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Distributed Prefiguration in Action: Tensions between Future Projections and Projectification in Translocal Networks of Community-Led Initiatives

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores distributed prefiguration within translocal networks of community-led initiatives. As a particular form of prefigurative politics, distributed prefiguration unfolds across interconnected local contexts. Despite their relevance to many social movements, the organisational processes that enable distributed production of alternative imaginaries remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, we present a comparative case study of three translocal networks of community-led initiatives, focusing on tensions between their future projections and the logic of projectification imposed by funding mechanisms, particularly European Union grants. We investigate two questions: How are distributed prefigurative initiatives' future projections affected by organisational requirements of projectification? And, how do distributed prefigurative initiatives navigate tensions between future projections and projectification through their funding strategies? Our research draws on 28 semi-structured interviews and participant observation within three major European networks: the Transition Network, the Global Ecovillage Network – Europe, and RIPESS-Europe, the European hub of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy. We identify direct and indirect tensions emerging in these networks and strategies used to address them. Findings reveal a paradox: while projectification can constrain distributed prefigurative initiatives' imaginative hyperprojectivity, it may simultaneously foster connections that enable new forms of projective imagination to emerge.

KEYWORDS: community-led initiatives, hyperprojectivity, prefigurative politics, projectification, translocal networks

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1. Introduction

Citizen- and community-led initiatives play a key role in imagining and building alternative ways of living and relating (D'Alisa, Forno and Maurano 2015; Silva 2023; Yates et al. 2024). Prefigurative politics means doing precisely that. As a concept, it claims that societal transformations towards more just and sustainable futures require us to 'prefigure' in the present the type of world we would like to live in (Monticelli 2022; Yates 2015; Raekstad and Gradin 2020). This inevitably involves an orientation to the future which shapes the actions of prefigurative initiatives (Creasap 2021).

While research on social movements and grassroots governance increasingly focuses on prefigurative politics (Rebelo, Malafaia and Fernandes-Jesus 2025; Zaimakis 2018; Kotyk 2020; Nelson 2026), existing studies have mainly examined 'situated' – i.e., locally grounded – forms of prefiguration, often overlooking the multiple and dynamic relationships beyond and across localised spaces of prefiguration, which have been referred to as 'distributed' prefiguration (Chertkovskaya, Hasselbalch and Stripple 2023; Saglietti, Brabant and Holmén 2026). Such distributed forms have the potential to challenge the status quo as they become assembled over wider spaces, encourage networking and collaboration, and make prefigurative arrangements more resilient (Chertkovskaya et al. 2023). Despite this practical relevance (Ciordia and Perego 2024), the concept has only recently been developed and remains theoretically and empirically understudied.

In this study, we focus on organisations that represent translocal networks of community-led initiatives (TNCLIs) in the European context as examples of social movement organisations engaged in distributed prefigurative politics. Community-led initiatives (CLIs) are defined as "self-organised initiatives of people working together towards some defined set of environmental and/or social goals, and most identify themselves

with defined localities or communities of place" (Henfrey et al. 2022, 211). They seek to empower citizens to collectively imagine desirable futures and put them into practice in their specific local context, thereby building a basis for local transformative change (Hausmann and Schwab 2025; Wittmayer et al. 2019; Silva 2023). Over the past three decades, many CLIs have formed translocal network organisations to better connect like-minded initiatives around the world (Penha-Lopes and Henfrey 2019). These networks have helped to define common visions for the future (e.g., narratives, goals, and strategies) of CLIs and communicate them to the wider society (Avelino et al. 2020).

So far, research on imaginaries of the future and prefigurative politics tends to focus on the content of the imaginaries produced by social movements and their transformational potential (Durham 2024; Moore and Milkoreit 2020; Soler-i-Martí, Fernández-Planells and Pérez-Altable 2024) but rarely looks at the organisational processes that produce such imaginaries and how they are in tension with practical constraints, such as the need to secure financial stability. On the one hand, radical imaginaries of possible futures are perceived as vital elements of CLIs and their networks (Wittmayer et al. 2019; Silva 2023) and defining elements of prefigurative politics (Habersang 2022; Komporozos-Athanasiou and Bottici 2022). On the other hand, to obtain funding and build a structure to support CLIs at a distributed level, organisations representing TNCLIs in Europe are faced with pressures for projectification. They are pushed to adapt their ways of organising to a 'project logic' based on limiting operations to pre-defined tasks, objectives, timelines, available resources, and performance evaluation criteria set by funders (Büttner and Leopold 2016).

We argue that this tendency towards projectification in the organisational structure of CLI networks – and the adaptive pressures it generates in relation to funding institutions – may enclose the practices of distributed commoning through which translocal networks reproduce shared imaginaries, knowledge infrastructures, organisational capacities, and collective identities. One consequence of this enclosure is the restriction of 'projectivity', understood as the imaginative process through which collective actors generate future projections that orient action (Mische 2009). More specifically, this process may threaten the cosmolocal (Schismenos, Niaros and Lemos 2020) and commons-based (Bauwens and Kostakis 2014; Kostakis, Niaros and Giotitsas 2015) architecture of TNCLIs by enclosing time, resources and imagination within short-term, funder-defined formats, thereby weakening the open-ended processes of commoning that sustain distributed prefiguration.

The main objective of this study is to explore these tensions within TNCLIs. Thus, we address the following research questions: How are distributed prefigurative initiatives' future projections affected by organisational requirements of projectification? And, how do distributed prefigurative initiatives navigate tensions between future projections and projectification through their funding strategies? We approach these research questions with a qualitative multiple-case study on the organisations that represent three major TNCLIs in Europe: 1) The Transition Network; 2) The Global Ecovillage Network – Europe (GEN-Europe); and 3) The European hub of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (RIPESS-Europe). We analysed 28 semi-structured interviews with key actors from these three networks combined with participant observation notes of several events and meetings. We demonstrate how each of these networks describes its future projections and funding choices and outline some of the consequences of the strategies adopted to face this tension.

Thereby, this study contributes to the literatures on prefigurative politics, imagination, CLIs, commons, cosmolocalism and projectification in two ways. First, it contributes to a better theoretical understanding of distributed prefiguration by conceptualising TNCLIs as commons-based and cosmolocal governance actors that produce shared imaginaries, methodologies and organisational repertoires across scales. Second, it provides empirical evidence on these tensions as a crucial element of distributed prefigurative organising. In doing so, it shows how projectification may threaten not only radical imaginaries, but also the commons-based infrastructures, temporalities, and practices through which TNCLIs sustain distributed prefiguration.

2. Theoretical framework: prefigurative politics, hyperprojectivity, and projectification

2.1 Prefigurative politics and the imagination of possible futures

Prefigurative politics refers to the "deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now" (Raekstad and Gradin 2020, 10). It is thus a form of resisting incumbent institutions and social structures as well as hegemonic norms, values, and narratives by developing alternative future visions (Yates 2015). In other words, prefiguration is a way of creating "alternative worlds" (Escobar 2022, xxiv) – other ways of being, knowing and doing.

