

Transforming the current economic, political and social paradigm through Time Banks

Increasingly as a response to the current economic, ecological and social crisis of our times, and in part facilitated by the development of the Internet, locally based and ethically orientated practices are, as one might put it, re-emerging (in new forms) after having been marginalized by the rise of Capitalism. These practices take the form of local economies with local currencies, local production, struggles for deepened and direct democracy etc. More than often these practices are either directly or indirectly linked to practices, political struggles and new cultural/ideological paradigms with common values on a global scale. That is to say, they form networks of global solidarity based on a profound awareness of the historical as well as current interdependence between the local and the global. In fact, even though we today see new forms of local practices emerging in the global North, sustainable lifestyles are and have been actively practiced throughout the global South during the process of modernization.

Despite this growing trend in the global North the alternative globalization — one built on a bottom-up instead of a top-down framework — is still a marginal phenomenon or bypassed (as is the case of much of the global South) when compared to the *status quo* of contemporary economic and political structures. So whether or not the alternative and sustainable globalization will prevail over the destructive forces of today's globalization without being "forced upon us" through a cataclysmic catastrophe, will depend on day to day politics of just as much local communities as of states and supranational unions. In fact, the role of local politics might be greater than we tend to imagine, for we are perhaps too easily prone to think that real political change is done at a "high level".

Out of these local and solidarity movements and practices, and as part of the vitalization of complementarity/alternative currencies, Time Banking in particular is one with potential transformative power, whether this is with regards to envisioning currency as a commons or a new economy building. Growing in numbers around the world, Time Banks are also starting to show signs of new and diverse forms of utilizations and applications: new and diverse forms of services and productions exchanged. As is to be expected this growth has also led to interventions by and meeting points/collisions/co-option with state power and legislation. This has also been the case in Finland.

Nearly five years after its establishment, Finland's biggest and first Time Bank *Stadin Aikapankki (STAP)* (Helsinki's local Time Bank) has around 3000 members (Helsinki has a population of around 550 000 inhabitants) and has during its total 4,5 years of existence witnessed around 15.000 "tovi" exchanges ("Tovi" being the currency used by the Time Bank). Through open and deliberate processes STAP members have defined an ethical charter for all activities done under STAP. This regulates not only what kinds of services can be produced in the Time Bank but also which actors can become members. This is a crucial point since besides individual actors also communities and cooperatives can join STAP and besides traditional neighbor help people have started to exchange services of a more "professional" type as well as innovating new forms of services. Helsinki Time Bank has also developed its own internal "time-tax" or "tovi-tax" which is used in different ways to support and develop local economy building.

All and all, this process has shown that Time Banking has a significant potential to develop transformative power. But as noted, such widening and growth of Time Banking will not go unnoted by state power. In the spring of 2013, the Finnish Tax Administration informed that it will investigate and prepare new guidelines for the taxation of Time Banks (something which had not been done prior to this). In October 2013 the new guidelines were released, issuing taxation obligations to any "professional" work done through Time Banks.

Although the news spread uncertainty and disappointment among STAP members, this was not due to work done through Time Banks became tax-laden, but because the tax was expected to be paid in Euros.

At the same time as the new guidelines from Finnish tax officials were surely disturbing, such a collision was known to ultimately be inevitable and even welcomed by some. The reason for this “positive” attitude is due to a perceived opened space for a deepened and radical political dialogue between civil-society (STAP), municipality and state. Through political mobilization and support STAP been able to gain sympathy and the interest of both representatives of the Helsinki city council as well as members of parliament, and even the ministry of finance. For instance, in its recent Strategy for Global responsibility Helsinki city has committed itself to support Time Banking as a part of the city’s commitment to build more sustainable and responsible economic practices through strengthening local economy builders.

Seen from a political point of view, one of the toughest challenges that STAP is and will be facing, is that for many outsiders (e.g. politicians and bureaucrats) as well as insiders (STAP members), the actual nature of STAP (how it produces value, what kinds of economic and social behaviors does it produce etc,) is to some extent unknown. This ignorance and uncertainty creates misconceptions that need to be sorted out through political dialogues and research. But more acutely, the toughest challenge will surely be the radically democratic and value-based nature of STAP (and its currency “tovi”) as compared to the monetary markets and the Euro. As we have already now seen in Finland, the first response from state power has been to marginalize and control the rise and potential of Time Banking. So as STAP is not pushing for tax-immunity but rather trying to open up the political possibility that work done through it should be taxed in its own currency (not money), it faces the political challenge of introducing into official municipality and state politics and policies a new and radical form of economic thinking and practices. (But as said,) the collision with tax officials might have opened up the right door for such a transformative process.

In addition to reporting on the ongoing political processes and dialogues, we are also keen to share our experiences of the inner dynamics of STAP and some dreams and visions about its future. As we noted in the beginning, Time Banking is not an isolated phenomenon, but should rather be seen as part of a larger response to the crisis of our times and movement towards an alternative globalization. We will share our thoughts on how Time Banking connects with the need for a strengthening of the commons, a need for solidarity economy and even local food production. Our main thesis is that the case of STAP can function as a case study and example of how these can be connected with and transform current political and social structures.