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BEYOND LONGEVITY

A LIFE-CYCLE APPROACH TO TIME BANKS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past couple of decades, scholars and activists have devoted considerable energy to envisioning and enacting alternatives to capitalism through various micro-initiatives. In addition to being small, many of these initiatives are relatively short-lived, leading critics to consider them failures. This article challenges the association of success with scale and longevity. We focus on time banks, a form of community currency organized around labor-time as the unit of exchange. While time banks have been shown to have myriad benefits for communities, very little attention has been paid to how benefits and challenges vary as time banks evolve. Rather than treating time banks as static institutions, we approach them dynamically, as entities that undergo different stages of development with evolving impacts throughout their lifespans. Drawing on over six years of qualitative research on US time banks, we model what we call a Time-Bank Life Cycle. Examining time banks through a life-cycle lens enables us to disassociate success from longevity while garnering a fuller understanding of the variety of challenges time banks face and the range of material, social, and ideological impacts they may have over the course of their lives.

KEYWORDS

Time Banks, Life-Cycle Frameworks, Complementary Currencies, Noncapitalism, Longevity, Success

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, scholars and activists have devoted considerable energy to envisioning and enacting community-based alternatives to capitalist markets. This includes a burgeoning interest in timebanking as a response to the failings of the conventional money economy. As a unique form of community currency, time banks rearrange participants' relationship to time, money and labor while illuminating the centrality of care work as the backbone of daily life. Numerous studies have correspondingly emphasized timebanking's radical potential (Gregory 2015; Seyfang 2004; Diprose 2017; Collom et al. 2012; Cahn and Gray 2015, to name a few). Underlying such studies, however, is an inconvenient truth: the majority of time bank initiatives are small-scale and short-lived (Glückler and Hoffman 2021; Valor and Papaoikonomou 2016; Dittmer 2013). This fact raises important questions about how longevity and scale relate to success. Facing such issues, some scholars have explored how time banks might succeed better by scaling up and prolonging their lives (see, for example, North 2010; Ozanne 2010; Seyfang and Smith 2002). While we see merit in such efforts, we adopt a different tack in this paper. Rather than designing strategies for making time banks bigger and longer-lasting, we develop new perspectives on how the meaning of success might shift over a time bank's lifespan, regardless of length.

While the multidimensionality of time banks' impacts has been well-documented (Michel and Hudon 2015), little research has been conducted on how such impacts vary across different stages of time-bank development. To address this limitation, we introduce a life-cycle paradigm. Drawing on over six years of qualitative research on US time banks, we ask three primary questions: What common developmental stages can we decipher across diverse time banks? How do the challenges faced by time banks shift as they develop? And how do time banks' material, social, and ideological impacts vary across these stages? We organize our findings around what we define as a "Time-Bank Life Cycle" comprising six stages, ranging from initial conception to discontinuation.¹ This novel life-cycle model enables us to partially dissociate success from oversimplified measurements of scale and longevity. Moreover, a life-cycle model facilitates the study of time banks as dynamic organizations whose material, social, and ideological impacts shift as the organizations themselves evolve. In this light, success should be conceived as a process rather than as a static state to achieve. This approach also illuminates noncapitalist temporalities that emphasize care work; patient labors of community building; and cyclical patterns of birth, decay, and renewal rather than capitalist fixations on growth, speed and efficiency.

2. THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL IMPACTS OF TIME BANKS AND THE LIFE CYCLE MODEL

Time banks are a form of community currency that enables the exchange of services outside of the cash economy. Like other community currencies, they are designed to encourage social cooperation, mutuality, and community-building alongside the material benefits of economic exchange (Gregory 2015; Meyer and Hudon 2017). What sets time banks apart is their unique system of valuation, grounded by a refigured relationship to time and labor. Rather than relying on a scrip form of money, time banks use time as a currency. Within time banks, the value of exchanged services is defined by the quantity of time expended in providing a service, typically measured in "time credits." Such credits are logged and exchanged through a central accounting system, with payback not necessarily coming directly from the person receiving the service or at the same time as the service is provided (Cahn 2004; Gregory 2012). In this way, time banks exceed one-to-one bartering of services and offer a system of generalized exchange in which each member's hour is valued equally. This equalizing approach to labor-time is the basis for both time banks' pragmatic benefits and their more utopian aspirations.

The timebanking movement has diverse origins and development pathways (see Weaver et al. 2024; Smith and Lewis 2016; Boyle 2014). For example, in Germany and Austria, Tauschring (exchange ring) systems have origins in the wider complementary currency movement and are especially associated with Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) (Schroeder 2020; Glückler and Hoffman 2022). In Italy, time banks emerged independently out of the women's movement with strong ties to municipal councils (del Moral-Espín 2017). In Japan, the Fureai Kippu model of timebanking developed relatively autonomously with roots traceable to the 1970s and a principal focus on eldercare (Hayashi 2012). In the US context, timebanking has been heavily influenced by the work of Edgar Cahn, who first developed a timebanking framework in the 1980s. Cahn theorized timebanking as a vehicle of social justice and as a stimulus for coproduction through which communities become empowered as producers of services they

consume (Cahn 2004). Our research draws heavily from this conceptualization of timebanking even as our case studies also reveal considerable variation at local levels.