Its emphasis is set on direct action, social relations, and decision-making processes (Habersang 2022). By putting alternatives into practice in the 'here-and-now', political 'means' (i.e., ways to achieve the goals) become political 'ends' (i.e., goals), expressed through 'alternative' social arrangements or institutions (Habersang 2022; Raekstad and Gradin 2020; Yates 2015). As proposed by Yates (2015), it tends to involve five main processes: 1) collective experimentation; 2) the imagining, production and circulation of political meanings; 3) the creation of new and future-oriented social norms; 4) their consolidation in movement infrastructure; and 5) diffusion and contamination of ideas, messages and goals to wider networks and constituencies.

Imagination plays an essential role in all these processes, guiding what and how experimentation of alternatives is conducted and what visions of the future are being created and diffused. This process of imagining has a dual function. On the one hand, it is a way of making sense of present societal realities (Komporozos-Athanasiou and Bottici 2022). On the other hand, it emerges as an emancipatory tool for resisting the present while envisioning alternative futures (Monticelli 2022). Prefigurative politics tends to emphasise future-oriented action (Creasap 2021) with prefigurative initiatives often committed to ensuring their future political relevance (Yates 2015). As such, what is done in the present is heavily shaped by 'future projections', i.e., the content of the alternative futures that influence the action of prefigurative initiatives based on beliefs and expectations of the future (Mische 2009). These projections are created in collective 'processes of projectivity', in which "categories of thought and action may be put together in new ways through a process of imaginative experimentation with projected courses of action" (Mische 2009, 698). Projectivity requires practical engagement with future possibilities and is best seen as a multidimensional concept involving cognitive dimensions, action orientations, and modes (Mische 2014).

Sites such as community forums, assemblies, and planning sessions can work as 'sites of hyperprojectivity', i.e., "arenas of heightened, future-oriented public debate about contending futures, such as those taking place in communities, social movements, and policy arenas" (Mische 2014, 438). These are communicative settings that allow reflective thought about the future in which "the explicit purpose of talk is to locate problems, visualize alternative pathways, and consider their consequences and desirability" (Mische 2014, 447). In this article, we see TNCLIs as sites of hyperprojectivity, using the term to refer to these initiatives' orientation to the future and the arenas they create to discuss and build alternative futures.

The tension between the futures that prefigurative initiatives project and what they are able to materialise in practice is not new in the literature. For example, Maeckelbergh (2011) shows that prefiguration can be seen as a strategic practice in itself, in which ideals of horizontality, diversity, and alternative democratic organising constantly need to be aligned to practical constraints and are thus continuously renegotiated. Chatterton and Pusey (2020, 27) locate this tension within a postcapitalist praxis organised across three terrains: "creating commons against enclosure, socially useful production that counters commodification, and joyful doing that negates alienated work". Others have examined how such tensions play out in engagement with institutions and in the everyday experience of participants. For instance, Levkoe and Wilson (2019) show that policy

engagement can itself be prefigurative, but that movements need to adapt to existing frameworks, language, and consultation formats designed by the state, which limits more radical or visionary politics. If such adaptation does not occur, relationships with other actors – such as local authorities – can be strained, limiting the potential to put future projections into practice (Bruehwiler et al. 2025; Hausmann, Stirling and Schwab 2026). Feola (2025) argues that deconstructive processes such as refusal and unlearning may be preconditional for prefiguration's liberating and protective functions. Related work shows that alignment between projections and practice cannot always be assumed, and that its pursuit generates ambivalent effects for those who carry it (Spanier, Guerrero Lara and Feola 2024; Raj, Feola and Velicu 2026).

We build on this work by specifying one tension in particular. Rather than asking generally how prefigurative aims become compromised in practice, we examine the relationship between projectification as an organising logic and hyperprojectivity as the collective capacity to imagine and debate alternative futures. This tension is distinctive because the arenas in which future projections are produced – gatherings, assemblies and trainings – are themselves resourced through project funding at the distributed level. What is at stake is therefore not only whether prefigurative initiatives can realise their projections, but whether they can sustain the conditions under which such projections are collectively generated at all.

2.2 Prefigurative organising at the distributed level

Recently, it has been proposed that prefiguration is best seen as a continuum of situated (i.e., locally grounded) and distributed (i.e., spatially dispersed) practices (Chertkovskaya et al. 2023). Saglietti et al. (2026) have since worked with the concept in the degrowth movement, showing that dispersed initiatives may be held together by shared imaginaries and metaphors of change as much as by organisational ties. Transition Towns, ecovillages, and solidarity economy initiatives exemplify the continuum of situated and distributed prefiguration. While local Transition initiatives are a clear example of situated prefigurative politics, TNCLIs bring elements of distributed prefiguration that are important to recognise and examine, as they allow a wider range of connections between actors in distinct territories.

Importantly, this continuum makes a distinction that goes beyond scale, and to describe the distributed level as simply larger would suggest that it does more of what situated initiatives already do, only across a wider territory. Critical work on scaling has questioned this assumption, noting that increasing impact does not necessarily involve moving to a higher level or covering a greater area (Tsing 2012; Lam et al. 2020; Pfotenhauer et al. 2022). Instead, research on translocal networks has documented how infrastructures and resources – such as narratives, methodologies and governance repertoires – are produced and maintained at the network level. This includes findings that shared narratives create a sense of identity and belonging across dispersed initiatives (Kunze and Avelino 2015; Wittmayer et al. 2019; Avelino et al. 2020), that intermediary organisations build the knowledge infrastructures through which methods and guidance circulate (Hargreaves et al. 2013; Roysen et al. 2024), and that new models of organisation and governance are themselves a form of social innovation (Pel et al. 2020). Distributed prefiguration is therefore best understood as prefigurative practice directed at the conditions of translocal cooperation and organisation itself, rather than as the geographical extension of situated practices.

This claim situates our argument in relation to research on how community-led initiatives generate wider impact. For example, studies on the diffusion of grassroots innovation have examined how local experiments have an impact through replication, scaling-up and translation (Seyfang and Longhurst 2016; Smith et al. 2016b), while other work has refined this picture by distinguishing multiple amplification processes (Lam et al. 2020) and by foregrounding the symbolic and cognitive influence of grassroots initiatives (Roysen et al. 2024). These literatures approach the translocal level primarily as a channel through which locally generated innovations travel further, adapt, or gain institutional recognition, and their guiding question is how far and

how effectively something spreads. In contrast, the concept of distributed prefiguration follows the prefigurative concern with the alignment of means and ends (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). It asks whether the organising through which coordination is achieved is itself consistent with the futures being projected. A network may circulate knowledge effectively while organising that circulation in ways that contradict the values it circulates.

This resonates with the typology developed by Laamanen, Forno and Wahlen (2023). Alongside scaling deep, up, and out, they identify scaling through institutions as an underexamined strategy, and they problematise the aversion of prefigurative politics towards institutional engagement. Two of their categories are particularly relevant here. Scaling deep concerns changes in values, beliefs and relationships, and depends on learning communities sustained over time. Scaling through concerns the negotiation of relationships with public institutions and their funding instruments. We argue that these operate in tension with one another at the distributed level, since the funding relationships through which translocal coordination is resourced may erode the relational and temporal conditions on which value-oriented work depends.

