

Powell, J. (2002). Development at the Conjuncture of Feminism and Associationalism.
International Journal of Community Currency Research 6, 1.
<https://doi.org/10.15133/j.ijccr.2002.004>

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Community Currencies: Alternative Development at the Conjuncture of Feminism and Associationism

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International Journal of Community Currency Research

2002: Volume 6

ISSN 1325-9547

Community currency systems (CCS), such as LETS, Ithaca HOURS and TimeDollars, are emerging from the fringe into the alternative development limelight. Academics from a variety of disciplines, often with scant knowledge of their history, theory or practice, cite CCS when pressed for concrete examples of their development agenda. This includes scholars of feminist economics such as Diane Elson¹ and Irene Van Staveren (1998:17), and "Third Way" gurus such as Anthony Giddens (1998:83-84). This, despite the fact that serious questions over the theoretical soundness, feasibility and potential impact of such systems remain (Offe and Heinze, 1992:150). In this paper, I will look at two key questions--which elements of CCS appeal so strongly to the respective agendas of feminism and associationism and, in light of this assessment, is CCS *really* part of an alternative development agenda?

Necessarily, this will begin with a brief discussion of the problematic definition of what exactly constitutes an "alternative development agenda". I will draw on my experience with the Bia Kud Chum system in Thailand to look at how CCS challenge dominant strategies of development in practice. This will be followed by an examination of those elements of CCS which are relevant to each of the frameworks and an analysis of whether or not this forms part of an alternative development agenda. Finally, I will conclude by offering an assessment of what risks and opportunities are presented by this increasing interest and what it will mean for CCS and the notion of development.

WHAT IS AN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA?

Immediately, a distinction should be made between Alternative Development and *alternative development*. I believe that Alternative Development is an incoherent position. It is, in essence, a critique of whatever constitutes mainstream development at a particular juncture; the equivalent of building castles in the sand. The Alternative Development of the 50's to the 70's was a critique of state-centred approaches; that of the 90's called for the state to be brought back in. Alternative development is comprehensible only if we understand it in its current context and form, and allow for a certain essentialism of the tenets of mainstream development. Having said this, it is necessary to define what I consider to be the central tenets of an alternative development agenda at present. If not, my subsequent argument could be accused of the 'catch-22 trick'²; any attempt to refute my argument could be countered by modifying my definition of alternative development--"moving the goalposts" as it were.

There are three elements central to alternative development. Firstly, development must involve a process of

self-empowerment. The emphasis here is on the role of society in society-state-market interaction. This must involve building institutions, not just individual capacities. Secondly, alternative development must reflect a deepening of democracy. Though there is much debate over what is meant by this notion (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001), I suggest that it must involve decision-making at the level of those affected while at the same time integrating this into a central role for the state. It must, additionally, have an oppositional political sensibility--apolitical is not alternative. Finally, alternative development involves the notion of strong sustainability, that is the change in desirable social objectives must be positive for every period (Pierce, 1990). Admittedly, the legitimacy of any one of these claims could, in itself, be the subject of a further paper.

CCS IN THAILAND: CHALLENGING DOMINANT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

On 13 April 2000 an article appeared in a Thai daily newspaper describing a community currency system in Kud Chum, a small, rural sub-district in the Northeast. Sources at the Provincial Finance Ministry were quoted as saying that the system 'could pose a threat to national security'³. After a brief visit to the community, these same officials declared that the system 'certainly violated Article 9 of the Currency Act of 1958.' Cold war language was invoked to suggest that the villagers planned to establish a "free state". In the weeks that followed, a never-ending stream of bureaucrats, police and media stormed the villages; the District Head decreed that the system must be stopped immediately, until a full investigation by the Bank of Thailand could be completed. What was it about this small community initiative that whipped the authorities into such a frenzy?

