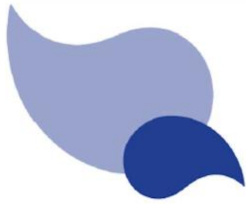

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Sunna Kovanen and Anna Umantseva, pp. 44-56

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Practising Sustainability Beyond Growth in Eco-social Entrepreneurship: An International Comparative Case Study

Sunna Kovanen and Anna Umantseva

This paper explores whether and how eco-social enterprises (ESEs) in rural areas are able to foster sustainability beyond growth in their daily practice. We approach sustainability beyond growth as a radical intertwining of social, ecological and economic concerns, where economy is understood as the secure and long-term fulfilling of basic needs within planetary limits. The study compares daily practices of five established ESEs in Brandenburg, Germany and Alentejo, Portugal. The ESEs represent the fields of agriculture and tourism and are diverse in their organisational forms and sizes. The data includes ethnography, interviews and document analysis. According to the results, ESEs support transition towards sustainability beyond growth and extractivism by facilitating slow, caring and respectful production practices that balance the needs of nature and human participants. While findings demonstrate such practices across all organisational forms and sizes, they were the most ambitious and heterogeneous in large co-operatives in less peripheral locations with more initial resources. Ethical negotiations on economic risk-sharing and decision-making were intertwined in and stabilised by market relations and hierarchical decision-making. Small and peripheral ESEs need to balance between the risk of exclusivity, precarity, complexity of diverse participation and limited resources for coordination.

Introduction

Economies centred on continuous growth seem incompatible with reversing ecological degradation (Hickel, 2019). Maintaining jobs with stable incomes and financing basic services through taxation are dependent on increasing productivity as well as increasing use of raw materials and fossil fuels (Koch, 2018). Furthermore, Koch argues that models which rely on increasing economic efficiency are overly optimistic, as they ignore overreliance on resource extraction. Following Kothari et al. (2014), we agree that discourses and practices associated with sustainable development tend to adopt rather than transform the capitalist and extractivist logic, prioritising economic growth, technological innovations, and managerial control over social and environmental elements.

Therefore, in line with Singh (2019), we approach sustainability from post-growth and non-extractivist perspectives. *Sustainability beyond growth* refers to striving for social justice and ecological regeneration within global planetary limits, radically interconnecting economic, environmental, and social concerns. This radical integration also implies a new understanding of the economy as the necessary material sustenance required for fulfilling basic needs, in constant negotiation and collaboration with other people and species (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Miller, 2019). Sustainability beyond growth highlights the possibility for transformation away from the status quo, to imagine other ways of being and other ways of working where care for nature and for the needs of humans decentres growth as the main aim of development.

Following Johanisova and Fraňková (2017) and Houtbeckers (2018), we suggest eco-social enterprises (ESE) provide concrete examples of post-growth sustainability, demonstrating viable alternatives to extractivist and exploitative development. ESEs are independent organisations that aim to provide livelihoods that regenerate ecological capital and enhance social wellbeing. They also often rely on non-capitalist relations such as gifts, donations, and volunteering, and harness democratic governance patterns (Johanisova & Fraňková, 2017). In this way, parallels can be drawn between ESEs and open cooperativism as “experiments in alternative modes of collective and cooperative organization and production” (Vieta, 2010, p. 8) which prefigure post-capitalist economy and unfold in diverse forms often beyond the traditional, legal co-operatives.

According to Szumelda (2020) and Schmid and Smith (2020), ESE research has mainly focused on possibilities of systemic transformation, and overlooked how emergence of such alternatives is affected by different geographic contexts and contextual conditions. Remote rural contexts present particular challenges to establishing and spreading alternatives due to their economic marginalisation, lack of institutional support, and distance from cities considered as hubs for transformative movements (Mihály, 2019). Hence, the first question of interest is how can eco-social enterprises generate sustainability beyond growth in rural areas?

Rural areas are extremely diverse, varying from affluent to remote and marginalised, with different opportunities for support networks of emerging transformative practices. Moreover, the trajectories of the enterprises differ, with different starting points and initial resources. There is a lack of studies which critically compare the diversity of ESEs in different contexts with regards to their possibility to generate post-growth sustainability in their mundane work. Thus, two further questions arise: which practices support sustainability beyond growth, and which hinder it and how practising sustainability beyond growth relates to diverse rural contextual factors.

