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How degrowth organisations try to make changes at the EU level: ECOLISE as a case study

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RESUMO

As ideias de decrescimento suscitam progressivamente o interesse da União Europeia devido a crises induzidas pelo sistema. No entanto, não existe literatura científica sobre grupos de lobby para o decrescimento dentro da UE, embora isto ajudasse a compreender como uma transição socio-ecológica pode ser realizada. Para preencher esta lacuna, esta dissertação investiga como as organizações de decrescimento tentam efetuar mudanças a nível da UE utilizando a rede europeia ECOLISE como estudo de caso. A recolha e análise dos dados seguiu a metodologia da *grounded theory*, uma vez que esta ajuda a obter conhecimentos originais sobre o mundo empírico, deixando os dados orientarem a investigação. O estudo de investigação qualitativa baseou-se numa análise documental de notícias, sítios Web, publicações e documentos internos da ECOLISE. Além disso, foi realizada uma entrevista semiestruturada com o coordenador de investigação da ECOLISE, Tom Henfrey. Destaca-se das conclusões que a estratégia da ECOLISE consiste em diferentes domínios de trabalho interligados e interdependentes para alcançar um impacto profundo e de longo alcance. A estratégia baseia-se em colaborações com instituições e organizações mais *mainstream* para uma maior funcionalidade. Além disso, a ECOLISE quer implicitamente impulsionar uma transição através do acoplamento estrutural entre o denominado Horizon 1 (i.e. instituições do sistema de capital) e o Horizon 3 (i.e. iniciativas comuns). O estudo fornece novos conhecimentos sobre o contexto da UE em relação ao decrescimento e sobre estratégias e experiências de uma organização em decrescimento a nível da UE.

Palavras-chave: Transição de decrescimento, União Europeia, rede, lobismo, acoplamento estrutural, iniciativas comuns

ABSTRACT

Degrowth ideas are increasingly arousing interest by EU institutions due to system-induced crises. Yet, there is no literature on degrowth lobbying within the EU, although this would help to understand how a socio-ecological transition can be practically achieved. To address this gap, the research question of this thesis is how degrowth organisations have attempted to effect change at the EU level. This was investigated using the European network ECOLISE as a case study by examining its strategy for achieving change. The data collection and analysis followed the principles of grounded theory methodology, as this helps to gain original insights into the empirical world by letting the data guide the research. The qualitative research study was based on a document analysis of ECOLISE's newsfeeds, websites, publications and internal documents. In addition, a semi-structured interview was conducted with ECOLISE's research coordinator Tom Henfrey. It stands out from the findings that ECOLISE's strategy consists of different interdependent work domains to achieve deep and far-reaching impact. It is based on collaborations with more mainstream institutions and organisations for greater functionality. Moreover, ECOLISE implicitly wants to drive a transition through structural coupling between the Horizon 1 (i.e. capital system institutions) and the Horizon 3 (i.e. commons initiatives). The study provides insights on the EU context in relation to degrowth and on strategies and experiences of a degrowth organisation at the EU level.

Keywords: Degrowth transition, European Union, network, lobbying, structural coupling, commons initiatives.

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ACRONYMS

ARTS	Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability
BASE	Bottom-up Adaptation Strategies for a Sustainable Europe
CAN	Climate Action Network
CfF	Communities for Future
CLIs	Community-led initiatives
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
CoR	Committee of the Regions
COP	Conference of the Parties
CoP	Communities of Practice
CSO	Civil society organisation
DG AGRI	Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development
DG CLIMA	Directorate-General for Climate Action
DG REGIO	Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
ECOLISE	European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability
EDSC	European Day of Sustainable Communities
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
ENERGISE	European Network for Research, Good Practice and Innovation for Sustainable Energy
FP7, FP9	Seventh Framework Programme, Ninth Framework Programme
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEN	Global Ecovillage Network
GLAMURS	Green Lifestyles, Alternative Models and Upscaling Regional Sustainability
H1, H2, H3	First, Second, and Third Horizon
H2020	Horizon 2020

INSPIRE	Investigating Speech Processing In Realistic Environments
LEADER	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale
LIFE	L'Instrument Financier pour l'Environnement
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
ProsEU	Prosumers for the Energy Union
SCP	Sustainable Communities Programme
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SIC	Social Innovation Community
TESS	Towards European Societal Sustainability
TRANSIT	Transformative Social Innovation Theory
UrbanA	Urban Arenas for Sustainable and Just Cities

INTRODUCTION AND PRESENTATION OF THE CASE STUDY

If the entire world population had the lifestyle of an average EU citizen, 2.8 Earths would be necessary in terms of resources, according to the WWF (Vandermassen et al., 2019). This is not only ecologically unsustainable but also unjust to future generations, as more ecosystems are depleted than can be renewed (ibid.). Besides, it is a sign of global social injustice, as it would be impossible to enable every person on Earth to have such a level of consumption. Furthermore, it is mainly the population of the Global South that suffers from climate change, which is a consequence of the emissions associated with over-production (Ware & Kramer, 2019). Thus, the most urgent challenge of our time is how to create conditions for human flourishing on a planet with limited resources (Jackson, 2017). Going by a school of thought in economic theory named *degrowth*, the one answer to this conundrum is a paradigm shift in economics and politics; from GDP growth to one that favours a socio-ecological transition based on local solutions to global problems (Demaria et al., 2013). Since the 1970s, scientists have been criticizing modern consumer society and warning of its consequences (Loske, 2018). In the light of growth critiques, alternatives should not only prevent environmental crises, but also a volatile economy and social disparity. For instance, the well-known German post-growth economist Nico Paech (2012) proposes an economic system with local currencies in which industrial production is drastically scaled back. As a result, there would be a 20-hour work week and people would use the newly gained time for engaging in self-sufficiency networks on a local scale. This would transform people from mere consumers to producers, which could create a sense of meaning in their lives. Alternative lifestyles are already practised and advocated by a global degrowth movement, which emerged at the beginning of the XXI century in France (Demaria et al., 2013).

However, when sustainability is discussed in politics, business and the media, it is mainly about the concept called *green growth* instead of degrowth. In contrast to degrowthers, proponents of the green growth approach believe that sustainability goals can be achieved with ecological policies in combination with a striving for economic growth (Jackson, 2017). The degrowth movement challenges this dominant view by arguing that there can be no absolute reduction of greenhouse gas emissions with simultaneous economic growth and therefore no sustainable growth (ibid.). The professor and leading figure in the German post-growth debate Reinhard Loske (2018) expresses the relevance of the related advocacy work as follows: “It is imperative that those social groups and actors motivated by socio-ecological concerns engage more deeply in the debate over the future of Europe and do not leave the field to those in whose thinking sustainability either doesn’t feature at all or else only as a footnote” (pp.6-7). Here, he demands that the degrowth movement’s existing commitment at the European level must be significantly expanded, which illustrates the topicality and importance of the issue that is discussed in this thesis. More concretely, the theme of this work is how degrowth organisations try to make changes at the EU level.

Albeit the political EU institutions, such as the EU parliament and commission, have the most important part in directing policy-making processes in the EU, the vast majority of the degrowth literature focuses solely on grassroots actions and widely omits political institutions' role for a system change, as D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) point out. In particular, there is still no research on how degrowth organisations carry out lobby work in the EU. To fill that gap in the literature, this work gives special attention to the relationship between one major degrowth organisation, named ECOLISE, and the EU institutions, and to how the EU enables or hinders a degrowth transition from the perspective of ECOLISE.

The ECOLISE network, whose name stands for “European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability”, serves as a case study for this thesis as an organisation that represents degrowth interests in the EU. ECOLISE voluntarily registered itself in the EU's lobby transparency register (Joint Transparency Register Secretariat [JTRS], 2020). The network is officially an international non-profit association under Belgian law (AISBL – Association without lucrative purpose) and was founded in 2014. The Brussel-based umbrella organisation currently consists of 42 members (22/01/2021) like associations, organisations, and movements from 17 EU countries and the UK and Switzerland. They can be active on an international, European, national, or regional level (ECOLISE, n.d.–a). The majority of the member organisations come from the ecovillage, transition and permaculture areas and represent concrete community-led initiatives (CLIs) at the local level (Henfrey, 2018a). Other member organisations are called “Specialized Members”¹ (Henfrey, 2018a); they do not represent local groups but support ECOLISE in its strategy by providing input, for example, in research and communication.

Even though ECOLISE is classified for the purpose of this work as a degrowth organisation, the network is more than that, and it does not define itself in that way at any point. Yet, the choice of ECOLISE as a case study is justified as its positions are in line with the degrowth movement, which becomes immediately visible in the first paragraph on the website where ECOLISE presents itself. There it criticises the system's “structural dependence on unconstrained economic growth, and the unfettered spread of unsustainable lifestyles” (ECOLISE, n.d.–j), which is a typical critique of degrowthers (e.g. (Jackson, 2017, Latouche & Macey, 2009). Furthermore, ECOLISE is practically involved in an explicit post-growth transition on the EU level, which is visible, for example, in its contribution to the EU Post-Growth 2018 Conference (Henfrey, 2018b). Besides, ECOLISE's vision of a transition from a local to a global level, which is based on the expansion of community-led initiatives that practice alternative ways of sustainable living (ECOLISE, n.d.–j), is also in line with degrowth views (D'Alisa et al., 2015b; Fromm, 2016).

Fazey et al. (2018) write that, in order to reach a socio-ecological transition, “[t]he first essential is the need for research to explicitly focus on transformational change and how this is brought about”

¹ Even though the thesis is written in British English, other dialects found in quotations are not modified throughout this work.

(p.61). Consequently, for degrowth not to be a utopia, a scientific focus on the practical steps leading to this transition is necessary. While ECOLISE carries out research that concentrates on the contribution of CLIs to that end, this work assumes a meta-level and focuses on ECOLISE's contribution to this very transition.

That way, this thesis can contribute to the EU interest group literature in two ways. For the first time, the strategy of a degrowth interest group in the EU policy context was examined. Secondly, the thesis offers a refined description of the EU policy environment in the degrowth context. This helps to understand, among other things, who exactly are the supporters of degrowth ideas in EU institutions and how this affects the participation of a degrowth organisation in policy processes. In this framework, EU funds that support the degrowth movement are identified, as well as policies and programmes co-shaped by a degrowth organisation.

The results are reached by approaching the empirical world using an inductive method for qualitative data analysis. As a result, the data directed the research process whereby the most holistic and truthful picture possible of ECOLISE's reality could be created. This approach is characteristic of the methodology of *qualitative grounded theory* which guided the data collection and analysis phase of this work. A multi-method approach was applied which included document analysis and a semi-structured interview with Tom Henfrey², the Research Coordinator of ECOLISE. The main goal of the grounded theory methodology is to determine what is happening in the respective empirical world (Charmaz, 2006). This work reaches that goal by offering insights into processes that ECOLISE is involved in, its strategy, its views and perspectives, and how the network is based in its context and responds to it.

The work is structured as follows: The first chapter is about the literature review on the topic, which is made out of two parts. Section 1.1 discusses the theoretical framework concerning the world views in which the work of ECOLISE is embedded. Thus, not only the concept of degrowth is explained, but also of green growth, which plays a role in lobbying EU institutions by being a guiding sustainability approach of major institutions. Section 1.2 covers the literature on EU lobbyism which helps to understand ECOLISE's lobby activities in the later course of the work. In the second chapter, the overall strategy and goals of ECOLISE and its underlying perspectives are set out for a general orientation. This includes its view on the relevance of CLIs and the cooperation between the degrowth movement with policy-makers for a transition. In the third chapter, contextual factors that frame ECOLISE's work are discussed. These include EU funds from which ECOLISE benefits, presented in section 3.1. The following section 3.2 explores other indications of an EU policy environment conducive to ECOLISE's work. However, not only opportunities but also challenges arise from the EU environment that ECOLISE interacts with, to be addressed in section 3.3. The context analysis contributes to a better

² In different documents or publications, he is referred to sometimes as Thomas Henfrey and sometimes as Tom Henfrey, whereby the latter variant is used in this work.

understanding of the extent to which the network encounters resistance or fertile ground in its advocacy work to achieve changes.

Thereupon follows an analysis of ECOLISE's specific activities as part of its overall strategy, which is the main part of this work. In other words, the fourth chapter discusses how ECOLISE has concretely tried to achieve change in the years since its foundation in 2014. Section 4.1 treats ECOLISE's research work, a central theme of ECOLISE's operations used to advise CLIs and policy-makers. In section 4.2, ECOLISE's actions regarding the support of CLIs are analysed. The work with member organisations is covered in section 4.3, and in 4.4 ECOLISE's lobbying activities of the EU institutions are discussed. Since it is noticeable that ECOLISE strongly relies on cooperation with partners in this area, subsection 4.4.1 is devoted to this aspect. The further actions of ECOLISE in this context are classified in subsection 4.4.2 according to Gaventa's (2006) model of spaces, whereby it becomes clear to what extent ECOLISE takes the initiative to gain political influence or reacts to offered opportunities. Section 4.5 expands on ECOLISE's actions regarding its engagement with the public, revealing how ECOLISE seeks to alter people's mindsets and mainstream CLIs. The thesis concludes with the most critical aspects of the results, the work's limitations, and issues to be addressed by future research.

Methodology

Grounded theorists conduct qualitative research through an inductive analysis of the data. That way, through the building of categories, fresh insights into the empirical world are prioritised over an analysis based on existing theories (Charmaz, 2006). Since this approach allows for all possible aspects arising in the studied empirical world to find their place in the research project in accordance with their relevance, grounded theory is ideal for analysing experiences (ibid.). Thus, by not testing hypotheses or deciding in advance which particular aspects to investigate, the possibility of overlooking important insights is largely eliminated. The choice of grounded theory methodology is based on the purposeful openness to different outcomes of the study, as means to reach an improved understanding of ECOLISE's experiences, strategies, and perceptions.

Concerning the data collection, all selected documents treat either experiences, viewpoints, or actions of ECOLISE. Most texts can be found on ECOLISE's website³. These include newsfeeds, activity reports, and webpages where ECOLISE introduces itself and its work. Besides, the ECOLISE Research Coordinator Tom Henfrey shared internal documents concerning ECOLISE's strategy for this thesis. More data was collected through a semi-structured interview with Tom Henfrey that allowed follow-up questions. The interview adhered to grounded theory principles, implying a few broad, open-ended questions (ibid.). Since most of the information revealed itself from the documents, one interview was considered sufficient for this work. Tom Henfrey was chosen as an interview partner because, as

³ <<https://www.ecolise.eu/>>.

ECOLISE's Research Coordinator, he has a clear outlook on the analytic frame of ECOLISE's work. The synchronous online interview was conducted through the platform ZOOM for video communication. The interview was taped, and afterwards, edited and intelligent transcription was used for the parts included in this thesis.

Hence, the study employed a qualitative multi-method approach combining document and interview analysis. Concerning the data analysis, firstly, documents were coded with the programme MAXQDA using the constant comparative method, which helped provide original insights and make differences between the categories visible. The inductive method was used to create categories, as is typical of grounded theory methodology (ibid.), which allowed to address the documents as openly as possible and start the analysis from the perspective of ECOLISE. The discerned categories from the data form the chapters of the work, thereby defining the structure of this thesis. However, it turned out to be challenging to organise data into clear categories due to ECOLISE's strategy of interconnecting all activity areas, which will be discussed later on. This realisation proves the complexity of the studied empirical world, suggesting the grounded theory methodology was the right choice for this work due to its flexible approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2011). As Charmaz (2006) advises for grounded theorists, first the document analysis was carried out to only afterwards be continued with the data collection in the form of the interview to stress the gaps and ambiguities that emerged from the documents. That way, the interview analysis was based on the results of the document analysis.

CHAPTER 1 – Literature review

It is to note that this literature review's focus is not a critical examination of the authors' positions. Instead, the most important concepts and ideas relevant to the analysis are presented in this chapter for orientation.

1.1 Worldviews

What is degrowth? In 2001, the degrowth movement was first created in France by political activists under the slogan *décroissance* (French for degrowth) (Demaria et al., 2013). But its theoretical roots trace back mainly to the 1970s, when, as per Loske (2018), the first major phase of growth critique took place. Two scientific reports of the Club of Rome, an independent and global acting organisation in which experts from different areas deal with humankind's challenges, were especially decisive here. They were written in 1972 by Dennis L. Meadows (1972) and in 1974 by Mihailo D. Mesarović and Eduard C. Pestel (1977). Both reports conclude that the earth as an ecosystem cannot withstand economic and population growth for long. Mesarović and Pestel (ibid.) argue that a fundamental worldwide structural change is needed, mainly in economic and technological terms, defining a new relationship between man and nature.

Another shaping figure in this first phase of growth criticism is the psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm. He enriched the growth critique, which focused on technological and economic developments, with political and societal aspects. Today, the degrowth movement represents a holistic approach that encompasses all societal relevant areas. Fromm (2006) agrees with the Club of Rome's conclusion, according to which new values in society are needed to enable changes in the economic structure. Still, in his book from 1976, "To Have or To Be", he criticises the reports for being written in a "spirit of quantification, abstraction, and depersonalisation [...] that is so characteristic of our time"⁴ (Fromm, 2006, pp.22-23). Fromm demands that this spirit needs to be overcome and asks in general for drastic changes in people's mindsets to reach a required new ethic for a society in harmony with nature as a necessary condition for human survival on this planet. He dismisses the economic structure designed for constant growth, which encourages people to define themselves through consumption and possessions. This not only leads to ecological crises but also stands in the way of people's "wellbeing" in a psychological and spiritual sense (ibid., p.14). Therefore, a transition from the current growth-based society is by no means a question of changing economic structures in favour of the environment and at the expense of humans' high life quality. Instead, the goal is the strengthening of life in harmony with nature. The objective should thus be "a healthy economy for healthy people" (ibid., p. 215). The present economy of industrialised countries can be regarded as unhealthy for various reasons, e.g. its focus on

⁴ Own translation. This applies to all further quotations from Fromm's work in this thesis.

growth and competition was the reason for the economic crisis in 2008 (Jackson, 2017). Loske (2018) sees this event as the beginning of the second phase of growth critique. Until that point, growth critics were not considered by policy-makers and industry because the models of transformation in the 1970s had radical and utopian contents and thus provoked adverse reactions (ibid.). The economic crisis can be regarded as a *game changer* because it legitimised demands for structural changes (Loorbach et al., 2016). Nowadays, the degrowth movement can build on more fertile ground considering that the themes addressed correspond to a growing “mindset which values cooperation over competition, access over possession, and socio-ecological impact over purely economic goals” (Loske, 2018, p.4); these are a few of the many values of the degrowth argument.

D’Alisa et al. (2015a) point out that “[d]egrowth has multiple interpretations. [...] Degrowth is a frame, where different lines of thought, imaginaries, or courses of action come together” (p.21). Therefore, it is difficult to name “typical” degrowth positions. Still, repetitive topics have found a relatively firm place in the degrowth discourse. Among these are the themes of decentralisation, participatory democracy, and the strengthening of local communities. As these are the core themes of ECOLISE, they will be presented here briefly. Fromm (2016) writes in this context that the participation of citizens in political decision-making processes requires a drastic decentralisation of politics and economy. In practice, the degrowth movement is an advocate of supporting the local economy and establishing local supply networks.⁵ For that aim, people engage in convivial societies based, for example, on local production, reduced consumption, and joint management of physical resources and land (Kallis et al., 2015). Besides, ecovillages are formed aiming at implementing holistic solutions that concern the social, ecological, and personal level as it is the goal of the degrowth itself. Many of these initiatives are represented by the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), whereby GEN Europe is a member organisation of ECOLISE. Ecovillages often practice permaculture, an alternative method that tries to imitate natural ecosystems. Permaculture is primarily applied to the area of agriculture, but it also includes a rethinking of the human’s place in nature and provides therefore guidelines for sustainable living that lead people to become productive citizens instead of merely dependent consumers (Lockyer & Veteto, 2015). Many of the ecovillages are represented by the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), whereby GEN Europe is a member organisation of ECOLISE. Hence, the idea of the degrowth movement is to live and practice models alternative to the ones performed by growth-based economies and societies dependent on fossil fuels. However, there can be no complete independence from the surrounding economic and political context. For instance, projects for alternative vegetable cultivation depend on land prices, and rental costs have an impact on cooperative housing initiatives. For the implementation of other ideas of the degrowth community, such as basic or maximum income or shortened working hours, the state is required (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020).