As a growing body of research has demonstrated, the potential benefits of timebanking are manifold, spanning material, social, and ideological domains. Materially, time banks offer an alternative source of economic provisioning that can reduce dependence on limited monetary resources. Economic independence, combined with the cultivation of new skills, can improve both self-determination and self-esteem while enhancing public health and addressing the exhaustion that can result from exploitative labor conditions (Boyle and Bird 2014; Gregory 2009). Socially, time banks can combat social isolation, bridge generational divides, and improve social inclusion for marginalized populations (Cahn and Gray 2021; Hayashi 2012; Ozanne 2010; Seyfang 2004). Ideologically, time banks have been linked to a radical temporal politics that decenters neoliberal discourses of work-time. Simultaneously, scholars draw awareness to the diverse time demands of informal care labor and the nonlinear temporal rationalities required to build trusting relationships (Bryson 2007; Gregory 2015; Wilson-Thomas 2021; Rice 2014). Through this reframing, time banks are thought to contribute to a feminist reordering of societal priorities and to a community economy rooted in reciprocal forms of care and concern (del Moral-Espín 2017; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). They are thus held up as examples of prefigurative politics that both generate imaginaries of alternative economies—what Erik Olin Wright described as “real utopias”—and demonstrate their viability in everyday practices (Schiller-Merkens 2022; Wright 2010; Collom et al. 2012).²

One recurring shortcoming of existing scholarship is its tendency to treat time banks as static institutions. Many studies take what amounts to snapshots of time banks at particular moments in time and then use those static representations to draw conclusions about timebanking’s general potential and its limitations. If noncapitalist social and temporal dynamics lie at the core of timebanking’s radical potential, we believe the study of such dynamics themselves must be temporalized—they must be studied in ways that account for how time banks evolve over time and how the nature, amplitude, and radicality of their impacts shift as they develop. This is where we find a life-cycle framework to be beneficial.

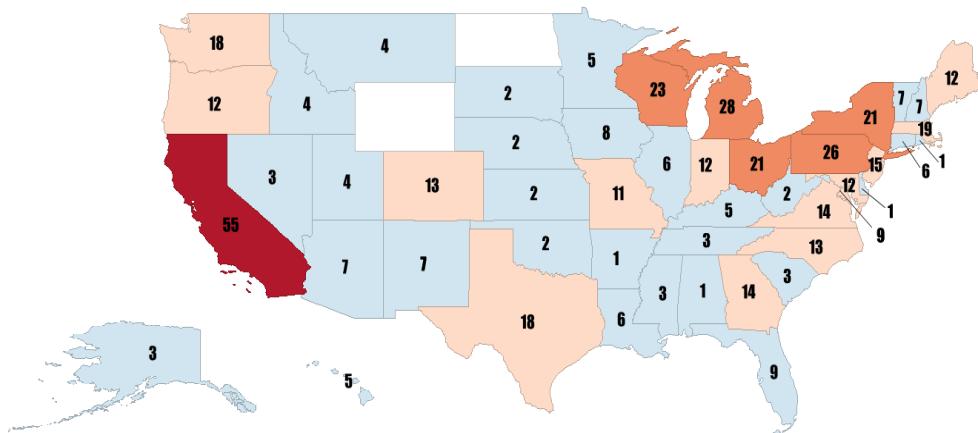
Over the past half century, life-cycle frameworks have been popular tools for analyzing corporate growth trajectories and for predicting transformations that capitalist firms undergo to survive in a highly competitive market environment (Flamholtz and Randle 2007; Greiner 1972; Miller and Friesen 1984; Quinn and Cameron 1983). Comparable models have been developed for the nonprofit and cooperative sectors (Stevens 2001; Bretos et al. 2020). Here, we map such a framework in the non-capitalist movement space of timebanking. In contrast to existing frameworks, which tend to adopt a grow-or-die orientation, our life-cycle framework is oriented around distinctly noncapitalist concerns encompassing mutualist approaches to community well-being. In line with degrowth thinking, we do not assume that growth is necessary, that efficiency is a primary objective, or that a longer life is an adequate gauge of time bank success (Banerjee et al. 2021).

The success and failure of an initiative, we argue, should be comprehended not solely by its size or duration but also in its contextual dimensions: whether it aligns with its overarching mission, attains specific goals, and influences the individuals and communities it engages. These aspects of success vary independently, and time banks may realize a diversity of successful forms throughout their lifespan.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Using data from hOurWorld and TimeBanks.org—the two largest timebanking umbrella organizations—along with information on independent time banks drawn from our research, we generated a combined dataset of over 480 time banks spread across 48 states (See Figure 1). We then examined the relative size, location, longevity, and exchange activity of time banks across the country.

Figure 1: Time Banks across the United States (2017)



Based on this dataset, we selected a diverse subset of time banks for more detailed qualitative research. These time banks vary in their operational scale, organizational structure, membership demographics, and geographic location. Through our sampling we seek to provide a good representation of the time bank movement in the United States. The time banks we covered ranged in age from over 20 years to less than one year old, and in size from under ten members to well over a thousand. They were also at different developmental stages when interviewed. Seven were no longer active when we contacted them. Two of these never made it past the planning stage, three closed within a year of launching, and two closed after several active years. The remaining time banks had varying levels of member activity and organizational stability. Our cases are spread across the US, albeit with a large representation from the East Coast region.

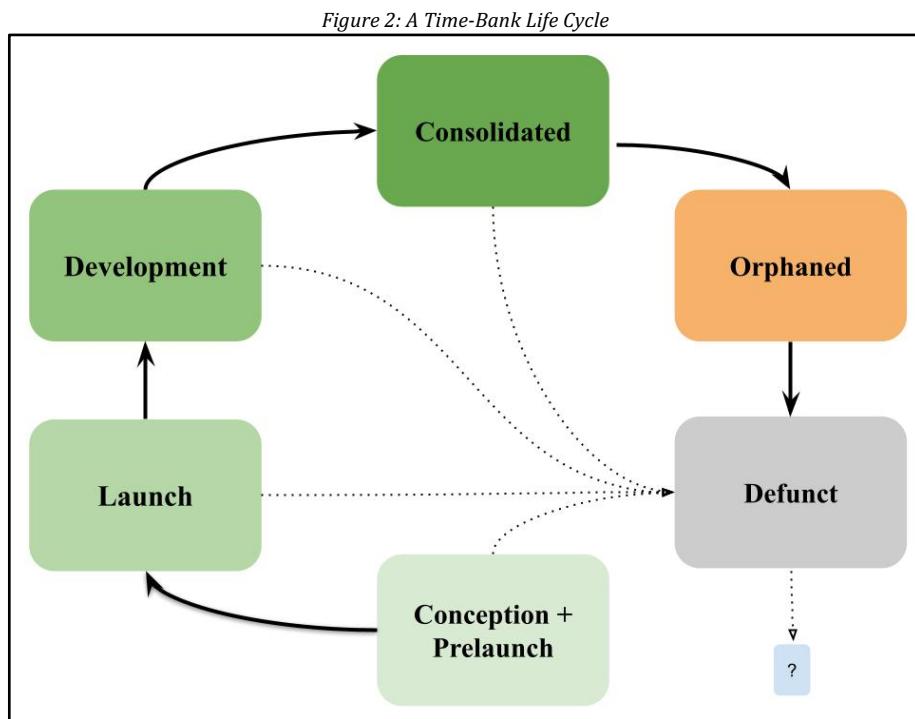
On the organizational level, approximately half were directly connected to (or “embedded within”) other organizations while the other half were stand-alone. Roughly a fourth had paid lead coordinators, with the rest relying only on volunteers, though this percentage fluctuated as time banks evolved. This proportion is slightly smaller than data reported by Collom et al. (2012), who found 38.3% of the US time banks they surveyed had paid coordinators. The difference may be due to our inclusion of a higher percentage of stand-alone and start-up time banks, both of which are less likely to hire paid coordinators.

