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On the money: Getting the message out

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Abstract

Complementary and community currency systems have been started all over the world. There are a number of critical success factors, one of which is education. There are many important reasons for educating people about community currencies, including practical, economic, social, ecological, political and psychological ones. Key audiences for messages about community currencies are participants, designers, administrators and public decision makers. Promoters have adopted a range of strategies to educate people who design, use or support these systems: books & articles, design guides, research summaries, general advice & information, videos, conferences, webinars (internet seminars), internet discussion groups and training. More coordinated and strategic support of these efforts would enhance their effectiveness.

"In theory, there's no difference between theory and practice; in practice, there is."

Yogi Berra, Baseball Coach

Lessons of experience

There have been thousands of experiments with community currencies around the world over the last few decades. Estimates vary as to the number of active systems but most systems that are started do not become sustainable. Many currencies have not established themselves beyond a relatively small group (typically less than 200 participants) and many systems are moribund. A few have established themselves and attracted a lot of attention.

It is important to analyse and disseminate the lessons from both success and failure to encourage a new generation of sustainable systems.

Critical Success Factors

The few systems that have lasted a long time show that it is possible to sustain a local currency over a long period.

Critical factors for the success of the currency include:

- Choice of currency design to suit local conditions and goal
- Cost recovery mechanisms to ensure sustainability of the system itself
- Governance structures and processes for decision making and conflict resolution
- Management structures and processes for day to day efficiency
- Marketing and PR
- Education and training.

You may have a well-chosen design, recover all costs, have great governance and management but if no-one knows about your system, understands why you are doing it or how it works, then you may be wasting your time.

This paper focuses on the role of educational strategies in improving the practice of community currencies.

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Why Educate about Community Currencies?

There are several reasons for educating people about community currencies:

Practical reasons

If we want to improve the sustainability rate of community currencies, we need to raise skill levels both for designing and participating in them. It is still too common for people with little knowledge to launch new currencies, riding a short wave of enthusiasm and idealism, but later watching their system disappear as the bigger waves of long-term maintenance break over them. People need skills and information for design and organisation.

Economic reasons

The recent financial crisis has shown the vulnerability of the 'real' economies of goods and services to the speculations of the global casino economy. Community currencies provide local financial instruments that can be integrated into other social economy mechanisms like community banks, credit unions and social enterprises to provide local economic stability. They give people tools to help themselves and their communities economically. People need to understand the economic dimensions of community currencies.

"If we want to improve the sustainability rate of community currencies, we need to raise skill levels both for designing and participating in them"

Social reasons

Community currencies help communities suffering from the 'externalities' of the market economy: community breakdown; crime; drugs; isolation etc. They create a kind of immune system to protect the community in hard times. People need to explore the social effects of community currencies.

Ecological reasons

A monetary monoculture dominated by a handful of powerful national currencies has the same effects as mono-cropping in a landscape – extreme specialisation and efficiency at the price of resilience in the face of challenges. Monetary diversity mirrors ecological

diversity: the richer the bio-diversity, the more resilient the whole system. This monetary diversity also supports real ecological diversity by enabling local communities to mobilise people to do essential conservation work and maintain environmental projects. People need to grasp the ecological benefits of community currencies.

Political reasons

Very few decision makers have heard of community currencies. If community currencies are to migrate from the periphery into the mainstream, then we need to get better at collecting the evidence for effectiveness and lobbying those in power to integrate community currencies as a tool for delivery of both social and economic development policy.

Although participation in community currencies has been relatively limited, the small evidence base we have shows clear benefits to a few heavy users. We need to spread knowledge about their benefits to increase pressure for positive social and economic change.

Psychological reasons

Participants often comment on the different 'feel' of participation in a locally owned and managed, interest-free money system. Educating about community currencies helps us to see how these mechanisms can play a role in our personal and community economies of exchange.

Audiences and Messages

The key audiences for messages about community currencies are:

- Actual and potential participants
- Designers of new systems
- Organisers and administrators
- Funders and public decision makers.

The specific needs of each of these groups is discussed below.

Actual and Potential Participants

We need to demonstrate the benefits of community currencies to potential participants and supporters. At the same time we need to highlight the practical challenges of designing,

organising and administering them to designers and managers of systems.

Participants need enough knowledge to be able to take part and integrate use of the currency into their daily lives. It should be easy to use and it should help them to solve their problems, meet their needs and achieve their goals.

WHAT WORKS: good website and flyers; motivating messages in simple language; new member events; regular social events; simple training; special offers.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: ideology & preaching; technical or academic language.

Designers of new systems

Designers need to be familiar with design features and options to ensure that systems are designed to meet participants' goals and take them where they want to go. They need to take a whole systems approach to community currency design, embedding the technical design process in a community development process that engages potential users early on. They need to be clear about ends and open about the means of reaching them.

WHAT WORKS: internet discussion groups; design guides; specialised training; respect for a diversity of approaches.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: ideology & preaching; mumbo-jumbo and mystification.

Organisers and Administrators

Organisers and administrators need to know what management tasks and challenges they will face and they need the skills of leadership and adaptability to local circumstances. They need to establish effective governance structures for resolving conflict and making strategic decisions.

WHAT WORKS: strong leadership team to share roles; internet discussion groups; specialised training; national support agencies.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: parachuting in models from elsewhere without adaptation; one-man or woman bands who refuse advice or training; leaving structures and processes to chance.

Funders and public decision makers

Funders and public decision makers need to know what community currencies are, what specific benefits they bring to which groups and what evidence there is for effectiveness.