⁵ In this context the term transition movement is often used.

To understand this better, the theory of the state by the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) can be adduced where he argues that “civil and political societies” (ibid, p.7) are closely linked. Hence, D’Alisa and Kallis (2020), who establish a connection between degrowth and Gramsci’s theory of the state, argue that there can be no grassroots actions independent of political decisions made from the top. Both aspects are indispensable parts of a greater whole. Consequently, an attempt to detach from the existing political institutions cannot lead to a degrowth transition. Instead, it is necessary to strive for a “cultural change of common senses” (ibid., p.7). *Common senses* are in Gramsci’s theory the different predominant, hardly ever questioned mindsets in society (ibid.). The respective governments have an interest in preferring certain common senses over others and propagate them through a “hegemonic discourse” (ibid. p.6). As a result, the ruling elite rarely must use violence to enforce their interests, since the population internalises the common sense so that it willingly supports the ideas that correspond to it. In this respect, Fromm (2006) writes that “the socio-economic structure of a society shapes the societal character of its members in such a way that they want to do what they are supposed to do” (p.163). Gaventa (2006), who analyses power structures, labels this “invisible power” (p.29).

D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) argue that nowadays, there is an unquestioned hegemony of common sense according to which economic growth is necessary. Correspondingly, to reach a degrowth transition, the task must be to create a dominant common sense in its support. Going by the degrowth currents, change cannot be achieved through coercion but only through cultural change. Avelino (2017), a researcher on sustainability transitions, corroborates this assumption by stating that “[i]nstitutions enforcing environmental regulations would only be effective if they are morally supported by a majority of the community” (p.10). Fromm (2016) also emphasises the importance of this cultural change and sees political institutions as an essential part of this work. He speaks of “educational processes” (p.215) and “educational campaigns” (p.217) that governments must lead for this purpose. As the goal is the achievement of an improved democracy, society must crave a structural change. For that purpose, the idea has to be made palatable to them, and as per Loorbach et al. (2016), these movements are *game changers* that effectively influence society’s dominant mindset.

It is interesting to take a closer look at the current widespread common sense of *sustainable development* and *green growth* that would need to be overcome for a degrowth transition. Latouche (Latouche & Macey, 2009), a leading intellectual of the degrowth movement, writes that “most environmentalist discourses make no critique of the growth society and confuse the issue with vague talk of sustainable development” (p.3). As per Mol (2000), a hallmark of sustainable development is the focus on modern technologies to achieve environmental sustainability, whereby economic growth is not seen as a contradiction to ecological principles. The worldview of the *Market Liberals* after Clapp and Dauvergne (2005) corroborates with this. Accordingly, globalisation and economic growth ensure long-term success for the environment and people’s wellbeing, among other things, through improved technologies. Green growth is mainly about achieving ecological goals in combination with economic objectives,

whereby the theory of sustainable development also includes social aspects. Its claim to a holistic solution for all aspects of life is comparable with the degrowth concept.

Although there is some evidence that the EU has been marginally concerned with degrowth ideas since 2007, for example, through the Beyond GDP initiative (Pollex & Lenschow, 2018), it is apparent that the EU, like the UN, the World Bank, and the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) officially identify with the ideas of sustainable development and green growth (Koch, 2018; Pollex & Lenschow, 2018). Advocates of the degrowth position oppose the ideas of green growth and sustainable development, as they assume that economic growth, as the cause of the problems, cannot be the solution. More concretely, their position is that improvements in efficiency and technologies are insufficient to achieve globally set climate targets, like those set by the Kyoto Protocol. The main argument is the impossibility of attaining absolute decoupling of economic growth and energy and material consumption. Yet, absolute decoupling, i.e. an actual reduction of current global carbon dioxide emissions, is indispensable if the climate goals are to be taken seriously (Jackson, 2017). Because of the inherent irreconcilability between economic growth and serious environmental and social objectives, policies in that paradigm are widely seen as *greenwashing* by the degrowth movement. In this context, the following quote by Fromm (2016) seems today more topical than ever: “De facto, nothing happens that truly helps us, but leaders and those led numb their consciences and their desire to survive by giving the impression that they know the way and are marching in the right direction” (p.24). To challenge this modus operandi, degrowthers engage, among other things, in lobbying and advocacy. Advocacy is a general term to describe the work of getting the support of someone for an idea. In this way, individuals can also carry out advocacy work in their everyday lives. As a sub-concept of advocacy, lobbying is specifically about influencing the policy-making process (Avner, 2016). Thus, lobbyists are also advocates but not necessarily the other way around. In the following, the main notions within the lobby theory are presented.

1.2 Lobbying in the EU

This literature review is not specifically about lobbying conducted by degrowth organisations, as there is no literature on this topic. That is why, in this subsection, concepts concerning general lobbying strategies in the EU are presented in a thematic overview. The specific findings relevant to this thesis are presented in the analysis section connected with ECOLISE’s strategy.

While combing through this existent literature, various subtopics have inductively emerged, which are, for the purpose of this work, classified as follows:

1. Where do interest groups decide to lobby?
2. How do the interest groups gain access?
3. What are the different strategies, depending on the context?

While covering these topics, it should be taken into consideration that they are interwoven because of “the inherently multi-faceted nature of interest representation” (Klüver et al., 2015, p. 455). For example, the strategy depends on where lobbying takes place, and the methods of gaining access are influenced by the respective institutions.

Beyers (2008) addresses the first question on the location of lobbyism by introducing two main arenas where interest groups can engage, namely the *front stage* and the *backstage*. What happens backstage is not or only partly observable to the public. Following Beyers (ibid.), especially the EU hosts an immensely rich number of such non-transparent contexts. Lobbyism that targets the backstage of the EU means lobbying e.g. “advisory bodies, committees, agencies and, to some extent, parliamentary committees” (ibid., p.1189). The relevance of the individual EU institutions for interest groups is mainly addressed by Coen (2007), Dür (2008), Eising (2007), and Klüver et al. (2015). In contrast to the backstage, the front stage is an outside arena, which means that a large audience can follow the communication between lobbyists, politicians, and citizens. Lobbyism at the front stage aims at drawing the public’s attention to specific messages or at contributing to political campaigns (Beyers, 2008).

The second question concerning access is approached mainly by Beyers (2008), Chalmers (2013), Rozbicka (2013), and Ruzza (2011) in the context of resources as a means to access, whereby there is a general agreement that expertise is a crucial resource. Furthermore, Thiel and Uçarar (2014) address the importance of attention and credibility to gain access. Năstase and Muurmans (2020) discuss the relevance of building reputation, whereas Bernhagen et al. (2015) elaborate on the importance of the right contacts for access.

Concerning the different lobbying strategies, a distinction can be made between inside and outside strategies. Outside strategies aim at influencing public opinion to pressure policy-makers (Kollman, 1998). Inside strategies are addressed directly to policy-makers, for example, through talks with EU officials (Chalmers, 2013). Scholars covering this topic in connection with the EU are mainly Beyers (2008), Boräng and Naurin (2015), and Chalmers (2013). In the case of inside strategies, a further distinction can be made between argumentation, i.e. persuasion through reasoning, and bargain tactics, i.e. the exchange of resources. In practice, both tactics are often intertwined since knowledge serves as a resource for bargaining strategies but also as the basis for argumentation. Here, the works of Baumgartner and Mahoney (2008), Beyers (2008), and Dür (2008) are decisive.

The literature review indicates that scholars each focus on some individual aspects of the nature of interest representation in the EU setting. Beyers (2008) criticises this by writing that “[r]esearch tends to be focused on single issues” (p.1188). Junk (2016) also calls for the research design of future work to be more “inclusive” (p.2) and to examine different relationships, as this is the only way to understand the background of interest groups’ decisions. Therefore, the methodology of grounded theory used for this work allows for the inclusion of manifold strategical aspects and contextual factors playing a role in the empirical world of the case study.

Besides, the findings of the literature, including the ones concerning environmental NGOs (Bunea, 2013; Junk, 2016; Ruzza, 2011; Sanchez Salgado, 2018), don't engage with the specific characteristics of degrowth organisations. That is why they don't necessarily reflect their reality. Even if some insights may be applied to the degrowth context — which is why some of the arguments from the literature on lobbying are referred to in the analysis of this work — they only concern some individual aspects. The questions of how and where exactly degrowth organisations advocate for a socio-ecological transition and which opportunities and challenges they encounter are not answered by the existing literature. Hence, this thesis contributes to an understudied field in the area of degrowth and lobbying.

CHAPTER 2 – ECOLISE’s perspectives, visions and goals

2.1 ECOLISE’s overall worldview, goals and strategy

Before discussing ECOLISE’s official strategy, the concept of *structural coupling* is to be presented. Its establishment is an unofficial goal of ECOLISE as it is supposed to lead to the growth and strengthening of CLIs and thereby to a degrowth transition. Hence, the explanation of this notion in the following can lead to an improved comprehension of ECOLISE’s objective of linking degrowth initiatives with capitalist institutions.

The theory of structural coupling was founded by the evolutionary biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1980) and has been applied by other scholars to various sciences and fields, as is the case in this work. Structural coupling is, put as briefly as possible, “an interaction among autopoietic systems” (Angelis, 2017, p. 332), whereby the term autopoiesis was introduced as well by Maturana and Varela (1980) in 1972. Autopoietic systems reproduce themselves “through a recursive loop” (Angelis, 2017, p. 227) by making their generated elements responsible for the production of new components, which renders the systems to be “autonomous entities”⁶ (Maturana, 2002, p. 6). The “conservation of autopoiesis” (ibid., p.10) is necessary for the survival of living systems (ibid.), and “[s]tructural coupling [...] can facilitate the realization of autopoiesis” (van Twist & Schaap, 1991, p. 32). In other words, a system needs to connect with another system, in a way that ensures the continuation of each system’s capability to reproduce itself, to flourish. To name an example, Maturana (2002) speaks of molecular systems that are connected through structural coupling by being open for flows of molecules which help the dynamics of self-production of each system. However, structural coupling is not restricted to the sphere of biology but can occur in any area, be it for example in a technological, political, or social. How is structural coupling related to this work?

Here the book of Angelis (2017) is crucial, to which Henfrey (2018b) refers in his position paper for the Post-Growth 2018 Conference. Angelis (2017) translated Maturana and Varela’s work on living systems “in terms that give insight on commons systems” (p.24). Henfrey (2018b) defines commons as “broadly speaking, all instances where social groups inclusively self-organise in order to regulate and administer shared use of any collective resource, whether tangible (e.g. land, energy, water) or intangible (e.g. knowledge, culture, social capacity).” He states that all degrowth initiatives are based on commons in some form (ibid.). Angelis (2017) describes communities, like the CLIs represented by ECOLISE, as “a structural element of commons” (p.337). Because commons are organised by social subjects through commoning, Angelis approaches commons as social systems based on Elinor Ostrom’s work. Ostrom, which Angelis calls “a champion of the commons” (ibid., p.156), won the Nobel Prize in economics in

⁶ It can be noted that “autonomous” does not imply an absence of a need for external input. Maturana (2002) describes this by explaining that at the biological level, living systems are self-producing, yet some flow of molecules passes through them from the outside.

2009 for her life's work on the commons. She made a significant contribution to the commons theory by refuting Garrett Hardin's *tragedy of the commons* thesis, as outlined by Angelis (ibid.) and explained in the following. According to Hardin (1968), commons rights would lead to resource depletion, giving the example of several farmers using the same land with their herds; each would use it to the maximum until no grass would remain. Therefore, he endorsed individual property rights or direct state management. Ostrom (2011) argues in her book from 1990 that the example mentioned by Hardin is a case of open access and not commons, as commoners establish rules for the use of and access to the commons, thus, ensuring the sustainability of the resources. By making this distinction, commons were first conceptualised as social systems. Angelis contributes to the commons literature by stating that open access and commons are not to be seen as opposites, as indicated by Ostrom since the first can become a part of the second. He writes that "in order for this free access to (re)produce, to be what it is through time, it has to be part of a commons, and has to be taken care of and governed by a specific bunch of commoners, the maximum number of which could be all the users of the free access space" (ibid., p.146). As per Angelis, for commons systems to reproduce themselves, be autopoietic, effective commoning as a form of governance is necessary. Thereby, he agrees with Ostrom that the reproduction of commons depends on managing principles. However, he also shares the view of Marxists and other anti-capitalists according to which the survival of commons "depends on the power relations vis-à-vis the enclosing (which simply destroys commons) or co-opting (which sucks surplus value by using commons as a way to keep social wages down) force of capital" (ibid., p.170). Combining Ostrom's and Marxists' approaches, Angelis sees commons as both "*endogenous* social systems, and commons as systems influenced by *external* social forces, capitalist social forces" (ibid., p.170).

He argues that degrowth is a condition in which commons systems can reproduce themselves, i.e. be autopoietic, which can be facilitated by structural coupling with other systems, based on the mentioned assumption that the survival of commons depends on external forces. Hence, with which systems should commons enter structural coupling? Angelis (2017) addresses structural coupling between different commons systems, which he calls *boundary commoning*, and also with structural coupling between commons and *capital systems*. Capital systems include all state and market formations based on growth and the accumulation of capital (Henfrey, 2018b).⁷ Both "[s]ocial autopoietic systems" (Angelis, 2017, p.259) are characterised by their different "specific autopoietic requirements" (ibid., p.313), i.e. different factors that have to be fulfilled for their existence. In this context, Henfrey (2018b) sees structural coupling as a desired form of interaction "in which commons creatively engage with – and in some cases are actively supported by – capital-based formations, in ways that support the continuation and growth of commons." The goal of ECOLISE is to enhance this interaction by making structural coupling "an implicit concept" of its strategy (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020), as the terms "structural

⁷ Here, Henfrey admits that for the purpose of "analytical simplicity" a generalisation takes place in this classification (Henfrey, 2018b). Building on these assumptions, this paper likewise does not question these simplifications.

coupling”, “capitalist structures”, “commons” and “autopoiesis” are not part of the official discourse conducted by ECOLISE. Tom Henfrey, as ECOLISE’s Research Coordinator, rather uses these “technical terms” in his analysis within a scientific framework (ibid.). Boundary commoning is not a term used by Henfrey, let alone ECOLISE, nonetheless it is the base of the network which consists of different commons initiatives with the goal of their autopoiesis: “[T]hrough a process of boundary commoning, many [...] commons have come together to form a network of commons with its own autopoietic process scaled up from the autopoietic processes of the individual commons” (Angelis, 2017, p.301).

ECOLISE and its members agreed on the current official strategy at their general assembly in April 2019. It pursues three explicit main goals: First, to strengthen the network’s structure, and second, to raise awareness among the population and policy-makers about the potential of CLIs for transformation, leading to policy changes. The third objective is to create an ideal framework that encourages collaboration and exchange in the areas of research, knowledge, and capacity building of communities (ECOLISE, n.d.–j). Since 2017/2018, ECOLISE has been developing this new strategy with its member organisations after the network had realised that the initial strategy from its founding year of 2014 was no longer in line with its current state of affairs. Henfrey sees this as an important natural learning process that is part of community-led action, with the strategy being constantly evaluated and reflected upon based on experiential values. In fact, *Knowledge and Learning* is one of three fundamental official pillars of ECOLISE’s strategy (Henfrey, 2018b). Therefore, a constant possibility of a redesign of the strategy due to an ongoing learning process exists. The other two pillars are *Communication* and *Policy/Advocacy* (ibid.). The communications working group focuses on spreading ECOLISE’s messages to the public and policy-makers; the Policy/Advocacy team aims at influencing policy processes at different levels.

To operationalise the new strategy, i.e. to put it into practice, the “Communities for Future” (CfF) programme was developed by ECOLISE (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020) and launched in September 2020 (ECOLISE, n.d.–i). Prior to the CfF, ECOLISE pursued the long-term strategic initiative Sustainable Communities Programme (SCP). The SCP goals included fostering synergies e.g. among various transition initiatives, CLIs, policy-makers, and researchers (ECOLISE, n.d.–o). Thus, the goals included boundary commoning as well as structural coupling between commons and capitals. However, the SCP was never fully implemented but its proposals are now to be carried out under the CfF (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). According to Henfrey, the advantage of the CfF compared to the SCP is that it “gives greater emphasis to the potential for structural coupling at all levels” (ibid.). Many activities planned by ECOLISE are related to the CfF programme, and a CfF web platform was set up, for instance, to share inspiring stories and provide space for collaboration.⁸

⁸ <<https://communitiesforfuture.org/about/>>.

The programme consists of four domains: Inspire, Enable, Advocate and Learn (ECOLISE, n.d.–n). The first domain involves motivating people to participate in CLIs or communities to join the Cff programme. In the next step, the inspired communities are enabled to become active. The advocate domain involves “work with partners and policymakers to create a favourable policy context” (ibid. p.14), i.e. lobbying. It is noticeable, however, that ECOLISE hardly ever speaks of lobbying but instead of advocacy work. A reason for this could be the common negative connotation of the term lobbying. After all, the existing revolving door phenomenon, for example, shows that lobbying can have the effect of policy-makers taking decisions favouring private interest groups at the expense of the common good. Therefore, it is not surprising that organisations claiming to represent civil society try to separate themselves from this picture, such as the Brussels-based start-up called “The Good Lobby”. Meera Ghani, the Policy Coordinator of ECOLISE confirms that ECOLISE uses the term *advocacy* when it comes to the work of lobbying. She explains that advocacy is the general term for a variety of activities that “push for change” whereby lobbying is a part of it. Hence, the advocacy domain includes not just contact to policy-makers but, for instance, also influencing partner organisations like CAN Europe and SDG Watch (see 4.4.1) “to change their narrative, and approach to policy-making and lobbying” (M. Ghani, personal communication, April 15, 2021)⁹.

The learning domain is about continuously acquiring knowledge relevant to ECOLISE’s work to improve its activities and provide advice for CLIs and policy-makers. A concept that is implemented across all domains is that of Communities of Practice (CoP). Here, people meet with the aim of “sharing experiences, tools and practices” (ECOLISE, 2019a). Thereby, new capabilities and knowledge can be created, and innovations fostered (Pór & van Bekkum, 2004), which makes it an important part of the Knowledge and Learning pillar of ECOLISE. This innovative strategy of knowledge exchange predicts success for the working areas, according to Pór and van Bekkum (ibid.).

It becomes apparent that the four domains resemble the aforementioned “three interconnected core pillars” (Henfrey, 2018b) of ECOLISE’s strategy. This interconnectedness can also be found in the four domains of the Cff, which Henfrey defines as “interdependent and complementary.” He uses the same words to characterise the strategic approach of ECOLISE called “disruption and conciliation” (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). This is a tactic in which action is taken on two fronts simultaneously. On the one hand, it involves “challeng[ing] the assumptions that sustainability can be achieved within the current dominant set of ideas and institutions” (ibid.), which can be seen as disruptive. On the other hand, it is about “creative engagement with policy” (Henfrey & Penha-Lopes, p.2), which belongs to the conciliatory part and is related to structural coupling; bringing “previously marginal ideas into the realms of political possibility” (ibid.).