Firstly, we will review the characteristics of sustainability beyond growth and extractivism. Then we will present the methodological and analytical approach — focus on daily practices of collaboration between human participants (and non-human nature) in ESEs, followed by the empirical analysis of five case studies. We will conclude with a discussion of the contextual comparison between the cases, and implications for enhancing sustainability beyond growth.

Sustainability Beyond Growth and Extractivism

The main theoretical foundations of post-growth sustainability can be derived from several sources, combining scholarship of the Global South and the Global North. On the one hand, they draw on feminist economy and geographic traditions (Fraser, 2014; Gibson-Graham, 2006). These have progressed from merely questioning GDP as a measure of wellbeing and remuneration and recognition for domestic work, to recent contributions that strive for a radical re-imagining of the economic sphere, with care as the principal constituent for post-capitalist futures (Singh, 2019).

On the other hand, it is Global South scholarship that places the questions of non-extractivism on the research and policy agenda (de Sousa Santos, 2014). It takes its foundation from, firstly, the grassroot struggles of marginalised, often indigenous, groups who are threatened by extractive industries (Valladres & Boelens, 2017). Secondly, it calls for recognition of ontological diversity and questions the approach towards nature as a mere resource, external to society (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Thus, the task of the research was to identify and articulate practices through which the interdependencies between the different elements of sustainability become tangible, as well as moments that obstruct these practices in favour of short-term, private economic interest.

Environmental and economic sustainability

This framing of environmental sustainability requires close intertwinement with the economic pillar, challenging the understanding of the economy as centred on productivist-oriented economic institutions (Singh, 2019). Collard and Dempsey (2020) suggest transitions to economic relations of care that exceed capitalism, because they are not designed to accumulate capital, but rather work towards “multi-species abundance” (p. 241) and wellbeing of human and non-human participants — “more-than-capitalist, more-than-human practices of care that promote the flourishing of human and non-human collectives” (Collard & Dempsey, 2020, p. 245). As Egmose et al. (2021) suggest, there is urgent need for a shift away from mastery of nature and extractivism towards attentiveness, respect, and reciprocity.

From an ESE perspective, intertwinement of economic and environmental elements refers to the prioritisation of the long-term work on ecological regeneration as essential for the

sustainability of the livelihoods. This often requires situated, manual, and slow work which enables practitioners to attune to and observe the impact of their work instead of focusing on mere output, even though this often results in short-term economic loss or high production costs (Hyvärinen, 2020).

Environmental and social sustainability

Non-extractivist sustainability highlights the need for breaking the dichotomy between social and environmental aspects. It calls for re-thinking the technocratic and instrumental definition of environmental sustainability, often prevalent in corporate and public policy decision-making, and striving, instead, for creating collaborative spaces and practices framed by interdependencies between human and non-human nature (Welden et al., 2021). Ecologically regenerative practices, hence, attend to human/nature relations holistically as an "ongoing, and forever experimental, cooperation with the more-than-human" (Beacham, 2018, p. 4). This interconnection radically questions homogeneous or essentialist definitions of "community" and instead, understands it as "nothing more or less than the exposure of beings to each other and each other's finitude" (Miller, 2019, p. 140). Moreover, it can be identified in the practice of eco-social entrepreneurship as a continuous, situated process of learning and negotiation (Miller, 2019, pp. 143–144). Instead of organising the processes as a controllable, hierarchical organisation, it requires building partnerships between ecosystems and human participants and leaving them space to exercise agency and a certain autonomy (Hyvärinen, 2020, pp. 83–84).

Social and economic sustainability

Post-growth non-extractivist sustainability implies a holistic framing of economic activity, that goes beyond productivism and capital accumulation. Capital is not absent and, in most cases, necessary, but it is intended to serve the "satisfaction of basic needs rather than individual capital accumulation" (Benalcázar & Ullán de la Rosa, 2021, p. 11). Besides financial remuneration, *social and economic sustainability* also refers to dignity, meaning of work, and the ability of participants to "shape the occupational terms that affect them" (Weiler et al., 2016, p. 1144) and jointly negotiate their contents of common engagement and responses to the risks arising from it.

