g., socio-political imaginaries of (de)growth, and the way social actors in CSAs assign meaning to them through processes of organising.

5.3.2 Abductive Logic of Inquiry

Conceptualising both *organisations* and *growth(-critique*) as discursive constructions, with regard to their materialisation as social and ecological processes (Schmelzer et al.

2022) has important implications for theorising about the phenomena under investigation and the logic of inquiry (Blaikie and Priest 2019; van Maanen et al. 2007).

In contrast to positivist approaches of deductive theory-testing and given the sparse literature existing about discourses of degrowth concerning alternative forms of organising, this research followed an exploratory route (Saunders et al. 2019). By aiming to explore interrelations of CSAs to wider discourses of socio-ecological transformation and growth(-critique), this approach was geared towards gradually generating understanding and theoretical insights through empirical analysis. Thus, the logic of inquiry may be understood as inductive reasoning, in which theory follows data (Saunders et al. 2019). Nonetheless, a fully inductive approach appeared unrealistic. Due to the extensive and growing literature on discourses of growth-critique as a whole, a conceptual framework had been constructed prior to the empirical study in an attempt to understand the wider field, by mapping alternative discourses to growth. In addition, preconceptions of the researcher informed initial theoretical understandings and reasoning. Consequently, by moving between understandings of theory and empirical data, such reasoning may be more appropriately designated as abductive (Blaikie and Priest 2019; Saunders et al. 2019). Abductive inquiries can be usefully described as constituting a 'back-and-forth character in which concepts, conjectures, and data are in continuous interplay', allowing for a process of discovery (van Maanen et al. 2007, p. 1146). The purpose of this exploratory approach has thus been to narrow down and refine the initially broad focus through empirical analysis, while taking theoretical presumptions into account as the research progressed (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018).

Following an abductive logic of inquiry, the research aimed to uncover how social actors in CSAs create social meaning and construct discursive accounts of organisational life in relation to ideas around (de)growth. To understand the lifeworld and tacit knowledge of researched actors, it has thus been crucial to gain access to their social world by exploring the interpretations, intentions, and behaviours from the accounts they provide (Blaikie and Priest 2019; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). In order to understand how CSA actors are creating mutual knowledge with regard to their organisational lifeworld, the study followed a qualitative case study research design.

5.4 Case Study Research Design & Strategy

This section turns to the particularities of the case study research design which informed the empirical inquiry into organisational discourses as the unit of analysis. First, the collaborative research ethos will be outlined, before discussing the comparative case study design and maximum variation sampling strategy. Second, the empirical setting and case study sample of two CSA co-operatives will be introduced to the reader. Third, the concrete strategies and methods of inquiry will be outlined in relation to data collection and data analysis procedures and techniques.

5.4.1 Collaborative Research Ethos

To gain an in-depth understanding of the organisational practices under investigation and in accordance with epistemological commitments, the research design of this study is grounded in forms of engaged and collaborative scholarship (Kieser and Leiner 2012; van de Ven and Johnson 2006). Organisational scholars have emphasised that investigations on social movements should not simply be done *on* research subjects but *with* them, hence offering benefits for the needs and objectives of the researched (Ergene et al. 2020; Fleming and Banerjee 2016; Willmott 2008; Wray-Bliss 2003). Participatory action research (PAR) has been highlighted as an iterative route of inquiry into alternative organisations, pursuing 'theoretical, practical and emancipatory interests' (Willat 2018, p. 768) through a collaborative and democratic relationship of researcher and participants (Saunders et al. 2019). However, finding common ground between theoretical and practical concerns often proves challenging as respective lay-expert understanding in theory and practice may differ significantly, necessitating ongoing communication to develop a mutual understanding (Kieser and Leiner 2012). Additionally, Varkarolis and King (2017) emphasise the substantial time and energy demand on research participants within conventional PAR strategies, which often proof difficult on top of daily operations.

In contrast, they argue for the utility of *responsive* action research (RAR) as an approach to research design. Based on the ethos of PAR in highlighting the key importance of a fruitful and mutually engaging relationship between the researcher and the researched, RAR is receptive to the needs of participants and organisations under investigation when constructing strategies of inquiry, however, without necessitating their full involvement (Varkarolis and King 2017). Adopting this approach means

trying to find common ground between the researchers' interests and the practitioners' concerns (Voronov 2008), based on their day-to-day experiences of organisational life (Klostermann 2020; Willat 2018), while not constructing the research design on a fully equal partnership. In light of the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impossibility of ethnographic fieldwork at the time of research, RAR represented a more realistic and fruitful approach. Indeed, informing and adjusting the study based on a collaborative relation with targeted CSA co-operative and network members provided vital insights that shaped forms of inquiry and areas of interest, as the following sections will show.

5.4.2 Comparative Case Study & Maximum Variation Sampling Strategy

Following a collaborative and responsive ethos, this research adopted a comparative case study approach based on a maximum variation sampling strategy, with the intention to enable rich and in-depth insights into organisational discourses, processes, and practices. At the same time, such approach granted enough variability to explore emerging themes through various data sources (Schwandt and Gates 2017).

Despite their relevance for quantitative and qualitative research, particularly within the latter, case study designs can enable rich and in-depth investigations of the issue at hand by accounting for multiple meanings and realities within organisational environments (Flyvbjerg 2011; Yin 2014). In addition to enabling detailed insights into organisational processes, case studies can also shed light on the relation of organisations to wider contemporary or historical contexts (Hartley 2004). Within this research, the urgency of a socio-ecological transformation with regard to the context of multiple and accelerating crises constitute such overall discursive and material context. At the same time, the agri-food context and wider food sovereignty movement can be seen as a broader ecological and political context in which individual CSA co-operatives are embedded. Both these contextual layers constituted discursive contexts that were integral to this study.

Moreover, the case study design lends itself to an investigation that goes beyond a mere description or explanation of the empirical but enables organisational analyses in relation to normative discourses. Committed to a value-bound inquiry, case study designs facilitate the perspective that 'empirical analysis can and should contribute to [an] understanding and discussion of […] normative questions' (Schwandt and Gates

2017, p. 615). As such, a case study design accommodates the exploratory nature of this study by enabling the researcher to explore areas of interest within their context while remaining adaptive to emerging insights (Hartley 2004). Therefore, such an approach may be described as an *emergent* case study strategy, in which the concrete focus of investigation developed through the chosen research setting and a sequential, in-depth investigation (Lee and Saunders 2017; Simons 2009).

In addition, a general distinction can be made between a single-case and a multiple or comparative case strategy, both of which rely on purposeful considerations (Bryman 2012; Yin 2014). Making an informed decision about such strategy in relation to the exploratory nature of this inquiry first necessitates a discussion of *what is* or constitutes *a case* (Ragin and Becker 1992) within the scope of this research. In other words, what made one CSA co-operative a more relevant unit of analysis than another? This process is referred to as purposive sampling which relies on the subjective judgement of the researcher in relation to the research questions (Bryman 2012; Saunders et al. 2019). Given the discussed ambiguity about degrowth organising, the process of identifying a case was built on a theoretical construction or what Ragin and Becker (1992) describe as *making* a case. This means, rather than being able to identify an organisation as a suitable empirical unit unambiguously, such construction relied on a continuous interaction between theoretical ideas and gathered empirical evidence. This process may lead to identifying one critical, unique, revelatory (Yin 2014), or paradigmatic case (Flyvbjerg 2011), i.e., a single organisation whose selection can be justified by their theoretical significance in relation to the research questions. However, as Flyvbjerg (2011) acknowledges, such identification is notoriously difficult in the absence of set standards that allow such judgement and thus often relies on the intuition of the researcher. Within this study, such a choice may have been justified through the selection of a single CSA that explicitly follows ideas of degrowth. Yet, in the absence of such case, a single-case design appeared less applicable to the research aims.

Instead, a comparative case study was identified as a more fruitful sampling strategy to augment the exploratory inquiry. Yin (2014) distinguishes between a *literal replication* and a *theoretical replication* strategy. The former implies a replication of findings across multiple cases, which necessitates a careful choice of similar organisational characteristics. The latter suggests a meaningful variation of cases in which one relevant contextual factor is purposefully different to allow for a

differentiated theoretical analysis of case samples, i.e., what Flyvbjerg (2011) calls *maximum variation* cases. Despite the expected commonalities of CSA co-operatives, a variety of differing organisational characteristics had been identified within the target population of the CSA co-op network in Germany (Netzwerk der Solawi-Genossenschaften 2024). Such observation precluded the possibility of selecting typical case samples and instead shifted the focus to an information-oriented selection of heterogenous cases based on theoretical interests (Saunders et al. 2019; Yin 2014). In line with the research questions, dominant approaches to organisational growth and scaling in line with respective organisational sizes at the time of research were identified as meaningful dimensions in line with theoretical considerations (see Chapter 3), allowing for a maximum variation of CSA cases. Such maximum variation of CSA co-ops in relation to scaling strategies appeared most useful to discern possible differences and commonalities across cases regarding imaginaries and prefigurative processes of organising CSA in relation to discourses of de(growth). Following a gradual understanding of organisational characteristics and contexts, the purposive sample out of the identified target population of CSA co-operatives had been significantly aided by the collaborative and responsive research ethos. Insights gained through online participatory engagement and field visits (see 5.4.3) helped the researcher to understand the diversity and intricacies of organisational scaling approaches of respective CSAs. Such intricacies would have otherwise been hidden from view and made this purposive sampling strategy difficult, if not impossible.

A further distinction can be made in relation to the unit of analysis (Saunders et al. 2019). While the embeddedness of co-operatives within the CSA network, and the frequent interactions within it (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft 2024) could have facilitated an embedded case study design (Yin 2014), an in-depth and comparative analysis of holistic CSA cases constituted the main focus of this study. While the network represented an important contextual factor, the research focus in line with the outlined research questions necessitated a targeted and detailed investigation of organisational life within individual CSA co-operatives as primary units of interest. Adopting an exploratory strategy and emergent case study design, a small sample size of two case study organisations had thus been identified to allow for purposive sampling in line with theoretically grounded considerations of maximum variation (Lee and Saunders 2017).

5.4.3 Empirical setting

The European CSA context has been identified as a suitable research population for this study. CSAs have proliferated widely across Europe (European CSA Research Group 2016), the UK (UK CSA Network 2024) and particularly the German-speaking context (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft 2024) within the past decade[30]. Particularly within the latter, the surge of initiatives has received a further boost in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic along with the resulting insecurity of global food supply chains and worsening ecological conditions.

However, this proliferation not only correlates with such wider societal conditions but is also a result of transregional and national organising efforts of CSA networks acting as federations, platforms of co-operation, and political mouthpieces of a plurality of projects. Dedicated to the diffusion of CSA ideas and practices, people within the German CSA network studied thus understand it as an association of CSA initiatives, based on democratic principles, offering a platform for (inter)national exchange, networking and consultation (Netzwerk Solidarische Landwirtschaft 2024). As such, it is structured into an elected council, a coordination group, and a variety of working groups which are formed based on need and more recently began to work with principles of sociocracy. Sociocracy describes a consent-based form of organising in different circles or groups, within which members of different working groups are sent as delegates to a higher-level council on a rotating basis. Delegates are accountable to their working group and can be withdrawn anytime (King and Griffin 2024). A good example of such a sociocratically-organised working group is the group around co-operatives, with which I had the pleasure to work with for eight months during this study. Due to the engagement with this working group, CSA co-operatives in Germany were identified as a suitable target population for this research.

While regular CSA initiatives are understood to supply between 100 and 500 members with food in Germany (Bendix et al. 2019), larger CSA co-operatives deliver more than 2,000 harvest shares per week (Netzwerk der Solawi-Genossenschaften 2024). In line with the maximum variation sampling strategy (see 5.4.2), a sample of two CSA

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[30] Given its long and successful history as alternative-economic model, some initiatives are in the process of expanding CSA organising principles into other sectors, e.g. in the form of a *community-supported industry* in North America (Helfrich and Bollier 2020, p. 27) or *community-supported everything* (CSX) in Germany: www.gemeinschaftsgetragen.de.

co-operatives was selected: Sunflower Seed Collective (SSC) and Green Ivy Co-op (GIC)[31]. While both CSA co-ops surpass the more common small-scaled size of CSA membership around 50-100 harvest shares[32] studied by organisational researchers thus far (Beacham 2018; Watson 2020), their idiosyncratic organisational development and growth led them to different membership magnitudes. While SSC served more than 200 harvest shares and a self-estimated 300-400 people at the time of research, GIC can be considered one of the largest CSA co-ops in Europe, nearing 2,000 harvest shares at the time of research. GIC thus exceeds SSC by nearly a tenfold multiplication of harvest shares. At the time of research, six people at SSC received a wage for their work, while GIC quintupled this number of wage labourers at their premises. Despite their significant differences in organisational size, prevalent social imaginaries of both co-operatives, as well as social processes around scaling surfaced during the engagement with the CSA network as indicating interesting commonalities.

Both of the studied CSA co-operatives were founded shortly after the inception of the nationwide CSA network in the early 2010s and thus represent fairly established and mature forms of CSA co-operatives. Each of them offers a rich history of more than 10 years of organisational development, achievements, failures, and struggles. Broadly aligned to a vision of socio-ecological transformation of the food system and wider societal conditions, they are perceived as politically active and vocal actors within their localities by their members and across the wider network (Fieldnotes). Both are located close to major cities (~ 10 km), within which most of their membership resides. They cultivate a variety of vegetable types (> 70), and orchards on their premises. At the time of research, they supplied a considerable amount of people with fresh, organically, and co-operatively produced vegetables on a weekly basis. During my CSA network engagement and field visits, they were also often referred to as a source of inspiration by co-founders of other CSAs.

Under German co-operative law, formal participation is regulated through the mandatory establishment of managing bodies responsible for co-operative governance, consisting of co-directors and the supervisory board, in which the latter appoints the former. In turn, both managing bodies are accountable and answerable to the wider

[31] Both CSA names are pseudonyms.
[32] One harvest share may refer to one person or a group of people (e.g., family, flat share, housing co-op) who receive vegetables from the CSA on a weekly basis.

membership organised in the general assembly, which elects the supervisory board and has a legal right to influence democratic decision-making processes in the annual general assembly irrespective of co-operative shares (Hartz et al. 2023). In the German context, however, a wide range of CSA configurations exist, which primarily differ in their ownership relation, collective structure, and degree of formalisation as registered association, company constituted under civil law, legal co-operative form, or more often a mix thereof (Netzwerk der Solawi-Genossenschaften 2024). Despite the plurality of organisational models, the German CSA network generally agrees on three organisational ideal types, depending on the relation of CSA members to agricultural production, the form of risk sharing, and their organisational constitution:

1) Producer-led CSA: Bilateral individual contracts between producer and consumers
2) The co-operative CSA: Cooperation between independent producer(s) and a legally organised member corporation
3) The co-entrepreneurship CSA: Cooperation of producers and consumers within one legal entity

While type one constitutes the traditional CSA form in which governance and ownership of the CSA lie entirely with the producer, type two describes a consumer-led CSA in a co-operative relation to one or more existing farms. Type three, i.e., producer-consumer led CSAs, describes a mutualised organisational model in which the entire membership constitutes itself as co-operative and carries the full responsibility for the risk of the undertaking, i.e., from production, to logistics, to membership communications and administration. Both studied organisations fall into type three of a mutualised CSA co-operative. Because of the joint ownership of the means of production and higher interdependencies, type three is understood to incorporate the highest degrees of identification of members to their CSA co-operative (Netzwerk der Solawi-Genossenschaften 2024). While signifying ideal types, in practice organisational characteristics can vary greatly due to informal organising practices and whether the CSA was originally producer or consumer-induced (Gruber 2020). In addition, Gruber (2020) distinguishes between self-organised, participatory, and service-oriented CSAs, depending on the balance between value-rationality and practicability, which influences the specific participatory structures of each initiative.

5.4.4 Data Collection

Following the maximum variation sampling strategy and the collaborative ethos elaborated on, this section explains the concrete methods and data collection procedures employed to address the research objectives (Blaikie and Priest 2019).

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, strategies of inquiry followed a layered approach in which stages of data collection progressively permeated areas of interest within chosen organisational settings (Saunders et al. 2019). As a research strategy, the emergent comparative case study design accommodated a multi-method approach, in which a variety of research techniques were employed to gradually generate rich empirical data (Hartley 2004). The data collection techniques employed primarily built on an eight month online participatory engagement with the CSA co-op network, semi-structured interviews with SSC and GIC participants, document studies within the co-op working group and across both sample organisations, as well as observations through short field visits. In contrast to method-led research, these techniques were selected as most appropriate to answer the research questions (Grix 2002) within the organisational setting and to account for the ongoing pandemic implications. Overall, data collection stages and research methods can be summarised as follows:

Phase	Research Method	Time Period
1st Phase: **Pre-Study**	Internet-based Research 5 Scoping Interviews Online Gathering Participation	Dec 2020 – April 2021
2nd Phase: **Participatory**	Online participation with CSA co-op working group, Document Studies, Fieldnotes from 9 field visits of CSA initiatives in Germany, 7 Pilot Interviews, 1 Focus Group	May – Dec 2021
3rd Phase: **In-depth**	Total of 39 Semi-structured Interviews GIC: 23 Interviews SSC: 16 Interviews	Oct 2021– March 2022

Table 5.1: Summary of Data Collection Stages and Methods

In what follows, the iterative, and to some extent, intertwined strategies of inquiry will be outlined in relation to the specific data collection techniques and rationales.

5.4.4.1 Phase I: Pre-Study Phase

Given the challenge of selecting a suitable research population for this study, the first phase involved exploring alternative organisations in an early empirical phase. Following Swedberg (2012), such pre-study phase is elementary in the process of discovery and aims to progressively theorise on insights and aspects that appear of interest to the research. Swedberg (2012, p. 9) describes this discovery phase as 'an early and imaginative phase' which precedes the justification for the major phase of research in which in-depth investigations are carried out. Alongside gaining a deeper understanding of the literature, such considerations appeared significant for selecting a suitable organisational sample in line with the aims of this research.

Thus, the pre-study phase started with exploring alternative forms of organising with an explicit socio-ecological and growth-critical ambition. Key informants across different European countries were identified based on their participation within alternative agri-food organisations and degrowth networks. All informants indicated an explicit or implicit engagement with discourses of growth critique. Informal scoping interviews were carried out with a total of five key informants. While identified informants covered a wide range of organisations, COVID-19 impacts aggravated gaining further access and engagement with some organisations. Thus, in some instances, pandemic implications required me to show sensitivity to individual situations and to discarding further inquiries. Eventually, such difficulties have been mitigated through joining online gatherings and workshops in which further contacts could be established. This strategy led to gaining preliminary access to the CSA co-op network in Germany (Netzwerk der Solawi-Genossenschaften 2024), based on identifying mutual interests, which led to an agreement about a collaborative engagement with the key informant. The key informant had been a co-founder of one of the case studies and was highly active in the network, which eased the process of gaining access to different CSA co-operatives and actors.

5.4.4.2 Phase II: Participatory Engagement

The second phase of data collection was primarily based on a participatory online engagement, in which the researcher was 'digitally embedded' within the CSA co-op working group for eight months.

Such participatory engagement proved vital to building rapport with CSA actors and in gaining sensitivity about the lifeworlds of research participants (Saunders et al. 2019). Conversations with the key informant indicated the need for processing information of various data sources into text for the CSA co-operative website, geared towards outreach and providing hands-on information for the organisational development of further CSA initiatives. Providing labour and supporting the network in their day-to-day work signified an essential step to ensure a mutually enriching engagement while obtaining a better grasp of the diverse organisational characteristics and lifeworlds of CSA participants. In addition to fieldnotes from online participatory observations, this data collection phase was primarily based on document studies, consisting of various forms of textual, visual, and audio content (Creswell and Poth 2018). Firstly, secondary data in form of previous studies (e.g., Paech et al. 2020) and other published material about the network provided a valuable overview of salient issues and discussions. Secondly, a small team within the network had previously conducted podcast interviews with each CSA co-operative, which invited the researcher into the day-to-day CSA life and the intentions, ambitions, and challenges CSA actors faced. The planning of further podcast interviews with old and new CSA co-operatives constituted one of the tasks the researcher was actively involved in. Thirdly, access to online meetings and communication tools (e.g., Slack, Mattermost) provided an additional resource of visual and textual content in regard to organisational issues. Fourthly, the researcher was actively involved in weekly jour fixe meetings to discuss the next steps in the website revamp project and other CSA network matters. Such conversations supported the building of rapport and gaining vital insights into specific formations and challenges of CSAs across the network. Fifthly, the researcher took on specific tasks of co-writing various texts in relation to CSA and co-operative organising, which were processed further by various network actors and later publicised on the website. Such tasks helped to facilitate a deeper understanding, particularly regarding the specificities, commonalities and differences amongst the target population of CSA co-operatives within the network.

Therefore, the active involvement in the co-op working group facilitated a productive form of document studies that would have otherwise been foreclosed to the researcher. Across this process, document summaries and memos were collected to capture emerging thoughts, insights, and findings as the research progressed (Saunders et al.

2019). In particular, the active involvement supported the respective sampling strategy (see 5.4.2) in order to analyse and estimate the relation of individual CSA co-ops to issues of growth and scaling and obtain hints about the organisations' set-up, their aspired purpose, activities, and general ideas about a socio-ecological transformation. Based on insights gathered, seven pilot interviews with CSA co-founders were conducted throughout a brief field visit of a total of 9 CSA initiatives in September 2021. In addition, the researcher was actively involved in planning and conducting a focus group discussion with a selection of four key informants from different CSA co-operatives, which took place in November 2021. Based on emerging insights from the participatory engagement, the focus group involved three segments in which participants were asked to reflect on the 'transformative diversity' across CSA co-operatives and how they navigated their respective transformative ambitions in relation to future visions as well as daily CSA practice. Insights gained from the focus group, as well as the observations and pilot interviews during the field visits, were important to identify a suitable sample of two CSAs and to secure their further participation (Silverman 2013). Given their commonalities and differences in relation to imaginaries and scaling processes, GIC and SSC crystallised as promising case study samples. Subsequently, participation in the third phase of this study had been secured with key informants of each organisation in November 2021.

Overall, the participatory phase served the identification of sample organisations from within the network, as well as to gain first insights into the CSAs from which initial themes emerged (Hartley 2004) that formed the basis for the in-depth phase of inquiry.

5.4.4.3 Phase III: In-depth phase

The third and main phase of data collection constituted an in-depth inquiry into GIC and SSC. Drawing on emerging themes and insights from the participatory phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from both CSA organisations to generate rich and detailed accounts of how participants construct particular versions of everyday organisational life (Kvale 2011; Leavy 2017).

Semi-structured interview techniques are particularly relevant for comparative case study designs to ensure cross-case comparability of the topics of interest (Bryman 2012). Due to pandemic impacts, all interviews were conducted online, which meant 'looking at the *field* through a Zoom-lens' (Howlett 2022), or Microsoft Teams for that

matter. Due to the necessity of conducting interviews online instead of in-person interviews at the premises of the CSA, which may have enabled a richer account of participants' experiences and contextual detail (Creswell and Poth 2018), the preceding phase of data collection provided vital input. In particular, the knowledge of both organisational settings and the rapport built with research participants through participatory engagement were key for being able to address the key issues of the investigation through in-depth interviews (Gillham 2000).

In contrast to exploratory pilot interviews, which targeted more general perceptions of growth critique and the organisational setting, in-depth interviews centred around more specific experiences, processes, and practices of organising CSA concerning socio-ecological transformation and growth imaginaries. Thus, an interview guide was constructed with a list of emerging topics of interest in relation to the research questions while granting enough flexibility for the interviewee to address any issues of concern (Bryman 2012; King 2011). However, given the tendency of abstraction on questions of growth(-critique) in relation to hands-on organisational practice in CSAs, identifying suitable questions presented a challenge, demanding ongoing processes of evaluation and reflexivity. Moreover, as Alvesson (2003, p. 14) argues, interview situations should always be considered as 'socially and linguistically complex situation[s]', i.e., instances of discursive constructions that are themselves open to a variety of interpretations, instead of mirroring a given organisational reality. The aforementioned aspects of value-bound inquiry thus urged reflections about the political constructions of organisational members, as well as the researchers' positioning, in relation to discourses of growth.

From a post-structuralist perspective, all interview participants (incl. the researcher) are to various degrees constituted as subjects through socio-historical discursive constructions that are exerting power over individual's language accounts. Far from only impacting the analysis of empirical data, this view also indicates that interviews are not a pure knowledge-transmitting activity from the interviewee to the researcher (Alvesson 2003). Instead, they constitute a context-specific and relational activity in which both researcher and participant are actively shaping the interview and, hence, its discursive knowledge outputs (Fontana and Frey 2000; King 2011; Kvale 2011). Following Kvale's (2011, p. 11) *traveller* metaphor, by perceiving 'interviewing and analysis as intertwined phases of knowledge construction', the interview process thus

involved ongoing reflections about the researchers' beliefs and preconceptions that influenced the interview process and concurrent interpretations. In particular, it has been important to be attentive to preconceived ideas and not impose a certain meaning of growth, e.g., when phrasing or asking interview questions, that may restrict multiple meanings the researched could articulate within an area of interest (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018).

In line with the idiosyncratic organisational structures of studied CSAs, ensuring the greatest possible variety and equal dispersion of interview participants' roles and functions constituted an important factor. Generally, this research distinguishes between employed CSA co-op workers and members. Additionally, co-founders, board members, and co-directors constitute analytically important functions which were held either by workers or members in both CSAs. While co-directors of GIC were employed by the co-op, co-directors of SSC, and board members in general, fulfilled their function voluntarily. CSA co-founders often ended up serving as co-directors for some time in each organisation. Due to the process-oriented research focus, former CSA workers and members were considered legitimate informants if their involvement in diverse roles justified it. The following table shows the distribution of research participants (workers and members) in both organizations:

Role	GIC	SSC
Workers	12	7
Members	11	9
Total	**23**	**16**

Table 5.2: Distribution of interviewed Workers and Members

While trying to balance the composition of participants, personal identifiers and demographic information with regards to, e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background, were not identified as analytically significant in relation to the research focus of this study[33]. The decision to hide these and other demographic identifiers in the analysis had also been made for anonymising purposes, given the relatively small number of workers employed in both organisations (see 5.4.3). Interviews were conducted using a snowball-sampling method following initial contacts gained

[33] Importantly, this should not be read as if, e.g., gender norms, are no significant factor in the organisation of CSA or agri-food production in general, but that such investigation could not be provided in the depth that it deserves within the space of this research project.

through respective key informants in each organisation. Most interviews lasted between 45 min and 75 min. With the consent of participants, all semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised for analysis purposes (Bryman 2012).

5.4.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis focused on the relationship between higher-level discursive constructions, i.e., imaginaries, and practice-oriented forms of organising, i.e., social processes, within CSA co-ops. Following a theoretical understanding in which imaginaries and social practice are discursively co-constituted, the analysis overall follows a discursive approach. Through progressively permeating the field, I have tried to gain a deeper understanding of underlying patterns of meaning, constituting social processes of alternative agri-food production in relation to wider socio-political imaginaries around growth, within the CSAs under investigation. This analytical approach facilitated the theorising process of the politics and conflictual processes underlying alternative organising in relation to wider socio-ecological ambitions. The sections below outline the theoretical considerations underlying this process, before explaining the analytical procedures in more detail.

5.4.5.1 Theoretical considerations

While the exploratory nature of this research may have been conducive to prescriptive data analysis approaches such as grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), this analysis was grounded in a constructivist approach of discourse analysis in line with my philosophical assumptions. However, instead of using Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) abstract understanding as a concrete analytical tool, it provided an overarching ontological lens, underpinning the analysis of discourses as 'created, maintained and changed in myriads of everyday practices' and often implicit ways (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 17). In contrast to realist-inclined approaches, such as critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), it has been my intention to analyse the use of language through discourse as meaning-making processes that constitute and shape particular forms of reality within organisations (Bryman 2012; Phillips and Hardy 2002). By analysing discourses around growth(-critique) within CSA organisations and workplaces as a concrete social domain, discursive constructions transcend from organisational practice to larger socio-political meanings around socio-ecological

considerations. The analysis of organisational discourses in relation to discursive formations of growth thus aimed to 'explore the relationships between text, discourse, and context' (Phillips and Hardy 2002, p. 5), by interpreting local discursive patterns while taking their historical context and socio-political interpretations of social practices into account (Bargiela-Chiappini 2011).

Organisational discourses enable organisational members to experience and make sense of the world through words and practices (Howarth 2000). Through various data sets, I explored how discursive constructions constituted particular versions of organisational life and social practice within selected case study organisations. In this vein, the analysis moved from a more abstract level of shared social imaginaries, e.g., of the future and socio-ecological transformation, to more concrete organising processes, e.g., of scaling and working, by paying particular attention to associate power dynamics and struggles. Attuned to the 'primacy of the political' (Bridgman and Willmott 2006, p. 114) within Laclau and Mouffe's (2014) political theory of discourse, the focus on organisational discourses facilitated the analysis and theorisation of intra-organisational conflict (Walton and Boon 2014). In particular, this focus has been identified around questions of scaling within both case studies as a salient analytical feature of CSA organising worthy of further theorisation. While not following the prescriptive analytical method proposed by Walton and Boon (2014), the analytical process took inspiration from the political analysis of conflict in alternative organisational contexts. By identifying key antagonistic discourses around scaling and analysing how specific events unfolded into organisational rupture, this analytical conception facilitated a close reading and unpacking of conflictual social processes in relation to wider imaginaries of socio-ecological change. Accordingly, this study aimed to provide a 'contextualised analysis to consider what the conflict means and how that meaning operates' (Walton and Boon 2014, p. 367) within and across CSAs.

5.4.5.2 Analytical Procedure

Despite the significance of data analysis for qualitative research (Silverman 2007), concrete procedures, particularly in relation to case studies, often rely on the intuition of the researcher (Simons 2009; Yin 2014). Generally, the process of qualitative data analysis is conceived of as interconnected with stages of data collection (Saunders et al. 2019). Rather than pursuing a top-down strategy that relies on theoretical propositions (Eisenhardt 1989), or a bottom-up strategy entirely grounded in lived

experience (Gioia 2013), the analysis thus evolved as an iterative process of theorising (Locke et al. 2020; Swedberg 2012). Within the emergent case study approach, this iterativity has been particularly useful, as various stages of data collection and the interpretation of the acquired data informed the following steps.

Given the large quantities of data collected, it was necessary to break down the gathered material into meaningful sets to facilitate a more focused interpretation (Saunders et al. 2019; Simons 2009). Therefore, the software NVivo was utilised to store and support in analysing various forms of data collected at different stages, i.e., progress and document summaries, memos, fieldnotes, and interview transcripts (Yin 2014). In line with the iterative approach, ongoing interpretation and adjustments of questions were necessary to follow up on issues worth investigating (Simons 2009). While analysis processes between stages of data collection followed a more intuitive approach in identifying initial themes, patterns, or contradictions within case study organisations, a more structured approach was employed after data saturation occurred.

As per the comparative case study design, a cross-case synthesis was employed to analyse and contrast both holistic cases (Yin 2014) in relation to the research questions posed. While there is no 'cookbook procedure' (Yin 2014, p. 170) for such technique, a thematic analysis (Saunders et al. 2019) was initially followed to explore discursive themes and patterns within both cases, before contrasting the findings in a cross-case analysis. In practice, this involved a two-stage coding process in which initially derived codes from within each case resulted in more descriptive, inductively derived first and second-order themes. These themes emerged from familiarising processes with various data sets, particularly through a close reading of interview transcripts (Saunders et al. 2019). Given the relative openness of research question at this stage, detailed codes were assigned across transcripts, such as 'politics of growth', 'growth as double-edged sword', or 'clash of imaginaries'. In a second coding step, initially derived codes were contrasted through a renewed coding process across cases (Locke et al. 2020). Revisiting initial codes enabled a more focused third-order coding and thus, a greater theoretical abstraction through identifying commonalities and differences across cases in relation to salient analytical themes. In particular, this comparative process provided a deeper reading into the stark differences of scaling and work orientations in relation to transformative imaginaries across the cases.

Adopting an abductive logic of inquiry, such emerging themes were continuously contrasted to theoretical propositions in the literature (see Chapter 3), which also supported a redefinition and concretisation from initially two to three sub-research questions.

For example, the focus on de-alienated work developed at later stages of data analysis. Before conducting the cross-case synthesis, my analysis focused more broadly on the negotiation of idealist and pragmatic versions of organisational practice against shared transformative imaginaries. Through the cross-case analysis, I began to see significant similarities and differences in regard to themes such as 'meaningful work', 'crossing boundaries', and 'identification with work' relating to the specificities of CSA labour. Thinking through these themes thus surfaced a more concrete focus on the CSA workplace and the particular struggles involved in mediating what I then theorised as de/re-alienating work experiences contingent on path dependencies of scaling. In addition to the process of how alternative work imaginaries materialise in CSA practice, such patterns appeared to speak directly to the literature on meaningful and non-alienated CSA work (Watson 2020), as well as prefigurative processes of *degrowing* (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023). Moreover, contextual data from the focus group discussion and tentative insights gathered during short field visits indicated the primacy of CSA labour as both a significant catalyst for bringing people into CSAs but also a major source of disillusionment if expectations failed to be met. Thus, these analyses and discovery processes served the continuous interplay between contexts, 'concepts, conjectures, and data' (van Maanen et al. 2007, p. 1146) that enabled the establishment of themes and relationships across cases.

5.5 Ethics & Reflexivity

In critical social studies, epistemic and methodological reflexivity is essential to knowledge production (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018; Fournier and Grey 2000; Johnson and Duberley 2000). In order construct careful interpretations of empirical material and to make explicit how the author came to make certain knowledge claims, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) emphasise the significance of processes of systematic reflection at several different stages of the research process. At the same time, the extent to which the researcher can navigate fully through these issues as an autonomously knowledgeable subject remains questionable (Alvesson et al. 2008;

Johnson and Duberley 2000). However, within this space, I will try to expand and reflect on the most prevalent ethical issues of this research.

As highlighted under epistemological assumptions (see 5.2.2), this research constitutes a value-bound inquiry, revolving around fundamental concerns about the role economic activity plays in intensifying socio-ecological crises, i.e., most pressingly, the climate crisis. Thus, it is important to be explicit and transparent about 'where the author is coming from' (Weick 2002, p. 894). Such aspect appears particularly relevant, as I consider myself embedded within both degrowth and co-operative movements, both of which constitute issues under investigation in this study. Thus, the very choice of research topic and subjects is underpinned by a normative stance towards issues of social and environmental justice. This stance informed the need to study and understand alternative ways of organising and the extent to which these may provide avenues for mitigating intensifying socio-ecological crises. The research focus, along with the theoretical conceptions employed, thus indicates a critical stance towards the standard objects of OMS analysis, which often appear geared towards reinforcing business-as-usual forms of organising that only sustain the unsustainable. Here, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) caution that investigating familiar discourses in line with one's assumptions and values spurs issues of positionality of the researcher due to shared socially constructed understandings with the research subjects. Similar reflections could be drawn from locating myself within a particular research community (Alvesson et al. 2008). In other words, both the researchers' and the researched assumptions and knowledge are socially and culturally constructed within systems of power, i.e., a product of discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). As the uncovering of such naturalised meaning-systems within studied organisational environments (Kelemen and Rumens 2008) constituted a part of this analysis, there is a danger that the research becomes distorted by the researchers' foregone conclusions.

Thus, it had been important to confront and question my own taken-for-granted standpoints during the research process (Johnson and Duberley 2000) and to 'allow thinking and practice to become' through a collaborative engagement with the research subjects (Iedema 2015, p. 97; Iedema and Carroll 2010). Here, continuous conversations with members of the CSA co-op working group I worked with, provided a critical-reflexive space in the intermediate stages of this research. In particular, conversations with key informants forced the researcher to step back from

preconceived theoretical conceptions, e.g., around degrowth, and guided the inquiry towards practical issues facing CSA practitioners. Most of all, the engagement process has been a humbling experience in relation to highlighting how little I knew about the intricate processes of agri-food production. This process, to some extent, helped to mitigate the power relation between the researcher and the researched (Wray-Bliss 2003) by working with and learning from CSA practitioners in a responsive manner (Varkarolis and King 2017). Taking Weick's (2002) cautionary remarks about *disciplined reflexivity* into consideration, I have tried to bring the voices of the researched to the fore, rather than elaborating in depth about my personal experiences.

Nonetheless, power asymmetries remain in regard to questions of authorship, i.e., issues of (re)presentation within this research, which constitute a central aspect of methodological reflexivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018; Alvesson et al. 2008; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In addition to epistemological concerns about what sort of organisational reality, and thus knowledge assumptions, are constructed, this incorporates an ethical-political dimension of what and whose views the researcher is representing (Bell and Willmott 2020; Linstead 2015). While some methodological choices regarding the collaborative ethos have mitigated such concerns to an extent, they cannot be mechanically eliminated but require ongoing reflexive processes. Here, it is important to note my relatively privileged social position (Alvesson et al. 2008) in being able to spend all this time thinking, reading, and writing about the topic under investigation rather than experiencing CSA work first-hand in the field (see 10.4 for limitations). Thus, I have tried to ensure the greatest possible diversity of CSA co-op actors' voices to augment as best as possible the 'dynamic multiplicity of voices, genres and social languages' (Maybin 2001, p. 67). Nonetheless, as a discourse analyst, the analysis provided remains a representation of reality based on my interpretation of the data, and thus, *one* reality of the social world rather than an objective truth (Phillips and Hardy 2002).

Chapter 6 - Common Ground: The Shared Quest for System Change

6.1 Intro

This chapter introduces how CSA actors across both GIC and SSC are making sense of the broader conditions they are faced with and illustrates a shared understanding of the parameters of a socio-ecological transformation of the agri-food system. Firstly, it draws attention to how actors within both CSAs perceive what has often been referred to as grow-or-die conditions of food provisioning under a hegemonic formation of industrialised agriculture. Secondly, it discusses worsening ecological conditions through the lived experiences of intensifying climate breakdown impacting agri-food production. Thirdly, it interrogates how respondents project such lived experiences of the climate crisis into the future by enacting practices of hope and hopelessness in relation to CSA provisioning. Fourthly, it outlines the contours of what will be referred to as transformative imaginaries of how both CSAs are aiming to build a more sustainable future along ecological, socio-economic, and political dimensions. Overall, this chapter sheds light on the *common ground* of organising alternative food provisioning across both CSA co-ops, by highlighting commonalities across their conditions, future projections, and imaginaries of socio-ecological change. Common patterns provide the basis for analyses about the social and political processes of scaling and working, to be discussed in the following chapters.

6.2 Grow-or-die Conditions: The 'Death' of Peasant Farming

While both CSA co-ops share a desire to overcome the systemic conditions of expansion-based agriculture, it is first necessary to understand how respondents are making sense of the prevailing conditions that led them to organise CSA. Accordingly, this section provides insights into the ways CSA proponents experience the socio-economic and ecological conditions faced within the broader agri-food system. Such accounts afford important insights and grounding to the lived experience of CSA actors, their motifs, reasonings, and convictions.

Industrial Agriculture is widely understood to be one of the major drivers of the climate crisis and rampant biodiversity loss. It has also been subject to increasing contestations around issues of social justice in recent years. Thus, it comes as no surprise that many CSA actors take issue with the conditions of food provisioning experienced under the

expansion-driven agricultural regime. Indeed, many participants spoke of an overarching sense of alienation, from both food production and consumption. From a consumption-based perspective, such feelings particularly surfaced when confronted with the fragility of globalised food supply chains, e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic, or other moments when the personal subjection to a globalised food system became painstakingly clear. Ocean, a member who had been active at GIC before helping to set up another CSA elsewhere, elaborates on widespread feelings of vulnerability emerging from the remoteness from food cultivation processes:

> '[…] this alienation is something I view very critically, that evermore people do not know at all where their food is coming from. They cannot appreciate it nor evaluate it in terms of quality or price. Also, the ways one is dependent on something that we need for survival [i.e., food], and how… vulnerable one is, because we have not only lost the direct contact but also a lot of knowledge. That many people don't even know anything about how to cultivate it […] this is something we need to start from – against this alienation and loss of food sovereignty.' (Ocean, GIC, Member)

In a similar vein, Kerry, a member of SSC reports that their primary motivation to join the CSA had been 'the feeling of being at the mercy of capitalism'. While previously taking food 'directly out of the trash barrel, or get it from the foodbank', they expound on the coercive effects of a food system that is ultimately about 'the valorisation of foodstuffs – not about eating them'. As such, the growing realisation of food insecurities through market-based provisioning and the loss of knowledge about food cultivation processes that could help to avert such dependence often constitutes the starting point for many peoples' interest in CSA. At the same time, such accounts also take issue with being subject to a mode of food consumption that systemically ignores and externalises the increasingly worsening conditions of food production.

Accordingly, alienating forces of industrialised food consumption are also understood to increase the distance towards intensifying grievances and injustices of food production processes, as Dylan, who studied gardening and joined SSC's work team a few years ago, argues:

> 'Certainly, the awareness for the hardships of people in agriculture, I mean it will be a big, big problem within our consumer society that we just blank it out

> because it is a product that we buy in supermarkets. It's packaged, or labelled whatever… and so much humanly gets lost'

The widespread ignorance about the hardships of agri-food production were stressed throughout the research process in countless descriptions of exploitative working conditions under a growth-based agricultural regime. Dylan, for instance, related their own experiences of industrial dairy farming to the 'transcontinental transport of produce' which ultimately relied on the 'exploitation of peasant labourers within conventional structures'. Others, like Parker (Operations Manager), who left a comfortable and well-paid IT job to work the land at GIC, commonly elaborated on the inherently exploitative structures of European agriculture:

> 'Well […] I think we need to speak about the working conditions in agriculture, because that's the field we are operating on, and agriculture is incredibly badly paid for extremely arduous work, with precarious employments… often only 3 month contracts, or 6 month contracts. And after that it doesn't matter what happens to the people. […] You work during summer and get unemployment benefits, or you go back to your home country.'

In addition to precarious short-term contracts, such accounts often emphasised exceptionally low wages, chronic overtime, backbreaking drudgery, physical overload, exploited migrant labour, and maximum stress-levels as the normality, rather than the exception within the sector. Continuously deteriorating working conditions were also part of tempestuous debates within the focus group discussion about what one participant from GIC described as an 'agricultural system that has gone completely nuts with its prices, wages, and mechanisms'. In particular, participants emphasised the impact of market forces and corporate power in creating unbearable price pressure for many market-supplying farms. This pressure is seen to have extended even across the comparatively higher-priced organic food sector. Skye (Operations Manager), who just finished their apprenticeship at GIC after having worked in different sectors before, underlines this issue when saying 'you really wouldn't think that you are exploiting people while buying organic food'. Along such lines, many respondents reported a disenchantment with market-oriented avenues of food provisioning and ideas of green consumerism as a whole, in neglecting workers' needs. Consequently, reactions like the following from Jodie, who used to work the land at SSC, become more comprehensible:

> 'Before I became part of SSC, I actually didn't want anything to do with the agricultural sector anymore. I was so annoyed with it because the living [and working] conditions are so inconceivably bad. And I […] actually wanted to think about what else I could still do, because I got so annoyed by these conditions.'

Invariably, such accounts point towards widespread feelings of alienation amongst agri-food labourers resulting from exploitative working conditions and the wider implications of the growth-based agricultural system.

Feelings of disenchantment also appeared to emerge out of a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the kinds of work and its organisation within people's previous jobs. Given diverse levels of previous experiences in agricultural work, different tendencies can be observed across both organisations. Just like Jodie, the majority of wage earners at SSC at the time of research were trained in the cultivation of vegetables or other forms of farming. Here, a growing sense of disillusionment with hierarchical forms of employment in the conventional agricultural sector can be discerned. Dylan (SSC, Worker), for instance, lamented the 'extreme monotony' of work within efficiency-driven farms delivering primarily to grocery chains. Here, the subjection to bosses along with stark wage differentials in already underpaid jobs was described as a major source of frustration. At the same time, insights gained from field visit often pointed towards what was often described as highly unjust subsidising system on the basis of acreage rather than social and ecological criteria. Respondents from the network and both CSAs identified the 'death' of farming enterprises as a result of what was widely understood as *grow-or-die logic* of European agriculture which made vegetable cultivation an unviable endeavour for many smallholders. In addition to making farming unappealing for following generations, the widespread surrender of many small-scale arable farms has not only attracted the attention of agribusinesses, but also investment groups which have shifted large areas of land into financial speculation (Fieldnotes). Many CSA workers, like Skye (Operations Manager, GIC) thus articulated their frustration about such speculation-driven hiking up of land prices which makes it inaccessible for many and restricts possibilities to farmland in ecologically sustainable and autonomous ways. Overall, experiences of exploitative, unjust, and ultimately unfulfilling agri-food labour thus stood as a major motivator for establishing or joining CSA projects.

6.3 Climate Conditions: A 'Mirror Imaging'

On top of grow-or-die conditions, worsening ecological circumstances, and in particular implications of climate change, are not only a concern for conventional forms of food production but are already aggravating the circumstances under which CSA practitioners are able to cultivate produce.

Field visits to both organisations in September 2021 gave indications into the realities of living with, and in many cases, struggling against adverse impacts of a changing climate. At SSC, many respondents recounted instances of contestation around their water supply with neighbouring farms. Based within a region with relatively low ground-water levels and surrounded by primarily conventional farms, conflicts had already emerged during longer drought periods which made irrigation from a deeper well necessary, which the CSA had commissioned in line with regulations. Subsequently, the CSAs water hoses were sabotaged multiple times during night hours, which left members like Leslie to speculate that some of the adjoined conventional farmers were not too favourable towards the 'alternativeness' that the CSA represented:

> 'There was this suspicion that this came from the neighbouring farmers or the people that were of the opinion – now the hippies are taking our water away!'

Multiple accounts sensed a growing social frustration amongst the village community triggered by dried-up wells and growing water demands as a result of longer lasting droughts, while at the same time observing that the CSA was able to irrigate their vegetables despite their own wells remaining dry. Even though the confrontation could eventually be resolved through a neutrally moderated process by a third party, it points to a broader picture of severe climate realities within the agricultural sector. Jessie, a co-founder and worker at SSC, remembers what they experienced as 'blatant social impacts' of the climate crisis:

> 'There were immediately quarrels here in the village. Some only had surface-level well water, then they saw us irrigating and were like – *woahhh, they're taking all our water away!* And I think that's all these social ramifications that we mustn't underestimate. […] It also leaves us with questions in a second drought year – does it still make any sense? Up to a point where we need to ask ourselves if we shouldn't reorganise our farming entirely. Should we only do

> drought-resilient cultivation or what does even work here from a longer-term perspective?'

To Jessie and their co-workers, the quick escalation around the water scarcity and increasingly worsening climate conditions, which make severe droughts more likely, points to more fundamental questions about the viability and predictability of vegetable cultivation in SSC's location.

Similarly, GIC had just experienced the 'most difficult and challenging season' (Fieldnotes) since its inception, at the time of the field visit. As opposed to the difficulties of droughts in previous years, the summer of 2021 was unusually wet and characterised by heavy rainfall, which resulted in flooding, crop failures, and harvest losses at a major scale. Despite the planned economic model that CSAs are operating on, compensating such losses demands a great deal of perseverance as Haven, a worker who had only started at GIC, recounts:

> 'The tomatoes caught late blight very quickly […] and then the fungus was spreading rapidly. This is my first season, and it's indeed… a good reason why that is the case, but it is still quite hard to stomach when you see that things don't work, and the tomatoes die. What was the loss? 70% or so - I mean really extreme! […] So yeah, it was quite burdensome. And I do see the world quite positive and don't let myself be pulled down, but that got me quite a bit. So, the season was very stressful, and I realise now that it had worked me over quite a bit.'

While Brooks, an administrative worker who had been with GIC for a long time, argues GIC's membership did not experience a major drop due to this harvest loss, they said they have 'a hard time imagining how [members] deal with it if this happens another year in succession'. Arguing that the CSA needs to find ways to adapt to extreme weather conditions, however, they concede that it was such adaptation that 'broke [their] neck in some instance', as preparing for a dry year actually intensified the damage from heavy rainfall. Such insights reflect many experiences gathered in the field which, on the one hand, point towards personal and organisational struggles to keep up with the increased risk and unpredictable impacts of climate change in a real time scenario. On the other hand, they also highlight the dangers of such scenarios to the cohesion of the wider CSA membership, seen as vital for organisational stability

and continuity, if major harvest losses become more frequent. Witnessing such struggles about climate impacts not only shows that it has become a daily reality for CSA practitioners, but it also accentuates the potentially large-scale implications for the socio-ecological conditions under which CSA initiatives organise more generally. Living and working with such imponderabilities thus provides what Lake, a member who volunteers at GIC for a few hours each week, described as a 'mirror imaging'. Through such mirror image CSA proponents witness wider, global existential threats like the climate crises at close quarters, thus making them comprehensible on the level of small-scale agri-food provisioning.

Overall, socio-economic and ecological conditions provide insights into some of the most prevalent factors turning people away from growth-based industrialised agriculture and towards alternative food networks like CSAs. As the analysis has shown, however, the already unfolding climate catastrophe not only entails daily struggles for CSA practitioners, but also shapes imaginaries about future possibilities of food cultivation and CSA organising.

6.4 Hope(lessness): A race against time, or resilience in collapse?

Rather than constituting a distant future scenario, a temporal relation appears to exist between CSA actors' lived experiences of already unfolding ecological breakdown at present, and imaginaries about future trajectories. Here, discursive constructions about the future lend insights into how CSA proponents enact practices of *hope* and *hopelessness* within their organising.

Given the intensification of climate-related impacts on agri-food production, many participants perceive their CSA commitment as a source of hope in relation to enacting their values in practice. Thus, many would circumscribe the forms of collective action CSAs are practicing in similar ways to Ollie, an active member of SSC nearly since its inception, who was occupying a co-director role during the time of research:

> 'A kind of economic activity […] that is perhaps more fit for the future […] because it is an attempt try to indicate how agriculture and veg cultivation will need to look like if one aims to continue to practice it […] under changing climate conditions.'

In essence, such accounts portray the hopeful prospect that CSA organising practices can indeed have a transformative effect on the agri-food system. Ollie's connotation to the future thus incorporates the intent of CSA projects to not only envision a different form of agricultural production, but to practice it in the here and now. For many respondents, like River, who has been a member of GIC since its early days, their involvement in CSA projects thus represents the enactment of a more hopeful future scenario informing a sense of agency for change:

> '[…] I find it encouraging that within my daily activities […] be it within wage work or in the projects where I'm engaged in otherwise, I have the opportunity to come together with other people who also like to do something and change something, and that is something that, of course, I find reassuring… if I see that partly, there are so many different people coming together in these projects that they're not always the same, but it has widened throughout society […] – so ok we somehow get more, the question is does it go fast enough? Of course, I would like it to be faster.'

In a similar vein, Cleo argues their membership at SSC 'connects well with their values and how [they] imagine society', when arguing that organising collectively will always be a solution to what they view as 'permanent crises'. While such accounts signify CSA as providing a hopeful space for working towards more desirable futures, some doubts appear to remain 'whether that [change] happens fast enough and comprehensively enough' (Riley, GIC, Member).