⁹ From an E-Mail exchange (found on the ECOLISE website) with Ghani in order to get clarification on this matter. This communication is not mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, as it can be regarded of minor importance considering its limited scope. Ghani is informed that her statement is used in the thesis.

2.2 ECOLISE's view on the relevance of CLIs

ECOLISE emphasises on various occasions that CLIs have developed advanced models which offer solutions to prevalent problems at all socially relevant levels, i.e. at the societal, ecological, and economic scale (ECOLISE, 2019c). Furthermore, they provide a meaningful purpose for all participants (ECOLISE, 2018h). This corresponds to the literature, where degrowth is presented as a holistic concept to global challenges (e.g. Fromm, 2006).

ECOLISE refers to the result of the EU funded TESS (Towards European Societal Sustainability) study from 2017 by quoting that “‘If just five per cent of EU citizens were to engage in effective community-led climate mitigation initiatives, the carbon savings would be sufficient for nearly 85 percent of EU-28 countries to achieve their 2020 emissions reduction targets’” (ECOLISE, n.d.–b, n.d.–l). This can motivate those to engage who doubt their capacity to influence substantial change in the world. ECOLISE thus promotes grassroots participation in CLIs as a realistic and achievable solution to climate problems. The network contests thereby the mindset that it is an arduous way to achieve change: “[E]co-communities are proving changes are possible, they are relatively simple, and they come with improved quality of life, which is the key feedback loop (the reward) that inspires even deeper changes” (ECOLISE, 2018j). For the analysis of this statement, the concept of common senses by Gramsci can be adduced. ECOLISE is committed to changing the widespread common sense that stands in the way of transformation, according to which consumption, mobility, and extensive usage of technologies represent a high quality of life. In line with the title of the book “Liberation from Excess” by Nico Paech (2012), the degrowth movement tries to convince society that renouncing consumption can be a desirable lifestyle; very explicit about this is Fromm (2006). Therefore, by disseminating these messages that challenge common assumptions, ECOLISE acts as a social innovator as its work to achieve changes includes new ways of framing (Avelino et al., 2019).

Besides, Sanchez Salgado (2018) contributes to lobbying theory by showing that environmental organisations are more likely to spread hope than fear to achieve their goals, which seems to be the case with ECOLISE. The frequent mention of the positive effects of community-led initiatives legitimises its work and shows that alternatives already exist and are effective, implying that a degrowth transition does not have to be a utopia. Castells (2015) explains that “hope is a key component of political mobilization” (p.14) because it motivates people to take action today, even if the benefits will only be visible in the future (ibid.). The inspire domain of the CfF is directly related to this task of spreading hope.

At the beginning of 2019, ECOLISE published the first edition of the Status Report on community-led action on sustainability and climate change which “demonstrates that communities are delivering a much broader set of benefits than technological solutions focussed only on reducing carbon emissions” (ECOLISE, 2019d). This description by ECOLISE intends to emphasise the superiority of degrowth alternatives in contrast to, e.g., green growth solutions. ECOLISE thus uses so-called narratives of

change: “In a constant struggle over interpretive supremacy with dominant narratives [...], narratives of change seek to reveal the failings of current institutional systems and suggest alternatives” (Wittmayer et al., 2019, p. 9).

Furthermore, ECOLISE’s council member Nara Petrovič writes that only CLIs can offer long-term solutions, as they do not emerge from the system that created the problems it wants to solve. In this way, he advocates the degrowth concept:

In the wake of the climate crisis, the global approach to solutions remains urban and technological, and therefore limited to the dominant paradigm that caused the problem. Ecovillages offer a different approach, rural and organic; rural in the sense of human-scale integration of people with their living environment and organic in the sense of going along with, instead of against, nature (ECOLISE, 2020c).

Therefore, degrowth initiatives are presented as superior concrete options to current models within the growth-based system. The UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are among these dominant takes on sustainability. ECOLISE shows that CLIs can offer and are already working on solutions for the real problems that the SDGs are meant to target. At the same time, ECOLISE writes that “[t]he perspectives and activities of CLIs also highlight weaknesses and contradictions in the SDGs” (ECOLISE, n.d.–1). At this point, ECOLISE emphasises that in mature economies, economic growth, social equity and sustainability, all objectives of SDGs, cannot occur simultaneously and refers to research (ibid.). Hence, this argumentation is part of the disruptive strategy of ECOLISE. Solutions provided by CLIs are free of these contradictions because they do not depend on growth. Angelis (2017) explains this by saying that economic growth is an autopoietic requirement of capital systems. This means that without economic growth the current financial system would collapse. Yet, economic growth is not an autopoietic requirement of commons, as they are kept in existence by “alternative means of livelihood and exchange that are not directly measured in terms of economic growth” (ibid., p.313). These alternatives are called “frugal innovations” (Schneider, 2010, p.2) as new ways are found to operate within the given boundaries.

In summary, ECOLISE wants long-term changes of the prevailing system in favour of a “transition to both post-growth and post-capitalism” (Henfrey, 2018b). To achieve this, ECOLISE regards CLIs as indispensable, which becomes particularly clear in the following statement by Eamon O’Hara, the Executive Director of ECOLISE: “The message is very clear – engaging citizens in local, community-level responses leads to transformative change; without such engagement, such transformation will not be achieved” (ECOLISE, 2019d). This explains why ECOLISE focuses on this particular area of the degrowth concept. However, the network invests a significant part of its work not on the direct support of communities but with contact to EU institutions, which implies that ECOLISE believes that this can eventually help the development of CLIs more. ECOLISE’s perspective on this topic is presented in the following chapter.

2.3 ECOLISE's view on the relevance of cooperation between degrowth initiatives and policy-makers

According to ECOLISE, CLIs can only develop their full potential if policy-makers support them. Local initiatives have many innovative ideas but there are plenty of barriers to their implementation. These include regulatory and administrative obstacles, a high dependency on volunteers, and difficult state funding access (ECOLISE, 2018h). Their dependence on external financial resources arises from the difficulty for CLIs to produce a financial surplus (Esteves, 2017). Due to the complexity of these problems, they cannot solve them alone (ECOLISE, 2018h). As per ECOLISE, existing obstacles should be removed from the top in the first step, and in the next steps, regulations, and laws should be passed to support regenerative CLIs (ECOLISE, 2018b). Narrowed down, ECOLISE demands from policy-makers financial and policy support for CLIs (ECOLISE, 2018b, 2019j).

ECOLISE acknowledges that local initiatives cannot flourish entirely independently, consistent with D'Alisa's and Kallis' (2020) elaborated connection of Gramsci's theory of the state to the degrowth movement. Accordingly, the voluntary cooperation between degrowth initiatives and state institutions can be conducive to a degrowth transition by allowing the network of regenerative communities to grow. ECOLISE corroborates with that by writing that a degrowth-friendly policy context is essential for local initiatives to spread (ECOLISE, n.d.-b) and that "something powerful and transformative is unfolding" (ECOLISE, 2018b, p. 2) when policy-makers support bottom-up action, implying structural coupling. Elsewhere, the network writes that without this support "effective grassroots initiatives remain in a pilot or experimental phase, often find themselves in conflict with prevalent policy trends, and struggle to achieve wider societal impact" (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 2). Essentially, bottom-up initiatives are insufficient to reach a degrowth transition, but structural coupling with capital institutions is needed (Angelis, 2017; Henfrey, 2018b). This view is confirmed by degrowth researcher François Schneider (2010) who states that frugal innovations created by bottom-up initiatives are only successful in combination with "adjustments" from "a higher level", i.e. by governmental or international institutions, that aim at reducing the „consumption and production capacity" (p.20). In this regard, Fromm (2006) writes that "the government must play an important role" in directing production toward "healthy and reasonable consumption" (p.215).

ECOLISE further assumes that "without wider citizen and community engagement, top-down policies remain ineffective in the face of current challenges" (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 2) and that "bottom-up approaches are an essential complement to top-down approaches in achieving the radical, structural and lasting lifestyle changes necessary for creating an equitable, sustainable and zero-carbon society" (ECOLISE, n.d.-g). These statements illustrate that neither top-down actions alone but only the combination of bottom-up and top-down activities is effective in achieving a transition. This implies ECOLISE's rejection of a model in which it is dictated to the citizens from the top to lead regenerative

lifestyles. The Gramscian theory (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020) can also provide reasons for this perspective: “No ruling class survives merely by exercising force; it has to establish a ‘hegemony,’ a prevalent discourse that makes sense for many actors in society because it responds to their interpretation of the issues at stake and their responses to them” (p.6). Fittingly, Fromm (2006) writes that it is not an option for a “new society” (p.211) that the state exerts coercion on citizens since this leads to the opposite of the desired goal of an improved democracy. For example, curbing consumption only results in citizens wanting to consume even more as a form of protest. Therefore, the objective is to make people wish to change their lifestyle by making the alternatives seem more attractive. Thus, a new system can only replace an old one if the right time has developed for it. Fromm (2016) writes in this respect: “All [...] changes can only be made step by step and with the consent of the majority of the population. The final result will be a new economic system[...].” (p.218). Angelis (2017) argues that “[s]ystems are not implemented, their dominance emerges” (p.269). This is aligned with Marx’s idea of a social revolution, which, in contrast to Lenin’s conception of a political revolution, implies a gradual process and not a one-time event in which power is usurped (ibid.). Correspondingly, Henfrey (interview, November 4, 2020) says that time is needed before there can be a replacement of the current system with a new one, as the latter still needs to be worked on: „[S]o of the moment we have these possibilities and alternatives in terms of CLIs but no community initiative has fully replaced what the state or the market are doing, so we can’t abandon the state or the market without a good idea of where we are going.” ECOLISE’s strategy of “disruption and conciliation” fits in with this, whereby the current system is being questioned so that it makes space for the next one, and simultaneously that new system is being worked on. Hence, it can be concluded that ECOLISE plans to “‘build a new world in the shell of the old’” (Henfrey, 2018a). Schneiberg and Lounsbury (2008) talk about movements that question institutions and want to “disrupt” (p.650) them and, on the other hand, movements that “draw on [...] existing institutions” (p.649) and work out new projects. ECOLISE’s special feature is that it interconnects both strategies at the same time.

How exactly ECOLISE envisions a transition path from a dominant capitalist system to a degrowth model based on commons is described by Henfrey (2018b) in his draft position paper for the Post-Growth 2018 Conference in Brussels. Based on Angelis’ (2017) book, Henfrey (2018b) argues that structural coupling between commons and capital formations would lead to a growing worldwide network of degrowth initiatives, gradually replacing and rendering obsolete capitalist structures. That way, a transformation process from the current capitalist economy to a post-growth economy can take place. In this context, Henfrey refers to the Three Horizon model developed by the International Futures Forum. Organisations of the First Horizon (H1) strive to maintain the status quo because of their ideological commitment to economic growth. The Third Horizon (H3) stands for the goal of a post-growth society based on commons and the commons initiatives that already exist. The Second Horizon (H2) includes the transitional processes and organisations that contribute to the implementation of the Third Horizon (ibid.). Henfrey sees ECOLISE as an H2 organisation practising structural coupling between

the H1, which dominates today, and the H3, which is to be strengthened for its expansion and full implementation (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020).¹⁰ According to Henfrey, this role is necessary because “the First Horizon and the Third Horizon find it difficult to relate to each other directly” (ibid.).

Structural coupling needs to be based on “a relationship of respect and listening between institutions and communities” (ECOLISE, 2018b). Thus, ECOLISE seeks partnerships on an equal footing, in which political institutions do not exploit an imbalance of power to promote capitalist structures. Instead, communities should be actively involved in the design and implementation of solutions to global problems. To this end, ECOLISE’s objectives include “to facilitate this dialogue, by creating a platform where practitioners and researchers can jointly develop policy proposals and positions and contribute in an open and constructive way to the creation and implementation of policy” (ECOLISE, n.d.–f, p. 3). Consistent with ECOLISE’s aim of mutual respect, Henfrey speaks of his attitude of “abandoning the language of confrontation” (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). Therefore, structural coupling is not to be seen as a method “to fight the system from within” (ibid.) because capitalist formations like the EU institutions are not perceived as enemies to be defeated. Instead, ECOLISE views itself in the role of an empathic advisor trying to help the capitalist institutions to answer the following questions: “What is this institution supposed to be doing and why is it becoming a source of problems rather than something that’s helpful to the people? What are your aspirations, what’s the good that you want to do in the world, and how can we bring about the change that allows you to reconnect with that and act upon that” (ibid.)? This method should guarantee the flourishing of the institutions in a way that is conducive for the common good because for structural coupling to happen, each system’s autopoiesis needs be conserved (ibid.). This respectful interaction is a social innovation, as ECOLISE contributes to changes in relations (Avelino et al., 2019) and therefore practices what it wants to see reflected in the world. Besides, this approach is based on ECOLISE’s fundamentally positive conception of human beings. Thus, as per Henfrey “everybody at base is trying to do the right thing regarding to [his or her] understanding within the limitations that surround [him or her]” (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). In this respect, Henfrey speaks of “accept[ing] the humanity and morality in every person”. Fromm (2016), on the other hand, has a more neutral view of human beings, according to which people are neither inherently egoistic nor the opposite. Rather, tendencies are reinforced by social structures and the result of the growth-oriented system is that the average person is selfish, and politicians are more interested in their profit than their social responsibility. Following this line of thought, it might be difficult for ECOLISE to appeal to the goodwill of politicians of H1 institutions.

However, ECOLISE provides examples for successful collaborations, based on politicians having the public good in mind, which are classified here as examples for structural coupling. One case is the regional government of Navarra in Spain that recognised the potential of local ecovillages to solve the

¹⁰ Henfrey adds “that this is just [his] personal assessment, not necessarily shared by others [from ECOLISE] and certainly not a deliberate strategic choice [of ECOLISE]” (T. Henfrey, personal communication, April 21, 2021).

problem of rural exodus. Having contacted a local member organisation of ECOLISE to learn from their experience, the local government and the organisation are now working together, and significant progress was noticed, especially regarding rural land and population regeneration (ECOLISE, 2019j). ECOLISE describes the positive trend for the degrowth movement, namely that more and more “community initiatives are engaging in dialogue with municipal partners, helping to inspire and even reorient municipal activities, in line with longer term climate and sustainability goals” (ECOLISE, n.d.–g). In structural coupling, the outcomes are positive for the commons and the capital institutions in the sense that they can better fulfil their function. Consequently, autopoiesis of the capital system, which is conserved by structural coupling, does not mean that the system’s status quo is perpetuated, which would be undesirable for the commons. Instead, both systems change similarly to the way that, for example, “individuals in a close relationship change ‘congruently’ through their interactions” (Brocklesby, 2011, p. 622). Thus, structural coupling can “enabl[e] the municipality to be better, to be more in tune with its purpose as a municipality [...]” (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). Yet, the logical consequence of this is that degrowth initiatives and organisations may also change in contact with capitalist institutions and thus lose their integrity. This danger of co-optation is mainly thematised in section 3.3.

ECOLISE finds that institutional support for degrowth initiatives should grow not only at the local and regional level but also at the country and EU level. However, that such examples as from Navarra can be replicated at the EU level seems much more difficult. Reasons for this can be found in Fromm’s (2006) argumentation: “Due to the immanent logic of today’s capitalism [...], governments are getting bigger and bigger and eventually inflate into huge bureaucratic apparatuses, which are governed centralistic from the top” (pp.224-225). This is reminiscent of a survey result from 2018, according to which 57 per cent of respondents in Germany associated the EU with “rampant bureaucracy”¹¹ (Winde, 2019). Further, after Fromm, people who work in these apparatuses become bureaucrats who “no longer have a human bond with [their] subordinates” (p.227), since through quantification measures, “people are managed like things” (p.226). Ergo, even though this is an over-generalisation, the bureaucratic structure of the EU could complicate ECOLISE’s work with EU officials for the purpose of achieving socio-ecological changes, following Fromm’s argumentation. Yet, the EU level is fundamental, as per ECOLISE, because problems we are facing, such as climate change, are global and therefore require coordination at the international level. Due to the EU’s overarching role, it can, for instance, promote collaboration between different regions to find sustainable solutions (ECOLISE, n.d.–l). Hence, although ECOLISE also supports fruitful relationships between local authorities and degrowth initiatives, the focus of its work, as will be shown later, is on liaising with EU institutions.

The results presented in this chapter show that ECOLISE has a very clear idea of how a transformation should take place and how the dominant institutions can contribute to it. D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) state that “[t]hose who write about degrowth advocate radical policy and social change, but have

¹¹ Own translation.

no model to explain how, why and under what conditions such change could come about and what role the state would play in it” (p.1). Hence, ECOLISE contributes constructively to the degrowth discourse and, through its scientific focus, also to the literature focusing on involving political institutions in its strategy of achieving change.

As described above, ECOLISE expects from the EU support for CLIs and, in a broader sense, for degrowth positions. The extent to which the EU has already supported the degrowth movement and ECOLISE morally and financially is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3 – Context

3.1 EU funds

Based on the document analysis those EU funds were identified which support projects directly related to ECOLISE's work. The largest financial support for CLIs by the EU comes from its financial instrument called Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). ECOLISE welcomes the existence of this support, yet the network criticises some aspects of it. According to ECOLISE, a significant issue here is that not enough CLIs can access funding under the CLLD. The network gives the example that in many countries, urban communities are not allowed to benefit from the CLLD (ECOLISE, 2017h). Furthermore, ECOLISE disapproves the fact that “[m]any CLLD programmes have a priority focus on short-term economic development activities (employment and enterprise creation) but do not provide sufficient flexibility to support longer term transition processes” (ibid.). Hence, it seems that the form of interaction between the EU and commons through the CLLD is not that of a desired structural coupling focusing on the growth of commons. Instead, until now, it appears to have elements of *co-optation* in which capitalist thinking is in the foreground, and CLIs are seen as an opportunity to serve economic growth (Henfrey, 2018b). Therefore, ECOLISE calls for changes so that the CLLD becomes accessible to all communities and adopts as its overarching goal the promotion of a socio-ecological transition. For this purpose, the EU should simplify the application process for financial support and install local CLLD offices to assist applicants (ECOLISE, 2017h). Besides, initiatives should be supported even if they don't generate jobs directly, implying that economic growth should not be at the focus, but the growth of sustainable communities; so that the CLLD could become an element of structural coupling.

Besides, the EU has set up a thematic group called “Smart Villages” in the framework of its European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), in which ECOLISE participates to make rural services more sustainable. To this end, more digital innovations and community-led actions are promoted in the regions (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). The EU programmes Smart Villages and CLLD are directly addressed to CLIs. Financial support measures mainly directed at organisations and networks are Horizon 2020 (H2020), exclusively for research projects, and Erasmus+ (ECOLISE, n.d.–n); with the majority of ECOLISE's resources coming from these funds (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020).

In 2018, ECOLISE carried out intensive and finally successful fundraising, finding expression in the funding of the Urban A and COMETS (Collective Action Models for Energy Transition and Social Innovation) projects within the H2020 budget. Both projects started in 2019 and run for three years (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). Another H2020 funded project with ECOLISE's participation is the GROW Observatory, which is running since 2016 (ECOLISE, n.d.–k).