Understanding care and affective labour as an integral part of economic activities not only refers to the conventional framing of care as a gendered domestic work, but also to the broader human capacities to create and maintain social bonds, be attentive to the needs of humans and nature, and to reproduce the shared meanings and values for social co-operation (Fraser, 2014). Hence, it is not enough to recognise and remunerate the work of caregivers, rather a caring economy should become "a collective ... undertaking ... to reproduce, regenerate, and renew a common world" (Singh, 2019, p. 141) that challenges the economic status quo.

Recognising the interdependence of the different elements of sustainability in organising livelihoods helps to decentre the pressure for private profit accumulation and market competition. Nevertheless, in daily practice the actual harmonisation of different needs often remains challenging. According to Szumelda (2020), rural populations have often already experienced hard and precarious working conditions and may not be as ready as activists from well-off backgrounds to exchange decent income for socially meaningful work. As Federici (2018) observes, incorporating social and environmental care into the economic sphere is a laborious activity that often cannot be mechanised and requires committed affective labour. Moreover, attempts at shifting away from strong work hierarchies and conventional extractivist practices in ESEs often require high competence and commitment with minimum economic resources, which creates a major risk of overburdening the most engaged (Paech et al., 2019). Responding to these challenges raises questions as to how to make this a creative process and a celebration of reproductive work and how post-capitalist practice can be separated from naturalising exploitation of self and others as its necessary companion.

Methodology

Analytical lens: collaborative practices between (non)human participants

Following Schmid and Smith (2020) and Houtbeckers (2018), we use daily practices as an analytical lens for identifying both emergence and incorporation of sustainable alternatives into the institutionalised reproduction of capitalist systems. Such practices embody “normative and practical negotiations concerning lived history, now, and the future, since no clear guidelines exist on how to organize for postgrowth society and economy” (Houtbeckers, 2018, p. 259). In particular, we focus on practices of collaboration (Kovanen, 2021) as a means of comparing the cases and exploring interdependencies between participants in processes of negotiation or contestation and how diverse participants engage in decision-making within the organisations and negotiate economic activities beyond capitalism.

Responding also to calls for renewed attention to practices of caring and reciprocal human-nature relations in a search for non-extractivist alternatives (Bresnihan, 2015) and acknowledging the strong interconnectedness of environmental aspects with social and economic elements in post-growth sustainability, we include non-human nature as an element of daily collaborative practices.

Empirical methods and research area

The research was conducted as an international comparative case study in Brandenburg, Germany and Alentejo, Portugal in 2019. Brandenburg and Alentejo were considered suitable for comparison due to several commonalities: both are among the most rural in their countries, relatively structurally weak, they share a similar history of large-scale land ownership and low level of industrialisation, and new trends of ecological entrepreneurship and lifestyle can be observed in both. However, Brandenburg has some comparative advantages. Germany has an average higher economic welfare standard than Portugal, and whereas easily accessible parts of Brandenburg have benefitted from population growth in the recent years (Demografieportal, 2022), Alentejo has suffered from the latest financial crisis and experienced a reduction of employment, population, and public infrastructure.

A comparative approach supports theory development by identifying repeating patterns across different contexts, and the situated nature of seemingly universal phenomena (Lang, 2018). Methods included semi-structured interviews, focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2001) and document analysis. These were applied with the strategy of switching between zooming in and zooming out on practice (Nicolini, 2009). Ethnographic participation was the means to zoom into the daily collaboration and to identify reflexive moments, where ethical dilemmas of interdependencies unfold. Interviews and documents provided a means to zoom out beyond the practice to consider historical, regional, and institutional perspectives. We participated in the work of each case for approximately two weeks at a time and accompanied different workers in their tasks as well as attending internal and network meetings.

We compared collaborative practices across ESEs typically considered as transformative pioneers, such as multi-stakeholder agricultural co-operatives (Gonzalez, 2017; Paech et al., 2019), but also small family enterprises, which are typical of the case study areas. The aim of the case selection was to cover different organisational forms, sizes, and production fields, to represent rural livelihoods in more general terms (Szumelda, 2020). To select the cases, we first identified ESEs in the most common production fields of ESEs in the regions: tourism and organic agriculture. We then applied Johanisova and Fraňková’s (2017) criteria, including a primary non-financial motive, using profits for wellbeing of nature and community, democratic ownership and governance patterns, and non-monetised production practices. We contacted 16 ESEs, conducted discussions with eight, and focused on five who were accessible and motivated to participate. All five cases — see Table 1 — are autonomous organisations providing goods or services in and outside of the market, relating explicitly to their ecological and social aim, and incorporating the listed criteria to a greater or lesser extent. Finally, all cases have survived the start-up phase and thus have achieved a certain level of stability.