The time banks we sampled also varied in their membership demographics. Four were Black-led and explicitly organized around the empowerment of low-income communities of color. One time bank primarily served working-class immigrants. Another had a large membership of international graduate students. The remaining time banks reflected varying degrees of racial and class diversity, albeit with a skew towards middle class, white, and older membership.

In total, we conducted over thirty semi-structured interviews with current and former founders and/or coordinators of twenty-three distinct time banks (See Appendix).³ We chose to focus on founders and coordinators because of the central role they play in time bank development and due to their unique ability to reflect on time banks' organizational dynamics and histories. A fuller study of impacts across time banks' lifespans would require engagement with a greater variety of time bank participants. In our interviews, we explored the origin, mission, history, organizational structure, membership, and practices of the time banks. We also inquired about our interviewees' roles as coordinators, their perspectives on success and longevity, and their experiences with organizational challenges and the time bank's shifting impacts over time. For those that had gone defunct, we solicited explanations of why that happened.

4. MODELING A TIME-BANK LIFE CYCLE

From this research, we identified six distinct stages of time bank development: Conception + Prelaunch, Launch, Active Development, Consolidation, Orphaned, and Defunct. Figure 2 diagrams these stages.



This framework is not intended to be either predictive or prescriptive; we are not telling time banks what they should be or become. Not all time banks go through each stage—going defunct is a possibility at any point—and those that do don't necessarily follow a linear trajectory. We instead propose the model as a heuristic and diagnostic tool for better understanding how the impacts and challenges of time banks vary over the course of their existence. In the following sections, we explore the individual stages in greater detail, identifying patterns from our interviews.

4.1 CONCEPTION/PRELAUNCH: SPARKING IMAGINATION THROUGH ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES

The Conception/Prelaunch period is the crucial initial stage when founder(s) begin to envision and research how to make a time bank work in their community. Since the focus is on planning for a time bank rather than actually executing one, material and social impacts are generally limited. The main impacts tend to be ideological in nature. Designing and developing a time bank and its associated mission can be profoundly consequential for the founding organizers and crucial for the time bank's future trajectory.

One major thread running throughout our case studies is that time banks typically begin with some form of system critique. While each of the studied time banks has its own origin story, they all began with observations about the failures of existing governmental, social, and market systems to meet community needs. Timebanking provided a framework for naming such failures and for making visible the abundance of untapped abilities residing within communities.

The founder of the Cooper River Hour Share, for instance, described being motivated in opposition to the hyperindividualism of market society. Having lived abroad in more communal settings, she felt attuned to the benefits that a more interdependent lifestyle can bring.

"I wanted community togetherness and I believe in interdependency... Right now we're going through a global economic stressor. A really strong productive timebanking program helps offset a lot of that. It's just a smarter way to go about an economic front, a social front, a psychological front... We're so independent, but that's to our detriment and not to our advantage... We're a weaker, more economically disadvantaged society when we try to be independently resilient."

For her, the timebanking framework provided conceptual tools that helped her make sense of social isolation in her communities. It also offered a path for cultivating resilient forms of interdependence.

For other time banks, the founding rationale responded more directly to material conditions. Many contemporary time banks trace their origins to the 2008 financial crisis and the economic hardship induced by that colossal failure of capitalist markets. Others fashioned their time bank in response to the everyday crises of marginalization within the racialized capitalist economy. One initiative, Dane County Time Bank, was founded to address disaffected youth falling through the cracks of the criminal justice system. The cofounder of another, the Time Trade Circle, described creating her time bank to enhance support systems for vulnerable community members who had grown demoralized by interactions with government service providers:

"I wanted to find something that would allow people a social network that they could access easily and you could give back. Many of the people we worked with were so disempowered. They were receiving services which left them feeling bad about themselves."

For her, timebanking promised an empowering alternative form of provisioning rooted in mutual aid. Similarly, the founder of the Kola Nut Time Bank in Chicago described founding the time bank to foster economic solidarity within his predominantly Black and low-income community, a community that had been buffeted by disinvestment and discrimination, and wherein "people's time is valued very differently." Rather than supplanting the conventional money economy, this time bank was designed to buttress individuals struggling to get by.

Alienation was a prominent theme in our interviews. The coordinator of the Walnut Hill Time Bank, for example, described being motivated by the generational divide within her low-income West Philadelphia community. She observed how elders and young people, both marginal to conventional labor markets, had grown alienated from one another.

"We found that our seniors were actually afraid of our youth, but when you talk to the youth, you find that they do have respect for seniors. They don't mind helping out with their trash. They don't mind assisting them going to the bank. But the fear is there because the youth have their pants down and their caps on them and however they speak."

The time bank was created to bridge such divides. Several other time banks trace their origins to crises of overwork and alienation experienced by (primarily women and femme) caregivers. For overloaded caregivers, the formal accounting structure of time banks provides recognition and reciprocity for care work that is otherwise undervalued and uncompensated. These are just a few examples showing some of the sorts of system critiques behind time bank formation.