In this sense, such doubts indicate that hopeful and motivational frames of CSA action are often contrasted with what could be described as a *race against time*, providing an elevated sense of urgency in attempts to avert or minimise impacts of climate breakdown. This sense of urgency is mirrored by others like Sammie, who previously worked the land at SSC, when projecting their experiences of worsening ecological conditions into the future:

> '[…] I really do have thoughts like, right - can we actually cultivate veg here in 10 years or not? […] There are people who say, in 10 years we cannot cultivate anything here anymore […] when the Gulf Stream dries up… then we have temperatures here like on the North Pole or so […]. So, it would get too cold for veg cultivation, or there are voices that say that the weather extremes

> […] or conditions will last longer and stay longer, so that it rains, or is dry for ages [...].'

Comparing worsening ecological conditions with the social effects of keeping up CSAs alternative-economic model under such scenarios, Sammie admits they feel 'complete powerless' and 'very emotionally heavy' about such prospects. Storm, an administrative worker and co-director of GIC shares such concerns when saying 'the business of agriculture troubles us greatly' and subsequently questions whether there will still be reasonable cultivation conditions at GIC's location in the next five to ten years. Accordingly, a growing sense of insecurity about growing conditions leads to projections into the future that see worsening climate conditions exacerbating to a point at which the cultivation of produce may well become impossible. While many appeared doubtful that desired radical changes are happening fast enough to avert unpromising future scenarios, however, an overarching collective can-do attitude still permeates CSA projects. Avery, another long-term member of GIC who previously held a formal role in the CSA's governance body, puts it straight:

> 'The big question is whether it's enough and if it goes fast enough? I do have my doubts. Big doubts indeed. But I always come to the conclusion, what is the alternative? The alternative is doing nothing!'

Echoing Avery's sentiment, many respondents perceive their CSA engagement as enacting and upholding a sense of hope despite, and perhaps because of, growing concerns about possibilities of maintaining food cultivation under worsening ecological conditions.

In contrast to more optimistic future imaginaries, other CSA actors such as Terry, a co-founder of GIC, do not want to engage in what they refer to as a window-dressing exercise. Instead, their account paints a less optimistic picture of the future:

> 'That's where I always get to the point of self-empowering people as quickly as possible to build fairly resilient provisioning structures, because the collapse is plainly coming. Period. So, that's what I also think we can agree on relatively well. That's the most important thing. That we virtually… secure *our survival* [emphasis added], provided that's possible. […] When climate scientists say, yes it is a question of survival, but if we do this and that, we are on a good path,

> then that's already a lie to me. We are definitely not on a good path anymore, you know. It's about bare survival […]. What does it take on what level to make CSA organisations truly resilient and robust…? With the deal that CSA members… die as late as possible - later than others.'

As this strikingly blunt statement makes clear, CSA members not only evoke hopeful frames when relating to the future but for some, much more grave motifs come to play the crucial role in their future imaginary. Thus, the evoked *race against time* described above appears already lost, and rather turns into a *race for resilience* and bare survival in the face of imminent civilisational collapse. The spectre of collapse is evoked as 'common enemy' and threat by Terry, providing a unifying narrative going to the core of CSA's raison d'être. From another perspective, however, one may be inclined to argue that there is indeed a sense of hope left within such seemingly *hopeless* imaginary, i.e., in the attempt of building resilient provisioning structures that may to an extend soften the inevitable disaster. Nonetheless, others like Frankie, who used to work the land at GIC, do not buy into such prospects:

> 'Well, I am unfortunately someone who surely reads 2-3 scientific texts per week about the climate crisis […]. I'm glad you didn't use the word 'hope' because I don't have any hope. *Hope* is a waste of fucking time!'

In light of growing insights into worsening climate projections, Frankie has since dedicated themselves to what they see as more confrontational forms of climate activism, rather than being involved in projects of building alternatives like GIC. Showing the divide between such perspectives and more hopeful ones, Avery (GIC, Member) elaborates on longer debates and contestations about ideas of *resilience*. Arguing that they view resilience as returning to a point of departure after crisis, they denounce ideas of building resilience in an end-of-times scenario as a cynical fallacy, when asking: 'do they want to deliver co-op members with armed vehicles…?'. As such, future imaginaries of building collective resilience appear constructed on a contested terrain in relation to the sense of urgency that members feel towards the severity of ecological crises and its wider socio-political implications. Nonetheless, rather than solely implying visionary exercises between hope and despair, contestations about the future hint at the fundamental understandings of why CSAs come into existence, and more crucially, how they come to organise themselves, as the

following conversation witnessed between members of both GIC and SSC suggests:

> GIC respondent: '[…] It's simply about stopping – if we want to be very honest - with this embellishment exercise, by pulling all scientific facts together, in what condition this planet is. Then there should not be any sort of discussion from anyone anymore, that the collapse of human civilisation is right in front of us. And the question is, how do we deal with this as a society? […] And I mean, for me it brought some clarity into why I am actually engaged within CSA, and about what this whole thing – at least for me - is. It's not that I'm trying to impose such thoughts on everyone and to plunge all into dystopia. But I have this clarity what this is all about, from my perspective.'
>
> SSC respondent: '… and the most likely scenario is probably a green dictatorship, which is the only thing that might still be able to act and to quickly organise people so to say, at the end. […] No, I'm not sure either. I mean I really wonder… one can hardly imagine that somehow grassroots movements are springing out of the ground overnight and turn society insight out in such a pace […]. I mean at SSC, it's good-things-take-time-like. It simply takes so incredibly long until trust grows, until you win people over as a result of them seeing – *ah, they're working on this for 5 years now, and are still not bankrupt, seems like it actually works. Aha ok. Could be an interesting concept!* – or something along these lines. I mean most people don't let themselves be convinced through arguments, they only believe what they see, or follow a dictatorship. Of course there are nuances between that, but… from zero to a 100? I'm really not sure.'

Despite spectres of collapse and authoritarianism looming over such discussions, this exchange points towards wider transformative intentions of CSAs beyond changing agri-food production in their location, but to work on wider systemic transformation in the form of a grassroots food movement. The conjuncture of socio-ecological conditions and future outlooks elaborated on in this chapter, lays the foundation for the ways in which CSA actors construct transformative imaginaries in relation to their rationales and objectives of socio-ecological change.

6.5 Transformative Imaginaries

Building on future projections and enactments of hope(lessness) in relation to increasingly difficult conditions of agri-food provisioning, this section sheds light on how CSA actors construct *transformative* imaginaries. Transformative imaginaries are often evoked as common horizons of the ways in which CSAs may be able to contribute to wider systemic changes. In a nutshell, CSAs do not aim to offer a complementary form of growing food in different ways, but to prefigure a form of organising that may challenge hegemonic ways of producing and consuming altogether. They do so within three interconnected discursive dimensions that can be broadly segmented into ecological, socio-economic, and political imaginaries. By outlining each of these dimension below, the analysis gives insights into how imaginaries influence organisational rationales and objectives to organise a socio-ecological transformation from below.

6.5.1 Ecological imaginaries

Transformative ecological imaginaries constitutes one of the main pillars upon which CSA ambitions are built on. Here, both organisations emphasise the importance of keeping their economic activity within ecological boundaries.

Accordingly, GIC actors explicitly outline their aims to 'consciously keep economic activity within natural and technological cycles' within their informational material. Similarly, SSC has manifested their ecological ambitions as follows:

> '*Ecological* means for us to practice a productive vegetable cultivation by using as little energy and technology as possible, within which we are trying to protect natural balances as best as possible, and to regenerate it. […] We try as much as possible to maintain an appropriate balance between handcraft and machine labour, to counteract impacts of technological developments, e.g., wasteful consumption of crude oil, to protect the soil, and to achieve the highest possible autonomy.'

While SSC appears to follow a somewhat more minimalistic approach through what some members framed as 'a mix of low-tec and DIY', GIC members articulate a circular approach that follows a more 'incremental minimisation of utilising non-renewable resources'. Despite such nuances, however, both CSAs position themselves

firmly in opposition to expansion-driven forms of agriculture. In this sense, ecological considerations are understood as being at the core of production and distribution processes of both CSAs, e.g., by furthering soil protection practices, using resistant seed varieties, or through a sparing approach to water and energy resources.

Nonetheless, the primary objective of both CSAs is to provision its members with locally-produced, fresh vegetables on a weekly basis. Many members thus first and foremost relate ecological benefits of seasonal, regional, and organic produce to their individual-level motifs for a healthier and more sustainable diet. From such perspective, CSAs convey a win-win solution. In addition to facilitating members' personal endeavours for more future-proof lifestyles, the CSAs are seen as providing a 'holistic approach to environmental protection' (Kit, GIC, Member) and 'safeguard resources necessary to sustain livelihoods' (Kerry, SSC, Member). In this regard, the planned economic model of CSA facilitates a sufficiency-based organisational function, enabling a more purposeful provisioning of food that avoids 'overconsumption or overproduction' and the wastage that comes with it (Brooks, GIC, Worker). Organising CSA food is thus understood as turning the process of growth-oriented valorisation on its head, as one SSC's workers suggests in a text explaining CSA, by hinting at Adam Smith's famous principle:

> 'Needs assessment instead of market research – because the needs of members is the basis for our cropping plan. The counterpart is the production at random, the chaos, the everyday speculation with expectable sales volumes, the blind hope on the well-disposed invisible hand of the market.'

However, the counterpart to such organising and production principles in line with larger ecological ambitions constitutes the limitation of needs amongst members. In this vein, members from both GIC and SSC often regard personal consumption sacrifices as necessary in order to bring themselves and wider society back into harmony with processes of nature. However, to Kit, a long-term member of GIC, such changes constitute a large socio-political challenge for CSA that necessitate:

> '[…] Making it clear to people that [climate change] means that it simply cannot go on like this and for some things there may need to be less of […]'

Nonetheless, such lifestyle changes are not necessarily perceived as renunciation, but others, like Terry (GIC, Co-founder) perceive it more positively as practicing

collective ways of 'slowing down'. Similarly, other people from the wider network reported they were stunned with 'how frugal people lived' at SSC (Fieldnotes) and its adjacent commune. While examples vary widely across both CSAs, many respondents thus preferred to speak about 'developing a different culture around food' (Dylan, SSC, Worker). Ollie (SSC, Co-director), for instance, elaborates on their personal experience of being exposed to a creative process of limiting consumption:

> '[…] I think that's also an exciting aspect within praxis […] what some would relate to individual implications of degrowth debates, I mean somehow self-restraint, or limitation, or renunciation. I for one had the feeling, that I also enjoy that at SSC, because in fact I hardly ever go to purchase vegetables.. they're always coming on Thursdays. […] Something arrives, and I need to cook with that and deal with it. But I'm not buying any groceries, and one can get used to that pretty quickly, it works well […]. Because this *I need to always have everything available, and to run for groceries and to be totally spontaneous* is decreasing. […] That's what I find exciting because it's a practical implication within such semi-planned economic project that brings all these weird obligations with it. But in the best case, it's also not bound to too many constraints and doesn't work expansion-oriented.'

Many more accounts across both CSAs expressed a similar sentiment and emphasised positive impacts of learning to deal with unknown sorts, quantities, and aesthetics of their weekly produce, in opposition to the ubiquitousness of food items in supermarkets. Despite Ollie's reference to *degrowth*, the understanding of the concept appeared to vary widely across CSA proponents across the wider network. Mirroring Ollie's sentiment on an organisational level, for instance, other respondents, like Jessie (SSC, Worker), and Cleo (SSC, Member) argued that to them, the CSA itself signified the 'degrowth' of agri-food production given the non-expansionist orientation to farming. Across all respondents, however, such direct relation to degrowth imaginaries remained the minority.

Yet, in similar ways, respondents like Spencer, a co-director of GIC, often evoke the transformative ecological potential of CSAs in creating more 'transparency [about] the interrelations of agriculture', when recalling what initially got them interested in the concept:

> '[…] This was the point where we said, *look, there are people who really know how it is produced* and who do not need to believe an eco-seal, or don't need to trust colourful brochures and flashing websites, but they can watch the veg grow day and night, if they like. And they can assist, participate, also literally comprehend what happens, how… difficult it is to grow veg, how much work it takes, how much setbacks one has to compensate.'

Echoing this transparency, SSC members explicitly express their aversion to eco-seals by arguing it is them who 'collectively determine and control what happens on the field'. Rather than needing to trust shiny marketing materials and certificates that are seen as often portraying a make-believe image rather than genuine ecological practice, the nearness and direct relation of production and consumption is understood to grant CSA members undistorted insight. As such, the development of knowledge about ecological processes and the struggles of food production are perceived as a vital part of both CSAs ambitions to countering notions of alienation within market-based agri-food production. From a members perspective, Avery (GIC, Member) highlights that weekend gardening groups at GIC are trying to establish a closer relation of members to the locus of food production with the idea that experiencing the hard work entailed will change people's relation to food. Thus, they argue that 'next to the big aims of a different society, different types of economies' such efforts are geared towards 'simply less veg being thrown away'. Equally, from a worker's perspective, Jessie (SSC, Worker) puts the often undermined position of farmers in capitalist markets into contrast with the ecological implications when saying 'whatever you cultivate will be utilised, like it is already sold in a figurative sense'. They argue CSA practices facilitate the awareness of end-users about what harvests went well and those that did not and adapt their diets accordingly. In addition to stressing the potential of direct relation practiced within CSAs to revaluing agri-food production in opposition to wasteful market-based practices, the necessity of raising awareness about ecological processes is further underlined by the experience of major harvest losses discussed above. Indeed, their causes and wider implications would have been inaccessible for distant supermarket consumers, as River (GIC, Member) argues:

> '[…] We had years in which it was either extremely hot or we had way too much water, where we had considerable harvest losses. Last year was really difficult […] and I really hope that the people who support this, that we

> collectively get through such times. That we inform ourselves, that we are in communication with each other why that may be the case […]. I wish […] that we are effectively… as a result of being in communication with each other and always understanding the larger contexts, that we can actually be a stable unit, where everyone can participate and somehow support and also get through such phases collectively.'

Given the increasing unpredictability of agricultural farming, accounts such Rivers' highlight that creating understanding for ecological processes is envisioned to be an essential factor for building the necessary collective trust for sharing the risks of the undertaking across all members. In this vein, CSA proponents stress the potential of the direct relation of CSA members to revaluing agri-food production practices in opposition to wasteful market-based practices. Building and maintaining such understanding and trust takes ongoing communicative efforts within CSAs to maintain organisational stability, as mirrored in SSC's communication to its membership:

> 'Toxic, standardised, overbred foods harm not only us but also exhaust soils and producers. We don't just want to lament this [and] confine ourselves to shifting our consumption to the organic supermarket, but to care collectively about our produce.'

Accordingly, building consciousness about the harmful ecological effects of industrial agriculture is ultimately geared towards cultivating more caring and collective attitudes towards food production and consumption. Fostering such food sovereignty consciousness is thus seen as a vital ingredient for reducing harmful externalising behaviours in both CSAs.

6.5.2 Socio-economic Imaginaries

In order to counter alienating and deteriorating workplace conditions of growth-based agriculture, transformative socio-economic imaginaries constitutes a second layer influencing the ambitions of CSA proponents.

Numerous conversations throughout the fieldwork, and in particular the focus group discussion confirmed the notion that for many, the establishment of good working conditions are the pivotal driver for people's CSA commitment. Reportedly coming from a 'sort of trade union perspective' Charlie, a co-founder and worker at SSC,

argues that 'workers' rights are as important as ecological criteria' to them. Thus, to them, creating 'labour conditions which enable a workplace that at least brings us closer to a normal societal workplace zone' constitutes the 'be-all and end-all'. Similarly, Parker (Operations Manager), a long-term GIC worker underlines that 'establis[hing] good working conditions' is:

> '[…] the foundation. That's the core of GIC for me. And if that would be challenged, then I would be out of here fairly quickly […]. I mean I'm somehow also [a] realist and that we can't just turn this world around and to somehow abolish capitalism… yeah, it's a nice, overarching goal, but a concrete objective is to allow people to have a fairly tolerable life. And if we can offer good working conditions and [workers] feel well and not exploited or badly treated, so they can't be bothered to come to work, then I think that's a good contribution.'

While seeing the interest of workers at the heart of CSA ambitions, both accounts elevate the pursuit of good CSA working conditions above aspirations of ecological change and wider systemic transformation. Contrasted with often exploitative conditions faced within expansion-driven industrial agriculture, their motivation of establishing workplaces that enable a better life for agricultural workers are also mirrored by some members. For instance, Lake (GIC, Member) argues that doing 'business differently' must not neglect the interests of employees, when saying:

> '[…] All economic alternatives, no matter how clever they are thought through and how politically correct they may be, will only function long-term if it is kept in mind who are the people who work there? How do they work together? How well can they get involved? How well can they take ownership of things? How well can they also stay human and find their own limits and also have a different life? So only if this works out, we can speak of an alternative […].'

Overall, such insights point to a widely shared belief across both CSAs, that higher objectives of systemic change can only begin to be pursued with a transformation of work. For many, transforming agricultural workplaces through CSAs thus starts with meeting the material interests of the people employed, as Storm (GIC, co-director) points out:

> ‘I really do believe that the way we do it, and *if* it works – I say this deliberately, we are really in an experimental phase because it’s really a hard way to earn one’s living – if it works, then we would have changed [the] structure within agriculture. Then we could show, it does work differently! In particular with wages, otherwise *there’s simply no point* [strong intonation]! Because it’s not just about organic and not using chemicals, and [using] less CO2 and tractors, and stroking plants or whatever, but it’s really about: If we want to change the structure in sustainable ways, then we *must show* that we can pay the people fairly who work in agriculture.’

Following Storm’s passionate plea, offering people doing the ‘main work’ in the co-ops’ daily operation well-paid and secure jobs, is fundamental for GIC’s transformative ambitions. While SSC shares ambitions to pay agricultural workers better wages, other factors similar to Lake’s statement above appear at least as salient, as Ollie (SSC, Co-director) highlights:

> ‘[...] There may be higher wages in contrast to an employee existence on a [conventional] farm, but whether that constitutes a managerial salary - which the farmers [here] are partly fulfilling because they carry enormous amounts of responsibility - is difficult to say [...]. As such, it’s more about good working conditions that are fun in the best case, and to some extent self-determined and not too badly paid. And maybe one is also receiving a different kind of feedback or appreciation through the community behind it.’

Just as GIC, SSC builds on the solidaristic funding model of CSA in an attempt to ‘compensate the unjust and unequal valuation and remuneration of human labour according to the capitalist valorisation logic’, as outlined in informational material. Nonetheless, as Ollie’s statement highlights, judging the fairness of CSA wages remains a difficult task given relatively large responsibilities pressing on workers’ shoulders at SSC. Similarly, despite a widespread sense of pride about the ‘markedly above-average salary’[34] (Noel, GIC, Board Member) GIC offers workers, doubts appear to exist that what constitutes a ‘fair’ salary within their region, might not necessarily be perceived as such in others (Fieldnotes). In contrast to solely economic

[34] This refers to above-average salary in general terms across the wider region, rather than the much lower national average salary of agricultural workers as Avery (GIC, Member) underlined.

ambitions, self-determined work according to abilities appears to be a stronger motivation at SSC. In other words, establishing better working conditions opens up deeper questions about the nature of work, as Jessie (SSC, Worker) indicates:

> '[…] Again, this alienated work definitely plays a blatant role, in a long-term [sense]: What is work? And how do I want to work? Not just for myself, but I also see that when we have interns. We certainly get feedback like *wow, that's something completely different* […]. Also, in a collective where I can be human as well. I mean, where I'm not only an employee.'

Jessie's articulation resonates with insights gathered from across the CSA network (e.g., during field visits and the focus group discussion), aiming towards alternative ways of working. At SSC, such ambitions most prominently manifest themselves in objectives to reduce hierarchies, thereby countering alienating forces of conventional agriculture. Such imaginaries may be understood as geared towards a revaluation and re-appreciation of agricultural work more generally.

Ideas on revaluing agricultural work and ambitions on working differently manifest themselves in attempts to foster employee well-being, regeneration, and better working relations within both CSAs. Most clearly, such aspects can be observed with regards to aspirations of reducing working hours, which appears to be a widespread phenomenon across the CSA network (Fieldnotes). As Avery (GIC, Member) elucidates, such ambitions are understood to open up possibilities for 'another way of life', when pointing out that 'there is hardly anyone who is working full-time' but that most GIC workers have deliberately chosen part-time work models. Jodie, who we know from their attempt of dropping out of agricultural work entirely before joining SSC, elucidates that a reduction of work time along the lines of a degrowth economy appeared to be without any alternative for them:

> '[…] We have […] 25 h/week positions. You don't find that anywhere. I've worked 60 hours *always* within agriculture. *Always,* because there are actually no other jobs. You always work 60 hours, despite having 40h in your contract. But because there is so much to do, you end up working 60 h, especially on dairy farms, completely normal. […] Yes, and that really annoyed me, and at SSC – 25 h work/week, and to also have time still, as in degrowth economies..

> I was convinced it doesn't work otherwise; how should I do that? […] I need to work differently to also have time to organise myself in different areas.'

Jodie's account mirrors similar perspectives of GIC workers such as Max and members like Rene, who set the 'avoidance of full-time workplaces' explicitly in relation to realising degrowth imaginaries within CSAs. Along similar lines, many respondents emphasised deliberate attempts within both CSAs to counter chronic overwork within the agricultural sector by working part-time in attempts of 'sharing the burden of work in more collective ways' (Avery, GIC, Worker). Instead of solely pursuing economic motifs of gainful employment, such accounts are indicative a broader reconfiguration of work in CSAs, e.g., urging a shift towards the preference of more free time in an otherwise work-intensive labour process.

Ultimately imaginaries of revaluing work are directly related to, and for many, emerged as a consequence of feelings of meaninglessness under previous employment. Thus, a salient pattern across both organisations involved a profound change of perspective, described by some as a 'mindshift'. Such change of perspective was often spurred by a certain *crisis of being* within an employment relation that became somewhat meaningless to individuals before working and participating in CSAs. A good example is provided by Terry (GIC, Co-founder), who described themselves as a 'happy frequent flyer', living a jet set life due to their freelance consultancy work commissioned by large multinationals before being suddenly drawn into climate change documentaries and degrowth books. The information gained through such material provoked a radical lifestyle change and mindshift which eventually motivated Terry to start GIC. Charlie describes a similar process of realisation before dropping out of an academic career and co-founding SSC as a farmworker:

> 'I couldn't see any books anymore […], I just couldn't bear this… nose-heavy, overly intellectual form [of work] anymore, because I thought somehow it's not like the problem in our society is that there isn't any knowledge […] there are thousands of manuals for anything, but there are too few people getting active in practical ways. […]. I developed a certain kind of aversion against researchers, despite being one myself […] so it was an aversion against myself and what I represented and used to be. So, I somehow thought - *right people, all you have to do is to take a spade into your hand!* We have less than 1%

> working in agriculture, and we probably need more than 5% or whatever, I don't know... in any case way more than now, that's the problem!'

Charlie's statement of a state of a crisis of being, and in this case even an antipathy against what one's occupation is representing, was very often followed by a career change to working the land and organising within CSAs. This pattern was not just observed from CSA workers formerly employed all across the occupational spectrum, but also amongst the wider membership, as Ocean (Member) who used to work in the automobile industry parallel to running a small artisanal store with friends, explains:

> '[…] I actually had some sort of small crisis with the whole design and handicraft, because I thought, well this all swallows resources too – they are nice yes, but no one needs them to survive. But everyone needs foodstuffs to survive […] in this sense GIC came at the right time. I mean when you are dealing a lot with such topics in your spare time, then working at an automobile corporation feels more and more insane. So, at some point I thought, it's somehow weird that I develop SUV's here and at the same time I am engaged in ecological and regional agriculture on weekends.'

Such descriptions mirror many responses gathered throughout the fieldwork, within which participants described a 'catalysing' (Ocean, GIC*,* Member) process of deep reflection and inner tension between opposing workplace implications, their personally held values, and their CSA engagement, towards socio-ecological ends. In this sense, work and participation in CSAs is often described as alleviating the lack of meaning experienced, as a member of SSC illuminates poetically in an online text:

> 'Through the direct contact of farmers with food emerges a grateful alliance within which reciprocal gratitude, in consciousness of mutual dependence, becomes tangible again. Work, in order to satisfy the needs of others is a rich reward. The cold feedback of sales figures can never achieve such communication, because it is impoverished and devoid of any human face.'

In opposition to anonymous market relations, an understanding appeared to be prevalent at SSC that the immediate relations and mutual dependence of workers to the produce and the people who consume it, lends ample meaning to CSA labour processes. Indeed, many participants in both organisations described that they found themselves on a quest for meaning on which CSA signified a high gravitational

attraction to pursue imaginaries of transformative change. Accordingly, a salient pattern appeared to exist at GIC which saw many 'enthusiastic career jumpers' (Lake, GIC, Member) becoming CSA employees, often without previous agricultural experience but lots of political vigour. Respondents often highlighted a desire to 'exit the rat race' (Fieldnotes) and described an 'atmosphere of departure' (Ocean, Member) that GIC appeared to embody. Respondents such as Frankie (Worker), for instance, elaborated on the liberating feeling of going against the societal norm and quitting their high-income but ultimately alienating job in the corporate world, to work the land at GIC. Overall, accounts such as those of Brooks (Worker, GIC) who highlighted the desire to 'work[ing] more hands-on', and that working at GIC was 'something more meaningful' in the face of the climate emergency, were ubiquitous across both organisations and emphasise the transformative potential of imaginaries of CSA work.

6.5.3 Political Imaginaries

Entangled with ecological and socio-economic imaginaries, proponents at both CSAs evoke political imaginaries to induce a wider societal transformation.

Somewhat more prominently than in other CSA co-ops across the network, a strong sense appeared to pervade both CSAs that their form of food provisioning is political. Spencer, who co-founded GIC, re-affirms the notion that GIC first and foremost constitutes a 'political project' rather than a 'food project', oriented towards the common good rather than profit, when saying:

> 'We didn't [initiate] GIC to somehow generate the coolest organic veg in town, but we want to act as an example that one can think economic structures differently […]. It could have been a completely different form, and these basic ideas and core beliefs how we can live well together can be projected onto many different fields […]. I don't see it as completed at any point, but I hope that it will grow and flourish further and give many more impulses into […] society. And that is the reason, why we are – next to solely producing veg – also engaging in interconnecting neighbourhoods, in networking with other organisations, and to engage in many other different aspects, such as now in the run up to council elections. Because we have some kind of imagination how we can develop ourselves in a positive sense as society. And at the same time, we are witnessing what impacts climate change has out there in the countryside

> at our fields. […] It is so existentially threatening for us as human civilisation on this planet, that to not participate or to not feel responsible is not an option.'

By trying to spread an 'imagination' of a different society, GIC has acquired a widespread political standing which is acknowledged far beyond the bounds of its local context. As such, GIC actors have used the increasing popularity of their CSA and at the same time successively attracted more members by co-initiating a variety of campaigns around, e.g., 'supporting refugees', 'biodiversity loss', 'critiques of industrial food production', and 'climate protection', together with allied movements (Fieldnotes). SSC has laid out its political ambitions in a similar vein:

> 'We do not want to accept the existing socio-political conditions but give suggestions and impulses with new concepts for change. Within the co-op, this happens through an incremental development of a novel form of self-determined work and collective production, solidaristic distribution, and non-hierarchical decision making […]. On the quest for a differently structured, solidary-based society we strive towards exchange and mutual support with initiatives, groups, and individuals, who share this quest and fight for a different society. […] Through needs-oriented cultivation and self-determined work depending on abilities, we want to take first steps towards food autonomy. We will demonstrate that we can organise ourselves to create a non-industrialised and non-capitalist form of economy. We don't just want to offer consumable services, we are not a veg box, but we understand it as a step into the right direction.'

During fieldwork, many respondents pointed out that SSC has consistently been involved in organising, supporting, and donating food to protest camps, e.g., against highway expansions, coal mining, and right-wing marches across their region (Fieldnotes). Many members, such as Cleo (SSC) underlined their support for such 'political harvest' and perceive their CSA as embedded within social movements struggling against existing societal conditions. Accordingly, both organisations articulate their ambitions to contribute to system change unambiguously, by going beyond solely providing veg to their members.

Ultimately, political imaginaries of contributing to a larger societal transformation find their outlet in ideas of transferring ideas of CSA as an alternative organisational

concept out of its societal niche existence. Accordingly, a widespread understanding appears to exist across both CSAs and the wider network that envisions a continuation of the experienced exponential growth of CSA initiatives and practices across the country in order to eventually reach system-level relevance. Indeed, alluding to the alleged impact of both organisations in contributing to the rapid increase of new CSA initiatives within the past decade, Terry (GIC, Co-founder), argues it should not be seen as a coincidence that 'the CSA movement in Germany started in principle with SSC and GIC'. The following excerpt from SSC at the hight of the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies a similar level of confidence about the potential of CSA:

> 'We are convinced that our form of production will prove itself in this historical moment. Our strategy of relative autonomy [and] localism will prove itself. […] How about CSA instead of enforced labour […]? How about not being dependent on foreign imports […] in every sector of production? Industrial agricultural is not the answer, it is the problem! Possibilities of a totalitarian society are getting closer in a crisis, just as much as a solidaristic society. A transformation is ahead of us, let's make sure that our ideas are getting implemented! […]'

Building on such proactive contestation of industrial agriculture, respondents such as Parker (GIC, Operations Manager) maintain the transformative potential of CSAs lies in the collective ownership of food production combined with the removal of market-based commodity exchange, as the basic principles of capitalist relations. Such claims resonate with SSC actors, who argue in a leaflet that the purpose of CSAs is 'not the accumulation of capital for unlimited growth objectives' but to satisfy the needs of workers and members, e.g., by easing the workload, diversifying crops, and producing in ecologically less harmful ways. While both CSAs make no secret of striving to 'challenge capitalist structures to an extent' (Ollie, SSC, Co-director), many respondents also underline the difficulties of both 'being part of a system that [one] criticise[s]', and to compete with it (Focus Group):

> '[…] This neoliberal system can only stabilise itself through growth. And with ever more growth this story doesn't work. Thus, you need to overcome this economic system and of course you get to problematic areas and say, as long as we have our small GIC as playground we can have a laugh about that and

pat these small [experiments] a little. But if this wants to become a movement suitable for the masses, you need to reckon with fierce resistance, cause it's clear that this story is not that simple. But as always, you need to start somewhere…' (Avery, GIC, Member)

Along similar lines, several members underlined that CSAs envisioned path out of the niche existence inevitably runs counter to system-immanent barriers that favour the expansion of market relations, and thus economic growth. While the non-growth approach of CSAs appears for many as key to challenge exploitative relations of capitalist agriculture, many concur with Avery that envisioned bottom-up strategies of enlarging the CSA movement need to reckon with resistance from incumbent actors. Despite 'neutralising the market' (Lake, GIC, Member) to a degree, respondents in both CSAs thus emphasise the challenges of organising CSA somehow within, but also against, and potentially beyond capitalist market relations.

In this vein, the path out of the niche is also perceived to induce wider cultural change emerging from the internal workings of CSAs by inspiring transformative change in other areas of life, as indicated in the excerpts at the beginning of this section. While SSC tries to do so through non-hierarchical and self-determined forms of work, Spencer (GIC, Co-director) indicates this when stating that the fundamental question motivating GIC is:

> 'What do we need to live well, and what of this can we obtain in self-organised ways?'

Thus, both CSAs aim towards spreading more solidaristic and collective forms of production, consumption, and distribution within and through their co-ops. Embodying and experimenting with forms of self-organisation is thus of fundamental importance to CSAs, as Kerry's (SSC, Member) account exemplifies:

> 'A desirable future? Yeah actually, I wish that local communities can empower themselves to provide for their livelihoods themselves […]. SSC can maybe act as an example on how that works in small-scale, local veg provisioning […]. As in, to give an example and to say *it works*, we don't have to have commodities and consumers, we can organise that […]'

Kerry expresses a widespread sentiment across both CSAs that perceive the self-

empowering effects of CSA food organising as a vital element to 'somehow shape the world that we live in' (Kai, GIC, Worker). In line with imaginaries of food sovereignty, such accounts ultimately underline the prefigurative function both CSAs symbolise in building the capabilities and reclaiming a sense of agency over provisioning processes for ones' livelihoods, which can be traced back to the very origins of both CSAs. Ultimately, such ideas are understood to facilitate a more de-commodified and crisis-proof form of organising that offers a certain degree of independence from volatile and often hostile market conditions. In this vein, several respondents from both CSAs underlined the necessary negotiation processes around self-organisation, by highlighting the contingencies and political choices involved in organising an alternative form of food provisioning.

6.6 Conclusion

Offering a contextual reading of patterns across both CSAs, research discussed in this chapter showed a broadly common understanding of the conditions, future projections, and imaginaries of socio-ecological change. In this vein, experiences of alienation, exploitation, and meaninglessness mark what has been discussed as grow-or-die conditions of industrial agriculture, which contribute to the establishment of CSA initiatives as an alternative form of food provisioning. Nonetheless, worsening ecological conditions, provide a mirror imaging into the impacts of the climate crisis within everyday CSA organising. Such lived experiences were found to be projected into the future by CSA actors, who are navigating a *race against time* when enacting forms of hope within their organising, or hopelessness in trying to build *resilience in collapse*. Rather than constituting a clear binary, however, such enactments rather constitute a dynamic frame through which CSA actors are making sense of their forms of organisation in relation to wider socio-ecological processes. Accordingly, the enactment of hope(lessness) finds an outlet through three interconnected transformative imaginaries along ecological, socio-economic, and political imaginaries. All three imaginaries were found to draw on growth-critical conceptions in regard to a) organising food within ecological boundaries, b) transforming relations of work, and c) organising in opposition to the logics of expansion-driven industrial agriculture. Significantly, the combination of all three dimensions of transformative imaginaries thus points to prefigurative ambitions of contributing to systems change.

As such, collective imaginaries can be interpreted as influencing the formation of organisational rationales and objectives in relation to the ways in which such wider transformation may be facilitated. Overall, such aspects point to the importance of social processes on how transformative imaginaries may be put into practice, i.e., how CSAs may be able to scale transformative impacts in line with ideas of effecting wider systemic changes, to be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 - To Grow or not to Grow? Scaling the Commons

This chapter explores social processes around of how both CSAs aim to bring transformative imaginaries of socio-ecological change into being. However, instead of discussing patterns across both organisations, this chapter will detail these processes in individual sections for GIC (7.1) and SSC (7.2). Findings of this chapter are presented to discuss the interrelation between organisational objectives, diverging strategic orientations, and wider socio-political imaginaries of (de)growth. These findings surface what will be referred to as *politics of growth*, i.e., social processes marked by disputes, struggles, and contingencies over the CSA's strategic direction in relation to questions of organisational growth and alternative scaling routes.

In both cases, the politics of growth emerge out of longstanding debates and ongoing tensions amongst core teams of co-founders erupting into a conflictual process around scaling pathways and the strategic direction of CSAs. Debates around appropriate strategies show that CSA actors are making sense of their preferred approach of organising CSA through different lenses of achieving transformative impacts on internal levels, i.e., the co-ops' norms and practices, and externally, by aiming towards structural societal change. Strategies aiming to further transformative impact internally, are built around interrelated dimensions of *relationality, consciousness,* and *solidarity.* Perspectives that primarily aimed at prefiguring alternative social practices in line with these transformative dimensions within both organisations were found to overwhelmingly emphasise the limits of organisational growth. In contrast, strategies aiming at transformative impact external to the organisation, draw on interrelated dimensions of *pioneering, displacing,* and *mainstreaming*. Accounts that emphasised the possibilities of scaling up co-op activities predominantly underlined the associated transformative impact of such strategy on furthering structural societal change of agri-food provisioning. Thus, in both cases, simultaneously existing strategic orientations to challenging organisational norms and practices appear to clash with perspectives privileging structural societal change, when reasoning about diverse scaling routes to contribute to transformative change. Negotiation processes about strategic directions and organisational scaling are hence riddled with conflict, and thus, issues of power. Ultimately such conflicts led to a split amongst co-founders in both CSAs, ending their collaboration within the organisation in year seven. Notwithstanding such commonalities, however, the organisational outcomes of such social and political

processes depict key differences, as outlined in Figure 7.1. While the confrontation of core members results in a fast-growth oriented approach gaining the upper hand at GIC, a slow-growth approach becomes the dominant organisational force at SSC.

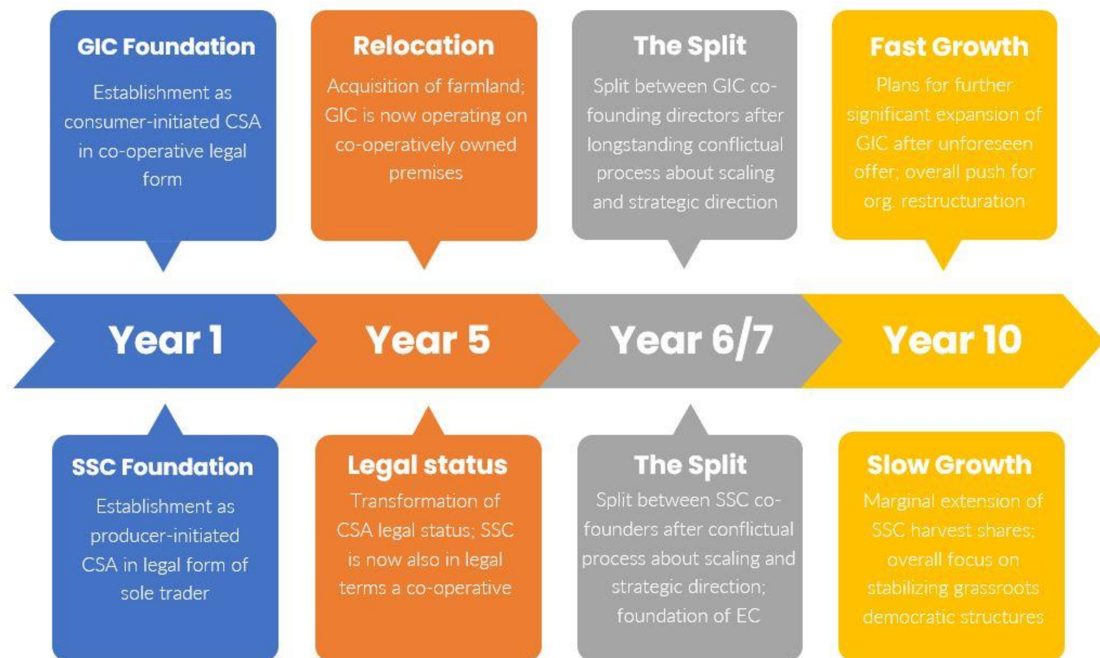

Figure 7.1: Timeline of CSA development in GIC and SSC from year 1 to 10

The struggles over the dominance of strategic ideas thus points to a deeper examination of the ways in which CSA actors' underlying values and ideas of how their CSA ought to be organised, pervades the wider organisation and influences forms of co-operative organising. By augmenting the ways in which CSA members are making sense of, and justify their preferences, for transformative strategies, the analysis shows how their conceptions directly intersect with questions of scaling pathways towards dedicated organisational ends. Accordingly, the analysis of the ensuing struggle over the dominance of transformative ideas outlines how CSA actors are navigating conflicting inner-organisational forces around diverse idealistic interpretations over the privileging of strategies and ways of organising CSA. Rather than focusing on often individualised and tempestuous debates, the analysis aims to foreground the political processes of how antagonistic social forces develop and are negotiated across conflictual social process within each CSA.

After briefly outlining the organisational structure and development of both cases as CSA co-operatives, the reader will be introduced to the social processes around the politics of growth by shedding light on debates around diverse scaling pathways.

Subsequently, the conflictual social processes leading up to the split amongst co-founders are discussed as a key analytical foci. Against this backdrop, the analysis then augments such conflictual social processes by outlining how CSA actors politicise organisational limits and growth in relation to strategic dimension of scaling internal and external transformative impact, as a core contention in both organisations. Finally, the chapter ends with an overall conclusion of the findings across both cases.

7.1 Strategising for Transformation(s) at GIC

7.1.1 Stepping up to the plate: Forming a 'lived commons'

This section serves as an introduction to the organisational context and history of GIC. When making sense of the organisations' development, GIC respondents to various degrees evoke an increasing drive to taking matters of changing the agri-food system into their own hands.

In the effort to collectivise the CSA ownership, GIC's founders consciously chose the legal status of a co-operative[35] from the outset. Accordingly, layers of membership status exist within GIC's structures consisting of employed co-directors, operation managers, workers, the supervisory board operating on a voluntary basis, and the wider membership. Workers designate people with an active employment relationship to GIC, working the fields and greenhouses, doing admin work, or driving delivery vans for GIC. Here, a distinction can be made between operation managers who have been assigned supervisory responsibility for a particular workspace and other workers who do not. Operation managers are also part of the core team, influencing operative decisions within the co-op executed by co-directors[36].

In contrast, the wider membership constitutes itself through the membership and a contractual relation to the co-op which guarantees the pooling of financial contributions in order to cover operative costs in return for weekly harvest shares[37]. Amongst the wider membership, some members are actively volunteering in the labour

[35] Importantly, the vast majority of CSA initiatives within the network decided against legally becoming a co-operative, given the perceived enormous bureaucratic efforts, time, and money, connected to such endeavour (Fieldnotes).
[36] References to informants will thus distinguish different layers of roles according to their scope of responsibility for the operative co-op business: co-director, operations manager, workers, and members.
[37] Co-op members do not necessarily need to take part in the harvest share contributions, e.g., if they have moved away but still would like to have a share and support the co-op without receiving veg.

process of GIC, e.g., by dedicating a day per week to supporting the operative business of the co-op, while others tend to help out more sporadically, e.g., during larger harvests or by organising events. Members are to various degrees organised in pick-up stations to which harvest shares are distributed on a weekly basis. In addition, co-op members have founded an association as additional organisational unit organised around diverse working groups and diverse matters of interest going beyond the daily operations of the farming co-op.

The organisation had initially been formed as a community of co-op consumers around a small team of co-founders. With a lack of farming experience amongst its core team, GIC actors initially co-operated with existing farmers by establishing fixed purchase agreements, hence obtaining a lower self-sufficiency rate than other CSAs who produce all vegetables themselves. Terry, a co-founder and initial co-director describes the initial phases of GIC as follows:

> 'We simply formed a co-op, utterly naïve and dilettante in our convictions […]. Of course, we oriented ourselves on CSA principles in the beginning so to say, but we also adapted to the circumstances, and they did not serve themselves as such… we also did not have any money. We didn't have any experience and thus we had created this internal economic cooperation with those farmers in the beginning in the first years of GIC.'

Despite the lack of 'knowhow and land' (Spencer, Co-director), GIC comrades were eager to expand their initially somewhat restricted CSA remit. In contrast to the current form of collective ownership, in which all co-op members are also co-owners of the acquired farmstead, GIC actors initially obtained veg from an individual farmer and some other suppliers, with the intention of eventually becoming a farm successor. However, such plans of collectivising the premises of a farmer had to be discarded when negotiations about inheriting the farmers' premises broke down, bringing the relation to the primary farmstead to an end. According to internal documents, this led GIC comrades to search for their own arable land and eventually acquiring their own premises. Therefore, GIC evolved over time from what may be described as a CSA model akin to a consumer co-op (i.e., Type 2, see Chapter 5.4.3) into a mutualised CSA co-operative (i.e., Type 3) under common ownership over the means of production.

In addition, GIC members commit themselves to the principles of the 'economy for the common good' (Felber, 2012), which examines the observance of value creation processes according to social and environmental criteria. The acquisition of the farmstead has been perceived as a measure of furthering such aspirations, as Avery (Member), remembers:

> 'We just sourced this from other farmers […]. Of course, everything ecological and regional, but of course we could not control the working conditions at their premises. You cannot go on such farmyard and say *I want to examine your working conditions, are these seasonal workers?* […] You can't do that, at least not very long and that's why it was rather clear that if we really want to pull this through, we need to have the whole process in our hands. We needed to reduce the suppliers massively […]'

Collectivising GIC's farmland in line with common good principles has therefore been understood as a measure to enhance the control over 'the whole value chain' and labour processes of the CSA. Accordingly, many GIC informants described that the collectivising process constituted an important stage in furthering a collective sense of responsibility amongst the membership:

> 'The character has adapted itself to the locations where we were. […] Now, we simply have the structures locally. So, of course things are different if you know that's ours, and [we] can arrange [ourselves] differently here. And especially in contrast to stages where we were before, really just as visitors so to say, it's a different feeling, also a different responsibility of course… still this: *that's OUR farm, and that's OUR enterprise, and that's where WE are developing structures* is just a cool process, but it definitely changed to the stages before.' (Brooks, Worker)

On top of changing relations to the farmstead, members like Ocean and Sasha argued that the co-ownership also evoked a sense of self-efficacy and belonging to GIC amongst the membership, alongside a general spirit of optimism to 'being able to change something'. In order to 'making fundamental change tangible', GIC members have also committed to 'taking matters into their own hands' by assigning high importance to 'live[d] participation', as collectively agreed upon in the co-ops guiding

principles. Nonetheless, in contrast evoking emotional bonds around community participation, Spencer (Co-director) maintains:

> 'Sense of community – that is one aspect as it were, whether that is the decisive one, I for one, am not sure. I find it much more important that we as a co-op […] are not just acting as such, but we are per legal definition a collectivised enterprise. So, the organisation does not belong to one single person, or someone is enriching themselves with it, and what we are generating as surplus is not going into the accounts of an individual or investors or someone else, but we are per legal framework a *lived commons* I'd say. And that's what is distinguishing us from my perspective plainly from a delivery service, a subscription box, or any other producer, retailer, consumer relation construct.'

By alluding to a *lived commons* as distinguishing characteristic, Spencer defends a more legal-rational understanding of a collectivised enterprise over more affective modes of strengthening members' sense of community and responsibility. Overall, such differences indicate diverging orientations over the pathways of transformative change within GIC.

7.1.2 Politics of Growth at GIC

The ways in which GIC actors negotiate and make sense of various strategic orientations to socio-ecological change intersects with questions around organisational growth and alternative scaling routes. At GIC, such strategising processes can be observed as highly contentious and riddled with conflict. The purpose of this section is to interrogate conflictual processes ensuing from debates around diverse scaling pathways by shedding light on the *politics of growth* and concurrent struggles around strategic directions of the CSA. In the following, negotiations around diverse scaling pathways are discussed, before outlining conflictual social processes leading to the split amongst co-founders.

7.1.2.1 Scaling Pathways at GIC

Diverging orientations to organisational scaling provide the basis for social negotiation processes amongst GIC actors on *how* transformative imaginaries may be achieved, when weighing up different and often conflicting interests about the organisations' development.

In this vein, strategic considerations at GIC appear closely connected to worsening ecological conditions of agri-food provisioning. Timber (Worker), for instance, evokes the previously discussed *race against time* when saying ‘the question is, what way [leads us there] and how fast we do it?’, thus lending a temporal factor through a sense of urgency to strategising processes. This chimes with Terry’s (Co-founder) perspective, who we know from their plea of viewing CSA organising as a survival program for the looming catastrophic effects of climate breakdown:

> ‘The question is why are we actually doing this? As in, what is actually the aim? What is the reason that we practice CSA? And in the face of this question, I do always get to the topic of size management, or how large can and should a CSA optimally be? How do you measure something like that? This question really is on my mind since the very beginning because I do actually come from this degrowth way of thinking […], optimum size and so on. This question really moves me since the very first second. […] I measure this question against how much time we have left to really get a sufficient amount of people into a regional and resilient basic provisioning structure. […]’

Positioning themselves explicitly from a sufficiency-oriented degrowth perspective, Terry’s assigned significance to questions around what an *optimum size* of the CSA might be appeared to resonate with the wider membership. While not necessarily agreeing to Terry’s grim future outlook, many GIC informants confirmed the notion that questions around the organisations’ approach to scaling are fundamental for strategic deliberations on how meaningful transformative change may be achieved. Debates around the organisations’ growth and size thus have accompanied the developmental process of GIC since its inception and often formed the background to political controversies within the co-op, as Sasha (Member) remembers:

> ‘There is the question, how large is this supposed to grow? Yeah, we have discussed this in so many rounds. Do we want to grow, grow, grow? On the one hand, that we say, we are a successful like an enterprise… simply grow, grow, grow… always up. Or do we say no, something is changing now, so let’s stop here and we are simply stagnant. Yeah, there have always been discussions, *heated discussions*.’

In contrast to the purported understanding of growth as form of organisational achievement, Sasha alludes to other perspectives appearing to take a more critical stance by aiming to negotiate organisational limits. Initially, debates revolving around what an optimum size might constitute for the co-op were heavily influenced by the available acreage at GIC's various locations. After the initially declared strategy of 'growing into' a farm succession due to the existing relation with a farmer came to an end in year three, co-op actors had to relocate and co-operate with partner farms before ultimately acquiring their own premises. For some GIC actors, the collective acquisition and subsequent relocation seemingly altered the outlook on growth. Yet, the following announcement from the core team indicates a clear stance on GIC's intention shortly after the relocation in year five:

> 'For [next year] our aim lies at [so and so many] co-operative households on average[38]. Thereby, GIC is not growing for growth's sake, but to reach its optimum size […]. In this way, the costs per member for the acquisition and the infrastructural setup of the farm are at a reasonable scope. At the same time, a healthy, future-proof equilibrium should be achieved in harmony of humans, nature, and common-good oriented economic activity. An equilibrium in which negative external effects are avoided and the full costs of GIC's basic provisioning are internalised.'

The communicated optimum size of harvest shares indicates an approximate number of shares the CSA believed to be organisationally sustainable at the time. Thus, rather than growing for 'growths sake', GIC aimed at internalising all social and ecological costs arising from its undertaking by following a clear plan of limiting its activities. However, GIC respondents often emphasized that such ambitions should not necessarily detract from political imaginaries to expand the CSA movement.

> 'There has always been more the idea to initially have a second, and then maybe a third co-op at a different location, also out of logistical reasons […]. Those would all be separate co-operatives, also with a large autonomy, but all committed to the same general principles.' (Avery, Member)

According to Avery, ideas of replicating GIC's CSA model in horizontal ways across the region found widespread membership support in conjuncture with ideas of

[38] Concrete numbers of households are hidden for anonymising purposes.

determining an optimum size. Such replication would reduce logistical efforts by e.g., sharing resources and reducing the distance of the co-ops' premises to their membership. While such satellite co-ops are thought to operate independently from GIC in their given spatial remit, all co-ops are imagined to be linked to the co-ops' association and thus committed to the guiding principles of GIC. Apart from offering a platform for networking, education, and community building, the association had been specifically set up with the intention to diffuse CSA ideas within and across the region. However, other members were less enthused by the idea of replicating GIC. River (Member) and Skye (Operations Manager), for instance, raised concerns that simply transferring GIC's principles onto a newly founded satellite co-op and ensuring that such principles are put into practice in the long run appears like a risky endeavour. By articulating scepticism about differing social dynamics and potential tensions a replication strategy would entail, River (Member) instead advocated for new initiatives to function 'completely autonomous […] kind of more like a network', through a strategy of multiplication. However, not least due to the extensive pressure on land prices, other members remained doubtful about the viability of such ideas of horizontal proliferation due to the material need of finding the people and land necessary to put such plans into practice.