In this sense, the concept of 'assemblage' offers an analytical lens to examine this situated-distributed continuum (Chertkovskaya et al. 2023; Rodríguez-Giralt, Marrero-Guillamón and Milstein 2018; McFarlane 2009). It highlights that translocal networks comprise place-based initiatives and multiple actors who enter the translocal 'space' to exchange their resources, ideas, practices, and imaginaries. As assemblages, translocal networks are more than the sum of initiatives, and both individual and collective members of the network have their own agency (McFarlane 2009). This perspective allows a focus on the relations between entities and how they are organised in order to produce prefigurative effects, which – as Chertkovskaya et al. (2023) note – incumbent actors may always resist by co-opting or undermining prefigurative initiatives.

Understanding TNCLIs as assemblages also brings into view three organisational features that distinguish distributed from situated prefiguration in practice. The first concerns representation. Organisations operating at the distributed level speak for a network without exercising authority over it, which raises recurring questions about who is entitled to articulate its vision. Prefigurative organising has long treated representative structures with suspicion, on the grounds that they remove decision-making from those who must live with its consequences (Maeckelbergh 2011; Teivainen 2016), and movement heterogeneity has been shown to build tension within translocal networks rather than only between them and their environment (Laamanen et al. 2023).

The second concerns resource dependency. Sustaining translocal coordination requires paid staff and continuity between encounters, and therefore exposes the distributed level to external funders in ways that situated initiatives, drawing largely on voluntary work (Seyfang and Smith 2007), can often avoid. Intermediary organisations depend on funding and grants to circulate knowledge across networks (Hargreaves et al. 2013; Roysen et al. 2024), which places them in continuous negotiation with funders whose agendas shape what can be done and sustained over time (Kohl-Arenas 2014; Smith et al. 2016b).

The third concerns temporality. Situated prefiguration unfolds in the open-ended rhythms of everyday practice, whereas distributed prefiguration is organised around episodic encounters such as gatherings, assemblies and collaborative projects, which function as arenas in which shared knowledge, identities and capacities are reproduced (Haug 2013; Kunze and Avelino 2015). We suggest that this episodic structure makes the distributed level unusually compatible with project-based funding, since projects and gatherings share a bounded temporal form defined by fixed timelines and expected outputs (Büttner and Leopold 2016).

These features also clarify how distributed prefiguration relates to adjacent concepts. Transnationalism describes the crossing of national borders, whereas what matters analytically here is dispersion and network coordination, which may also occur within a single country (Avelino et al. 2020). Multi-level governance presupposes nested jurisdictions and formal authority between levels, whereas the relations we examine are polycentric and the distributed organisation holds no authority over situated initiatives, which is why we work

with assemblage rather than level (McFarlane 2009). Cosmolocalism, discussed below, specifies an architecture in which knowledge circulates translocally while implementation remains local (Bauwens and Kostakis 2014); distributed prefiguration is compatible with that architecture but asks whether the practices sustaining such circulation themselves embody the futures being projected. Finally, prefigurative organising involves struggles that are faced internally – related to the heterogeneity of actors – and externally, because of the embeddedness in and dependency on a contested economic system, which makes it difficult to reproduce and maintain core alternative values (Schiller-Merkens 2024).

2.3 Commoning, cosmolocalism, and their role in distributed prefiguration

The concept of cosmolocalism helps specify how distributed prefiguration functions organisationally. Cosmolocalism refers to arrangements in which knowledge, designs, protocols and know-how circulate globally or translocally as commons, while implementation remains locally grounded and adapted to situated conditions (Bauwens and Kostakis 2014; Kostakis et al. 2015; Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis 2019). Although the concept has often been associated with peer production and distributed manufacturing, its relevance is broader, particularly for TNCLIs.

Transition initiatives, ecovillages and solidarity economy organisations do not simply replicate a central model. Rather, they participate in translocal knowledge commons composed of narratives, principles, training materials, facilitation methods and practical experiences. These resources circulate across networks, but their meaning and effectiveness depend on local adaptation. Cosmolocalism therefore helps understand the organisational structure of distributed prefiguration: common resources are generated and maintained at the translocal level, while situated initiatives translate them into locally meaningful practices.

The literature on commons further deepens this perspective by shifting attention from commons as resources to commoning as practice (Linebaugh 2008; De Angelis 2017; Bollier and Helfrich 2019). Commoning refers to the ongoing practices through which people create, maintain, govern and defend shared resources. In TNCLIs, commoning includes producing shared narratives, organising assemblies and trainings, maintaining relationships of mutual learning and adapting methodologies to local contexts. This approach also helps distinguish different spatial scales of commoning: everyday practices of mutual aid, ecological stewardship and democratic decision-making at the local scale; the circulation of shared imaginaries, methods, tools and stories across networks at the translocal scale; and attempts to influence policy, secure funding and build alliances at the institutional scale.

From this perspective, the tension examined in this article is not simply between radical imaginaries and organisational constraints. It is also a collision between two governance logics. Commons governance tends to privilege polycentricity, subsidiarity, intrinsic motivation, relational accountability, open-ended experimentation and long time horizons (Ostrom 1990; Hess and Ostrom 2011; Bollier and Helfrich 2019). Project management, by contrast, tends to privilege centralised accountability, fixed deliverables, short funding cycles, measurable outputs and extrinsic evaluation criteria (Büttner and Leopold 2016). Projectification can therefore be understood as a process that risks enclosing the temporal, relational and imaginative conditions of commoning.

2.4 Projectification and the enclosure of distributed commoning

Projectification consists in the proliferation of projects as a way of organising work in different institutions (Fregolente et al. 2022). This organisational model is based on the restriction of operations to pre-defined tasks, goals, timelines, resources available, and some kind of performance evaluation criteria. In the EU, projectification has become a form of control to foster local policy implementation in accordance with the overall strategic aims of EU policy-making (Büttner and Leopold 2016), which directly affects TNCLIs that

rely on EU grants. Because of the complexity of its technicalities – specific standards, regulations, practical conventions and particular rhetoric – the applications and implementation of EU-funded projects require a professionalisation that restricts access to actors who can adapt and reproduce these managerial standards (Büttner and Leopold 2016).

Some of the already identified negative consequences for organisations that became dependent on this type of funding are: the continuous application for funded projects in order to maintain staff while adding little value regarding the long-term effects of the projects (Andersson and Wickelgren 2009), the instability and precarity of the jobs created (Büttner and Leopold 2016), and the risks to the health and wellbeing of employees because of its severe demands (Lindgren, Packendorff and Sergi 2014).