Table 1: Cases overview

	Users Co-op (CSA)	Producers Co-op	Herbal Farm	Solawi (CSA)	Ecotourism
Region	**Alentejo, Portugal**			**Brandeburg, Germany**	
Type	Farm — vegetable, meat production, agroforestry	Co-operative of workers, producers and consumers.	Farm — aromatic and medicinal herb production	Farm — vegetable production	Ecological and natural camping site
Organisational structure	Co-operative & single entrepreneur	Co-operative	Single entrepreneur	Single entrepreneur	Single entrepreneur
Founded	Family or State ownership since 1800, 2018 transition to Users Co-op	2014	2009	2008	1992, previously state ownership
Ownership	Land in private ownership, enterprise co-operative	No land ownership	Land and enterprise in family ownership	Land and enterprise in family ownership	Land and enterprise in family ownership

Analysis

All five cases launched their enterprises, motivated by the objectives of enhancing social and environmental well-being and societal transformation for sustainability beyond growth. For example, Users Co-op transitioned from a monocrop industrial farm to a co-operative with ecologically regenerative agricultural practices. Its production has been transformed from hierarchically managed, and ecologically unsustainable, industrial farming with low-quality employment to a horizontally managed multifunctional system, which provides stable employment for locals. It enhances nature regeneration in contrast to past extractivism. Producers Co-op was started when a group of local activists organised an open forum that identified unfavourable conditions for environmentally beneficial farming, including firstly, the predominance of large-scale industrial farming and secondly, the inability of local self-employed to formalise their businesses due to high costs. The co-operative is inspired by the global degrowth movement and aims to boost local sustainable economies. Herbal Farm was motivated by an aspiration to generate ecologically sustainable, economically stable, and meaningful employment, as well as to improve the quality of life for locals and newcomers in a remote, depopulated area. The emergence of the herbal farming sector across Alentejo was inspired by the search for alternatives to the simultaneous ecological and financial crisis after 2008. Ecotourism was transformed from a cheap, mass-tourism location into a model of degrowth-oriented tourism by a new generation of entrepreneurs. The camp site follows high ecological standards and restricts the human use of the space in favour of nature and animals. It reduces economic pressure and adapts to the shrinking population by reducing the amount of labour, which enables it to provide good employment for fewer people. Solawi was started by a group of young adults from Berlin using the model of community-supported agriculture (CSA) a system that connects producers and consumers by allowing the consumer to subscribe to the harvest of a certain farm and where consumers usually carry a part of the risk of enterprising. The motivation was to build an example of community-based subsistence economy and provide a place for learning for others interested in organic, regenerative, and subsistence-based production and construction methods. Table 2 outlines the different organisational contexts in relation to their access to resources (human and financial), proximity to urban centres, and their ability to attract and rely on support of volunteers and networks.

Table 2: Contextual characteristics

	Users Co-op	Producers Co-op	Herbal Farm	Solawi	Ecotourism
Support networks, collaborations	Co-initiator of the CSA network in Portugal; research and professional networks, national/ international traineeships and volunteering	Founded within a local internationally known hub for artists and activists; collaborates with national/ international degrowth movement	Informal network of herbal farmers and regional development actors, collaborates with regional universities	Strong CSA network in Germany with over 360 farms, international volunteering	Eco camping network in Germany, regional high school for sustainable development, regional tourism association, climate movement
Location	Easy access to the capital city and other smaller towns	Located in a small town easily accessible from the capital city	Remote rural area, limited access to capital city with public transport	Easy access to capital city	Remote rural area, limited access to capital city with public transport
Initial resources	Owner inherited 500ha land	Human resources — initial network of activists and artists	Small-scale farm	Small-scale farm	Small-scale plot