Two years earlier, a group of villagers from Kud Chum attended a conference on community currencies. Though not thoroughly convinced that the idea would work in their community, the representatives felt that the concept addressed the same question that they had been asking themselves for over a year. Despite successes in organising villagers in a co-operative rice mill and indigenous health centre, community leaders felt that they were fighting a losing battle. They had increased local incomes but expenses had skyrocketed, and most farmers were buried in debts owed to the government-run Bank of Agriculture and Agricultural Co-operatives (BAAC) and informal lenders. How could the community encourage more diverse production at a local level to reduce the outflows?

New ideas were spawned--perhaps the rice mill could pay its staff partly in a community currency to encourage them to purchase more local products; or maybe such a system could be used to encourage trade between burgeoning food security groups. Reciprocal labour groups, barter and 'kindness' systems of exchange had always been a central tenet of Northeastern culture.

Villagers organised a series of workshops to study local resource flows. Each village worked together to determine where income was coming from and on what this income was being spent. In one village, members were shocked by the amount of money leaving the community over the course of a year to purchase children's snacks. Surely, suggested a number of participants, this was something that the community could produce itself. More than just an economic issue, this was also a health issue--most processed snacks have virtually no food value and are the leading cause of dental caries (and, therefore, represent a substantial health expense). As a result of these discussions, training was organised on the production of snack foods made from local materials. Based on similar analysis, another group has begun successfully producing shampoo, dishwashing liquid and laundry detergent.⁴

A CCS working group hammered out the details of exchange, organisational structure, bank location and policy, and methods of conflict resolution. Obviously the exchange medium, the "Bia" itself would be meaningless if it was not accompanied by efforts to encourage local production and trade. Group members decided that, initially, the best way to promote this was through the creation of weekly markets. By the end of the first market day, 112 households, out of some 600 households in the community, had registered as members of the Bia Kud Chum system. Some 8,000 Bia (approximately 250\$US) had been taken out as interest-free loans.

Less than two weeks later, the state crackdown began. Rumours were spread that anyone caught with Bia in their possession could be arrested for threatening national security. The intimidation campaign was effective; less than fifteen years earlier, those who were similarly accused by anti-communist forces simply disappeared. Before any conclusion had been reached by an ad-hoc committee formed to investigate, the District Head ordered the system closed. The system sat in a state of limbo for over four months while authorities waited for the results of an official investigation by the Bank of Thailand. Finally, on 16 August 2000, a press release was issued stating simply that Bia Kud Chum violated the Banking and Currency Acts and 'could confuse villagers if it spread to other areas.' At the time of writing, with the assistance of activists, academics and the Law Society of Thailand, the villagers of Kud Chum are

examining several options to re-start the system (Pichpongisa, 2000).

CCS AND FEMINIST ECONOMICS: CO-OPERATION, REVALUATION AND SUBSIDIARITY

Epistemologically, CCS share with feminist economists a rejection of "homo economicus". According to the neo-classical tradition, economics is about the objective study of rational actors in the market. Scarce resources will be allocated efficiently by individuals acting in their own self-interest in a competitive marketplace. Feminist economists counter that this view of economics is incomplete, unnecessarily dualistic and, in fact, *subjective*. Harding (1995:141) takes up this last point, showing that objectivity can only be obtained by recognizing one's own standpoint. If what is chosen to research, how it is researched and how results are interpreted is almost entirely the dominion of men, then to deny a gendered perspective is to offer subjective analysis under the guise of objectivity. Strober (1994:145) takes issue with the implicit denial of abundance, altruism and co-operation; in the mainstream view these qualities are associated with the feminine and accorded a lesser value. She points to the role of marketing in creating the illusion of scarcity and cites ample evidence that more of our economic lives are concerned with sacrifice and co-operation rather than greed and competition. She argues forcefully that economics should concern itself with both the former and the latter. By focusing solely on the former, 'economics makes it more difficult to redistribute power and economic well-being.' This leads to Nelson's (1995:143) conclusion that economics must be the study of the 'realm of provisioning' including family and social activities and not just markets.