However, projectification should not be understood solely as a process of bureaucratisation, managerial control, or the enclosure of grassroots initiatives. While projects can impose temporal constraints, reporting requirements, and external accountability mechanisms on civil society actors, they may also function as enabling infrastructures for collective action and innovation (Fred and Godenhjelm 2023; Fressoli et al. 2014). Within grassroots movements, project-based arrangements can create opportunities for actors to mobilise resources, coordinate activities across geographical scales, and develop shared learning processes that would otherwise be difficult to sustain (Smith et al. 2016a). Through partnerships, training activities, and collaborative experimentation, projects facilitate the circulation of knowledge, practices, and organisational capacities across dispersed initiatives, contributing to the diffusion of grassroots innovations (Seyfang and Longhurst 2016; Loorbach et al. 2020). Empirical evidence from TNCLIs further suggests that projects can strengthen collective visibility, generate new opportunities for cooperation, and provide the organisational infrastructures necessary to sustain long-term collaboration across multiple territories (Esteves et al. 2026; Girardi et al. 2025).

At the same time, project-based collaborations can create spaces in which actors collectively articulate alternative futures, develop common frameworks, and coordinate experimentation across local contexts. Such dynamics are particularly relevant for distributed prefiguration, where transformative practices depend on the capacity to connect dispersed sites of experimentation while maintaining sufficient coherence to support collective learning and action (Dorland 2018; Pel et al. 2020). Research on grassroots movements has repeatedly shown that intermediary structures and translocal networks play a critical role in enabling innovations to travel, adapt, and gain institutional recognition (Smith, Fressoli and Thomas 2014). In this regard, projectification should be understood as a contradictory process. Although it may generate pressures towards professionalisation, dependence on funding cycles, and unequal concentrations of expertise, it can simultaneously enhance the capacity of grassroots actors to coordinate distributed action and sustain translocal networks of commoning (Fred and Godenhjelm 2023; Girardi et al. 2025).

In the context of distributed prefiguration, projectification introduces a managerial and temporal logic that often sits uneasily alongside the commons-based forms of governance through which distributed prefiguration is organised. While project funding may provide vital resources for networking, coordination, and experimentation, it can also reshape the priorities, rhythms and accountabilities of TNCLIs. Seen through a commons and cosmolocal lens, projectification may enclose the very conditions that allow distributed commoning to occur. These include time for collective imagination, resources for relational work, autonomy in defining priorities, and the capacity to maintain translocal knowledge commons beyond the lifecycle of individual projects. This deepens what Laamanen (2022) calls the 'paradox of prefigurative organising' – sustaining an organisation in relationships with powerful funders while staying consistent with its own aims and ethos – by showing how the practical reproduction of distributed prefiguration depends on navigating the contradiction between commons-based governance and project-based funding regimes.

In summary, the strands of literature brought together in this section provide the analytical lens through which we approach our cases. While the concepts of prefigurative politics and projectivity help understand the

collective capacity to produce future projections and to sustain the arenas of hyperprojectivity in which they are generated, we rely on the rather novel concept of distributed prefiguration, which locates this capacity at the translocal level and identifies the organisational conditions on which it depends, particularly representation, resource dependency, and episodic temporality. We have related this to theoretical work on commoning and cosmolocalism to clarify how this level is organised, as a translocal knowledge commons that is enacted and adapted in situated contexts. Projectification, then, helps conceptualise the logic through which funding relationships may either resource or enclose these practices. In Section 4, we use this theoretical framework to compare how each network articulates its future projection, how it positions itself in relation to EU project funding, and what tensions emerge between the two.

3. Data and methods

In this study, we use a comparative case study analysis grounded in a multiple-case study design (Yin 2018). Aiming to compare approaches of GEN-Europe, the Transition Network, and RIPESS-Europe, we gathered empirical data through semi-structured interviews and conducted participant observation in several events and activities organised by these TNCLIs. The fieldwork was carried out between 2021 and 2023 as part of the research project 'Transnational networks for regenerative development in Europe: A comparative perspective on grassroots mobilisation and policy advocacy' (EuroREGEN) and consisted of three of the authors – each in one of the networks – attending online and face-to-face events, undertaking site visits, and participating in partnership European Union-funded projects.

3.1 Case studies of European translocal networks of community-led initiatives

Since the late 1990s, the European CLI landscape has been changing, with trends towards professionalisation, projectification and networking of local initiatives (Penha-Lopes and Henfrey 2019). In particular, many loosely connected CLI movements have formed network organisations that facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration between individual community initiatives, often with the aim of building resilience, increasing visibility, amplifying their advocacy efforts, and ultimately achieving greater impact beyond their communities (Avelino et al. 2020; Jackson 1998). In our multiple-case study, we examine the social movement organisations that represent three major European TNCLIs. These networks were selected because they are among the most established and geographically extensive TNCLIs in Europe, and because each emerged from a distinct movement tradition – transition and climate action, solidarity economy, and ecovillages and intentional communities respectively – while sharing a comparable trajectory of professionalisation and transnational networking. This combination allows us to examine how organisations with different origins and cultures navigate similar institutional and funding pressures at the European level.

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was founded in 1995 in Findhorn, a Scottish ecovillage (Jackson 1998). GEN defines an ecovillage as "an intentional, traditional or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate social and natural environments" (GEN 2019). They are a way of living a communally and collectively organised life that includes food production, social life, participatory decision-making, leisure, and others that are harmlessly integrated into their natural environment (Henfrey and Ford 2018). GEN is currently the central institution that connects thousands of communities from more than 100 countries. It is decentrally organised with largely autonomous regional branches on all continents (Henfrey and Ford 2018). This study analyses GEN-Europe, which was founded in 1996 and currently connects over 100 ecovillages in 26 countries and has 18 subordinated national branches. GEN-Europe organises international meetings and conferences, coordinates research on ecovillages, and provides a shared vision and guidelines for the ecovillage movement in Europe. While ecovillages experiment with alternative ways of

organising social and ecological life at the situated level, GEN-Europe connects these experiences. These practices enable the circulation of knowledge, values, and organisational capacities across the network while supporting the development of shared future projections.

The Transition Network is a global movement of grassroots initiatives which started in 2005 with a local initiative in Totnes (Devon, England), created as a bottom-up initiative aiming to tackle global environmental and climate challenges at the local level while strengthening community resilience (Feola and Nunes 2014). It rapidly spread to 48 countries with thousands of local initiatives addressing various issues according to the interest of the participants and pressing issues of their territories, varying from initiatives such as community gardens, repair cafés, food markets, energy communities, cultural festivals, and local economy circuits (Hopkins 2015). In 2006, in response to the growing demand for information and support from new initiatives, a charity organisation was set up by members of various local UK-based Transition initiatives: the Transition Network. Over time, the expansion of the movement in different countries led to the creation of national and regional hubs. Thus, in terms of prefigurative mechanisms, the Transition Network operates locally through such initiatives and translocally through hubs and shared organisational principles that are adapted to local conditions.