Integrating long-term environmental and short-term economic sustainability

All five cases aim at reducing the environmental impact and preserving natural resources in their farming and nature conservation practices, doing so at different scales and using techniques with different degrees of regenerative potential. In order to ensure fertility and resilience of their lands, all the entrepreneurs attempted to work with the processes of regeneration, rather than strictly controlling and managing nature for production or protection purposes. In Users Co-op, agroforestry is the most ambitious agroecological project with large parts of the plot allocated for reforestation amongst farmland and grazing fields. Currently, however, the economy of the farm depends on meat and organic vegetable production, food processing, and income from teaching, consultation, and providing accommodation. This diversification allows the farm to allocate spaces for slow reproduction of natural cycles of the eco-system, since the time and effort implied in collaboration with nature may be at odds with short-term material stability. This is demonstrated by the owner of Users Co-op during a farm tour, who explained the practice of reserving part of the land out of direct productivity from a human perspective:

> These plants which are here are not to feed us, not to feed the animals, they are to feed trees. When we have trees, the trees will feed the soil. And when we have the soil here, we can have horticulture, cereals, whatever you want.

Diverse means of income also allows Producers Co-op to commit to slow and empathetic ecological practices among local farmers, while their revenue relies mostly on sales revenue from the co-operative shop and services by the former self-employed co-operative members.

> [We] try to understand if they [local farmers] use chemicals or not. And now we accept. In the beginning we didn't, but then we understood that we have to be humble in what concerns the farming. It's not easy. So, we should not [be] moralist about it, but try to find technical solutions that in a way address the problems (Producers Co-op, Founder).

We observed that changes to non-extractivist relations with nature required, and were accompanied by, acceptance that diverse participants each have a different pace and trajectory in their relations with their natural environment. The findings suggest that local workers were

participating in the ESEs because they provide decent employment, and not primarily because of a prior interest in nature regeneration. As an international employee in the Users Co-op observed:

> I think for them [local workers] the aspect of having a good employment, safe employment is probably still more important than the inspirations.

However, being able to learn caring practices, seeing the impact of their daily work, and being a part of spaces where work with nature is non-extractive eventually can generate appreciation for these practices. For example, the cleaner and the construction worker at Ecotourism both became convinced about the efficiency of ecological materials after using them themselves, and an elderly woman, who first sold jam through Producers Co-op, began to sell local wild herbs after becoming inspired by local biodiversity. Over time and after years of ecological practice, the long-term impacts of sustainable livelihoods became more tangible, with farmers in Herbal Farm and the network of Users Co-op observing improved soil quality and resistance to droughts, unlike their conventional partners.

Integrating social sustainability with ecological regeneration

The cases demonstrate that transitioning to non-extractivist relations in production and management also requires creating social environments for the participants that allow personal creativity, ability to exercise agency, and collaboration with others. Hence, ESEs tend to strive for working environments based on slow and caring relations with nature and people alike. All five cases aimed to overcome the traditional hierarchies in working relations by attempting to engage workers and wider stakeholders into the decision-making of the enterprise, albeit influenced by contextual factors and types of leadership.

The CSAs (Solawi and Users Co-op) have a strong focus on participatory decision-making between all participants. Solawi is the only small family-owned enterprise open to diverse volunteers, where reproductive tasks are broadly shared and work is horizontally coordinated via daily meetings. Due to the short intervals of volunteering at Solawi, however, the main long-term decision-making remains in the hands of the farmer family. Users Co-op strives to change the traditional system of autocratic landownership and collaborates with a young farmer, experienced in developing sociocratic decision-making principles; a form of organisational governance and consensus decision-making that allows individuals to express themselves, through open and inclusive discussion. Nevertheless, encouraging active participation in decision-making while attending to the diverse needs and capabilities of participants is a lengthy and challenging task, requiring competent coordination (Paech et al., 2019). As noted by respondents in several cases, for those used to conventional hierarchies, engagement in decentralised decision-making can be often uncomfortable. According to the young farmer and sociocracy-expert:

> It is a challenge to somehow change this culture. People have to understand that they can be part of the decisions and part of the solutions.