Henfrey (2018b) argues that the EU has already strongly supported research on topics that are important for a degrowth transition. Except for the projects in which ECOLISE is directly

involved, there are, for example, “completed FP7 projects such as BASE, TRANSIT, TESS, ARTS, PATHWAYS, GLAMURS” and other ongoing H2020 projects called “ENERGISE, INSPIRE, [...] and ProsEU”¹². However, Henfrey (ibid.) finds that more is needed for research becoming vehicles of change: “[D]espite substantial recent research investment on the part of the EU and others, knowledge remains patchy and fragmented, and is not effectively mobilised for either policy influence or action.” Besides, ECOLISE criticises H2020 and previous EU Research Framework Programmes for not inviting civil society organisations (CSOs) and citizens to develop the funding programme’s priorities (ECOLISE, 2017g). This leads to ECOLISE’s vocation to focus intensely on its Knowledge and Learning domain and combine this activity with its Policy and Advocacy work to influence the planning of research funding by the EU (Henfrey, 2018b). In the framework of research funding, the EU also supports ECOLISE’s creation of knowledge commons (presented in section 4.1) (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). Overall, a focus of the EU on the promotion of sustainability research is visible. Thus, it is beneficial for ECOLISE that one of its main activity domains covers research (see section 4.1). For other areas of ECOLISE’s work, such as the SCP and the European Day of Sustainable Communities (EDSC) – organised by ECOLISE to raise awareness of policy-makers, society and other stakeholders – the funds have been smaller (ibid.).

In addition to the H2020 subsidies for research projects, other projects in which ECOLISE is involved are funded mainly under Erasmus+. One of these is the Ecovillage Transition in Action (ETA) project, “led by GEN in partnership with ECOLISE, GEN-Germany, the Norwegian ecovillage Stiftelsen Kilden Økosamfunn and the University of St Andrews, Scotland”, which was launched at the EDSC 2019. The project aims to promote cooperation between CLIs and policy-makers at a local level (ECOLISE, 2019i). The largest project so far led by ECOLISE and supported by the EU, particularly within the framework of Erasmus+, is BLAST (Blended Adult learning for the Social-ecological Transition) (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). Its goal is to educate people throughout Europe on how they can effectively contribute to a socio-ecological transition.

The EU funding of these projects can be seen as a sign that the EU is more open to ideas behind the degrowth concept. Further indications of this will be discussed in the next chapter.

3.2 Degrowth-friendly conditions in the political environment

Ideally, in structural coupling, the capital system recognises the need to expand the commons system in order to achieve sustainability goals. ECOLISE’s goal is to reach this through its policy and advocacy

¹² H2020 is the successor of FP7, which was a European Union’s Research and Innovation funding programme. Some of the results of the TESS research are used in the ECOLISE documents as a basis for argumentation.

work. In which way H1 institutions have already expressed their support of the degrowth movement and CLIs, is dealt with in this chapter.

2017: At the COP23, the UN climate conference in November 2017 in Bonn, a new Local Communities and Indigenous People's (LCIP) platform was founded, participating as a party in the next COP negotiations. O'Hara concluded from the conference that governments are increasingly convinced of the importance of cooperation with non-state actors (O'Hara, 2017) which can be interpreted as a growing openness to engage in structural coupling with non-state actors. He sees this as an evident success of ECOLISE and other organisations that have committed themselves to promote the recognition of CLIs. For this reason, after O'Hara (ibid.), there are "reasons for optimism", but at the same time, the network demands a faster pace of progress.

2018: ECOLISE sees the funds received in 2018 for the large projects UrbanA and COMETS as signs for continuous financial support for more projects in future. The network feels valued by these funds and the related recognition as a project partner (ECOLISE, n.d.-d). The year also saw a policy paper's publication by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), an EU consultative body representing CSOs, on "Boosting climate actions by non-state actors." ECOLISE writes that this shows the policy-makers' recognition of the important role of non-state actors, like CLIs, to meet climate goals. As per ECOLISE, this can be attributed mainly to the Paris Convention's implementation, which leads to proposals from a broader spectrum being listened to (ECOLISE, 2018h). However, ECOLISE believes that actions, such as adopting appropriate policies (ibid.), must follow this first step of recognition. The EESC also showed support for CLIs by setting up a "European Dialogue on Non-State Climate Action" in 2018 to shape the political arena in a way that supports bottom-up climate action by bringing together non-state actors with policy-makers (ECOLISE, 2018d). Additionally, the EU's Council issued a policy statement in February 2018, praising in an unprecedented manner the relevance of CLIs in the fight against climate change (ECOLISE, 2018b). O'Hara calls this "an important breakthrough" and a fruit of ECOLISE's advocacy work (ECOLISE, 2018e). The statement by the Council is essential because of its consequences for the EU's decision-making processes: "It means that all related EU policies should now consider the role of local communities, and EU negotiators also have a green light to promote the role of local communities in the UN climate negotiations" (ibid.).

An essential event for the whole degrowth movement was the Post-Growth Conference in September 2018 in Brussels, chaired by supporting Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) (ECOLISE, 2018k). The fact that the EU addressed the issue in a specially organised conference lasting several days, with various stakeholders' participation, is hugely significant, given the EU's general orientation towards green growth, as described in section 1.1. After Henfrey, ECOLISE partly takes credit for this conference due to ECOLISE's advocacy and policy activities (ECOLISE, 2018o). The frequent demonstration of the network's effectiveness and success can motivate the member organisations to continue the work and leads to "a sense of both impact and relatedness" (Avelino et al., 2020). Besides, Henfrey (ECOLISE, 2018o) argues that this event's existence is a sign of the crisis in which the EU finds itself

due to its neo-liberal orientation. Loske (2018) also shares this view according to which the EU is in an identity crisis of which widespread EU critical movements are proof. Following Loske (ibid.), a reorientation of the EU towards the degrowth concept could provide the EU with new meaning and justification.

Who profits from the public's distrust in EU institutions are, among others, degrowth movements (Loorbach et al., 2016). Ergo, the loss of legitimacy of dominant institutions leads to an increase in counter movements' legitimacy (ibid.). Fittingly, Henfrey argues that the progressive degrowth ideas, which were regarded too radical for a long time, seem to be considered at that conference because of the EU's crisis (ECOLISE, 2018o). This fits in with Loske's (2018) analysis of the history of growth critique. Accordingly, the second phase of its blossoming could only begin with the onset of the economic crisis and the resulting increased recognition of degrowth positions. Crises are called *game changers* (Loorbach et al., 2016) because of this transformative potential, which is evidence of governments' low planning ability and foresight by pushing business as usual until crises occur. The reason for this may be that powerholders are trying to stabilise their position by not implementing unpopular reforms, including ambitious climate policies, as means to maintain the support of the electorate (Koch, 2018). Consequently, by using the green growth doctrine, the expectations of the population are to be met. Maes and Jacobs (2017) write that the EU population demands economic growth, for instance, to feel secure about workplaces, and at the same time, the protection of ecosystems. Green growth seems to be a win-win solution; it helps to gain or retain voters by showing that action is taken in the sense of problem-solving, while at the same time, habits and lifestyles of the population hardly need to change. This convenient solution seems to be ideal: business as usual with a clear conscience. Thereby, it appears that those in power hope that disastrous economic, social or environmental consequences of this modus operandi will only occur to their successors. On the other hand, the degrowth movement claims to offer sustainable solutions, based on a "longer-sighted discourse" (Loorbach et al., 2016), aiming to avoid future crises (e.g. Jackson, 2017).

Looking at the opportunities of 2018, it becomes apparent that several EU institutions supported the degrowth movement, namely the Parliament, the EESC, the Commission, and the Council. ECOLISE summarises the year as follows: "At EU level there are signs of positive change, but much more needs to be done to really harness the potential of CLIs" (ECOLISE, n.d.-I).

2019: Tom Henfrey participated in May 2019 in the conference on "Collaboration for Climate Action", the theme of this year's "International Conference on Climate Action - ICCA2019". The event was organised by Germany's Federal Environment Ministry, the State of Baden-Württemberg, and the City of Heidelberg, where the event took place. Within this framework, many grassroots organisations were invited. Henfrey (2019) commented on the event with bold letters:

All speakers – whether from government, civil society, academic or business – clearly recognised the seriousness and urgency of the situation, the need to upscale existing solutions at an unprecedented rate and the central role collaboration is likely to take all parties out of their existing comfort zones if this is to be achieved.

Interestingly, he notes that a mindset has emerged among the speakers, pursuant to which real changes include getting out of the “comfort zone” which is a typical degrowth position. The fact that the German state was involved can be an excellent sign given Germany’s particular role in the EU, as described by Koch (2018). Henfrey approves the German government’s support for many grassroots initiatives through its National Climate Initiative and its commitment to address climate challenges. Still, Henfrey also recognises that, like all governments, the German government “remains constrained by what is considered politically acceptable” (Henfrey, 2019). Fittingly, Bunea (2013) summarises an idea from the work of Skodvin et al. (2010) by writing that policy-makers are limited in their enforcement of policy goals by “political legitimacy and policy feasibility” (Bunea, 2013, p.555). Following Castell (2015), the result is “that at the end of the day, the dreams of social change will have to be watered down and channelled through political institutions” (p.272), which is called “*realpolitik*” (ibid.). However, Henfrey (2019) concludes from the event that ECOLISE should not miss the opportunity for structural coupling: “[T]he space of possibility for engaging established political structures is greater than ever before, if we are prepared to step into it.”

2020: ECOLISE sees the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for the recognition of the importance of CLIs through their high level of resilience in crises. After O’Hara, it became clear that the communities’ life model, with its local supply structures, social cohesion, and lower dependence on global markets, can be the answer to the uncertainties caused by global crises. Thus, change can occur, with decentralised decision-making processes and a greater focus on locality in distributing goods and services (ECOLISE, n.d.–i). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic proved the shortcomings of the current system in the equitable global provision of the essentials (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). As a consequence, once again, a global crisis can lead to the legitimacy of the degrowth movement. D’Alisa and Kallis (2020) write that a degrowth transformation, despite the requirement of value changes in society, does not necessarily have to be a very longsome process. Crises can speed up the process by stimulating reflection in societies. People are more open to considering new solutions for their hardships if the presented alternatives seem convincing. Equally, policy-makers are more receptive to advocacy work in this particular period. After all, not only the public but they too are insecure about the pandemic and attach particular importance to public opinion now (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). That is why ECOLISE has made the strengths of communities in times of crisis the core theme of the 2020 annual general assembly. The main aim was to motivate the participants to seize the emerging opportunities by getting more involved (ECOLISE, 2020d). ECOLISE planned to take advantage of this opportunity phase by supporting several events within the framework of the European Day of Sustainable Communities 2020, which focuses on responses to the COVID-19 crisis (ECOLISE, n.d.–i).

Concerning the future, ECOLISE believes that its work will continue to be increasingly relevant. The reason for this optimism is the growing dissatisfaction of the population and rising demands for socio-cultural changes, partly expressed in the form of various grassroots campaigns (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). This is consistent with Loske’s (2018) assessment that changes in values are currently happening in

society. New crises are also likely to occur that enhance this tendency, as they are inherent to the current system (e.g. Jackson, 2017).

Besides, ECOLISE welcomes the EU's measures for this decade in connection with its orientation towards sustainable development: "[F]avourable policy opportunities are [...] emerging in relation to increasingly ambitious climate mitigation targets and adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, along with the various Green New Deal proposals" (ECOLISE, n.d.-n, p. 3). This could be somewhat surprising because ECOLISE, with its degrowth vision, has different plans for purposeful and effective measures to cope with the climate crisis. However, the network supports all attempts of policy-makers to take a more sustainable path. This matches the three-stage process outlined by (Gough, 2017) which should lead to a final socio-ecological transition. The first step on this path for EU countries is the implementation of green growth strategies. In the second step, there should be a more regulated form of capitalism, with reforms that aim to change consumer behaviour. Only in the third step should degrowth strategies be implemented. However, ECOLISE demands that this process should not take too long, taking into account the severe climate and environmental problems (ECOLISE, n.d.-l; O'Hara, 2017), whereby the network shares the opinion of various scholars (Angelis, 2017; Castells, 2011; Koch, 2018). It is worth mentioning that policies typically coming from the degrowth spectrum do not have to be adopted only in the third stage but can already occur in the phase of green growth (Koch, 2018). Hence, ECOLISE shows a positive outlook on the EU programmes for the time after 2020, which, thanks to ECOLISE's advocacy work, "are expected to include a greater emphasis on a community-led transition" (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 4). It seems, therefore, that the EU's green growth strategies do indeed already contain degrowth elements. Pollex and Lenschow (2018) examined the EU's H2020 Framework Programme for degrowth influences and concluded that it contains degrowth positions, but the focus remains clearly on economic growth. In the interview, Henfrey (interview, November 4, 2020) says that "[...] the opportunity phase is expanding at various high-level political frameworks [and] political agreements", which means that "the second horizon is becoming increasingly stronger within incumbent institutions, although it's by no means predominant." This implies an existence of an at least growing understanding from the institutions that "they need the transformative change and they need to take an interest in what's happening on the Third Horizon [...]." As a consequence, the possibility of structural coupling is higher today than in the past. This facilitates H2 organisations like ECOLISE to build structural coupling between the H1 and H3. Furthermore, the local implementation of EU programmes also leads to more opportunities for the active involvement of CLIs in local policy-making processes which leads to the "mainstreaming" of CLIs (ibid.). That is exactly "[t]he aim of Communities for Future: **the widespread mainstreaming of regenerative and transformative community-led action on climate change and sustainability in the period up to 2030 and beyond**" (ECOLISE, n.d.-n, p. 1). This mainstreaming can be seen as a change in the current common sense as a necessary condition for a transition (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020). Thus, the CfF is an action plan to respond to and catalyse the new emerging opportunities (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020).

As a consequence, ECOLISE expects the recognition of the role of CLIs to continue in the future. At the same time, ECOLISE is committed to stressing, as shown above, that this is not a matter of course but the result of its dedicated work; meaning that the EU and its Member States' support may also diminish without continuous persistent effort, which emphasises the vital role of ECOLISE for a degrowth transition.

In summary, ECOLISE's frequent positive presentation in its documents of the opportunities arising within the EU fits Sanchez Salgado's (2018) analysis, according to which EU-based CSOs praise policy-makers if they see the occasion for doing so, as they consider it to be a fair approach that can increase the organisations' credibility. Besides, it's a way to motivate members and supporters.

However, this optimism is only one side of the coin and should not deceive the overall picture of the framework conditions since ECOLISE also faces severe obstacles. As per ECOLISE, these influence the network's work no less: "The current environment is highly mixed, and offers both unprecedented dangers and unique opportunities" (ECOLISE, n.d.-n, p. 2). After having dealt with the opportunities, the next part will focus on the dangers or challenges.

3.3 Challenges

In ECOLISE's advocacy strategy for 2020–2021, it is stated that "[i]n terms of challenges, the 'business as usual' approach still prevails and the capitalist growth-centred approach to transition, which emphasis 'greening' of the current system, still dominates [sic]" (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 3). Besides, at the Paris conference from 2019, O'Hara was expressing his displeasure to all gathered that "[c]ommunity-led initiatives are an essential part of the response to the climate emergency, yet they are still not on the radar of policy makers and do not get the recognition and support necessary" (ECOLISE, 2019c). Building pressure is a possible intention behind this statement.

Further, ECOLISE names financial and regulatory obstacles that hamper CLIs from participating in mainstream policy processes (ECOLISE, n.d.-l). ECOLISE has to deal with similar challenges as Henfrey (interview, November 4, 2020) explains in the interview with regard to ECOLISE's lack of a highly refined communication strategy adapted to the various EU institutions: "Our resource limitations prevent us from being as meticulously organised as we'd like to be."

Moreover, a TESS research project found that 62 per cent of the CLIs surveyed face public policy problems since they have to comply with various regulations and laws (ECOLISE, n.d.-l). For example, "many laws restrict the use of compost toilets, independent water (re-)use or eco-construction of houses" (Avelino et al., 2020, p. 967). Thus, not only the policy-makers' passivity is an obstacle to CLIs due to insufficient funding, but also that the regulations imposed actively complicate the work of CLIs.

The TESS research project shows also that another constraint is a "policy environment which is [...] unsupportive in general or ambiguous towards CLIs" (ECOLISE, n.d.-l). This matches Henfrey's (2018b) analysis, according to which "[t]he two predominant forms of relationship between capital and

commons [...] are enclosure and co-optation.” In the case of *enclosure*, it is about the “expropriation of commons resources, whether direct (by force and legal measures) or indirect (by externalities such as pollution etc.)” (Angelis, 2017, p.317) which leads to the destruction of specific commons. Co-optation means “the use of commons to work for capital and not simply for the reproduction of commons themselves” (ibid.). That means that commons become monetised and serve the capitalist system whereby their own autopoiesis is hampered. These conditions are the opposite of desired structural coupling, so their current dominance shows that ECOLISE’s goal is still a long way off.

In this context, Henfrey and Penha-Lopes (2018) refer to the phenomenon of coercive isomorphism which represents the pressure that regimes exert on commons to comply with their demands. Governmental influence on the developments of CLIs increases when they are legitimised by a legal organisational form, as these statuses are provided by the regime actors. However, the only way for CLIs to overcome barriers to obtaining funds or collaborating with other organisations is usually to enter a legal form. The stages of selecting the right legal organisational status and then complying with the applicable rules, in turn, lead to further barriers. Challenges related to this can be summarised as “financial, knowledge, and organizational” (Becker et al., 2018, p.4). In order to choose the appropriate form, knowledge is necessary, which must be paid for by the CLIs, as it is usually not already available to them. Moreover, establishing a legal form is related to a significant amount of bureaucracy and organisational work, to ensure that the required conditions are met. As a result, less time and money can be spent for the purpose of preparing a transition. As Becker et al. (ibid.) state, “[t]he process of applying for and maintaining a legal form is a process of coercive isomorphism as CBIs are subjected to pressures to conform to standard recognizable structures and forms that may not have been envisioned as part of the CBI by the founders” (p.4).

ECOLISE is continuously confronted with coercive isomorphism, and, after Henfrey and Penha-Lopes (2018), “[t]his danger is perhaps more pronounced at the scale at which ECOLISE operates and amplified by its explicit attention to policy-related goals” (p.4). This means that, compared to smaller commons initiatives, the network runs a particular risk of co-optation due to its constant contact with capital organisations. Also, ECOLISE’s legal organisational form, a registered association, implies challenges as “this legal form has very strict requirements for dealing with profits” (Becker et al., 2018, p. 5). This means that ECOLISE cannot only focus on its mission but has organisational and bureaucratic efforts to maintain its legal status. ECOLISE is also more exposed to coercive isomorphism because, as an umbrella organisation, it allows its members to bypass the barriers to obtaining legal status. Thus, CLIs can legally join an already established network and avoid bureaucratic and financial efforts themselves (ibid.). Besides, ECOLISE is especially vulnerable because its funding stems mainly from the EU, and this dependence represents “a source of a lot of necessary compromises” (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). Henfrey also says, referring to the EU funded projects, that “[t]he demands of the programmes and projects forc[e] [ECOLISE] to work often in ways that aren’t exactly how [it] choose[s] to but are necessary to access funds [...]” (ibid.). According to Beck et al. (2018), resource dependency

is the main reason for CLIs to apply for a legal form and thereby, a central factor leading to coercive isomorphism.

Interesting is ECOLISE's "pragmatic" (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020) attitude to this situation, with Henfrey saying that accepting and navigating these tensions allows the network "to make the most of it" (ibid.). ECOLISE uses the pressures as a force for innovation since they force the network to continuously examine if it is not losing sight of its values and at the same time find ways to remain fully functional in its activities by engaging with institutions of the capital system. This tightrope act demands a lot of self-reflection. Thus, ECOLISE is not discouraged by the challenges but sees them as a vehicle for growth (Henfrey & Penha-Lopes, 2018). ECOLISE passes the knowledge and experience that the network acquires on coping with pressures to its members, who, in turn, advise CLIs, resulting in a "multi-level learning ecology" that is continuously responsive to the external context (ibid.) Hence, in the framework of ECOLISE's learning domain, a community of practice is built to build a higher resilience which is a goal of ECOLISEs strategy (ECOLISE, n.d.-f). Thereby, resilience is an integral part of commons systems (Angelis, 2017) and thus of degrowth initiatives. In this regard, Avelino et al. (2020) write: "[A] sense of increased resilience is gained by overcoming obstacles and transforming them into opportunities for creative adaptations" (p. 962). "Creative adaptation" is carried out by ECOLISE in this context, for example like this:

Strategies that we have experienced include [...] creation of niches within high budget projects led by larger organizations to support smaller-scale activities relevant to the project's wider aims but difficult to fund independently; alliance with organisations with existing capacity to secure and manage large grants willing to create such niches within their projects [...] (Henfrey & Penha-Lopes, 2018, p.2).