The villagers in Kud Chum recognise the shortcomings of economic dualism implicitly. The price that villagers charge for their various agricultural products vary according to the context and the economic and social standing of the recipient. Some foodstuffs are kept back to be sold at lower prices (or given away) to members of the community for which a higher price could have been sought on the market. In neo-classical terms, this is strictly irrational behaviour resulting in inefficient outcomes. The impact of the thinking of feminist economics is already being felt in critical institutional economics⁵ which regards such behaviour as exhibited by the Kud Chum villagers as rational within a socially embedded context.

The result of the epistemological bias in mainstream economics is that unpaid labour, usually women's labour, is under or unvalued. Paid work in the formal economy has been dominated by men, while unpaid work in what is euphemistically called the "informal" economy is almost exclusively performed by women. This division denies the fact that the paid economy is utterly dependent on the nurturing, maintenance and welfare provided by the reproductive economy. In a classic analogy, Henderson (1982) has compared what she calls the "counter-economy" with the bottom two layers of a cake which subsidizes the market economy--the icing--with unpaid labour. In its 1995 Human Development Report, the UNDP estimated the value of non-market, unpaid labour at about 70% of global output; more than two-thirds of this is the 'invisible contribution of women'. By tracing the evolution of the national accounting systems, Waring (1989) shows how this is the result of systematic attempts to exclude the value of women's contributions from national accounts. As a result, much of the methodological rigour of feminist economics comes from its efforts to make women's work visible through household work studies at the micro level and engendered data collection at the macro level.

Seyfang and Pearson (2000:59) make the connection between CCS and unpaid labour explicit.

community currencies can reinvent--or restructure--the market, rewarding and valuing services and skills that are not recognized by the market economy, such as caring socially reproductive services for whom the market currently has no demand.

It is worth examining if this is, in fact, the case. Certainly in Kud Chum, community members recognised the explicit need to emphasize the key role to be played by women in the design and implementation of a CCS. This decision was taken for both normative and practical reasons. In previous community development efforts, the predominance of men in leadership roles was identified as a shortcoming. Furthermore, since women are the managers of the household purse in this community, it was felt that any initiative to change consumption patterns which did not place women at the centre would surely fail. Secondly, the Bia Kud Chum system offered a route to overcoming men's privileged access to resources--information, credit and training. It was largely the women in the community who analysed resource flows and initiated skills development to address the issues identified, unlike state-led programmes in agricultural technology which target men. The Bia itself offered the possibility to act as a credit vehicle and the project also initiated a revolving fund in the national currency accessible only to those who had participated in the analysis of the community economy.

However, in light of government interference, the evidence about the ability of CCS to 'restructure the market' in Kud Chum is inconclusive. There is reason to approach this issue cautiously. If a community exchange medium is viewed by men as "women's money", this may lead to a gender-marking of the currency, thus diminishing its purchasing power. The members of Womenshare⁶, a CCS in New York open exclusively to women, might argue that this is a desirable development. The gender marking of money can work both ways. Since community currencies can not be used to purchase items such as cigarettes and alcohol, they may result in a shift away from unproductive expenditures which Elson (1998:165) argues lead to a 'depletion of human capacities (and are) often associated with violence against women.'

The re-structuring of the market sought after by CCS is part of a strategy which is sceptical of the benefits of increasing commoditization. This point is critical in drawing a more sophisticated distinction between the various ideological positions within feminist economics. What has been categorized (Ferber and Nelson, 1993:8) as liberal and empirical feminist economics seeks women's empowerment via a gender-sensitive application of neo-classical tools. However, constructionists in the critical school believe the market itself, as a gendered institution, plays a role in the exploitation of women. The DAWN network (Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era) advocates 'alternatives based around expanding and improving subsistence production and moving away from production for export markets' (Elson, 1995:207). This is based both on the theoretical link drawn between 'overcoming the asymmetries of gender and overcoming the asymmetries of the international economic system', and extensive empirical research which shows the negative impact on women of a move towards export crop production⁷ as advocated in Structural Adjustment Programmes.