In the two larger co-operatives (Users and Producers) participatory decision-making and decentralised learning is facilitated not only by availability of young active volunteers skilled in running the organisation, but also by the co-operative, multi-stakeholder structure. Unlike Solawi who only involves those people who are primarily motivated and committed to communal, sustainable living, the larger co-operatives explicitly aim to engage not only young committed participants but also local residents. As such, they are able to facilitate slow and caring learning processes with local workers. Producers Co-op, for example, has created a flexible system of membership that allows different degrees of engagement and responsibility, depending on the members' needs and capabilities. Firstly, the co-operative is open for "effective members", who can buy shares, vote, and participate in management. In addition, "collaborative members", can sell and buy their produce via the local shop, without the obligation to participate in organisational activities. Thus, local residents can participate on an occasional basis without the pressure of full engagement. One such "collaborative member" who sells produce and

home-made jams through the co-operative, shared that due to her full-time job, she prefers to participate in the co-operative's meetings only to clarify concerns related to her own sales. This flexibility allows the co-operative to slowly extend participation into the broader rural population.

In contrast, smaller family enterprises in more geographically remote locations had motivation but limited capacity to either engage diverse participants or facilitate direct democratic practices:

> [We received a] contact from the local institution that trains young people with mental illnesses. And they asked if we could have one of their students as a trainee. But unfortunately, we couldn't because we are a very small farm. So, if our normal [worker] is not there, the [trainee] has to work autonomously. We cannot have somebody that needs supervision all the time (Owner, Herbal Farm).

Similarly, for Solawi, enabling volunteering required the farmer family to compromise and share their limited private living space which is often not possible for other family enterprises.

Small enterprises in peripheral regions may even benefit from hierarchical organisation in providing clarity and separation between work and leisure for all participants. While the workers enjoyed independence and flexibility in their own tasks, the leaders respected the expertise of their employees. Moreover, in cases with more decentralised coordination (Users Co-op and Solawi) and freedom for participants with diverse learning trajectories, occasional collisions of interests caused arguments between the leaders and new, experienced participants with a vision and interest of their own. Thus, the participatory decision-making seemed to reach its limits even in these highly democratic ESEs. Accordingly, centralised leadership in smaller enterprises may enhance ecologically sustainable work, as leaders are able to initiate ambitious developments without time-consuming negotiations.

Finally, as the small enterprises lack the local accessibility and capacities to coordinate diverse exchange on site, they facilitate learning and inspiration on ecological production methods via cross-regional networking. In small enterprises mainly, the leaders are connected via professional and research networks. Ecotourism is a known example amongst German camping sites for its degrowth-based camping model. The informal network of herbal farmers, in turn, supports the spreading of ecological and economic practices and learning new methods from abroad for the benefit of the whole sector. Both Solawi and Users Co-op are internationally connected via networks of 'wwoofing' — a movement to link visitors with host farms (https://wwoof.net/). This makes them, and especially Users Co-op, visible and popular in their fields, attracting students and volunteers nationally and internationally.

Rethinking what economy means in sustainability beyond growth

All cases seek to provide decent living and socially just working conditions for their participants, and all but Ecotourism attempt to serve people of diverse socio-economic possibilities. Nevertheless, the challenge of short-term economic risks and precarity was solved in different cases with different compromises (see Table 3).

Table 3: Economic activities of ESEs

	Users Coop	**Producers Coop**	**Herbal Farm**	**Ecotourism**	**Solawi**
Reciprocity-based channels	CSA	Co-op structure allows members to buy from uncertified producers and share risks	Informal lending, transport etc. Co-operation between farms, solidarity in export contracts	None	CSA Decommodified relations in farm living and work, and in market sales
Market sales channels	Online shop, on-farm shop, Lisbon shop	Sales to non-members	Bulk sales to an export company	Customers paying fees for services	Sales to restaurants

One means of balancing social and economic justice is a certain decommodification of economic activities and mutual commitment to sharing short-term economic risk. A typical example practised by Users Co-op and Solawi is the CSA-model, where customers share risks with the farmer through a long-term commitment to purchasing produce. Replacing monetised exchange with non-monetised commitments and relations was practised by all but Ecotourism.

However, decommodified relations also emerge in practices that are not typically considered as such, for instance, in exporting agricultural produce in bulk. For instance, the herbal farms sell most of their produce abroad through one monopoly-holding export company. However, the company restrains from abusing its power position, and instead, attempts to find a sales channel for all products. Thus, the farms are able to sell produce despite fluctuations in the quality of produce and demand on the market. Similar informal solidarity is practised between farmers in their peer-networks, where they often avoid competition by exchanging knowledge, organising transport and packaging, and creating new products together. This reciprocity throughout the value chain provides some economic support for an otherwise precarious field. Even so, Herbal Farm is struggling with its income generation.