This allows ECOLISE to bring in its individual and more radical ideas in the given limitations. Further actions are discussed in the analysis of the network's fields of activity in the following.

CHAPTER 4 – ECOLISE’s activity areas¹³

4.1 Knowledge and research

The Knowledge and Learning pillar is crucial to ECOLISE’s work, which is reflected in ECOLISE’s founding history. A key driver for the creation of ECOLISE was the desire to expand research concerning CLIs to gain missing knowledge in this field that could be used to advise both policy-makers and local initiatives (Henfrey, 2018b). This shows the interconnectedness of the Knowledge and Learning pillar with the Communication, and Policy and Advocacy pillars of ECOLISE.

The network emerged in part from the TREE research initiative, which consisted of many later ECOLISE members, such as the Transition Network, Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), Gaia Education, and the Schuhmacher Institute. The primary goal was to develop a proposal for EU research funding, but in the end, it was the innovative way in which the initiative worked that was more significant. It was about building an “international, transdisciplinary community of practice” (Henfrey, 2018a) using a method borrowed from the field of permaculture. ECOLISE’s Research Coordinator, Tom Henfrey, continues using social permaculture as a research method, whereby the focus is on creating enriching synergies that can emerge from effective collaborations between academics and practitioners (Henfrey 2014, 2018a). This shows that permaculture is not only an agroecological concept (as indicated in section 1.1). Henfrey (2018a) writes that “[p]ermaculture principles advocate relationships of mutually enhancing two-way interchange between interacting systems.” These relationships, therefore, involve structural coupling.

Thus, ECOLISE is not only a network with members from the permaculture field but also practices permaculture methods, which in itself has a transformative character (Henfrey, 2014). Especially the Transition Research Network, ECOLISE’s member organisation, is engaged in developing these designs and is therefore particularly important for ECOLISE in the research area (ibid.). According to Henfrey (2018b),

[W]e do not simply need policy change to support and more effectively leverage the achievements of community-led initiatives, and the many familiar proposals for structural changes in macro-economic and social policy that could help enable this, we also need change in the ways knowledge is created and mobilised for policy change.

This approach is advocated, for example, by Avelino et al. (2017), who examine game changers for transformation. The scholars are “pointing to the fact that new societal challenges call for new methodological approaches.” Also, Fromm (2016) calls for a “new science” (p.213) in which humanity is in the focus because only this way transformative solutions can be found.

¹³ The following part is not structured in conformity with the four action domains but finer categories were developed through the document analysis.

To deepen the understanding of these new scientific methods, Henfrey introduces the term *Mode 3 research* (Henfrey, 2018a), “which integrates itself within commons initiatives and employs their methodology, thus prefiguring post-growth forms of knowledge generation and mobilisation” (Henfrey, 2018b). Mode 3 researchers go further than *Mode 2* researchers in their aim of supporting transitional changes. Following Henfrey, Mode 2 researchers disclose that their studies serve the purpose of supporting change, but they do not become part of the underlying movement through the adoption of its methods (ibid.). In other words, Mode 2 research has a theoretical dedication to supporting change, and Mode 3 research additionally has a practical contribution. Fromm (2016) criticises the Club of Rome reports (as shown in section 1.1) not because of their conclusions but because of the way they were written. This implies that he demands more research that incorporates alternative mindsets in its methods, so it could be said that he finds fault with Mode 2 research and asks for more Mode 3 research.

Mode 3 is clearly distinguished from *Mode 1* research, which is generally the most widespread mode (Fazey et al., 2018). Here, researchers firmly distance themselves from the research objects to be objective, a claim that is impossible to meet, as per Henfrey (2018b). Yet, this is not the only criticism Henfrey makes of Mode 1 research; in his opinion, this approach also means that without an open space in which practitioners and researchers meet on equal ground, much practical knowledge is lost. For example, Henfrey describes that transition groups often avoid collaborating with researchers because they have experienced “manipulative or exploitative behavior” (Henfrey, 2014, p. 123). This is because of the fundamental differences between the values held by transition groups and academics working for Horizon 1 institutions (ibid.). Mode 3 research, adopting the methodologies of the transition movements, can be a solution to this problem, as entering into dialogue with the practitioners with the aim of co-production can “reconcile divergent values” (Tschakert et al., 2016) and generate knowledge that is not detached from reality (ibid.). Henfrey (2014) also calls this method “para-academic practice” (p.121), whereby the aim is to build a bridge between the commons initiatives and the academic world (ibid.). This bridging implies a structural coupling in the field of research.

After Prasad (2016), researchers like Henfrey that listen to non-researchers and translate their ideas for research are *creative dissenters*. They have an essential function if structural changes in power relations are to occur since innovations, as designed by CLIs, are dependent on these researchers to gain influence. Thus, Prasad states that not only CSOs and grassroots activists can effect change, but also researchers. As laid down by him (ibid.), heterogeneous networks provide the necessary space for the engagement of researchers with practitioners which is the case with ECOLISE. Fazey et al. (2018), with a contribution of Tom Henfrey, believe that significantly more research should incorporate practical knowledge to understand how transformation can be achieved. This fits with Fromm’s (2016) view that there is a need for “designs, models, studies and experiments” (p.214) in which concrete steps are examined and elaborated for a transition that has a courage-giving and inspiring effect.

In line with the principle of social permaculture and its emphasis on the importance of collaboration, ECOLISE has had several research partnerships, which became particularly visible in 2019 with

the EU-funded initiatives UrbanA and COMETS (ECOLISE, 2016b). The UrbanA project connects practitioners and researchers whereby an “UrbanA community of practice” is built to enhance the learning processes (EcoliseWiki, 2019). In the framework of the COMETS project, Henfrey, in cooperation with other researchers, published a book chapter in 2020 entitled “Collective Action Initiatives in the Energy Transition. Supporters of a strong sustainability paradigm?” (ECOLISE, 2020e). COMETS is led by the University of Turin and involves twelve partners from eight countries. ECOLISE’s work here is, among other things, to create a platform of experts from collective action initiatives on energy transition (ECOLISE, 2019f). Besides, ECOLISE is responsible for elaborating the research design and reformulating the initiatives’ knowledge into research (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). For ECOLISE, the documentation of informal knowledge of CLIs is crucial so that it doesn’t get lost in the academic sense, which makes it available to feed into policy decisions (Henfrey, 2018b). This fits the permaculture design as informal learning is its basic component (Henfrey, 2018a). Another EU-funded project within the framework of H2020 is the GROW Observatory. Here too, ECOLISE works together with several partners and member organisations to bring together researchers, professional growers, gardeners, and in general people interested in land and soil (ECOLISE, 2016b). Besides, in the framework of the Erasmus+ funded “Ecovillage Transition in Action” project, representatives of ECOLISE, the Global Ecovillage Network, GEN Germany, the Norwegian ecovillage Kilden Økosamfunn and the University of St. Andrews, a renowned university in the UK, met in an eco-community in Germany in March 2020 (ECOLISE, 2020c). Here, ECOLISE mediated as an H2 organisation between the H1, i.e. the University of St. Andrews, and the H3, i.e. the ecovillages, to support structural coupling.

In the interview, Henfrey (interview, November 4, 2020) talks about the advantages of collaborating with established universities as a way of obtaining benefits that ECOLISE would not get independently:

The researchers who are committed to operating within the academy, within universities, and major research organisations, bring a lot of resources, a lot of capabilities, a lot of possibilities, that aren’t directly available to us working from outside [...] and that’s a way of mobilising diversity and that diversity, that pluralism I think is vital to effective action as well as an ethical imperative to embrace the full diversity of possibilities and potential [...].

For the facilitation of communication between participants from different domains, while balancing power relations through a common language between specialists and non-specialists, pattern languages are used as a specific methodology by ECOLISE.¹⁴ Finidori et al. (2015) state that these pattern languages “function as a medium for conversation and self-reflection, introducing feedback loops into design processes and allowing structural coupling of design and practice. Such processes foster [...] new forms of communication within and among groups, and new modes of innovation and action.” Hence, they correspond to the importance of structural coupling and the interdependence of ECOLISE’s

¹⁴ These were originally developed by Christopher Alexander in the field of architecture. The idea was further developed and nowadays pattern languages are used in all possible areas (Finidori Borghini & Henfrey, 2015).

communication and learning domains as important parts of the network's strategy. Furthermore, pattern languages are an example of social innovation that "contributes to transformative change" (Avelino et al., 2019, p.196) because they aim at changing social relations in the framework of research to become based on equality and mutual respect (ibid.).

Since 2018, ECOLISE has been refining its Mode 3 research by the "development of a knowledge commons for community-led action on sustainability and climate change" (Henfrey, 2018b). Henfrey (2014) describes the importance of this as follows:

The creation of new commons, and defence of existing ones, are crucial antidotes to inaction and inappropriate action in response to climate change and other sustainability crises on the part of economic and political elites. [...] A viable post-carbon academia would form an active part of this movement, dedicating itself to the creation and maintenance of knowledge commons to which all are able to contribute and gain access in a radical democratisation of academic practice [...] (p.134).

Here it becomes apparent that ECOLISE is not only concerned with inciting politicians to implement changes (as presented in section 4.4) but also with taking propositional action, meaning creating the desired alternatives itself (El Khoury, 2015). Research plays a significant role in this respect, following Henfrey (2018b), and can contribute to the degrowth movement's goal of improved democratisation (Fromm, 2006).

To this end, ECOLISE is developing knowledge commons, which include the Status Report and the ECOLISE wiki. They are commons because they belong to an "open source facility for all interested parties within or connected with the post-growth, degrowth and related communities" (Henfrey, 2018b). ECOLISE is developing protocols and agreements under which conditions contribution is possible (ibid.) which is characteristic for open access after Ostrom (2011). In 2018, ECOLISE started working on its first "Status Report on Community-led Action on Sustainability and Climate Change in Europe", which it published at the beginning of 2019. New versions are going to be issued every two years. Tom Henfrey and Gil Penha-Lopes were the lead authors of this report and developed its framework, but the content is to be written in a collaborative phase by partners, member organisations, and other stakeholders (ECOLISE, 2018i); in general, by both researchers and practitioners (Henfrey, 2018b). Thereby, the contributors form a "co-creation community" (ECOLISE, 2018g); meaning, the report applies the method of social permaculture.

In October 2018, the ECOLISE wiki became publicly available online, which "exists to support compilation, synthesis and co-creation of new knowledge to support the work of ECOLISE members and supporters, along with allied organisations and networks" (ECOLISE, n.d.-m). Together with the Status Report, it should strengthen "the evidence base" on CLIs (ECOLISE, n.d.-d, p. 2). This is particularly important to ECOLISE, as the network wants to be sure that its policy demands are well-founded which is the only way it can convince policy-makers to take risks and break new ground (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). With the Status Report as a "state-of-the-art on community-led climate action in Europe", ECOLISE wants to publish the concentrated knowledge found in the ECOLISE wiki in a structured form (ECOLISE, n.d.-d).

The network has also developed a Wiki on Sustainable Just Cities as part of the “urban commons movement” of the UrbanA programme. This “supports inclusive, co-creative, open access and open source approaches to knowledge generation.” One advantage of this procedure is that a project can constantly evolve (n.a., 2019). This means that the wikis are autopoietic commons since their knowledge component is continuously reproduced (Angelis, 2017). Since degrowth is a condition with autopoietic commons (ibid.), ECOLISE helps establish a transition by producing these autopoietic commons.

4.2 Work with communities

Within the inspire domain of the CfF programme, ECOLISE motivates communities to take concrete measures to significantly reduce their ecological footprint. The network is particularly suitable for this position, as it can build on strong experience through its cooperation with existing CLIs (ECOLISE, n.d.–n). The CfF also specifies how communities should be enabled to actualise their ideas after they feel inspired. In this step, ECOLISE aspires to provide the communities with the necessary resources and support to coordinate the processes. Through the CfF programme, ECOLISE wants to initiate stronger cooperation with its members and partners “to create a pool of trained Communities for Future Climate Coaches that can support and accompany communities and neighbourhoods through the inspiration to action process” (ECOLISE, n.d.–n, p. 10). ECOLISE also wishes to bring members and initiatives together and create a Europe-wide “collaborative framework” (ibid.) for exchange and mutual support, meaning a Community of Practice (CoP), to find new ways of enabling communities (ECOLISE, n.d.–n). Thus, here, it becomes visible that the enable domain is closely linked with the learning domain. Matching this, ECOLISE wants to comprehend better how to support CLIs more effectively by increasing its knowledge about the development of the communities it assists. To this end, ECOLISE will try out new ways of documenting and analysing the progress of CLIs. The results will be published on the CfF online platform, which will allow interested parties to benefit from ECOLISE’s experience (ibid.).

Within the H2020 funded Smart Villages initiative ECOLISE has been co-developing a model that rural communities can use to enhance their development (Hess et al., 2018). Besides, as part of the Erasmus+ funded programme Ecovillage Transition in Action (ETA), ECOLISE, mainly in partnership with GEN, helps eco-communities establish a relationship with local political authorities. The concrete tasks here include the provision of training and other educational tools to facilitate the desired cooperation. The transfer of information, methods, and advice is based on research and the experience of successful relationships between local authorities and communities (ECOLISE, 2019i). ECOLISE also wants to monitor, evaluate and assess this work permanently (ibid.), so again the learning domain plays a role to inform better practice.

A conference in Brussels in 2018 with the title “Civil Society and municipalities: building sustainability through collaboration” also dealt with the support of collaboration between CLIs and local municipalities. ECOLISE organised it in cooperation with the EESC, CoR, the EU’s assembly of local and

regional authorities, and the Transition Network (ECOLISE, 2018l). This shows that ECOLISE has succeeded in ensuring that the discourse finds its way into the EU institutions. Thereby, ECOLISE contributes to the CfF goal of “mainstreaming” (ECOLISE, n.d.–n, p. 1) CLIs.

Besides, ECOLISE was present at all Global Forums of the European Rural Parliament in Asturias, Spain, meaning in 2017 and 2019, which is a campaign launched by rural people represented by different organisations that meet every two years at large gatherings. In this framework, ECOLISE organised two workshops, where it was outlined how the network envisages collaborations with the European Rural Parliament’s attendees to support CLIs in rural areas (ECOLISE, 2019j). Collaborations like these offer the possibility for boundary commoning.

When it comes to ECOLISE’s work with communities, the analysis made clear that the network mainly talks about plans concerning the new CfF programme. For that reason, it seems that ECOLISE has so far not in-depth covered this area but aspires to do more in this area. ECOLISE’s overall objective is to strengthen and enlarge the H3, which includes the CLIs. However, due to ECOLISE’s function as an umbrella organisation, work to this end does not always happen directly. The members of ECOLISE often assist the local communities, and ECOLISE, in turn, focuses on other areas, like policy and advocacy work, research, and member work, so that the CLIs can ultimately be most efficiently supported. In the next chapter, the work with ECOLISE’s member organisations will be analysed.

4.3 Member work

Much of ECOLISE’s work concerning member organisations deals with “capacity building” (e.g. ECOLISE, n.d.–e, p. 13). Capacities are various factors that help members to become active and overcome barriers. Thus, when ECOLISE’s enabling strategy mainly concerns communities, capacity building refers to the member organisations. A barrier can be a lack of knowledge and experience. ECOLISE wanted to help its members overcome this barrier concerning the EU policy-making processes by organising a policy training event in Brussels in November 2016 with seven member organisations participating. This should help to enable them to participate in policy and advocacy activities. The expertise came in this case from “Tony Long, the former director of WWF-Europe, [...] senior officials at DG CLIMA, DG AGRI and DG REGIO, [...] Benedek Javor MEP, at the European Parliament, and [...] the president and vice president of the EESC’s Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO)” (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). In this way, member organisations could benefit from ECOLISE’s links with the EU institutions and partner organisations to gain access to first-hand lobbying knowledge. In 2019, ECOLISE organised various capacity-building events for members and ensured more opportunities for them to get directly involved in the policy-making process. For this purpose, the members can use ECOLISE’s contacts and get involved as their representatives. This way, Tim Clarke from GAIA Trust represented ECOLISE at the European Commission advisory group for the Structured Dialogue on the European Structural and Investment funds (ESIF) in 2019 (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). Another example is the European

Commons Assembly from 2016 in Brussels, where ECOLISE was represented by the Managing Director of ECOLISE's member organisation GEN-Europe (ECOLISE, 2016c).

It is significant for ECOLISE to “develop [its] members capacity to interact and engage in policy-making at the local, national and EU levels” (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 1) as this leads to a sharing of tasks. ECOLISE focuses thereby mainly on its influence at the EU level, and to “ensur[e] coherent policy responses at all levels” (ECOLISE, n.d.-d, p. 6) and to increase the “collective influence” of the operation (ibid.), ECOLISE wants the members to be especially active at a national, regional, and local level (ibid.). Besides, in ECOLISE's Advocacy Strategy for 2020 and 2021, the network states that it wishes to work “on supporting national members rather than taking national level action [itself]” (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 9). Gaventa (2006) agrees that this vertical strategy can “make sure that changes are meaningful at each level” (p. 8). Besides, it can offer “a sense of meaning in that members can contribute to social transformation, through the different roles they play within the movement” (Avelino et al., 2020, p.971).

Responsible persons of the ECOLISE team for the work with members are the Policy, the Network and Outreach, and the Communications Coordinator, which illustrates the interconnectedness of ECOLISE's strategy. In this context, the responsibilities of the Policy Coordinator are among other things “to (a.) develop webinars and workshops to engage members in policy-making at the EU and national level, (b.) identifying suitable training opportunities for members, [and] (c.) assist in keeping the Policy Circle up to date on recent developments on topics of priority and interest [...]” (ECOLISE, 2020b). Meera Ghani, the Policy Coordinator since 2017, has been carrying out her function in cooperation with the policy working group, which consists of representatives of ECOLISE members, namely with “Robert Hall, GEN-Europe; Tim Clarke, GEN-International; [and] Brigitta Spaelti, GEN-Switzerland” (ECOLISE, n.d.-c); this is an example of close cooperation between ECOLISE and its members. The policy working group is now called “policy circle” and its main aims are achieving policy objectives and finding ways for the members to participate in advocacy work despite a lack of resources (ECOLISE, n.d.-f). ECOLISE hopes for growing participation of its members in this circle (ibid.).

Also, in the context of the CfF initiative, ECOLISE wants to involve its members through “participatory webinars”. These webinars, also known as “CfF online conversations” (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 12), aim to regularly link EU politicians and partner lobby organisations from Brussels with the members. It is important for ECOLISE to create a “space for dialogue” (ibid.) which is a clear reference to the degrowth concept, as “dialogue, [...] plurality of legitimate perspectives [...] and the eradication of the monopoly of experts from collective decision-making are fundamental tenets of [...] degrowth”, according to D'Alisa and Kallis (2015). Another by ECOLISE practised degrowth position is horizontal linkages among the members and ECOLISE (ECOLISE, n.d.-f) which becomes apparent through the webinars that aim at making the members' “[...] work and voice visible, and engaging them actively in CfF” (ECOLISE, n.d.-n, p. 11). Correspondingly, ECOLISE's strategy was redesigned with the members' engagement in “a network-wide process” (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020).