Participants in Kud Chum regarded CCS as a tool to encourage more diverse production at a local level. This came after the recognition that greater participation in the global market had *increased* levels of indebtedness. Once again, no conclusive data are available to substantiate the increase in intra-community resource flows, however, ample qualitative evidence is available from longer running systems such as the Red Global de Trueque (RGT) in Argentina that this is the case⁸. A final note of caution is warranted here. Any move towards increased subsistence may risk simply increasing women's "double load". The initial experience in Kud Chum was mixed on this point. While men participated in expanding agricultural diversity for local consumption, efforts to produce substitutes for primary consumer goods were taken up exclusively by women.

CCS AND ASSOCIATIVE ECONOMICS: DECENTRALIZATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING

From the relatively new insights of feminist economics to a repackaging of old ideas about the interaction between society, state and market: according to Stears (1999:570), associationalism is 'the doctrine that political, social and economic power should be removed from the central state and distributed among smaller, voluntary associations'. The debate has been raging since Bismarck established the first welfare state in turn-of-the-century Germany as a means of placating socialist opposition. Welfare states since have varied to the extent and in the manner that they rely upon the so-called third sector.

In its most popular contemporary form, such initiatives to devolve powers to civil society have fallen under the rubric of the "Third Way". Since most scholars concede that the Third Way has no agreed-upon definition⁹, it is useful to unpack the various lines of thinking that it refers to. With the election of Tony Blair's New Labour Party in May 1997, the ideas of Paul Hirst, or what has been referred to as "libertarian associative democracy" gained ascendancy. The key objectives of this programme are to make voluntary associations the primary governance structure; pluralise and federalise the state; use democracy as communication; and, through all of this, improve the performance of the economy (Amin, 1996:5). Stears (1999:574) contrasts this libertarian--or what he calls "pluralist"--model, which entails competition between voluntary associations for the patronage of welfare recipients, with the participatory model¹⁰, where services are provided by 'voluntary associations that are co-operatives between providers and recipients'. Amin and Thrift (1995:58) criticize both approaches, charging that neither model comes to terms with the abuses by those already in power, risking becoming a democracy for privileged groups; nor do they address how problems of co-ordination can be resolved to ensure equitable distribution. In their place, Amin and Thrift argue for "radical democracy". The key difference is the requirement that civil society actors must do more than establish networks and build resources; they must act *politically* to 'create a space for themselves, and to curb the influence of the powerful' (1995:59).

Most commentators would agree that CCS is an example of the associational principle of decentralization being put into practice (Shorthose, 2000:201). The nature and degree of this decentralization varies across communities. In Kud

Chum, the explicit objectives were focused on the provision of supplemental employment opportunities in the interstices; plans to integrate basic health services and agricultural training are, as yet, unrealized. It is interesting to note that discussions had already been held about the feasibility of providing certain disadvantaged members of the community with a monthly income in the community currency; this was an extension of an existing but limited initiative to provide monies from the profits of the rice mill to such individuals. This is indicative of most systems' attempts to integrate welfare in some rudimentary form into the community exchange mechanism. The principal benefit, however, is still seen as the provision of supplemental employment. In the North, this is seen as a potential obstacle to the spread of the concept; unemployed citizens who might consider joining are deterred by the fear that they might jeopardize their unemployment benefits (Offe and Heinze, 1992:100).

This raises the question of the strongest critique levelled at associationalist welfare provision--is it just right-wing state rollback under a different banner? Stears (1999:584) contends that 'breaking down uniformity in the manner of service provision would also therefore mean breaking down uniformity in the quality of services offered.' Without delving into the finer details of such arguments or the associationalist response, it is striking to note that the situation in the South sets the critique on its head--instead of state rollback, the question becomes will the presence of CCS prevent state *entrance* in the first place? In the foreseeable future of state cutbacks to welfare expenditure following the Asian Crisis of 1997, the question is moot for the villagers in Kud Chum. I will, however, return to this point in the closing discussion.