The ideological impacts of time banks during the conception stage can be meaningful even if the time banks last a short time or never launch. Founders may feel encouraged to rethink the social implication and significance of economic activities. For example, the founder of the Toledo Time Bank, which lasted only a few months, described how the time bank's main impact "was that we discovered that people were generous beyond expectations." Similarly, the founder of another time bank that failed to launch described how the process taught her "to value people and their time and the gifts that they have."

While ideological dimensions loom larger in this stage, initiating a time bank does still have material and social consequences. As much as umbrella organizations such as TimeBanks.org and hOurworld have made it easier than ever to start a time bank, individuals on the ground still must do the research, make decisions about structure and software, and build up a set of norms for how the time bank will operate. Relationship-building is also crucial at this stage. Founders typically find themselves reaching out to prospective stakeholders and community partners, putting thoughts into action while accumulating and mobilizing social networks crucial for later stages.

We found that these early labors are generally performed out of personal dedication to the timebanking concept without any expectation of compensation. This drive can make the prelaunch stage a period of high passion and motivation. Nevertheless, the need for material resources and social connections in this stage is a source of vulnerability. Two major reasons why time banks failed to launch were inadequate team support and limited founder capacity. The founder of the Cooper River Time Bank describes this:

"Nobody really was the leader except for me, and it wasn't a time in my life where I could be the leader... Honestly I really wanted to pass the baton... I actually have to have a job job. And I actually just kind of got discouraged when

[the founder of another time bank] told me how much work and dedication was put into it. I'm like, I need someone else to run it. I can't do it!"

It takes work to make it to launch, and not all founders have the bandwidth to get there.

4.2 LAUNCH: IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Once time banks move beyond the initial planning and begin actively recruiting members, they enter what we refer to as the launch stage. Several interviewees characterized this as a dynamic period when the time bank design is tested in the community and new administrative processes are implemented. Accordingly, coordinators' work shifts to including more promotional activities, community outreach, and public education, as well as mundane tasks such as bookkeeping and website maintenance. The general aims in this period are to build out membership and operational capacity to levels where meaningful time exchanges can commence.

As time banks become reality, the nature and scope of their impacts change. Whereas the prelaunch stage ignites the imagination of founders, in the launching stage, founders seek to ignite the imagination of others. They seek to inspire community members with a model of economic provisioning and social interaction that few have encountered before. The founder of the Cowry Collective, for instance, expressed the importance of promotional labors early on, when the benefits remain largely abstract and participants must be recruited simply to get the initiative off the ground. Though membership is understandably low at the outset, enthusiasm and effort are typically quite high. Whether by organizing orientations, attending community events, or going door-to-door in neighborhoods, promoting a new time bank takes hustle. It helps to have a passionate and charismatic coordinator.

Successful timebanking also takes receptive community members. People join time banks for different reasons. Some join for explicitly ideological reasons, as the founder of Time Trade Circle described:

"There are a lot of people who just want to be members. They want to be supporting this movement of people who believe in alternative currencies or who believe in intentional communities...They want to be supporting a shared economy. They want to be supporting alternatives."

The idea of timebanking as a radical alternative to the conventional cash economy is an enticing message for some. For others, the social dimensions draw them in. A time bank in its launching phase can be a powerful banner that attracts like-minded individuals to socialize and exchange ideas. The interpersonal interactions that coordinators forge in their promotional activities have social impacts—they are reminders of what the Cowry Collective coordinator described as "the basics of connection and of life."

Still others join for more material reasons. We find clear examples of this in time banks that launched after the 2008 financial crisis, when the idea of receiving "free" services during a time of economic hardship was particularly appealing. It's worth noting, however, that people may join for the cashless services but end up experiencing social benefits. This social embeddedness differentiates timebanking as an alternative to conventional currencies and markets. Material benefits interweave with social and ideological elements to do more than merely tap into pre-existing communities. Rather, timebanking helps to constitute communities anew.

For many, the launching period is characterized by uncertainty and imbalance. As new members join and begin enjoying service exchanges, time banks' social and material benefits grow, but the scope of these benefits remains constrained by the limited exchange opportunities early on. When we examined hOurworld data we found that young time banks tend to devote a high percentage of exchanges—as high as 90%—to supporting the time bank itself. This is especially the case with stand-alone time banks that lack a paid coordinator and consequently rely heavily on "volunteers" who earn time credits by helping with time-bank operations. This imbalance reflects community support—people are giving their time to help the time bank launch. But the prevalence of bank-directed exchanges also implies that the material benefits of a launching time bank remain secondary to the social and ideological opportunities at this stage: the majority of the services exchanged are not actually going directly to members.

Additional kinds of imbalance can run time banks aground. Time banks require both giving and taking. With too little of one or the other, a time bank can flounder. Indeed, one-sidedness was a recurring source of difficulty among the time banks we interviewed. For some, getting people to offer services was the major challenge. Recruitment can

be exceedingly difficult if people do not want to give their time. The comments of the founder of River City Time Bank reflect this difficulty:

"Unfortunately, I think culturally timebanking is one of those things that's going to be a hard sell... I think people want to be served and not to serve. They don't want to have to do things for other people. People who have jobs and careers don't want to go home and do that job and career in their recreation time either, and so I think it's a hard sell in that regard."

When time is tight, contribution can feel difficult, even as needs increase. We might expect to find this pattern in a highly individualistic market society lacking a preexisting culture of interdependence and giving.

Our research also, however, revealed the reverse form of one-sidedness: people giving without taking. This pattern was especially pronounced in faith-based time banks operating within preexisting communities rooted in principles of charity. When, for example, the Toledo Time Exchange launched as a joint initiative of two separate faith communities, the founders discovered that members were resistant to the time bank idea because they did not like the idea of receiving return services from others. While generosity is typically considered a virtue, it can also present challenges.

"We found that people were generous and there were more than enough people that had skills or services that would be able to be lent to the time bank. In terms of people who wanted those services—that was challenging! People were generous, but they didn't want to be on the receiving end... more and more people didn't feel that it was right to receive something that they could have paid for or been given by somebody else."