In a way, even within commodified relations, customers who accept a higher price for regenerative produce can be considered as showing solidarity with their ESE, providing a major income source for all cases. Market income is important, especially for Users Co-op, to cover the high costs of employment and meat production in Portugal. Compared to Germany, the CSA model is in its infancy in Portugal and economic welfare levels are comparatively lower.

Relations of economic solidarity tend to come with compromises. In Users Co-op, the produce is delivered only in Lisbon resulting in higher prices for goods, highlighting the risk of social exclusiveness of ecological production. Ecotourism compromised diversity and social justice for their ecological aims. In the process of transition to a degrowth-model, the entrepreneurs evicted large numbers of long-term elderly campers in order to turn a full, social and low-cost camping site into a natural area with a few high-quality “glamping pods”. The entrepreneurs did not succeed in facilitating a slow and mutual learning process, such as in Users Co-op or Herbal Farm, and as a result the local customers were convinced that the leaders of Ecotourism act out of profit-orientation only, not believing the leaders’ ecological arguments. According to Fletcher et al. (2019), this is a typical process in other tourism enterprises with similar transition process.

In contrast, Solawi also attempts to serve low-income customers. Both in the CSA model as well as in market shares, low-income customers are encouraged to pay less for produce. Moreover, Solawi practise decommodification in working relations: the participants and leaders consider working at the farm and having their basic needs covered as gifts of free will, not two sides in a price-performance relation. Thus, permanent members and owners make their living without employment contracts. For Solawi, the more established presence of both the CSA model and decommodification support these practices. Even though such working and living relations require the acceptance of a simple lifestyle, the inspiring experience of collaboration and learning usually outweigh the challenges, which further helps to lower the costs for the enterprises, as confirmed by research participants:

> After lunch, an afternoon circle was held. Lisa started in German and said she was inspired by the people on the farm. She continued in English, that you often hear several languages and people from different countries get to know each other .... Timo, on his turn apologised, that he may start to cry, and wanted to say again how important the warm and caring atmosphere of the farm had been for him ... (Solawi, research diary, Day 4).

Solawi is perhaps the organisation most radically questioning the capitalist production principles. However, it requires a strong commitment to the community and trust in the informal relations from the participants, which might be a stressful practice for those who are not used to these dynamics, hence limiting participation of people less familiar with alternative economies.

Discussion and Conclusions

In relation to the question of how ESEs generate sustainability beyond growth in rural areas, we demonstrated practices that blur boundaries between economic, environmental and social pillars of sustainability. The environmental aspect of sustainability is reflected in the focus on regenerative practices — striving for attentive and caring relations with natural eco-systems that restore deteriorated environments and return to nature its ability to sustain life. These processes require careful attuning to slow cycles and signals of natural processes, which do not necessarily result in short-term economic profits. However, all case ESEs were able to harmonise ecological and economic sustainability by fulfilling the material needs of their committed participants, at least in simple terms, and taking a long-term perspective to slowly learn the new, situated, and attentive practices. Together the ESEs introduce the relevance of non-human nature as a collaborative partner to multi-stakeholder co-operation, negotiating its needs alongside social well-being of human participants and economic sustainability of the initiative.

Similar to ecological regeneration, social sustainability refers to caring relations of work and engagement allowing for decency and agency attuned to a diversity of trajectories of different participants. Hence, social sustainability ceases to be an ideal and transforms into caring negotiations and attending to interdependences (Miller, 2019). Even though practising in ESEs started for many participants from instrumental interests, respectful, heterogeneous and well-coordinated common work enabled shared ethical commitment to emerge over time. Facilitating such participatory processes appeared rewarding, but also time-consuming and requiring extensive coordination. Sustainability beyond growth and extractivism thus requires time, space, and respect for caring and slow transitions, accommodating different backgrounds, and needs of diverse actors, being careful of abrupt disruptions of their trajectories. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2071, p. 23) observes, “making time for care time appears as a disruption of anthropocentered temporalities”, where anthropocentered temporalities comprise the established direction of progress and productivist-oriented work. In instances where this attentiveness was not always present, conflicts between members were unavoidable or learning of sustainable practices became accessible for only those already committed to the cause.