While decentralization may be the form that associationalism assumes, capacity building in civil society is the substance. In study after study, economic success is linked with networks of association (Amin, 1995:54). The most influential of these studies is Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1993); drawing on data gathered over a twenty year period during which Italy devolved political powers to the state level, Putnam draws links between high levels of community association (Chambers of Commerce, Rotary clubs, football leagues, etc.), effective democracy and economic success. What is not clear from Putnam's groundbreaking work is which came first. According to Amin (1995:54), attempts to reproduce regional economic success are oriented towards the construction of institutional capacity. A community develops the potential for action through the negotiation process itself, *not as an outcome of it*.

The stated method by which CCS seek to reach their goal of responding to market failure is through fostering supportive community networks. This "building of social capital" can be seen in Kud Chum in the formal discussions held between participants from different villages about such issues as valuation and dispute settlement; in the informal discussions which arose between buyers and sellers at the farmers' market; and in the accounting, production and marketing skills developed during the analysis of the local economy. There is a risk however that social interaction will be seen as something which is always positive. State intervention to stop the Bia Kud Chum system led initially to conflict and division. Some villagers suggested that the participants "got what they deserved" for trying such a "crazy idea". The verdict over whether the benefits, derived from increased and varied forms of interaction, outweigh the costs is still out.

One further point is worth discussing in relation to the issue of capacity building. A similar dilemma arises for CCS organisers as faces the advocates of associational welfare provision (Streeck, 1992:516)--how to prevent the exit from collective citizenship? In both cases, programme impact is mitigated to the extent that some groups, particularly those that control key resources, can afford or even have an incentive to avoid collective obligations. In Kud Chum, this is exemplified by, for example, the (relatively) wealthy farmer who produces eggs for export who refuses to accept community currency for a much-needed commodity. The answer for associative democracy, according to Streeck (1992:514), is that 'exit from collective citizenship must be foreclosed in particular for groups commanding resources that are crucial for building a successful community.' Traditionally, this has been enforced by the undemocratically-drawn lines of the nation-state. Streeck views this as particularly problematic for the European process of integration as privileged domestic groups will have more opportunities for exit from national obligations. CCS organisers, without any of the coercive powers of the state, have had to rely at a micro level on moral suasion to urge participation. An interesting but as yet untested approach is that of economists such as Jayaraman (2001), who argues that community currency can serve as a signal for local demand, thereby enhancing the efficiency of markets. This argument may be an effective technique in solving the exit problem.

CCS AS PART OF AN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Having looked at the commonalities between CCS in practice and feminist and associationalist theory, I return to the question I asked at the beginning of the paper--are CCS part of an "alternative development agenda"? As defined herein, such an agenda must necessarily include three elements. It must involve a process of self-empowerment which

develops institutions not just individual capacities; it must deepen democracy in the sense of constructing oppositional politics; and it must exhibit strong sustainability. In order to deal appropriately at length with the conjuncture between CCS, feminism and associationalism, I have not assessed the ecological implications of CCS; I leave this third element then as an unchallenged assumption for future work.

The example of the development of Bia Kud Chum provides evidence that CCS can serve as a tool of self-empowerment. Via participatory community economic analysis, members built networks between villages to assess shortcomings in the local economy, formulate responses and organise to acquire the necessary skills. This provides further evidence that the associationalist capacity-building project is on the right track. Bia Kud Chum challenged the dominant state-led model whereby "experts" identify the economic opportunities, and then government bureaucrats organise skills workshops. By examining CCS through the lens of feminism, the potential to introduce the notion of economics as provisioning, value unpaid labour and strengthen subsistence production was brought into relief. This represents a concrete, achievable agenda to overturn the structures of patriarchy which systematically exclude and de-value women's activities.