This sentiment was echoed by the coordinator of Bridging the Bayous, a Catholic Charities time bank in Louisiana. Like the Toledo Time Exchange, this time bank did not advance past the launching phase. Despite the coordinator's best efforts to situate timebanking as a strategy for building social connection, the community did not embrace the idea: "They did not like that you had to give and expect something in return. They felt it was selfish," the coordinator recalled. Participants would consequently bank their credit hours rather than taking from others. The resulting one-sidedness led to the time bank's demise after only a few months.

Many mature time banks sustain imbalances through the creation of community accounts or through members' willingness to leave surplus time debits and credits unactivated. But a time bank requires a flow of time credits to remain operational. New time banks' tendency to face polarized forms of one-sidedness is symptomatic of a neoliberal society organized around individualist capitalist markets on the one hand and volunteerism on the other. In such contexts, charity provides a corrective to the excesses and shortcomings of capitalist markets. It is no wonder, then, that time banks would receive initial resistance both from overworked, self-centered community members and from faith communities anchored to charity models and accustomed to selfless giving in a world where everything else appears to be selfish competition. In such contexts, time banks present a paradigm outside familiar norms of interaction: they are neither charity nor conventional market. They entail horizontal forms of giving-AND-taking (not giving OR taking) that make interdependence visible in ways that charity and market transactions do not. Many time banks hope to expose and acclimate people to new understandings of economic life as a way to support new reciprocal modes of interaction (see Collom et al. 2012, 41). For launching time banks, this goal is both timebanking's challenge and its promise.

4.3 DEVELOPMENT: ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

If a time bank's launch generates sufficient membership size and organizational capacity to enable regular, free-flowing exchanges, the time bank enters what we term the development phase. Here, organizational priorities shift from simply recruiting members towards sustaining and improving the time bank. As the membership expands and diversifies, the supply and demand of services generally increases. This shift presumably better enables time banks to deliver on their specific missions with expanded social and material offerings. These organizational changes also open up different opportunities for ideological impact as members become habituated to non-capitalist modes of interaction.

The work of coordinators does not end when the time bank is launched, but the nature of the work typically shifts. Time banks must be maintained. The founder of Kola Nut emphasizes this point with a garden metaphor:

"If you take a handful of seed and you just kind of go out and spread it on a vacant lot. And you're like, 'Hey, I expected this idea to just grow if I threw it out there.' But that's not how it works. It's a garden you have to keep tending to, which is why you need a coordinator, because if you just set the platform up, and you get a few people in and you leave it alone, it will wither away very quickly."

In addition to ongoing recruitment, development generally entails practices such as matchmaking, organizing regular social events, cultivating partnerships with other organizations, maintaining data, and managing membership. For embedded time banks, support from the overarching organization can ease challenges commonly faced in the prelaunch stage. For stand-alone time banks such as Kola Nut, building partnerships with other organizations and initiatives helps widen the perspective to situate timebanking as only one part of a larger solidarity economy.

For embedded time banks, these coordinating labors can help stabilize the time bank's status within the encompassing organization while also building support for larger institutional objectives. Though mundane, this sort of member management has significant ideological implications. Timebanking's most radical element is arguably its revaluation of labor time. By valuing everyone's time equally, time banks have the potential to empower people marginalized by the market economy. When member participation rates are low, however, experiencing this sort of empowerment first hand is difficult. Our interviews are replete with observations of people enthusiastically joining a time bank but failing to participate. As the Phoenixville Area Time Bank coordinator put it, "You need a core group of people who are excited and want to keep going." Without input from enthusiastic members, responsibility to stimulate member participation and ensure the time bank remains vibrant falls heavily on coordinators.

Expanded participation increases opportunities to transform understandings of self and community. For instance, during a regular potluck meeting of the now-defunct Media Time Bank, one elderly member described feeling reluctant to submit requests because she had no outstanding skills to provide in return. She was surprised by the response from the time bank's younger members, who found her sewing and cooking skills extremely valuable. We frequently heard such stories of discovery in which time bank participants learn to see, sometimes for the first time, both their own abilities and those of others. The coordinator of the Onion River time bank explains this transformation well:

"People discovered skills that somebody else has. They might have known the person, but they had no idea that they could do this or that or something else. And that's why timebanking helps to build the community. It helps build the knowledge of what each of us can do, or loves to do."

Through these processes, individuals not only learn about their community but also develop new understandings of self, cultivating new forms of economic subjectivity in the process.

In addition to such subjective transformations, time banks during their development phase can be effective at socializing members into non-capitalist modes of interaction with one another. Even among time bank members, the competitive capitalist paradigm can be hard to shake. Participants sometimes bring a capitalist mindset into their timebanking practices. As discussed previously, it is not uncommon for time bank members to "hoard" time credits like one would save money. We also heard of efforts to incorporate a rating system for services received. As the coordinator of the Southern Oregon time bank puts it, "although we were using hours, the consciousness was still modeled on dollars." The Onion River coordinator echoes this, "One of the main challenges...is that we have to think in new ways, the paradigm shift from the money economy to the time banking economy."

In the face of this incongruence, several coordinators described how participants must learn non-capitalist modes of being. The founder of Dane County, for example, characterized timebanking as a unique opportunity "to make things happen that [otherwise] wouldn't." Timebanking, she suggested, can effect a shift in mindset from scarcity to abundance. We saw this exemplified in an account by the Onion River coordinator about how timebanking transformed his thinking about debt.

"I had some things I wanted people to work with me on and then I just didn't have the hours to pay for it. You didn't want to go into the minus; you didn't want to go into the red. In the meantime, I've learned that if I'm in the red, it's not in the red as you think about it in the monetary economy. It means that I have received more help from the

community than I have given at the moment. In other words, it's like they've given me a hug. They've shown me love and I should not be afraid of being in the minus."

Rather than being a source of anxiety and a sign of individual failure, the meaning of debt in this instance is refigured as a source of social connection and an indication of community support. The Cowry Collective founder similarly described how timebanking can instill a form of communal joy that can serve as an antidote to capitalism's demoralizing consequences. In her words, timebanking can be "a fun experiment into what a utopia could be—in terms of how we get around capitalism... basically, in a way that's fun and joyful, and brings us together." These ideological transformations can occur throughout a time bank's evolution, but they appear particularly pronounced during the development stage as practices are being learned and social and material benefits are expanding.