Concerning economic practices, we observed that almost all cases strive to integrate practices of decommodification, engaging people to participating in activities not based solely on monetary exchange, but bringing in ethical aspects such as risk sharing, trust, and appreciation of the work of natural environments. The intertwining of decommodification and market-based practices supported each other rather than one completely preventing the other flourishing. While economic activities striving for decommodification created strong bonds and commitment locally, market-based relations also allowed flexibility for participants not able to be physically present or have strong personal commitments. The intertwinement of market-based and decommodified relations in ESEs hence supports Fraser’s (2014) argument that in searching for post-growth non-extractivist sustainability it is not enough to see decommodification as a fit-all requirement, since decommodification does not necessarily mean overcoming extractive and exploitative relations (as Fraser demonstrates, for instance, with feminist struggles for remuneration of reproductive labour). As could be seen in one of the family enterprises, decommodification of labour might also imply and necessitate intimate communal relations, where identifying and speaking out about exploitative practices in daily reproductive work becomes more difficult, since all disputes are expected to be resolved based on trust rather than through contractual relations. Hence, we can conclude that ESEs demonstrate processes of continuous balancing between decommodified and market-based relations for careful considerations of ecological and social sustainability beyond and within the capitalist logic.

The second set of research questions concerned particular practices and contexts which support or hinder sustainability beyond growth. In relation to ESE organisational structures, co-operatives were better able to harmonise the different sustainability aspects than the smaller family enterprises by engaging in more ambitious and even radical changes to

conventional production processes and organisational structures. However, we observed practices harnessing interdependencies in small family enterprises not typically considered as transformative, such as prioritising the needs of eco-systems over those of human participants and informal sharing of economic risks. Simultaneously, the small family enterprises also met especially strong constraints in economic security (Herbal Farm), participatory decision-making (Herbal Farm, Ecotourism) or social inclusion and justice towards local, broad population (Ecotourism, Solawi) either unwillingly or as a conscious prioritisation, sometimes catalysing rural gentrification (Dieckmann & Theuvsen, 2019; Fletcher et al., 2019).

The research has also highlighted the spread of aspects associated with open cooperativism among diverse rural livelihoods, Co-operative organisational forms do seem to support collaborative decision-making about major issues such as ownership or the use of surplus resources (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gonzalez, 2017). However, relations such as risk-sharing between individual participants also emerge without a formal co-operative membership, through learning trajectories in joint, daily work. Even the small ESEs resemble open co-operatives (Larrabure et al., 2011; Vieta, 2010) in a commitment to a "community of practice" (Wenger, 2008) and in their emergence in response to socio-ecological crises.

In terms of geographic contexts and support by already existing institutional structures, the ESEs with the highest ethical ambition and intensity of collaborative practices are either in urban/city environments and/or benefit from material wealth such as large land ownership. In this research, these cases include Users Co-op, Producers Co-op, and Solawi, which are CSAs and/or co-operatives that rely on both market-based sales in Lisbon and Berlin, and/or on urban civic networks and young, educated volunteers. The benefit of structurally strong and connected spaces becomes clear also in country comparison. Even Ecotourism, a peripheralised case in Germany, can rely on wealthy urban customers better than the rural Herbal Farm, in Portugal. Similarly, different ecological movements and institutionalised advisory structures are a strong support for the German cases in comparison to Portugal. However, as a possible downside, strong movements may also enable ESEs to remain in their supportive niches, such as Solawi and Ecotourism did, without needing to search out partners in local or institutional contexts. Thus, small and peripheral ESEs would especially need external support in facilitating diverse participation and taking time for slow learning.

In conclusion, practices striving for post-growth sustainability exist in both countries and in different contexts within the countries, demonstrating diverse attempts at shaping post-growth sustainability, with more radical disruptions of conventional systems or more reliance on established mainstream structures and practices. The cases simultaneously depend on contextual factors, adapt to them, but also overcome them, integrating care for nature and people in seemingly unfavourable contexts. This suggests that understanding paths for building alternatives requires particular attention to the diverse ways institutions and spaces co-constitute the situated opportunities for the grassroots politics of possibility.

The Authors

Sunna Kovanen is a PhD-candidate at the University of Leipzig and works as a researcher at the Brandenburg Technical University of Cottbus-Senftenberg, Germany, studying the stability and transformative potential of social and ecological enterprises in rural areas. Anna Umantseva is a PhD-candidate at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her current research interests include emergence of social innovation in rural European areas and the field of regenerative farming.

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