

DESCRIPTION FOR GENERAL PUBLIC

Community currencies (also referred to as ‘complementary currencies’ or ‘local currencies’) are money issued mainly by non-state subjects, in both cash and non-cash form, and used within a specific region or community. Community currency systems are predominantly niche projects, with several hundred and several dozen users. However, there is no lack of examples of initiatives that have gone from small grassroots community projects to large-scale systems. The examples include the Swiss *WIR*, in circulation since 1934 and involving 60,000 users, or the Argentinian local currency *créditos*, which was used by 7% of the local population during the financial crisis of the 1990s. There exists a total of ca. 6,000 alternative currencies in the world (both local currencies and crypto-currency). The community currencies initiatives show real potential to stabilise and enrich household budgets on the one hand and to regulate the economy in times of crisis on the other. Therefore, the research into such systems is tantamount to the search for practical solutions in the times of economic recession.

The main objective of the project is to provide a **comparative ethnographic description of community currency systems**. In order to realise my goal, I will conduct field research and interview the leaders and participants of the enterprises at hand. I intend to make the following community currency systems subject to scrutiny: The ‘Greener’ – Polish Local Currency (*Zielony – Polska Waluta Lokalna*), London's ‘Brixton Pound’, The Swiss *WIR* currency and blockchain-based local currencies – the Swiss *Léman* currency and the Kenyan currencies brought into existence by Grassroots Economics Foundation. The key research question is as follows: What are the cultural, economical, environmental and institutional conditions for the creation and maintenance of community currency projects? Are there realistic prospects for their long-term development? Why is it the case, that the majority of such systems are short-lived? Thus, community currency research implies the analysis of the composition of the cultural environment, in which such initiatives can develop or disintegrate. Therefore, the comparison of systems originating from diverse cultural backgrounds should help to reveal the precise conditions which are beneficial to such initiatives.

The ethnographic description is therefore intended not only to account for the similarities between community currencies (their analogous ideological, structural and social aspects), but also to display the contextuality of community currencies (their cultural and economical peculiarities). Why do certain community currencies remain niche initiatives, and the others develop on a scale where they are capable of supporting the national economy as a whole (as is the case with the *WIR*)? This research possesses a quite practical dimension, since the literature on the subject claims, that the issue of currencies by grassroots communities is typical of times of money shortage or oversupply. Therefore, such systems constitute a sort of self-help in the face of the financial crisis, and the recognition of their potential may be vital to the struggle against the results of the lack of economic stability. The description of their development environments may provide practical organisational advice for the coordinators of local currency systems.

The reflection on blockchain appears frequently among the communities involved in the creation of local currencies. This particular technology, allowing for a decentralised and secure way of booking the accounting data, is primarily regarded as a great hope for the dynamic development of the complementary exchange systems. It is viewed as a means of establishing transactional trust, founded on neither the state and its institutions, nor banks or communities, but on the cryptographic technology itself. With the above in mind, it is worthwhile to investigate the current beliefs among the creators of community currencies: will the development of dispersed blockchain data registers enable the expansion of grassroots communities using a complementary currency? How do leaders of the surveyed community currencies respond to blockchain technological innovations? Is blockchain a technology of hope for all of the movements under my scrutiny? Or is it a rather disturbing tool to use? The research project at hand is, in its entirety, not only an analysis of monetary system projects with a potentially stabilising role in times of economic turmoil, but an insight into the innovative blockchain technology as well, as it becomes increasingly applied to financial transfers and, according to the World Economic Forum, may well change the world as we know it within the decade to come. My research is thus a contribution to the discussions on the shape and development directions of the contemporary monetary system.