In addition to ideas of horizontal proliferation through replication and multiplication, the idea of determining a sufficient organisational size also inspired other experimental approaches within GIC. Different working groups initiated a variety of projects to complement members' basic food provisioning through the co-op, beyond the usual production, purchase, and distribution of veg. Projects included the addition of, e.g., bread, grains, beverages, fruits, or the further processing of produce, sometimes sourced from regional partners, but more often realised through member's participation. Such extension and deepening of GIC's provisioning structures through complementing its product range constitutes another scaling pathway. Members like Sasha, for instance, perceived the extension of the available food spectrum as another worthwhile scaling strategy while maintaining an optimum organisational size:

> 'So, I think we should set a limit to the size of households and [rather] optimise ourselves, or think about what we can make better, before we grow at all costs. […] And then to spread the story [through] small, nice, solidary satellites […]'

To Sasha, such solidary satellites could, for instance, focus on brewing beer or developing a bakery out of the existing projects driven by membership commitment. Such inner-organisational scaling focuses on enhancing the degree of self-sufficiency and food autonomy from market-based provisioning structures. Nevertheless, despite the presence of various scaling pathways, the following statement by a previous co-director appears to indicate that identified organisational boundaries for the co-op may in fact not be as fixed as they appeared:

> 'There is an optimum size and that would it be it. As in, […] we don't estimate, but we have the figures. We know what we need for our operative business, what form of investment we have planned for the coming years, and how many people, how much capital we need to cover that. And there, [where we currently stand] is optimal […]. And if you [ask], can it still grow? Certainly, it can, I mean we are super busy. We recognise that the idea works well. I find it nice to create good workplaces and to develop a team somehow, that likes to work here. And of course, there is a desire to broaden it. If we get the land, if we somehow find enough interested comrades [around here], and if we have people that want to work here… so that needs to play well together. And the question is, if you only have one building block, do you still push in this direction? And that's something we have to get straight at the moment. Again, what is the initial impetus? But of course, we simply are super bustling […]'

Irrespective of the commitment to the previously communicated optimum size of GIC, the respondent circumscribes such target as an operative benchmark for the organisation at the point of time. In this sense, it appears rather as a temporarily-fixed, moving target in this articulation. Thus, political imaginaries to broaden the reach of GIC are clearly visible in this account, yet with the caveat of attracting enough members and workers, next to the struggle of acquiring land as the ultimate precondition to do so. Moreover, the account implies that internal discussions revolved around whether transgressing such limits is meaningful even if some of the preconditions were absent. Overall, such contemplations point to larger contentious debates on transformative organisational strategies in conjuncture with appropriate scaling routes.

7.1.2.2 The split: Thinking Big vs. Optimum Size

Ideas around determining an optimum size for the co-op indicate that 'the growth question' has continuously led to passionate debates across GIC's development, eventually erupting in a split between co-founders in year 6 and 7.

Several informants highlighted that the key conflict emanated from the core group including the co-ops' co-founders, described as a struggle for 'power, […] ideas, and ownership' (River, Member). Often, different 'character traits' (Ocean, Member) amongst co-founders were highlighted as a crucial aspect for diverging strategic priorities. Avery (Member), for instance, remarked that 'latent tensions' had always existed amongst co-founding directors at GIC, necessitating different forms of mediation from the supervisory board. Reflecting on the process of building up the CSA, Terry (Co-founder) elaborates on such moments of rupture ultimately escalating into a dramatic organisational change process in year six after GIC's inception:

> 'It's already been difficult all these years. I mean if we look into these interpersonal processes [we] had these conflicts again and again, but we managed to fight [them] out on our level. Although we did not manage to bring them to a constructive solution […] it often felt like a forced marriage, but […] that's just the way it is, I mean people are different and they have to get along with each other. But then the time was ripe, indeed because we could not keep these conflicts in check any longer. From my perspective simply because of years of blatant mental overload, always worn out close to burnout, and perhaps also often in the thick of it. […] It came to this extraordinary situation that the board decided we [the co-directors] needed to end our co-operation […].'

Confronted with the decision of the supervisory board and exhausted from years of ongoing turf battles, Terry subsequently described the emotional separation process as the 'most painful time' of their life. Such turf battles amongst co-founders were often characterised by competing ideas and visions about the organisational direction of GIC, ultimately also impacting the daily operations at the co-op through unforgiving interpersonal quarrels. Noel, who had just started on the board when the conflict erupted, described the severity of the situation as a landmark decision of choosing the right candidates for the position, as this would determine the organisations' direction from then on. As such, GIC's co-founders were often described as the driving force

and ‘identification figures’ (Ash, Worker) who ‘simply ma[d]e reality’ in dealing with the co-ops’ daily business as co-directors (Noel, Board member). After a long process of consultation with GIC’s board members, quarrels came to a head when a managing co-director decided to leave their position, leaving remaining members of the core team in a process of limbo and distress about the organisations’ future in year seven.

Additionally, the conflictual lines were also perceived to having pervaded the wider organisation, surfacing the formation of ‘opposing camps’ (Robin, Member) and ruptures amongst work teams as well as to the remaining co-directors, that had hidden beneath the surface until then (Ocean, Member). In the process of a broadening conflict, some workers felt let down due to a sense of overload, lacking stability and guidance in the labour process, while opposing camps generally appeared to have sided with different co-founders (Frankie, Worker). Despite only a partial collective processing of the turbulent period, a renewed restructuring process and reconfiguration around new co-directors as well as returning co-founders like Spencer ultimately resolved what many informants referred to as the ‘largest crisis’ (Kit, Member) GIC had yet to endure.

However, reducing such emotionally charged processes to a mere difference between competing personalities and character traits of individuals in co-op leadership positions appears short sighted when taking broader social forces of the conflict into account. As such, conflictual processes can be characterised as a struggle for the dominance of transformative ideas and ultimately the power to significantly shape the overall direction of the organisation. Thus, various strategic orientations around scaling pathways can be perceived to have clashed as the organisation evolved, as Noel (Board Member) explains when recapping longstanding debates:

> ‘Extending this offer also means some kind of growth, as in growth of the organisation. That means somehow the whole construct becomes bigger so to say. Or does one want to have the same [construct] in a smaller form next to it? […] Because the initial concept was that we wanted to offer a platform on which smaller organisations develop again and again, with all having the same superstructure, and all based on the same principles. But each [would] be somewhat self-contained, integrative, and overseeable. Everyone knows each other a bit if you want to become involved also as a member. So, that was the

> idea when we started. But it has become clear that there never were any other [potential] founders that [were keen] on creating another organisation like this. That means, […] we always got bigger, it simply remained as one co-operative. And now we strive for nearly a doubling in the coming years in regard to membership figures… and it becomes bigger and bigger so to say.'

Despite aspirations to maintaining an optimum organisational size in favour of alternative scaling pathways, GIC successively surpassed self-imposed limits to growth. Alongside resignations that left a strain on GIC's workforce composition, the split led to a reorientation process with a resulting 'shift in orientation […] sense and purpose' (Ash, Worker) to a dominant strategic orientation centring primarily on widening GIC's societal influence. In other words, concerns for organisational boundaries were eventually discarded in order to scale up the CSAs' activities with the intention to giving more people the chance to become part of GIC. Thus, as Noel indicated, at the time of research, GIC co-operators found themselves in the process of significantly expanding the CSAs' operations and membership.

Through what some described as a 'stroke of luck' (Lake, Member) GIC had been offered a significant amount of additional land in close proximity to its fields. Given a long and unsuccessful searching process for land to replicate GIC's model or to multiply CSAs in the area, the possibility of extending farmland has been described by some as a 'big jackpot' for the co-op (Skye, Operations Manager), nearing the tenth year of its existence. Similarly, a focus group participant who joined GICs' leadership team after the split, emphasised the possibilities this undertaking offers:

> 'For us, it's an incredible success that we can convert agricultural land that had been cultivated in conventional ways for over 30 years. I mean we won't grow in permaculture ways there. We will do a cultivation that we still achieve certain yields, that's clear. And I think it's cool if we get more and more agrarable land within and around [our area] which we then convert to not be in private ownership anymore. Because that's the system, and one can and must criticise it, and it must change. So, I think if you acquire and cultivate it as a community, that's really cool… if you get it out of this existing machinery, out of this system […].'

In addition to highlighting the benefits of converting conventionally-farmed land into CSA cultivation, the informant also argued that the scaling up of GIC feeds back into the popularity of the co-op as an alternative enterprise, i.e., helping to attract much needed personnel. Overall, the split indicates that conflictual lines traverse along strategic currents for internal and external impact, intersecting with ideas of transformative change on the level of organisational norms and practices, as well as wider structural societal change. The preference for wider structural impacts appears to confirm that a fast-growth approach has gotten the upper hand in the struggle for the dominance of strategic priorities at GIC. In order to create a deeper understanding of the politics ingrained within social processes of scaling socio-ecological change, the following analysis shines a light on the diverging rationales about strategic directions pervading social forces at GIC.

7.1.3 Strategic Directions at GIC

Conflictual social processes around organisational scaling routes indicate the simultaneous presence of different rationales on how GIC actors aim to bring about meaningful socio-ecological change within and through their CSA. In other words, GIC actors apply different frames of reasoning when trying to translate transformative imaginaries into organisational scaling strategies.

Strategic orientations proceed along ambitions for internal and external transformative impact, providing the underlying basis for political contestations around how GIC ought to be organised to effect transformative change within and through the organisation. The analysis shows that diverging strategic orientations have materialised into opposing social forces within the CSA, ultimately erupting into the split across various actors. This section will proceed as follows. First, the analysis will outline how GIC actors that appeared more concerned about GIC's fast growth approach politicise various limits of organisational expansion in line with a focus on transformative impacts on internal organisational levels. Strategies to scale internal organisational impacts proceed along dimensions of relationality, consciousness, and solidarity. Second, the analysis discusses contrasting understandings underlining the possibilities growth entails for transformative ambitions of GIC actors to impacting large-scale structural changes on a societal level. Strategies to scale external organisational impacts proceed along dimensions of pioneering, displacing and

mainstreaming. Navigating such apparent conflictual lines in strategising processes has continuously represented a prime locus of contention within GIC.

7.1.3.1 Politicising Organisational Limits & Scaling Internal Impact

Against the backdrop of the conflictual scaling process, a significant section of GIC informants appeared to continue to contest the fast growth-oriented development of the CSA. Overall, such accounts point to the risks of endangering GIC's transformative ambitions and operative functioning, while favouring the scaling of internal transformative impacts.

First, the continued contestation of dominant scaling approaches has resurfaced attempts of creating a shared understanding about the meaning, purpose, and self-conception of GIC. Such efforts are mirrored in multiple efforts to constructing mission statements and guiding principles for the CSA, after an initial document had been drafted under great haste by a small circle of the core team during the set-up phase. Often referred to as 'guardrail' (Spencer, Co-director) and 'cultural basis' (Noel, Board Member), GIC actors thus aimed at providing a common understanding for its operations anchored in overarching aims and forms of conduct in the aftermath of the split. The renewed collective process of determining guiding principles across GIC's co-op and association thus signified an attempt of striking some form of balance and building bridges between what Noel (Board Member) and several others described as an apparent 'idealism and realism' across the organisation. Here, divergent poles continued to resurface the divide between what they observed as more community-oriented ideals in contrast to imaginations favouring the recruitment of 'as many [comrades], as fast as possible' (Noel, Board Member).

Accordingly, workers in co-op leadership positions increasingly found themselves in the 'defence' (Fieldnotes) and under 'pressure to justify' (Storm, co-director) the most recent growth plans within the co-op and across parts of the network. Members like Kit and Rene, for instance, reacted with surprise and confusion about the apparent lack of justification for such decision, given longstanding debates that had seemingly resulted in a compromise in reaching an optimum size with the outlook for horizontal proliferation. As a long-term member, Sasha (Member) takes an even more explicit position when saying they are 'reluctant towards growing further' and 'even prefer to shrink' when articulating a preference for 'build[ing] up the farm' instead. Seemingly

disheartened about the loss of ideas to creating community areas at the farm for collective celebrations and workshops at weekends, Sasha's account appears emblematic for a wider sentiment across a section of GIC members seeing a wide gap between transformative claims and organisational reality. From such perspective, a preference for qualitative improvements of GIC's farm in line with keeping a manageable size of GIC comrades instead of quantitative expansion becomes visible.

In particular, such ideas appeared widespread across members of the GIC association, who appeared concerned about GIC's overall direction. Members like Sasha thus fear the increasing logistical complexity on GIC's current growth trajectory might eventually lead to the organisations' 'collapse', or at the least endanger its commitments to sustainability on socio-economic and ecological levels. Seemingly self-critical, Terry (Co-founder) laments what they experienced as 'extremely pragmatic' operative approach at GIC, which from their perspective involved 'very little strategic' thinking and collective reflection until opposing imaginaries came to a head and nearly effected the organisations' failure.

Others felt more torn. While Timber (Worker) concurs with the decision to take on further land given its proximity to GIC's existing acreage, they maintain that creating spin-offs of GIC would appear more meaningful to them. From a more operational side, they add:

> 'But this growth… I find it difficult […]. One simply needs to know its boundaries and limits. Just as we need to know the planetary boundaries, we need to know our operational limits as well, or at least respect them. And one can always optimise and make things more efficient. But that's not necessarily what a degrowth economic strategy is about. The way I perceive it, it would actually mean ok, if I make something more efficient […] then instead of working 8 hours, I can only work 6 hours a day. Do the same thing in 6 hours and have 2 hours more free time. But no, we would do 2 hours more in order to do more [because] we still need to grow, we have to do more!'

Through the analogy of planetary boundaries, Timber describes their concerns about the pitfalls of a rebound effect, which does not translate into less but in fact more work with higher targets in the ongoing expansion process. By saying 'less is often more', Timber (Worker) translates degrowth thinking onto GIC, by emphasising the need to

respect the limits of ecologically-oriented agricultural labour and questioning the ultimate purpose of further organisational growth and enhanced efficiency. Indeed, even growth-advocating workers like Parker (Operations Manager) acknowledged that GIC 'can't grow indefinitely' given limiting factors of the current team constellation and the 'blatant skill shortage' in the agri-food sector. Thus, they remark GIC should be wary to not 'become like a factory' due to the emphasis given to imaginaries of creating good working conditions at the farm. Members like Lake articulated similar concerns for the capacity of the organisation and labour to cope with the renewed expansion:

> 'Well, the origin was to say [so and so many] boxes is the end […] simply out of the consideration that we can oversee how much personnel we need, how many greenhouse areas, how many outdoor areas. We have that under control, and then that's good so to say… if we want the whole thing to be manageable in terms of the employees as well as the number of comrades, so that it somehow stays a lively community. And if that should work with as flat hierarchies and as much cooperation as possible from a work perspective, instead of a classical, fully structured business with hierarchies. Then we simply need to stop at some point.'

In line with such politicisation, supporters of organisational limits generally draw on three interconnected key strategies to scaling transformative impact on internal organisational levels: Relationality, Consciousness, and Solidarity.

Relationality: 'We need a redefinition of consumption and prosperity'

Being part of a CSA is built on premises aiming to go beyond relational exchange akin to transactional market logics.

Thus, prefiguring alternative social relations constitutes a widespread aspiration amongst GIC actors in order to counter estranged, volatile, and exploitative conditions of industrial agriculture. Often, such imaginaries draw on ideas to break up relations and identities between producers and consumers through CSA organising, as stated under one of GIC's goals:

> 'It's not a matter of consuming better in the same old system but to question the very foundation of consumerism. We want to constitute an alternative to

> the currently existing economic construct. In light of the price war within the food industry, whose pressure leads to decreasing quality, wage dumping, and the externalisation of responsibility and costs, we need a redefinition of consumption and prosperity.'

Accordingly, GIC members publicly position themselves against solely being part of a project that enables greener or more ethical consumption but as an initiative that aims to challenge the very understanding of what 'consumption and prosperity' mean. In Spencer's (Co-director) words, GIC does not have 'customers', 'products', and is not 'sell[ing] anything'. Cultivating different relations also resonates with the wider CSA movement striving for food sovereignty. The following insight from a focus group participant and CSA worker from the wider movement, who had initially been inspired by GIC, can be seen as emblematic for such conviction:

> 'For real change […] it's not sufficient to anchor the transformative on the side of producers, e.g., in the form of fair wages. Rather, we need to work on the side of consumers […]. We need to become *prosumers* at last! We need to take responsibility, develop insight and knowledge for a future-proof and equitable agriculture and food production. A product – even if a CSA harvest share – that does not provoke a change of lifestyle, or values is no contribution towards a transformation. From my perspective, a transformation of society to new values needs relations: new relations within the work team, to meaningful work, new relations between producers and consumers […]. And relations are formed through joint activity, organising, spending time with each other. Transformation also means shifting away from current systemic values of *faster, higher, further*. […]'

In line with such ideas, CSA actors envision a relational transformation, away from growth-based dynamics of continuous acceleration, intensification, and expansion, by enabling CSA participants to collectively experiment and embody different values towards food provisioning. Changing relations between what is conventionally seen as producers and consumers, amongst workers, but also to work itself is thus perceived as the basis for prefiguring a different form of agriculture. This resonates with the overarching ambitions of GIC actors, who argue that 'moving from consumers to co-producers' necessitates an 'entirely different approach that goes beyond the sole act of

purchase', as communicated in the CSAs' guiding principles. Reaffirming the notion of relational change, members such as Ocean thus react with scepticism about the expansionary approach of GIC:

> 'So, what is important for me in this whole theme really is to have direct relations, to understand more, somehow being in contact with other people, perhaps also being at the farmstead myself and participate occasionally. That's what I find really exciting, and of course if it [becomes] that gigantic… then this becomes less and less possible… or the share of people who don't have a relation to the place, becomes ever larger.'

In contrast to the perceived dissolution of boundaries along globalised food supply chains, many other GIC's members resonate with Ocean's perspective for re-localising relations in economic, social, and ecological terms. They argue that beyond a certain organisational size, cultivating such relations becomes more and more difficult. Informants advocating for the need to cultivate alternative social relations also hint at the importance of fostering an environment that increases people's insight and understanding for the intensifying socio-ecological struggles of agricultural food provisioning.

Consciousness: 'A Trojan Horse'

In order to cultivate an environment that enhances people's understanding for agricultural processes, members of GIC underline the notion of consciousness raising as a central element to internal transformative strategies.

As opposed to anonymised market relations, prefiguring more direct relations is also often understood as a prerequisite for enabling and fostering transformative learning processes amongst the membership. By drawing on their experience in organising GIC's charitable association, Riley (Member) imagines such learning processes to come to effect through 'community experience[s]' in which 'the education […] happens in the process' of participating on the field. While only a minor share of GIC members are officially part of the association, many members consider their efforts in cultivating and deepening a sense of community around the farmstead an elementary part of GIC's mission in creating an 'experimental field' (Riley, Member). Ultimately, such efforts are geared towards achieving a greater understanding for the socio-ecological conditions and consequences of agri-food production. Avery (Member)

reinforces this understanding when arguing a ‘change in consciousness through getting active’ in the co-op changes people’s habits over time. Similarly, for Kit, ‘consciousness raising […] is an ambition that lies beneath all’ from their perspective. Community relations and participation are thus seen to provide the conditions for transformative learning processes at GIC.

Nevertheless, others challenge this notion when arguing for the necessity to move beyond the idea of close-knit communities in order to reach wider parts of society when aiming to raise peoples’ consciousness. As such, River (Member) argues, moving CSA organising out of its niche existence also requires moving beyond preaching to the choir of the already-convinced, when describing attempts to ‘making things better in bubbles’ as a fallacy. Thus, they advocate for an approach that is able to ‘reach more people who are not part of it’ and making GIC accessible through:

> ‘A different kind of project which can get people on board in this transformation towards a different economy, different relations, an idea on how do we want to live? How do we want to feed ourselves? […] So, I think that is what I find interesting at GIC , that it can reach a lot of people with its approach. […] Solely through this [they] need to begin to deal with it. Where does my veg come from? Who actually cultivates it? Why does this actually come now? […] And of course, GIC has the option to position itself politically through various media channels, the GIC magazine, etc. That has always been a very important aspect of GIC, to enlighten people, but in a dosed way, understandable for everyone, all those who are initially taken on board. And everyone who wants to deepen their [knowledge] can immerse themselves on-site, or in other project opportunities that exist.’

Reinforcing such ideas, Spencer (Co-director) uses the connotation of a ‘trojan horse’ to describe a more incremental approach to consciousness raising across the membership and wider society through ‘teasing [people] with thoughts, ideas, impulses, questions, background information’. From such perspective, priority is given to granting people a low-threshold entry into the co-op, understood to precede deeper cultural changes so that ‘over time a change in attitudes and indeed behavioural changes set in amongst them’ (Spencer, co-director). Moreover, for Terry (Co-founding member) such trojan horse strategy should also be understood to further

processes of 'unlearning' values that uphold unsustainable systemic logics. In this sense, an ambition for transforming norms is understood to be brought into motion after getting people on board by inviting them to learn more about the necessary processes of agri-food production.

Solidarity: 'The community carries the overall risk'

Aspirations to prefigure alternative social relations and to raise members' consciousness about agri-food provisioning ultimately converge in ideas to foster solidarity amongst GIC proponents.

Accordingly, many members underlined that a notion of cultivating consciousness towards more solidary organisational practices and modes of co-existence has been fundamental for their involvement in GIC, as Sasha (Member) argues:

> 'The way of thinking, yeah… the thought to say that something like this even exists… a solidary [way of thinking]. […] CSA means to tinker with something collectively. And what I find great is that because there are many families present, that also a lot of children at any age learn this way of thinking. […] That is transformative I think, for everyone. […] That is actually the primary guiding principle to also let this solidaristic way of thinking bleed into other areas, to other industries. […] That is my aim of GIC and why I am part of it.'

While practicing solidaristic ways of thinking and being constitutes a foundational principle to GIC's internal organisation to Sasha, they explicitly point towards transformative effects when transgressing GIC's boundaries. Kit (Member) shares such sentiment when underlining that expanding solidarity for them is not necessarily about 'becom[ing] bigger' as an organisation but by 'being in solidarity outwardly with partners and similar enterprises'. By cultivating solidary relations amongst the wider membership, and with GIC's allies, practices of solidarity are thus imagined to spread from GIC across wider society, thereby affecting wider societal transformative impact.

Ultimately, developing community relations and solidarity consciousness are geared towards the essential organisational practice of solidarity. Antithetical to societal norms of competitive individualism, ideas of creating a culture of solidarity are perceived as a binding material aimed at replacing, or at least cushioning growing economic risks of agri-food production. In light of increasing ecological risks of

farming, GIC members like Lake hence argue that market risks are essentially 'turn[ed] off' through the solidary mode of organising CSA. Practicing solidarity is thus understood as the bedrock granting stability to GIC, as Noel (Board Member) explains when highlighting the risk of a major membership exit through economic hardships experienced through the COVID-19 pandemic:

> 'But we have not observed that at all yet. So, that proved that we are very stable […], I mean that was also to some extent an involuntary test to see how stable we are [...]. Similarly, when we had considerable amounts of harvest losses simply through droughts, or last year when it was very wet and whole cultures completely failed, we have seen that it still works. […] So, we do see that we are relatively crisis-proof in relation to the farm, something that could be more difficult for the individual farmer if there are 1-2 bad years, that's not nearly as stable as it is in our case, where the community carries the overall risk.'

Despite more frequent 'involuntary' tests, GIC maintained its operation largely without major losses in memberships due to the resilience granted by ongoing membership solidarity in collectively sharing the risks of the undertaking. Not least, such perceived stability is also reinforced through solidaristic agreements with partner farms which to some extent 'hedg[e] against the risks' of major harvest losses as Marion (Member) argues. Strengthening community solidarity thus signifies an elementary component in sustaining the viability of the organisation in light of increasing socio-ecological and economic threats.

7.1.3.2 Politicising Organisational Growth & Scaling External Impact

In contrast to outlooks wary of the CSA's expansive plans, another section of GIC actors draws on more optimistic frames of reference when making sense of dominant strategies aiming towards externally-oriented impact.

Confronted with concerns and criticisms from members politicising the limits of organisational growth, a key feature of perspectives more receptive towards the possibilities of growth appears to be an articulation of 'act[ing] pragmatically instead of just talking', as outlined in GIC's guiding principles. While GIC actors aim to 'continuously grapple with social criticism' of their practices, they admit:

> '[…] But hey, we are realists and no wizards: if, for instance, the transport of produce is only possible with CO2 emitting vehicles out of comprehensible reasons, this is to be accepted until a better solution has been found.'

Rather than 'trying to be perfect', Spencer (Co-director), thus emphasises that GIC actors are focused on 'more doing than talking' and to continuously improve the co-op instead of being 'paralysed by ideological discussions'. Such focus on 'tangible doing' represents a source of inspiration for many members, as Robin remarks. Similarly, despite highlighting what they perceive as clashes with higher ambitions agreed on in the guiding principles, Rene grants that making 'all processes as simple and practicable as possible in order to function in the long run' constitutes a 'big strength' of GIC. Reiterating ambitions for fair pay, good working conditions, and accessibility for people on lower incomes, Storm (Co-director) thus maintains:

> 'We are simply doing it! […] We simply can endure it much better [than others] to move within the existing system and to also utilise the resources within it, as long as there is nothing better. […] Because we are in a system that we criticise, and we probably have all these problems [that come with] being in this system. But we need to move within this system, otherwise you don't achieve anything.'

Other workers like Max confirm such understanding when describing GIC's form of organising as a 'living process', perceiving the co-ops' hands-on approach simultaneously as part of, as well as in competition with capitalist society. By helping GIC to survive and thrive in a capitalist system, such perspectives emphasise the possibilities of scaling up the CSA, as Skye (Operations Manager) maintains when highlighting GIC as a 'very ambitious project':

> 'I believe within the CSA [movement] a sort of imagination exist on what size a farm could have and how many people one can provision with it. So, there is a certain scheme […] between 100 to 400 people on the farm and you always have a certain idealism. […] But we are totally falling out of that scheme actually. We are very dynamic […] and we try out a lot of things […]. And I think that is absolutely good, because we do want […] to provision for an urban society. And I believe that our growth is absolutely necessary because in a city or on the outskirts […] it is impossible to provision for people out of small-

scale CSAs […]. I am very convinced that we need a large structure to provision [for them] […].'

While to Skye, the very act of being a farmer 'needs a lot of idealism' under current conditions, they point towards what they view as the 'potential' GIC's growth entails in 'simply trying out alternatives to show that [they] work'. Similarly critical about growth-averse forms of CSA focusing primarily on relational change, as emphasised across the network, Parker (Operations Manager) argues:

> 'That's actually not what I would aim at. As in, that I absolutely need to change personal relations to the farm or to the workers here. I don't think that should be the basis for a good economic system […]. Because if you imagine that, I mean that goes into the infinite… so in order for that to work you need good relations to your farmer, […] to your underwear manufacturer, […] to that person that produces your glasses […]. That's totally impossible. That [might] work for this veg thing, but I think it's a big mistake that one looks at the niche or […] veg provisioning […] and thinks that we could organise society […] in the way we do here […].'

Accordingly, both Skye and Parker challenge the perceived idealism of other CSAs focusing on the prefiguration of relational change for failing to move beyond niche experiments. Instead, they attribute GIC's ambitious fast-growth approach as necessary to contribute to required structural changes across wider society. While confirming Terry's impression about the seeming lack of strategic thinking in GIC's early phases, Spencer (Co-director) elucidates why the co-op came to value what they perceive as a more pragmatic approach:

> 'We still have growth plans, but that's not what it's about. We want to have an impact; we don't work to get bigger but that the lever becomes longer which we can then move. That's what we are about. And this impact and the development of impact that's the crucial part, and that's what growth helps us with […]. So, and in this way we try over time relative pragmatically […] by being integratable into everyday life, to practice an alternative economic model which leads to societal change. Because through what we do, we change the infrastructures and *realities* of people and make it a lot easier to act differently as before, at least in terms of food.'

While demonstrating awareness about potential issues accompanying the rapid growth of GIC by emphasising a 'balancing act' in which they need to be wary that 'the size per se doesn't become a problem', Spencer maintains the possibilities outweigh the limits of growth to achieve desired societal changes. For instance, they argue that economies of scale enabled the CSA, e.g., to extent the product range which complements members' provisioning structures as well as offering opportunities to acquire own equipment which reduces dependencies on other farms. Moreover, even some members with a more favourable outlook on building stronger community relations, such as Riley, concur with the benefits of the purported view of giving more people the opportunity to being part of GIC. Similarly, Ocean, who had been particularly outspoken about their scepticism towards scaling up the CSA, also conceded that they had recruited many members with a 'good conscience' knowing that the organisational growth had been economically necessary to fully utilise the farms' capacity.

Overall, such understandings prevailed as the dominant social force of how GIC ought to be organised. As such, the politicisation of growth closely relates to three interconnected strategies focusing on external transformative impacts on a societal level: Pioneering, Displacing, and Mainstreaming.

Pioneering: 'If you grow, you're successful'

The external focus to generating transformative impact most clearly accentuates political imaginaries aiming to bring CSA organising out of its niche existence and into wider society.

First and foremost, GIC members position the co-op as a 'pioneer organisation' that tries to 'show in exemplary ways how a socio-ecological transformation of agriculture can succeed', as communicated within the co-ops' guiding principles. Here, the notion of 'pioneering' entails a conscious attempt to inspire other people to form alternatives that may contribute to socio-ecological change within and outside of agriculture. Therefore, the organisations' public image appears to take precedence in several accounts of members in furthering imaginaries of transformative change by inspiring other projects within the region and beyond, as Rene (Member) argues:

> 'Yeah, the success is surely […] how it appeals to the outside, say as a prototype and stimulus to emulate. That's actually the most important thing,

> say from a transformation perspective. […]. Let me put it this way… the internal success, that we achieve that all is well, and everyone is satisfied, that's of course also success, but one that does not directly have an external impact.'

Rene's explicit elevation of GIC's external impact above internally-oriented aspects of a well-functioning organisation resonates with others like Kit (Member) who perceives the trajectory of transformative virtue to move 'from GIC into society'. Indeed, fieldwork insights confirmed that such ideas of prototyping and seeing the co-op as a 'lighthouse project' (Avery, Member) or 'role model' (Marion, Member) for alternative provisioning structures have found appeal in inspiring similar projects, even beyond GIC's region. As a long term member and working in communication, Sasha perceives the publicity and media attention around GIC as a proof for its increasing societal relevance and influence:

> 'The brand is surely.. I mean, just look on how much press coverage we get […]. The brand of GIC should not be underestimated and […] is influential so to say. […] I just see the brand and growth, and one is also a little proud to have been part of it from the beginning and also helped to build it… as a small wheel so to say. […] I think one is defining oneself through growth, that's just as it is […] like in every sector. If you grow, you're successful.'

By highlighting the steadily increasing external visibility of GIC, Sasha's understanding about the organisational growth of the co-op mirrors the societal norm of what makes an enterprise successful. Accordingly, members like Robin argue that such interpretation of transformative achievement which sees the co-ops' expansion associated with an increasing recognition and attractiveness for potential members, appears to pervade GIC. Such increasing visibility was not least made possible through GIC's relocation, which had been the precondition to its expansion, enabling better paid agricultural jobs that remain the minority across the sector. Nonetheless, despite personally benefitting from increased workplace security and better pay, some workers like Brooks concede that such pioneering developments did not come without experiencing 'farewell pain' from moving on from more personal relations and feeling more 'strongly connected' to other workers at previous locations.

Displacing: ‘Because otherwise we won’t change anything at the system’

The ambition to effect a structural change of agri-food provisioning in GIC’s region constitutes a main driver for the externally-oriented strategic orientation within the co-op.

Notably, GIC informants often referred to such ambition when making sense of the organisations’ development and practices. For instance, Parker (Operations Manager), elucidates their position when co-determining such ambition:

> ‘The basis for this decision is always the question, what do we actually want to achieve with GIC? […]. We do not want this feel-good-happy-place where all are satisfied and live in their bubble, but for us it is about having an input into society… and that only works through growth. […] I mean, what we do is very much in demand at the moment. The question is whether that will endure? So, is it actually realistic, or is it only a hype at the moment so to say. And that’s where we derive this strategy from. […] Do we have what it takes to provision people better? […] I mean, it cannot be the ambition to say OK we’re positioning ourselves next to the whole thing and say, we are better, but we are not really an alternative to it. That means staying marginal with 0.0000001 % market share […] nothing is proven with that. Rather, could we actually provision large parts of the population? That’s the question we need to ask ourselves…’

Given such ambitions, several respondents reaffirmed Parker’s rationale for an expansionary approach to CSA, by characterising CSAs operating on a smaller-scale structure as ultimately unsuitable for having structural impacts. Such understanding ties the co-ops’ transformative impact closely to the continuous growth of its membership base, i.e., households.

In addition, the strategy of converting or reclaiming land that has previously been cultivated in conventional ways into more socially and ecologically sustainable CSA practices constitutes another intended material outcome of such growth-oriented vision. Many GIC actors like Kai (Worker) thus perceive the strategic orientation towards structural change through growth as a ‘meaningful and logical’ element of the struggle against the prevailing industrialised agri-food system:

> ‘I mean… there’s eventually also a strategy behind that, as in that… we as GIC want to establish a provisioning structure that to an extent displaces the existing model which we consider not to be good […] or respectively to enable people to get themselves into a reasonable provisioning structure somehow. And thus, from this perspective I find the growth [strategy] in principle good. It is in this sense also not growth in the [aggregate] economic sense that we say always more, but something else is being supplanted somehow.’ (Kai, Worker)

However, given the sheer magnitude and scale of such endeavour, others such as Timber (Worker), who joined GIC to produce food ‘in harmony with nature’ describe such ambitions as ‘moon-shot strategy’ when expressing concerns in relation to their work, as previously highlighted. Spencer (Co-director), who played an integral role in constructing such ‘moon-shot’ vision as a co-founder, also paraphrases the aim to address significant parts of the large urban society in proximity to GIC in ironic ways, by referring to it as ‘maybe a little megalomaniacal’. Nevertheless, they justify such strategic orientation as follows when being confronted with the ambitiousness of this undertaking:

> ‘It always depends on what your intention is. As in, would you like to be a social project? An agricultural one? Or more a provisioning structure? What do you attach more weight to so to say […] and our orientation is pretty clear, that we want to establish a provisioning structure for the city region […]. We want to give an answer to the food structures that exist at the moment, on how we can do it differently, how we can do it better. And that is our aspiration, that we do not get stuck in small-small rounds. We do absolutely want to have a weight here in the city. Because otherwise we won’t change anything at the system.’

While acknowledging inevitable trade-offs between attaching weight to different transformative impacts, many GIC actors are similarly convinced that large-scale CSA structures are necessary to supplant prevalent agri-food structures in order to move beyond the niche existence of CSAs.

Mainstreaming: ‘It shouldn’t necessarily hurt to be part of GIC’

Addressing ‘the breadth of society’ and particularly ‘those that are not yet engaging with sustainability matters’ constitutes a third strategy aiming for externally-oriented impact at GIC, as communicated in its guiding principles.

Such strategic orientation is understood to necessitate finding appropriate means of persuasion and resonance with wider society, as a focus group participant holding a leadership position at GIC elucidates:

> ‘We actually want to be compatible for the masses here […]. We really have no desire that only an elitist portion […] can deal with our system, because it’s too expensive. Or, for instance, it’s a huge topic that in order to cook all that produce that one receives from us every week, one actually has to have a lot of time and that contradicts completely a life model that we want to support […]. I mean, I do understand why one would like to have convenience food every now and then or something more practical, a salad that is already pre-washed. And here, we try to find a way that is […] practical for many, because we actually want that everyone can feed themselves that way. Both financially, and in terms of convenience. And still, we want to stay true to our aspirations.’

According to this account, the aim to affect large-scale changes to the agri-food systemic necessitates the diffusion of CSA into wider society, which may best be described as *mainstreaming* strategy. As such, the focus group participant maintains that ‘gathering [all] the environmentalists’ around GIC’s location would ‘change [nothing] at society as a whole’. Being ‘compatible to the masses’ thus stems from a motivation to not replicate an eco-conscious bubble that appears inaccessible for many. On top of aiming to be affordable, they also underline that GIC needs to be ‘integratable’ into people’s daily lives’, e.g., by accommodating life models that are less conducive to dedicating a lot of time to participating in CSA. GIC aims to facilitate this through the practice of prepackaged veg boxes. In contrast to other CSAs working with free withdrawals of veg in autonomously-organised depots based on individual needs of members, which relies on increased membership efforts, GIC streamlines and standardises the amounts of produce consumed by their membership. Through a dedicated team of workers packing weekly harvest boxes, GIC is thus trying to reduce obstacles for people to be part of their CSA. While increasing efforts for GIC, Spencer (Co-director) argues that GIC consciously decided for such ‘convenience thought which is very much anchored in society’ in order to ‘reaching the people that otherwise would not be part of it’. In this vein, GIC actors aim to make it easy for members to integrate their CSA participation into daily routines with the understanding that ‘it shouldn’t necessarily hurt to be part of GIC’ (Spencer, Co-director).

In more general terms, the degree to which members actively contribute to and participate in GIC's labour process, is understood as being fully in their hands. Thus, the co-op's guiding principles entail a section that tells members they are able to 'dose [their] personal engagement to the co-op according to [their] preferences'. The element of personal choice of how, when, and how often members are participating in the CSA has been consciously decided upon in order to respect personal schedules, and to grant people a low-threshold entry into GIC. While recognising that people may start from different levels of awareness about agricultural conditions, Storm (co-director) reaffirms the relation of such aspirations to ideas of structural transformation:

> 'We believe to get this large change through changing the structure, and not because every individual is behaving correctly. Because […] you simply have a larger lever if you change the structures in a way that everyone can act differently in easier ways… and acting correctly now is in many, many situations simply far from everyday life […]. It also needs to function for people to do their work and not care for where they get their foodstuffs from for most parts of the day. […] To deal with that you could fill your whole life content, that's all good… but I simply don't believe that over time so many people would form themselves… who act differently against existing structures because it is very, very arduous, rather than having an actual impact to change something through it.'

Overall, such accounts appear grounded in a scepticism about possibilities of cultural changes, e.g., to lifestyles accustomed to a work life that leaves little time to be dedicated to the cultivation of food. Instead, Storm's (Co-director) perspective privileges a change of agri-food infrastructures without requiring too many changes to people's daily routines. Such mainstreaming strategy is thus articulated as more realistic to effect desired large scale transformative impacts.

7.2 Strategising for Transformation(s) at SSC

7.2.1 Feeling Responsible: 'More than just a farming business'

Building on the discussed common ground of transformative imaginaries amongst both CSAs, taking responsibility for the socio-ecological change of the agri-food system appears an imperative for SSC actors.

To many SSC respondents, caring for one's food provisioning signifies a key moral obligation underlying their CSA participation. From a feminist standpoint, Ellis' (Member) account stands as emblematic for a broader sentiment across SSC:

> 'In those areas of life which are about making life possible in the first place […], which for me includes feeding oneself and to be there for each other […], I find it morally pretentious to completely give up responsibility to other people who then do that for you. And I think, if they would do that for you and earn good money for it, then maybe this would not be so much of a debate, but now it is the case that all of these areas, all care work is paid very badly or not at all. So, from my perspective, no one should shirk themselves out of it. Although I also think that of course this is very personal, and you cannot expect from every person that they bear responsibility in all aspects […].'

While qualifying their argument somewhat, Ellis' 'moral aspiration' describes the widespread belief amongst SSC members that collectively caring for the food provisioning structures of the organisation 'makes it crisis resistant'. In order to enshrine such sense of collective responsibility into the organisation, SSC has chosen the legal form of a co-operative enterprise. Yet, initially, SSC had started in the form of a sole trader, an organisational form more common to peasant farmers, in order to acquire the farmstead at which the CSA is still based. While forming a co-op had always been the intention of co-founders, the choice for this more conventional legal formation initially appeared more practicable to get the CSA of the ground. As most of the CSA's co-founders had a background in farm work, it can be argued that SSC had been formed as a producer-induced CSA initiative, before transforming into a CSA co-op five years after its establishment.

Thus, SSC shares structures of a formal co-op, composed of co-directors, a supervisory board, as well as the co-op assembly consisting of the wider membership. However, the adoption of such organisational structures imposed by co-operative regulations to some extent contradicted practiced internal arrangements and behaviours, which led to controversial debates at SSC. Jodie, who formerly worked the land and occupied the legally mandated co-director role at SSC for some time, remembers the challenges of SSC's transformation process into a co-op:

> 'I have to say I found it pretty difficult, because our entire social system is not built to do it in the way [we intended it]. That means, it's not that easy, for instance, to also share responsibility in a legal sense. That's not wanted politically […] and that's why it's not that easy to get it done. But still, I think a co-op is not a bad legal form to do that, despite also having directors and you cannot simply decide in consensus, that doesn't work. That's also a big issue within SSC, that actually this old culture that we have worked out, namely moving away from majority democracy towards consensus-based decision-making… that's not being mapped, for instance, in the legal form […]. That's always difficult. […] It's about, as realistically as possible and in actual reality to share responsibility collectively as a group […]'

Just as Jodie, many SSC informants highlighted the discrepancy between cultural intentions of self-organised practices at SSC and predetermined co-op structures. As such, ideas of sharing responsibility for the farm and its operations through grassroots forms of democracy and being collectively liable for the CSA were seen to be in conflict with the lack of a suitable legal formation. Before adopting co-op structures, SSC proponents had already experimented with more horizontal organising structures and consensus-based decision making for several years. Such organisational practices were heavily influenced by a membership composition that initially drew on housing projects and autonomous movements (Fieldnotes). Moreover, the adjacent commune operating on the basis of a sharing economy played a major role in facilitating the launch of SSC as a CSA, as all co-founders were initially based at its premises. These circumstances also influenced cultural intentions and priorities about the ways in which SSC ought to be organised, which the co-op communicates as being oriented on a model of 'co-operative self-administration'. Thus, SSC's organising structures can perhaps best be described as a synthesis of co-op structures assigning formal responsibility to certain roles as well as practiced horizontal structures mirrored in several organisational bodies.

Daily operations at SSC's farm are organised by a core team of workers and some heavily engaged members, around which the remaining co-op bodies revolve. All formally employed workers at SSC work the land and share more administrative tasks. While all workers are considered operation managers on an equal footing, one co-founder and worker with the highest level of formal training had initially signed the

contracts for the farmstead. The process of legally collectivising the premises has therefore been highlighted as an important milestone for the organisation to grant the highest possible equality amongst members, as Cypress, who had been part of a working group to transform the CSA into a co-op, argues. Since then, at least one worker always held an elected role of a co-op co-director on a rotating basis, together with other members of the co-op. While co-directors hold the formal responsibility, they are understood to perform an executing role based on decisions made collectively by the co-op council in plenary assemblies. In addition, a supervisory board elected by the membership elects and consults co-directors.

While all major decisions about financial planning and the statute are formally taken within the annual general assembly, the co-op council forms the primary decision-making body of the co-op for all other matters exceeding the daily business. The co-op council meets on a frequent basis and is composed of all present SSC members, as well as those receiving harvest shares from the organisation[39], deciding through a consensus-based procedure. For decisions concerning the daily operations at the farm, workers are meeting once a week and decide collectively. In addition, the co-op has recently started an organising circle as an intermediary body to support workers with all decisions concerning the extended daily business. Besides constituting a consultation body, the organising circle observes the implementation of decisions taken by the co-op council and has the option to delegate decisions and tasks to the council. The organising circle meets on a biweekly basis and consists of a fixed number of workers, co-directors, members of the board as well as members from the wider co-op, who participate on a temporarily fixed time on a voluntary basis.

The wider membership constitutes itself through a contractual relation to the co-op guaranteeing the pooling of financial contributions in order to cover SSC's operative costs in return for weekly harvest shares. Members organise themselves within independently functioning pick-up stations to which harvest shares are distributed on a weekly basis. While members can choose to start or join diverse working groups, operating in self-responsible ways to plan and implement projects around the co-op, they are encouraged to dedicate at least three days per year to work at the farm. As

[39] One does not necessarily need to be a formal member of the co-op to receive harvest shares, e.g., if part of a housing project/co-op, or another group receiving weekly veg shares.

such, members can choose between, e.g., helping on the fields, supporting with administrative tasks, or organising diverse events.

Overall, SSC's complex organisational structures are in part a result of the experienced controversies around mandated formal responsibilities when transforming into the legal entity of a co-op. Yet, many informants perceive these structures as vital, when evoking the organisations' strong roots in proclaimed basic principles. As such, SSC's basic principles are understood as a 'cornerstone' underpinning the co-ops way of organising, as Jessie (Worker), who previously held a co-director role at SSC, argues:

> 'It's more than just the farming business […] that the people feel the responsibility for diverse matters so to say […]. That's also what makes this *more*, as in this collective project where there is a connection and… I really believe that this thing of we are not just any kind of enterprise that produces veg, but a CSA with a certain […] political claim and also impact. A lot of that comes from this […] grassroots democratic, member-integrating or carried [approach]. So, not only integrating, that only means that they are included, but they carry it actually […].'

While many informants reinforced imaginaries of enhancing members' self-efficacy, Jessie's account underlines the need for members' to understand and feel responsibility for *their* farm through 'carrying' the co-op in various ways. Overall, such insights point to efforts of furthering members collective sense of responsibility and proactive partaking in organising the socio-ecological change of agri-food provisioning.

7.2.2 Politics of Growth at SSC

With the aim of transferring transformative imaginaries into practice, SSC actors have been negotiating and making sense of various strategic orientations which intersect with questions around growth and scaling. Social processes around the strategic direction of the CSA are often highly contentious and ultimately led to a cleavage amongst the core team. Accordingly, the purpose of the following section is to interrogate such conflictual social processes ensuing from debates around diverse scaling pathways by shedding light on the *politics of growth*.

7.2.2.1 Scaling Pathways at SSC

Questions around organisational growth have always been paramount across SSC's developmental process, forming the basis for political controversies and prolonged negotiations within the organisation. Charlie, an academic dropout and co-founding worker at SSC thus argues:

> 'When we founded the CSA, it was clear for me from the start that […] the size is always crucial, for everything […]. My wish had always been we are not becoming more than 120 people […] because up to 120 people you may be able to assign a face to people in your head and that is still recognised as part of the group so to say. That's why I thought that would be a good size. But then I somehow noticed that's not feasible economically. We need to go beyond that, that's not how it works. That's why in the beginning we had 120 harvest shares. And yeah, economically […] and also socially that's exactly that area in which both work well, as in the social works and also the economical. The question is, however, does the ecological work as well? That's the third component.'

Charlie's initial conviction of limiting SSC membership size to a specific number of harvest shares mirrors widespread views around determining an optimum size for the organisation which balances the socio-economic stability and longevity of SSC with ecological production methods. Some informants like Kerry (Member) thus stressed 'continuous efforts […] to limit or balance growth' in favour of sustainable structures at the co-op, at the very beginning of the interaction. In light of a 'finite planet' and the limited reach of the project, Kerry even circumscribed such efforts as 'daily occupation' at SSC. Aria, a long-term member who resided in the adjacent commune for some time, justified their backing of the decision to not grow as a CSA with an appreciation of a 'sense of knowing each other' and the 'apprehension that this gets lost if one is getting bigger'. Similarly, Cleo (Member) remembers a wider sentiment across the co-op that foregrounded support for limiting the organisational size in conjuncture with worries that becoming 'too large' as an organisation would mean exceeding its 'limits of capacity'. Such concerns often revolved around fears of increasing anonymity across the organisation and ultimately losing the sense of collective responsibility for the project.

By contrast, Aria also highlights an orientation towards the horizontal proliferation of other CSA initiatives, which appeared as a widely endorsed goal by SSC members. However, rather than retaining an element of control through the approach of replication, i.e., by creating satellite co-ops, these organisations are rather envisioned as autonomous entities from SSC. Accordingly, the stance to support the inception and development of autonomous initiatives through *multiplication* appeared to be backed by many members along with an intention to avoid competition amongst CSAs in closer proximity. Such aspiration could also be observed in an information leaflet, in which SSC comrades clarify the position of the co-op six years after its inception:

> 'SSC sees itself prospectively to be embedded in a network of CSA farms, in short *the commons* – whereby the range of food items being distributed could be extended. However, at present, these are merely ideas that will need to be discussed and thought through.'

From this perspective, ideas of multiplying CSA initiatives and connecting them within a CSA commons network directly emerged out of a process to explore ideas of enhancing the diversification of food provisioning structures within SSC's locality. Prior to this announcement, a dedicated working group had formed itself to explore ways to deepen provisioning structures within the CSA in more detail around a 'product range expansion project' (Charlie, Worker). The working group had issued an opinion poll across the membership and explored possibilities of deepening SSC's food provisioning portfolio beyond vegetables. Kerry (Member), who initially perceived such explorations and debates around extending SSC's provisioning range as fruitful, elaborates on the democratic process:

> 'There also was this questionnaire and initially the idea was not bad. […] We established that demand exists for lentils, tofu, oil, and garlic and so on, but it was declined in the co-op council despite due deliberation. So, it's been said that […] we are already [so and so many] harvest shares, which entail around [double the amount of people]. They need to know each other first for it to be fun, that they can work together, that […] people actually identify [with SSC], that they actually come to the fields and do things in order for it not to be solely an administrative thing, so we don't need to start with sanctions or offsets, how this work can be done.'

Thus, the co-op council ultimately rejected the proposal to extend SSC's food range on the grounds that such development would increase the level of complexity for the organisation and may threaten its social stability. Instead of deepening and diversifying the product range within SSC as a single CSA, the idea of a commons network thus implies possibilities for co-operation amongst multiple CSAs for the mutual benefit of all members by exchanging respective produce with other CSAs. Such co-operation across CSAs would see the widening of an available product range and thus deepen the food supply for everyone. However, depending on the degree of specialisation of CSAs to particular products, such conception also builds on some form of homogenisation of agri-food cultivation within CSAs. Thus, to some extent this form of scaling is built on assumptions of rationalisation when aiming towards highest possible degrees of food sovereignty across a CSA commons network. Vigilant about such ideas, Jessie (Worker) maintains:

> 'So, this small, diverse farm is just not as efficient I would say. In turn the labour is a completely different one for me as a worker, as if I would only be weeding carrots all day or so. The labour is simply a lot more varied.'