RIPESS-Europe is a network of transnational, national and regional-level networks and hubs that promote regenerative and democracy-enhancing approaches to relocalisation from the grassroots embedded in an intersectional approach that has the integrity of territories and communities at its core. It was launched in 2011 as the European hub of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy (hereafter referred to as RIPESS-International), founded in 1997. Participating networks and hubs organise, in webs of mutual recognition and support, CLIs promoting collaborative and place-based practices and institutional forms that support different forms and scales of commoning and community-building. RIPESS-Europe promotes transnational education, training, research and networking activities to develop advocacy, management and soft skills in CLIs. The goal is to improve the socio-ecological resilience of communities and territories via the institutionalisation and political recognition of commoning as practice by promoting the visibility and sustainability of such practices, as well as supporting participants in their engagement in policy-making. Thus, RIPESS-Europe's prefigurative work is primarily epistemic and institutional, organised through webs of mutual recognition, transnational education and training, and advocacy oriented towards the political recognition of commoning.

3.2 Data collection

Potential interviewees were selected based on their diverse experiences, perspectives, and roles within these networks, including both actors directly involved in the organisations representing the networks and participants engaged in their broader activities. We also followed a snowball sampling approach in which initial participants recommended additional interviewees. A semi-structured interview guide was developed and used flexibly to allow participants to elaborate on their experiences and for new topics to emerge during the conversations. In total, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and November 2022, including 13 interviews with members of the Transition Network, 8 with RIPESS-Europe, and 7 with GEN-Europe. Interviews explored organisational development, funding strategies, relationships with institutions, project implementation, and participants' perceptions of future projections and organisational change.

The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes on average, were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Most interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Interviewees were based in 13 European countries (Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden) and occupied a variety of roles within the networks, including staff

members, council members, volunteers, project managers, funders, members of national and regional networks, and members of local initiatives. Interview data were complemented by participant observation in meetings, workshops, conferences, and project activities, as well as by the analysis of organisational documents, project reports, websites, and communication materials. To ensure the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

3.3 Data analysis

Data analysis followed three iterative coding cycles informed by an abductive approach, whereby empirical observations were continuously interpreted in dialogue with existing theoretical frameworks (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 2022). The first cycle focused on descriptive coding of interviews, participant observation notes, and project documents, generating a broad set of codes related to, for example, network organising, institutional relations, funding, and normative orientations. The second cycle involved grouping and refining codes into broader analytical categories, identifying recurring themes such as projectification and funding strategies, professionalisation and power relations, and knowledge diffusion. In the third cycle, these categories were further interpreted through the theoretical lenses of distributed prefiguration, hyperprojectivity and projectification, resulting in the three analytical dimensions presented in Section 4: future projections, funding strategies, and the tensions between them. The coding process was conducted iteratively through regular team discussions and analytical workshops, allowing for the refinement of emerging interpretations and the comparison of findings across cases.

3.4 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The research design involved a significant degree of researcher embeddedness in the networks under study. Each of the three researchers conducting fieldwork had a long-standing relationship with one of the networks and participated in its activities beyond the scope of this research project. This embeddedness facilitated access to events, meetings, internal discussions and key informants that would have been difficult to access through more detached forms of observation. It also enabled a deeper understanding of organisational cultures, histories and internal dynamics.

At the same time, we recognise that embeddedness may shape what becomes visible or invisible in the research process. Close involvement with a network can facilitate trust and access while also creating risks of selective attention, over-identification with participants, or the normalisation of organisational assumptions and practices. To address these risks, we adopted several reflexive strategies throughout the research process.

First, each researcher conducted fieldwork in a different network, which allowed for comparative discussion of interpretations across cases. Second, the iterative coding process included several collective analytical workshops in which researchers critically examined each other's interpretations, coding decisions and emerging explanations. These discussions often involved questioning assumptions that appeared self-evident within a particular network and comparing how similar phenomena manifested across cases. Third, empirical interpretations were triangulated through multiple sources of evidence, including interviews with actors occupying different positions within the networks, participant observation, organisational documents and informal conversations conducted during fieldwork.

In addition, one of the authors occupied a formal governance role within RIPESS-Europe during the period of fieldwork, serving on the organisation's Coordination Committee after being invited to contribute academic expertise to the development of the network's strategy. This position provided privileged insight into organisational deliberations and strategic decision-making processes. At the same time, it required ongoing reflexive attention to the distinction between participation in organisational governance and the analytical interpretation of empirical material. Throughout the analysis, interpretations concerning RIPESS-Europe were

subjected to collective discussion and critical scrutiny by the wider research team. Rather than treating researcher embeddedness as a source of bias to be eliminated, we approached it as a source of situated knowledge that required reflexive examination and collective validation throughout the research process.

4. Results

In this section, we discuss how the future projections that guided the three case study networks are affected by the organisational demands of projectification, and what funding strategies these networks adopt to manage the resulting tensions. Our analysis shows how each network combines its future projection with a particular funding strategy. We identify three distinct orientations: relying on EU funding to support and diffuse the network's practices, avoiding EU funding to preserve organisational principles, and using EU funding as a complementary resource for delimited activities. These orientations should be understood as funding strategies rather than as exhaustive accounts of the networks' organisational tactics.

Table 1 summarises the main findings for each network. Rather than providing a complete account of the empirical findings, it offers a concise overview of the three analytical dimensions – future projections, funding strategies, and the resulting tensions – to facilitate comparison across the cases.

Table 1 – Overview of comparative case study results

	Future projection	*Funding strategy*	*Tensions*
GEN-Europe	'To make the ecovillage the blueprint of a new societal organisation'.	Implementation of EU projects to diffuse sustainability solutions created by ecovillages.	Between *diverse future projections* (differing at situated and distributed levels) and *projectification.*
Transition Network	To create non-hierarchical organisational settings that prioritise processes (how things are done) over results.	Avoid EU grants and actively search for (the few) funders who value their holistic and intangible impacts.	Between the *future projection* (shared at the situated and distributed level) and *projectification*.
RIPESS-Europe	To create 'another economic model' based on solidarity, self-management and internal democracy, by engaging in epistemic and institutional commoning through knowledge exchange, advocacy and network-building.	Complementing main funding with EU grants to develop delimited actions to influence broader change.	Low compatibility tension with projectification.

***Source**: The authors.*

4.1 GEN-Europe: EU funding as a means to spread ecovillages' innovative practices

Besides counting on the funding granted by its main partners since its foundation (i.e., Gaia Fund and the Gaia Trust), from 2007 on, GEN-Europe started getting funding from successful project applications to the Grundtvig programme (an EU education and training programme). Around that time, it was clear that Gaia Fund and Gaia Trust funding "was going to become less and less and less [available] in the future" (Stella,

GEN). Therefore, the network started specialising in EU grant applications like Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps, and Horizon Europe. As described by one of the GEN-Europe members, they realised that the activities developed by ecovillages had a good fit for the EU funding criteria:

> "These things are almost automatic when it's done through the Ecovillage movement. So that's why it's so easy for our projects to fit all the checkboxes and thus get funded. So, this is a good way of funding, implementing European policy" (Henry, GEN).