WHAT WORKS: both quantitative evidence (statistics for participation and trades) and qualitative evidence (real stories about benefits of participation); personal relationships with funders and civil servants; sending newsletters and bulletins.

WHAT DOES NOT WORK: ideology & preaching; technical or academic language.

Delivery Mechanisms

We need to develop targeted educational strategies to suit the information and skills needs of each group.

Some will prefer to read academic papers analysing the details of community currencies; others will want hard evidence of benefits before they back the idea; others will prefer to read articles in the local newspaper or a national magazine; others will just want to try it out and see what happens; others may want to engage in training.

Conclusions

Complementary and community currencies represent a decades-old, worldwide movement that is constantly evolving new designs and forms of organisation.

The outward variety can obscure the commonalities between systems: releasing local potential for wealth creation; sharing wealth locally; valuing people as assets; reciprocity; valuing and rewarding essential work. These common values and goals are essential messages that need to be clearly articulated and communicated to specific audiences – participants, designers, administrators and decision makers – using various languages and methods.

Promoters of community currencies have developed an impressive array of communication methods but a lot of it is sporadic, uncoordinated, inconsistently supported and not integrated with other social economy mechanisms.

Like all good entrepreneurial activities and innovations, community currencies depend on the efforts of a few maverick pioneers taking risks and getting support where and when they can. Barriers to development include lack of knowledge, time or money.

More coordinated and strategic support by funders and institutions for educational efforts – commissioning professional educational materials and making full use of the internet, multimedia and social networking – would help disseminate this great social innovation even further and enhance its effectiveness.

Educational strategy or tool	Audiences	Aims	Delivery Agents
Books & Articles	Decision makers General public	Persuasion Information	Various authors: Bernard Lietaer: http://www.lietaer.com/ Margrit Kennedy: http://www.margritkennedy.de/ Thomas Greco: http://www.reinventingmoney.com/ Richard Douthwaite: http://www.postcarbon.org/person/36218-richard-douthwaite
Magazine	General public Designers	Information Share stories	Community Currency Magazine http://www.communitycurrenciesmag.net/dp/
Design Guides	Designers Administrators	Specialist information	Community Currency Guide by Bernard Lietaer and Gwendolyn Hallsmith http://www.global-community.org/gc/newsfiles/25/Community%20Currency%20Guide.pdf The Lewes Pound How To Guide by Oliver Dudok van Heel: http://www.thelewespound.org/assets/docs/Lewes_Pound_How_To_Guide.pdf
Research summaries	Researchers Decision makers Policy analysts	Analysis Specialist information	International Journal of Community Currencies Research http://www.ijccr.net Bibliography of Community Currencies Research http://www.communitycurrencies-literature.de/1.introduction/ Community Currencies Research Group http://www.complementarycurrency.org/communitycurrenciesResearch.html

Table 1: Educational Strategies and Resources for Complementary Currencies (continued overleaf)

Educational strategy or tool	Audiences	Aims	Delivery Agents
General advice & information	General public	Information	<p>Complementary Currency Resource Center http://www.complementarycurrency.org/</p> <p>Time Banks USA http://www.timebanks.org/</p> <p>Time Banks UK http://www.timebanking.org/</p> <p>Time Banking Wales http://www.timebankingwales.org.uk/</p> <p>LETSsystems Home Page http://www.gmlets.u-net.com/</p> <p>LETS in Australia http://www.lets.org.au/</p> <p>LETSLink UK http://www.letslinkuk.net/</p> <p>LETS Link-Up http://www.lets-linkup.com/</p>
Videos	General public	Persuasion	<p>The Money Fix http://themoneyfix.org/</p> <p>La Double Face de la Monnaie http://mareauxcanards.ouvaton.org/films.php?choix_film=25</p> <p>Search for “community currencies” and “complementary currencies” on You Tube: http://www.youtube.com</p> <p>Videos about Time Banking: http://www.timebanks.org/videos.htm http://www.timebanking.org/</p> <p>Lyttleton Time Bank, New Zealand: http://www.lyttelton.net.nz/timebank</p> <p>Oliver Dudok van Heel talks about Lewes Pound http://transitionculture.org/2010/01/22/oliver-dudok-van-heel-on-local-currencies-transition-and-the-lewes-pound/</p>

Educational strategy or tool	Audiences	Aims	Delivery Agents
Conferences	Designers Participants	Dissemination Networking	Various organisations e.g. USA, 2004 http://www.smallisbeautiful.org/local_currencies/2004_conference_report.html Germany, 2004 http://www.newmediaexplorer.org/sepp/COMMUNITYCURRENCIESurrencies_in_Europe2_2004.pdf New Zealand, 2009 http://www.transitiontowns.org.nz/node/1470 Annual Time Banking congresses c/o Timebanks USA and Timebanks UK
Webinars (internet seminars)	Enquirers Designers	Training Specialist information	Value for People http://valueforpeople.co.uk/letsmakemoney
Internet discussion groups	Enquirers Participants Designers Researchers Advocates	Share knowledge, experiments, updates and inquiries	CC Open Collective is a moderated online forum (skype chat): contact Les Squires (skype name: LSquiresSkype) Time Banks Forum http://forums.timebanks.org/
Training	Enquirers Participants Designers	Training Specialist information	Time Banks USA http://www.timebanks.org/ Time Banks UK http://www.timebanking.org/ Value for People http://valueforpeople.co.uk/training