4.4 CONSOLIDATED: LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS AND ORGANIZATIONAL ADAPTATION

Time banks cannot rely on the efforts of their founders forever. After some time, most time banks eventually grapple with a leadership change. As a time bank's leadership transfers away from its founders, it enters what we call the consolidation phase. This transition is often difficult. Indeed, many time banks succumb after the departure of charismatic founders. Yet our interviews show that this phase also presents opportunities to enhance community impacts by democratizing leadership and renewing the time bank mission.

Across many interviews, we noted a heavy emphasis on burnout, which can occur at various points but is often thrown into sharpest focus during the Consolidation phase. Multiple former coordinators explained that their decision to leave largely resulted from feeling exhausted by the seemingly endless labor that coordinating required. The account of the Orange County Time Bank coordinator reflects the sentiments we heard widely:

"I was so excited and putting so much time and energy into it...but when it became every weekend or both days on the weekend (because I DO work full-time on top of doing the time bank on the side), I got to a point [where], because I was doing so much just by myself and others didn't have the time or weren't able to, I hit a bit of a burnout where I just couldn't maintain keeping doing it on my own. I had to take a step back."

The hustle of sustaining a time bank takes a toll on coordinators. Labors that are invigorating in earlier stages when enthusiasm is high can later become a major weight. On this score, we saw various manifestations of the so-called "founder's syndrome," wherein too much dependence on a single leader and too little succession planning left time banks in a precarious situation. As one former coordinator of a now-defunct time bank recounts:

"I didn't start with the "kitchen cabinet" as they call it, which is like the whole team. I just loved this idea and took off with it. So I didn't have anyone really who was going to keep things running when I decided I wasn't going to do it. Or I couldn't / didn't have the capacity to do it... I really didn't run it like that."

Her vision of a radical economic organization propelled her to contribute years of organizational labor, but her failure to share the administrative burden meant that when she checked out, no one else had the institutional knowledge necessary to take the torch.

Our interviewees suggested that spreading responsibilities across a collaborative leadership team supports successful consolidation. The coordinator at Time Trade Circle, for instance, argued that a collaborative leadership group was key to their successful transition:

"There's a board and the board is a working board. On that board there's somebody who does orientations. It's her job to train other people to do orientations. Then those other people can do orientations. It's somebody's job to do member help... Each person has sort of an area of responsibility."

In overcoming transition challenges, consolidated time banks continue delivering material benefits to members. Such transitions can also introduce significant new social and ideological impacts, especially if the transition entails the democratization of governance. The spread of organizational responsibility can represent a novel form of investment in a time bank. "One definite change that I've seen is people are taking responsibility more about the organization," explained one member of the Hour Exchange Time Bank. "Quite a few people have stepped up and said, 'Okay, we didn't know things were changing that way. We want to get involved and we want to help.'" The leadership change at Hour Exchange stimulated collaboration among members; rather than viewing membership

as a casual commitment, members realized they had to put energy into its cultivation. This commitment induced a stronger sense of collective ownership over the time bank's success.

Leadership transfers also give time banks opportunities to pivot their organizational objectives to new directions. Dane County Time Bank, for instance, rebranded itself as the Flywheel Skill Share after the founder parted with the organization. Flywheel also adjusted its mission, adopting a less transactional and more radical abolitionist framework critical of racial capitalism. Rather than using timebanking as a restorative alternative within the youth criminal justice system as it had at the outset, it evolved to center empowering marginalized communities around common causes outside that system.

In sum, the consolidated stage brings potential shifts in the character of time bank impacts. Consolidated time banks extend their material impact through organizational continuity. By transferring leadership roles away from their charismatic founders, time banks can augment their ideological and social impact by becoming more democratic with a higher level of membership participation. When individuals feel that some other leader is responsible, they are more likely to view membership as casual, without associated responsibilities, whereas when individuals feel responsible for the success of an organization, they are more likely to contribute labor and step up when necessary. The prior work of socializing members into timebanking norms can have carryover effects that encourage a self-organizing ethos as more seasoned members provide support for new or less motivated participants.

4.5 ORPHANED: LEADERSHIP EXIT AND INDEPENDENT EXCHANGE

An unsuccessful leadership transition does not necessarily mean the time bank goes immediately defunct. Nor does it entail that the time bank ceases to have impacts. Time banks that no longer have an active coordinator but continue to harbor time-bank activity are in what we call the orphaned phase. During this phase, the time bank continues to exist in the sense that the communication networks and software remain intact, but there is no longer a coordinator actively facilitating exchanges or promoting the time bank.

Our findings suggest that time banks often become orphaned when they fail to consolidate after the departure of a burned-out key coordinator. But this is not the only occasion when orphaning happens. Sometimes, outside events shape the outcome. The Care Village time bank, for example, became orphaned shortly after it launched in 2019. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic undermined community outreach efforts and the coordinator eventually ceased actively promoting exchanges, even as the time bank's infrastructure remained intact. Regardless of the reason, when a time bank is orphaned, exchange activity generally declines and its material, social, and ideological impacts typically dwindle.

Despite decreased organizational capacity, exchanges often continue among existing members. As one time bank member described:

"The people that were already there and knowing who to ask, they were continuing. Last summer I did a wedding for somebody, because she knew me, and she knew that I had offered it through the time bank. For the new ones, it was hard because they didn't know where to start and who to ask."

Seasoned members do not necessarily need the initiative of coordinators to continue exchanging services with other members they know. Thanks to timebanking software, exchanges can take place without manual bookkeeping, at least for a while. And if a vibrant network of cooperation and mutualism has already been established, the formal coordination provided by the time bank may be redundant for some members. Indeed, some coordinators suggested that successful time banks might not need a coordinator. Pointing to her own burnout and recognizing that the health of her time bank was tightly tied to her involvement, one founder ruminated:

"I think a successful time bank would be one where the members end up kind of running things for themselves. There's still some aspect of coordination, I think that can come from a leadership team, but how could the energy that is needed to help keep a time bank being sustained just happen from the membership itself?"