Although the construction of an oppositional politics was never an explicit objective of the organisers in Kud Chum, it is clear from the reaction of authorities that it was perceived as such. This serves to illuminate the potential pitfalls of the touchstone of associationalism--decentralization. The Royal Thai Government has in recent years joined in to the global chorus of calls for decentralization. However, what the example of Kud Chum so clearly illustrates is that elites are only supportive of the decentralization agenda when it is *they* who determine which powers will be devolved, how the transfer will be effected and in whom the power will be vested. CCS threatens to capture power from below uninvited.

It is clear then that CCS *can* be part of an alternative development agenda. Our analysis of these initiatives through the lens of feminism and associationalism, however, reveals a number of risks on the horizon. CCS organisers' awareness needs to be heightened to the threat that local exchanges themselves may become gender-biased institutions, reinforcing stereotypical roles and increasing women's double-burden. This risk is accentuated by the current dominant role of men in CCS thinking and discussion groups. As in Kud Chum, gender analysis should be built in from the start; even then, results may be mixed. The evidence of the ability of CCS to fundamentally re-structure the market is inconclusive; ultimately, it may not be able to fulfil the expectations that some feminists have placed in it.

Secondly, supporters must be wary of co-optation into a programme of state rollback in the North or the maintenance of a minimal role for the state and redistributive taxation in the South. This menace is particularly acute for the TimeDollars model since its focus on voluntary service, without the LETS analysis of monetary structures, lends itself well to welfare provision. I do not for a moment suggest that this is the intention of TimeDollars supporters, however, it is worthwhile to note the rapid spread of TimeDollar-based systems across Tony Blair's UK. Rather than serving as Amin's 'counter-hegemonic model', CCS which replace state employees with unpaid volunteers serve a regressive agenda, both from an economic and a gender vantage-point.

It could be argued that this "politicisation" of CCS is simply part of its maturation as a concept and the beginning of its absorption into the mainstream. After its initial honeymoon period with grassroots activists, micro-credit has undergone severe criticism for its role in "luring" the marginalised into the global marketplace¹¹. This precedent is worth considering as CCS proponents ponder future steps for the development of the concept. There is a recognised need to more actively include governments, particularly at the municipal level, and community businesses into CCS planning and implementation (Powell, 2000). However, the loss to the strength of CCS as part of an alternative development agenda should be weighed very judiciously in this potentially Faustian bargain. The participation of scholars from the fields of feminism, radical socio-economics and eco-development will be vital if the potential of CCS is to be maximized.

ENDNOTES

1. In a conference on Gender Budgeting in Bangkok organized by Focus on the Global South, 7-10 June 1999. [return to text](#)

2. See Sillence, J. (1986) 'The Logic of Arguments in Planning', in A Theory of Planning. Aldershot: Gower, pp. 90-101. [return to text](#)

3. B. Somsin, 'Coupon issue could fall foul of bank laws', *The Nation*, 15 April 2000. [return to text](#)

4. Participatory Analysis of Community Economy, Nature Preservation Association, October 1999. [return to text](#)
5. See, for example, Hodgson, Samuels and Tool (eds) (1993) *The Elgar Companion to Institutional and Evolutionary Economics*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar. [return to text](#)
6. Womenshare, established by Wilson and McCourt in 1991, has approximately 100 members exchanging services. [return to text](#)
7. See, for example, M. Mackintosh (1989) Gender, Class and Rural Transition--Agribusiness and the Food Crisis in Senegal. London: Zed Books. [return to text](#)
8. The Global Exchange Network, which began in May 1995 covers 15 of the 23 provinces of Argentina, boasts nearly a quarter of a million members and has an estimated annual turnover equivalent to one billion US dollars (Primavera, 2000:6). [return to text](#)
9. Halpern and Miosz (eds) (1998) The Third Way: Summary of the NEXUS On-line Debate. London: Nexus, in Popple and Redmond (2000:393). [return to text](#)
10. Amin attributes the participatory model to Hadley and Hatch. [return to text](#)
11. See, for example, John Samuel's 'The Holy Cow of Micro-credit', in *Third World Resurgence*. [return to text](#)

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International Journal of Community Currency Research
2002: Volume 6
ISSN 1325-9547