In conjuncture with the desire for a diverse labour process, Jessie emphasises that SSC's ecological aspirations, e.g., to use resistant seed varieties to increase the resilience of crops, constitutes a 'red line' for the co-ops' development from their perspective. Here, the drive for efficiency is viewed as containing underlying assumptions about the need to rationalise and expand production when aiming to provide the highest degrees of food provisioning as possible to CSA members. Such ideas were viewed rather sceptically across SSC, based on the fear that such practice would decrease the ecological diversity, quality, and sustainability of the cultivation. Accordingly, Cleo's (Member) sentiment is emblematic for a wider conception at the co-op:

> 'I believe there is a collective understanding that we don't need to grow […] we don't have a growth claim, which is also the idea of degrowth […]. Yeah, I would say it's not the aim to continuously acquire new land […]. I like the idea with the orchard, to enhance the diversity and not the mass. That makes sense to me. So, the diversity in terms of different organisations or co-ops, but also within the project to increase the diversity and to say, we'll do [other things].'

As Cleo explains, the co-op has gradually and carefully added few vegetable fields and recently an orchard to its production. Rather than favouring the scaling up of the organisation, a combination of horizontal proliferation of CSAs in conjuncture with ideas of diversification thus appeared to be prevalent amongst SSC actors. Consequently, negotiation processes within SSC have over time resulted in a more restrained approach to expansion when given the opportunity.

7.2.2.2 The Split: Small but Stable vs. Full Supply

Social processes of negotiating limits to the organisational size in conjuncture with alternative ideas of scaling have led to long lasting contentious debates within SSC.

In a key historical moment for the organisation, a key conflict emanating from the core group around co-founders and workers of SSC could be observed, when the opportunity arose to scale up the CSA in significant ways. Six years after the CSAs' foundation, significant amounts of further acreage had been offered to the organisation from within the local community, which would have resulted in more than a doubling of acreage to be cultivated. This offer also coincided with ongoing negotiation processes on whether the co-op council would decide to deepen SSC's provisioning structures, as elaborated on above. Despite the lucrative offer, however, the overall verdict from the co-op membership remained unfavourable to expansionary ideas on the grounds that such development would impact the organisation negatively, particularly in relation to its democratic pursuits, as Charlie (Worker) remembers:

> 'When the offer came, [we] went searching for [people], because we did not want to do it ourselves. As in, we didn't want to provision somehow for [so many] people at once with vegetables. We [did] not want that our farm expands too quickly. We like our structure. We do not want that our [work] team becomes larger than 6-10 people [because] then we can't do our horizontal assembly structures anymore, etc. that simply limits us. Our principles cannot be scaled so easily.'

Following consensus-based decision making procedures, the offer to expand SSC's acreage and activities had thus ultimately been rejected by the co-op council. Accordingly, the reluctance to expand SSC's provisioning structures across the wider co-op membership mirrored a similar sentiment within the core team of workers when

confronted with what the growth of SSC would mean for work structures. Nonetheless, the quest to find other people to take up the offer in order to build an independent CSA proved more difficult than initially imagined. In addition, an element of time-pressure to acquire or pass on the land complicated the process. Thus, Jodie (Worker) noticed growing tensions, which had become particularly prevalent across workers:

> 'I noticed there [were] just so many tensions […] amongst the workers. […] And then there was this argument about how should actually the basic direction […] of SSC be aligned in the future? […] There were many conflicts within SSC's history, this was one of the biggest conflicts I have witnessed […]. It was about a struggle of forces […] what's next? Where do we want to go? […] I didn't experience this as productive, these incredible energies […] if one does not manage to work on this collectively but against each other [...]. That's something I have also noticed in this conflict. It binds so much energy and that's also wasted energy […] and it can do very real damage. But this bound energy also cannot be used for other things. That's also a gigantic […] economic damage, but also uneconomic damage.'

By describing the effects of the ensuing conflict of diverging forces amongst workers at SSC, Jodie indicates the surfacing of a struggle for power over different ideas and strategic directions, emerging out of debates around diverse scaling pathways. Accordingly, a workshop had been organised shortly after the land was offered, to discuss differing visions around the future of SSC, within which questions around the organisations' growth and scaling routes were debated. Participating in the workshop, Jamie (Member), remembered debates to be 'very controversial […] very emotional […] and very polarised'. Sammie (Worker) summarises the core conflict as follows:

> 'So I think the core issue around these discussion back then was… on the one hand, how large should a CSA be while still having a certain sense of community […] so that people still know each other and that they appreciate their produce in sufficient ways, and also come to [participate] on the fields – versus [others] who always said […] if we want to supply people in affordable ways with ecological, fairly-produced, well cultivated food we need a higher efficiency […] our machines preferably need to be fully utilised over the whole week, and this small acreage is not really worth it.'

Accordingly, polarising forces surfaced around diverging visions about SSC's scaling approach, which contrasted a section of workers to push for what has been described as 'full supply' of members food provisioning versus the urge to 'stabilise' the CSA organisationally (Jamie, Member). Falling into the formerly mentioned camp, Hunter (Worker) elucidates their perspective:

> 'Basically, there were always discussions amongst workers concerning how do we develop ourselves. Do we buy a new tractor or do we invest in […] better farm infrastructure and so on. And I was more like *let's invest and onwards*, also when the offer about the acreage came. Or even before that, I suggested whether we could collectively start a co-operative network with the inception of new CSAs and try to scale up things a little, instead of […] working side by side, everyone doing the same. So, and there I was more or less fighting a losing battle at SSC […].'

Workers like Hunter who were advocating for a growth-oriented vision thus ultimately found themselves on the back foot against social forces advocating for the maintenance of organisational limits. Crucially, in contrast to the focus on structural societal impact advocated for by Hunter and others, SSC members remained overwhelmingly favourable to strategic orientations emphasising transformative impacts within the CSA. Indeed, Jamie (Member) explained that many 'shied away' from the 'very large vision' of rapidly expanding the CSA's membership and production. Similarly, Cypress argued they felt 'intimidated' by the sheer scale offered by the growth opportunity. Instead, Jodie (Worker) gave vent to their feelings when saying:

> 'So, my feeling about this – which is why I really went through the roof back then […] was, that if we want to preserve SSC as it is, with this quality that I experienced there, then we must have organic growth. […] It cannot be broken over the fence like that […] as in, that's indeed attractive and I can completely understand that – but it doesn't work!'

In this sense, the negotiation of opposing social forces unfolding from within the core team ultimately resulted in the split of co-founders in year seven. In consequence of the split, a section of the core team of workers ultimately decided to leave SSC and to initiate the formation of Elderflower co-op (EC) as a new CSA in close proximity with the land offered originally to SSC, pursuing an expansive-oriented vision.

Reflecting on how debates ultimately unfolded into two opposing camps, Jessie (Worker) locates what they experienced as 'big struggle' of diverging forces into underlying politics of co-founders when arguing 'there were a lot of clashes and battles for your own ideals to prevail'. To them, different motifs amongst co-founders and the desire to 'fulfil [them]selves' through SSC constituted crucial influencing factors in the conflictual process over the dominance of transformative ideas and strategies. While ecological matters took precedence for Jessie, others to various degrees appeared to prioritise perspectives informed by autonomous labour movements, anarchist self-organisation, or socialist productivism in line with a planned-economy. Other's like Quinn, who worked the fields at SSC for some time, alluded to what they saw as 'old debates […] whether one can establish the right in the wrong'.

Overall, such clashes between different assumptions and assigned priorities could be perceived to impact the organisation in its daily operations and ultimately erupted into a conflict on questions around the 'strategic direction' (Jamie, Member) of SSC. While some like Jessie (Worker) described the conflict as a process of discovery of 'where do we actually want to go?', others argued the conflict helped a lot of people to sharpen 'what sort of project one actually feels comfortable' (Cypress, Member) with.

7.2.3 Strategic directions at SSC

Within conflictual negotiation processes around growth and alternative scaling routes, SSC proponents can be perceived to apply different frames of reasoning when translating transformative imaginaries into organisational practice. Such differences result in diverse strategic orientations providing the underlying currents that have led to the split amongst the team of co-founders at SSC. In an attempt to deepen the understanding of the substance of such conflictual debates, the following section offers a grounded account of SSC respondents' reasoning for achieving transformative impact on internal organisational norms and practices, in contrast to external orientations of changing societal provisioning structures. The following analysis will initially outline how organisational limits and growth are politicised, before turning to such underlying orientations to scaling internal and external transformative impact.

Overall, the underlying value judgements diverging strategic priorities are based on, can be perceived to have influenced the formation of wider social forces amongst the membership of SSC in conjuncture with the newly formed EC. Given the split amongst

co-founders and the subsequent refoundation into EC, SSC informants often compared prevalent approaches at EC to their CSA when elaborating on different conceptions and strategies to achieve transformative impacts. The following discussion will thus utilise such insights by contrasting underlying reasonings of diverging perspectives around scaling internal transformative impact with understandings accentuating external impacts, primarily prevalent at EC. Such understandings outline conflictual lines and influence political processes on how CSA ought to be organised in relation to limits and possibilities of scaling SSC.

7.2.3.1 Politicising Organisational Limits & Scaling Internal Impact

In line with the dominance of what may be perceived as a 'slow growth' approach of SSC, a large section of SSC informants continued to stress the importance of reckoning with organisational limits to growth in the aftermath of the split. Overall, such perspectives particularly engaged critically with the expansionary trajectory of EC.

In particular, many SSC participants underlined the co-ops' approach to be grounded in, and informed by, its strong adherence to its principles. While workers like Jodie recognised recent achievements of EC co-op in generating a broadly appealing public image, seen as helpful for the CSA movement overall, they argue:

> 'From my perspective, [EC] is surely […] a very attractive concept and certainly a good supplement, but it's not as much tied to [CSA ideals]. I mean […] there is this concept of *conventionalisation* organic farming, like once again something becomes the mainstream and [thereby] flattened in its ideals. And then it needs new ideas, which again shoot out, only to be flattened again… and so you slowly develop […]. The dilution in favour of mass effect. […] And there I would say that SSC is actually strong in very consistently sticking to its ideals, that is its strength. And there I thought it would actually be stupid to give this up in favour of mass impact […].'

Echoing a widespread sentiment across SSC, the adherence to its principles is perceived as a defining characteristic of SSC, for instance, when deciding against a refrigerated warehouse due to its negative CO2 impact, or when refusing to take out bank loans to retain some independence from capitalist constraints. The latter in particular has been highlighted in several instances, when referring to the expansionary

development of EC, seen as forfeiting autonomy. Thus, the seeming dependence of larger CSAs on appeasing funding guidelines for subsidies and loan repayments are perceived to not only constrain the freedom of political positioning as a co-op, but also the operative processes resulting in 'being less free when making fundamental decisions' (Charlie, Worker).

Accordingly, the strong grounding and adherence to what many SSC informants perceived as elementary CSA principles also informed the ongoing politicisation of limits to organisational growth. By referring to EC's development, a member who held a co-director role at SSC for some time thus argued in a focus group discussion:

> 'That has also been the debate […] to demonstrate that this works on a larger scale. And there, I always think, of course it works somehow larger, but with the caveat that one is throwing a few ideals overboard. But I personally don't find that very exciting […]. I find it way more exciting to work on this organisational complex, to structure it in cool ways so people can learn things in the process. And maybe it also becomes somewhat bigger from time to time due to inflation or other things, but the primary focus is on stabilising the political project and to interlink it with other initiatives surrounding it.'

Just as this focus group participant, many other SSC members emphasised that their core attention lies within fostering a stable organisational environment and learning processes at the co-op as opposed to seemingly compromising on SSC's principles by expanding the CSA. Reaffirming their stance on the chosen path of what was often referred to as 'slow organic growth' (Charlie, Worker), Jessie (Worker) thus maintains:

> 'I did not want the group to become that big and yeah, there were these confrontations […]. There was this idea to become three times as large […] where I noticed that's not for me. So, I like these overseeable structures. I also believe that our members appreciate especially that it is that way, having personal contacts and […] somehow here at this place it didn't feel good to become three times as big. We are also so much interwoven with the commune. These collective meals and so on, that's something that I value very much. And I think what they did with [EC co-op] that's good, they do a good job. But here at our place, I think it would have blown things [out of proportion] and I think it's good that it actually came the way it did.'

In line with Jessie's sentiment, members like Cypress often expressed a desire to 'stay on top of things' rather than increasing the logistical complexity and anonymity when bringing in many more people to the co-op. As such, they articulate their wariness about increasingly losing their 'sense of responsibility' through such process (Cypress, Member). Indeed, the sheer idea of knowing only the names and faces of full-time employees, as it is imagined to be common at EC, was not perceived as a valuable aspiration amongst SSC members. Additionally, Cleo (Member) even described an 'inner resistance' against what they describe as 'growth mindset' and visions of expansion, both in relation to SSC's farming activities and more generally in 'life, or in society'. Instead of growing for growths' sake, they thus advocate for an orientation on workers' capacities and reflecting on concrete needs before extending SSC's agri-food cultivation. Similarly, Kerry (Member) asserts that SSC's approach is opposed to the growth compulsion immanent in capitalism in which 'everything that can be done, must be done'.

Overall, such accounts shared a common thread in valuing characteristics of remaining relatively small-scale, stable, and limited in size, which are believed to enabling strategic orientations internal to the CSA, observed as interdependent dimensions of: Relationality, Consciousness, and Solidarity.

Relationality: 'A more personalised dependence'

In line with the dominance of critical perspectives towards organisational growth at SSC, ideas to develop and foster alternative forms of relations within and through the CSA enjoy widespread support amongst the membership.

Above all, this notion appears to emerge from intentions of furthering a collective sense of responsibility to transform agri-food provisioning by breaking up estranged market relationships. Accordingly, Charlie (Worker) reiterates their critical stance towards expanding SSC in relation to the conflictual process:

> 'We always had […] these struggles across the entire developmental time of SSC about growth, non-growth and so on, because for [some] it didn't all happen quickly enough, and it wasn't large enough […]. We always fended it off, among other things I paid attention that we don't become too large because I thought that the CSA principles only work if a personal acquaintance exists between members and farmworkers. Because my fear always was that if the

> social bonds become too weak as it gets too anonymous and large, then market principles begin gain traction again so to say. To which CSA one goes and decides to change or whatever depends on the product range, rather than this relation. And at the end we are back to where we started. Then we have all these veg box farms, but people change CSA as they do with supermarkets.'

In line with Charlie's cautionary remarks about degenerating into market logics, many SSC informants stress the need to prefiguring more personalised relations by developing an awareness about mutual dependencies across a manageable amount of people. Thus, ideas to not 'feel as […] consumers […] but to identify as part of the whole story' are communicated as an explicit goal of SSC members, in line with wider CSA principles. The importance of such ideas are addressed unequivocally within a pamphlet outlining the expectations towards new members:

> 'The development and strengthening of social relations within the co-operative is an essential component of the concept. The necessary openness and participation is expected from everyone. The existence of the co-op depends on the engagement of its members.'

Several members described this relational understanding as 'heart of it all' (Cleo), when referring to the praxis of organising CSA by building new relations to members, workers, but also the soil and plants at SSC's farmstead. Others often highlighted the 'sense of unity' (Aria, Member) emerging from feeling integrated into the 'collective project', also understood as a 'stabilising factor' in times of crises (Jamie, Member). Reaffirming such perspective, a focus group participant and previous co-director even argued that not achieving such 'social invigoration' would constitute a major 'failure' of the co-op 'if it would not matter where the food comes from or if it's just a particularly convenient form'. To them, building 'stable social relationships' goes beyond the boundaries of the co-op entity by emphasising the 'close relations' and 'anchorage within other social movements', e.g., around climate justice, perceived as a space for mutual learning and support. Affirming such stance, Cypress (Member) also underlines the intention to establish trusting relations with people in the immediate environment beyond the adjacent commune, such as neighbouring conventional farmers, shepherds, and local producers, as essential for the CSA. Hence, one SSC co-

founder summaries this understanding as follows when attempting to pin down what characterises CSA from their perspective:

> 'Mutual aid and responsibility are awakened through a collective interest about the functioning of the collective production, instead of the oppositional interest of consumers and producers on the marketplace […]. Within CSA everyone engages in a dependency from a manageable amount of people, whereas in a market-mediated agriculture a dependency exists to an army of unknowns. I would like to plead […] for a positive consideration of a more personalised dependence, because I think that the consciousness about personal dependence from others is the precondition that the other can satisfy their basic need according to the feeling of being needed.'

Building on such ideas to foster close social relations, ideas of building consciousness across CSA members signifies another important element from the perspective of achieving transformative impacts internal to the organisation.

Consciousness: Getting 'people out of their comfort zone'

Raising insights and understanding of SSC members through reconfiguring their relation towards each other as well as agri-food processes constitutes another key element for effecting transformative change on an organisational level.

As such, several members assigned importance to a growing consciousness about agricultural labour processes of SSC, by being on the fields and building relations with workers and other members. In particular, such learning processes have been highlighted in relation to the growing impacts of the climate crisis. Cypress, for instance, recalls a specific incident of a worker addressing the wider membership via email, urging them to contemplate about the broader relations between the food system and ecological conditions:

> 'A specific person [addressed] all members […] by formulating anxieties and saying… do we not actually need to rethink our crop rotation, our cultivation method? Should we not somehow begin […] to say goodbye to certain cultures because they are becoming untenable with global warming and emerging droughts or wet periods here in this form. So, if there is no guarantee anymore that this works, then we need to reorientate ourselves in terms of our crop

> rotation. And I find that very, very cool that this is being addressed. Somehow […] I'm sitting here in my […] city house and think *oh shit, absolutely!*'

SSC members at large appreciate such transparency and exchange, enhancing the awareness about various matters of what it means to organise food provisioning in times of ecological crisis. Indeed, Jessie (Worker) argues that the importance of consciousness raising informs the co-ops' strategic orientation towards scaling:

> 'Then people quickly tend to think we don't [need to] do any foil tunnels anymore, but only free-range and only with machines… and I think no, these are also things that are needed [because of] our social and environmental educational claim so people can come out here and help along, that's what you need manual labour for. That definitely needs to stay.'

Jessie's account stands for a wider sentiment across SSC members who value attempts of fostering members learning processes through working the land in collective and manual ways, as opposed to solely efficiency-driven practices. In this sense, Ollie (Co-Director) also spoke about the ideal of inducing such 'collective learning processes' by means of the co-ops' discussion and plenary processes. In a similar vein, Dylan (Worker), describes what awareness raising means to them, when contrasting their brief experiences at larger CSAs:

> 'For me it was clear from the beginning that we […] have a distribution […] with large boxes and not smaller, pre-packaged ones as it is the case at [larger CSAs], where it's blatantly consumer-oriented. But […] if you engage with it, then you have to learn something new as consumer and the farm should not orientate itself too blatantly on the market because we must get people out of their comfort zone and to transfer them more into an activist field, so that they become aware for it […].'

By aiming to get members out of their comfort zone and into a more politicised CSA practise, Dylan describes a broader sentiment across the CSA network of what could be described as processes of unlearning transactional market-oriented logics. As part of such processes, SSC informants also communicate ideas of developing 'solidarity with one another [as] an essential learning objective in the collective labour process', as part of their principles. However, such learning processes are not envisioned to

remain on the level of consciousness, but rather inform practices of solidarity within SSC.

Solidarity: A 'Social Anchor'

Practicing solidarity within SSC constitutes an essential strategic orientation to effect internal transformative impact.

Most obviously, such ideas are articulated through the co-ops' collective goals of building a 'solidary, low hierarchy, equitable community' based on mutual support and informing prospective and current members that:

> 'An atmosphere of trust and solidarity amongst each other is of particular importance for us. We will jointly raise the funds required for [our] cultivation. The veg ought not to have a fixed price, but payment is being made monthly according to financial means. We share good and bad harvest and thus secure the farm and the income of farmers independently of weather fluctuations.'

Thus, ideas of solidarity referred to here are built on the practice of decoupling the prices from the weight of weekly produce, as a means to revalue agri-food provisioning in opposition to transactional market logics. At SSC, this materialises in two ways. Firstly, the practice of 'bidding rounds' at the beginning of each season refers to the process of covering the required annual budget through members' bidding or pledging a certain amount of the funds that they are able to contribute to the CSA each month. While an orientation value nearing the average contribution exists, such practice is intended to allow for a more equitable approach by inviting members to join the co-op irrespectively of their income. Secondly, the practice of free withdrawal of veg is understood as means to 'share the harvest in solidary ways'. Given the successful funding of the annual budget, every member 'is entitled to' freely withdraw the amount of vegetables according to their needs from large boxes of the weekly harvest in their respective pick-up station[40].

Overall, such practices are intended to stimulate members to cultivate forms of fairness, justice, and solidarity within their weekly engagement with the co-op by paying attention to the needs of others. Indeed, for many CSA actors like Dylan

[40] According to Jodie (Worker), SSC only provides an 'auxiliary size' on the basis of what two people would consume in terms of vegetable supply, a praxis that has established itself over time to provide a 'general orientation'.

(Worker), the practice of community solidarity is thus seen as the 'central' element of SSC. Thus, Jessie (Worker) elucidates, that practices of solidarity 'became an integral component' and 'very important social anchor' over the years which played a huge role for their growth aversion. In line with such perspective, several accounts remarked that becoming 'too big' as a co-op would result in the vanishing of trust, and thus established practices of community solidarity. Instead, Aria and Ollie (Members) remarked that a prevalent imaginary exists across members that 'being in solidarity' with each other requires members to build trust towards each other through the cultivation of close social relationships.

7.2.3.2 Politicising Organisational Growth & Scaling External Impact

In contrast to growth-critical perspectives aiming primarily towards internal transformative impacts at SSC, in particular the section of workers and co-founders who migrated to EC in the aftermath of the split politicised optimistic standpoints towards growth. Thus, this section will primarily draw on the reasonings from these respondents in making sense of diverging orientations.

In valuing the external transformative benefits of expansionary approaches, the foundation of EC has purportedly resulted in a different understanding of organising CSA. Reflecting on their time at SSC before starting EC as often involving insufficient mechanical equipment and only being able to offer low wages, Hunter (Worker) argues:

> 'At the time with [the decision] to not take bank credits […] we tried as improvised as possible and with simple means […] not to be too expensive […] for members. It was a lot of idealism and self-exploitation at the beginning. […] Whereas now I think, from a political context that has not achieved too much either. As in showing capitalism that such a CSA is completely superior, if we work our butts off on such a low-level.'

Instead, Hunter's framing of EC as a progression of SSC builds on the political understanding that CSA needs to be thought bigger from the start, if such form of agri-food provisioning were ever to get 'out of the niche'. From a class perspective, Quinn (Worker) concurs with such views when advocating for the political potency of larger CSA projects:

> 'EC has a lower threshold, in many aspects, in order to join. That's why I got the impression that more people from different milieus have access there… also to these ideas and the [kind of] work. They get access to such ideas behind it. The added political value may be higher there as at SSC, who are super idealistic in this sense… where someone from the neighbouring village […] may not be able to come in. They would fail on many cultural barriers […].'

While acknowledging the downsides of a seemingly higher potential for capitalist co-optation at EC, growth advocates like Quinn often promote what they perceive as a more socially accessible approach of larger CSA co-ops. To them, the prevalent orientation at EC, to recruit members who are not already part of an eco-conscious bubble and to being more integratable into peoples' lifestyles, may be less 'idealistic' but politically more useful. Indeed, Quinn traces the seeming neglect of such ideas back to the adherence to strong CSA principles impeding such debates. Comparing their experience at both SSC and EC as a co-founder, Hunter thus argues:

> 'Yeah, I think at SSC it was more this cool project and generally a collectivised business with this high ideological aspiration; we do have that too but not quite so overt that we communicate political content very much, because that's…. simply a broad membership base from the centre of society cobbled together. […] The focus here lies on creating good working conditions and […] having an ecological flagship company […]. So, here it's less of that […] co-op with a community feeling. SSC does have this touch of scene and rebelliousness, and we are more like CSA 2.0… good veg for all who can afford it […].'

In contrast to SSC, Hunter describes various compromises at EC, seen as necessary to recruit members from a broader section of society with 'more weight on middle class clientele', which they argue would clash with SSC's approach. When describing their vision of a 'CSA 2.0', for instance, they argue for the necessity of leaving it up to the members whether and how often they participate on the fields. Furthermore, instead of SSC's practice of bidding rounds, EC only offers solidarity concessions for members on lower incomes. Despite seeing such trade-offs as necessary to achieve fairer wages, Sammie (Worker) who migrated from SSC to EC described their work at SSC as their 'political comfort zone' in which they felt they had to 'compromise less', when saying:

> 'It's actually exactly that thing between idealism and pragmatism, and I think we are still quite idealistic at EC […], but we went more into a pragmatic direction in contrast to SSC. But I also think that that's the logical consequence to some extent. Because I […] think it's also good to cultivate the acreage one has in professional ways, with people who are paid properly and who actually understand what it's about. Because otherwise one could say […] if we want to feed the global population […] and do not use agricultural area in a proper way, then it might make more sense to somehow grow a forest or something… that would be better for the climate […].'

Just as Sammie, other advocates of expansionary forms of CSA organising reinforce the challenge of feeding a growing amount of people in a time when impacts of the climate crisis are becoming ever more apparent in agri-food production. As such, Sammie describes their work at EC as a 'balancing act' of 'producing reasonably affordable harvest shares', while highlighting the need for finding the most efficient ways of cultivation within circumstances marked by the scarcity of agricultural labour. Overall, such politicisation of growth is geared towards scaling external transformative impacts across what may be seen as strategic dimensions of: Pioneering, Displacing, and Mainstreaming.

Pioneering: Being 'societally relevant'

Politicised through both growth-critical and expansion-oriented CSA approaches, the notion of pioneering can be perceived as a strategic orientation evoked by both SSC and EC actors.

In this sense, several SSC members emphasised the 'exemplary role' (Kerry, Member) of their CSA when describing its importance in demonstrating that agri-food production can be organised in different, more collective ways. A prevalent understanding thus appears to exist at SSC about occupying a 'lighthouse function' (Jodie, Member) as a CSA, geared towards convincing a wider proportion of society to engage in similar forms of reorganising agri-food provisioning. At SSC, such insights are connected to the material outcomes experienced in the co-ops' locality, as Ollie (Co-director) elaborates enthusiastically:

> 'I think it's a totally interesting development right here in this context, because… simply through the fact that at some point people have started this

> project and that it was here continually, other things became possible […]. They only became possible because we were and are here on site. And that has very nice implications. It's not like we are muddling around by ourselves, but it gives us a certain dynamic to other, different interesting projects, without individual farms somehow being totally under pressure […]. Yeah, it's a little bit a pioneer thing for the region […]'

By pointing to the pioneering function SSC has evolved into for the region, SSC informants often expressed a great sense of pride about the fact that several other CSA initiatives had established themselves around the locality of the co-op. On top of EC emerging out of the split, a cluster of CSA initiatives had formed itself in close proximity to SSC. As such, both Ollie (Co-Director) and Dylan (Worker) underline the positive effects such development has for the region in fostering an active exchange between city and country, while drawing a large membership base from urban areas to reconnect to rural agri-food production. In part, SSC members thus assign such developments of horizontal proliferation, in form of the multiplication of CSA initiatives, to the existence of SSC as a precursor.

By contrast, the conviction that only an expansive approach to CSA can result in a pioneering enterprise that is 'societally relevant' (Hunter, Worker), surfaces particularly strongly amongst EC proponents. As such, Sammie (Worker) who worked at SSC before moving to EC co-op argues:

> 'It has a different societal appeal, so for instance, if we say climate politics is going completely out of control, there's a catastrophe coming, and if we do an event or so, that reaches more people than it would at SSC. So, maybe we could say, we simply reach more people now, and that does feel a bit like an achievement.'

On top of increasing the reach of communication, such perspective is often based on being taken more seriously as an organisational and economic actor in negotiation processes with public authorities. As such, even some SSC informants explained that they can see some sense in the desire to becoming an 'established player in the region' by being a 'huge project [and] a huge employer' (Cypress, Member). Accordingly, some respondents like Quinn (Worker) explicitly contrast such external reach to ideas

around achieving transformative internal impacts through relational change, when arguing:

> 'Yeah, I think for me questions of ownership are almost more important, as in building these flagship models or establishing [CSA] models that allow to operate differently without reproducing this ownership pyramid system. So, creating *lighthouse projects* in this way feels more important to me, instead of some family cutting out the intermediary between consumer and producer. Maybe also more important than [people in] cities pretending to do agriculture […]'

Quinn's conception to prioritise collective ownership structures of agricultural production on a broader scale appears to resonate particularly with proponents of EC. Overall, EC actors like Hunter (Worker) perceive their CSA as an attempted progression of SSC by 'thinking [CSA] in a larger dimension' with the ultimate aim to 'getting out of the niche' and achieving a certain 'societal relevance'.

Displacing: 'Structures that can provision for millions or billions of people'

In addition to the assigned value of pursuing greater societal relevance through large-scale CSA structures, strategies of displacing industrial forms of agri-food production featured strongly amongst informants now affiliated with EC. Sammie (Worker), for instance, explains why they became convinced of such approach:

> 'I would say at EC […] the bottom line is, I find it nice that we have such large acreage that we work on. So, that we could transfer them from conventional into ecological [farming] […] and I do feel that in terms of biodiversity a lot has already happened there, which […] makes me happy.'

Enthusiastic about the flourishing biodiversity and 'beautiful habitat for human and non-humans' at SSC, Sammie (Worker) saw it as their 'duty and responsibility' to help converting large acreages of monocultural soil that had been cultivated in industrial ways for decades into something more akin to SSC. While they initially remained disinterested about the 'size or whether its big or small', Sammie saw the opportunity to 'at least try' to transform the land into something more ecologically viable at EC. Such conviction is also based on the politics of land within a region that many

described as controlled by large agribusinesses which are making access to arable land 'incredibly difficult' (Ollie, Co-Director).

Collectivising such large acreages thus fits with wider political imaginaries aiming at widening the land access in order to grow food in more socio-ecological compatible ways. By contrast, Hunter (Worker) describes a more opportunistic approach which led them to split from SSC:

> 'And when the offer came […], I said together with [a few] others *ok, then we try this again in a new dimension*. CSA […] as an attempt of [being] large and taking a lot of money in our hands, proper enterprise with efficient processes and… thereby simply getting out of the niche and showing that this isn't just a gimmick and pastime […]. So, we can say, also in relation to being relevant for society as a whole, we need structures that can provision for millions or billions of people […].'

In addition to Hunter's political aspiration of provisioning for as a many people as possible, Sammie (Worker) assigns meaning to such approach by being able to provide many employees with a secure and fairly-paid agricultural job. From such perspective, becoming relevant for wider society necessitates large-scale structures and efficient labour processes, understood to 'opening up leeway' for 'innovative technology', 'ecological cultivation' and 'better wages' (Hunter, Worker).

While informants from both SSC and EC maintain the benefits of co-operative co-existence together with other CSA initiatives in the locality, the drive for growth and efficiency at EC co-op nonetheless entails some concerns. Thus, Hunter (Worker) speaks bluntly when saying:

> 'Everyone does their thing, and yeah, of course at the end you have got to see, who delivers what? How efficient can you make it? You shouldn't fool yourself about this either […]. Of course, there is somehow […] some competition existing […], that maybe in the end, if we are more efficient, can pay better wages, then we can retain the workers at our farm […]. So, at different levels, at the end some form of competition takes place, [we] shouldn't delude ourselves about that. That's, as long as we don't give ourselves a common umbrella structure, where we subject ourselves to, or mutually orientate ourselves on.'

While SSC workers like (Dylan) maintain that the CSA's 'uneconomic' peasant farming approach operating in an 'absolute niche' is worth protecting against such dynamics, others like Ollie (Co-Director) raise concerns about such latent competition. On top of competing for scarce agricultural workers, they also raise concerns that a latent contest around CSA members could become worse over time.

Mainstreaming: 'Conforming to Society' vs. 'Society needs to adapt itself'

In order to provide CSA produced vegetables for as many people as possible, many respondents perceive the plurality of alternative food initiatives around SSC as a desirable development.

Despite the acknowledged differences and latent competition, some SSC members like Harper argue that such divergences should rather be seen as an encouraging signal that CSA is gaining in importance across society. From such perspective, the approach of EC is understood to broaden the reach of SSC by providing a vehicle to transfer CSA ideas to 'more and more people within the midst of society' (Harper, Member). In this sense, Quinn (Worker), argues that the efforts needed to being part of SSC are much higher as compared to EC. For instance, SSC members are required to wash and sort their veg themselves when collecting it from their distribution point, a practice that Quinn describes as 'strenuous' in contrast to larger CSAs like EC who provide preprepared boxes. Given large investment plans, however, proponents at EC also needed to adopt a more proactive approach to convincing people across the larger peri-urban region to become part of their CSA. Thus, prepackaged boxes support such undertaking as Ellis (Member) remarks:

> 'I do believe that many [people] quickly and simply become members of EC because they are more present […] they need to recruit many members because they took on extremely high debts so to say. This way, they are on everyone's lips, and the access to the CSA entails […] a lower threshold.'

Such large public relations and marketing efforts employed at EC to recruit members are seen somewhat sceptical in the eyes of many SSC members. In opposition to conscious efforts at SSC to incorporate members into the CSA labour process, the pressure to recruit members in a short period of time led EC actors to release their members from many burdens of participation. Such different conceptions have

arguably played a major part in the conflictual process elaborated on above, as Charlie (Worker) explains:

> 'I don't know if that's the philosophers stone or so, but… [they] always said, well we can't pick people up like that, as in with the dirty veg that we offer at SSC and just not sorted out and so on because… well, somehow for me that's part of CSA that people wash it themselves and thereby the farm doesn't have the burden. *But that's the big issue*: are we approaching society and changing ourselves, conform to society, or do we say, we do these things, and we do them in these ways, we do it differently and we change society. Society needs to adapt itself to us, because we have smarter ideas […] that is the fundamental question […].'

In opposition to the approach of being as integratable as possible into people's daily routines, prevalent at EC, Charlie's passionate plea emphasises a wider sentiment across SSC which calls on current and future members to acclimatise to SSC's ways of practising CSA. From such perspective, dominant ideas about prefigurative practices at SSC stand in direct opposition to prioritising large membership numbers.

While acknowledging that such political aspirations are based on conscious decisions in which members ought to 'start to identify with the product again', others like Quin (Worker) denounce such ideas as 'individualistic'. Instead, Hunter (Worker) maintains that aspirations to impacting society as a whole even necessitate 'structures akin to supermarkets', i.e., for instance, by bringing CSAs into a co-operative association with retailers to produce and distribute in larger dimensions. Such 'socialised supermarkets' would also entail reversing the renowned CSA logic of taking any produce of the farm, by reintroducing an element of choice for co-op members. Such perspectives are primarily motivated by ideas to covering the full range of food supply for CSA members, rather than prefiguring alternative norms and food practices, as common at SSC. Thus, SSC actors like Dylan (Worker) vehemently oppose such ideas based on a similar experience in a larger CSA:

> 'Dreadful really… there were conversations around having an app where one can somehow decide Friday afternoon what you have in your box on Saturday, where I thought, *for what do we actually need this app?* […] it creates a bubble where this individualism of society retains such a huge significance […].'

In addition to criticizing the financial resources and CO2 emissions necessary to offer CSA members a more convenient digital user experience, Dylan's account epitomises the predominant aspiration of SSC proponents to transform members subjectivities. Overall, such differences in understandings and disputes highlight deeper underlying rationales around how CSA ought to be organised.

7.3 Conclusion: Growing within, against, or beyond the food system?

Research outlined in this chapter examined conflictual social processes within both CSAs around the *politics of growth* emerging from diverging ideas and strategic orientations on scaling pathways, geared towards putting transformative imaginaries into organisational practice. Navigating these conflictual processes presents a significant challenge for CSA organising, aiming to prefigure alternative forms of agri-food provisioning in light of worsening socio-ecological conditions. As such, research participants across both co-ops and the wider network repeatedly highlighted that negotiating and debating such 'higher-level' questions constituted an ongoing challenge for CSA initiatives. Moreover, particularly at GIC, some respondents reportedly regretted the initial neglect of such strategic conversations, often seen as detached from the labour-intensive day-today organising of CSA.

Overall, findings of these cases exemplify the politics ingrained within social processes of negotiating and determining organisational strategies to scaling transformative impact within and through CSA co-ops. In particular, insights gained point towards the development of conflictual social forces in both organisations, which to various degrees privilege diverse organisational scaling pathways. Specifically, longstanding negotiation process within both CSAs signify a key debate around appropriate scaling pathways and strategic dimensions, demonstrating similarities in the escalating tensions around opposing forces, which ultimately erupted into conflict and a split amongst co-founders. Importantly, debates in both organisations were found to revolve around a divide between the effectiveness of more internal and external contributions of CSAs to wider socio-ecological change, concomitant with the politicisation of organisational limits and growth.

On the one hand, GIC's idiosyncratic organisational development into an expansion-oriented CSA co-op has raised questions both within the organisation and across the wider network, about the strategies and practices congruent with the prevalent *common*

ground of transforming agri-food provisioning. On the other, SSC's organisational development as a CSA co-op with a grassroots democratic structure, led longstanding negotiation processes to a collective decision not to expand the co-ops' acreage and activities, thereby purportedly relinquishing the opportunity to giving more people access to their alternative food provisioning structures. In an attempt to understand the conflictual social processes around respective scaling strategies, the findings show an in-depth analysis of the underlying value-judgements and politics of the wider CSA membership, underlying respective diverging social forces within both organisations. As such, the cases offer an understanding of how conflictual social processes have shifted the balance of power in favour of diverging idealistic transformative positions, described as a 'fast-growth' orientation at GIC, while solidifying the balance of power in favour of a 'slow growth approach' at SSC.

Overall, the analysis of both cases suggests that longstanding negotiation processes around the politics of growth opened up contingencies of considering a variety of alternative scaling routes, to reaching transformative imaginaries conducive to socio-ecological change. However, due to the struggles of a challenging everyday organisational life, such long-term strategic questions sometimes appeared to be sidelined in everyday organisational processes, resulting in a strategic indeterminacy that ultimately erupted into conflict rather than a productive debate. The outcomes of the ultimate decisions taken within such conflict-laden processes are not just implicating the scale, strategic direction, and workforce composition in both CSAs, but also affect the forms and processes of CSA work, as the subsequent chapter shows.

Chapter 8 - Working Common Land

The following chapter outlines findings on how food labour is organised and experienced by CSA actors in both organisations. First, findings at GIC (8.1) will be outlined, before turning to SSC (8.2). As such, the research analyses grounded accounts of how social relations and processes of food labour materialise in each CSA, as well as how workers experience them within the daily organisation of CSA work. As the analysis in the previous chapters has shown, the *common ground* of transformative imaginaries across both organisations diverts around conflictual strategising processes on how transformative change may best be scaled within and through CSA co-ops. Given the significance of such conflictual processes for the overarching direction of both CSAs, the analysis in this section focuses on how dominant scaling approaches impact CSA work and workplaces. Thus, the analysis shines a light on what could be described as a path dependency of work processes in the aftermath of the split, in order to gain an understanding of the social outcomes that flow from different strategic directions and organisational configurations.

Initially, ongoing difficulties of organising CSA labour processes will be interrogated within each co-op, by shedding light on collective efforts to determine and maintain suitable work structures. In both organisations, such efforts emerge out of a desire to stabilise what has often been experienced as a precarious and sometimes chaotic organisation of work within turbulent and energy-sapping phases of CSA development. Thus, efforts can be observed that aim to formalise the labour process in both CSAs. Such formalisation processes led CSA actors in GIC to organise work with an increasing emphasis on rationalising the workplace, developing more hierarchical divisions of labour, as well as a centralisation of decision-making. In contrast, SSC actors try to sustain a more horizontal organisation of labour while rationalising the workplace through what is often described as neglected economic factors, by generating investments to ease some of the burden of agricultural labour. The organisation of work at SSC thus builds on reinforcing a more egalitarian division of labour, in line with ambitions to maintain a collective sense of responsibility for the project and decentralised forms of decision-making. Findings of both cases demonstrate how organisational actors try to navigate the often contradictory demands of political aspirations, cultural understandings, and socio-economic necessities of organising food labour in CSAs.

Subsequently, the analysis interrogates how the navigation of contradictory demands impacts the experience and aspiration to prefigurate alternative forms of labour in both CSAs. Research presented in this section lends insights into possibilities of putting transformative socio-economic imaginaries (see 6.5.2) into CSA workplace practice. Findings are organised in eight different but interrelated dimensions, which give insight into four overarching themes of workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work in CSAs. Insights gained from both cases indicate a constant negotiation of degrees of co-determination, autonomy, (in)formal hierarchical relations, as well as the meaning, identification, and sustainability of work, in relation to material consequences emerging from dominant scaling pathways. By drawing on CSA work of the wider membership, findings also highlight how such work is negotiated against the backdrop of collective learning processes and ideas of scaling practices of solidarity within and across CSA co-ops. At GIC, work is impacted by patterns of fast and continuous expansion of acreage and the membership, which appears to facilitate socio-economic ambitions of improving agricultural labour conditions, to the detriment of social-cultural aspirations of working differently. At SSC, the cautious and slow growth approach has resulted in a focus on maintaining horizontal and collectivist forms of labour, while somewhat neglecting socio-economic aspects which prolonged a precarious existence of workers.

8.1 Cultivating Alternative Food Labour at GIC

8.1.1 Organising the 'Chaos'

Against the backdrop of conflictual processes around scaling strategies, the chosen path of GIC's expansive development has entailed lasting controversies around the forms, structures, and practices of CSA work. Not least due to the organisations' 'fast growth' approach to transforming food provisioning structures through CSA organising, GIC workers have found themselves in continuous restructuring processes in order to keep pace with an ever-enlarging membership base and farmland. Moreover, diverse relocations of the CSA, involving the reconstruction and maintenance of large-scale irrigations systems, storage space, and greenhouses, meant that workers had often been occupied with ensuring the infrastructure remained viable for agricultural production. On top of that, the conflictual separation process has left

emotional marks on many GIC actors, also resulting in a high amount of fluctuation across work teams (Focus Group).

Accordingly, several commentators referred to GIC's early years as a 'chaotic' time (Haven, Worker), when describing a sense of disorganisation in parallel to the CSAs expansive development. Others, like Ocean (Member), ascribed various inner-organisational conflicts as emerging out of such perceived disorganisation, as GIC primarily 'grew out of enthusiasm':

> 'I think it simply was because of there […] somehow not being a good team structure or leadership, or however one is working together. So, there were simply no structures, but many were driven by this enthusiasm for the project and that it's something different and that one can make something great out of it. And I think there were for a long time no supervisions or structures, where simply conflicts happen, […] conflicts around who does how much? And who has how much holiday? And who lets the others do the work so to say? […] Due to this, there was a certain fluctuation […] were there were larger conflicts and then also people left […].'

Echoing such impression, Storm (Co-director) argued that GIC's internal structures were still 'lagging behind' the volume of harvest shares that are actually handled by the CSA. They argue much of their work at GIC thus far has been focused on clarifying and readjusting structures, the insufficiency of which had repeatedly been pointed out to them by the wider workforce.

Such identified need to improve the work structures of the CSA appeared even more pressing for GIC actors in light of renewed expansive developments. To affect the desired alternative food supply structure in the region, the repeated burst of growth thus presented the CSA with yet another enormous challenge to create the personnel and logistical conditions for significantly more members and harvest shares. While some members like Marion reduced the issue of growing structures to a mere 'standard problem' facing any growing business, an overarching sense was manifest across respondents that managing this transition constituted a 'decisive [and] critical phase' (Lake, Member) for GIC. As such, several GIC actors alluded to such transition phase as outgrowing the project character of a 'start-up' (Brooks, Worker) into more established structures, as determining the challenging road ahead for the team on site.

Ultimately, such insights appeared to emerge out of what many respondents observed as limitations of more informal ways of organising CSA. Parker (Operations Manager), for instance, highlights the importance of structures 'the larger the team becomes', when saying:

> 'So, thus far our style has always been a bit like, we'll just run ahead and do stuff, but that just doesn't work anymore with so many people. But the people need something that gives them a little bit of orientation, like at least guard rails left and right, which you have to specify somehow, or conferring powers very clearly […]'

With an overarching sense that the co-op was 'bursting at the seams' (Storm, co-director), many members of the core team were thus convinced that the necessity of enlarging the workforce at GIC's farm has to be accompanied with formalising work structures. However, given past conflicts around GIC's scaling strategy, the upcoming growth plan and restructuration process did not remain without further contestations, as Skye (Operations Manager) remarks, when saying 'it's sometimes problematic that… not everyone in the team supported it to 100% that we grow':

> 'Because for some people it's the imagination that this is now the farm and the people with whom I work for the next 20 years […] and I make my workplace nice. And of course, it's very confrontative if you say ok, we […] grow further and we will add more people, also into our team and the structures change. […] I believe, it's actually a very, very, very, large obstacle or it simply requires a lot of work, to build a structure that conforms to our aspirations. So, a structure which […] doesn't have such a pecking order, but where we have a good cooperation, where everyone has their place, where everyone can participate as much as they want, but that no one goes to the dogs. And that we achieve our goals purposefully, like that we are simply a functioning farm where no one is overloaded but […] one that is economically viable.'

To Skye, reconciling diverging social forces at GIC around a common project that realigns the expansionary approach with ideals of good working conditions and participatory structures, signifies a large challenge for the co-op. Thus, they concede that they and their colleagues have not yet managed to clarify 'how [they] actually want to organise [themselves]'. In this sense, Spencer (Co-director) assured that it is a

priority for them that no one gets overloaded in the pending significant enlargement of GIC. While emphasising that the expansion also entails possibilities of having 'more of the good things', they caution that such development necessitates the organisation to 'actively design and create' better structures. Nonetheless, for many respondents the envisioned formalisation process appeared to urge more fundamental organisational questions, as Lake (Member) confirms with a sigh:

> 'I think we are in a stage where it's about […] not always saying *a little more is still possible* with the same people, and we are all committed […]. I think there's a very fundamental problem of such medium-sized enterprises who are […] accustomed to a very, very intensive collective growth and collaborative forms of working, if they reach a certain limit in terms of staff and extent of workload, which then becomes critical because it urges the question: Are we taking a step further as organisation? Which then also means levels of hierarchy or impersonal forms of organisation and cooperation, like stricter structures […]. And there, a lot have failed at this point of being a start-up with lots of commitment and willingness to then saying at a critical point – *and now?* Are we growing further, or growing ourselves to death, or what does it mean? Do we change ourselves in principle? […]'

Confronted with such fundamental questions, many respondents like Kai (Worker) raised similar concerns about 'being able to keep up' with the reconfiguration of work structures. Across perspectives, an overarching sense thus became palpable that a lot of work needed to be done at GIC to reconfigure work processes and structures, while ensuring good working conditions.

8.1.2 Formalising GIC Labour

Organising GIC's renewed expansion alongside readjusting work structures, while not sacrificing transformative imaginaries, represented a colossal task in the eyes of GIC respondents. In line with the identified necessity to clarify roles, tasks, and responsibilities, a formalisation process has thus been set in motion at the CSA. Such formalisation process can be observed in tendencies towards increasing and interrelated efforts towards professionalisation, a stricter division of labour, and the centralisation of decision-making at GIC.

8.1.2.1 Rationalisation: 'Professionalising' the CSA Workplace

In light of the upcoming expansion, calls to 'tighten' (Storm, co-director) and rationalise work structures were made abundantly, in particular, from members of GIC's core team. Across the wider organisation, such calls have been echoed by what many informants observed as a process of professionalisation.

In contrast to conventional farms, Skye (Operations Manager) argues that GIC follows 'different logics', which first and foremost provide farmworkers with higher incomes. Nonetheless, due to producing in economically less productive ways, e.g., through less specialised forms of cultivation, they contend that GIC needs to 'think about efficiency to some extent' or risk 'building a castle in the sky'. With a sense of inevitability, Skye thus maintains that instead of continuing to work 'that unprofessionally' while growing further, GIC needs to 'rationalise, perhaps also at the cost of the team'. Pointing to the praxis of holding regular review and forecast meetings in which every worker has the chance to express their feelings about their work, for instance, they remark that such rounds 'take a lot of working time' while 'add[ing] little' to the collective undertaking. Instead, Skye (Operations Manager) underlines the importance to 'professionalise' work processes, e.g., by calculating the actual costs of veg and to determine further avenues to specialise CSA work. Echoing such considerations, Noel (Board Member) points to the opportunities the added growth of GIC opens up to 'specialise and […] professionalise in certain matters that are currently still deficient'. In this vein, the professionalisation process is understood to reduce conflict and to consolidate workflows in clearer ways, understood as facilitating workers well-being.

Others, like Marion (Member), take a more explicit stance when arguing that an honest conversation has not yet taken place about what they perceive as a 'slowing down' of work processes due to the voluntary participation of GIC members at the farm. Instead, they advocate for a more 'pragmatic […] not romantic approach' to organising CSA workflows, for instance, when picking weeds at GIC's farm:

> 'It just doesn't help, if [our] aim really is to provision for all [people in the region] with a respective pricing policy […] this dawdling away of volunteers doesn't contribute to our goal […].'

Indeed, several respondents indicated that transforming tasks that have previously been based on voluntary labour into a paid employment, constitutes one major aspect of the professionalisation process. As such, Spencer (Co-director) explains that bringing 'all the routine work […] into routine processes' in order to be less dependent on the help of voluntary labour, is an explicit ambition at GIC. Extending beyond paying decent wages, however, the improvement and maintenance of good working conditions by, for instance, enabling workers to take holidays in the peak summer season, is unheard of across the agri-food sector, as many highlighted favourably. According to Parker (Operations Manager), such ambition has been set collectively by GIC farmworkers, despite the overall conviction that no seasonal workers should be employed at the co-op, who would have been able to absorb seasonal work peaks. Due to the characteristics of seasonal farmwork, as often being based on exploited migrant labour from lower income countries, GIC respondents were adamant that 'the production of food should not be based on' (Storm, co-director) such practice at GIC, generally perceived as standard across the agri-food sector. Doing so would effectively undermine the ambition of achieving good working conditions for all at the CSA. However, organising work this way leads GIC to be 'effectively always one person short, the whole time in peak season' (Parker, Operations manager). Adding to such complications, Skye (Operations Manager), maintains:

> 'Now we have very pragmatically the need to rationalise ourselves. We recognise, for instance, we have difficulties in our cultivation to find team members who do the simple gardening activities, assistants […]. Our assistants earn more than other farmers who take on full responsibility, but we [still] find it difficult […] The work is very unfulfilling, it's chopping, weeding, harvesting, and planting. That's tiresome at some point. And the people are always changing. So, now we need to think […] how do we organise a team that is able to act, so that we can work well?'

In contrast to 'everyone doing everything' as it used to be common practice at GIC, Skye emphasises that the organisation needs to think about how CSA work could be done 'more efficiently, so you need fewer assistant workers'. Given the initial dependency of voluntary and often precarious labour to getting GIC off the ground, rationalisation measures have thus overall been welcomed as facilitating decent working conditions at the farm. Lake (Member), for instance, highlights efforts to train

farmworkers directly at GIC, and to recruiting employees with the necessary skills for CSA work, were enabled through the 'professionalisation boost'. In light of the growing volume of work and what some viewed as a 'large structural problem' (Riley, Member) of 'finding qualified personnel […] to practically do the cultivation' and retaining them 'at GIC in the long-term' (Storm, co-director), such efforts have seemingly become critical. Overall, several GIC actors thus spoke about 'normal steps' of GIC as a 'normal commercial enterprise' in 'professionalis[ing] itself with the size and responsibility over time', which to Avery (Member) signified an organisational duty towards the membership, in assuring that their contributions are administered sufficiently.