Unlike in other phases of the Time Bank Life Cycle, when the potential for success is often tied to the efforts of the coordinator, the beneficial impacts of an orphaned time bank depend almost entirely upon the self-motivation of its members. In rare instances, the degeneration seemingly implied by the orphaned stage can occur simultaneously with regeneration as both membership and leadership structures are revitalized and re-imagined.⁴

Nevertheless, time credit exchange during the orphaned phase generally only happens among seasoned members. For newer members, the lack of coordinators makes integration into the network nearly impossible. In addition, although time credit exchanges are primarily coordinated through software, having no moderator for the time bank website means that service requests and offers easily become outdated and unreflective of the actual member base. This inconsistency negatively affects the experience of active members and their willingness to engage.

4.6 DEFUNCT: AFTERLIFE AND ONGOING IMPACT

When time bank members cease exchanging time credits, the time bank enters the defunct stage of its life cycle. A time bank does not need to progress through all the previously mentioned phases to reach the defunct stage; we have encountered examples of time banks going defunct at various points in their development.

Our interviewees nevertheless made it clear that many time banks go defunct due to the burnout of coordinators followed by unsuccessful consolidation. Without a transition strategy, consolidation is hard. What might start out as a temporary orphaning period as the coordinator withdraws can quickly develop into a pathway to permanent closure. The experience of Media Time Bank exemplifies this. After its founding coordinator left, the Media Time Bank struggled to recruit a new team of coordinators. The search for a new leadership team lasted too long. During the prolonged orphaned state, “everybody kind of forgot about the Time Bank because when they try to look for something, all the offers and requests, they expired... Because a year has passed, everything disappeared.” Without the coordinator’s matchmaking and recruitment efforts, the time bank’s platform became outdated and undersupplied with time offers. Lacking the ability to sustain some minimum level of activity during the orphaned period, the time bank died out altogether.

In many instances, going defunct is experienced as a loss. The lack of documented exchange between members may indicate that a defunct time bank no longer has a material impact, while not having a formal organizational structure may seriously limit its capacity to mobilize the community. Yet crucially, we suggest that being defunct is not necessarily the same as failure. If success is tied to impact, then time banks can, in some circumstances, continue to succeed long after they have ceased to formally exist. Many former coordinators agree. While a defunct time bank no longer records time credit exchanges, its former members may still exchange services independently. In some instances, going defunct might even be an indication of success, suggesting the time bank has helped achieve its aim of fostering robust community engagement more generally. Asked to speak about the potential for success in timebanking, the founder of Kola Nut time bank offered up the Cowry Collective as an example:

“What I tell folks about the experience of Cowry Collective is that even though that timebank wound down, the connections and relationships that were made inside of that time bank continue to form in themselves, and in things like solidarity economy St. Louis, you know, and other community endeavors that are happening out that way.”

He saw the success of Cowry Collective as ultimately tied not to its continuing existence but rather to the enduring relationships it initiated and to the further economic experimentation in economic solidarity it inspired, asking us to complicate our understanding of failure. The Cowry founder herself echoed these sentiments:

“I visited one of my friends in her apartment, maybe it was last year. She put out a sign-up list of offers that people could do and exchanges they could set up on their own, and she didn’t even mention it [to me]... So it was kind of neat to see how something that she had learned of through me and the time bank, she was trying to replicate on a smaller level just by trying to get to know her neighbors in an apartment complex.”

As an impetus for social and economic change, the Cowry Collective was successful far beyond the lifespan of its formal exchanges. Throughout its life cycle, the time bank forged communities, incubated friendships, and inspired creative new actions. Some time banks are even more directly involved in launching other community initiatives that outlive the time bank itself. The now defunct Media Time Bank, for instance, helped to nurture several community initiatives that outlived its own existence, including a free store and a mutual aid group among acquainted former time bank members. By seeding other organizations, a defunct time bank can still make a material and social impact, not unlike the way the decomposition of organisms gives life to others in a healthy ecosystem.

Here, the notion of success of a time bank is again broadened. Ultimately, time banks are one of many tools community organizers use to promote solidarity and mobilize resources. Of course, in some contexts, we see timebanks go defunct due to a failure to respond to myriad challenges of ongoing existence. Yet, in others, going defunct can be an indication that the time bank has realized its principal objectives. The founder of the now-defunct Walnut Hill Time Bank hints at this outcome when reflecting on her time bank's social and ideological impacts:

"The outcomes that we get from the time bank I think are countless and I think it affects people's lives, the people in this community and other communities. It's such a personal and positive effect... I think you can change people's lives in a year and if it fades out, that's okay."

Even more radically, some even consider the most successful time banks to be the ones that no longer need to exist—the ones that have succeeded in building a strong community with a strong sense of solidarity and mutual assistance. As the coordinator of the Riverside Time Bank puts it, "In some ways, I guess it's just you want people to do it without really even having to record it, where they're just offering to help each other... the vision or mission of the time bank is just to get people helping each other." The founder of the Cooper River Time Bank shared similar sentiments. Even though her initiative never publicly launched, she says it transformed her thinking. "I just enjoyed learning about it. I enjoyed just knowing there's a better way to live. I feel like as a society we're one of the worst with how we think about what success looks like. So I like knowing that there's a different version of success."

5. CONCLUSION

There is a tendency within mainstream political economic discourse to associate success with longevity. From such a perspective, noncapitalist economic initiatives such as time banks that might be relatively short-lived are readily discounted as implausible alternatives to conventional capitalist institutions. We, by contrast, have argued that time banks should be approached as dynamic institutions that evolve over time and have varying impacts at different stages of their development. We cannot fully appreciate their potential or the various challenges they face without understanding such developmental phases in context.

We have modeled a time bank life cycle to address this gap. The idea of an organizational life cycle reinforces that organizations are by their very nature finite, with beginnings, endings, and stages in between, all requiring analysis. Adopting a life-cycle lens helps shift the focus away from seeing endings as failures and longer life as inherently better. A life-cycle lens also invites reconsideration of what success means and how it might vary across different stages of an organization's development, challenging underlying presumptions. Examining time banks at various stages provides valuable insights into their nature and their capabilities.