Furthermore, ECOLISE practices sociocracy as a system of governance that is about finding consensus in the decision-making process (Avelino et al., 2020), for example, in the election of the ECOLISE Council (ECOLISE, 2017b). Thus, ECOLISE promotes equal decision-making power, participation, decentralisation, and autonomy of its members (Avelino et al., 2020, p.961). These principles are fundamental in the case of ECOLISE, as its members are mostly from the ecovillage movement and “[g]aining a sense of autonomy is at the heart of [this] movement” (ibid., p.966). This can keep the members’ motivation to be part of ECOLISE high (ibid.). In summary, ECOLISE adopts the values of the movements it represents, which means that “[i]ts internal procedures, [...] influenced by the permaculture principle ‘everything gardens,’ are decentralised, dynamic and constantly evolving” (Henfrey & Penha-Lopes, 2018, pp.1-2). Besides, Henfrey considers the fact that ECOLISE is owned and led by its members to be positive. It is a way of not giving in too much to coercive isomorphism by having “constantly the third horizon pulling” the network, making it easier to keep its integrity. Since this organisational structure implies new ways of organising to achieve changes in social relations, it can be called a social innovation (Avelino et al., 2019).

In addition to developing the members’ capacities and bringing them into contact with policy-makers, another objective of ECOLISE regarding its member work is the strengthening of collaboration between the members, as in the CfF online conversations (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). Overall, the CfF initiative is designed to enable ECOLISE members to work with one another and ECOLISE’s external partners to promote a Europe-wide transformation (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). Also, before the implementation of the CfF initiative, ECOLISE has worked intensively to improve the “dialogue and exchange between ECOLISE members and partners in the framework of the Sustainable Communities Programme (SCP)” (ECOLISE, n.d.–e, p. 3) in 2019, which has led to new collaborative projects. Collaborations are also promoted in the monthly ongoing online meetings since June 2018, organised by the ECOLISE Knowledge and Learning team. The aim of these meetings is, among others, “to seed collaborative developments in raising awareness of community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability” (ECOLISE, 2018s) by exchanging knowledge and strengthening cooperation between the members in a CoP. The online meetings are an example of the interconnectedness of ECOLISE’s activity domains; in this case, the domains inspire, enable, and learn. ECOLISE also supports ecological sustainability, a degrowth principle, by focusing on online meetings that avoid unnecessary mobility to connect members.

An example of a collaborative initiative between members is the UrbanA project. ECOLISE is part of the UrbanA team, but it is led by its member, the global network ICLEI (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives) (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). To achieve an increased network collaboration, ECOLISE considers it essential to further develop communication facilities to strengthen links among members and ECOLISE (ECOLISE, n.d.–n). This can eliminate disconnections resulting from different experienced realities on various levels; meaning, ECOLISE can minimise the risk of not perceiving the

problems that organisations and communities have to deal with on the local level which would prevent the network from adequately representing their interests (Gaventa, 2006, p. 6).

ECOLISE plans to implement several ideas concerning this issue, such as “peer-to-peer support meetings, [a] mailing list, Facebook group, clearer links with Communication coordinator and Network coordinator, meetings one-on-one with members [and] connection with the ‘ECOLISE Platform’ [...]” (ECOLISE, n.d.–n, p. 12). This should increase the members’ satisfaction regarding the area of communication. Overall, ECOLISE aspires to intensify its efforts in this framework with its new “membership strategy”, implemented in April 2020 (ibid., p.11), which is about identifying the needs of its members and finding ways to meet them. The network also wants to acknowledge the needs of the whole network in terms of its member structure, for example, by debating the ideal number of members and how to achieve a higher member diversity (ibid.); here, ECOLISE’s goals of constant learning and improvement become visible. As per Castells (2011), a network consists of interconnected nodes, all of which aim to contribute to the effectiveness of the network in achieving its goals. There are less and more important nodes. Networks tend to eliminate nodes they don’t need and add new ones in the process of reconfiguration. In this case, ECOLISE is working in the membership strategy to include new nodes, i.e. member organisations, that will serve the network as a whole. Thereby, ECOLISE exercises “networking power” (p.42), following Castells (2011). ECOLISE focuses on the inclusion of new members and not on the exclusion of existent members since it aspires to have a growing network which is necessary for a transition (Henfrey, 2018b).

4.4 Policy and advocacy

4.4.1 Lobby coalitions

“ECOLISE believes it is better to work together with organisations with which we share a common goal. Especially in terms of our advocacy work, we recognise the need to join forces in order to achieve greater recognition and support for citizen and community-led action on climate change and sustainability” (ECOLISE, 2017f). Rozbicka (2013) also speaks of an “institutionally generated need for co-operation between actors” (p.848). This means that empirical experience can confirm the results of the literature according to which, an actor could not lobby successfully all by itself due to “the complexity of the system and its multiple arenas and dimensions” (ibid). Because of these circumstances, Klüver (2011) argues that, when studying lobbying, it “has to be considered as a collective enterprise rather than as an individual endeavor” (p.502). Bunea and Baumgartner (2014) state that there exists “a very modest interest in systematic analyses of EU lobbying coalitions, despite a wide agreement that this is a key factor in explaining lobbying success and a very frequent form of collective action at EU level” (p.1431). To give more attention to this gap in the literature, ECOLISE’s development of its collaborations in the field of policy and advocacy will be discussed below.

In November 2016, ECOLISE had its first policy training initiative in the EU. The network was able to gain critical knowledge from other organisations with more experience on EU processes so that ECOLISE could learn how to integrate itself best. The policy training was hosted by AEIDL, the European Association for Information on Local Development, which exists since 1988. Besides, Tony Long, former Director of the World Wide Fund for Nature, the WWF, shared his experiences on EU policy-making and strategies. ECOLISE gained new insights from this experience; for example, it became aware of the importance of connecting with external organisations and networks to work together towards common goals (O'Hara, 2016). ECOLISE was also invited to participate in the Multi-stakeholder Coalition in 2016 and within this framework to join the Paris Agreement's implementation phase. The coalition is coordinated by the EESC and the CoR (ECOLISE, n.d.–c) which reveals that ECOLISE does not only collaborate with other organisations but also EU bodies with the function of speaking for CSOs at the EU.

In April 2017, ECOLISE, together with several SIC (Social Innovation Community) partners, organised a forum with the title “New Economy & Social Innovation” (NESI). It took place in Malaga, Spain, and brought together several people and organisations with the common goal of achieving a more sustainable economy; with plenty of opportunities to exchange experiences and explore collaboration possibilities (Kolosy, 2017).

On 13 October 2017, ECOLISE officially became a member of the Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, the largest NGO coalition in Europe actively fighting anthropogenic climate change (ECOLISE, 2017f). With its more than 170 members, it is considerably larger than ECOLISE. Since the value of a network increases with its size (Briscoe et al., 2006), the inclusion of ECOLISE is positive both for CAN and ECOLISE. In the same year, ECOLISE also became a member of SDG Watch Europe. The topics covered by this CSO alliance relate to the Sustainable Development Goals initiated by the UN and are therefore cross-sectoral (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). Due to the open positioning and broad fields of interest of CAN and SDG Watch Europe, ECOLISE can integrate itself well. In 2018, ECOLISE worked on its relationship with CAN-Europe and SDG Watch Europe to get support for its policy messages (ibid.). Besides, after “working closely with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) for several years”, ECOLISE became a full partner in the EESC-coordinated International Climate Governance Coalition (ICGC) in 2018. The aim here is to offer non-state actors an opportunity to become more involved in implementing the Paris Agreement (ECOLISE, n.d.–d).

Within the 2019 founded coalition “the Green New Deal for Europe”, which consists of European activists, trade unions, and researchers, ECOLISE works for a more sustainable and fairer Europe by demanding policies from the MEPs that imply a genuine transformation (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). This “Green New deal for Europe” is about empowering communities and moving away from the dogma of economic growth (n.a., n.d.); ergo, ECOLISE, with its degrowth positions, fits perfectly into that coalition. Besides, in 2019, ECOLISE participated in a pan-European campaign calling for a fair and sustainable European consumption and production agenda with four other civil society network organisations:

FTAO (Fair Trade Movement), IFOAM-EU (Organic Agriculture), CIDSE (Catholic development agencies), and RIPESS-EU (Social Solidarity Economy). The product of the campaign was the publication of a fictional newspaper called “The Fair Times”, a unified demand for “transformative policies for a fair and sustainable Europe” from the newly constituted Parliament of 2019 (ECOLISE, 2019b).

To change the current policy narratives in the EU, ECOLISE plans to establish a CfF alliance consisting of policy partners comprised, for example, of the “EESC, CoR, MEPs, [...] members of CAN-E and SDG Watch and other” (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 14). The goal is to achieve a common narrative, facilitating cooperation (ibid.). Wittmayer et al. (2019) speak here of “narratives of change” that “evolve on an ongoing basis and are the product of the interaction of different people, stories and mediating infrastructures” (p.7). Fittingly, ECOLISE does not want to impose a narrative from the outset, i.e. adopt a “hierarchical” (ibid., p.3) approach, but to develop it collectively, which is called a “deliberative” (ibid.) method. Between those who can identify with the narrative, a closer connection emerges (ibid.). Another goal of the CfF alliance is to find ways to improve the coordination of joint actions (ECOLISE, n.d.-f). For that purpose, ECOLISE had an online meeting in March 2020 with Jesse Colzani from the organisation “The Good Lobby” to learn more about efficient lobbying and “develop[ing] joint policy messages” (ECOLISE, 2020a).

The ECOLISE outreach strategy discusses what further upcoming work is needed concerning ECOLISE’s partnerships. The aim is to find out “which are the key strategic partnerships for ECOLISE and which next steps could be done to create them” (ECOLISE, n.d.-n, p. 11). In future, ECOLISE intends to “engage as much as possible with CAN-Europe” (ECOLISE, n.d.-f, p. 9) as the platform allows for an exchange of experiences between different organisations, and ECOLISE can learn from them how to influence policy processes more easily (ibid.). This shows, that ECOLISE also aims at establishing Communities of Practice through its partner organisations which proves the interconnectedness of the *learn* with the *advocate* domain (ECOLISE, n.d.-n). In particular, ECOLISE says it intends to present to the EU, together with CAN Europe, recommendations for the EU’s budget planning for 2021–2027, the EU’s Long Term Strategy and the European Green Deal (EGD) (ECOLISE, n.d.-f).

Rozbicka (2013) states that in the literature on coalitions of EU interest groups, there is talk of “long-standing partnerships between organizations” (p.346) and “short-term, *ad hoc* coalitions” (p.347). ECOLISE forms more intensive (CAN, SDG Watch, EESC) and less intensive (e.g., the Fair Times) coalitions, whereas it has the strongest alliance with CAN and the EESC for several years. It can be assumed that short-term coalitions are less prevalent because ECOLISE works mainly on long-term policy changes and *ad hoc* coalitions work on single issues and dissolve after achieving their goal or after surrendering (ibid.). As shown in the following, ECOLISE has been shaping for years long-term programmes, such as Smart villages, CLLD, EU budgets and more, which means that long-standing partnerships were more relevant here. Rozbicka (2013) summarises that there seems to be a consensus in the literature that successful coalitions tend to be short-term and not long-term coalitions. She also

adds that this is not due to the structure of the coalition but the goals they want to achieve, as it is harder to achieve long-term changes. This stresses the difficulty of ECOLISE's mission.

In summary, it becomes evident that ECOLISE forms alternative as opposed to opposing coalitions; meaning that it is not about combatting environmentally harmful industries, for instance, but about constructively advocating alternatives and participating in the elaboration of sustainable policies (Hess, 2018).

The coalitions that ECOLISE is part of have a higher potential of reaching transformative changes through ECOLISE's "radicalising influence" since the other organisations' orientation is in comparison "a lot more mainstream" than ECOLISE's (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). At the same time, this mainstream orientation leads them to have better access to EU institutions, from which ECOLISE can profit (*ibid.*). Consequently, this helps to mainstream ECOLISE's positions, the main goal of the CfF programme (ECOLISE, n.d.-n). As it was shown in section 4.1, ECOLISE follows the strategy of collaborating with more mainstream organisations or institutions also in the area of research. Consequently, this opportune method of operating is a critical aspect of ECOLISE's strategy to stay functional. Henfrey speaks here of a "complementarity and potential synergy by collaborations across these spectrums between reformism and radicalism" (interview, November 4, 2020) and that "the tensions that arise from pulling in different directions can be very productive and helpful if navigated constructively" (*ibid.*). This is evocative of ECOLISE's handling of the tensions that arise in contact with EU institutions (see section 3.3). In its lobby coalitions, ECOLISE is faced with the danger of becoming more mainstream. Therefore, it needs to pay attention to adhering to its values and specialisation on CLIs, which can only be represented in the EU in this form by ECOLISE. Beyers (2008) writes that specialisation as a niche organisation "improves the capability to formulate coherent positions. Moreover, specialization allows the forming of positions that contain specialized technical information and expertise – resources many EU institutions need. Such positions may be less vague and, therefore, potentially more rigid and informative" (p.1204). That means ECOLISE has high resources to offer, with its expertise on CLIs gained through its knowledge and research work and its contacts to local initiatives, making it easier for ECOLISE to access the EU institutions (Beyers 2008; Chalmers, 2013; Ruzza 2011). Besides, information as a resource makes the network suitable for bargaining and not just arguing lobby tactics (see section 1.2) (Beyers, 2008), enhancing the lobbying success.

The results of effective coalitions are a more substantial persuasive power by building a "critical mass" (ECOLISE, 2018b) for ECOLISE's advocacy work. The theory confirms this assessment of ECOLISE. As specified by Gaventa (2006), one way to influence the hidden power, i.e. power for agenda-setting, of the EU institutions is to exercise "collective power of numbers" (p.7) as an advocacy strategy and thereby to "increase the visibility and legitimacy of their issues, voice and demands" (*ibid.*). This corresponds with Klüver's (2011) findings that interest groups have a better chance of succeeding in the lobbying process if several groups move in the same direction. In the end, "the size of a lobbying coalition relative to its opposing coalition on any given issue" (p.487) is decisive. As per Castells (2011),

the ability to exert influence depends, among other things, on the extent to which a network can connect with other networks to pursue common goals in the form of “strategic cooperation” (p.45). Since ECOLISE enters these cooperations, it exerts “network-making power”, which according to Castells is “the most crucial form[] of power” (p.45). This shows that ECOLISE is well adapted to this “world of networks” (ibid.).

Now, that the focus has been on the lobby coalitions, the next section deals with ECOLISE’s specific lobbying activities.

4.4.2 Spaces

It will be examined how ECOLISE uses, seeks to open or creates “opportunities, moments and channels” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 26), called *spaces*, to participate in policy processes. Gaventa (ibid.) distinguishes between *invited spaces*, *closed spaces*, and *claimed/created spaces* (p.25). Through *invited spaces*, institutions, authorities, or other organisations aim to encourage the participation of CSOs in policy processes. When this willingness is not existent, in other words, when decisions are made behind closed doors, we speak of *closed spaces*. CSOs can try to open them up by demanding more transparency and opportunities for participation. Otherwise, CSOs can also take the initiative themselves by creating spaces to participate in policy processes, which are accordingly called *claimed/created spaces*.

This division into spaces of ECOLISE’s lobbying activities helps primarily to obtain insights into existing relational dynamics between ECOLISE and EU institutions. Also, it facilitates a more structured overview of the network’s actions. These will be listed in a rather descriptive chronological order to understand better what ECOLISE has concretely been doing to achieve changes. The actions are only very briefly touched upon to just have a first overview that interested parties can use to go deeper on this basis. Afterwards, follows the analysis of the subsections.

ECOLISE’s participation in invited spaces

As early as 2014, the year of the foundation of ECOLISE, the network started to participate in policy processes at a UN consultation on the then newly adopted SDGs. Subsequently, ECOLISE added its position to a report by the EU Parliament on the Global Framework Beyond 2015 about the SDGs (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). ECOLISE was also able to influence the development of the EU Commission’s CLLD programmes by contributing to the EESC’s opinion on the CLLD and developing a guidance document for beneficiaries of the programme. ECOLISE considers its engagement in this respect as successful because the critical role of CLIs in fighting climate change was incorporated into the CLLD programme (ibid.). This work seems crucial, considering ECOLISE’s criticisms of the CLLD as presented in section 3.1 and it being at the same time the most considerable financial instrument of the EU to support CLIs.

In 2015, ECOLISE was active at the international level by participating at the COP21 in Paris. Besides, ECOLISE developed a common position to be presented to the EU Commission consultations on GHG emissions of member states and emissions in the agriculture sector. ECOLISE has also expressed its position on the importance of CLIs by participating in the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) working group and at the conference on the green economy. Moreover, ECOLISE contributed to an EESC public hearing and an opinion document of the EESC. Furthermore, ECOLISE became a member of the EU's Structural Dialogue on the European Structural and Investment (ESI) Funds (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). Here, the EU Commission aims to involve civil society in the formulation of policies and the discussion on how the funds should be distributed (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). In this context, ECOLISE has started lobbying for the CLLD programme “to be a mandatory element of all ESI funded programmes in all Member States” (ECOLISE, n.d.–c), as this would mean increased funding of CLIs. ECOLISE continues this work until today (*ibid.*).

In 2016, ECOLISE continued its contact with the ENRD by starting its intensive cooperation on elaborating the EU Smart Villages Initiative (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). Furthermore, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) invited ECOLISE to participate in a seminar entitled “Changing our Mindsets - Seizing opportunities in the Green Economy”, organised in early July 2016 by the ENRD (ECOLISE, 2016a). Its title is particularly interesting, as ECOLISE states (*ibid.*), since from a degrowth perspective, changes in mindsets are a basis for change (Fromm, 2016). In November 2016, ECOLISE participated at the first meeting of the European Commons Assembly in Brussels in the EU Parliament. This occasion invited a discussion between commoners and EU policy-makers (ECOLISE, 2016c).

In 2017, ECOLISE participated at the United Nations Climate Change Conference for the third time. Here, closed spaces for ECOLISE became invited spaces through its connection to CAN: “ECOLISE's recent membership of CAN-Europe proved to be particularly beneficial, in terms of providing access to briefings and resources, and opportunities to input into evolving discussions” (O'Hara, 2017). Thereby, ECOLISE used the opportunity to call on policy-makers worldwide to support CLIs (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). In the framework of this COP23, the EESC organised an event on “Boosting cooperation between all actors to implement the Paris Agreement”, in which ECOLISE made its position heard (O'Hara, 2017). ECOLISE has also provided input to the CLLD by again advising the EESC on its position on “Advantages of the Community-led Local Development approach (CLLD) for integrated local and rural development” (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). In November 2017, ECOLISE, in a meeting with the EESC and the EU Commission, expressed its view that the CLLD needed urgent changes (ECOLISE, 2017h). In December 2017, Eamon O'Hara gave a speech in Brussels at a meeting with policy-makers on social innovation initiatives. The ENRD organised it as part of its work on Smart Villages. O'Hara spoke about how communities are already promoting innovation through their climate action in rural services, highlighting the importance of linking innovation with sustainability (ECOLISE, 2017i). Furthermore, he wrote an article in the EU Rural Review, which dealt with the Smart Villages Initiative

(ECOLISE, 2018h). ECOLISE considers this work as successful in the regard “that climate action and sustainability are now a key component of the proposals for this new EU initiative” (ECOLISE, n.d.–d, p. 6). ECOLISE has also continued to promote changes to the CLLD initiative by publishing a policy paper on the subject (ECOLISE, n.d.–c).