8.1.2.2 Division of Labour: 'We simply are the Management'

In line with rationalising work structures, a shift towards hierarchisation could be observed. In this vein, many GIC actors called for a stronger division of labour, roles and responsibilities, along with more hierarchical governance structures.

Since a large part of GIC's work structures had 'grown organically' (Brooks, Worker) out of people's capacities, various informants highlighted the necessity for a stronger segmentation of work responsibilities. As such, several workers described similar career progressions as Kai (Worker), who initially started with assisting in labouring GICs' fields, before growing into a role with team responsibility, arguing 'it wasn't necessarily clearly defined […] what [this] job was'. In addition, Ocean (Member) highlights that GIC's growth dynamic sparked lots of interest amongst people to volunteer for the co-op, yet not all coming with a similar 'attitude' and a similar 'understanding' of what CSA work entails. Thus, roles were often unclear or left undefined, while it had been neglected to inquire about skills, disposition, and the suitability to different kinds of work amongst recruits. Instead, the basis for employment had often been the interest and sympathy for the project. To Ocean (Member), such neglect often resulted in a mismatch which brought up conflicts within teams about 'who does how much, who takes responsibility, and who never takes responsibility'. In order to resolve such conflicts and to define work structures more clearly, many respondents therefore argued for the necessity to determine a framework to organise the work in more functional ways.

For many, the renewed growth impetus thus provided a salient point for the organisation to review and clarify roles and responsibilities. In the words of the focus group participant from GIC's core team, such increased efforts can thus be seen as attempts of 'control[ing] the pile of chaos a little better', by 'defining tasks more clearly […] instead of leaving it to chance'. Accordingly, some informants reported attempts from within the core team to, e.g., setting up a 'job description' (Storm, co-director) or an organisational 'organigram' (Brooks, Worker) for the first time. Many members like River observed such efforts for a clearer and more 'professionalised' division of labour as a positive development, when pointing out that 'tasks that were previously covered by volunteers are now paid jobs' and that 'it becomes more and more defined who actually does what'. Overall, such measures towards a more defined division of labour can be perceived as derived from domineering strategies of effecting a structural change of food provisioning, as Marion (Member) indicates:

> 'I believe it's a fallacy that you can save the world somehow with 10.000 smaller CSAs […]. If I imagine I would need to be at a CSA for every object that I buy throughout the year – well congrats, that's not going to work. In this sense, this basic division of labour […] is one building block.'

Given the previous ambiguity of job roles, Parker (Operations Manager) explains that boundaries were 'drawn more sharply' between different areas of work at GIC, resulting in a 'stronger segmentation' which represents the advantage of being able to 'concentrate on [one's] area' of work. Adding to their plea of specifying guard rails and giving workers orientation, Parker (Operations manager) thus explains:

> 'We currently try to implement such form of structure. In the sense of, what levels of hierarchy do we need? Who has exactly what responsibilities? And what are the requirements for the positions?'

In Parker's words, establishing such 'framework' for people signifies an important step to helping workers to understand their area of responsibility within which they can move 'relatively freely' and manage themselves in the best ways possible. Nonetheless, they maintain that all such efforts of making a farmworker's job appealing ultimately reach limits. While doing farmwork can be rewarding in many ways, they argue, it remains a 'hard job' with many 'extremely stressful days at which you ask yourself, why am I actually doing this?' (Parker, Operations Manager).

In line with such contemplations, expanding vertical organisational structures appeared inevitable in the accounts of many respondents. Several members, like Lake, claimed that the organisational challenges sparked through the growth dynamic naturally required 'people who lead, guide, and help move [the organisation] forward'. Similarly, Avery (Member) perceived the emerging hierarchy as the natural order of things, which despite previous struggles with what they view as more 'idealistically-oriented' members wanting to do away with bureaucratic tendencies, signified a necessity for the co-op. Most obviously, the push towards hierarchisation can be observed in the growing conviction displayed by Storm (co-director) who, despite an internal struggle of not feeling like a 'predestined leader', feels a sense of responsibility to occupy such role at GIC:

> 'In terms of this leadership role, that's a little… well, that's actually difficult. In some sense, I have the strong feeling that we [co-directors] need to put the focus on conveying to people that *we simply are the management*, and do not somehow clean the spades if someone falls ill. So, that it becomes clear what's behind the co-op, and what happens if we don't do this or that well.'

In contrast to some previous co-directors who had been involved more operatively in work processes, Storm argues that the organisations' transition now requires managing expectations across the workforce about what their role should be about. Nonetheless, despite seeing the need to taking on the responsibility of giving workers' orientation, several respondents like Skye (Operations Manager) emphasised a struggle between imaginaries of more horizontal ways of working and the perceived necessities of vertical distributions of power. Elaborating on what they see as difficulties of community-based organising in contrast to more conventional farms, Skye argues:

> 'I find that very difficult, to share tasks, inconvenient tasks, if this clear responsibility doesn't exist. I think that often led to conflicts here. Because on one side we are a very dynamic project that grows very quickly and also has a clear direction, [so we needed] a strong hierarchy, short communication channels, and fast decision-making… but on the other side [we had] a very flat hierarchy, or no defined structure at all, and rather laborious communication channels. So, that wasn't and still isn't fully resolved… That's a large problem of such alternative organisations that simply tasks that normally were done by

> a boss – who also has the interest because they eventually skim off profits – that isn't fully implementable in such an employment relationship.'

Other workers, like Kai, described similar struggles to not replicate hierarchical relations of conventional farms at GIC as the 'greatest challenge' when delineating the existence of a 'distinct narrative […] about what GIC is and should be'. With the image that the CSA does not signify a 'classical business' with clearly defined hierarchies, they argue that expectations from sections of the workforce grew about propagated ways of how 'labour can be organised differently' (Kai) at GIC, i.e., in non-hierarchical ways. In contrast to such perspectives, they argue other workers allegedly expected clear hierarchies and instructions and were confused if those did not exist. According to Kai, such divide often led to conflicts when diverging expectations clashed with the messy organisational reality, which led GIC actors to move away from an initially experimental and structurally less defined approach to what now resembles a 'stronger hierarchical structure'.

8.1.2.3 Centralisation: 'You cannot discuss everything'

Alongside the increasingly vertical orientation towards governance structures, many GIC actors emphasised the need to centralise decision-making processes.

To several respondents, the need for specialised knowledge and expertise of CSA labour represents an important precondition legitimising further centralisation. Despite introducing themselves as 'not a fan of hierarchies' and highlighting their initial efforts of trying to keep the organisation of work as non-hierarchical as possible, Parker (Operations Manager), explains that their experience of everyday work life at GIC made them reconsider:

> 'The question is how are decisions made and who is able to make decisions, for instance? And I think, here it gets difficult very, very quickly […]. How should I find consensus with someone who lacks specialised knowledge? […] Or if we actually move to a higher level, I believe it becomes more difficult, and I think that's the deficit of many of these initiatives… who actually has the […] knowledge to design alternatives […] without having the foundations? […] I simply find that difficult to discuss with someone who lacks a certain knowledge […].'

By advocating for work on an equal footing in daily encounters, Parker argues that 'hierarchies do not [necessarily] make the difference'. Instead, they argue for the viability of co-determining major decisions within annual general assemblies, while stressing that having the 'expertise' is vital to take 'daily operative' decisions, e.g., when deciding on what to cultivate at the CSA. Notwithstanding the 'strong desire' of some members to participate in the yearly cultivation plan, Brooks (Worker) also maintains the co-op 'needs to be pragmatic' in such processes. Thus, they emphasise the need to acknowledge knowledge differences, while surveying members' desires. Similarly, several members, like Marion, remarked that hierarchical structures and distributing decision-making authority onto fewer individuals was in and of themselves not an issue to them, but rather that it depends on what job needed to be done. Describing themselves as 'not really on the romantic side', they argue that some tasks just do not appear to suit grassroots democratic processes and 'discussing everything' at length. As such, recent collective processes of determining guiding principles at GIC, for instance, appeared 'too much like a discussion competition' to them. Thus, to Marion (Member), letting the 'experts decide' while having an opinion poll once a year would be sufficient.

Echoing such understanding, several members, like Lake, noted that in fact, 'most members [were] glad that co-directors and supervisory board would sort things out'. As an example, Lake recalled that the decision for the most recent expansion had been made primarily within the directorate and core team at the premises, while sending out an opinion poll to gauge the general feeling about such decision across the wider membership. Accordingly, Lake remembers that the participation in this poll, held on an online exchange platform, had not even crossed 5% of members, while another poll regarding the possibility of extending GIC's operations to fermented beverages nearly reached half of the membership. The difference in participation gave Lake reason to believe that there was indeed not a high level of interest in decentralised decision making. Instead, according to them, the wider membership appeared to trust in the capabilities of co-directors. Ocean (Member) thus claims that for many members 'the knowledge that one can theoretically participate and have a say' often appears to weigh more than 'actually doing it'.

In this sense, Noel (Board Member) grants there was 'hardly any discussion' about the recent growth plan, nor 'was it requested' by the membership. Instead, they explain

that the strategic orientation had created a path dependence which 'automatically' lend the mandate for the approach. Nonetheless, Noel admits that many proposals were 'pre-discussed' within the core team and then 'only being put to a vote' by the wider membership at general assemblies, clearly indicating a more 'top down' logic from their perspective. Validating such insights, River (Member) argues that many decisions were being prepared, evaluated, and eventually often taken by co-directors without much involvement by the wider membership, which to them only appears necessary in larger decisions. Accordingly, Spencer (Co-director) highlights the need for advanced trust in the co-directors 'who were employed exactly for this purpose', to act and decide in best interests of the wider membership, when saying:

> 'Our main concern is not that we discuss every decision with all people and that we always need to collectively decide but that the basic rules, according to which we work […], a mix of general principles, constitution, and self-conception, are backed by everyone […] and the operative decisions are taken by [us] […]. Because we are the executives, and it would simply overwhelm the entire system if you would constantly discuss every little thing in grassroots democratic ways […]. That's also not our understanding, but rather that it needs people who take the decisions, who push in order to develop a certain dynamic. But the overarching points are then decided collectively.'

When discussing the possibility of a spin-off side project on beverages at a general assembly, for instance, Spencer (Co-director) argues that 'windows of opportunity' may have already closed if various pathways would be discussed at length from the start. Instead, they argue for a balanced approach to consider what decisions may need a larger mandate from members, and others which may best be achieved through 'opinion polls' in order to receive a legally non-binding 'pattern of opinions' and ensure efficient decision-making procedures. Referring to a 'symptomatic' situation at this assembly, Riley (Member) argues that after weighing up the pros and cons, a member of the assembly summed up the palpable ambivalence by asking 'what [the directorate] would recommend we do now?' (Riley, Member). In addition, many members like Avery described a random composition and a low level of membership participation at general assemblies which often remains well below 10%, due to the rapidly expanding membership base. As such, Avery (Member) confirms the approach of top-down proposals, pre-discussed in smaller circles and 'nodded off' in assemblies

as legitimate to not lose time sensitive opportunities. Nonetheless, they admit such processes had in the past also led to critiques by members, e.g., during the first guiding principles process which had been determined only by a handful of people from within the core team due to 'time pressure'. Despite such 'quarrels' against decisions being increasingly taken centrally at GIC, several members like Sasha confirm the viability of such procedures:

> 'You cannot discuss everything. I always said, certain parts you simply need to decide as co-directors, stop, full stop, finish. Otherwise, things don't move forward, if you discuss everything then you are in a commune and that also doesn't go any further. […] Let those decide who have the best insights and the most experience, they also have the highest risk […].'

By arguing against what they experienced as 'eternal' discussions, Sasha's account signifies a prevalent sentiment across a larger segment of GIC members problematising decentralised and lengthy discussion making procedures.

8.1.3 Experiencing GIC Workplaces

Against the backdrop of processes of formalising CSA labour, the following section provides an in-depth analysis of how employed GIC workers experience their day-to-day work. In light of the prevalent growth-driven externally-oriented scaling strategy, the analysis links closely to imaginaries aiming for better agricultural working conditions and to prefigure alternative ways of working more generally. Findings are presented in four overarching categories of workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work, each featuring two distinct themes.

8.1.3.1 Workplace Democracy

Co-determination: A 'Fait accompli'

Alongside efforts from the core team to rationalise the labour process at GIC, many workers commented on the lack of co-determination in their daily work, perceived as arising from the tendency towards increased centralisation at the co-op. Most distinctly, several critical voices raised concerns about not being heard in the most recent round of expansion, announced by the directorate. While showing an understanding for the decision made by co-directors based on their level of insight, Haven (Worker), for instance, argues:

> 'Yeah, we did talk about it, [but] some people would have wished that they would be asked more whether they actually wanted to grow. And there are some worries that […] the work gets too much or that work is loaded on oneself that wasn't there before, and it is already a lot of work, and those over hours also need to be reduced somehow. [So], it is also seen with scepticism.'

Apart from highlighting the need to employ more trained farmworkers in their work area to shoulder increased volumes of work, Haven also appeared disappointed about what they perceived as poor participation of the wider membership in the poll issued about recent growth plans. Along with some other workers, and by describing the outlook of a 'tough year' ahead, they left the organisation shortly after the interview. Echoing concerns that 'some workers don't want to grow', Max (Worker) describes an overall friendly working environment in which everyone is always 'free to express [their] opinion'. Nonetheless, they give concern to their experience by saying 'whatever we discuss, they decide from the top down', when arguing:

> 'It's not [the] real alternative that we are looking for as a society, I think. Because it's the same way of thinking and the same power from the top to down like we have in […] capitalist organisations and so on.'

Rather than opening up the question whether GIC 'should grow' as a co-op, Kai (Worker) remarks that an employee survey had been issued in the course of determining the further expansionary development of the CSA. Alongside consultations with individual employees, such questionnaire aimed to see whether workers were generally on board with it. While describing such survey as 'overdue', however, Kai views such process as lending a 'certain legitimacy' to the board decision. Taking a more critical perspective, Frankie (Worker), who had since left the organisation, recounts the team meeting in which the 'growth strategy [had been] conveyed […]' to workers in 'a very bad manner' from their perspective:

> 'Then we had this team meeting […] where they did this totally banal… workshop with us. Yeah, you know people stand on the field since 5-6 am in the morning. It is 8 pm, and then such a team exercise, like with no culture of teamwork. Then we do it, and then: *okay yeah, this was your team exercise and now we tell you how the growth [plan] works*: *So, we'll grow exactly like in previous years percentagewise. That means, [x amount] of boxes in 5 years –*

per week…! Yeah, there were nearly all employees […] and when I looked around, nearly all jaws dropped. Because we never really had a period of rest [as in] now we achieved something… but [people] were like - *what?! We need to pack [that many] boxes per week? How should that work…?'*

By referring back to the large vision of transforming agri-food structures for the region, Frankie describes what they perceived as disbelief amongst the workforce to whom it had never really been made clear what such strategy means for their work. Other workers like Ash, who had also left the organisation, described a similar team consultation meeting around a restructuration of GIC as an 'alibi process'. Explaining that a plan had already been drafted in advance of what would happen, they argue:

> 'The team had very often been confronted with a fait accompli, like: *Hey, we are now 150* – to name a figure – *shares more in two weeks*, and it was more like a *deal with it*. As in, little agreement beforehand like *hey, what does this mean for you if there are suddenly 100 more* and so on… So, a lot of decisions that were taken and then in the best case discussed in hindsight.'

Ash emphasises what they perceive as little exchange about the growth process across work teams and the wider membership, ultimately resulting in the absence of any 'process of participation' in taking such decisions. Overall, such accounts point to a growing gap between workers higher up in the emerging hierarchy, e.g., who professed the growth and centralisation of GIC as common sense, as opposed to workers further down, e.g., stressing that they their voices were often not being heard.

Mirroring such lack of co-determination, several members articulated similar experiences. In reference to the recent growth process, Kit (Member), for instance, remarked they felt 'a bit run over' by the procedure, arguing they were 'not really asked' but their approval appeared already 'implied from above'. Due to the internal development and ratification of decisions prior to assemblies, Robin (Member), who scaled back their participation due to what they describe as 'forces' pushing towards the increasing hierarchisation of GIC, labelled the recent growth decision as an apparent 'mock participation'. Similarly, Ocean criticises what they perceived as 'very little' opportunities to influence decision making during annual general assemblies describing it as 'fake participation' leaving them to feel frustrated and 'a bit fooled'. They argue, general assemblies were often 'overloaded with content' and 'pro forma'

democratic processes that left little room for discussion. In this vein, Frankie (Worker) stresses what they viewed as a general 'lack of space for people' at general assemblies, in which members can discuss their thoughts and ideas. They recalled being 'shocked' at several instances in which members' inquiries were cut off due to the lack of time, in which the majority had been spent on legally required agreements, e.g., about balance sheets. Such instances and the increasing use of opinion polls as the basis for decisions seemingly left many members like Rene 'disappointed' about the lack of space for in-depth discussion and more participatory forms of decision-making.

Thus, many respondents stressed the need for more honesty about the limited possibilities of co-determination in making decisions at GIC, while calls for 'sociocracy' (Frankie, Worker) had gained currency in collective processes of determining guiding principles for GIC after the split. However, responding to such calls for more horizontal organisational structures, Skye (Operations Manager) explains that such ideas never appeared viable as opposed to the necessity of alleviating the perceived 'vagueness' of structures:

> 'It's interesting because many of these ideals or imaginations that one had initially now are being thrown overboard. At the beginning, there was this strong willingness to take the team with you and [have] lots of participation, and everyone wanted to get involved. And it was also wanted that everyone had the imagination that if everyone participates, it gets better […] and it was wanted somehow to try and satisfy everyone's needs. But in the end it was like, the people who carried the responsibility got least out of it. So, this creates an imbalance, and that […] did not function in the long run […].'

Several other respondents articulated similar scepticism about the equal weight being attached to the voices of, e.g., long-term committed GIC actors, such as the co-founders, as opposed to newer members who may not stay with the CSA very long. While Max (Worker) thus perceived the centralised decision-making authority as justified, they wonder if precisely such hierarchy may be a reason for why half of the workforce left GIC since they started.

Autonomy: 'Orientation' or 'Total Control'?

Aiming towards improving working conditions on site, several GIC respondents elaborated on increasing efforts of getting the labour process under control. By adding

to their plea for good working conditions and a culture of work on an 'equal footing', Parker (Operations manager), for instance, reiterates the need for clear responsibilities 'in particular for people who don't have the strong intrinsic motivation'. Contemplating on their experience of work life at GIC's farm, they argue:

> 'On a daily basis, I have also noticed that it's really difficult for people… to simply be free and autonomous. That's a large challenge, yeah because freedom does also mean responsibility […]. Especially, if I support decisions, then I am responsible at the same time and cannot say, for instance, *alright yeah, but I actually do not want to come for watering on Saturday*.'

Concurring with such challenge, Haven (Worker), described their difficulty of being assigned 'lots of freedom' in their role, while at the same time carrying the 'sole responsibility' for their area of work, which appeared daunting to them. Nonetheless, Frankie (Worker) also decried a seeming fear or absent sense of feeling empowered, amongst parts of the workforce during their time at GIC, to taking matters into their own hands. To Ocean (Member), some CSA workers seemingly find it hard to cope with more autonomy and instead 'easier to work within hierarchies', while others strive for higher levels of 'self-determination' in the labour process. Navigating such dichotomy amongst sections of workers thus appeared like a large challenge for organising work at GIC.

Accordingly, many members of the core team, like Storm (Co-director), perceived the need for measures that could facilitate more guidance in CSA work. At the same time, however, Storm also pronounces a strong sense of aversion ('I could actually throw up when I hear myself') when alluding to the fact that such process necessitates co-directors to 'building in a certain distance' to the workforce. Displaying an ambivalence to embracing their previously explicitly pronounced leadership role, they thus describe what they perceived as a 'painful' but necessary process of defining and carrying out 'three-monthly target agreements' with workers in an emerging organisational development process. From their perspective, such process would eventually help to clarify 'what tasks [people] are working on', but also to 'learn to say no to things' that one does not have capacity for within three months. While some workers indicated that such plans had been perceived as reasonable solution to manage

challenges of ‘start-up enterprises […] becoming large quickly’ (Haven), Timber (Worker) remarks:

> ‘They are implementing an *objectives and key results* (OKR) tool… a management tool. That’s cool […] total control so to say. On the one hand, I think it’s good, in a sense of helping people to help themselves, in a way to organise yourself […]. You have got everything in view, you can evaluate everything, so it’s a super control tool […]. But it will also be quite demanding [with] such an operational management [tool] […]. Some people also feel like being put under pressure or controlled with many things, and then there are key figures and optimisation here, efficiency there…’

Accordingly, a sense of uncertainty amongst workers became palpable when contrasting the purported benefits of the OKR tool to rationalise work processes with the potential downsides of an increasing sense of managerial control. Not least due to such uncertainty, voices demanding a works council or employee spokesperson appeared to gain currency, emphasising a growing sense of frustration amongst parts of the workforce. According to several informants, controversies around such calls indicated it to be a ‘sensitive topic’ (Timber, Worker) in which some people appeared to feel personally attacked. Arguing that such calls emerged primarily out of ‘one unhappy person’ within the organisation, however, Storm (co-director), argues:

> ‘I do actually compare that very often with parenting and my children […]. On the one hand, they also need fostering, so they become independent. On the other, [I need to] clearly show the boundaries. And we had that […] several times with a few employees […]. I think last year […] there was just such a low point, really because of a massive dissatisfaction in the team, and indeed there were 3-4 people who joined forces and started to talk badly […].’

As such, Storm (co-director) and other members of the core team assign the perceived dissatisfaction amongst the growing workforce to previously ‘non-existent clear responsibilities’ and by not having a ‘clear position’ in the past that would have ‘give[n] people orientation’. Despite stressing they ‘would never talk to an adult human being like a child’, Storm emphasises that ‘some [employees] just appear to need that’. Similarly, by describing themselves as necessarily growing into a ‘leadership role’ due to the intense organisational setup period of GIC, Terry (Co-

founder) argues they felt like being ‘mummy and daddy’ for their workers, during their time at GIC. Such arguments point to what some GIC actors in positions of responsibility underlined as the need for a certain kind of paternalism in CSA work relations, despite a professed reluctance for such managerial positions.

8.1.3.2 Work Relations

(In)formal Hierarchies: ‘Office’ vs. ‘Field’ Mentality

The often subliminal discontent about the increasing lack of workplace democracy at GIC also appeared to signify a growing distance between workers with more administrative tasks, making the bulk of decisions at GIC, and the wider workforce. Overall, an absence of job rotation and an increasing lack of understanding for each other’s labour, appears to further hierarchical relations and discontent amongst workers.

Accordingly, workers like Haven referred to an ‘office-mentality’ of co-directors, when describing what they perceived as inhabiting ‘sometimes really different worlds’ in comparison to others primarily working the CSA land. To them, such different working worlds seemingly lead to conflicts. For instance, they explain somewhat humorously that before directors were moving into separate, specially built office facilities, confrontations about various ‘priorities’ were being had, e.g., about the cleanliness of facilities. More than just a trivial matter, however, such confrontations appeared to underlie different understandings about the value of dissimilar work at the CSA, as Haven explains:

> ‘We do have some farming assistants, and they do often see the office-people in their [building] sitting at their laptops […] and think like *okay, why are they sitting there the whole day? I mean one just cannot do that much on a laptop* and *that’s not proper work, they should come to the field!*’

While doing some office-hours themselves in their role at GIC, Haven argues that conveying an understanding for such kind of work to other GIC workers, who solely work the land, remains difficult. Confirming such insights, Max (Worker) argues that GIC has ‘too many people in the office’ as an agricultural co-op. While acknowledging necessary planning work being done in office jobs at the co-op, they highlight that the surplus to cover the costs of office employees’ wages has to be generated by the hard

physical labour being done in the fields. Seemingly vigilant about such issues, Storm (Co-director) argues for the importance to create transparency and a common understanding about everyone's tasks and roles. As such, they explain it would be necessary to communicate 'what the co-directors actually do', by adding that after all, they 'are also just employed here'. Nonetheless, articulating their frustration about often having to do things 'themselves […] if [they] wanted something extra' from workers, they ask: 'is the directorate just the idiot who always steps in if others don't feel like it?'. Such account alludes to the sentiment for a clear division of labour and tasks at GIC.

In this sense, workers, like Timber, referred to what they perceived as a prevalent 'us and them' notion between members of the core team and the wider workforce, leading to frustration and workers exiting the organisation. Moreover, Ocean (Member), points to a 'hierarchy between those who are in the office and those on the fields', which to them is a product of farmworkers not being 'represented in the directorate at all' since the very beginning. Perceiving such hierarchy as a critical issue, they argue:

> 'That also often becomes clear in the salary hierarchy because the people in the office of course have [university degrees] or come out of project management […]. I find that totally critical that one has such a valuation. Because no matter how many managers a company like this has, if no one cultivates the veg then it does not function […]!'

By comparing GIC to other CSAs, Ocean criticises that co-directors now seemingly occupy a 'wholly different position' at GIC, being primarily responsible for managerial tasks but 'not involved in the primary production' as such. Seemingly symbolising such differences outwardly, such notion had also previously led to controversies across the wider network when the co-op made headlines through a press release in a popular journal for managers, in advance of the split. While some network actors perceived such publication as rather 'embarrassing' (Fieldnotes), Terry (Co-founder) remembers some voices arguing GIC would 'now sell [the] beautiful CSA idea to capitalism'.

Indeed, Ocean contends that the composition of GIC co-directors and the supervisory board has thus far primarily attracted people who 'work well in hierarchies', ostensibly discouraging more participatory tendencies amongst parts of the workforce. For Noel, such realisation had led to what they described as a 'reality shock', when initially

starting their position on the supervisory board at the time of the split, noticing how much their work resembled a 'conventional commercial enterprise'. Describing their previous engagement as general member as 'clearly more idealistic', however, they argue that their recognition that it needs 'more than just idealism in such organisation […] for it to work well' had been important for their continuous engagement. Similarly, more sympathetic voices, like Skye (Operations Manager), emphasised the different 'understanding' of work 'if working in an office and doing project management […] in a more regulated setting' than working 'with nature' in an agricultural operation. Being placed in between administrators and the wider workforce in the organisational hierarchy, Skye thus emphasises that such different understandings necessitate constant negotiation on both sides.

Meaningful work: 'It's your job now'

Along with an ostensibly growing dissonance between field and office work, many respondents also observed a shift in attitudes to work amongst GIC labourers.

In particular, such shift appeared to become more and more visible in a felt discrepancy between widespread imaginaries amongst people looking for meaningful work at GIC and their lived experiences. Given the prevalence of GIC workers who changed careers, e.g., by quitting well-paid corporate jobs, to follow their enthusiasm for a different kind of work, such imaginaries over time appeared out of reach for many. Referring back to what they view as a need to organise more efficiently, Skye (Operations Manager) remarks that:

> 'The larger the team becomes […] the more you have workers in the team, [...] who […] come to work, but not because they identify with the whole big picture, and now don't really have the need to listen in a big round what went badly last month, and what happens next month. But they come, there is a morning meeting, and that's enough… So, it's different than if one is a small group, where this is much more essential, perhaps also more interesting for everyone [to know] ok what's next, and […] how [one] can get involved? So, these design options that existed for everyone in the beginning got a bit lost. That now focuses on less people taking responsibility.'

With the rapid growth of GIC, Ash (Worker) argues that lots of people who joined the organisation at later stages had a different 'access' to the organisation. To them, more

and more people were seemingly ‘*only* […] interested in a well-paid workplace and good working conditions’. While some people on a ‘quest for meaning’ were still joining at later stages, by seeing GIC as a ‘very idealistic project’ and an ‘alternative’ with possibilities to ‘doing things differently’, Ash sees such desires as ostensibly decreasing across the workforce. Thus, they contend that the professionalisation boost has not only altered ‘why people went there, and what they searched for when starting to work’, but also the ‘relations to the project [and] within the team’. Instead, Ash observed more and more people being employed with a different orientation to work, arguably identifying less with what they perceive as ‘basic ideas’ of CSA. Frankie (Worker), takes an even more explicit stance:

> ‘I think that people who put their heart and soul into it, simply took their heart and soul out of it […]. Previously there were many workers with heart, soul, sweat, time, leisure time at it, like – w*e are gonna do this fucking thing*! – yeah, that was the feeling […]. And now, that’s over. Now you simply work there […] it’s your job now! You go there you do your job, and then you go home. And I mean, you do not have to be involved somewhere with your whole existence, but some people were just flashed. Yeah, because you then have the feeling that you are somewhere in the process of changing something, making it better. And I think this… *we do something special*, or GIC is a *special place* […] nobody has that anymore.’

Many informants appeared to confirm such shifting attitudes and work ethics within the workforce, e.g., when describing a decreasing ‘magnetic effect’ (Ocean, Member) for people looking for meaningful work. Haven, for instance, notes that some of their colleagues ‘absolutely just see it as a job’. In contrast to the practice of seasonal workers, they argue that the permanent employment all year round has led to less commitment to the hard and often unpredictable labour at GIC.

By contrast, despite describing their personal working life at GIC as ‘self-realisation to a certain extent’, Brooks (Worker) argues that some of their previous colleagues also had a ‘very dreamy’ approach in relation to possibilities for personal development through work. To them, this can only ever be partly the case at GIC, as the job contains the same rights and obligations as a ‘normal business enterprise’. Similarly, Skye (Operations Manager), describes CSAs in general as a ‘melting pot […] for people

who are looking for meaning'. As such, they argue that many people appeared to join GIC who 'project a lot into the work or in this project, which isn't there at all, or cannot be fulfilled', thus creating problems for the organisation of work at the co-op. Articulating a sentiment that the work at GIC starts to feel a bit more like in a 'classical enterprise', Kai (Worker) points out:

> 'So, that's just the work to which you go to in order to do your job. And for me, it's a work that I really enjoy doing, that I also have a lot of fun with, and which interests me, *but it's just a job* and for very many *it is* then simply *the job*. And at the beginning… when I started, the whole thing felt a bit more like family somehow, community and so on, and we are all doing this project, this mega cool project, and are building something together […].'

Explaining the merits of a 'classic job model', Kai (Worker) elucidates that their relation to work had changed from an initial disregard of whether they spend their work or leisure time in activities around GIC, while now there appears to be more of a 'segregation' between the two. While highlighting a 'trade-off' to hiring people with a genuine interest for GIC as an organisation, they argue that the CSA has moved to searching for people 'who want to work there, because they need a job, not because they are somehow looking for fulfilment in this work and then get disappointed'. Such approach appears to have become more relevant for the organisation, as 'the faster [it] grows, the quicker we need new workers'. As such, Kai explains efforts to counter a development in which people are becoming 'disillusioned' with what they were hoping to find through working at GIC and the reality of working in agriculture, leading to a high fluctuation in the past. Emphasising the limits of making hard agricultural labour appealing, Parker (Operations Manager) explains increasing efforts to screen out what they describe as people who are generally 'bursting to work for the project', but who are often 'overqualified' and have an overly 'romanticised idea' of CSA work.

Instead, Parker and Lake (Member) highlight the amenities of workplace security and above average pay, the organisation offers to people who 'actually just want to do the labour' to feed their families and people otherwise disadvantaged on the job market. Indeed, for Storm (Co-director) the very idea of being able to choose to work in jobs that are meaningful, and 'fun' signifies a generational shift away from 'just being happy to have a job and earning money'. Given the often arduous labour involved in

farmwork, by e.g., cleaning vegetables at GIC, they stress the need for greater societal changes. Therefore, Storm (co-director) explains that the organisation aims to 'eliminate as much manual labour as possible' by asking 'who does this work, if one does not want to mechanise it?'. Aspiring towards greater work efficiency, they explain that GIC is thus experimenting with more mechanical methods in order to relieve some of the burdens of laborious agricultural work.

8.1.3.3 Sustainable Work

Crossing boundaries: 'There was no fucking time!'

As controversies around meaningful work at GIC show, a growing discontent appeared to emerge amongst parts of GIC's workforce. While sources of discontent are varied, often they appeared to emerge from a felt mismatch to imaginaries of prefiguring different ways of working that could impact larger societal changes, spurred by the growth dynamic of GIC. Such mismatch materialises, on the one hand, in experiences of workers that the methods of agri-food production currently utilised at GIC are exceeding ecological limits. On the other hand, growing work intensities appear to have crossed social and personal boundaries.

GIC informants often pointed out that the project 'attracts very idealistic people' (Haven, Worker), aspiring towards more ecologically sustainable and resilient cultivation of foodstuffs. However, as workers like Max, Haven, and Timber underlined, agro-ecological concepts like market gardening, agro-forestry, or permaculture, requiring more manual labour and time, are hardly implementable at GIC given the magnitude of the organisations' operation. Despite acknowledging some positive efforts, e.g., to reduce water consumption at the farm, Max (Worker) thus argues that implementing more ecological cultivation practices is 'getting more and more difficult' at GIC, when arguing:

> 'I think we could do some experiments to try to figure out other practices that could be much more […] sustainable, but we have this pressure... It's not the free market, *but it's our market*. So, we have this amount of vegetables every week. Every change has to be mediated […] with everybody in the company. Not so much as workers, but the [co-directors] and comrades […]. But I mean from the bottom […], I think we have a kind of lack because our […] principal decision makers […] don't know too much about how ecology works […]. So,

> sometimes […] we romanticize the ways we farm a little bit, [like] talking about permaculture, but we don't go to deep into anything […].'

Articulating frustrations about what they view as a romanticisation of ecological practices at GIC, Max highlights the difficulty of negotiating major changes to the production practices with the principal decision makers, who from their perspective are the directorate and the wider membership. After all, they argue experiments with more sustainable practices, e.g., to not degrade the soil, are limited by the pressure to produce weekly harvests for the ever expanding membership. For instance, Max (Worker), highlights a recent decision to not cultivate certain kinds of veg anymore due to the sheer magnitude of weeding that would be necessary, and instead obtaining it from other farming organisations GIC is co-operating with. According to Skye (Operations Manager), such decision had been made based on the need to cultivate food that is less manual labour intensive and due to the need for efficiency, in order to manage the organisational expansion without overstraining the workforce. Nevertheless, Max criticizes the 'externalising way of thinking' underlining such practice, arguably making it more difficult to ensuring sustainable cultivation techniques, as well as good working conditions, at partner organisations.

In addition, many respondents elaborated on a prevailing sense of having reached a breaking point in terms of workload and the pace of work. Expounding on an increasing number of absences through illnesses, for instance, Haven (Worker) argues that many people at the farm were overworked, with those who are having more responsibility 'working themselves up', when saying:

> 'I do also notice it […] that in terms of my nerves… *wahhh*, it would be good to have some peace and quiet now […]. I do have the feeling, if I look at my predecessors (*laughs uneasy*), it's this feeling the whole time – we are also growing right now […] – it's like you run all the time, and run, and run, and run, and you just hope that you can sit down at some point and have a rest. But no, then the next thing comes, and you are always running and running, and just wish for a time when things calm down a little.'

Describing a widespread feeling that there never seems to be enough time to 'arrive' and optimise the organisation internally, Haven explains that the high workload often 'became too much' for workers. Such phenomenon appeared to be a recurring one, as

the supervisory board already communicated their worries about the workload being too high and in dire need of workforce expansion, just before the split in year six. Similarly, Parker (Operations Manager), notes that the organisation has been 'moving so incredibly fast' in recent years, acknowledging that workers 'more or less run along, without structure'. Countering other voices arguing 'that's the job' after all, however, Haven stresses that the concept does not appear to be fully matured if the conditions continue to overexert farmworkers. To Haven, the renewed growth plan thus represents a case in point, preventing much needed regeneration.

Indeed, some members like Robin also observed what they described as a 'rushing ahead' of people within the core team, based on an understanding of transformation that strives towards GIC becoming 'as large as possible, as quickly as possible'. Describing some of their own experience at GIC as 'energy-sapping', they argue such approach ultimately prevents workers from 'taking care of each other, and themselves', leading to 'massive collateral damage'. Confirming such insight, Terry (Co-founder), self-critically reflected on their time at GIC as being based on 'doing and running away from the front, and then healing afterwards', thus often neglecting the needs of workers, including their own. Accordingly, workers, like Frankie, stress the 'pressure' they felt in the labour process in consequence of a business plan requiring the growth of harvest shares to balance the costs of acquiring GIC's farmstead, when arguing:

> 'And then we had to achieve such intense growth every year. […] There was *no fucking time!* […]. That's not actually why I initially wanted to work here […]. It is simply *no alternative*. So, GIC promotes this attitude towards life by peddling this line that it *is an alternative to the system.* Yeah, things are allegedly pursued that have *zero* relation to reality. […] If I just go to work and earn my money, then I don't do it. So, I [want to] work somewhere, where I can join in the forging because I think about things that I am very passioned about […] but that was never important enough […] and then this initial core somehow gets lost… yeah, *why* you are part of it. It becomes too big […]. Why are people unhappy that work here? […]. I think such a blatant growth strategy is completely part of the system […].'

Whilst describing GIC as an 'open room' when they started working there, Frankie argues that it had already started to feel like a 'company with completely hierarchical

structures' as a consequence of the relocation process, urging a major membership expansion. Comparing their experience of work to smaller CSAs that allowed for more variety of work and experimental cultivation, they argue their work life had become 'completely monotonous' and even 'boring […] because it became so large' (Frankie, Worker). Thus, apart from urging the organisation to 'stop kid themselves about how large the *alternative* project is' (Ash), a section of workers left the organisation in disappointment about not feeling that they had a say in determining their working conditions. However, while others, like Max (Worker), confirmed a sense of boredom through increasing specialised labour processes, they grant that there is a clear trade-off between more diversified work and the benefits that the division of labour brings in terms of above-average salaries and holidays during peak seasons.

Identification with work: 'What kind of Solidarity'

In contrast to the disillusionment amongst some workers, seemingly emerging from the expansionary organisational dynamics of GIC, other respondents argued that such experiences were often rather self-induced due to widespread political aspirations.

In this sense, some respondents emphasised the difficulty of balancing one's work as both a paid worker and member at the co-op, which often makes it difficult to draw boundaries of engagement. Workers like Timber, for instance, emphasised discrepancies between embodying the interests of both, entail clear 'points of conflict', i.e., not least in their aspiration for fair pay as opposed to affordable harvest shares of members. To Brooks (Worker), such difficulty is compounded by the quest to finding meaning, leading many to overstrain their engagement due to an initial state of euphoria. Frankie, for instance, elaborated on what they experienced as 'mega frenzy' about the vision of how large GIC can become, in which they participated in member join-in activities over long hours on weekends during peak season, in addition to their day-to-day work.

While Spencer labelled the first few years of building up GIC as 'classical self-exploitation', other long-term workers, like Parker (Operations Manager), described an overriding sense of 'self-exploitation' in which the ongoing high workload 'leaves a mark on one's health'. Accordingly, Parker decried that 'only very few people' appear to shoulder the bulk of responsibility in coordinating work at GIC to 'keep the whole thing running'. While some members, like Riley, indicated that issues of overextension

often appeared as a 'personal' matter, Skye (Operations Manager), asserts the restructuration process would reduce the pressure on individual people who are seemingly 'at their limit', in making the organisation less dependent on their personal work performance. At the same time, they also caution about speaking of self-exploitation, as other farmers would work at least as hard under more difficult conditions and earn much less than GIC workers.

In this sense, Lake (Member) observed what they view as a problematic interpretation of work under 'the label of solidarity'. They argue that the organisation needs to be mindful of not 'wearing out' such label, if the engagement of some workers becomes so large for the project that it 'goes at [their] own expense', when elaborating:

> 'If someone always goes home at closing time and also always reduces their overtime, where I say alright, that's their right as an employee – of course, where is the problem? But one is working in an environment where it is often said like, *well, but we are all in solidarity and we do it all together, and that's all for a good cause, and we can't be like that*… so, if there's a [working] climate like this, then somehow it doesn't figure […] there are people for whom *work is endless*. […] So, from my perspective, this does not fit under the label of solidarity anymore. And I see that it's not good for individuals […] it can become a fission fungus […].'

In this vein, Lake points to what they perceive as a 'hazard' of accumulating unpaid voluntary work in solidarity with the project, thereby neglecting personal needs. As such, they argue that perceptions of who does how much and when, had become a larger issue in recent years, as more people appear to work only 'for the job' rather than out of 'political passion'. Such issue appears to be a growing concern in the face of the renewed expansion. Thus, they argue that the understanding of 'what kind of solidarity' the organisation tries to operate by, needs active intervention. While many informants reported that most workers officially only work around four days a week, Timber explains that many people appear to go above and beyond their 'own limits for GIC, because it's a good thing'. As such workers like Ash reported that they felt 'exhausted' from growing expectations from the core team to 'always doing a tick more' for the 'pioneering project', while feeling that their opinion about the development of the overall project became less and less important. Thus, in the late

stages of their engagement, Ash had personally already 'said goodbye emotionally from GIC as [their] project' and just saw it as 'wage work'. Instead of embracing the expected 'overall responsibility' for the project, they thus argue that many people understandably 'ran out of steam' to work extra hours. For members, like Robin, such overburdening already became visible in the past when the 'inspirational engine' of co-founders ran dry, which prevented them to transmit the energy for the 'large transformative vision' to the wider workforce.

8.1.3.4 Decommodified Work

(Un)learning: More than an 'eco-deluxe subscription box'?

In addition to employed workers, the participation of the wider membership in GIC's labour process constitutes an important element furthering decommodified work relations, e.g., in line with ideas of prosuming. Nonetheless, the viability, need, and expectations about membership participation has become a contentious issue at GIC in the aftermath of the split.

According to the organisation's own records, GIC's proclaimed public image of constituting 'more than an eco-box' in the early days of its establishment has helped to attract many new members. However, as inferred by the accounts of many members, such notion appears to have become increasingly contested over the years. Noel (Board Member), for instance, admits that the COVID-19 pandemic in fact acted as a 'catalyst' to changing the perspective of the core team on the need to integrate the wider membership into the CSA labour process. While the offer to 'maintaining the bond' of members to the farmstead and workers through participation remains, insights were gained during the pandemic that participation was 'no longer absolutely necessary for it to function' (Noel, Board Member). Contrasting GIC to other CSAs working with mandatory participation, Noel thus points to a 'gradual process over many years', of a proportionally decreasing participation in join-in activities or at general assemblies, which appears irreversible due to GIC's increasing size, when saying:

> 'So, I do believe this offer is still taken gladly, but it reaches significantly less by now, because this *convenience* [approach] is exactly what that leads to. You simply get a box, pick it up, are happy with it, and that's it. You basically don't think about it any further, or maybe you don't even take other offers because it's just too difficult. In the beginning you really knew a lot of people and met

> every now and then. It was more of a communal thing […] but I am sometimes not sure if this storyline still gets through or if one says it is simply a veg box like any other veg box. So, I think this gets a bit lost, and this reduction of participation does have implications for the organisation itself […]. This notion of convenience leads to people *making* it more convenient [for themselves] and perhaps then dealing less with the topic of where does my food come from? How can a sustainable agriculture be constructed and so on?'

Along with a fading storyline of 'making alternative [organising] tangible' (Noel, Board Member), several informants highlight the growing organisational divide between increasingly professionalised farmworkers, paid to produce veg, and an increasing section of passive members, content with its consumption. Thus, some workers, like Kai, describe 'sobering' experiences of join-in activities in which less than 1% of the membership turned up. While maintaining GIC's principle to see any form of participation as valid, they concede that 'just having the option to participate' appears a 'little weak' when taking larger imaginaries of the co-op into account. Indeed, several members, like River, remarked that a large proportion of people joining the organisation at a later stage have never been at GIC's farmstead at all.

Nonetheless, several workers, like Haven, also reported that not all of their colleagues were enthused by the idea of getting to know members and incorporating them into their CSA labour. While Parker (Operations Manager), for instance, highlights the much needed support by members in large one-off harvests or weeding join-in actions, they lament the time and energy needed to instruct members, alongside needing to provide an 'entertainment factor' for members to join on a regular basis. Similarly, while describing GIC as an experimental 'playground for your own ideas' ahead of acquiring its own grounds, Riley (Member) criticises organisational efforts of making it too comfortable for members in providing a 'feelgood factor'. Thus, they problematise the communicated notion of voluntariness by arguing participation '*should* matter', and argue the useful labour provided for the organisation, e.g., by easing the burden off farmworkers, should be made more 'visible'. Underpinning such argument, they recount a conversation with an upset member about their regular participatory labour on GIC's fields, which to them appeared meaningless in the eyes of their non-participatory comrades at pick-up stations.

Accordingly, many members perceived a loss of the 'transformative character' of the organisation, in which large parts of the membership appeared to see GIC simply as a 'subscription box' (Ocean). Others, like Kit (Member), described the organisation becoming 'more impersonal' along with the expansive development, in what feels more like 'a good delivery service'. Thus, Sasha (Member), who described their previous heavy involvement in any kinds of labour at GIC, argues:

> 'I used to be very committed and – that's the drawback if you grow – it did become more commercial […]. For many, it's simply cool to have this box […]. At least 50% see it as an organic veg box and not really as CSA. And maybe it's hard to say it like that, but most [members] say *box, done!* […] I think the understanding is less present amongst people than at the beginning.'

For Terry (Co-founder), such development comes close to what they describe as a 'sale of indulgences', emphasising the loss of transformative potentials, by solely being content with a passive form of green consumerism. Along similar lines, Robin (Member) observed a 'growing distance […] between the core team that *does*, and members who actually just *watch*', partly leading to what they perceive as growing 'estrangement'. While articulating their appreciation for what has been created at GIC, both Terry and Robin argue such development appears particularly concerning in the face of mounting socio-ecological crises, questioning 'whether it will still work?' and if members can be re-activated in times of worsening climate conditions. At this backdrop, others raised concerns whether principles of solidarity and community resilience can still be upheld along with increasing harvest failures, when asking 'how often can you do that as a CSA?' (Parker, Operations Manager). Against the development towards more professionalisation, several respondents thus problematised the treating of members' community labour solely as add-on' (Ash, Worker). While some contemplated obligatory labour contributions as a form of 'compulsory solidarity' (Kit, Member) to reinvigorate the 'community spirit', others underlined the importance of community labour to raising the consciousness of members about the 'fragil[ity]' (Lake, Member) of food production and the 'backbreacking' (Ocean) work involved. In general, such accounts thus often described a growing sense of anonymity amongst the membership in which relational aspects, proximity, understanding, and a sense of belonging appeared to have become less relevant with the increase in organisational size.

Scaling Solidarity: Prosuming vs. 'Customer Service Expectation'

In parallel to a perceived fading of the initial storyline, several GIC respondents problematised what appeared as a growing customer service attitude amongst the membership, understood as violating basic solidaristic ideas underlining their conceptions of CSA.

Accordingly, some members observed an increasingly 'demanding attitude' (Sasha) amongst some of their comrades, seemingly falling back into a transactional cost-benefit analysis of the membership while questioning the necessity of their participation. Thus, workers, like Ash, criticised what they viewed as a 'reinforced customer-producer relation', in which a more impersonal attitude of expecting an equivalent value of veg for a paid sum of money appeared to spread. Within their area of work, they even described a growing 'anticipatory obedience' to 'pampering' the 'customer', by satisfying organisational demands of 'creating the perfect product', as increasing their personal discontent. To Ash, a general area of tension exists between membership forces valuing the 'power of [green] consumption' in contrast to those viewing the organisation as an alternative to capitalism and other forms of domination. Based on such experiences, however, they argue it would be more honest of GIC to speak of an 'eco box deluxe', which members could 'buy with an even better consciousness', instead of portraying GIC as a 'real alternative' in the form of a collective and participatory project. Similarly, Frankie (Worker), experienced a growing distance to the membership, which to them appeared to emerge from marketing GIC as a 'brand' to people, e.g., at festivals in urban areas, many of whom simply wished to 'tick the sustainability box'. Thus, Frankie problematises the ways in which it was often 'explained' to people 'what GIC is':

> 'I have also been at these booths in order to recruit new people and I found it important to explain to people that it is something where you should participate in – you don't have to […] – *but it would be very great if you can come* […] to join-in farming activities and so on. And I think that often got lost because you had the pressure of needing to get their signature […] and the larger GIC became, the less we as a team and as a co-op were close to the people. You could no longer explain to people why the potatoes in the box had soil on them. […] The purpose of GIC was not there anymore, because I find it incredibly important to explain to people what's going on in the field. You could not reach

> these people anymore […]. GIC simply became a great organic box that also gave you an attitude to life, cause *it's no alternative to the system* I'm sorry. It's *completely part of the system*.'

In line with growing pressures of membership expansion, Frankie articulates their frustration about not being able to convey an understanding of the increasingly difficult context of agri-food production, by saying 'no wonder we can't get to grips with the climate crisis'. Confirming such insights, many informants recalled complaints by members, e.g., about veg 'not looking as perfect' (Timber, Worker), being 'unwashed' (Kit, Member), having 'too little' or 'too much' in harvest shares, perceived by many workers as a 'lack of appreciation', according to Ocean (Member). To Lake (Member), such complaints emerged out of the 'service character', which appeared increasingly ingrained into GIC's organisational design and mirrored in the membership composition.

Some workers, like Kai, described such increasing 'customer service' expectations and 'pressures to justify' the CSAs' practices as also having emerged from the broad recruitment of members, moving beyond 'hardcore eco [activists]', in expansionary phases. According to Haven (Worker), such increasing expectations indicate a lack of connection of members to the farmwork, leaving workers wondering: 'oh, and these are the people we work for?' (Lake, Member). Despite strong efforts by the organisation to communicate background information and to mediate 'massive frustrations' amongst both members and workers (Brooks, Worker), such observations indicate what many perceived as a lack of understanding, solidarity, and growing distance to food labour by members. While valuing membership feedback, Skye (Operations Manager), for instance, concedes that 'many of our comrades are more like customers' instead of prosumers. Thus, they describe a process in which many members start by being 'very excited' as 'prosumers', only to see their membership 'very quickly becoming incorporated into their daily routine', thereby regressing into a customer relation. Nevertheless, they maintain:

> 'And then you pick up the veg and then it's rather the case that this relationship is not really there anymore, which I am not really sure if that's a problem in and of itself… like, I am not sure what the value of a prosumer would be. I mean, I do think it would be good […] but the question remains that if we wish

> to create a different world or achieve a transformation, whether one… can in fact participate in everything that one consumes. That's still difficult […].'

Along such lines, the social value of prosuming is perceived to reach systemic boundaries. Indeed, informants like Frankie (Worker) and Ocean (Member), highlighted that while harvest shares were relatively cheap in comparison to other CSAs, they are in large parts mostly accessible for relatively affluent, urban, and well-educated people. Despite reaching some societal strata that are understood as not being the usual suspects for ecological consumption, members, like Marion, emphasised the privileged position of being part of GIC, by indicating their predilection for 'premium products'. While there appeared to be a clear ambition to making such premium products accessible for the many, some members challenged the organisation for compromising on a more inclusive form of solidarity. Rene (Member), for instance, criticised the 'relatively weak' (Rene, Member) solution to making harvest shares more accessible through introducing a donation-based box understood as a 'balancing mechanism' (Spencer, co-director) on a conditional basis for people on lower incomes, rather than offering stronger solidarity-based solutions.