Ideologically, we have revealed qualitative differences in time banks' transformational potential, contingent on coordinators' roles during the different stages and whether they are conceiving the idea, spreading the word, or habituating members to noncapitalist routines in later stages of their time bank's development. We also saw that time banks' material costs and benefits shift in both quantitative (i.e., how many exchanges are happening) and qualitative (i.e., what sorts of exchanges are happening) ways across the different stages of development. The social impacts also shift as time banks move from the exhilarating periods of conceptualization and launch to more routinized forms of social interaction in the later stages, and ultimately to the consolidation and dormancy of the initiative.

Attempts to further develop the time bank lifecycle and associated understandings of success and failure would be well served to collect qualitative evidence from a wider diversity of time bank practitioners, with a particular emphasis on non-leader participants. While focusing our data collection on leaders enabled our team to get a deeper look at the organizational priorities and challenges at different stages in our proposed lifecycle, furthering these ideas requires developing our collective understanding of how participants experience these visions and practices of coordinators.

Of course, no time bank lasts forever. Some fail to achieve even basic degrees of functionality and others fail to realize the vision of the founder(s). But by interrogating the nature of dormancy, we have also shown how even time banks that are orphaned and defunct can have enduring transformational impacts. Indeed, some practitioners even measure success by how vibrant the community is independent of the time bank's existence—a successful time bank may be one that has made itself redundant.

We see our findings as powerfully useful for time bank practitioners, who can reference a life-cycle framework that can help them anticipate challenges and plan for the future. While the life-cycle framework developed here is idiosyncratic to time banks, we also see the implications of this study as valuable for other sectors and economic forms. Making noncapitalist endeavors and their stages visible can embolden people to imagine and enact alternatives.

Furthermore, shifting the paradigms of success in these ways can alter how we evaluate the marginality of economic alternatives within prevailing capitalocentric discourse, which tends to represent capitalist institutions as the only viable form of economic provisioning even as diverse noncapitalist economic practices pervade day-to-day life (Fisher 2009; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). A double standard underlies such capitalist realism. Whereas the rapid rise and collapse of capitalist firms is regarded as a normal aspect of competitive markets—a reflection of the creative destruction that gives capitalism its vitality—for noncapitalist economic initiatives such as time banks, being short-lived is taken as an indication of failure and as a basis for further discounting the very pursuit of economic alternatives. In this light, shifting focus away from longevity and towards different developmental stages can illuminate meaningful and radical ways that alternative economy initiatives impact people's lives even beyond their physical presence. This more layered approach can help diversify the repertoire of emancipatory economic action while enhancing appreciation of what Zanoni et al. (2017) describe as "post-capitalist politics in the making."

We wish to conclude with the words of the founder of the Onion River time bank.

"I've been on call with other time bank coordinators about exactly this question: 'What is a successful Time Bank?' ... And the main thing we can come up with is that there is a living community. That people are doing things with each other. That they're working together, supporting each other. Essentially, a form of mutual, and underline the word mutual, aid. We help each other."

If time banks, like so many other alternative economy initiatives, are tools to improve community life, then it seems that success should be measured not by the long life of time banks but by the improvements to community life they have made possible.

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APPENDIX: TIME BANK CASE STUDIES

NAME	Location	Years active	Size*	Status at time of interview(s)
Archcare Time Bank	New York, NY	2006-	Large	Consolidated
Arroyo SECO Network of Timebanks	Los Angeles, CA	2008-	Medium	Consolidated
Bridging the Bayous (Catholic Charities Time Bank)	Houma, LA	2016-2018	Very Small	Defunct
Care Village Community Exchange	Carlsbad, CA	2019-	Very Small	Orphaned
Cooper River Hour Share	Collingswood, NJ	2013-2013	Very Small	Defunct
Cowry Collective	St. Louis, MO	2009-2018	Small	Defunct
Flywheel Skill Share (Dane County Time Bank)	Madison, WI	2005-	Large	Developing/Consolidated
Hour Exchange Portland	Portland, ME	1997-	Medium	Consolidated
Kola Nut	Chicago, IL	2018-	Small	Launching/Developing
Media Time Bank	Media, PA	2011-2019	Medium	Consolidated/Orphaned
Neighbor2Neighbor (Community Exchange)	Allentown, PA	1999-	Medium	Consolidated
Onion River Exchange	Montpelier, VT	2008-	Medium	Consolidated
Orange County Time Bank	Long Beach, CA	2011-	Medium	Defunct
Phoenixville Area Time Bank	Phoenixville, PA	2004-	Small	Consolidated
River City Time Exchange	Evansville, IN	2014-2014	Very Small	Defunct
Riverside Time Bank	Riverside, CA	2015-	Small	Defunct
Silver City Gospel Mission Time Bank	Silver City, NM	2016-2017	Very Small	Defunct
Southern Oregon Time Co-op	Ashland, OR	2010-	Medium	Consolidated
Time Trade Circle	Cambridge, MA	2005-	Large	Consolidated

Toledo Time Exchange	Toledo, OH	2013-2014	Very Small	Defunct
Unity in Our Community Time Bank	Detroit, MI	2010-	Large	Consolidated
Valley Time Trade	Northampton, MA	2002-	Medium	Consolidated
Walnut Hill Time Bank	Philadelphia, PA	2007-2015	Small	Orphaned/Defunct

* Very Small=fewer than 20 members; Small=20-200 members; Medium=200-1000 members; Large=above 1000 members

ENDNOTES

¹ The idea that time banks have distinct life cycles was introduced to us by Terry Daniels, cofounder of hOurworld, who suggested that time banks go through developmental stages defined by the shifting responsibilities of coordinators.

² More skeptical analysts contend that time banks are more symbolic than substantive and that they shore up capitalism's excesses by reproducing neoliberal articulations of self-help as an alternative to the welfare state (Dittmer, 2013; Valor and Papaoikonomou, 2016).

³ Interview protocols received Human Subjects approval through Haverford College's institutional review board. All interviewees completed consent forms.

⁴ Bretos et al. (2020) observe similar patterns in the life cycle of cooperative organizations.