Besides, O’Hara participated in an *invited space* created by the European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ECOLISE, 2018n). At this LEADER Reloaded conference in Portugal in September 2018, EU officials and LEADER representatives from across Europe came together. O’Hara held a presentation to all attendees about the importance of making climate protection and transition a priority in EU’s programmes for 2021–2027. He called on EU policy-makers to “support community-led climate action and to shift success metrics away from short term economic goals to a broader set of indicators that reflected the need for a more holistic approach” (ibid.); with degrowth being such a holistic concept that does not accept the GDP as a measure for prosperity (Jackson, 2017).

ECOLISE presented in 2018 its opinion on the EU’s long-term budget on a public consultation launched by the EU Commission. This was an invited space since the consultation was open to all citizens (ECOLISE, 2018c). Furthermore, ECOLISE participated in the Structured Dialogue on the ESIF group in 2018, which has an advisory role for the EU Commission regarding the implementation of the ESIF (ECOLISE, n.d.–c).

In September 2018, ECOLISE participated at the Post-Growth Conference in Brussels, which was led by “supportive MEPs” (ECOLISE, 2018k). In this context, “progressive ideas” were presented in the presence of EU policy-makers and ECOLISE had the impression that the politicians were receptive to them (ECOLISE, 2018o). Tom Henfrey prepared a policy paper for this occasion (ECOLISE, 2018k), speaking of the importance of structural coupling. As an invited space, the conference enabled Europe-wide representatives of the degrowth movement to access the EU policy space (ECOLISE, 2018o).

Besides, the EESC has invited ECOLISE to contribute its views in the form of policy papers on several topics, including the EU’s long-term climate strategy and financing (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). The policy papers of the EESC from 2018, called “the Mid-term evaluation of the LIFE programme” and “Boosting Climate Action by Non-State Actors”, incorporated the opinions and contributions of ECOLISE (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). This shows that the EESC considers ECOLISE as a valuable partner and appreciates ECOLISE’s view. ECOLISE also took part in the so-called Talanoa Dialogues organised in Brussels in April 2018 by the EESC, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), and the Climate Chance Association where policy-makers met with non-state actors in an open and inclusive environment with the focus on story-telling and listening (ECOLISE, 2018f). In November 2018, ECOLISE submitted a contribution to the Talanoa Dialogue platform, which combined insights from the dialogues with experience and knowledge gained by communities and member organisations (ECOLISE, 2018p).

In December 2018, ECOLISE participated at the COP24 in Poland. ECOLISE’s president Robert Hall spoke of the “catastrophic negative consequences of business as usual” in front of the present government leaders. In contrast, he used very positive rhetoric when addressing the role of CLIs: “We also

call on leaders to recognise, enable and support the bold, creative action already being taken by communities.” He also urged leaders to make decisions right away at the COP24 (ECOLISE, 2018r). Thus, he used the strategy of building rhetorical pressure by stimulating an awareness of the emergency. At the COP, ECOLISE was furthermore able to win the sympathy of EU policy-makers. Brigit Aru, Policy Officer at DG CLIMA responsible for the EU’s long-term strategy, showed interest in ECOLISE’s work and a joint meeting to further exchange views (ECOLISE, 2018a). ECOLISE also discussed with the CoR on this occasion even more possibilities for cooperation. Several concrete plans could be made, such as the CoR proposing ECOLISE to co-lead the International Climate Governance Coalition (ICGC) and inviting ECOLISE to send the CoR its views on the EU’s long-term strategy. ECOLISE also discussed further cooperation possibilities with the EESC (ibid.).

In 2019, ECOLISE continued to work with the ENRD to ensure that the sustainability and climate change criteria required by ECOLISE are taken into account in the CLLD and Smart Village initiatives that run from 2021 to 2027 (ECOLISE, n.d.–n). ECOLISE states that in 2019 it intensified its work on the CLLD compared to previous years (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). The network also participated in various events and activities of the ENRD and EU Commission. In December 2019, for example, ECOLISE joined the ENRD thematic lab on “Climate change mitigation and adaptation”, where suggestions on the EU LEADER programme for rural development were discussed. ECOLISE’s main message was that the priority of EU funding should be given to sustainability and climate action (ibid.). In May 2019, ECOLISE participated in a Paris conference hosted by the OECD (ECOLISE, 2019c). O’Hara made clear that it is important to break down the barriers for CLIs (presented in section 3.3). He also spoke in front of high-ranking politicians of desired “near term policy initiatives to boost funding and enable participation, but also longer-term measures such as universal basic income” (ECOLISE, n.d.–e, p. 13). In this way, he demanded on the occasion of this invited space, inter alia, to open more closed spaces to enhance possibilities of participation.

In this year’s EDSC, a round-table discussion was held with MEPs and officials from DG Regio and DG Clima. An important supporter of ECOLISE among the MEPs seems to be Sean Kelly, who hosted this roundtable (ECOLISE, 2019g). The EDSC events were followed by “a subsequent debriefing event at the offices of Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, which brought members into direct contact with policy makers” (ECOLISE, n.d.–e, p. 13). Thus, this invited space was created by a network that ECOLISE is part of. Besides, to further acquire knowledge and skills related to lobbying activities, ECOLISE participated in a training session on “How to engage with European Parliament and the European Commission” organised by CAN (ibid.). Consequently, the goal of this invited space was to offer training on how to enter so far closed spaces.

Closed spaces – How ECOLISE tries to open them

While it became clear that ECOLISE had already developed valuable contacts within the EU institutions, ECOLISE regretted in 2018 that the truly “‘influential’ policy makers” (ECOLISE, 2018a, p. 2) have not yet been reached. This shows that despite the many invited spaces, crucial spaces are still closed. ECOLISE intended to address this problem in cooperation with the EESC through changes in the coming EDSCs, for which concrete ideas were discussed at the COP24 (ibid.).

At the COP25 in Madrid, there was a lack of active involvement by the network at the official events in contrast to the recent years. Network and Outreach Coordinator of ECOLISE, Juan Del Río, expressed his frustration about the “austerity measures and the impacts of the global extractive economic system” that he saw responsible for the protests in Chile where the COP was supposed to happen initially. This year, ECOLISE was particularly active at the “Cumbre social por el Climate (the Counter COP).” ECOLISE thereby took the side of the demonstrators and organisations that had no access to the official events. In a retrospective newsfeed, ECOLISE disapproved of the clear separation of critical activities from the official events of the COP, meaning, criticised the closed spaces in the framework of the conference (ECOLISE, 2019l).

ECOLISE demands more participation possibilities also regarding the next EU Research Framework Programme (FP9). In November 2017, ECOLISE joined 17 other organisations to request that CSOs and citizens should be able to bring in their ideas before the Commission’s proposals for the FP9 in March 2018. The concern stemmed mainly from the organisations’ view that the involvement of CSOs and citizens lacked in the elaboration of the H2020 Programme and other previous EU Research Framework Programmes (ECOLISE, 2017g).

Only a few actions like these are known, which explicitly address ECOLISE’s demands for more participation and transparency, meaning the opening of closed spaces. However, this aspect is fundamental in ECOLISE’s work as its long-term vision encompasses the co-creation of policies by politicians, researchers, and practitioners from sustainability initiatives, hence, the complete opening of spaces for participation for these stakeholders (ECOLISE, n.d.–f).

Claimed/created spaces by ECOLISE

In November 2016, ECOLISE organised an event in Brussels, namely the policy training on EU programmes and the EU policy-making process. Here, meetings “with senior officials at DG CLIMA, DG AGRI and DG REGIO, a meeting with Benedek Javor MEP, at the European Parliament, and [...] a meeting with the president and vice president of the EESC’s Sustainable Development Observatory (SDO)” took place (ECOLISE, n.d.–c). A sign of optimism for ECOLISE was that Javor “identified several opportunities for cooperation, on both current (existing Directives and funding proposals) and future work” (O’Hara, 2016). He offered to support ECOLISE at events in the framework of the EDSC in the EU Parliament. ECOLISE received similar encouragement from the EESC, and both sides agreed on working with increased intensity together. Besides, officials from the Agriculture/Rural Development

and Regional Policy DGs informed ECOLISE on how it can benefit from current programmes and co-develop future programmes (ibid.). Hence, they pointed out to ECOLISE the present and future invited spaces that ECOLISE can take advantage of. ECOLISE also had a concrete opportunity to get actively involved in policy-shaping at the event when the Climate Action DG of the European Commission invited the network to submit its views on the future EU strategy on climate action (ibid.). Hence, this event, organised by ECOLISE, shows that claimed/created spaces could result in invited spaces for ECOLISE created by policy-makers. This means that ECOLISE created an opportunity to have contact with policy-makers which naturally unfolded into offers for cooperation from the side of the decision-makers.

ECOLISE learned from this event that it is crucial to get involved in every phase of the policy cycle, i.e. as early as possible and even after the policy has been approved (ibid.). Following Bernhagen et al. (2015), lobbying is most effective when it starts already in the policy development phase, thus at the beginning of the cycle, preferably before the first documents on the policy are available. Hence, it seems to be a strategically reasonable decision of ECOLISE to be involved from the beginning. Eising (2007) has found that “EU associations concentrate their activities on its early stages, whereas national groups tend to follow the process from the formulation of EU policies until their implementation in the member states” (p.356). Here, ECOLISE as an EU association seems to be unique, with its intent to be present throughout the process.

Besides, in 2017 ECOLISE initiated the first EDSC, which took place on September 22. The day aims to

showcase for policy makers and other stakeholders the huge diversity of ways that local communities, such as those celebrating the European Day, are taking action on critical global challenges, driven by the desire of ordinary people, throughout Europe and the world, to be part of the solution rather than the problem (ECOLISE, 2017d).

On this occasion, the EESC co-hosted with ECOLISE an event in Brussels to mark the start of the day. MEPs, the EU Commission, national government representatives (ECOLISE, n.d.–c), and stakeholders from the local and regional levels participated (ECOLISE, 2017e). This shows that Brussels as a venue for advocacy work is a strategically suitable place to reach policy-makers on all levels. After all, representatives from all EU countries and regions meet regularly in Brussels.

ECOLISE was notably encouraged by the Greens of the EU Parliament at this EDSC. Philippe Lambert, MEP, co-chair of the Greens, spoke at the panel discussion of the event about the need for politicians to remove the obstacles that stand in the way of the development of local initiatives (ECOLISE, 2017e). This demand is in line with ECOLISE’s view as set out in section 2.3. ECOLISE also received strong support on that day from Rudolf Niessler, “director for Smart sustainable growth and programme implementation at the European Commission’s DG for Regional and Urban policy.” That he is not an exception with this supportive attitude was made clear by his statement: ““We all agree we really need to mobilise bottom-up actions”” (ibid.). Artur Runge-Metzger, director of the climate strategy at the European Commission’s DG Clima, gave a speech at the conference, emphasizing the

importance of bottom-up initiatives as a complement to top-down implementations, which is in line with ECOLISE's view as described in section 2.3. Karl Falkenberg, former Director-General for the Environment at the European Commission, was impressed by the debate. He criticised that the EU has been particularly trusting private lobby groups (ibid.). This confirms Coen's (2007) finding that business-oriented lobbyists have advantages in the lobbying process over NGOs. He hoped for a change of this state of affairs and even begged ECOLISE when he said: "[P]lease, please, please continue" (ECOLISE, 2017e). This coming from representatives of H1 institutions shows the potential of structural coupling, whereby the capitalist formations understand the necessity to support commons initiatives. For that purpose, close contacts could be established at the EDSC, which provides a sound basis for further lobbying activities. This is important, following Coen's (2007) reference to the work of Richardson (2000), because "public interests find themselves insiders on specific Commission forums because of sympathetic political leanings of directors of directorates" (Coen 2007, p.339). For instance, ECOLISE won the Climate Action Directorate-General's trust at last year's policy training and at the EDSC the sympathy of the directors Rudolf Niessler, Runge-Metzger, and Karl Falkenberg. Besides, it has resulted in strengthened contacts with MEPs and the EESC. This may provide more invited spaces for ECOLISE. Hence, 2017 was an exceptional year for ECOLISE's policy and advocacy work, mainly because of the first EDSC, which has become ECOLISE's flagship (ECOLISE, n.d.-d). In summary, the EDSC is a created space by ECOLISE which has a high potential to facilitate structural coupling.

On the COP24, Robert Hall from ECOLISE invited all participants to the joint event organised by ECOLISE entitled "Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Leading the Way for Enhanced Climate Action, Showcasing Transformative Change." The aim was to bring to the attention of world leaders that indigenous and local communities must be part of the solution to climate change (ECOLISE, 2018r).

In summary, the described created spaces are mainly events in which contacts to policy-makers were established. However, also written forms of becoming active were practised: ECOLISE jointly drafted with SIC partners the Lisbon Declaration on Social Innovation in 2018, a call on the EU to make social innovation a crucial topic of its strategy (ECOLISE, n.d.-d). Within the 2019 founded coalition "the Green New Deal for Europe", ECOLISE participated in drafting a proposal that "calls on Europe's public investment banks to inject 5% of GDP each year in the transition to net-zero emissions" (GNDE, n.d.). Also, in 2019, ECOLISE and four other European and International civil society networks published a fictional newspaper called "The Fair Times" to motivate the newly elected EU Parliament to pursue sustainable policies (ECOLISE, 2019b). Hence, participation in coalitions facilitates the creation of spaces to submit opinions.

In 2020 ECOLISE recruited a Policy Assistant to support the Policy Coordinator and a Deputy Director for the newly established headquarter in Brussels. The Deputy Director's tasks in creating spaces are to strengthen links with EU institutions and to organise events in Brussels together with the Policy Coordinator. Regarding the exhaustion and identification of invited spaces, his tasks are working with EU-funded projects and identifying new funding opportunities (ECOLISE, 2020b). Rozbicka

(2013) writes that “groups with [...] significant organizational resources (larger staff, offices based in strategic points) have proven to be extremely effective in realizing their objectives” (p. 848). Consequently, ECOLISE can significantly boost its opportunity spaces by having an office at a strategic location in Brussels and employing more staff.

Implications

The many occasions in which ECOLISE could get involved in invited spaces show the “proactive [...] stance” (Thiel & Uçarar, 2014, p.106) of the EU institutions to get out of their previously described legitimacy crisis. Finally, the creation of invited spaces can restore legitimacy by opening closed spaces (Gaventa, 2006). Following Junk (2016), the Commission is increasingly inviting NGOs to participate in the policy-making process to respond to critical debates concerning the democratic deficits of the EU. Besides, the EU’s rise in interest for ideas to meet climate agreements, as described in section 3.2, is reflected in the creation of invited spaces for organisations like ECOLISE. It became apparent, that it was mostly the EESC that created the invited spaces. This does not come as a surprise, considering the EESC’s mission of “promoting the development of a more participatory European Union” (European Economic and Social Committee, n.d.). ECOLISE’s lobbying activities are mainly carried out indirectly through the EESC. This became visible by ECOLISE’s contributions to multiple policy papers by the EESC, or its participation in the Multi-stakeholder Coalition and the International Climate Governance Coalition (presented in subsection 4.4.1), coordinated by the EESC. Even the events in Brussels in the framework of ECOLISE’s main created space, the EDSC, are co-organised with the EESC.

Henfrey says that there is now “more space than ever before to the active involvement of community groups and the types of partnerships and collaborations that can allow CLIs to shift from being isolated niches to being meaningful forces for more widespread change” (interview, November 4, 2020). The big number of invited spaces shows tendencies for participatory governance and decentralisation (Gaventa, 2006). As per O’Neill (2015), participatory democracy is one of nine social indicators for determining whether degrowth is occurring. Hence, the increase in spaces for participation could represent the primary step towards a degrowth transition and structural coupling, as participatory democracy can be seen as the basis of structural coupling. After all, in this form of interaction, “commons creatively engage with [...] capital-based formations” (Henfrey, 2018b), and this engagement must include participation in political decision-making processes as this is the vital engagement needed to achieve changes.

Since confrontational advocacy does not fit participation in invited spaces (Gaventa, 2006) and the facilitation of structural coupling, it is consistent that ECOLISE refrains mostly from this approach (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). Therefore, the section on ECOLISE’s activities related to closed spaces is smaller since, for example, more combative activities like the participation in the Counter COP are part of the apparent work in this regard. ECOLISE’s strategy to achieve increased participation is more subtle and concentrates on using given opportunities or the active creation of spaces. This

conciliatory aspect of ECOLISE's strategy includes facilitating contact with policy-makers by creating *invited spaces*. Therefore, not only do policy-makers create invited spaces, but they also "may be created from the other direction" (Gaventa, 2006, p.27).

Through this engagement with political institutions, ECOLISE can be classified as an *insider* (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008, p. 658) network. ECOLISE distinguishes itself, for example, from the organisation Greenpeace, which, as an *outsider* (ibid., p.654) organisation, is "operating outside established channels to [...] disrupt or directly contest existing arrangements" (ibid., p.650). Because of its radical positions, it is difficult for Greenpeace to negotiate with policy-makers (ibid.). Besides, Greenpeace refuses subsidies from the top to stay as autonomous as possible (Beyers, 2008). In contrast, ECOLISE is mainly based on EU funding (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020), so it is appropriate that the network maintains contact with the institutions (Junk, 2016). Moreover, this makes part of its strategy of structural coupling.

Now, it is interesting to analyse what the breakdown into invited and created spaces means for the existent power dynamics, since, following Gaventa (2006), "simply creating new institutional arrangements will not necessarily result in greater inclusion or [...] policy change. Rather, much depends on the nature of the power relations which surround and imbue these new, potentially more democratic, spaces" (p.23). For this analysis, it is important to consider that "[t]hose who create [the space] are more likely to have power within it" (ibid., p.27). The classification of ECOLISE's activities into invited and created spaces shows a numerical superiority of spaces created by institutions as opposed to spaces created by ECOLISE. This implies that the majority of the spaces in which ECOLISE acts are controlled by the EU. Hence, this can lead to a continuation of power imbalances and have even a negative effect on the goal of transition if these spaces are merely "re-legitimizing the status quo" (ibid., 23). Finally, Henfrey (2014) writes that "mutually supportive interaction", which can be seen as structural coupling, is not possible if "a pronounced power imbalance exists" (p.128). Thus, a power imbalance in the spaces could pose a risk for the co-optation of the organisations invited to participate. In this way, policy-makers may appear to have an interest in implementing participatory democracy, sustainability measures and social change but the real purpose might be to make use of these organisations to strengthen the capital system. Hence, in terms of structural coupling, i.e. interaction of co-equal systems, there needs to be an increase in what could be named co-created spaces by civil society organisations and policy-makers, where both have equal power. This fits with ECOLISE's goal of a co-creation of policies by policy-makers, researchers, practitioners and civil society (ECOLISE, 2017g). Co-created spaces are already implemented by ECOLISE, which consequently promotes structural coupling. For example, the EDSC has been organised in cooperation with the EESC, an EU body.

Following Gaventa (2006), however, it is insufficient to exclusively consider the space dimension when it comes to better understanding power dynamics. After all, they also depend on the levels, i.e. global, national, or local, where they occur, and the different forms of power exerted. These include the "hidden power", which is the power to decide what gets on the political agenda, the "invisible

power”, which is the power to influence mindsets, in the sense of *common sense* (D’Alisa & Kallis, 2020), and the “visible power”, which includes the observable parts of “the ‘who, how and what’ of policymaking” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 29). These considerations led to Gaventa’s (ibid.) design of a “power cube” which aims to include the interrelation of all these factors and can be used to analyse power dynamics.

Gaventa (ibid.) suggests that “[t]ransformative, fundamental change happens [...] in those rare moments when social movements or social actors are able to work effectively across each of the dimensions simultaneously” (p.30). While it is not the purpose of this work to explore power relations in-depth, it is worthwhile to look at ECOLISE’s involvement in the different dimensions, as this helps to unify the various findings of this thesis and present a holistic picture of ECOLISE’s work.