8.2 Cultivating Alternative Food Labour at SSC

8.2.1 SSC: 'Stabilising' the Project

In the aftermath of conflictual processes around scaling pathways resulting in the split and a dominant orientation valuing a 'slow growth' approach, remaining SSC actors emphasised continuous efforts to maintaining the CSAs' strongly pronounced grassroots democratic principles and horizontal organising structures.

In the years following the split, SSC suffered several additional breakaways of workers leaving the co-op. At its peak, such fluctuation amounted to the workforce being reduced in half. Given the relatively small team of around half a dozen employees, all occupying operating manager functions equitably at SSC, the repeated exodus nearly 'put the project itself at risk' (Quinn, Worker). In what they describe as a 'catastrophe for those who stayed behind', Charlie (Worker) argues they learnt the hard way that below a certain organisational threshold of staff, sustaining a CSA becomes difficult. In contrast to an initial perspective of establishing an optimum membership size, in correspondence to the cultivated area and farmworkers, the experience of 'extreme

overburdening' during the time made them rethink. As such, Charlie argues individual workers, as well as the organisation as a whole, can hardly compensate for such losses in labour power in carrying the day to day workload, which easily falls into 'total self-exploitation'. The focus group participant from SSC's core team also referred to the time as 'crisis mode', when trying to find adequate replacement for employees leaving, while upholding daily operations to guarantee the continuity of the CSA. While many referred to the 'loss' (Jamie, Member) of many valued workers as providing an increased sense of 'insecurity' (Aria, Member), Ollie (Co-Director) argues the organisation also had to 'learn to deal with' the fact that such fluctuation would be a constant element of organising CSA work. Initially, the organisation had only employed trained and experienced farmworkers. However, continuous fluctuations led to a rethinking of hiring strategies. As such, the organisation came to largely employ people without formalised farming education but based on being 'highly motivated' (Ollie, Co-Director) to work for SSC. Such measure had also been framed as an answer to what the focus group participant described as a 'skilled workers crisis' across the agri-food sector, depicting a large challenge for the organisation.

Despite feeling an initial sense of relief through the establishment and subsequent outflow of workers to EC, marking the end of what Jessie (Worker) describes as 'very challenging' personal conflicts in building up SSC, they experienced the effects of such 'break away[s]' as a 'large crisis'. As several members, like Aria, highlighted, the main responsibility and knowledge about day-to-day labour processes tends to lie within the hands of only a few people at SSC. Such unequal distribution is generally seen as making it difficult to transferring knowledge about organisational processes onto new workers. In order to alleviate the precarious conditions of covering for the diminished manpower, the weakened core team of 'leftover' (Jessie) workers thus set up an 'organising circle' as a new organisational unit. Established as an intermediary organisational body constituted by parts of the workforce and the wider membership, the organising circle is understood to mediating between daily operations and more strategic questions, usually discussed in regular co-op council assemblies on a bi-monthly basis. According to several voices, the organising circle helped to 'relieve the strain off farmworkers' (Charlie, Worker), through the participation of volunteering members supporting employees in time-sensitive decisions, in extension of the daily business. By dividing responsibilities onto more shoulders, SSC actors thus retained

the viability of the project in this critical organisational period. As workers like Charlie ascertain with pride, overcoming such precarious organisational phase signified the projects' 'resilience in uncertain times', lending 'food security […] far from complex supply chains of capital'.

After long periods of insecurity and struggle, Jessie (Worker) thus describes a feeling of 'arrival' and suggests that SSC finds itself in a 'stabilisation phase', particularly in relation to its infrastructural setup, norms and routines, strategic direction, and its 'solid ideals'. At the same time, they argue GIC is trying to 'gain a foothold with these ideals in relation to economic aspects' by trying to examine 'uneconomic' production processes, as such aspects previously 'tended to fall down a little bit behind'. Arguing that this process may necessitate GIC to 'grow a little', Jessie (Worker) argues this particularly involves adapting 'labour processes in the sense of how we can make work a little easier'. As such, the small-scale and more diverse labour process at SSC previously did not allow for easing some of the pressure off farmworkers, often resulting in 'situations of overload'. Thus, such shift to what was often described as previously neglected economical forms of organising has been understood to relieve some of the most arduous labour at the CSA, by determining time and energy saving measures geared towards fostering employee health and well-being.

In line with the chosen path of slow organic growth, the organisation had thus recently undertaken what many described as a targeted expansion resulting in a gradual expansion of production in year nine, in order to 'raise capital for [new] investments' (Cypress, Member). In this sense Leslie (Member) argues:

> 'Still, it was always about… is this growth or not? […] So, we expanded anyway out there, as in we got a second field, some more comrades, a [few] more workers. We still have to see that. Then again, there are other co-ops growing out there […]. [It] is more and more surrounded by CSAs. But as long as that's in this form of working without exploitation […] I per se have no issue with this extension because it's a percentual extension and not an artificially generated one […]. So, there is no artificially generated demand, which is then met, but the other way around. There's a large demand […]. So, it shows […] that it works.'

Along such lines, members like Ellis elucidate that the growth impetus emerged out of the conviction that a relatively minor expansion of members and acreage would not impact the SSC's workload in significant ways. Instead, the driving force for such collective decision had been purported as the 'conversion' of growth into well-being of workers (Kerry, Member).

While many members referred to SSC's participatory structures as 'established' (Cypress) and 'solidified' (Ellis), they underlined the importance of the grassroots democracy in granting the organisation stability. As part of the expansionary process, many respondents like Ollie (Co-director) thus remained adamant about the need to continuously 'strengthen social connections' in and around the co-op, perceived as 'elementary' to further consolidate grassroots structures and to cultivate alternative livelihoods. Given previous concerns that the significant expansion of acreage, offered before the split, would have weakened close exchanges amongst members and 'probably overwhelmed the organisational culture', Ollie emphasises the widespread significance assigned to maintaining a feeling and 'desire for solidarity' across SSC's membership.

8.2.2 Formalising SSC Labour

Due to experiences that brought SSC as a project to the brink of collapse, organisational efforts geared towards stabilising the CSA particularly emphasised the formalisation of the labour process. Here, CSA actors are navigating several fields of tension between upholding the adherence of grassroots democratic structures, while improving working conditions, spurring continuous efforts for rationalisation, collectivising labour, and decentralised decision-making, discussed in the following.

8.2.2.1 Rationalisation: 'As anti-capitalist we still have to deal with money'

Enabled by targeted investments gained from the gradual expansion of acreage and membership in recent years, many respondents observed a process of professionalisation at SSC, in line with calls to ease some of the pressures off workers. Arguing that 'the operational build-up is more or less over', Ollie (Co-director) describes the organisational pursuit to 'professionalise to some extent' as follows:

> 'Now it's more about organising structures in better ways […]. In the sense of not only muddling around with what you could just afford or machines that you picked

up somewhere […] but in some respects to change to […] solutions that can also make volunteer work more pleasant. Or that people need to spend less time for it in volunteer labour, but also in [everyday] farming […]. This year we bought a new tractor which does not break all the time. So, that we somehow create processes that are fun and eat up less working time […]. And at the same time, despite the investments, that we deal with it in a way that we don't get caught up in such blatant growth pressure.'

Instead of wasting time through, e.g., constant repairs and using laborious admin tools, many respondents underlined increasing efforts to making work processes more efficient across SSC. Rather than aiming to 'ration' tasks away, however, Ollie stresses that such efforts are geared towards making working conditions more 'pleasant' for everyone involved, thus spending less time on 'improvised solutions'. In turn, such measures are understood to open up space to increase organisational efforts into 'educational work' around the fields and to establish stronger links with the 'food sovereignty movement' in general, to help 'reshaping the region' (Ollie, Co-Director).

While confirming the prevalent 'non-growth logic' at the co-op, and not wanting to become a 'large company', Dylan (Worker), argues that investments made had become 'very necessary' in 'creating long-term security' and stability for SSC. Next to paying off some of workers' over hours, they explain the expansion and targeted investments are opening up possibilities to 'purchase better technology and simply have more freedom'. To them, the freedom created is helping to ease the labour process for workers, while also enabling the organisation 'to realise their philosophies much more effectively'. Indeed, with the disappearance of major conflicts and some fears of precarity, Dylan (Worker) has the impression the organisation 'is doing better than ever before'. Arguing that the 'professionalisation' and rethinking of investments into the co-op help to improve the working conditions at the CSA, they thus argue:

> 'We need to see that also with the salary discussion. At some point we need to get people who have the potential to take on a high level of responsibility but are also valued in their area of work through wages. That's simply the thing in our world where we can achieve a high level of satisfaction relatively easily. And I somehow see that this is what is needed in a company like this […]; characters who remain and who are here for 4-5 years, maybe even 10 years,

> to realize a vision, but also […] because it gives their life meaning […]. Sometimes it was the case that we had such a blatant fluctuation, then it just became clear, okay, it's just going in a direction where we can't keep it up anymore. We're so cheap and don't have enough income and then one group broke away and started EC […].'

Highlighting the precarity of CSA labour, several accounts underlined that previous fluctuations had also been caused by the inability to give workers a perspective for their personal future. Previous workers, like Sammie and Quinn, for instance, hinted that relatively low wages and the same rates of pay across workers, may have been a reason why many moved on after a few years. Thus, Dylan stressed the need for more 'strategic thinking' in wage discussions and starting a visionary process in collaboration with the wider membership, to raise capital for future investments into SSC's workplaces.

Nevertheless, despite what several respondents referred to as legitimate 'infrastructural requirements' being the 'impetus for growth' (Cypress, Member), some discomfort appeared to prevail about the 'uncertainties' of expansionary developments (Jessie, Worker). In a most vocal plea, one member articulated their dissatisfaction about the apparent 'professionalisation', by pointing to what they viewed as an emerging 'division between active and passive members' on an internal communication platform. As such they protest that SSC comrades had 'discussed for years that [they] do not want that at all and that actually every member should see themselves as an active member'. Emphasising the value of SSC as a 'place of learning', enabled by members' participation and involvement, the member articulates their disappointment about SSC's 'flair get[ting] lost'. On the one hand, such intervention can be interpreted as exemplifying a strong adherence to CSA principles in line with the dominance of growth-critical perspectives, which many SSC members appeared to feel strongly about in their aspiration of 'building an alternative' to capitalism. On the other hand, however, other voices, like Quinn (Worker), pointed to what they perceive as a 'fear' about ideas to promote the project from within the capitalist system, persisting at SSC, which they argue would help to generate much needed funding for the project. Thus, Jodie (Worker) admits that observing radical principles in daily CSA work is not always a simple process:

> 'That's maybe also a normal process that within the set-up [phase] you must tie yourself strongly to ideals and have a strong vision. And then reality [sets in] and you begin to move into the direction of this utopia, and then so many problems and so many things happen over and over again. […]. [We have] to move within this field of tension between reality and utopia […] because even though we understand ourselves as anti-capitalist we still have to deal with money […].'

By describing their time at SSC as a constant navigation between an aspired utopia and the organisational reality, Jodie (Worker) argues they felt such tension clearest when introducing financial planning during SSC's farm expansion. Despite initial resistance to it across the core team, Jodie argues the process of looking at key figures constituted a personal 'aha moment' for them, ultimately helping to sustain the co-op, by providing a long-term overview and a forward-looking mechanism. In contrast to 'normal logics' on what constitutes a successful business, i.e., measured by profit maximisation, they explain that the grounding ambition was to invest 'so that [employees] work less overtime', while remaining affordable for members. Thus, Jodie (Worker) highlights what they perceived as a rethinking of 'practised' ways of determining what constitutes organisational success, when arguing 'there are other criteria for success […] which are often secondary, but it's those we want to make big'.

8.2.2.2 Collectivising Labour: No 'revolutions through paid work'

In addition to rationalisation efforts to easing some of the burdens of CSA labour, the maintenance of a sense of collective responsibility for the project is perceived as a cornerstone for the organisation of labour at SSC.

In general, day-to-day work at SSC's farm is understood as organised and performed by employed workers, based on an equitable amount of responsibility and say on how such work ought to be conducted. As such, SSC actors aspire towards 'the gradual development and testing of a new model of self-determined work and production in a collective'. In particular, the value of 'group processes' is explicitly accentuated within SSC's constitution, as an 'important aspect of farmwork' that ought to be reflected within social meetings in the workplace. At the same time, workers have a 'duty to honestly report about group dynamics' to the wider membership, e.g., at co-op meetings.

On top of the organisation of day-to-day work at the farm, however, workers rely on the continuous participation and mandatory contribution of labour from the wider membership, with the aspiration to divide work as equally as possible amongst all members. As such, the organisational mantra of 'want[ing] as much collectivity as possible' is evoked frequently as, for instance, in communicative efforts towards members during pandemic times. At the same time, however, such approach is also understood to help avoid increases in harvest share prices and averting pressures to grow, due to the fact that additional paid hours and added positions would have to be covered by the membership. Thus, respondents would often stress the importance of members organising autonomously in working groups (Fieldnotes) and to shouldering some of the CSA work, by 'being active on site' (Cypress, Member). Exemplifying the importance of membership participation, Jessie (Worker) argues that, e.g., feeling the 'backing' of members when the workforce had been reduced by half due to fluctuation, in setting up the organising circle and 'divid[ing] responsibility of operational decisions […] onto more shoulders', helped significantly to stabilise SSC. They thus underline the 'infrastructure for members' as equally important as the food production process, when arguing this helps 'to run the company in a completely different way'.

Within all work tasks, 'continuous negotiation and discussion processes' form a 'cornerstone' (Jessie, Worker) to fostering the 'self-efficacy' of members and to practicing collective forms of responsibility, as underlined by SSC's statutory principles. Thus, several respondents underline the importance of social negotiation processes 'taking place through discourses on the field' (Jessie, Worker), when working the land in collective ways. Explaining the 'need for more fundamental reflections on your own actions within the co-op', Kerry (Member) argues:

> 'The point is actually what happens on the fields… when one is interacting with others, like at the moment, it would be while harvesting carrots, that this exchange happens [about] how do we want to live together and how do we want to shape this collective production, so to speak? This is actually happening live […].'

By describing the fostering of relations and social negotiation amongst members as a necessary social process within CSA work, several respondents highlighted that local veg distribution points ('pick-up stations') fulfil an important social role in the division

of labour in SSC's planned economy. Pick-up stations function as federal collectives in which members organise the distribution of veg in autonomous ways through regular exchange and self-organised meetings. As such, Cypress (Member) emphasises the importance in 'getting this sense of what kind of project SSC actually is', which to them happens primarily 'through informal channels [and] face-to-face communication when being involved in pick-up stations. In addition to individual work contributions, pick-up stations ought to contribute at least a full day of collective labour at the farm during peak season, while alternating in organising and moderating co-op plenaries, assemblies, and bidding rounds. Constituting another 'core' social negotiation process, other members like Cleo also describe the practice of a bidding rounds at SSC as a crucial 'group bonding' ritual for every member, to experience the mutual dependence of CSA food provisioning at the start of each growing season.

Nonetheless, despite the general understanding about the importance of members' participation in SSC's labour process, respondents like Ollie (Co-director) also concede that the way the organisation 'deal[s] with volunteering and full-time work' signifies a key area of tension at the co-op. Despite the many positive examples of collective work efforts at SSC's farm, they admit that often not enough members seemingly appear to join compulsory work efforts at the farm. SSC actors had thus recently decided to hire a new 'community building' position to transfer some of the voluntary labour of membership administration, described as the 'centrepiece of the co-op' (Jessie, Worker), into paid employment. At the same time, Ollie (Co-Director) advocates for the need to view the 'allocation of responsibilities' for work at the co-op as a 'political question', when pointing to the distribution of agricultural labour on a structural societal level:

> 'I also actually don't believe that you can achieve revolutions through paid work, so to speak. [As in] that you are paid wages for revolutionary work and that you can overcome capitalism in this way. I doubt that. That's why I somehow find it ok [to] demand voluntary labour […].'

Such tension between voluntary and full-time labour appear to be compounded by what many voices highlighted as diverting logics between informal practices of organising labour in horizontal ways, in contrast to legally mandated co-operative structures. In the course of transforming SSC's legal form, an agreement had been

reached that would see the organisation going beyond legally mandated co-operative structures. Thus, horizontal norms around labour and decision-making structures, practiced since the very inception of SSC, were to retain precedence over more vertical ones. As such, co-directors and supervisory board, for instance, are understood to only occupy a 'bounded mandate' (Jamie, Member) in executing collectively reached decisions within the co-op council.

8.2.2.3 Decentralisation: 'Inertia as resilience'

In line with efforts to collectivising labour in the CSA workplace, SSC actors attach great importance to decentralised decision-making structures.

Based on the organisational constitution, all decision-making at SSC generally follows a three-stage systemic consensus process. Next to the need for awareness of consensus principles, such approach is generally understood to require a 'constructive discussion culture', as Ellis (Member) explains. Drawing on recent decisions of 'the annual budget and the necessary inflation compensation' involving an increase of members' contributions, they argue member's practice such discussion culture by 'experience[ing], nearly every month, that they can contribute to […] really important decisions'. Members, like Harper, thus argue the continuous integration into decision-making processes indeed constitute 'the point where [they] become a prosumer', helping them to gain a deeper understanding of work processes at SSC. Articulating similar impressions, Jodie (Worker) observed that members 'have the feeling of […] having power' in taking collective decisions at SSC.

At the same time, however, Jodie (Worker) highlights the complexities of asymmetrically distributed information and knowledge disparities across co-op actors, when arguing that for some topics one 'needs to acquire special knowledge to become capable of making decisions at all'. While workers often deal with partly complex farming issues, they point out that most members have less time to engage with such issues next to day to day jobs. As such, Jodie (Worker) describes a 'discrepancy' that workers still carry most of the responsibility, by keeping 'an eye on making sure that it still worked'. Several members, like Cleo, confirmed what they perceive as a 'hierarchy of knowledge', which becomes particularly apparent during co-op council assemblies where workers need to 'maintain the frame and structures […] far too often', due to such knowledge disparities. Similarly, Jessie (Worker) admits that

despite workers having the same voice as other members within assemblies, they note that ‘informally it is of course a different voice’, as members recognise the ‘expertise’ of workers being the ones who are present more regularly on the fields. Nonetheless, despite the awareness about such issues, consensus-based decision making and continuous social negotiation processes, e.g., through ‘taking time to resolve conflicts’ (Jodie, Worker), are generally seen an essential factor for organising work at SSC. At the same time, many respondents highlighted the common experience of lengthy decision-making processes at SSC. Some members like Jamie problematised what they often experience as ‘inefficient’ processes, e.g., when highlighting that a topic discussed in one co-op assembly can only be decided upon in the following assembly, which to them often feels ‘dragging and difficult’. Such process is aggravated due to assemblies rotating in different neighbourhoods and thus sometimes entailing a completely different membership composition in presence, causing the decision-making process to ‘start again at zero’ (Jamie, Member).

However, despite alluding to such plenary structures as often ‘exhausting’ and sometimes ‘nerve-wracking’, many members, like Cleo and Aria, overall confirmed the value of taking the time to work around and improve decisions within lengthy consensus-based processes. Even Jamie acknowledged the value of slow decision-making in granting the organisation stability. On the one hand, Jodie (Worker) describes such area of tension within horizontal decision-making processes when arguing for the significance of ‘not wasting too much time on a topic’, e.g., by participants dragging discussions out without much knowledge on the topic. On the other hand, however, they emphasise the knowledge being generated through objections being raised and corrected, enabling collective decision-making processes to slowly move forward. Indeed, Jodie (Worker) describes some of their experiences of ad-hoc decisions as ‘terrible’, arguing it was in fact ‘absolutely overwhelming’ and ‘murderous for the entire group’ if something had to be decided quickly in assemblies. Instead, they underscore the value of spreading out decision-making processes across assemblies, giving co-op members time to ‘shed light on things sufficiently’ and talk it through in their respective peer groups before coming to a decision. Referring back to their strong feelings against a possible expansion, when SSC actors had been offered additional land in year seven, Jodie (Worker) thus explains their thinking process:

> 'People want to discuss, and they won't come to an opinion so quickly. That's exactly the inertia that is so annoying […]. At the same time [this inertia] is a gigantic protection […] because it's a bit like *hold your horses*, okay, what's next here? And so, I would say […] this inertia, it's also a kind of resilience […]. That was my feeling that we had to go against […] this inertia, in a way […] where I thought ok, that doesn't work with the structures we have and then we would have to give up the most valuable thing about SSC, to set up such a huge operation here, and I didn't want that. I didn't find that helpful and […] that's what worried me the most about it […]. So, these resilience aspects that arise from the fact that there are a lot of redundancies […] and also, for example, completely away from efficiency. Because efficiency is exactly the opposite, eliminating all redundancies. This understanding that this is actually the case, that you give up quick wins and quick advantages, so to speak, in favour of resilience, in favour of stability […].'

Inspired by degrowth thinking, Jodie (Worker) argues that their understanding about what SSC actually wants to achieve had been a 'learning process', shaped by continuous CSA practice oriented on making SSC resilient and 'fulfil[ling] needs' instead of 'accumulat[ing] money'. Confirming such perspective, Charlie (Worker) underlines the 'patience' and 'very slow' approach to organising that characterises SSC. Drawing on the process of determining the co-op's internal forms of conduct, for instance, they argue that specifying decision-making remits between daily operations and those needing to be discussed more widely in the co-ops' assembly had totally 'slowed down and decelerated' SSC's operations. While acknowledging that such process of collectively creating such common rules had been perceived as 'very laborious' at the time, they maintain:

> 'But at some point it became clear to me […] this process of dealing with legal clauses, of formulating things, of expectations that we have of each other or what this is supposed to be… it just led to a lot of people dealing with it and the people who were involved in this process at the beginning are people who see it as their own, they helped shaping it, *it's their farm*, so to speak and they therefore have the appropriate confidence at a meeting to even become active in such a consensus process because they have a different standing.'

Accordingly, slow participatory processes are seen as crucial to help members to identify with SSC and being able to participate actively in making decisions at the co-op. Despite what many framed as often difficult social processes of collective decision-making, such insights thus underline the benefits of horizontal processes when contrasting between the need for efficiency and the organisational resilience generated through slower processes.

8.2.3 Experiencing SSC Workplaces

The following section aims to shed light on the lived experiences of employed workers. In light of the prevalent internally oriented scaling strategy at SSC, the analysis links closely to imaginaries aiming for better working conditions and to prefigure alternative ways of working and living altogether. Findings are presented in four categories of workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work, each featuring two distinct themes.

8.2.3.1 Workplace Democracy

Co-determination: Time-consuming ‘turf battles’

The significance of workers’ ability to determine their working conditions is frequently emphasised by SSC actors. As opposed to ‘what has become established in our society as an interest representation form’, i.e., in the form of a works council or union, many workers, like Charlie, thus describe their ‘co-determination within farms’ as without alternative to champion their collective interests, when arguing:

> ‘I don't see how workers’ interests can be represented and maintained in any other way than through participation in decision-making processes. Ultimately it's like […] the [CSA worker] has to protect [their] own interests as an employee to the employer, i.e., by negotiating with the members. And that's a really tough job […] because... somehow you're in the community and somehow you also have completely conflicting interests in parts which have to be represented […]. So, this contradiction between capital and labour that you have within a CSA, you just have to deal with that […].’

Accordingly, Dylan (Worker) underlines the importance of all SSC workers earning the same wages in creating a ‘cohesiveness’ when positioning workers’ interests confidently in negotiations, e.g., about the yearly budget and workers remuneration,

with the wider membership. In the past, Dylan (Worker) argues, such process had often resulted in the budget being 'traded down' in favour of cheaper membership contributions to the detriment of an appreciation of what workers are contributing to the co-op. Accordingly, such accounts emphasise the added pressure workers have to endure in representing their interests in front of a large number of members.

At the same time, members like Ollie (Co-director) also point to discrepancies between the grassroots democracy of the co-op assembly in relation to the plenary of workers in day-to-day operations, e.g., when talking about discussions around growth:

> 'Somehow things are discussed in advance in the [work] team for a really long time, which then perhaps reach the grassroots democracy, and the grassroots democracy says: *we don't want that at all!* And then [workers] talked about it for a really long time… but the problem is not solved either […] because the workers as a unit try to find a position outwardly and then I have the feeling that in parts, they are grinding each other down or discussed things for a really long time […].'

Instead of acknowledging 'conflicting interests' amongst workers and embracing decision making as an open process across the wider membership, Ollie (Co-Director) problematises that some decisions are 'chewed' over and discussed at length by workers in advance of assemblies, before being discussed again. Describing such process as a waste of time, Ollie continues that 'work meetings were [often] totally overloaded' with such larger questions and negotiations, thus taking time away from day-to-day questions. As such, workers, like Jessie, highlight the inherent tension between preliminary discussions taking place within 'deeply involved' workers, before discussions with the remaining membership, often leading to impatience. While such long processes of coming to collective decisions 'take effort and a bit of annoyance', Jessie nonetheless experiences the involvement and support from the wider community as 'enriching', when saying one has to be 'patient and take people with you'. In order to avoid 'symptoms of fatigue' (Ollie, Co-Director), across workers and members, several respondents point out that the newly instituted organising circle is intended to shift questions onto the right level of decision-making at the co-op.

Nonetheless, Jessie (Worker) concedes that such difficult processes of co-determination with the wider membership also mirror in everyday workplace

experiences at SSC, which they characterise as ‘always a big struggle’. Particularly during the early years of building up the co-op, they argue, the labour process had often been characterised by ‘a lot of arguing and fighting for one's own ideals’, which sometimes felt ‘very, very stressful’ and ‘very uncertain’ to them. On the one hand, Jessie explains the source of their stress emerged from the approaches of some of their colleagues who were ‘always planning the next thing’ while ‘the dirt hadn't even been cleared away from what had just been done’, leaving other workers without breathing space. They experienced such approaches of always pushing ‘forward’ and ‘just mess[ing] things up as best as you can’ as ‘incredibly tiring’. At the same time, Jessie (Worker) underlines the particular constraints of agri-food labour when describing a controversy about the process of planting:

> ‘We also had a big argument about it in the spring […]. I wanted the plants to just be planted. You never know if it rains, can I go back to the field? So [that meant] planting on Saturday. The others of course: *Planting on a Saturday*? *Forget about it!* [But] then from the perspective of my area, I say, *they have to be planted now!* So […] sometimes there are a few constraints that you have to adapt to the weather and that you have to subject yourself to nature again to some extent. If I know it's going to rain throughout next week, then I just have to power through this week. Then it's clear that I can say to myself, *OK, next week it'll be calmer*. That's why with these… sensitivities and capacities, there is always a balancing of what is going on, agriculturally?’

Along similar lines, Sammie (Worker), reflects on their time living at the commune and working the fields at SSC, when highlighting what they experienced as lengthy and difficult ‘turf battles’ amongst their colleagues which ‘very quickly became emotional’. While arguing that such turf battles might not be entirely avoidable, particularly due to the equitable organisation of labour at SSC, they argue that ‘there are a lot of topics where you can totally fall out’, when recounting a controversy around the issue of ‘soil compaction’:

> ‘Is the ground now too wet to drive on or can you still drive on it? Because if the ground is too wet that leads to soil compaction and is of course not good. That was actually a big topic every fall between [some workers] […]. [Some] had very high standards and said no... *We're not going to the field right now*

> *because it's too wet* and [others] kept saying *no, we have to get the harvest in now and we'll save time if we do, you can drive on it and the field is not too wet* […]. That was a discussion and argument time and time again, and somehow people shouted at each other on the field […]. There were always a lot of extensive discussions about how something was being done.'

While there was often little time to prepare such decisions beforehand other than in their free time, Sammie (Worker) explains that they sometimes perceived it as a problem that 'everyone was constantly involved in day-to-day operations'. In addition, they caution of 'exponentiating' effects in agriculture, 'if you make such a wrong decision', which can drive up the workload for the whole team. Overall, Sammie's frustrations about the inability to finding 'common ground' on such issues and to reduce workplace disputes, echoes accounts of other workers.

Autonomy: 'Basically, you have to be the boss'

The ambition to 'not work in hierarchies' (Jamie, Member) but to test out collective ways of working by assigning every worker an equal amount of autonomy and 'high levels of personal responsibility' (Jessie, Worker), signified a strong motif for CSA actors when founding SSC. While efforts of putting such 'high ideals' into practice are generally perceived to assign SSC a 'role model function' (Quinn, Worker), many informants point to shortcomings of such collective structures in their CSA work experience.

While articulating their excitement about 'training' autonomous ways of working at SSC, Jodie (Worker) describes 'alternating as a manager and as staff' on the fields as a large challenge. Given the aims of equal distribution and long-term rotation of tasks and areas of responsibility, set in the co-ops constitution, they explain SSC workers need to navigate being in a 'leadership role' in some areas, while simply having to 'obey' instructions in others. On the one hand, Jodie (Worker) argues such navigation involves, e.g., 'telling others what they have to do, how much they have to harvest, what boxes have to be packed'. On the other, they emphasise the willingness of letting oneself being 'led by others' within temporarily assigned areas of responsibility. Accentuating what they experienced as downsides of autonomous ways of working, Jodie thus explains that 'so much tension arose in the team' within SSC's collective work structures during their time, when saying:

> ‘I have loved the freedom of responsibility, and I hated the burden of responsibility […]. There were always conflicts and different approaches to problems […] and you have to somehow come to a common line, or you withdraw internally and say go do your own thing […] and it all creates a lot of tension. I think that's usually what the boss channels off […]. That's when you find the boss […] stupid, and then you do something that you find nonsensical. Now, I have to live with it, it's nonsensical, and I'm doing it because that's what I've decided in the team, but I still think it's nonsensical and that's causing me so much tension because I'm also to blame for it. I can't say the boss is so stupid or I then say the colleague is so stupid. That in turn worsens the entire relationship at work. So, I think that creates a lot of tension because it's also something we haven't learned well. I think that requires a lot of practice and […] SSC is still at the beginning, I would say, about this learning process, *how do you do it together?* How do you steer together, when do you take the lead, when do you just keep your mouth shut and trust that it will work?’

Confirming such insights, Dylan (Worker), describes the process of moving from a more ‘sheltered’ work life at a conventional farm, and little professional experience, to what they sometimes experienced as a ‘shark tank’ at SSC. To them, working at SSC comprised a ‘wholly different job profile’, necessitating a lot more ‘independent learning’ without the ability of relying on a superior. While highlighting the challenges of adapting to autonomous work at SSC, however, Dylan also describes it as an emancipatory process helping them to ‘grow as a person’.

Contrasting such navigation between leadership and followership in the daily CSA labour process, others signalled that such autonomous ways of working do not appear to work for everyone. Despite political aspirations for high levels of self-determined work, Ollie (Co-Director), for instance, explains that some previous workers had struggled to adhere to such ideals and instead felt overwhelmed with high demands of self-responsibility. According to them, such situations easily led to discontent amongst workers, if the feeling emerged that someone had ‘perhaps not taken enough responsibility’ of their assigned roles and tasks. Struggling with the premise of high amounts of work autonomy at SSC, Quinn (Worker), for instance, elaborated in-depth about how they felt increasingly overwhelmed with such demands despite their political claim for ‘self-emancipation’ by ‘working [things] out’ themselves:

> 'This was a bit of my criticism right from the start, that […] a lot was assumed. Although of course that was how it was communicated, that people who join SSC bring an ability to work self-responsibly, to learn the ropes and to work out a lot on their own […]. I found that very difficult, because I also personally noticed that […] I come from [a background] where I don't think it was taught in such an individualistic way and I sometimes have problems with that… I find it better if I don't know something that someone explains it to me at length before I spend hours looking for it myself, and…. then you could say yes, then it is not the right place for me. But on the other hand, I think […] it would be good to create places like that, as inclusive as possible and I don't see this inclusivity that much in many [alternative] projects […].'

By recalling some of their work experiences at SSC in which they 'spend lots of time working their way into non-standardised workflows' that had been passed down from their predecessor, Quinn (Worker) describes their difficulty to manage their work in desired autonomous ways. In particular, they argue such difficulties often pertain to the 'knowledge lost' through fluctuations within the work team, making it harder for newcomers to continue the work. As such, Quinn (Worker) recalls one of their assigned tasks about agricultural regulations which necessitated working with complex files in which they 'felt left alone' to figure it out. In addition to a feeling of 'insecurity' about how to go about such complex tasks, they describe an increasing lack of confidence in their 'decision-making certainty', which posed problems for the work team as a whole. Ultimately, such experiences left Quinn (Worker) feeling disillusioned with what they circumscribe as 'individualised' ways of working of taking high degrees of autonomy for granted amongst workers. In contrast to their proclaimed ideal of self-emancipated work, however, Quinn (Worker) acknowledges that in hindsight it had been difficult for them to not have a 'classic boss' giving instructions and to gradually grow into larger work responsibilities.

By contrast, other workers like Jessie recalled what they experienced as a time of extreme overload and personal struggle when half of the workforce left SSC, forcing them to take on a leadership role as one of the co-directors of the co-op. Similarly, Charlie (Worker), elaborates on their difficulty of performing a leadership role when needing to 'pass on the organisational knowledge' to newcomers:

> 'You have to remember that those who stay always have to train the new ones. And that's just such a blatant burden because you then have this responsibility for the overview, which is then distributed much less across shoulders, and of course this becomes more problematic if you strive for a horizontal structure like we do. If you have a farm managed by a boss it is also problematic, but not to the same extent as with us, because ultimately you have to guide, initiate, introduce, etc. and train the people […]. And that is such an additional workload, which above all means […] having a compressed working time, simply because you still have to think about it while you're doing the same work with others… basically, you have to be the boss so to say. You have to think further in your head and think about what needs to be done and then in connection with the social problem that you work in a company where the ideology is completely different. So, you're also fighting against your own ideology to a certain extent, because the acceptance for leadership is often not that great in a company like this […].'

As a 'guardian of organisational knowledge' on how 'things were done around here over the years', Charlie (Worker) describes what they experienced as 'tormenting' efforts to navigate tensions within the intended horizontal labour process at SSC, as a 'mind-fuck'. Overall, such experiences also indicate tension between intended work relations and actual work experiences, to be discussed in the following.

8.2.3.2 Work Relations

(In)formal Hierarchies: 'Forces that cannot be named'

Despite the intended precedence of practiced horizontal structures, several respondents pointed out 'contradictions' between such cultural intentions and formal power relations imposed by co-op structures (Charlie, Worker). While many members highlighted efforts to keep the hierarchical influence of formal roles as little as possible within organisational assemblies, a general awareness thus appeared to exist about the prevalence of 'informal hierarchies' (Aria, Member).

Jodie (Worker), for instance, problematises what they observed as persisting subtle relations of power within SSC labour process, when referring to discrepancies between mandated co-op structures and more horizontal aspirations as a 'difficult area of tension'. Having occupied a co-director role for some time, Jodie argues they

perceived informal hierarchies as a 'problem inasmuch as it has not been mapped in no way in any structure', when saying:

> 'I think it's always a large challenge in such structures that there is a formal structure but there is also a strong informal structure and if that gets out of hand, i.e., if the informal structure gets very strong, then it is no longer controllable. There are forces that cannot be named, are not allowed to be named. It's like such bans on thinking, and that was something that I had also experienced strongly and where I thought that we have to take countermeasures - it is important to map this as much as possible, i.e., to depict the forces that exist so that they can, for example, be voted out or can be discussed at all […].'

Given the identified divergence 'between real power and the [mapped] power structure', Jodie's call for mapping the existence of people with lots of experience, knowledge, and eloquence, exerting power over SSC's labour process, eventually led to the formalisation of such structures in the recently instituted organising circle. In contrast to what they described as occasional 'solo efforts' by workers, if quicker decisions needed to be taken, e.g., during pandemic times, they argue the organising circle helped to lend more 'legitimacy' in formalising such decisions, beyond bi-monthly co-op council meetings.

Nonetheless, on a wider organisational level, difficulties appeared to remain. Jamie (Member), for instance, articulates mixed feelings about the value of the organising circle, when arguing it appeared as there were 'hardly volunteers in it' but mostly people with formally assigned roles, such as workers, directors, and supervisory board members. To them, such composition is different from what had originally been discussed, arguing 'it is really not so easy if somehow everyone [and] no one is responsible':

> 'I just wished that […] it somehow goes more in hand with what [we] g[a]ve [ourselves] as a rule […]. It is a little chaotic at the moment. The directors feel a little responsible, the supervisory board feels a little responsible […] workers feel very much responsible. Then this organising circle is somehow being built around it. That's still a bit chaotic for me […].'

Confirming such notion, Ollie (Co-Director) acknowledges that on many occasions members still appear to not understand how the 'incredibly complex relationship

between the co-op and […] other [organisational] structures' actually work. While formally required and assigned roles are often referred to as 'strawman' or 'more done for the paper', as during the focus group discussion, they admit conflicts still appear to emerge from non-visible 'informal hierarchies'. Cypress (Member), who had been part of the supervisory board for some time confirms such conflict when drawing on their personal struggle:

> 'I do observe that people who occupy these functions somehow do carry more responsibility than others, although it shouldn't be like that per se […]. Actually, it should primarily be an external representation, but it's a form of assuming responsibility that maybe happens subconsciously when in tenure. So, at least that's how I felt. [As] a member of the supervisory board, it's just a little harder for me when I notice when there is a substantial issue […] instead of thinking *ah well, I don't have capacity for that right now*. It's more difficult to emotionally withdraw from it if I know […] I have a certain role here now, or I've been here for 10 years now… I need to have an eye for this somehow.'

Despite acknowledging members' constraints of balancing wage labour with participating at SSC, Cypress (Member) problematises that to them there is not enough 'assumption of responsibility […] in relation to the size of the collective' amongst CSA members, in addition to volunteers assigned in formal roles. Overall, Ollie thus argues the diverging double-structure of the organisation necessitates constant navigation work 'between the two poles' in order to uphold the organising principles of SSC, while adhering to formal structures.

Meaningful Work: 'It's really not just a job'

In relation to high amounts of autonomy within daily labour processes at SSC, many respondents highlighted differing attitudes to work amongst parts of the workforce to complicate work relations. In particular, such differences appeared to surface in politicised understandings of what constitutes meaningful work at the co-op.

Many SSC workers emphasised the political nature of their everyday labour. Dylan, for instance, perceives the political as firmly 'anchored in everyday [work] life' at the co-op. In comparison to their new position at EC, Sammie (Worker), also emphasised they felt they had to compromise less at SSC as 'the labour process [was more] in

accordance with [their] political stance'. In contrast to a more specialised division of labour at EC, they argue:

> 'There was just more variety. I think that was really cool at SSC. The fact that I pinched out cucumbers in tunnels and ploughed the field with the tractor or chopped the bed […] that was really great in terms of the variety of tasks. Whereas I would like to be in the field again at EC, but I'm always in the office because [we're] so specialized. […] But I think that's somehow ok for me, because […] if I look at it from a communist perspective, it's not entirely stupid if people specialize more. But clearly for individual job satisfaction, a lot of people think it's great, and I do too, of course - if you always have variety. So, you have to […] make sure that you manage this […] balancing act […] between how much variety do I need and what compromises do I make in favour of efficiency […]?'

Prioritising diversity of work content over efficiency, Jessie (Worker) stresses that their work on the fields of SSC signifies a practical exercise of politics when saying 'we do the political work within our labour and in our production mechanisms'. While problematising that politics are usually 'decoupled' from the social process of food production, working at SSC thus constitutes 'more than just a job' to them. In particular, they emphasise learning processes as a core element of the aspiration for emancipatory work. Nonetheless, Jessie grants that due to various 'struggle[s]' of workers with large amounts of autonomy in the past, there is now a greater awareness that 'people have to grow into' their role and the responsibilities coming with it. Exemplifying such struggle, they recall an incident which resulted in the departure of a previous colleague, when different perspectives towards work became apparent:

> 'It's really not just a job, in the sense of a job where you work from then until then and nothing else […]. [But some] find that unemancipated that you put so much effort into wage work so to say. […] There is this […] perspective that wage work is one part, and I do not want to give so much of my life into it and here there is the other perspective, like a little bit this overidentification so to say, which I also have at times […] that work, and life become blurred. And these fronts collide […]. It's not the kind of job where you start thinking on

> Monday when you get here and then leave everything behind on Thursday when you leave. And there was simply no willingness to change that […].'

By highlighting such conflicting perspectives towards work leading to quarrels at SSC, Jessie (Worker) alludes to a dominant view existing amongst SSC workers, which favours people joining the work team with 'lots of enthusiasm' and 'with everything they are'. By contrast, they show an antipathy towards 'people say[ing] that it is just job here'. Nonetheless, Jessie (Worker) argues that such differences do not necessarily have to end in a fall out. Due to finding out such differing standpoints collectively, SSC actors had previously managed to part ways on good terms.

From an opposing stance, Quinn (Worker) points out what they refer to as 'ideological' differences when politicising the interpretation of emancipatory work. Referring back to their personal struggle of autonomous labour, they contrast a clash between what they perceive as an 'individualistic approach' to work at SSC and their plea for more inclusive workplaces and a focus on functional organising processes as a whole. As such, they problematise what they describe as differences in socialised predispositions of people to work in autonomous and self-emancipatory ways depending on, e.g., their class background and educational experience. Arguing that such conflictual perspectives on emancipatory work are openly addressed within SSC's work team and 'the core of what is lived in SSC through different people', Quinn (Worker) elaborates:

> 'Some say that it is also important for self-emancipation that you don't have everything taken after you but that you create your own ideas, and others come from a political perspective on a macro level, and they say, well, but isn't it more important that the project functions better and that people somehow feel more comfortable and stay in it longer than this individualistic approach? […] It was so completely […] from this private tradition, i.e. the *personal is political* […] and others, I think, come more from a […] tradition of somehow creating projects that are supposed to help establish a different social system.'

Taking a critical stance towards the prevalent idea of emancipatory work at SSC, Quinn (Worker) argues such focus often results in 'lo[sing] a lot of people along the way' as knowledge about different 'lifeworlds' gets lost. Seemingly concerned about such differing orientations to work, Jamie (Member) argues:

> ‘There somehow exists a negotiation between those who have been there for a long time […], who have built it up like this and have put a lot of unpaid work into it, i.e. a lot of over hours, very much in private, a lot of heart and soul, and those who join now, where the business is somehow running and established… And they see it more as wage work or as a job and are now not so willing to do an incredible amount beyond what they are paid for, or who just want […] to have their private lives on the side, like keeping things separate a little bit. Or don't want it to get so out of hand […].’

By exemplifying the impression of many other accounts, Jamie’s concerns about an internal ‘contradiction’ between an ‘increasing employee attitude’ of some newer co-op workers and longer-term workers, who interpret their work at SSC as more than just a job, highlights a change of work orientations over time.

8.2.3.3 Sustainable Work

Identification with Work: ‘I'm just the backer for the scene’

The predominant understanding that working at SSC constitutes more than a conventional employment relationship, also appears to lead many workers to go above and beyond their personal limits for the organisation.

Accordingly, many respondents point out that the common interpretation of meaningful work often leads to an extraordinary commitment of individuals in pushing their personal boundaries. Due to self-organised forms of work, members like Cleo, for instance, observe that it is often difficult to determine ‘where the limit’ to autonomous labour lies. While elaborating on the threat of ‘long-term burnout’, common in smaller farms with high ecological aspirations, which often fail due to a neglect of sustaining themselves financially, Jessi (Worker) stresses that SSC’s form of organising can to some extent avert such developments. By arguing that working at SSC means ‘exchanging’ a more secure income ‘for responsibility’, they argue:

> ‘I do think it’s sometimes practical to have such [normal] job, because you do not need to take it home with you […]. And to say *no, I actually don’t want that* or to admit that*, actually I want to have paid work*, that’s also ok but here it simply is *more*. Otherwise, it would not work. This is more than just this wage labour job where you actually […] only take responsibility in the moment where you are

> present at the location and otherwise make a cut. Here, a lot that goes into everyday life, and I could block myself from that, but then I don't need to be here, because it's a continuous struggle […]. It's just not a job where you say okay, *bye until next Monday, you won't see me anymore* […]. There's always something that happens where, like now, you organise the party and stuff like that where you just can't say, *I have my 20-hour job here now and that's enough for me* […].'

In consequence of the ambition for self-emancipatory and autonomous work, Jessie (Worker) underlines the continuous struggle between navigating high workload demands at SSC and recognising personal capacity limits. Due to recent departures of workers, they point out that discussions about 'what kind of expectations are actually realistic' are ongoing within the work team. Exemplifying such discussions, Quinn (Worker), elaborates:

> 'When the pressure was very high [someone asked] *can you fill in again at the weekend?* […] Of course, there is a lot of that in the summer […] and people work overtime. [But] then I asked myself, well, isn't that an ideal from a farm like this, that we don't end up in such a burnout situation and that we pay ourselves well, and don't do so much overtime and stuff like that? And that's really these contradictions that we always have […]: *What kind of company are we?* Are we simply a company that, e.g., doesn't have such an urge to produce, that is a little more relaxed, or do we really want to step on the gas in order to somehow […] almost undercut the competition with our principles?'

Other members, like Harper, shared concerns about the danger of 'burnout' amongst workers given the number of over hours accrued, in particular, in the peak summer season. Arguing that 'ultimately, workers are still employees in the classic business sense', they highlight that a lot of pressure appears to weigh on them. While emphasising that workers' remuneration is set in SSC's 'planned economy', Ollie (Co-Director) admits contritely that 'there has always been too much overtime, latently'. Despite the aspiration to enable alternative 'life models' that are less 'structured, jam-packed, with so much pressure', Ollie thus cautions from the dangers of burnout when explaining that many people, incl. themselves, appear to inflict a high amount of pressure on themselves by feeling a constant responsibility for the 'political project'.

Describing themselves as ‘highly driven’, Dylan (Worker) recalled their experience in a larger CSA project, in which they helped building up the infrastructure through what they describe as enormous efforts, in the founding phase of the enterprise. Despite describing a valuable experience, however, they left the organisation disillusioned after being made aware of the discrepancy between the marketed image, emphasising values like ‘social justice for land workers’, and the exploitative practice of the organisation benefiting largely from underpaid and free labour. Drawing the comparison to SSC, they note while laughing:

> ‘Well, we just don't go out and tell people how good our working conditions are […] and that we are basically creating paradise on earth for the workers […]. But we also try to suggest that we are a project, we also do political work, and for some people that’s just representative. They then do political work in [the city] […] and other people like me, see their part of the commitment from these unpaid overtime hours simply as their political work […] that's what I'm good at. I'm not the person who organizes protests here or maybe also publishes on the topic in specialist magazines and does political work this way, so to speak, but I'm just the backer for the scene […].’

At the same time, Dylan (Worker) also describes a ‘stark imbalance’ between their enormous amounts of accrued over hours and their compensation in their current role at SSC. Yet, knowing that they will indeed never be able to be compensated in monetary terms, they perceive their work as ‘creating a political framework here on site’ and by selflessly enabling other colleagues to ‘go to demonstrations and chain themselves somewhere’. From Dylan’s (Worker) perspective, their over hours thus also signify ‘political work’ by ‘keeping others’ backs clear’ to organise within associated social movements, while they take over the cultivation of veg on site. Similarly, Jodie (Worker), also reports on their difficulty of balancing their high commitment for SSC work with downtime, when describing the notion that ‘work never stops’ as ‘painful, because it spills over into my private life, and it takes up too much space and that hurts’. As such, they explain that co-op actors tried to counter the development that work seemed to be endless for many SSC workers, by starting to write down working hours as a measure ‘to actually know how much […] we actually work?’. In opposition to the organisational aim to break away from the logic of exchanging wage labour for a set number of hours of work at the farm, Jodie (Worker)

argues, they instead came to see such terminologies as ‘protect[ion]’, i.e., from unsustainable and often self-inflicted patterns of overwork.

Crossing boundaries: ‘It's not just about productivity’

In parallel to predominant work relations characterised by a strong identification of workers with the politics of labour at SSC, organisational practices often appear to reinforce what many experienced as an increasing blending of work and life in attempts to prefigure alternative livelihoods. Navigating such blending appears to pose significant challenges for workers, in particular, when aiming to integrate reproductive aspects into work at the farm.

Several members, like Kerry, emphasise what they describe as a central ambition to ‘not exclude […] reproductive activities’ within SSC’s labour processes. They argue, the aspiration to ‘organise production inclusive[ly]’ necessitates ongoing reflections ‘how participation can be organised’ so that everyone who wants to ‘can actually participate’, when saying:

> ‘For instance, it affects people with children who come and who can't work so productively […] and this is where you can perhaps see most clearly how important it is to support the[se] people […]. Then I have to reflect on myself, as a worker, and say it's not just about productivity, but it's also about everyone being able to participate […]. [They] also want to take part in the discussion on the field and also want to have the feeling that [they] can now be a fully-fledged member of SSC. And why can't other people who […] might not be able to do harvesting or planting quickly, because they care for children […]? Because that's just as important, and it's not just about doing things quickly.’

Instead of doing the work in the ‘fastest way possible’, Kerry (Member) explains workers occupy a crucial role in ‘creating the framework conditions’ for people to participate at the farm. In contrast to other CSAs working more efficiently, they argue, inclusivity is just as important for SSC’s labour process, when saying ‘it's not just about getting [the work] finished’. Reflecting on their work at SSC, Sammie thus elaborates:

> ‘So, there was a lot of exchange on the field with the members too. […] From the classic idea of efficiency, if you just look at the economic output, how many

vegetables you produced and so on - of course, there was somehow... maybe room for improvement. However, it was also really important to talk to the members […] in the field […] but of course, work processes took longer and longer. But that is also the [point], that is also an output somehow, that members learn something and that members are involved in the production […]. That has always been a topic: […] How can we work as efficiently as possible and still... manage it as a collectively managed company […]?'

On the one hand, Sammie (Worker) generally experienced the many 'social interactions' with members at the farm as 'enriching', describing it as a form of 'output' going beyond ideas of productivity. On the other, they reflect that the inclusion of members in the process of working the fields of SSC often felt more of a 'burden and it was difficult to distance [oneself] from it'. During regular membership participation on site, for instance, Sammie (Worker) explains that it often had not been clearly defined of 'who is now responsible' for taking care of members' needs. To them, however, it had been 'hard […] to look away' when 'no one was taking care of them'. Therefore, Sammie (Worker), refers to the approach of 'living and working together' and being 'confronted with the farm around the clock and always seeing the work' as 'overwhelming'. In spite of reduced working hours and the alternative organisation of livelihoods around the farm and commune, they problematise the increased blending of work and leisure time experienced at SSC.