The process of changing the main funding source of the organisation started between 2013 and 2014. GEN-Europe's focus on EU grants as a main funding source seems to be a strategic choice. As explained by one interviewee, the vision behind it was to "offer the Ecovillage model to the main society and to make the ecovillage the blueprint of a new societal organisation" (Ema, GEN). A justification for this future projection comes from the recognition that most solutions widely discussed and promoted in society (e.g., the Sustainable Development Goals) tend to address governmental actors or companies and often ignore citizens' capacity to develop and implement solutions. Thus, the GEN-Europe network aims to share ecovillage's solutions as examples of the potential of citizen-led action:

> "These are only ideas for people. People can use them in their own houses, or in their gardens, or in their community, or in their municipality, but it's focused on people, citizens [...] So we have to get back to an era, or go to an era, or make a new era in which we do have a positive impact and make sure that there's a lot of biodiversity" (Johannes, GEN).

The intention of building "bridges between the mainstream society and [ecovillages'] experience" (Max, GEN) combined with successfully funded projects gave capacity for GEN-Europe to share the sustainability solutions created by ecovillages with new spheres of society. It also facilitated the organisation of in-person gatherings and the development of joint projects, connecting network members from different European countries as described by Sara:

> "Maintaining alive the connection, the inspiration, and the motivation. [...] And these not only brought transmission of knowledge, but it also brought the hope that you could do that in your country maybe one day or that you could bring that knowledge into your place" (Sara, GEN).

While European funding is seen as an opportunity to address the needs and strengthen the capacities of the network, the decision to put efforts into getting EU grants also created tensions. In the following quote, a participant from GEN-Europe explains the ambiguity of focusing on European funds as their main strategy:

> "There are a lot of other things at the European level that exclude, maybe don't stand for, what we as an organisation agree with. But that's not what I look into. I look into where we can make use of the European Union's objectives and their funds and then apply to those. [...] But it's maybe not like the first thing that ecovillages would want to be doing. I think ecovillages would want to be planting trees or converting agricultural land into farmer culture or organic agriculture" (Anna, GEN).

Those most negatively affected by this tension – between the values that are part of the ecovillage movement's future projections and the practical activities imposed on the members involved in EU-funded projects – are the members who support the translocal network and are involved in developing the projects. This is described by one of the participants:

> "I feel that people involved in these [EU-funded] projects kind of fall into some kind of mental and physical niche or just kind of frame, frame as a better word. And again, it's hard to get out of it. And, then, you just think and work in that kind of direction, and then somebody comes with a broader strategic thinking. You don't think about it. You just want to be opportunistic and use the project money for whatever you're doing there to have some form of income" (Sofia, GEN).

The tensions emerging from the incorporation of this project logic have unfolded a reflexive process expressed by some members directly involved with project activities who identified negative impacts of the projectification of the network. The main issue is the disproportionate amount of effort directed to applying and implementing grant funding in relation to efforts channelled to the scope of the ecovillage movement. Some consequences identified were the concentration of power and protagonism among members who have the skills to get projects approved and psychological consequences for members who feel overloaded with the amount of work and disconnected from the motivations that made them engage in the ecovillage movement. The latter is described by a member who decided to decline his position in international projects and focus on local and regional activities: "My conclusion was that yes, [project] funds are fine, but it's a bit draining also to be dependent on those research funds for projects like this. [...] I don't want to invest some of my lifetime into this" (Max, GEN). Although there were internal discussions regarding the risks of relying on EU grants as a main source of funding, these negative consequences have not produced direct changes in their funding strategies.

4.2 Transition Network: avoiding EU funding to hold on to core values

For the Transition Network, despite participating as a partner in some European projects, European funds were never a central income source. The Transition Network – which is juridically a Charity under UK law – has been quite successful in capturing UK-based funding but, as explained by a staff member, much less successful in their attempts to capture European grants:

> "Because I think in some of our unsuccessful approaches, I had this feeling that European funding is a whole specialist game. [...] So, maybe this isn't the right fund for us [...] I think there's a really high bar to reach, and [...] we are a bit too non-mainstream or [what we do is too] experimental, and maybe we just can't offer the tangible outcome metrics that they really want. [...] But maybe we don't want to bridge that gap. You know, if we did, we would be taking a different strategy. We're still on the lookout for a funder who can appreciate impacts in the same way as us" (Marjorie, Transition Network).

As the interviewee's quote above suggests, the Transition Network's non-mainstream approach – or holistic, as members often describe it – "narrows down the choices of funders" (Marjorie, Transition Network). Following a systemic, process-based approach does not allow for addressing metrics that are often required in many funding applications, such as carbon savings, or present a predictable course of action as many of the experimentations present an open-ended characteristic. Thus, to preserve its way of working and avoid adapting to EU grant criteria, the Transition Network sought funders who appreciated its 'holistic' approach, characterised by intangible impacts related to the quality of implementation processes and the relationships developed among stakeholders. Some examples are the support of an anonymous funder to work on the role of emotions in activism and that Tudor Trust – a UK grant-making charity – was willing to support internal organisational experimentations needed to develop a non-hierarchical governance model. Horizontal and non-hierarchical forms of organising are central elements in the Transition Network's future projection.

The resistance of the Transition Network to funding opportunities that imposed restrictions on the way of doing things or directions to specific outcomes (e.g., EU grants) seems to be related to a tension between the project logic behind this type of funding and their future projection of changing a culture that gives central attention to what is done (results) instead of 'how things are done' (process). As put by one of its members, there is a "need to pay attention to process, to emotions, of how things were done was as important as what was done" (Claire, Transition Network). This approach has been discussed and practised in local projects from the beginning of the movement and generalised by the Transition Network as organisational principles that can be translated into applicable principles and practices that are adaptable locally (Feola and Nunes 2014). Therefore, for the Transition Network, this projection was an important reference to follow in their funding choices as it is shared between different distributed and situated layers of the movement's prefigurative politics.

In the Transition Network's case, the choice to not adapt the scope of their action and their way of working to the logic of the EU grants liberated them from adapting their activities to a restrictive framework. This freedom allowed the organisation to focus on imagining and experimenting with new forms of organising, which led to the development of a shared governance structure. This change in organisational structure not only affected the UK-based charity but also created regular instances for interaction and decision-making along with national and regional hubs and other transversal projects that are part of the international network.

Although the Transition Network's funding choices allowed the organisation to pursue its aim of building non-hierarchical organisational environments, the option to develop permanent structures of shared governance coincided with a decreased energy to carry out more travel-intensive activities such as holding face-to-face international meetings and implementing international joint projects that allowed people from different places to meet frequently and exchange experiences. The alternative found by the organisation to keep promoting knowledge exchange and connections across localities was to promote online activities like webinars, online courses, the creation of online platforms, campaigns and research strategies to gather and share experiences. We noticed during fieldwork that, parallel to this change, many of the national leaderships that used to be active in international activities of the network turned their efforts either to their territories and/or to other networks that allowed international connections. So, based on different sources of information collected in the fieldwork, we can consider the possibility that the choice of avoiding the EU grants might have affected the Transition Network's power to keep building translocal connections.