In order to counter such developments, other respondents underlined the importance of incorporating aspects of care within their daily work. Instead of being 'bossed around', like in previous occupations at conventional farms, Dylan (Worker), for instance, emphasises the freedom to openly discuss collective solutions for social and emotional issues at work. They emphasise that such measures are enabled through 'how am I doing rounds' in weekly workers' meetings, seen as an important element to avert feelings of overload within their work. In accordance with this, Jessie (Worker) points out they learnt from previous cases of exhaustion and burnout within the co-op, seen as emblematic across agriculture, when highlighting the importance of not seeing 'overload' as an individual issue:

> 'So, if a person says *I'm taking care of myself and I'm not doing overtime at all so that I don't get burned out*, then that's one thing that's actually welcome. But

you just have to see: *Ok, how is the whole team doing?* This is a team decision! Because if individual people can say that very clearly for themselves and others see a need for the company, then you have to find a balance […]. But I think if you can do it well in a team, then that's exactly why I think this thing about burnout and overload should never be discussed individually but should always be looked at again as a team […]. Because before there was really this kind of [attitude]: *Well, if you do too much, tough luck!*'

Based on such experiences, Jessie (Worker) argues SSC workers had to learn to balance their workloads more equally across the team. Accordingly, they emphasise the 'continuous communication' necessary to coordinate and redistribute work by developing an understanding for each other's workloads and capacities. Underlining the value of weekly work meetings in establishing greater transparency of the collective workload, they emphasise a process navigating potential work overload by taking over work from each other or putting a 'break' on some tasks, if they exceed capacities.

Despite such measures, however, others highlighted what they view as longstanding neglects of socio-economic factors, when pointing out that unpaid over hours of workers are still subject to ongoing discussions, impacting workers' time for recuperation. Ellis (Member), for instance, remarked that despite formally low working hours 'you don't have to kid yourself that the workers really don't earn much' in relation to the time actually spent at SSC. Indeed, Cypress (Member) argues despite the progressively increasing orientation value in bidding rounds 'it was simply calculated with a lot of self-exploitation' from the beginning. On top of extended shifts, Quinn (Worker) argues that sometimes a principled impetus, e.g., to do work 'by hand and not machines' out of ecological considerations, results in 'hidden works' further contributing to their workload. Asking, 'who has access to this type of work' and 'who can afford more morality?', they stress:

> 'But if you're honest, we still have a lot of overtime that hasn't been paid yet. So, you can ask... well, maybe because we come from a relatively well-off family or work in more value-based ways, maybe that doesn't bother us that much really. But there are enough people who can't afford it. So, and that

actually shouldn't be our aim, that we create a work structure where we all actually do a little more work, like for the ideal, but which ideal? […]'

From Quinn's (Worker) perspective, various forms of 'inequalities' and 'class contradictions' often appear to be reproduced and hidden under the guise of 'trying to be the right thing', while reinforcing the precarious existence of workers within alternative projects like SSC.

8.2.3.4 Decommodified Work

(Un)learning: Overcoming 'commodity thinking'

In line with aspirations of effecting transformative internal organisational impacts, SSC actors often highlight relations between the mandatory membership participation in the labour process and what may be described as processes of unlearning transactional market-logics. While such unlearning also aims at conveying a different cultural understanding and the prefiguration of more solidaristic relations at the co-op, pandemic effects put such ambitions under a severe test.

In demarcation to 'vegetable box CSAs', many accounts highlighted deliberate organisational efforts to 'ensure that vegetables or labour, i.e. member engagement, do not become a commodity' (Kerry, Member). Indeed, several respondents exemplified processes of gaining consciousness about predetermined roles and practices. From a worker's perspective, Jodie (Worker), for instance, recalls feeling 'shocked' about the interaction with members when joining SSC:

> 'They are held responsible to such an extent that I thought, *oh God, you can't talk to the customer like that* […], although it was clear to me that it was about breaking down exactly these roles and taking responsibility together. I noticed how much I was still influenced by the old understanding, even though my intellect understood it from providers and customers and so, I was really shocked. Like, for instance, somehow the parsnips were in a bad situation and actually we should really take care of them now and then it was said, *so if no one comes here to weed them, then we'll plough them under*. Then I thought, *you can't do that, it doesn't work like that*, but the next day there were 10 people standing there [on the field]. So, we weeded it and then it looked good again. And, well, that felt so foreign to me, and so shocking!'

In contrast to such experiences, Jodie (Worker) argues they never dared to engage with members in this way in previous CSA roles. Instead, they argue, previous organisations they have been involved with 'never got out of this [customer] relationship', which they actually wanted to dismantle, as it 'would have been beyond [their] imagination' to hold members accountable in such manner. By reflecting on their thinking during such experiences at SSC, Jodie (Worker) argues that they started to understand what they frame as 'unconscious driver[s] maintaining these roles'. Drawing on the practice of free withdrawal of veg from distribution points, for instance, they exemplify the ambition to decouple monetary contributions from the amount of weekly produce, in favour of fostering cultural norms of solidarity and trust amongst members. In contrast to labour-intensive practices of weighing, packing, and cleaning of veg, needed 'only to participate in the market', Jodie (Member) argues SSC does not 'even have a scale'. Such omission does not only reduce the work effort needed by everyone involved, but according to them, also necessitates members to 'train' new behaviours of 'making sure that there's enough for everyone', while satisfying one's own needs. From a members perspective, Ollie explains that experiencing such process of veg distribution aims at transmitting a 'sensitivity how needs are negotiated'. Accordingly, members are encouraged to give thought to 'what they take out, and what not', by interacting and being considerate about their comrades' needs, understood as markedly different from 'market-compliant' forms of 'convenience'. Nonetheless, Jamie (Member) emphasises the continuous work necessary in 'overcom[ing] this commodity thinking' when elucidating their experience of such social negotiation processes:

> 'We actually want to […] see that we can get away from calculating things like: if I pay so much, I get exactly that. But rather that you take what you need and that you don't necessarily weigh it in the distribution stations, but rather that there is a bit of a conversation about it: *Have you already taken some or can I take some more?* That somehow a bit of a relationship is established and that was a very important part of the basic idea […]. I had the feeling that a lot of work was put into how we communicate that […]. It was said again and again, e.g., at meetings, that we are counteracting this pure consumer [understanding], and it was always said we are […] not a subscription box!'

Many more members, like Aria, highlighted the impact of such practices in evoking learning processes amongst SSC comrades, to transforming their understanding of

roles within SSC, by discerning a ‘change in behaviour’ on an ‘individual everyday level’, due to their ongoing engagement. Emphasising that SSC’s practices have become a ‘daily routine’ for them, Leslie (Member), for instance, underlines their personal learning process when saying by now, they find it more difficult to follow ‘this different way of thinking [of] calculate[ing] everything’.

At the same time, however, respondents also encountered several limits of transformative learning processes through active engagement in SSC. Several members, like Harper and Jamie, pointed to the high ‘demands’ placed on people in getting involved and to commit labour to SSC next to wage work and other obligations. Indeed, Ollie (Co-Director) admits that an SSC membership generally ‘asks a lot’ from people, when recalling instances in which seemingly overwhelmed members reported they feel they actually ‘cannot meet the demands’ and wanted to leave the organisation. Even committed members, like Cleo, emphasise what they describe as ‘feelings of guilt’ about seemingly ‘never having enough time’ to contribute to the ‘shared labour’ at the co-op, when saying:

> ‘There are always emails from workers that describe beautifully what is happening on the field. And […] sometimes people say *you have to come more*. And it's like this: I read the emails regularly. I [come] to general meetings […], and I regularly do the duty of picking it up, but I should actually go to the field a lot more often. They always ask how often you come in a year […] And I don't think I've ever managed to go there as often as I said I would go […] well, unfortunately there is a gap between expectations and reality, I would say […].’

While arguing their feeling mirrors others in their pick-up station in which ‘everyone constantly has the feeling that they are not doing enough’, Cleo (Member) also emphasises that COVID-19 pandemic impacts considerably aggravated their intention to participate more often. Indeed, many accounts stressed the detrimental effect of pandemic restrictions in contributing to a subsiding ‘consciousness’ (Jamie, Member) about ideas that the membership at SSC goes beyond financial transactions in return for food, which to many underlined the importance of physical presence in CSA participation. While Quinn (Worker) observed an increasing sense of ‘fatigue’ amongst members, given the absence of interaction and social exchange, others, like Ellis (Member), concurred that online meetings had not only ‘reduced the motivation’ but

that the ‘relation to the farm […] gets a bit lost’. Most distinctly, Charlie (Worker) thus argues that the pandemic was indeed ‘putting [SSC’s] direct democratic functional principles to the test and also destroys them’, when summing up co-op assemblies as proceeding ‘way to smooth’. Overall, such impressions exemplify the fear of many SSC actors that the lack of physical presence and active participation on SSC fields results in a retreat of members into passive consumer roles and subjectivities.

Scaling Solidarity: CSA competition or Co-optation?

In parallel to pandemic impacts affecting SSC’s participatory structures and ambitions, the proliferation of CSA initiatives in close proximity urged workers to build relations beyond the immediate bounds of the organisation. While the emergence of a plurality of initiatives has been overtly welcomed, in line with ambitions to diffuse CSA ideas and practices widely, several informants observed the resurgence of competitive logics on an organisational level, aggravating intentions of building solidarity and co-operation across CSAs.

In spite of the abundance of accounts highlighting the benefits of membership participation in relation to learning and prefiguring more solidaristic relations, many respondents cautioned about the paradoxical constraints SSC’s approach faces due to a growing popularity of the CSA movement. Particularly in relation to the size and infrastructure of larger CSA initiatives, like EC, which enables them to ‘produce much more cheaply’, Jessie (Worker) articulates growing concerns over being able to finding enough people to support approaches like SSC, when saying:

> ‘It's a bit threatening whether you really can communicate your own ideals so well, or what the veg farm stands for, so to speak. Because that's exactly what you have to communicate to people so that you can justify this additional price […], because in the end people in the city will see that price […]. It's just really difficult for small[er] businesses that have very high ideals […] and then of course also engage in a certain amount of self-exploitation and are perhaps not quite as economical […].’

Acknowledging SSC’s economic disadvantage, compared to larger CSAs, Jessie (Worker) also points out that practices such as, e.g., pre-packaged boxes, are also more ‘practical’ for people. Thus, they worry whether such ease of participation and potentially lower costs will prompt members to return to more commodified forms of

CSA engagement. Sharing such concerns, Sammie (Worker) elaborates on their struggle to recruit enough members to cover the significant costs for EC's growth plans. Despite targeting different societal audiences than SSC, they concede:

> 'The fact that we are in competition with other CSAs… we don't actually want that […]. It feels totally uncomfortable that we know exactly when we somehow need [so and so many] harvest shares […] then at some point there may no longer be enough space for, um, smaller CSAs […]. We can now always say like a mantra that *there is room for everyone*, and we want to get CSA out of its niche, and that as many people as possible see it as normal to have a CSA share, and to eat that way. But that can happen […]. If inflation somehow rises, and energy prices and gas prices rise, people will save on food first, so we don't have to fool ourselves.'

Similarly, Hunter (Worker) also admits that due to larger economic developments, the competition for CSA workers and members may intensify in the future, reiterating their plea for an overarching 'commons network' structure encompassing all local CSAs. Nonetheless, other informants like Ollie and Aria (Members) reacted more optimistically about the development of informal structures of cross-organisational co-operation, ranging across jointly purchased machinery, exchange of knowledge and partly produce, as well as mutual support in various administrative and political matters. While welcoming such intensifying co-operation as 'very valuable', Ellis (Member), however, cautions about the wider effects of growing competition from larger initiatives, when saying:

> 'I would say from a sort of political-ideal, maybe even ideological point of view, I am a bit concerned that farms such as EC […], I don't want to say displace [more] progressive food suppliers, but at least making it more difficult to justify it […]. Because if you were talking about CSA five years ago […] you were talking about a very different CSA than today […]. That's also the issue in the network, *what actually is CSA?* What do we want to name as CSA, and what not?'

Utilising larger 'capacities for public relations and advertising' (Ellis, Member), the growing presence of EC in the public domain, for instance, has raised concerns amongst SSC members who articulated fears about a growing 'dilution' of CSA

principles in the eyes of the public. By alluding to dangers of capitalist co-optation, such accounts point to apparent ideological differences in interpretations of CSA, which are perceived by members, like Ellis, to impede projects like SSC, seen as more radical and persevere in their value adherence. Overall, such accounts stress that larger CSA co-ops make it too easy for members to 'hand over responsibility' for the farm by obtaining 'an eco-veg box' (Ellis, Member), which to them increases the risk of falling back into customer service attitudes. In this vein, fieldwork insights confirmed what some network informants designated as 'latent ideological conflicts' when articulating divergent philosophical interpretations of organising work and participation in CSAs. Accordingly, some SSC proponents like Charlie (Worker) warn that seeing the CSA network purely as an exchange platform, lacks a foundation in set identifiable criteria for what CSA ought to be:

> 'I somehow came of the opinion that this isn't enough. Because my worry was that we only have a few years until capitalism will come again and try to integrate new ideas. And if we haven't developed a defined seal so to say, or a defined association structure, then we'll simply be eaten up. It will simply be sucked up, capitalistically integrated. Then there will be farms everywhere that will call themselves CSA because we cannot defend it […] and this will cause maximum confusion amongst end-users. And what SSC is representing currently will remain a niche thing.'

Aiming to counter such co-opting developments, workers, like Charlie, previously initiated a regional CSA group together with participants from other CSAs, with the intention to determine a set of collectively agreed upon CSA criteria that all participants could sign up to. Yet, despite far advanced discussions, negotiations ultimately failed due to what Charlie (Worker) described as an 'extreme […] grassroots democratic constitution' of the network. Due to the consensus-based orientation, one person intervened and brought the collective agreement to a standstill, leaving remaining members frustrated and disenchanted. Slightly cynical about the growing competitive tendencies, Jodie (Worker) elaborates on what they see as the largest difficulty to gaining autonomy from market relations:

> 'As long as everyone does capitalism, that's the easiest thing. It's totally low-threshold because, firstly, everyone does it, secondly, you can buy it […]. Time

is so short and that means people go to work, they earn money, what are they supposed to do now? Mess around in the field somewhere or have endless discussions or something like that when it's so easy? […].'

Nonetheless, despite what they described as an initial resentment against larger CSAs like EC, Jodie (Worker) grants that such feelings are in fact 'totally counterproductive', when advocating for mutual support across organisations, highlighting that after all 'we are fighting the same fight'. While pandemics and ecological crises constitute 'growth engines' for the popularity of CSAs, however, doubts remain whether SSC's participatory structures, often described as 'inconvenient' (Quinn, Worker) and 'too laborious' (Jodie, Worker) can convince larger parts of society continuously.

8.3 Conclusion: Prefiguring Alternative Food Labour

At the backdrop of transformative work imaginaries and diverging scaling strategies, findings presented in this chapter have outlined differing social outcomes of how work is organised and experienced within both CSA co-operatives.

While the conflictual process, resulting in a predominant fast-growth strategy, has led GIC actors to formalise work in increasingly vertical ways, SSC actors were found to focus on maintaining horizontal structures in line with the dominant slow-growth approach. The increasing focus on rationalisation, a more hierarchical division of labour, as well as the centralisation of decision-making at GIC is perceived as emerging out of the strategic orientation, as well as the socio-economic pressures associated with scaling up CSA provisioning, within a single organisation. While a rethinking towards more economically viable forms of CSA labour has recently resulted in a minor expansion of SSC's operations, the organisation of labour was built on the maintenance of an egalitarian division of labour, as well as consensus-based forms of decision-making.

Comparing the experiences of work within and across both CSAs sheds light on organisational efforts to prefiguring alternative forms of food labour. Firstly, efforts to formalise CSA labour in both organisations lead to different experiences of *workplace democracy*, pertaining to interrelated dimensions of co-determination and autonomy. At GIC, many accounts highlighted an apparent lack of co-determination during the most recent round of expansion, driven by a growing managerialism exerted by the

core team. In addition, the increasing hierarchical and specialised division of labour appears to lead to further a lack of autonomy in GIC work processes. Exemplified in the ambivalence about issues of control and orientation, many workers articulated scepticism about the value and necessity of managerial tools in providing orientation. In contrast, the importance of workers' ability to determine their working conditions has been underlined by many accounts at SSC. However, issues appear to remain about what many vividly described as time-consuming turf battles amongst workers, impacting the work efficiency and relations within SSC, also in relation to negotiations with the wider membership. Furthermore, the large autonomy assigned to SSC workers appears to create both possibilities for self-emancipated work and difficulties for people who experience the high demands of self-responsibility as overwhelming and exclusionary.

Secondly, the organisation of CSA labour in accordance with scaling pathways influences *relations of work*, pertaining to the relations amongst workers as well as relations to work itself. At GIC, an increasing divide and growing distance has been observed between administrative workers in office functions and workers on the field. Such divide not only appears to emerge out of different life worlds experienced in day-to-day work, but also creates informal hierarchies about the meaning assigned to different forms of labour at GIC. On top of such alterations of relations amongst workers, many accounts shed light on the shifting relations to work itself at GIC. While the developmental phase of the organisation had been shaped by many enthusiastic newcomers to agri-food work on a quest for meaning, a predominant understanding of CSA labour as a conventional employment relation has become the norm at GIC, spurring both disillusionment and acceptance amongst workforces. By contrast, tensions between informal, horizontal norms and more vertical, formally mandated structures have created discrepancies within SSC, leading to power imbalances. Despite aspirations to share responsibility equally across the CSA, such discrepancies aggravate efforts to prefigure alternative relations amongst SSC actors. Moreover, the understanding of what constitutes meaningful work at SSC diverges on different politicised understandings of emancipatory labour. A predominant understanding appears to prevail, which perceives autonomous CSA work as a vehicle for self-emancipation, while dissenters question such work orientation as individualistic and somewhat exclusionary.

Thirdly, the organisation of labour and the meaning attached to it also affects experiences of the *sustainability of CSA* work, influenced by the identification with work as well as the perceived crossing of personal boundaries. At GIC, findings highlight an overidentification with work alongside proclaimed ambitions to contribute to socio-ecological change amongst some workers, seen as jeopardizing the sustainability of CSA labour through forms of self-exploitative solidarity. The analysis also shows a perceived mismatch between imaginaries to work in harmony with nature in which the increased focus on scale and efficiency detracts from ambitions to produce food in more ecologically sustainable ways at GIC. In addition, the increased intensity of workload and pace experienced through the fast-growth approach also led many workers to exceed their capacity limits. Similarly, a perceived overidentification with the politics of work at SSC appears to increase the danger of overload and burnout amongst some workers. Moreover, experiences of a blending of work and life in attempts to incorporate reproductive labour into the labour process creates a boundaryless work environment, threatening to exceed sustainable levels for some.

Fourthly, in line with scaling strategies, GIC and SSC differ substantially in their approach to incorporate the wider membership into CSA labour processes. While the voluntary approach helped to attract a large number of members to join GIC and to materially improve working conditions (i.e. wages, holidays, job security), findings pointed to a return to more impersonal and transactional relations akin to market logics. Such process has arguably reinforced a prevalent service orientation, which many criticised as aggravating efforts to generating solidarity amongst members to the organisation, workers, and each other. By contrast, the mandatory participation at SSC indicated learning processes, perceived as breaking down commodity thinking amongst both workers and members, through the active and continuous participation. Nonetheless, the high demands set on members, as well as the absence of presence during times of pandemic restrictions appears to indicate a backwards trend amongst some, to falling back into customer relations. Moreover, in contrast to GIC, the experienced proliferation of CSA initiatives in SSC's locality has led to a resurgence of a latent competition across CSA organisations, aggravating efforts of building solidarity across the organisational spectrum.

Chapter 9 - Discussion

9.1 Introduction

The case studies presented in this research show that CSA organising involves conflict-laden social processes that are informed by multiple and often conflicting imaginaries of socio-ecological change. By drawing on nascent literatures of degrowth and alternative organising, the following chapter discusses findings across both cases in an attempt to answer the three sub-research questions. Following the structure of preceding findings chapters, this chapter interrogates how degrowth-oriented organisational imaginaries (Chapter 6) inform strategising processes of scaling (Chapter 7), which in turn influence the organisation and experience of de/re-alienated work in both CSA co-operatives (Chapter 8). Finally, the discussion aims to show the interrelation between all themes foregrounded in sub-research questions, by turning to the main research question. Here, the analysis of present case studies gives insights into the possibilities and limits of CSA co-ops to prefiguring degrowth on an organisational level. Each section follows the same logical structure in commencing with a recap of research questions and relevant literature, before offering a comparative analysis of findings and outlining contributions to the literature.

9.2 Imaginaries of Socio-Ecological Change

RQ 1: How do organisational practices within CSA co-operatives interrelate with wider socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth?

Addressing the first sub-research question, this study contributes to the debate on degrowth organising by exploring the extent to which wider socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth ideas are pertinent for the organisation of CSA co-ops.

This research has been informed by the persisting conceptual ambiguity around the notion of degrowth organisations and organising (Chapter 3). The literature highlighted an often research-led interpretation and reconfiguration of degrowth to suit particular audiences, theoretical perspectives, or organisational activities (Froese et al. 2023; Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021). In contrast to the majority of research focusing on the compatibility of specific organisational and economic configurations of organisations to degrowth, the review identified that only limited attention has been

given to the social processes of organising in line with degrowth ideas. Nascent literature focusing on individual actors withdrawing from growth-driven organisational spaces has analysed such acts as prefigurative processes of *degrowing*, understood to be initiated by a dissatisfaction with the larger system, which can spur the organisation of degrowth-inspired landscapes (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023). Similar research has focused on individual forms of prefiguration, initiated through profound ontological shifts (Heikkurinen 2019) and inner revolts against the psychological suffering experienced through growth-driven capitalism, spurring a moral awakening to explore alternative organising in line with degrowth ideas (Vlasov et al. 2023). More optimistic perspectives observe an empirical manifestation of 'degrowth co-operatives' (Cunico et al. 2022, p. 12). However, research on the CSA network level in Germany has found that the CSA movement at large did not appear to reciprocate the apparent interest of the degrowth movement, with the latter's primary focus on seemingly abstract critiques of growth economies, in contrast to practice-oriented socio-ecological transformation (Spanier et al. 2023). Overall, the review identified a lack of research on how collective processes of degrowing are organised, negotiated and contested. Therefore, further exploration into the actual pertinence of (de)growth imaginaries for organisational practitioners is important to gain insights into how prefigurative processes of degrowth may be enacted, embodied, and performed in everyday organising towards socio-ecological transformation.

Theoretically, this research followed a Castoriadian (1987) conception of social imaginaries, viewed as an important normative precursor to prefigurative organisational practice. While social imaginaries are understood as instituting society and enabling social practice (Banerjee et al. 2021, p. 6), individuals and collectives may contest and challenge hegemonic social imaginaries through their reflexive capacity to re-imagine and shape new social imaginaries through social practice. Despite the centrality of Castoriadis' thought to degrowth and pervasive calls to *decolonise* imaginaries of growth (Latouche 2009), however, the question of how such imaginaries are to be undone in social processes remains largely unexplored in empirical contexts (Varvarousis 2019). Thus, this research builds on the co-productive relationship between imaginaries and social practice, by focusing on the generative capacity of social imaginaries in relation to the generative temporal framing of prefigurative practice (Gordon 2018; Zanoni et al. 2017). Following Emirbayer and

Mische's (1998) sociological reading, this research analysed organisational practice in the present (*practical evaluation*), as simultaneously informed by the ways in which people interpret and imagine their relationship to the past and future. In this sense, social imaginaries informed by past action and future projection are understood as acting upon present structural and historical organised contexts in reproductive or transformative ways, through prefigurative organisational practice.

9.2.1 The Implicit, Explicit, and Absent Presence of Degrowth

The analysis across both cases shows that degrowth ideas hold pertinence for participants on the level of organisational imaginaries in partly explicit and often implicit ways. In particular, such ideas can be observed in the ways in which CSA practitioners aim to contribute to socio-ecological change, in what has been analysed as transformative ecological and socio-economic imaginaries. Transformative imaginaries have been described as constituting a *common ground* on which actors in both CSAs not only aim to build an alternative form of agri-food provisioning, but one that may challenge hegemonic ways of producing and consuming altogether. Such imaginaries bear significant influence on organisational objectives, as addressed in written text, or articulated in interviews and conversations.

Grounded in everyday struggles and future projections of worsening ecological conditions of agri-food production, ecological imaginaries inform organisational objectives towards more sustainable forms of food production and consumption. Despite differences, CSA actors across both organisations were identified as articulating growth-averse ambitions to their ecological production, by emphasising the need to operate within natural limits and cycles as much as possible. As such, abundant acknowledgements were made about the ecological threats of expansive agri-food production, clearly indicating a widespread growth-critical stance across both cases. On the one hand, this emphasis can be understood as an implicit recognition of sufficiency-oriented degrowth arguments which emphasise limits to material and energy use in production processes, following a needs-based orientation of members' food supply through a planned economic model. Such orientation could also be observed on the individual level by many CSA actors who aspire towards value practices that, e.g., facilitate the limitation of personal needs in line with slower, more frugal ways of living, perceived as more conducive to aspirations of ecological sustainability. Some respondents explicitly related such practices of sufficiency and

self-limitation to what appear as individual forms of prefiguring degrowth. On the other hand, few respondents explicitly described their form of CSA organising as 'degrowth' of agri-food production in relation to the non-expansionist orientation to farming, i.e., what may be observed as *degrowing* industrialised agriculture by regrowing commons-based agri-food organisations.

Based on exploitative and alienating experiences in relation to industrialised and growth-driven forms of agri-food production, socio-economic imaginaries aiming towards a transformation of agricultural work were identified as playing a crucial role in the accounts of CSA practitioners across both cases. While some differences can be discerned in the weight attached to fair wages and secure workplaces at GIC, and the comparatively larger emphasis on self-determined and non-hierarchical work at SSC, transformative imaginaries often featured deeper considerations about the nature of agricultural work and its social value. As such, imaginaries of prefiguring different, more meaningful ways of working in CSAs were not only part of conversations with several workers in each CSA, but also featured heavily in conversations across the wider network. Here, ideas of a broader reconfiguration of often arduous agricultural work and the preference of more free time through the widespread practice of avoiding full-time workplaces are indicative of what some respondents in both CSAs explicitly referred to as the prefiguration of degrowth ideas. Less often, implicit relations can be drawn from the ways in which workers were projecting their working conditions onto degrowth imaginaries, e.g., when referring to the need to respect organisational and workers' boundaries just as much as planetary boundaries.

In addition, many accounts in both organisations indicated what had been identified as a *mindshift*, emerging out of a personal state of crisis and a sense of meaninglessness, experienced as an inner tension between personal values and previous employment relationships, before joining a CSA. In many cases, such mindshift processes led to the urge of transforming feelings of uneasiness about one's work and workplaces into a shift in careers to working the land or getting active in CSAs in other ways. While few indicated the explicit influence of degrowth ideas as playing a part in such personal change processes, the more prevalent realisation about one's personal contribution to unsustainable growth-based patterns of production and consumption may be read as implicit references and entry points into degrowth imaginaries. Such findings can be interpreted as encouraging insights into how such recognition and mindshift may

contribute to people seeking work that contributes to socio-ecological change instead of furthering multiple crises spurred by growth-driven organisations. Degrowth-oriented imaginaries attached to work and participation in CSAs thus appear to contribute to a catalysing process of reconsidering one's societal role and to pursuing what appears as more meaningful work, in the face of worsening ecological crises and agricultural working conditions.

Nonetheless, in spite of the occasionally explicit, and more often implicit presence of degrowth-related ideas on the level of organisational imaginaries, such identification did not appear to be met with a similar prevalence on a more operational level in either CSA co-op. When participants talked about the processes of organising CSA at the farm and in their distribution points, degrowth imaginaries did not enter the conversation. When workers spoke about their experiences of CSA work, degrowth imaginaries did not feature. When members spoke about their forms of participating in CSAs, they did not talk about degrowth imaginaries. Across the participatory engagement of the researcher with the co-operative working group in the CSA network, conversations about CSA practice largely revolved around issues that appeared removed from what was often perceived as abstract academic ideas of degrowth. Moreover, on the few occasions when degrowth ideas were identifiable in relation to practice, the interpretation appeared influenced by particular and sometimes narrow readings, e.g., in the present case often following a sufficiency-oriented school of degrowth thought, prevalent in the German-speaking sphere. While some personal relationships appeared to exist amongst degrowth-oriented scholar-activists and CSA practitioners, who generally appeared receptive to degrowth in relation to macro-oriented debates of system change, such ideas appeared largely absent in the ways CSA actors spoke about their day-to-day organising. Thus, in contrast to the implicit and explicit consultation of degrowth imaginaries as a way of understanding prevalent organisational and individual objectives of socio-ecological change, this relationship appeared less pertinent with regard to organisational practice. Empirically, the usefulness of degrowth concepts that bear relevance for organisational practice thus appears limited to the level of broader organisational imaginaries within both CSA cases. In other words, the prevalence of degrowth imaginaries did not seem to directly translate into day-to-day CSA practice.

9.2.2 (De)colonising Imaginaries and Organisational Practice?

The preceding analysis allows some preliminary conclusions with regard to the first sub-research question on the interrelation between organisational practice and imaginaries of (de)growth, in relation to the existing literature on prefigurative degrowth organising.

While degrowth imaginaries appeared to signify a pertinent influence on CSA participants on a macro-oriented level, by informing organisational and personal objectives in occasionally explicit and often implicit ways, the glaring absence of degrowth in day-to-day organising speaks volumes. Here, degrowth discourses did not appear to exert a pertinent influence on CSA actors in making sense of their everyday organisational realities, often characterised by the need for hands-on action to deal with the social, ecological, and economic imponderabilities of agri-food provisioning. In this space, degrowth imaginaries, with their focus on broader diagnoses of growth-driven socio-ecological ills and concurrent prognoses of transformation, seemed more like a clunky interference than a useful concept furthering the political ambitions of CSA practitioners. Thus, this study identifies a disconnect between often discursive and macro-oriented political imaginaries of degrowth, and their usage and materialisation in prefigurative organisational practice of organising CSA.

Accordingly, this research confirms similar studies attesting to the imbalance between predominantly academic and discourse-driven degrowth movements and the practice-oriented CSA network in Germany, despite both sharing similar goals of working towards radical socio-ecological change (Spanier et al. 2023). Moreover, on an individual level, this study echoes previous research by identifying a mindshift in which people purposefully seek out forms of CSA work in order to contribute to socio-ecological change instead of furthering various growth-driven crises. However, in contrast to initiating personal prefigurative processes of *degrowing* (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023), often limited to individual-level escapism towards a more self-sufficient provisioning of livelihoods, present cases point to the potential of degrowth imaginaries to spark social prefigurative processes. In this sense, CSA work and participation can constitute a powerful imaginary in which personal mindshifts can catalyse a process of pursuing more socio-ecologically meaningful work through collective forms of degrowing. Nonetheless, such processes often appear to be impaired by a disconnect between degrowth imaginaries and day-to-day practice.

In contrast to more optimistic perspectives seeing the empirical manifestation of 'degrowth co-operatives' (Cunico et al. 2022), the disconnect between degrowth imaginaries and organisational practice holds important implications for organisational research and practice in relation to degrowth. Specifically, the identified empirical absence of degrowth in organisational practice suggests the need to take a more critical stance and cautious approach to the ways in which 'degrowth' is understood in organisational contexts, and in making sense of empirical phenomena. Here, this research points towards a significant departure from the ways in which degrowth has been theorised, enacted, and often problematically fixed to a particular version (Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021), or reconfigured to fit hegemonic discourses in organisation and management studies (Chapter 3). More to the point, the often-evoked degrowth agenda of *decolonising* (i.e., liberating) imaginaries from growth should not necessarily mean we need to *colonise*[41] organisational spaces with degrowth or attribute its label to organisational practices which bear little relevance for practitioners. While Fournier (2008, p. 534) reminds us that the quest to 'escape' from the growth economy is 'as much a question of decolonising the imagination as one of enacting new practices', alternative organisational practice may not necessarily wear a degrowth tag to further its political agenda. Instead, this research points to a more careful engagement with the specific ways in which forms of organising may or may not be conducive to degrowth as a larger socio-ecological transformation, which has to be *systemic* in its essence. After all, no single organisation can ever prefigure degrowth on its own – but it can create conditions, practices, networks, and forms of work that contribute to this process, potentially allowing a larger social and political force to emerge that may eventually challenge hegemonic formations of growth as unviable and undesirable. In other words, rather than labelling organisational practice as (non-)degrowth, this study challenges researchers to think more deeply about *how* forms of organising may contribute to, or counteract, such larger societal transformations towards degrowth, without convoluting political economic and paradigmatic concepts with instances of organisation.

However, far from shedding degrowth as an organisational concept in its entirety, following this line of thought instead attempts to open up new avenues for more

[41] While using these terms to engage with ubiquitous degrowth terminology, I agree with others who have rightly warned against the solely metaphorical usage of decolonisation, thereby rendering it meaningless and domesticated (Deschner and Hurst 2018; Tuck and Yang 2012).

reflexive theory building on degrowth organising (Banerjee et al. 2021; Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021). Accordingly, the present analysis points to the need for organisational research on degrowth to develop theoretical tools which allow for a more careful and fine-grained analysis of studied organisations in relation to the political economic agenda of degrowth. In the attempt to aid the study of prefigurative degrowth processes on an organisational level, theorising needs to be attuned to the study of social processes and the extent to which these can create the conditions for a socio-ecological transformation on a systemic level. Such a conception thus implies a reconsideration of methodological approaches to studying degrowth organising in practice. Rather than imposing a specific meaning of degrowth to an organisation or organisational practice, this thesis aims to emphasise the ways in which theorising needs to be more attuned to the material struggles experienced within social processes towards socio-ecological transformation. This is important, as empirical evidence suggests that degrowth imaginaries are often perceived as rather abstract and not very pertinent for pressing organisational issues facing CSA practitioners in their day-to-day struggles.

9.3 Scaling Socio-Ecological Change

RQ 2: How do CSAs strategise scaling pathways towards socio-ecological transformation?

This section focuses on the conflictual processes leading to moments of rupture in both CSAs, by focusing on prefigurative strategising processes of scaling transformative change in relation to political imaginaries of growth and degrowth. After a brief recap of relevant literature, this section offers a two-part discussion to answer this question. Firstly, it will attempt to offer an understanding of the prevalence of organisational rupture in a relatively early organisational stage (Year 6-7) in both CSAs, which differs from conventional co-operatives. Secondly, it seeks to explain why different scaling strategies became dominant in each CSA.

In chapter three, it is argued that questions of scaling prefigurative ideas and practices beyond societal niches are key for a bottom-up degrowth transformation. In relation to broader political debates around the identified strategic turn of degrowth (Barlow et al. 2022), the investigation of interstitial strategising processes through commons-based organising thus constitutes an important question for *how* degrowth

transformations may be scaled across wider society. Equally, research on prefiguration has highlighted the need to pay closer attention to applied strategies on how strategic priorities are negotiated within social processes of movements (Yates 2021). In the context of this research, social processes of negotiating scaling pathways can thus be perceived as a form of *prefigurative strategising* which connects the imaginary ends, i.e. broadly defined organisational imaginaries of a wider societal transformation, with the means, i.e., strategies of scaling. Previous research has pointed to strategising processes towards wider social transformations as a key area of tension in prefigurative organising, in which diverging perspectives on appropriate strategies can depict a major source of internal struggle (Schiller-Merkens 2024). At the level of organisation, chapter three thus identified the need for a critical understanding of strategy as an inherently political organisational process that has ramifications beyond the organisation. Such understanding appears particularly useful for bottom-up movements and counter-hegemonic forces aiming for social change (Levy et al. 2003). Following others (Blom and Alvesson 2016; Levy et al. 2003; Spicer and Boehm 2007), this research understands strategic processes as hegemonic struggle, in which organisational actors attempt to exert influence on the organisational and ideological forces shaping the overall direction of the organisation.

In the context of prefigurative degrowth organising, strategic questions around organisational growth and scaling have been found to constitute the most prevalent area of contestation (Hinton 2021). Much research on degrowth organising emphasises the need for limiting organisational growth to ensure social relations remain on a manageable scale, understood to facilitate democratic participation, trustful co-operation, shared responsibility, community solidarity, conviviality, and autonomy (Froese et al. 2023; Gebauer 2018; Nesterova 2021). Therefore, the normative equation of scaling with organisational growth as necessary, desirable, and potentially infinite is increasingly put into question as limiting strategic options for transformative change processes in line with degrowth (Colombo et al. 2023; Pansera and Fressoli 2020). However, chapter three also highlighted problems of scalability and a *growth dilemma* facing commons-based organisations (Euler 2019), in navigating trade-offs between economic stability through growth and limits to the organisational size in favour of more horizontal political ethics. Within market environments, much has been written about the degeneration of co-operatives, succumbing to the influence of market forces

and reverting to organisational logics of growth, profit, and competitiveness, which can bring the means-ends tension to the surface. Often coming from an economic perspective, degrowth-oriented research thus highlights strategic pathways for co-operatives to strike a balance between reaching a stable organisational size to remain economically viable, socially stable, and ecologically sustainable. In particular, influential research on CSA initiatives identifies a balancing act within a developmental corridor towards an optimum organisational size (Paech et al. 2019). Echoing organisational research (André and Pache 2016; Kannothra et al. 2018), more sociological perspectives emphasise an ethos of care as a means to prefiguring degrowth (Sekulova et al. 2023). By attending to member's limits and needs as well as democratic, inclusive, and equitable means of participation, over and above a single focus on tangible organisational results, caring processes are understood as particularly pertinent in times of crises and group break-down (Sekulova et al. 2023).

Closely connected to strategies of balancing growth, chapter three outlined a growing number of studies discovering alternative scaling strategies to achieving transformative social and ecological impacts. From a degrowth perspective, the literature identified a preferred tendency towards strategies of scaling *out* to spreading organising principles and proliferating smaller co-operatives, as opposed to scaling *up* one larger co-operative (Johanisova et al. 2015; Sekulova et al. 2017). Others highlight strategies of scaling *deep* through contributing to cultural changes on societal levels as fundamental for system change (Colombo et al. 2023; Moore et al. 2015). While some of this literature indicates latent tensions about diverging priorities affecting negotiation processes about scaling strategies (Bauwens et al. 2020; Kannothra et al. 2018), overall scholarship remains largely depoliticised, focused on scaling typologies, and offering managerial solutions to hybrid objectives in competitive market environments. Colombo et al.'s (2023) typology of scaling routes has been identified as a particularly useful lens for this study, as it synthesises the fragmented scaling literature into a degrowth-oriented framework towards system change, in a co-operative agricultural context. The framework offers a helpful differentiation between inward and outward-focused organisational dynamics, underlining the impact of scaling strategies on the internal organisation and wider society. While Colombo et al. (2023) maintain that transformative impacts are to be generated through synergies and the complementarity of scaling strategies to facilitate wider systemic change, however,

the study overlooks issues of power and politics within strategising processes to negotiating scaling pathways. Applying a critical lens to such strategic processes of scaling, the following section focuses on the prevalence of organisational ruptures in demarcation to conventional co-operatives (9.3.1.1), before attempting to explain why different scaling strategies became dominant in each CSA (9.3.1.2).

9.3.1 (Un)Common Ruptures

Despite different starting conditions and organisational developments, both CSAs experienced severe conflictual processes about the overall strategic alignment and direction, leading to organisational rupture between year six and seven after their establishment. As such, this research outlined important commonalities across both CSAs within prefigurative strategising processes, i.e., negotiations and deliberations about how transformative imaginaries may best be put into practice. Particularly within core teams around co-founders, workers, and committed members, contentious debates around organisational growth and scaling pathways have formed a continuous background to political controversies across each CSA's development ever since their inception. In contrast to everyday organising, such debates appear particularly influenced by diverse political imaginaries aiming to generate transformative organisational impact and to broaden the reach of CSAs, by contributing to a wider systemic transformation.

In line with partly explicit and often implicit degrowth imaginaries, debates in both organisations were initially characterised by an adherence to maintaining organisational limits in favour of social and ecological objectives while ensuring economic viability. Navigating such a balancing act (Paech et al. 2019), strategising processes quickly turned to alternative scaling pathways (Colombo et al. 2023). While strategies of replication (scaling out inwards) appeared more prevalent at GIC, ideas of multiplication (scaling out outwards) appeared more common at SSC. Nonetheless, within labour-intensive periods of building and developing both CSAs, such ideas remained contested and in relational conversations with other scaling routes. Both organisations set up associations and commons networks with the intention of facilitating the diffusion of CSA practices and principles (scaling with outwards) in their region and beyond. Both cases also debated scaling pathways in relation to extending and deepening their food provisioning range internally (scaling deep inwards) and externally through co-operating with other CSAs and food co-operative

partners. Confirming scholarship on degrowth organising (Chapter 3), such efforts to maintaining a stable organisational size to further alternative means, i.e., scaling pathways to generate transformative change, can be viewed as attempts of translating prevalent degrowth imaginaries as discussed above (9.2.1) into scaling strategies.

Despite such longstanding strategic negotiations and debates, however, the conflict around scaling pathways came to the surface in both organisations over diverging perspectives on what can be understood as pathways of scaling deep (Colombo et al. 2023). In this context, scaling deep concerns questions on how the CSA co-operatives may contribute to wider societal changes by transforming norms, values, and practices of food provisioning within the organisation and wider society. Significantly, within both cases, opposing factions formed themselves in a struggle for the dominance of ideas and the power to shape the overall organisational direction in relation to prioritising transformative impacts on the internal organisation (scaling deep inwards) or wider society (scaling deep outwards). While the former entails social imaginaries to retain limits to the size and magnitude of the CSA and its operations, the latter primarily builds on productivist social imaginaries to expanding the membership and operations of the organisation. In other words, opposing imaginaries of *how* CSA organising can contribute to a wider socio-ecological transformation directly collide in strategic processes of organisational scaling. The rupture experienced in both CSAs thus unequivocally points to a clash of imaginaries between inward and outward-focused efforts to strategise and deep-scale transformative socio-ecological change.

9.3.1.1 Clash of Imaginaries: Planting the Seeds of Rupture

At first glance, the analysed conflictual processes can be explained with what effectively appears as a tension between the means and ends of organising. Such means-ends tension constitutes an enduring phenomenon within social science analysis in general, and alternative organising in particular. Within prefigurative organisations striving for wider social change, like many co-operatives, the commensurability between means and ends constitutes an important part of why people are founding, working, and participating in these organisations. Thus, tensions between the means and ends of organising represent a common problem which can lead to group conflict and organisational ruptures. Accordingly, this study confirms that the social negotiation of appropriate strategies to instigate wider social change can constitute a major source of struggle within prefigurative organising (Schiller-Merkens

2024). Analytically, however, the specificity of this research points to additional insights in relation to how the often-latent means-ends tension evolved relatively quickly into explicit and stark confrontations which, in both cases, ultimately led to organisational rupture. Thus, this part of the discussion offers an explanation pertaining to the specific influences of CSA organising structures, degrowth imaginaries, and the context of agri-food production. Taken together, these interrelated factors are planting the *seeds of rupture* in both cases, which are analytically different from conventional co-operative contexts.

Firstly, the organising structures of both cases, which can be understood as a specific form of producer-consumer co-operatives, contribute to the significance of prefigurative strategising processes due to the relative insultation of CSA co-operatives from direct market forces. In other words, rather than being directly subjected to ongoing market transactions for organisational survival, as is the case in worker co-operatives, CSA co-operatives constitute themselves through a stronger bind and long-term commitment of members (i.e., yearly rolling contracts), intended to grant stability to agri-food production. Temporarily shielded from market forces, such as fluctuations in demand or price wars, CSAs economic situation - and by extension, the need to grow to keep operations running and pay workers' wages - is not under the direct influence of market dynamics. This aspect does not only grant CSA actors more predictability to plan the annual growing season, but also enlarges the sphere of influence with regard to scaling strategies against market-driven or subsidy-induced expansion, as commonly experienced within the agricultural sector. This magnified scope has opened ample space to negotiate, debate, and contest diverse scaling pathways, which shifts the focus to CSA participants and their imaginaries attached to strategies of generating transformative impact. While the relative insulation from market forces is geared towards granting CSAs stability, the experienced ruptures point towards the widened sphere of influence in strategising processes.

Secondly, prevalent political imaginaries of (de)growth amongst CSA actors constitute a major influence on diverging ideas, preferences, and priorities of prefigurative scaling strategies leading to organisational rupture. Given the identified scope for negotiating alternative scaling strategies in insulation from direct market influences, this research has highlighted continuous social processes in which CSA actors politicise scaling pathways in relation to divergent organisational imaginaries of

transformative change (Chapter 7). On the one hand, prevalent political imaginaries of degrowth could be perceived to inform the politicisation of organisational limits and alternative scaling strategies in relation to what has been analysed as largely an inward focus to generating transformative change within both cases. On the other hand, political imaginaries informed by productivist growth discourses favour an outward focus to generating transformative impacts and simultaneously contest such scaling strategies, by advocating for scaling up CSA operations. Accordingly, the means-ends tension in both CSAs does not primarily pertain to direct workings of market forces but is produced by the clash of political imaginaries, leading to a rupture amongst CSA actors on the grounds of opposing scaling strategies. Here, diverging imaginaries of scaling are projected onto different versions of CSA practice and social relations, which tend to be more, or less, in line with members' political imaginaries of socio-ecological change. While such analysis to some extent elevates agency over structure in producing organisational rupture, the ecological context of agri-food production and conclusions taken from everyday experiences constitute a third layer of influence on scaling strategies.

Thirdly, the specific context of agri-food production as a sector that is most directly exposed to rapidly worsening ecological conditions in the present and future, influences preferences and perceived necessities of scaling transformative changes through CSAs. Alongside prevalent influences of political imaginaries of degrowth, the experience and projection of ecological conditions combines direct and indirect effects on ruptural strategising processes. Both cases reveal the already severe impacts of the climate crisis on everyday agri-food production along with its social ramifications, which has a material influence on what, how and how much can be grown on the fields of both co-ops. While responses to such material ecological influences necessarily affect possibilities and limits of scaling strategies, ideas to counter and potentially mitigate such impacts through CSA organising vary within and across both organisations and can form another layer of contention. Accordingly, the sense of urgency to act and convince as many people as possible to participate in more ecologically sustainable agri-food provisioning in CSAs constitutes a future imaginary that informs an expansion-oriented scaling strategy. However, striving for ecologically sustainable production methods often implies significant amounts of manual labour, which necessitates limits to organisational growth. Thus, rather than the direct

consequences of ecological breakdown through, e.g., climate impacts, it is the imaginaries and conclusions drawn from everyday experiences, which inform conflictual scaling strategies that may lead to ruptures.

Taken together, the dynamic interplay of the relative insulation from market forces, degrowth imaginaries, as well as ecological conditions and future imaginaries, can be perceived as the seeds of rupture within both CSAs. Such insights are analytically important, as they point to a significant difference of market-insulated co-operatives informed by degrowth imaginaries in contrast to conventional co-operatives, in an age of ecological breakdown. Specifically, this research suggests that CSA co-operatives informed by degrowth ideas at the founding stage are likely to face overt means-ends tensions more quickly than other types of alternative organisations because of the relative insulation from market forces, which lends prevalence to the influence of diverging imaginaries.

9.3.1.2 Hegemonic Struggle: Dominance of Scaling Strategies

Building on the understanding of the impact of degrowth and ecological imaginaries on organisational ruptures as compared to conventional co-operatives, this section attempts to provide an understanding of why different modes of scaling became dominant in either CSA. In particular, it foregrounds distinct experiences of agricultural work, as well as the forms of democratic negotiation and participation at the founding stage as important factors creating path dependencies towards scaling orientations in both cases. In contrast to the commonalities across both cases planting the seeds of rupture, this analysis points to key divergences across the CSAs as influencing the respective dominance of scaling strategies.

Given the enlarged sphere of influence to transmit transformative imaginaries of socio-ecological change into practice in relative insulation from market forces, scaling processes in both cases could be observed as an ongoing and contested negotiation involving a multiplicity of actors. Due to the assigned importance and contested nature of scaling negotiations as determining the organisational direction, it is useful to analyse such strategising processes as a form of hegemonic struggle (Levy et al. 2003). Such hegemonic struggle is not only informed by conflicting imaginaries (9.3.1.1) but constitutes itself through power relations and disparities within both CSAs. The materialisation of such power relations within strategising processes can be understood

by paying attention to distinct preconditions of key CSA actors, as well as the development of democratic structures from the founding stage onwards. Both aspects depict key ingredients which influence hegemonic struggles in both cases and eventually tip the balance of forces into either fast-growth (GIC) or slow-growth (SSC) scaling dynamics.

Firstly, differences can be discerned with regard to the experiences of agri-food production and working conditions of CSA founders across both cases, which influenced priorities and choices of scaling strategies in the early organisational stages. While several SSC founders were experienced or trained in agri-food production, GIC founders were reportedly complete newcomers to the field. Thus, arguably there was a stronger focus on the working conditions of CSA food production at SSC in demarcation to conventional farming operations, whereas GIC founders initially started to co-operate with an existing farmer, before collectively acquiring their own farmstead. As such, the analysis highlighted a comparatively stronger emphasis on imaginaries of self-determined and egalitarian work at SSC due to previous work experiences that many described as exploitative and alienating. In contrast, transformative imaginaries at GIC highlighted a relatively stronger emphasis on achieving fair and better wages as well as job security. Accordingly, work experiences and imaginaries at SSC appeared more conducive to limiting organisational growth in favour of experimenting with, and reinforcing, a horizontal organisation of work. At GIC, the desire to collectively own CSA farming premises alongside fairly paid agricultural jobs appeared to necessitate a more growth-oriented approach in order to generate the required funding through an expansion of the membership.

Secondly, differences in previous agricultural and political organising experiences may have also informed initial preferences and organisational developments in relation to democratic participation and social negotiation processes within each case. The analysis highlighted the orientation of many GIC members on the founding figures, often described as embodying the CSA's diverse visions of transformative change and driving the agenda since the organisation's inception. As such, all GIC founders occupied formal roles of co-op directors largely in administrative functions, while SSC founders primarily worked the land and at least partially occupied formal co-director roles after the transformation of SSC into formal co-op legal structures in year five. However, despite founders at SSC holding similarly predominant roles as part of the

core team of workers, conscious efforts could be observed since the organisations' inception to discursively and in practice disseminate a collective sense of responsibility for the CSA across the wider membership. While accounts across both organisations underlined the strenuous and labour-intensive periods of building up physical and social CSA infrastructures, differences came to the surface in how scaling strategies have been debated openly across the membership, in formal and informal ways. Due to formalised consensus-based forms of decision-making under the explicitly desired involvement of the wider membership in co-op assemblies at SSC, larger strategic questions of scaling were debated and reviewed repeatedly in lengthy decision-making processes. At GIC, in contrast, the ongoing involvement of members in such strategic conversations was limited to less frequent general or extraordinary assemblies. Moreover, several accounts of GIC founders confirmed that scant attention had been paid to larger strategic questions in the initial years of the CSA, focusing primarily on the day-to-day operative functioning of the co-op. Over time, a vacuum seemingly emerged at GIC in which strategic debates on scaling questions needed to be made under significant time pressure, thus making more horizontal decision-making processes less viable. Importantly, however, rather than suggesting the superiority of consensus-based over more centralised forms of decision-making regarding strategising processes, the ongoing integration of members at SSC helped to maintain a platform for members to confidently voice their concerns and preferences to limiting growth. In line with the growth dynamic at GIC, such a platform became less and less viable and debates instead appeared to shift to informal spaces across members and workers without being able to influence the process in significant ways. In line with the enlarged sphere of influence to determine scaling pathways in CSAs, SSC's decentralised approach of collective responsibility enabled growth-averse imaginaries to remain dominant through ongoing strategic negotiations across the wider membership. At GIC, by contrast, imaginaries to uphold alternative scaling strategies became less and less prevalent due to increasing centralising processes at GIC, which constricted strategic conversations to a narrower core team.

Overall, the discussed differences in work-related experiences and inclinations of democratic structures and social negotiation processes across both cases, can be perceived as having created the conditions for different modes of scaling to become dominant in present cases. Therefore, this research identifies differences in agri-food

experiences and work orientations as well as implicit hierarchies at the founding moment as interrelated factors creating path dependencies towards scaling preferences. Such factors can be understood as important ingredients affecting the outcomes of hegemonic struggles to determining scaling strategies within both cases.

9.3.2 The Politics of Scaling (De)growth-oriented Change

The preceding analysis allows us to draw conclusions with regard to the second-research question on how CSA actors strategise scaling pathways, which bear significance for literatures on degrowth strategising and organising, as well as organisational scaling.

Firstly, this research identified degrowth imaginaries as a significant influence on organisational strategising for socio-ecological change, by focusing on the social and political processes of scaling. In contrast to market forces constituting the main catalyst for means-ends tensions in co-operatives, degrowth imaginaries along with future ecological imaginaries were identified as seeds of rupture in both cases. This explanation points to an important difference of market-insulated co-operatives informed by degrowth ideas at the founding stage. Such co-operatives are at risk of facing the overt means-ends tension more quickly than other types of alternative organisations because the insulation from direct market forces allows political imaginaries to gain prevalence in strategising processes. In other words, diverging political imaginaries to generate transformative socio-ecological change within both cases were able to unfold their ruptural effects because of the market-insulated organisational characteristics of CSAs. By contrast, conventional co-operatives face stronger limitations to negotiating alternative scaling strategies, as their organisational survival to a larger degree depends on direct and ongoing market relations. Rather than solely applying in the context of CSAs, such insights bear significance for debates on interstitial degrowth strategies (Barlow et al. 2022), and the emergent organisational scholarship on degrowth organising, by highlighting the challenges of scaling degrowth ideas through prefigurative organising. Specifically, this research points to the pertinence and danger of degrowth imaginaries to contributing to organisational ruptures in relatively early stages of developing alternative organisations.

Secondly, this research challenges the organisational literature on scaling pathways by uncovering the inherent politics, antagonisms, and contingencies within strategic

processes of scaling in co-operatives aiming for socio-ecological change. In particular, this research diverts significantly from the focus on typologies and managerial solutions in the literature on scaling in social enterprises (Bauwens et al. 2020; Colombo et al 2023; Moore et al., 2015). While social processes within both co-operatives confirm relational dynamics of scaling pathways identified by Colombo et al. (2023, p. 17), this research contests the idea that scaling strategies can easily complement each other and operate in a 'synergistic interaction' to generate systemic change. Instead, the ruptural tendencies identified across both cases indicate strongly pronounced conflicts on inward, i.e., organisational, and outward-focused, i.e., societal, pathways of scaling deep to generate transformative changes on cultural levels. Moreover, the specificities of work-related experiences of founding actors and implicit social relations at the founding stage can create path dependencies, which influence the respective dominance of scaling strategies within hegemonic struggles. While such ruptural tendencies may be softened by employing an ethos of care as a means to prefiguring degrowth, e.g., by ensuring inclusive democratic processes (Sekulova et al. 2023), it appears questionable as to whether confrontations around scaling strategies can be avoided entirely. Instead, this research underlines the need for researchers and practitioners of alternative organising to pay close attention to the social processes of how diverse imaginaries of socio-ecological change are being negotiated from an early organisational stage onwards.

9.4 Working towards Socio-Ecological Change

RQ 3: How do CSA workers organise, negotiate, and experience work?

Addressing the third sub-research question, this section focuses on the organisation and experience of CSA work in relation to degrowth imaginaries and conflictual processes of scaling.

Building on a broader analytical conception of work, chapter three identified the reconfiguration of work towards de-alienated labour as a key imaginary and debate for a degrowth transformation. Dominant post-work oriented perspectives within degrowth largely focus on the liberation *from* work, in contrast to others highlighting the importance of a liberation *of* work to counter the exploitation and alienation within wage labour (Barca 2019). Degrowth-oriented research on work has also been analysed to de-emphasise productivist logics and work ethics in favour of a focus on

well-being, care, and reproductive labour in accounting for slower rhythms of work (Foster, 2017; Heikkurrinen et al., 2019b; Vincent and Brandellero, 2023). While much weight appears to be attached to revaluing the character, relations, and centrality of work in society (Hoffmann et al. 2024; Kreinin and Latif 2022; Vincent and Brandellero 2023), the debate largely remains on macro-oriented policy and theoretical levels, neglecting experiments of alternative forms of work. Taking this 'substantial gap' (Vincent and Brandellero 2023, p. 4) of empirically grounded investigations of alternatives to capitalist work as a starting point, this study focused on the lived experiences of CSA workers to evaluate the potentialities of such work for a degrowth transformation. At the same time, this study followed calls to investigate new co-operative forms of work in the food system, which remain widely underexplored in organisation studies (Böhm et al. 2020). As such, the literature highlighted that CSAs have been frequently identified by the degrowth literature as prime examples of a new form of commoning (see Chapter 4), which in turn is understood as a social relation and process holding potential for de-alienation (Brownhill et al. 2012; Schmelzer et al. 2022). Therefore, this study builds on the understanding that the forms of work and participation in CSAs open up possibilities to counter alienated forms of work, in particular, in relation to working share models of CSA members (Watson 2020). Thus far, however, scant organisational research on CSAs has primarily focused on smaller initiatives and members' experiences in optimistic assessments of the de-alienating character of CSA labour (Watson 2020), thereby disregarding work experiences of CSA employees.

In connection with the need for empirical explorations of non-alienated work in relation to degrowth imaginaries, the study is situated in recent calls from organisational scholars to investigate possibilities of de-alienated labour in alternative organisations (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Langmead and Parker 2023; Watson 2020). Analytically, this thesis distinguishes de-alienation from meaningful work, while recognising the latter as a necessary but not sufficient part of a larger political quest to countering alienation in non-capitalist workplaces. While the literature identifies a divide between subjective and objective dimensions of meaningful work, this study follows constructivist conceptions recognising the discursively regulated notion of meaning, subject to different social norms and cultural contexts. Similarly, chapter three highlighted contrasting understandings of alienation as an objective outcome of

capitalist labour relations, on the one hand, and a subjective perception of indisposition, on the other. By contrast, this study takes a more cautious approach to taking both objective forces and subjective perceptions of alienation into account when studying the possibilities of de-alienated labour in CSAs. In contrast to Marxist perspectives seeing alienation as the universal outcome under capitalist conditions and perspectives accentuating the emancipatory promise of alternative organisations to promoting de-alienated labour at the interstices of capital, this research focuses on the extent to which tensions between both poles influence the CSA workplace. While CSAs are not entirely shielded from 'objective' capitalist structures, their insulated character arguably opens up space for less alienated agricultural labour which may result in different 'subjective' experiences amongst CSA workers.

Following recent theorising, this research takes a processual and temporal view (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Langmead and Parker 2023), which emphasises (de-)alienation as a process open to both contestation and inversion in alternative organisations over time. From a more optimistic perspective, recent studies highlight internal structures of collective ownership and control in co-operative workplaces as enabling de-alienating processes, while at the same time entailing obligations which make it difficult to distance oneself from work (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021). Such argumentation is also present in the meaningful work literature, in which *deeply* meaningful work constitutes a *double-edged sword* (Bunderson and Thompson 2009) that may also hamper efforts for de-alienation. CSAs, in particular, are renowned for self-exploitative work tendencies due to mutualist community obligations (Galt 2013). Taking a more critical stance, other scholars emphasise the inherent antagonisms, conflicts, and contingencies experienced in co-operative workplaces entailing possibilities for both alienation and de-alienation (Langmead and Parker 2023). Overall, these studies suggest the importance of ongoing and inclusive democratic deliberation processes as fundamental to countering alienating processes emerging from market pressures in worker co-operatives. However, following the understanding of the insulated character of CSA workplaces from direct market exposure, this study analysed the promise of CSAs in promoting de-alienated work (Watson, 2020) from the perspective of employed workers, in significantly larger forms of CSA organising.

9.4.1 De/Re-Alienation as a Terrain of Struggle

While findings discussed in relation to organisational imaginaries and strategising processes largely depict commonalities across both CSAs, it is in their specific forms of organising, negotiating, and experiencing work in which these cases divert significantly from each other. Thus, both cases can be analytically viewed as extreme examples in their configuration of CSA work in relation to dominant scaling pathways:

Dimensions	**Organising CSA Work**	
	GIC	**SSC**
Rationalisation	Productivist	Time-Liberating
Division of Labour	Vertical Orientation	Horizontal Orientation
Member Participation	Voluntary	Mandatory
Decision-Making	Centralisation	De-Centralisation

Table 9.1: The Organisation of CSA Labour at GIC and SSC

While an urge to rationalising work processes could be observed across both cases in the aftermath of the split, SSC's orientation to freeing up workers' time and obligating the larger community in working the land differed markedly from the productivist orientation of GIC, geared towards continuously expanding production. In line with such dynamics, divisions of labour shifted towards a vertical orientation with a centralisation of decision-making at GIC, while SSC was able to largely maintain its horizontal orientation and de-centralised forms of decision-making. Such stark differences in the organisation of CSA labour can be traced back to different scaling dynamics in both cases, generating path dependencies to what forms of work and communal labour appear possible, desirable, and necessary to manage the workload.

At first glance, experiences of work in both cases could be analysed through the lens of de/re-generation, which constitutes a common analytical tool to making sense of co-operative work organisation in relation to political aspirations. Through this lens, the organisation and experiences of work outlined at GIC indicate a rapid degeneration process across many work dimensions, in line with the fast-growth orientation. By contrast, the slow-growth approach of SSC allowed the CSA to facilitate the

maintenance of horizontal and egalitarian work structures, thereby continuously regenerating a horizontal co-operative ethos akin to degrowth imaginaries. Nonetheless, as processes of degeneration primarily pertain to the relapse of co-ops into market logics, by being directly subjected to market relations for their survival, such understanding appears to fall somewhat short in light of the insulated character of CSAs. Instead, other forces appear to be at play within both cases, which primarily pertain to internal organisational struggles faced by CSA workers, rather than market-driven factors. Seeking to offer a more nuanced understanding, this research thus attempts to shed light on the contingencies, conflicts, and antagonisms experienced in the process of translating degrowth-oriented work imaginaries into practice in relation to dominant scaling strategies. Mediating processes of de/re-alienation in both cases, the main identified negotiations and struggles are summarised in Table 9.2. By focusing particularly on the issues encountered in working the CSA lands, this research foregrounds a dynamic continuum of de/re-alienation across interrelated categories of workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work.

Within the interrelated dimensions of co-determining working conditions and workplace autonomy, a chasm became visible across both cases within the category of workplace democracy. At GIC, the increasing lack of having a say in the overall direction of the CSA, as well as increasing managerial efforts to controlling work processes on site, seemingly left many workers re-alienated. At SSC, the ability to maintain workers' co-determination and large degrees of autonomy within day-to-day work had been characterised by conflict-laden processes to navigate opposing interests with the wider membership, as well as struggles amongst workers emerging from the alternation between leadership and followership. Such diversion was also visible in the relationship amongst workers as well as their orientation to CSA work within the category of work relations. While an increasing distance between office and field workers furthered a lack of understanding and conflicts at GIC, SSC workers experienced tensions and discontent through the maintenance of practiced horizontal norms in opposition to formally mandated vertical co-op structures. Perhaps most distinctly, discrepancies between initial imaginaries of meaningful work and the predominant understanding of viewing CSA labour as 'just a job' became visible over time at GIC. Despite spurring disillusionment amongst many workers, others came to view imaginaries of alternative forms of agri-food labour as a romanticised and

unrealistic pursuit in light of outward-focused transformative ambitions. By contrast, the politicisation of CSA labour as ‘more than just a job’ but a source of emancipation at SSC, sharply diverts from predominant perspectives of meaningful work at GIC.

The extent to which CSA labour can be deemed sustainable for the people who do it, constitutes a third category, pertaining to how workers negotiate experiences of work intensity as well as personal, collective, and ecological limits. Here, both cases depict similarities in the levels of seemingly self-induced overcommitment of CSA workers in line with the proclaimed ambitions to contribute to socio-ecological change. While GIC workers and members observed issues of self-exploitative solidarity, understood as a form of normative control leading to overburdening in the early stages of CSA development, ongoing activist ambitions seemingly made it difficult for SSC workers to navigate limits to CSA work commitments. At the same time, however, continuously increasing work intensities experienced through the productivist approach at GIC has led many workers to exceed their personal capacity and aspired ecological boundaries, leading to disillusionment and exit from the organisation. At SSC, experiences of blending work and life, in attempts to incorporating reproductive and less productivist work practices, appeared to create a boundaryless work environment seemingly reinforcing existing inequalities.

Lastly, the extent to which work can be decommodified in CSAs constitutes a fourth source of de/re-alienation, pertaining to how far CSA work can further processes of unlearning market relations and practiced solidarity beyond employment relations. While more ‘convenient’ forms of participation had become dominant in line with scaling dynamics at GIC, in the aftermath of pandemic restrictions, many accounts indicated a degeneration into transactional relations. The development to largely passive forms of green consumerism amongst a growing membership section had been identified as preventing a deeper understanding about socio-ecological processes and alternative social relations in many accounts. Such developments appeared to reinforce a recommodification process amongst both workers and members, perceived as aggravating attempts to further intended solidaristic bonds at GIC. In sharp contrast to the reification of market relations at GIC, SSC’s commitment to collective responsibility indicated signs of (un)learning processes about predetermined roles and social practices across many workers and members. Nonetheless, such process reportedly came hand in hand with the experienced inconvenience and burden of

ongoing and active participation, understood as dependent on the physical presence enabling ongoing interaction and exchange across workers and members. In addition, attempts of building solidaristic relationships across the emergent cluster of CSA initiatives suggested a resurgence of competitive logics between SSC and other, particularly larger initiatives, aggravating fears of diluting transformative principles of CSA labour.

Categories	**Dimensions**	**Negotiations and Struggles Mediating De/Re-alienation Processes**	
		GIC	**SSC**
Workplace Democracy	Co-determination	Fait Accompli Mock Participation	Conflicting Interests Turf Battles
	Autonomy	Orientation vs. Managerial Control	Bosslessness vs. Temporary Leadership
Work Relations	Non-hierarchical Relations	Distance between Office vs. Field	Horizontal Norms vs. Formal Co-op Roles
	Meaningful Work	Romanticisation: 'Just a Job'	Emancipatory Labour: 'More than just a Job'
Sustainable Work	Identification with Work	Self-exploitative Solidarity	Work as Political Activism
	Work Intensity	Crossing Personal & Ecological limits	Boundaryless Work Work/Life Blending
De-commodified Work	(Un)learning	Convenience vs. Transactional Relations	Raising Consciousness vs. Inconvenience
	Solidarity	Service Orientation vs. Solidaristic Bonds	CSA Competition vs. Market Enclosures

Table 9.2: Dimensions and Struggles Mediating Processes of De/Re-alienation

Taken together, the categories and core issues outlined in each dimension compose a terrain of struggle and signify an ongoing process of navigating de/re-alienated labour in both CSAs. Importantly, these struggles neither solely appear to be induced by universal capitalist market forces, nor can they be said to emerge from a subjective state of mind, but instead emerge from organisational scaling and working processes to put transformative imaginaries into practice. In accordance with the prevalent

influence of degrowth imaginaries on conflictual strategising processes, the extent to which such imaginaries materialise in everyday CSA work is significantly influenced by path dependencies emerging from dominant scaling strategies.

Degrowth-oriented imaginaries of work discussed in this chapter (9.2.1) were identified as exerting a strong influence on CSA workers; in particular, in their efforts to counter experiences of alienation and the lack of meaning within growth-driven industrial agriculture and other, often well-paid jobs. As such, imaginaries to prefigure more ecologically sustainable and socially meaningful forms of work within CSAs had been observed to act as a catalyst facilitating mind and career shifts to work in CSA co-ops. Thus, the non-materialisation or clash of such imaginaries within everyday CSA work can become a primary source of frustration, disillusionment, and resignation facilitating re-alienation processes. While such re-alienation processes appeared to be particularly pertinent amongst GIC workers, causing many to leave the CSA, such a process did not appear to be shared universally across the workforce, suggesting that experiences of de/re-alienation are not necessarily homogeneous across CSA workforces. Indeed, many workers, in particular those who came to form the core GIC organising team, perceived the need for managerial control, efficiency, and clearer structures as necessary in prioritising larger visions of socio-ecological change. Despite the apparent recognition of re-alienating experiences amongst many, there appeared to be a willingness to forgo and sacrifice the prefiguration of more de-alienating forms of work, in favour of expanding the CSA membership and offering better paid CSA work, enabled by scaling pursuits.

In contrast, SSC's case shows a clear tendency towards de-alienating experiences of workers in line with the pursuit of alternative scaling strategies. In particular, efforts to maintain grassroots forms of democracy, commoning relations across the co-op, and initial impulses to de-emphasise productivism in favour of care, well-being and reproductive work, substantiate such claims in relation to degrowth imaginaries. However, reinforcing such de-alienating experiences evidently relied on continuous collective efforts, negotiations, and struggles, with close involvement from the wider membership community, all of which can constitute sources for re-alienation, e.g., when navigating conflicting interests and turf battles. As the analysis showed, high amounts of autonomy and egalitarian relations, for instance, are not in and of themselves grounds for de-alienation but can indeed re-alienate workers if political

imaginaries clash with everyday experiences. Moreover, by forgoing expansionary opportunities in favour of other political imaginaries, de-alienating work experiences have also been accompanied by significant amounts of precarity and self-exploitative labour of SSC workers, constituting a source of fluctuation and organisational turmoil not uncommon in CSAs (Galt 2013; Paech et al. 2019).

Overall, this research foregrounds the pursuit of de-alienated labour in CSAs as a terrain of struggle contingent on the alignment of transformative work imaginaries and everyday work experiences. While such alignment is substantively shaped by path dependencies of scaling, more objective forces of alienation, e.g., navigating fair wages, and subjective perceptions of alienation, e.g., what constitutes meaningful work, produce a constant tension mediating experiences of de/re-alienated CSA labour.

9.4.2 Towards De-Alienated Workplaces

The preceding analysis allows us to draw conclusions with regard to the third-research question. This research offers a contribution to the nascent literature on de-alienated work in alternative organisations, which also bears significance for degrowth debates.

While following recent theorising which sees co-operatives as sites of both alienation and de-alienation (Langmead and Parker 2023), the comparative analysis of CSA work exposes a dynamic continuum mediating social processes of de/re-alienation across four categories (Table 9.2) in alternative organising. As a whole, this research challenges studies focusing primarily on the emancipatory potentials of co-operative work in counteracting alienating experiences under capitalism (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021). At the same time, it contests the simplified understanding of CSA co-operatives as a new form of commoning that offers necessarily emancipatory and non-alienating workplaces. However, instead of discarding emancipatory potentials of co-operative work altogether, this research attempts to offer a more nuanced understanding by drawing attention to the contingencies and struggles underpinning de/re-alienating processes of CSA work. While confirming the de-alienating potential of participatory CSA labour in relation to working share models (Watson 2020), which appear more conducive to relations of commoning due to the close involvement of the wider membership, it offers a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of employed workers. In particular, analysed cases point to the contingency of de/re-alienation processes amongst CSA workers with regard to the (non-)materialisation of

transformative and degrowth-oriented imaginaries of work, which are substantially influenced by scaling pathways of CSA co-operatives.

In contrast to degeneration processes of, e.g., worker co-operatives, CSAs market-insulated characteristics offer a contingent platform to counter alienating forces emerging from market-driven growth compulsions of capital. While processes of re-alienation can intersect with degenerating tendencies, they are analytically distinct. In particular, individual workers might experience re-alienation, e.g., from their work, their comrades, or particular organisational processes, while the organisation as a whole may not necessarily be perceived to be degenerating. In turn, the absence of degeneration, or maintenance of the political ethos of alternative organisations, does not necessarily equate to workers experiencing CSA labour as de-alienating. In other words, the process-oriented conceptual language of de/re-alienation can lend more nuance to the study of co-operative workplaces in shedding light on subjective work experiences regarding organising processes, e.g., when work is experienced as sustainable or meaningful. At the same time, as the analysis has shown, de/re-alienated labour is attuned to changes in workplace conditions over time, in relation to political imaginaries and organisational objectives, and should not lose sight of the broader political economy and ecology in which co-operatives operate. In this vein, it should be recognised that the pursuit and prefiguration of de-alienated workplaces sits within broader ecological, social and political contexts and needs to grapple with existing structures of inequality on an intersectional level. Here, organisational researchers and practitioners are tasked with the question of who has access to potentially de-alienating workplaces like CSAs, and what structural conditions are hindering the participation and transition into such workplaces, particularly within the agri-food sector. Such questions appear particularly important in light of accelerating ecological breakdown, as well as the skill shortage and mass death of small-scale farming enterprises across Europe and the globe, adding fuel to the fire of an increasingly destabilising food system.

Accordingly, this analysis also holds important insights for a degrowth transformation of work. In particular, when viewing socio-ecological change in line with degrowth as a process, present cases point to the importance of CSA work and alternative agri-food labour within wage labour relations as an important site of struggle. As such, this research contests the often-singular emphasis placed within degrowth research on

demonetised work to countering alienating forces of paid labour in order to refrain from the growth economy (Chapter 3), by pointing towards CSA labour as a hybrid space insulated from market forces. Within such hybrid space, possibilities for de-alienated labour exist both within and outside (Watson 2020) of employment relationships, pointing towards the potential of CSAs as a transitional force towards degrowth-compatible work relations oriented towards commoning and care, as well as democratised, socially meaningful, and ecologically sustainable work. Temporarily shielded from the impact of direct market forces, CSA work can constitute a much needed space for experimenting with de-alienating work practices that appear less possible in more market-dependent co-operatives (Atzeni 2012; Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Kokkinidis 2015; Langmead and Parker, 2023) and, in particular, expansion-driven agri-food enterprises. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that a degrowth-oriented transformation of work at the interstitial level is likely to face a struggle against re-alienating forces within alternative organisations as these attempt to scale their impacts towards wider society. Thus, it is the speed and dynamic of organisational growth rather than direct market forces which create path dependencies for re-alienation in market-insulated organisations like CSAs. To further a degrowth agenda of liberating work within and beyond wage relations (Barca 2019), this research thus indicates the need for navigating processes of de/re-alienation as a terrain of struggle across workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work. To do so, this study emphasises the need for workers and members in alternative organisations to negotiate mutual expectations and imaginaries of work to further de-alienating forms of labour, in light of broader aspirations to scaling systemic socio-ecological change.

9.5 Conclusion: Potentialities of CSA co-ops in Prefiguring Degrowth

Main RQ: What are the possibilities and limits of CSA co-operatives in prefiguring degrowth?

Insights gained from the three sub-research questions allow us to answer the overall research question, posed to evaluate how and to what extent CSA co-operatives may be able to prefigure forms of degrowth organising. In order to do so, this section looks at the bigger picture of this research by considering the interrelation between organisational imaginaries, the politics of scaling strategies, as well de/re-alienated work, in relation to degrowth debates.

Overall, this research has shown that political imaginaries of degrowth have entered prevalent organisational imaginaries across both case studies. While degrowth does not appear to hold pertinence for organisational practice on an operational level in the studied CSAs, the discursive influence of degrowth ideas on an imaginary level affects material outcomes in both co-operatives. Specifically, efforts to translate degrowth-oriented organisational objectives into scaling strategies were identified as a major influence leading to organisational rupture at a relatively early organisational stage in both cases. This research highlights that co-operatives that are insulated from direct market forces and informed by degrowth imaginaries are likely to face stark and explicit means-ends conflicts sooner due to an enlarged sphere of influence to negotiate and debate prefigurative scaling strategies. This analytical difference indicates that strategising processes towards degrowth-informed change entail *seeds of rupture* within alternative organisations, particularly in the context of rapidly worsening ecological conditions. Navigating such increased ruptural tendencies thus poses a large challenge for prefigurative degrowth strategising processes which alternatives and movements need to reckon with in the pursuit of radical socio-ecological change.

Furthermore, the (non-)materialisation of degrowth-oriented imaginaries of work and path dependencies of scaling have been found to mediate the organisation and experience of CSA work. Instead of being driven solely by universal capitalist market forces or emerging from a subjective state of mind, this research highlighted ongoing negotiations and struggles emerging from organisational scaling and working processes to putting transformative imaginaries into practice, as primary factors mediating de/re-alienating work experiences. While processes of de/re-alienation offer a more nuanced perspective of work experiences across both cases, a clear tendency becomes visible in which alternative scaling strategies appear more conducive to de-alienating work in line with degrowth imaginaries. Nonetheless, the analysis highlighted that the non-materialisation and clash of political imaginaries can also induce re-alienating work experiences when following alternative scaling strategies, e.g., often impaired by precarity and self-exploitative CSA labour. From a degrowth perspective, this research highlights two important insights. First, the pursuit of de-alienated labour in alternative organisations constitutes an important terrain of struggle for degrowth, within and outside of wage labour relations. Second, the struggle for de-

alienated labour should not be confined to single organisations, but a broader degrowth transformation needs to reckon with how it can create conditions for de-alienating workplaces in the process of moving towards a degrowth economy.

Based on these insights, several inferences can be taken from this study in evaluating the possibilities and limits of CSA co-operatives in prefiguring degrowth. Firstly, this research points to the futility of practicing and prefiguring degrowth within a single and enclosed alternative organisation. Instead, both CSA co-operatives studied show serious attempts to move beyond a societal niche existence, by scaling their prefigurative efforts towards more systemic changes. On the one hand, both CSAs can thus be perceived as very successful in their attempts to not only serve members with socially and ecologically sustainable food for over more than ten years, but also in their pioneering contribution to *growing* the CSA movement at large. Such contributions entail important possibilities for the urgent task of prefiguring a degrowth transformation of the food system through a bottom-up movement grounded in the soil of struggles of deteriorating working conditions of agri-food production in the age of ecological breakdown. On the other hand, this research has pointed out the limits encountered in social processes of determining and maintaining alternative scaling strategies. In particular, degrowth imaginaries have been identified as a major source leading to organisational ruptures, despite and because of the insulated character of CSAs, originally geared towards granting organisational stability. These insights point to the importance of negotiating prefigurative scaling strategies within and across CSAs, and alternative organisations informed by degrowth ideas more broadly, in order to find *common pathways* towards systemic degrowth transformations, by building on a common ground of transformative imaginaries.

Secondly, this research gives important insights for a reconfiguration of work in line with degrowth agendas. On the one hand, CSA co-operatives studied offer ample possibilities to inspire imaginaries of non-alienated, more meaningful, and sustainable work. This offers much needed opportunities for workers to shift careers into agricultural work that can contribute to socio-ecological transformations conducive to degrowth processes. In particular, both CSAs stand as an example for the wider CSA movement, in experimenting with ideas to offer less-strenuous workplaces, reduced working hours, and communal labour to bringing members closer to food production. In particular, this research has indicated possibilities for de-alienated labour across

various dimensions in the CSA workplace when adhering to alternative scaling strategies. On the other hand, however, this research shows that the maintenance of degrowth-oriented imaginaries of de-alienated work can constitute a significant area of struggle in CSAs. A degrowth-oriented transformation of work within and through CSAs is likely to face a struggle against re-alienating forces if scaling strategies fail to reckon with working conditions and the needs and limits of workers. While alternative scaling strategies may open possibilities for de-alienated work relations and experiences, such possibilities appear diminished through approaches aimed towards a rapid expansion of CSA operations and membership. In particular, de-alienated labour in CSAs reaches limits when transactional market logics are reintroduced into the CSA workplace which distances CSA workers from their labour, each other, the membership, and decision-making power, in favour of growth, efficiency, and managerial control. In contrast, alternative scaling strategies that enable the prefiguration of de-alienated labour while limiting organisational growth, necessitate significant amounts of social labour from the wider membership to building alternative work relations and preventing a re-alienation of work into conventional wage labour relationships. Essentially, this research thus sides with perspectives arguing that a degrowth transformation of work necessarily needs more instead of less work, in particular communal labour akin to commoning, when aiming to prefigure de-alienated workplaces within agri-food production. Nonetheless, embedded within a growth-driven economic system, CSAs reach limits in systemic inequalities, determining the terms and access to participatory labour vis-à-vis the necessity of earning a wage.

Chapter 10 - Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This research set out to investigate the possibilities and limits of CSA co-operatives in prefiguring degrowth. As a whole, this thesis contributes to the emergent debate on degrowth organisations by focusing on the interplay between degrowth imaginaries and the social and political processes of scaling and working in CSA co-operatives. This chapter aims to explain the theoretical and practical contributions of this research, while highlighting its limitations and pointing towards future research.

The final chapter of this thesis commences with a discussion of the main theoretical contributions in accordance with the problematisation and identified gaps in the literature, which informed three sub-research questions. Firstly, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution by addressing the extent to which degrowth imaginaries influence prefigurative practice in alternative organising. Secondly, a theoretical contribution to the organisational scaling literature is outlined in relation to ruptural tendencies induced by degrowth imaginaries in market-insulated alternative organisations. Thirdly, this thesis makes a contribution to the nascent process-oriented literature on de-alienated work in alternative organisations, in relation to degrowth-oriented imaginaries of work. The extent to which these knowledge claims can be generalised will be addressed within each contribution section. Finally, this chapter highlights some practical implications for CSA co-operatives and degrowth strategy, before addressing the limitations of this research and pointing towards the need for further research.

10.2 Theoretical Contributions

10.2.1 Disconnected Degrowth Imaginaries and Organisational Practices

This research has been motivated by the need to understand the meaning and pertinence of degrowth at the level of organisation. Overall, there has been a persistent conceptual ambiguity around notions of degrowth organisation, as was identified in chapter three. Often research-led interpretations and reconfigurations of degrowth to suit particular audiences, theoretical perspectives, or organisational activities (Froese et al. 2023; Vandeventer and Lloveras 2021) appear to cloud analytical clarity. At large,

there appears to be no consensus across organisation studies and adjacent academic communities on what degrowth imaginaries mean for organisations and prefigurative processes of organising. Accordingly, this thesis addresses the cross-disciplinary debate by offering a theoretical contribution that suggests a substantial shift from how degrowth has been theorised and studied in organisations thus far.

In a first step, this study sought to contribute to the literature by providing further clarification via an analytical framework that offers a relational mapping of discourses to growth (Chapter 2). Given the sustained fragmentation and confusion of what degrowth means for organisations and organisational practitioners (Chapter 3), this framework posits a political-economic understanding of degrowth to the critical study of organisations. By highlighting the antagonistic relation between the hegemonic nexus of growth (i.e., formations of business-as-usual growth and green growth) and degrowth, such understanding challenges the prevalent *taboo* and ideological fixation on growth within CSR scholarship (Kallio 2007; Maier 2024). The counter-hegemonic formation of degrowth is positioned as transcending discursive formations of productivist growth, as well as more reformist postgrowth approaches. Such conceptualisation invariably points to alternative forms of organising that operate on significantly lower levels of biophysical throughput, as well as a departure from capital accumulation and profit maximisation, understood as generating diverse social injustices in the process of generating growth. At the same time, it highlights the need to organise social provisioning beyond endless expansion of production and commodification to facilitate human and ecological well-being within planetary boundaries. Taking the analytical framework as a starting point, future research should scrutinise taken-for-granted ideas, concepts, and assumptions within discourses and practices geared towards growth in organisational spaces. Such critical interrogation appears particularly relevant in light of the seeming deadlock within CSR scholarship and organisation studies more broadly, to making a growth-based business case for sustainability (Ergene et al. 2020), which largely reproduces an unsustainable hegemonic nexus to growth. Building on such analytical conception, this research aimed to empirically explore the relation between social imaginaries and practices of (de)growth on an organisational level.

In a second step, this research aimed to give insights into the actual relevance of degrowth imaginaries for organisational life and practice in alternative organisations

like CSAs, a commons-based form of organising often associated with degrowth practice (Chapter 4). By addressing the first sub-research question, the study contributes theoretically to the debate on degrowth organising, by exploring how the organisational practice of CSA co-operatives interrelates with socio-political imaginaries of growth and degrowth.

In contrast to perspectives observing the empirical manifestation of 'degrowth co-operatives' (Cunico et al. 2022), this research found a disconnect between discursive and macro-oriented political imaginaries of degrowth, on the one hand, and their application and materialisation within the daily organisational practice of CSAs, on the other. Echoing studies demonstrating a discord between discourse-driven degrowth movements and practice-oriented CSA networks (Spanier et al. 2023), this research shows an absence of degrowth on an operational level within prefigurative organisational practice. This suggests that the utility of degrowth as a pertinent concept for organisational practice appears to be limited.

This analysis moves away from the ways in which degrowth has been theorised and (mis-)used in organisational research thus far. Specifically, this thesis posits that liberating social imaginaries from growth should not equate to occupying organisational spaces with degrowth or attribute its label to organisational practice, which bear little relevance for practitioners. Instead, this research calls for a more careful engagement with how prefigurative organisational practices can create conditions that may contribute to a larger social and political force that furthers a political economic agenda of degrowth beyond individual organisations. However, rather than discarding degrowth from organisational analysis in its entirety, this research intends to open up new avenues for theory building on degrowth organising (Banerjee et al. 2021), by advancing organisational theory and practice conducive to a systemic degrowth transformation. Here, this research challenges organisational researchers to think more deeply about *how* forms of organisation and work may contribute to, or counteract, counter-hegemonic formations of degrowth with a view towards systemic change, without convoluting larger political economic ideas with instances of organising. Such conceptualisation challenges common sustainable business and economistic perspectives, focusing on often static organisational configurations (Chapter 3). In order to be analytically relevant, this thesis suggests that

research on degrowth organising needs to be attuned to the material struggles experienced within prefigurative processes and organisational practice.

The issue of generalisation of these insights needs to be carefully addressed. On the one hand, the analysed CSA case studies represent a specific form of producer-consumer co-operatives operating on a market-insulated basis in a geographical location within the global north. Given the prevalence of degrowth ideas on a European level and the frequent links made between CSA and notions of degrowth (Chapter 4), there are reasonable grounds to presume such insights can be generalised across a wider range of commons-based and alternative forms of organising on a European level. The case selection on the basis of maximum variation certainly supports such claim in relation to the CSA network in Germany. On the other hand, however, insights on the pertinence of degrowth ideas for day-to-day organisational practice might vary, in particular, within co-operatives that constitute themselves more explicitly on ideas and principles of degrowth[42]. Nonetheless, such explicit forms of degrowth organising continue to be rare. Future studies could interrogate how and to what extent the interrelation between social imaginaries of degrowth and prefigurative organisational practice differs across time and space.

10.2.2 The Politics of Scaling in Prefigurative Strategising Processes

With regard to the second sub-research question, this research offers a theoretical contribution to the debate on organisational scaling to generate transformative impacts, by focusing on the social negotiation processes in alternative organisations. In particular, this contribution shines a light on conflictual strategising processes underlying diverging scaling pathways in CSAs, in relation to degrowth-oriented imaginaries.

In chapter three, it was argued that questions of scaling prefigurative ideas and practices beyond societal niches are key for a bottom-up degrowth transformation. Connecting the means and imaginary ends of organising towards societal transformation, negotiation processes around scaling had been described as a form of *prefigurative strategising*. Overall, the fragmented organisational literature on scaling had been identified as largely depoliticised, with its focus on typologies, and its creation of managerial solutions to hybrid objectives in competitive market

[42] See, for instance, the degrowth-inspired Cargonomia co-operative: https://cargonomia.hu/our-history/.

environments (Bauwens et al. 2020; Colombo et al 2023; Moore et al., 2015). Degrowth perspectives generally feature a preferred tendency towards alternative scaling pathways and, in particular, seem to favour strategies of scaling out, by spreading principles and proliferating smaller co-operatives instead of scaling up larger co-operatives (Johanisova et al. 2015; Sekulova et al. 2017). Colombo et al.'s (2023) degrowth-oriented framework offered a helpful analytical tool that synthesised the fragmented literature, while differentiating between inward and outward-focused social dynamics of scaling. While strategies to effect cultural impacts within organisations and wider society (i.e., scaling deep) are seen as fundamental for system change, Colombo et al. (2023) suggest that systemic transformative impacts can be generated through synergies and the complementarity of alternative scaling strategies.

Accordingly, this research contributes to the theoretical understanding of degrowth-oriented scaling strategies by challenging the relative lack of attention paid to the politics, power dynamics, and contingencies across organisational scholarship about social processes of negotiating organisational scaling pathways. It did so in two ways: (1) By offering an understanding of the prevalence of organisational rupture in a relatively early organisational development stage of market-insulated co-operatives, and (2) by explaining why different scaling strategies became dominant in each case.

Firstly, this research showed that degrowth-oriented imaginaries can have a significant influence on prefigurative strategising processes leading to organisational ruptures in a comparatively early organisational development stage in alternative organisations. In contrast to the prevalence of market forces spurring means-ends tensions in regular co-operatives, politically motivated degrowth imaginaries along with climate-related imaginaries were identified as sowing seeds of rupture in both cases. Returning to the conceptual mapping of alternative growth discourses (Chapter 2), degrowth imaginaries can be perceived to clash with what has been identified as imaginaries of productivist growth discourses within both CSA co-operatives. Therefore, this research posits that market-insulated co-operatives informed by degrowth imaginaries at the founding stage, are at risk of facing stark means-ends tensions more quickly than other types of alternative organisations because of the enlarged sphere of influence over scaling processes, as compared to direct influences of market forces.

While such insights bear significance for prefigurative strategies of scaling degrowth-oriented ideas and practices, the issue of generalisation needs to be addressed. This research highlights that market-insulated co-operatives such as CSAs provide a contingent platform to enable and influence alternative scaling processes in line with degrowth-oriented transformations. At the same time, they face an increased risk of organisational ruptures at a relatively early organisational stage through the clash of divergent imaginaries. However, such increased risk appears less pertinent in market-dependent co-operatives (such as many worker co-operatives), which rely on a constant stream of market transactions and interactions. In the latter case, prefigurative strategising efforts of scaling are to a greater extent influenced by market forces which pose limits to how far alternative scaling strategies can be explored, negotiated, and put into practice. Therefore, this research primarily pertains to interstitial degrowth strategies within commons-based and market-insulated forms of social provisioning, aiming towards scaling strategies that to some extent *escape* (Fournier 2008) the market-driven compulsions of the growth economy.

Secondly, this study highlighted that prefigurative strategising processes involve struggles over the power to determine scaling strategies. In present cases, such struggles were shown to be significantly shaped by work experiences of founding actors and implicit social relations emerging from democratic structures at the founding stage, which created path dependencies over dominant scaling strategies. Work experiences and related imaginaries of how to transform agricultural work at the founding stage influenced strategic choices of scaling in the extent to which these were more conducive to socio-economic (e.g., fairer wages) or socio-cultural (e.g., egalitarian) work objectives. Implicit social relations informed by democratic practices and forms of negotiation at the founding stage were observed to create the conditions for opening up strategising processes to the wider membership or constricting it to a narrower core team over time. Such aspects contributed to laying the foundations for social dynamics and different modes of scaling to become dominant as a result of struggles in each case. Concurring with the emphasis attributed in the literature on scaling deep as a prime mechanism for system change, this research shed light on struggles informing the dominance of either fast-growth or slow-growth scaling dynamics. As such, the study showed that social processes leading to rupture in both cases led to a chasm between what Colombo et al. (2023) frame as inward and

outward-focused dynamics to generating transformative change within and through the organisation. Therefore, this research challenges the relative lack of attention paid to issues of power within social processes of scaling, by exposing the politicisation of strategic questions around scaling pathways within alternative organisations.

While these insights appear relevant for community-based organisations aiming to contribute to a socio-ecological transformation more broadly, they are particularly pertinent to scaling processes within agricultural work and co-operative forms of organising. The particular experience of agri-food labour in growth-driven farming enterprises may differ from other exploitative and alienating sectors, which may lead to different conclusions about what forms of labour organisation, and thus scaling pathways, are deemed desirable and necessary. Moreover, the impact of democratic negotiation processes at the founding stage may be less prevalent within scaling processes of co-operatives that constitute themselves on a weaker bond to their membership or end-user. Thus, generalisation claims are limited to market-insulated co-operatives like CSAs, which explicitly aim to break down the barriers between producer and consumer roles through their forms of organisation and work.

10.2.3 Between De-Alienating and Re-Alienating Alternative Workplaces

Addressing the third sub-research question, this research offers an incremental theoretical contribution to debates on the transformation of work in relation to scholarship on alternative organising and degrowth.

The reconfiguration of work and employment relations towards de-alienated forms of labour has been highlighted as a key issue in the debate regarding a degrowth transformation (Chapter 3). Such debates often remain on a macro-oriented policy and theoretical level, leaving a ‘substantial gap’ for empirically grounded explorations of alternatives to capitalist work (Vincent and Brandellero 2023, p. 4), mirrored in regard to the agri-food system more generally (Böhm et al. 2020). Nascent scholarship, which posits the individual as the key unit of analysis, has focused on personal prefigurative processes of *degrowing,* in which a growing sense of alienation and dissatisfaction from the larger system can spur individual actors to withdraw from growth-driven workplaces and initiate degrowth-inspired alternative livelihoods (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Biese 2023). However, such research fails to consider more collective forms of transitioning into alternative forms of organising in line with degrowth ideas. Instead,

this study is situated in recent theorising investigating possibilities of de-alienated labour in alternative organisations (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021; Langmead and Parker 2023) and builds on work highlighting the promise of participatory CSA labour to countering experiences of alienation (Watson 2020). As such, the market-insulated and commons-based character of CSAs has been identified as providing a fruitful ground to investigating possibilities of de-alienated agri-food labour. Taking a processual and temporal view, this research followed recent theorising of (de-)alienation as a process that is open to ongoing contestation and inversion in alternative organisations. By focusing particularly on the antagonisms, conflicts and contingencies experienced in alternative workplaces (Langmead and Parker 2023), this research provides insights into potentialities of de-alienation amongst employed CSA workers in significantly larger forms of CSA organising.

This research adds to nascent debates within organisational scholarship by foregrounding the pursuit of de-alienated labour in CSAs as a terrain of struggle, contingent on the alignment of transformative work imaginaries, alternative scaling strategies, and everyday work experiences. Rather than viewing alienation as an insurmountable state, this research theorises an understanding of social processes of de/re-alienation as a dynamic continuum, mediated by inner-organisational struggles and negotiations across categories of workplace democracy, work relations, sustainable work, and decommodified work. In particular, the study highlights the contingency of de/re-alienation processes amongst CSA workforces with regard to the clash or (non-)materialisation of degrowth-oriented imaginaries of work, which are substantially influenced by scaling pathways of CSA co-operatives rather than direct market forces. In contrast to previous studies identifying processes of degrowing on an individual level (Ehrnstroem-Fernandes and Biese 2022), present cases point to the potential of degrowth-related work imaginaries to spark social prefigurative processes towards alternative organising. While highlighting the potential of degrowth-informed imaginaries to contribute to a transition into more socially meaningful and ecologically sustainable forms of agricultural employment, this study suggests that experiences of de-alienation are contingent on the extent to which such imaginaries materialise in practice. Such insights challenge perspectives that primarily highlight emancipatory potentials of co-operatives (Kociatkiewicz et al. 2021) and participatory CSA labour (Watson 2020), in countering alienating experiences under capitalism. De/Re-

alienating processes are positioned in contrast to re/de-generation processes of conventional co-operatives, as market-insulated characteristics of CSA co-operatives arguably offer a larger scope to countering alienating forces of market-driven compulsions of capital. As such, this research posits the process-oriented conceptual language of de/re-alienation as lending more nuance to the temporal study of co-operative workplaces, by shedding light on subjective work experiences in relation to politically motivated work imaginaries, such as degrowth. At the same time, the analysis of de/re-alienated labour offers an analytical device attuned to changes in workplace conditions in relation to the broader political economy and ecology of alternative organisations. Overall, the extent to which CSA work constitutes a source of de/re-alienation is contingent on how workers navigate the social outcomes of strategies to scale the impact of transformative organisational imaginaries, materialising in the organisation and experience of CSA work.

As both studied cases constitute extreme examples of work organisation in CSA initiatives, this contribution can be perceived as applicable for a wide range of CSA initiatives and other market-insulated co-operatives or commons-based organisations. Nonetheless, the generalisation of such knowledge claims need to be handled carefully in relation to more market-dependent co-operatives, in which the negotiation of market-based income, e.g., wages (Langmead and Parker, 2023), potentially creates different conflicts, antagonisms, and contingencies than in CSAs. In other words, processes of re-alienation are more likely to parallel forms of degeneration in co-ops that rely on regular streams of market-based income. Such reliance arguably hampers room for manoeuvring alternative scaling strategies that may be more conducive to de-alienating work.

10.3 Practical Implications

Several practical implications can be drawn from this research for prefigurative degrowth strategies more generally, and for CSA practice, in particular. These insights also hold significance for policy-oriented change in support of bottom-up movements that aim to contribute to a socio-ecological transformation on a systemic level.

Firstly, this research indicates that prefigurative degrowth strategies are likely to face significant conflicts in alternative organisational spaces which threaten to lead to ruptures. While this appears particularly the case in market-insulated co-ops like the

ones studied for this research, such insights may also be of practical value to other community-based and commons-oriented organisational formations aiming to scale transformative socio-ecological change in diverse ways. This research emphasises the need for co-operative actors to pay close attention to how such scaling processes are negotiated and strategised from an early organisational stage onwards. Creating space and dedicating time for such bottom-up strategising processes within alternative organisations is never an easy task and is often overshadowed by more pressing tasks of organising on a daily basis, in particular, within labour-intensive agri-food contexts. However, as the analysis has shown, degrowth-oriented imaginaries can quickly constitute seeds of rupture, if diverging ideas of alternative organising activists and practitioners are not openly addressed and debated. This is not to say that conflict and rupture can or should always be avoided, but that reaching a common ground about *what* the transformative objectives of an organisation are, needs to be followed by much more difficult collective debates on *how* these are to be met. Degrowth activists and CSA practitioners are advised to pay greater attention to such social negotiation processes within alternative organising spaces, in order to open up and facilitate political strategising processes of scaling to the wider membership. Alongside the practical challenges of facilitating such debates, both cases also stand as examples of the difficulties posed by co-op legal frameworks in Germany, which structurally disincentivises and hinders more horizontal forms of organising. Echoing conversations from within the CSA network, this thesis joins calls for an overdue reconfiguration of German co-operative law to recognise the specificities of CSA co-operatives and enable horizontal democratic processes akin to commoning to take place.

Secondly, horizontal negotiation processes also appear relevant to maintaining alternative scaling strategies which were found as more conducive to de-alienating work experiences. As such, this research has pointed to the contingencies and conflicts emerging from the (non-)materialisation of transformative work imaginaries in relation to dominant scaling pathways. Here, this thesis points to the significance of alternative organisations, such as CSAs, as constituting a hybrid and contingent platform of struggle to countering alienating forces of growth-driven systems. Struggles for de-alienation within such hybrid and contingent platforms may constitute important sites for what degrowth scholars have called a liberation *of* work within

wage relations (Barca 2019). Navigating such space of struggle appears particularly important in light of the intensifying ecological crises, not least within agri-food labour, as this thesis has highlighted. Aiming to transform the food system in ecologically sustainable and socially just ways thus necessarily entails organising and negotiating agri-food labour in the most de-alienating ways possible. In order to do so, this study emphasises the need for workers and members in alternative organisations to negotiate mutual expectations and imaginaries of work and how these can best be put into practice, in light of broader aspirations to scaling systemic socio-ecological change. At the same time, degrowth policies geared towards decoupling livelihoods from the need to work in bullshit (Graeber, 2018) and batshit jobs (Hansen, 2019), must aim at creating secure conditions for de-alienating workplaces. For instance, degrowth ideas of universal basic income or universal basic services can free up necessary time to engage in the social labour of commoning in CSAs, which significantly increases possibilities for de-alienated labour amongst members (Watson, 2021) and workers. From the perspective of agri-food production and food systems transformation, work in a degrowth transition is thus not necessarily positioned to become less, but it can and should be organised in radically different, more de-alienating ways.

10.4 Limitations & Further Research

A core limitation of this research results from the data collection techniques employed. While the investigation of social processes had been intended to be studied by employing ethnographic methods, such as spending significant amounts of time in the field and conducting participant observations, pandemic restrictions prohibited such an approach. Ethnographic approaches could have proven useful for the actual observation and experience of CSA work over a longer time span, in addition to the short field visits in September 2021, as well as the eight months online participation within a working group of the CSA network. In particular, theorisations on social processes of de/re-alienation can only ever provide a starting point for further ethnographic investigation within CSAs and other collective and commons-based forms of work. Future research could thus utilise and test theoretical insights offered in this study, when conducting participatory observations to analyse alternative forms of social labour within co-operatives and particularly, in alternative food networks.

Furthermore, given the focus on CSA as an alternative form of organisation, the analysis on the extent to which degrowth informs organisational practices is inevitably compromised by the specific geographical location and the relative absence of degrowth as a broader political discourse. Here, the specific usage and amalgamation of various growth critical discourses under the broad term *Postwachstum*[43] in Germany, complicates a more targeted investigation on the influence of a particular meaning, adding difficulties to an already multifaceted character of degrowth discourses (see Chapter 2). For instance, due to the historically dominant understanding of degrowth from a sufficiency-oriented perspective in Germany (e.g., Paech 2019), understandings of degrowth are likely to privilege such interpretations over others, e.g., anti-capitalist, feminist, or decolonial currents (Schmelzer et al. 2022) that may be relatively stronger in other locations. Nonetheless, further research should investigate how degrowth is used and made sense of, in implicit and explicit ways within other organisational and cultural contexts, and the extent to which it can provide a pertinent frame informing organisational practice over time.

In addition, research presented in this thesis is contingent on the sampling strategy in relation to organisational dimensions, geographical locations, and the specificities of co-operative legal frameworks. While the chosen sample organisations were based on considerations of maximum variation, they can hardly account for the wide diversity of CSA initiatives across Europe and the globe. Future research could usefully compare CSA initiatives across countries, by drawing on a wider sample of cases, in particular, to understand the challenges and potentialities of how wider socio-ecological transformations may be fostered. Given the emphasis of both organisations on contributing to such wider societal changes and the expansionary developments of the CSA network in Germany, future research should follow Spanier et al.'s (2023) example, to investigate questions of compatibility and alliance building between CSA, degrowth, and commons networks on a social movement level.

[43] Literally translated: post-growth

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