4.3 RIPESS-Europe: striving for European grants as a complementary funding source

RIPESS-Europe is part of the social and solidarity economy movement, a wider and much older social movement organisation rooted in grassroots resistance against the neoliberal structural adjustments of the 1970s, the Global Justice movement of the 1990s and 2000s, as well as the anti-austerity struggles in Europe of the 2010s. RIPESS-Europe's strategies reflect the history of such movements – strongly connected to emancipatory struggles in the Global South, as well as disadvantaged populations and marginalised territories in the Global North – that have been working since the 1970s to create "another economic model" (Lucie, RIPESS-Europe). This seems to influence the level of freedom they seek in their funding choices, as explained below:

> "I think we want to preserve our freedom and our coherence but continue to build the alternatives little by little and become a stronger movement together. That's the weakness of being a decentralised kind of thing, but it's also a potential strength, and that comes with years. [...] We now have four people working with salaries while the rest are all volunteer contributions. But, we also purposely did not want to expand the organisation itself. The structure

> of the organisation keeps it more of a loose coordination to make it more sustainable because when you grow, and you need more resources, and you get as a network of networks, it's already very difficult to have resources for the local networks, for the national networks. So, we don't want to create it" (Charles, RIPESS-Europe).

As described by Charles in the quote above, RIPESS-Europe avoids expanding too much its organisational structure partially due to the recognition that expansion would imply a need for additional funding beyond the consistent funds granted by the Charles Léopold Mayer Foundation for Human Progress since its foundation. The self-imposed limits in terms of getting public funding seem to perform a specific function of maintaining the freedom to be critical of the institutions:

> "The rule number one is that we never, ever take money from any kind of government, national or local. No money from the government. And if we take European money, it's always for projects. [...] But RIPESS-Europe doesn't take the money, and we don't want to have direct finance because if you put that connection on with the money, then how are you going to get critical about the European Commission and so on?" (Luisa, RIPESS-Europe).

Other participants, however, highlighted that seeking EU grants is part of a recent strategy within RIPESS. Therefore, they are not as central to the network's sustainability as in the case of GEN-Europe. They are used "to strengthen and become stronger voiced and [...] maybe we can be heard better [by European institutions and civil society]" (Hugo, RIPESS-Europe). For RIPESS-Europe, the need for funding was still considered something new, but it became increasingly important for the network: "RIPESS-Europe is still quite young, and it is organically building in terms of different European projects. Two or three years ago, there weren't any, and now there is an increasing number" (Ava, RIPESS-International). During fieldwork, we did not identify clear impacts of RIPESS-Europe's engagement in EU-funded projects on the internal dynamics of the network or in terms of grassroots impact. However, cooperation between RIPESS-Europe and GEN-Europe intensified during the period of the fieldwork, and one of RIPESS-Europe's interests was to enrich their expertise on EU grant applications.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the tensions between future projections and projectification in TNCLIs as examples of distributed prefigurative politics. Building on literature on prefiguration, commons, and cosmolocalism, our analysis suggests that these tensions are not only about organisational adaptation to funding requirements. They also concern the possible enclosure of distributed commoning: the temporal, relational, infrastructural and imaginative practices through which TNCLIs produce shared visions, circulate knowledge, coordinate across scales and support locally grounded experimentation.

From this perspective, TNCLIs can be understood as commons-based and cosmolocal governance actors, and projectification matters because it can alter the conditions under which their shared narratives, methodologies and organisational repertoires are produced and maintained. It may provide resources for translocal coordination, but it may also redirect collective attention towards funder-defined deliverables, fixed timelines and measurable outputs.

Our analysis suggests two main findings. As a first finding, we identified how tensions operate in the Transition Network and GEN-Europe, whereas we found only limited tension in RIPESS-Europe. This relative absence should not be read as a negative finding. Rather, it points to important variation in how different forms of distributed commoning interact with projectification.

Whereas GEN-Europe and the Transition Network seek to reproduce forms of commoning embedded in everyday practices, organisational cultures, and situated experimentation, RIPESS-Europe primarily engages

in epistemic, political, and strategic commoning through knowledge management, advocacy and alliance-building. Its future projection is oriented less towards building or coordinating material and organisational infrastructures than towards strengthening the visibility, intelligibility and interconnectedness of already existing solidarity economy initiatives. Such activities align more easily with project-based funding, because their outputs are readily translated into reports, policy recommendations, training activities and dissemination strategies. Two further conditions reinforced this alignment. RIPESS-Europe maintained a deliberately lean organisational structure and continued to rely primarily on philanthropic funding and membership contributions, so that EU-funded projects remained supplementary rather than constitutive of organisational survival. Its roots in the solidarity economy and Global Justice movements may also have contributed to a greater capacity to engage strategically with institutions without perceiving such engagement as a threat. The RIPESS-Europe case therefore suggests that the relationship between projectification and distributed commoning varies according to the forms of commoning being reproduced, the organisational structures supporting them, and the funding ecologies in which they are embedded.

For the Transition Network, the project logic required by EU grants was in direct tension with their future projection of building an organisational culture that values process (how things are done) rather than results. The Transition Network staff perceived and expressed this tension in two ways. First, as a lack of capacity to apply for EU funding due to the high demands of professionalisation, which would require organisational adaptation. Second, in relation to the 'intangible' prefigurative action of the local initiatives, which would also need to adapt to become more 'tangible' and deliver the results expected by the parameters of EU grants. These changes were not considered a viable pathway by members of the Transition Network, as they would go against a future projection that guides their practices and is shared with initiatives operating at the situated level. Therefore, this tension did not seem to have produced disagreements within the network.

In the GEN-Europe case, our analysis showed internal tensions in the network regarding what was projected by members of situated ecovillages or distributed regional networks and members involved in GEN-Europe international projects. Following McFarlane (2009), we understand the network as an assemblage in which both individual and collective members retain their own agency. GEN-Europe is therefore not a unified actor, but the organisation representing the network at the distributed level is structured around internationally funded projects. It coexists with other assemblages that reproduce the network through situated and regional practice, and it is between these that the tension emerged. This tension was expressed in the disengagement of members from participating in international projects to focus on situated or distributed regional action, as in the case of the member who declined his position in international projects because he did not want to invest his lifetime in work he experienced as draining (Section 4.1). It was supported by a sense that the international projects focused on diffusing ecovillage practices lost their scope regarding values and other future projections of the ecovillage movement. Hence, the personal efforts required to do professionalised work to fulfil project requirements were considered not worth it, leading to a loss of meaning for the projects, power concentration and psychological consequences. These expressions of the tension corroborate the negative effects of projectification previously identified in the literature (Andersson and Wickelgren 2009; Büttner and Leopold 2016; Lindgren et al. 2014).

Our second main finding is that projectification can both restrict and provide conditions for distributed commoning. EU-funded projects may enable translocal coordination, knowledge exchange, and the creation of spaces for collective imagination. At the same time, they may impose organisational and temporal constraints that reshape the conditions under which commoning occurs. Hyperprojectivity emerges as one dimension of this broader process. This indicates that the improved potential of distributed prefiguration to challenge the status quo (Chertkovskaya et al. 2023) – represented in this case by projectification – might be relative and should be deeply analysed instead of assumed in advance.

In the Transition Network's case, the decision to avoid EU grants as a source of funding enhanced the coherence between situated and distributed prefigurative efforts. This coherence operated through a specific mechanism. EU project funding would have required the network to translate the work of local initiatives into measurable outputs and fixed timelines. This translation would in turn have obliged local initiatives to render their 'intangible' practices tangible in terms defined externally. By declining this funding, the distributed organisation avoided having to impose evaluative categories on situated actors that neither group recognised as their own. As a result, both levels continued to describe their work in the same terms and to be accountable to the same shared future projection. This is also why the tension in this case did not generate internal disagreement, as the conflict was located between the network and the funding logic, rather than within the network itself. However, avoiding EU funding did not affect the capacity of the organisation to exist, as it found ways to fund its activities. Nonetheless, it brought some difficulty in finding funds for in-person international exchange of knowledge and development of joint projects. These findings resonate with recent studies showing that collective-action networks need to adopt flexible and non-standardised strategies of collaboration and funding to sustain their prefigurative practices (Ciordia and Perego 2024). Our analysis suggests that the Transition Network, as an assemblage that represents the network at the distributed level, has developed a limited power to keep building transnational connections among network members as a negative effect of resisting projectification. However, it was able to avoid the frames that EU projects impose on processes of hyperprojectivity and experiment more freely with other funding and organisational arrangements for their distributed prefigurative activities.

In GEN-Europe's case, the negative consequences of projectification were faced by the organisation as a side effect of a strategy that ultimately brings positive effects. The facility to frame local projects' impact in the EU grants requirements allowed the organisation to achieve funding for its activities and brought the capacity to keep regular in-person meetings and joint activities. These conditions produced a sense of connection, inspiration, and motivation between people across sites. The network seems to prioritise the creation of 'sites of hyperprojectivity' (Mische 2014) and translocal commoning. International gatherings, training programmes and collaborative projects function not only as spaces for imagining alternative futures but also as infrastructures through which shared knowledge, identities, values and organisational capacities are reproduced across the network. In this sense, project funding seems to allow opportunities for members to engage in the imaginative process of 'projectivity' (Mische 2009), although this process might be limited by the frames imposed by EU grant applications. In GEN-Europe, the project-based organising culture, the network's future projection, and the creation of translocal spaces for imagining new futures thus appear to converge. Yet the negative effects are left to be absorbed by the individuals who experience them, rather than treated as a collective problem to be addressed by the network. The longer-term consequences of this approach remain uncertain. Future research should examine these power dynamics more closely, in particular the relationship between the organisation representing the distributed level and those situated initiatives whose future projections are incompatible with project-based work. The implications of the networks' strategies for new future projections would also be an exciting topic for further study. Our analysis is limited to the reality of specific TNCLIs engaged in sustainable and socio-economic changes in society. Further research with other types of translocal networks would be necessary to deeply understand this phenomenon.

In summary, our results suggest that projectification and future projections can be in tension in two different ways. In the Transition Network, we found a direct tension: the future projection shared by distributed and situated actors conflicted with the managerial and evaluative logic of EU project funding. In GEN-Europe, we found an indirect tension: the distributed organisation adapted to projectification in ways that enabled translocal coordination and sites of hyperprojectivity, but this adaptation generated friction with situated and regional actors whose understandings of ecovillage practice were less compatible with project-based work.

RIPESS-Europe, by contrast, shows a more limited or latent tension, partly because EU project funding remained secondary to its core organisational resources.

Read together, our three cases allow us to specify what the concept of distributed prefiguration helps to explain and where its limits lie. Chertkovskaya et al. (2023) propose that the distributed level makes prefigurative arrangements more resilient by extending connections across territories. Our findings support this proposition but also qualify it in two respects. First, the distributed level is not simply an extension of situated prefiguration but has its own organisational conditions of existence. TNCLIs must fund staff, coordinate across borders and sustain relationships over time, and the funding ecologies through which they do so shape what can be prefigured at this level. Distributed prefiguration is therefore best understood as a set of practices that depend on infrastructures of commoning rather than as an emergent property of translocal connection. Second, the situated-distributed continuum is not necessarily a relation of coherence. In GEN-Europe, the strategies that sustained the distributed organisation generated friction with situated and regional actors, while in the Transition Network the alignment between levels was itself the product of a deliberate funding choice with its own costs. A similar qualification applies to Saglietti et al. (2026), who find coherence between degrowth's imaginaries and its transformative strategies at the level of discourse. Our cases suggest that coherence in this register is a weak predictor of coherence in the organisational one, since a shared future projection did not prevent division over how the distributed level is resourced.

This also speaks to the diffusion and amplification literatures. Whereas that work asks how far grassroots innovations travel and what enables them to embed in wider society (Seyfang and Longhurst 2016; Lam et al. 2020; Roysen et al. 2024), our cases show that the infrastructures making such travel possible are themselves objects of prefigurative struggle: in GEN-Europe, the projects that funded translocal encounter and knowledge exchange were the same projects that generated friction with situated actors. Amplification and prefiguration are therefore not automatically aligned. The analytical value of distributed prefiguration lies precisely here: it directs attention to the relations between levels and to the organisational work required to hold them together, rather than treating the network as a single prefigurative actor. Its main limitation, at least as applied here, is that it says little about what happens when those relations come under strain, which is where our contribution on projectification and the enclosure of distributed commoning is situated.

Our findings also speak back to existing work on the tension between future projections and their materialisation. RIPESS-Europe supports Levkoe and Wilson's (2019) argument that institutional engagement need not be antithetical to prefiguration. The Transition Network illustrates Feola's (2025) contention that deconstructive processes can be constitutive rather than merely negative: refusing EU project funding was not a failure to scale but a means of protecting coherence between the distributed and situated levels. GEN-Europe, by contrast, shows how the arrangements enabling translocal encounter also produced the alienated work that Chatterton and Pusey (2020) place at the centre of postcapitalist critique.

These findings suggest that projectification can both enable and enclose distributed commoning. It can create conditions for hyperprojectivity by funding encounters, knowledge exchange and translocal coordination. Yet it can also enclose the time, autonomy, relational labour and imaginative openness required for commoning as practice. This paradox helps to move beyond an idealised view of distributed prefiguration as inherently transformative. Instead, it shows that the imaginative potential of TNCLIs is shaped by the organisational and funding infrastructures through which commoning is sustained across scales. Hyperprojectivity should therefore be understood not as an isolated cognitive process but as a collective capacity emerging from commons-based infrastructures of cooperation. The central question is thus not only whether TNCLIs can imagine alternative futures, but whether they can protect and reproduce the commons-based conditions that make such imagination collectively possible.

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Ethics statement

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