That ECOLISE is active in all spaces has already been shown. When it comes to the vertical dimension, ECOLISE’s strategy covers all levels as well. The global level is targeted, for example, through ECOLISE’s participation in the COPs. However, ECOLISE is mostly active at the EU level, at which most of the spaces for participation were identified. Additionally, ECOLISE also exerts influence at national and regional levels, mainly through its member organisations, as shown in section 4.3, and, for example, through its participation in the Erasmus+ funded programme Ecovillage Transition in Action (ETA). In addition, ECOLISE reaches out to national and regional government representatives at EU conferences (ECOLISE, n.d.–c, 2017e).

Regarding the different power forms, ECOLISE could be said to exercise hidden power in that the invited spaces were created indirectly by ECOLISE, as the network claims, namely as a consequence of its lobbying efforts. This way, ECOLISE influenced the agenda-setting of the EU (ECOLISE, 2018o), which illustrates the interconnection of hidden power with invited spaces. Suppose the invited spaces are indeed a reaction to ECOLISE’s successful efforts, meaning that the policy-makers have acknowledged the importance of an expansion of commons to achieve the set climate goals, the danger of co-optation is minimised and the possibility for structural coupling is increased. However, the problem that arises from the analysis of this work is that we do not know the real intention behind creating spaces for CSOs by the H1 institutions.

Thiel and Uçarer (2014) state that “impactful agenda-setting can be facilitated in venues where supporters are mobilised in either a horizontal (that is among EU institutions) or vertical fashion (that is from member state to the EU level) [...]” (p.102). This is about hidden power, as it is the power for setting the political agenda (Gaventa, 2006). The fact that ECOLISE works in a vertical fashion has just been explained. However, ECOLISE also mobilises its supporters horizontally, evident from ECOLISE’s various contacts within the different EU institutions presented in the previous sections. There are contacts primarily, besides EU bodies like the EESC and the CoR, with the EU Commission and the EU Parliament. Pursuant to the lobby theory, these are also the two venues that provide the most access (Thiel & Uçarer, 2014). Ruzza (2011) writes that “there is a strong and longstanding history of the incorporation of environmentalist ideas within the Commission and the Parliament” (p.460). ECOLISE

has no known direct contact with the EU Council, in which national governments dominate. However, through the EESC, which presents the opinions of CSOs also to the EU council, ECOLISE has an indirect influence on the Council (European Economic and Social Committee, n.d.). The difficulty of direct access to the Council for interest groups is also confirmed by Thiel and Uçarer (2014). Although the Council still has “significant decision-making power” (ibid. p.105), the importance of the Council is decreasing (ibid.). Besides, the Council only meets four times a year (Dür, 2018), suggesting that it is no significant disadvantage for ECOLISE that it has not established notable contacts with the Council. In contrast, the Parliament and the Commission have gained immense competencies through the Lisbon Treaty, so these are also the most important venues for lobbying (Thiel & Uçarer, 2014). The fact that ECOLISE mobilises supporters in both a vertical and horizontal fashion can significantly increase its hidden power.

ECOLISE exerts invisible power through the attempt to change common sense by the mainstreaming of CLIs. Visible power is exercised by ECOLISE, for example, through its participation in the development of the CLLD, Smart Villages, and other programmes. Here, it is noteworthy that ECOLISE works mostly on long-term instead of short-term policies, which illustrates ECOLISE’s will for substantial, structural changes.

It is not possible to deal with the interrelationships between the various dimensions in detail here; nevertheless, it became clear that ECOLISE is active on all of the dimensions described by Gaventa (2006) at the same time, and thus works in a “cross-cutting way” (ECOLISE, n.d.–f, p. 11), which can significantly increase the potential for achieving change (Gaventa, 2006). According to Gaventa (ibid.), this method of operating is challenging because different strategies are needed across the dimensions, which must be aligned with each other. ECOLISE confirms this difficulty “to develop new operational processes in multiple areas simultaneously and without direct precedents on which to build” (Henfrey & Penha-Lopes, 2018, p.1), which shows ECOLISE’s innovative approach.

Another challenge mentioned by Henfrey and Penha-Lopes is “the paradoxical position of operating within the very same structures it seeks to change” (ibid., p.1). A paradox here is that structural coupling is desired, whereby “the main aim of existing institutions and bodies associated with growth-based regimes” is to support the expansion of the commons so that they can take over “societal functions” and ultimately replace capital systems (Henfrey, 2018b). On the other hand, the desire to maintain their power positions is an inherent characteristic of incumbent H1 institutions (ibid.). Therefore, it is not an easy task for ECOLISE in its policy and advocacy work to encourage the H1 institutions to shift this mindset (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). Concerning structural coupling, Henfrey sees ECOLISE’s task as convincing the EU institutions to open more spaces for the Second Horizon, i.e. organisations like ECOLISE (ibid.). Hereby, it is crucial to address the rhetoric of the policy-makers concerning the importance of sustainability and to show them “hidden possibilities” (Henfrey & Penha-Lopes, 2018) on how they can act upon this, so that they can let go of their power urge (T. Henfrey,

interview, November 4, 2020). Again, this is based on the view that, in principle, policy-makers aspire to fulfil their function the best possible which depends on their received information and inspiration.

ECOLISE uses the arguing tactic in its lobbying work which is mostly about changing the status quo by challenging the thinking structures and views of the policy-makers. This interaction mode is predominant in the agenda-setting and shaping stages of the policy-making process. In comparison, the bargaining tactic is about the exchange of resources. Since NGOs rather have fewer resources and aspire to change current situations arguing is a frequent strategy of these interest groups (Beyers, 2008). This lobbying tactic is a difficult endeavour. After all, it is insufficient to have information on some specific policies, like in the bargaining mode, but complex and far-reaching alternatives need to be elaborated and well presented. In reality, mainly hybrids of the two types are found in lobbying strategies, although the respective proportions of the two modes vary. In this way, information as a resource is also presented in arguments, whereby bargaining and arguing are applied (*ibid.*). The necessary information is gained through ECOLISE's knowledge and research work (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020). In the area of communication, another pillar of ECOLISE's strategy, the network focuses on the way the evidence base is conveyed for better understanding and higher convincing power (*ibid.*). Here, Chalmers (2013) argues fittingly that the type of information as a resource is essential in the EU lobbying context and even more the way it is communicated.

Regarding ECOLISE's communication strategy, the analysis of ECOLISE's policy work made apparent that the same messages, meaning a single frame, have been repeatedly disseminated over and over again: The priority of EU policies and fundings should be given to sustainability and climate action (ECOLISE, n.d.–e) and the crucial role of CLIs in achieving these goals should be recognised (ECOLISE, n.d.–c, 2017i, 2018n, 2018r; O'Hara, 2017). Hence, ECOLISE does not spread different messages in different contexts. After Baumgartner and Mahoney, “repeatedly hammering a single frame” (2008, p.5) can help the message to sink in better so that it gains a firm place in the discourse. Besides, since ECOLISE identifies most with this frame, not mixing it with others aids in establishing a clear profile and mission of the network, which can make it appear more credible (*ibid.*).

In the next section, it will be analysed how ECOLISE communicates its message to the public.

4.5 Raising awareness of community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability

Because of the EU's crisis of legitimacy, the EU's authorities are particularly sensitive to developments within the population. For this reason, organisations need to convince the broad masses of their convictions if political and social changes are to be achieved (Castells, 2011). ECOLISE also writes that “shifts in mindsets and perspectives required for transition” (ECOLISE, 2017c) must be fulfilled, which is confirmed by D'Alisa and Kallis (2020) and Fromm (2016). Thereby, it is not only about influencing public opinion as means to pressure politicians by outside lobbying, but it is a goal in itself to change the opinions of the population for an upscaling of bottom-up initiatives. In this context, the communication

strategy is interconnected with the inspire domain of the action plan (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020).

Thus, Henfrey (ibid.) says in the interview:

We believe that there are far more people out there who would want to be involved in CLIs [...]. People need to know [...] where the local initiatives are, how they can connect with them and get involved [...]. So, the communications strategy, in a way, is the initial step in first of all making community-led action visible and then providing opportunities to socialise people into it [...]. We call it the inspire domain.

Concerning influencing public opinion, lobbying theory speaks of “increasing the salience and urgency of information” (Chalmers 2013, p. 18) as a strategy, especially within outside lobbying. ECOLISE speaks in this context of “raising the profile of existing community-led action on climate change and sustainability in Europe”, “highlighting the potential of community-led action” (ECOLISE, n.d.–h) and “raising awareness of community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability” (ECOLISE, 2018s). Although ECOLISE wants to reach both policy-makers and the population in this context (ECOLISE, n.d.–j), in this section, the term raising awareness is only used related to addressing the population, as ECOLISE’s activities concerning policy-makers were already presented in the last sections.

In order to raise awareness, ECOLISE contributed to newspapers in two cases: In December 2016, O’Hara drew attention to ECOLISE and especially to the relevance of CLIs in an article in the newspaper “La Vie Quercynoise.” He expressed the reason for this article as follows: “I started from the observation that there are many initiatives on this subject (community-led climate action), but without great visibility” (ECOLISE, 2016d). In August 2018, Nara Petrovič, an ECOLISE council member, wrote an article for the Slovenian newspaper “Delo.” An English version was made available online by ECOLISE. Petrovič wrote about the annual conference in Estonia of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) Europe, a member of ECOLISE (ECOLISE, 2018j). Through this article, people from the Slovenian population could be made aware of the work and existence of the ecovillage movement.

ECOLISE also cooperated with partners in the area of awareness-raising. To mention is the Erasmus+ funded BLAST partnership which is about educating people throughout Europe on how they can effectively contribute to a socio-ecological transition (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). Besides, at the conference “Social Solidarity Economy and the Commons”, held in November 2019 at the Instituto Universitário de Lisboa in Lisbon, attention could be drawn to the issue of a sustainable economy in the academic environment. It was organised by the research centre CEI-IUL with the support of ECOLISE, among others (ECOLISE, 2019k). Furthermore, ECOLISE’s co-organisation of the Transformative Cities People’s Choice Award 2019 also contributed to motivating grassroots actions and raising awareness by offering a public space for sharing and disseminating inspirational experiences (ECOLISE, 2018q).

The most important ECOLISE initiative in the area of raising awareness is the EDSC. To address politicians, ECOLISE co-hosts conferences in Brussels (as shown in subsection 4.4.2) and to reach the people of Europe, EDSC participants, ECOLISE member organisations and communities, organise

their own events. In 2017, 48 of these took place across Europe (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). The organisers came from 15 different European countries and prepared readings, bicycle tours, open doors of ecovillages, workshops, and much more (ECOLISE, n.d.–b). On this occasion, ECOLISE launched a booklet containing examples of successful CLIs and their positive impact on society and the environment. The title is “A community-led transition in Europe: Local action towards a sustainable, resilient, low-carbon future” (ibid.) and is freely downloadable from the ECOLISE website to facilitate access to this information and therefore reach potentially more people.

For the EDSC in September 2018, the new version of the booklet, called “Local, Community-led: A new Future Unfolding” was published (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). That year’s conference was streamed live from Brussels so that everyone interested could follow it. Thus, as many people as possible, not only politicians, should be reached with ECOLISE’s messages (ECOLISE, 2018l). Communities from 24 European countries, nine more than last year, participated in the EDSC 2018. A total of 105 events took place, more than twice as many as in 2017 (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). The “Fête des Possibles” is a significant event organised in this context, in which over 1500 communities from Belgium and France participated. ECOLISE was satisfied with the EDSC 2018 as a “wide audience” could be reached (ibid.). ECOLISE’s concrete contribution to this was creating an EDSC website and country/regional contact points. ECOLISE attributes the increased participation to these contact points, which promoted the EDSC at the national and regional levels. Therefore, for the coming years, ECOLISE planned to develop them further (ibid.).

At the EDSC 2019, events took place in 27 European countries, so there was a further increase compared to last year, reaching even more people in Europe (ECOLISE, 2019g). A particular success at the international level is that in 2019, inspired by the EDSC, an equivalent of this celebration day took place in North America for the first time and was supported by ECOLISE (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). In the framework of the EDSC 2019, ECOLISE established national contact points (NCPs) in ten more countries “to support awareness raising and participation in the EDSC at country level” (ibid., p.3). In May 2019, ECOLISE won the Lush Spring Prize for its high “dedication to regenerating the planet and social systems” (ECOLISE, 2019e). The money was distributed by ECOLISE in the form of micro-grants to member organisations, national partners of the EDSC, in seven European countries to support them in awareness-raising and event coordination (ECOLISE, n.d.–e). Owing to the pandemic, the events of the EDSC 2020 were held online or in a smaller setting (ECOLISE, n.d.–i).

Organisationally wise, to boost its work in raising awareness, ECOLISE employed a Communications Coordinator in 2017 (ECOLISE, 2016e), the year of the first EDSC. In addition, a new website for ECOLISE was created, increasing ECOLISE’s visibility on the internet (ECOLISE, 2017a). In 2018, ECOLISE continued to work on its website and proudly announced that 95 visitors daily visited its site at the end of the year. ECOLISE also became increasingly active on the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook. ECOLISE also set up a LinkedIn account in 2018 (ECOLISE, n.d.–d). To further expand the Communications work, ECOLISE hired a Communications and Network Assistant in January 2020.

His activities aim to help “showcasing the inspirational work of communities across Europe that are leading the way to a sustainable, low carbon future” (ECOLISE, 2019h).

For the future, ECOLISE plans to expand its communications activities by bringing on board, among others, celebrities, influencers, scientists, and decision-makers to spread ECOLISE’s message (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). According to Castells (2011), famous personalities are “a potent source of social influence” (p.327), and researchers, activists, and celebrities put global warming on the media agenda (ibid.). ECOLISE incorporates activists and researchers, but the celebrity aspect is still missing from ECOLISE’s strategy, so it stands to reason that the network wants to introduce this component.

Castells (ibid.) states further that “[t]he environmental movement [...] create[s] events to raise consciousness by attracting media attention. Furthermore, these events are often global” (p.331), for example, “through coordinated performances staged in different countries” (ibid.). Here it is true that ECOLISE has set up the EDSC to raise, if not global, so at least international awareness, but not necessarily by attracting the media’s interest. So far, the events have been relatively quiet, with open days of urban gardens, for example. Thus, there was no high media coverage. ECOLISE probably does not have the resources to steer the media coverage of its messages by launching advertisements (ibid.), so the media would need to have a self-serving interest in covering the EDSC. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, events that cause a stir are probably not on the agenda for now. Therefore, it is fitting that ECOLISE also intends to strengthen its online presence and seek help in the form of collaboration with external experts on public mobilisation (ECOLISE, n.d.–f). Indeed, there is still a lot of potential for ECOLISE in terms of its internet presence. For example, the network does not have an Instagram account, even though it is a popular social media platform and is scarcely active on its YouTube channel, which, as a consequence, has only 33 subscribers currently (29/12/2020). This could imply a need for ECOLISE to keep up with digital communication developments.

In summary, it becomes clear that ECOLISE connects very little with media with a significant outreach. Castells (2011) puts it clearly: “Messages, organizations, and leaders who do not have a presence in the media do not exist in the public mind” (p.194). Hence, ECOLISE does not set its focus on influencing the public mind through its activities. The analysis shows that ECOLISE’s work related to the EU institutions dominates in comparison to raising awareness in the public sphere. Junk (2016) writes in this regard: “[T]he source of financial support affects the way the NGO approaches policy-makers and the public: [...] the more dependent the NGO is on one source of support, the more it should focus its limited resources on securing this relationship by concentrating on lobbying this actor” (p. 4). Since the funds come mainly from the EU and not from the public in the form of donations (T. Henfrey, interview, November 4, 2020), ECOLISE spends its limited financial resources on working with the EU institutions. However, this does not mean that the network considers the area of public awareness-raising as unimportant as it wants to pay more attention to this area. Besides, the EDSC shows that contact with the public happens mainly through the member organisations and communities supported by ECOLISE. This is in accordance with the degrowth stance on local gatherings for exchange and decentralisation.

Influencing public opinion by ECOLISE from a central position in Brussels would make little sense following the degrowth train of thought. Therefore, ECOLISE's mission of awareness-raising is mainly based on the support of member organisations, communities, and participants of the EDSC at the local level.

CONCLUSION

This research addressed how ECOLISE, as a degrowth organisation, has tried to achieve change at the EU level. For this purpose, a qualitative analysis of relevant internet documents, ECOLISE's internal documents, and an interview with ECOLISE's Research Coordinator Tom Henfrey was conducted using the grounded theory methodology. This methodology proved to be particularly useful in analysing the complex empirical world in which ECOLISE operates, as it allowed to make all the different aspects of it visible.

It became clear that ECOLISE strives to accomplish change through its policy and advocacy work, through awareness-raising activities and research, and the support of its members and local communities. The gathered knowledge from its research work is used for policy advice but also for the improvement of practice, e.g. by advising degrowth initiatives. Thus, ECOLISE simultaneously supports bottom-up actions and influences top-down decisions and the public mindset. This holistic strategy is based on ECOLISE's view that only a combination of effective top-down and bottom-up measures can lead to changes, which can only prevail if they are supported by society.

One of the conclusions of this work is that ECOLISE uses a specific strategy of delegating tasks to its members for more efficient work and greater impact. Hence, the support of CLIs mostly takes an indirect form, in that ECOLISE builds capacities of member organisations that assist the CLIs directly. This is also the case when it comes to awareness-raising among society. In the framework of the EDSC, ECOLISE's flagship established for awareness-raising, ECOLISE is in direct contact with policy-makers in Brussels and supports the participants of the EDSC, such as member organisations and communities, to reach the population at the local level. That strategy is also found in ECOLISE's lobbying work. While the ECOLISE policy and advocacy team tends to focus on the EU level, member organisations are more active at the national or regional level. This vertical approach in ECOLISE's lobby strategy allows the network to penetrate all levels. Horizontally, ECOLISE is also well-positioned at the EU level, whereby the most frequented institutions are the Parliament and the Commission.

Besides, the analysis could reveal ECOLISE's more subtle strategy of shaping and practising the changes it wants to see manifested in a transition to post-growth, whereby the network becomes a social innovator. This includes incorporating values from the degrowth, commons, permaculture, and ecovillage movements (which are not to be seen as separate). ECOLISE's membership structure is founded on degrowth principles such as horizontal power structures, participation, autonomy, dialogue, consent-based decision making, and decentralisation. In its lobbying work, ECOLISE respectfully addresses H1 institutions intending to support their flourishing in a way that is helpful to the planet and people. Thereby, ECOLISE practices harmonious social relating that it aims to see reflected in the world.

Apart from that, ECOLISE implements degrowth values and actively creates alternatives, especially in the field of research. Here, Tom Henfrey and Gil Penha-Lopes, in collaboration with the Transition Research Network, are particularly active. Since they are scientists and sustainability practitioners

at the same time and incorporate their insights from practical experiences into their scientific work, they can be called para-academics. They produce *Mode 3* research, a term introduced by Henfrey, whereby social permaculture grounds the research methodology. This implies the inclusion of the transition movements' values into the research design and the focus on productive cooperation between practitioners and researchers on an equal footing. For this purpose, power imbalances in communication are eliminated utilizing *pattern languages*. Moreover, ECOLISE is not only a supporter of commons but is also involved in their creation. In the area of its Knowledge and Learning pillar, ECOLISE develops open source projects, such as the Status Report, the ECOLISE wiki, and the UrbanA wiki.

Another noted strategy of ECOLISE is to establish communities of practice (CoP), whereby the mutual exchange of experience and knowledge is at the focus. The resulting learning process is seen as a base for development. This is the core of the network, where member organisations, CLIs, and the ECOLISE team form a CoP mainly through online meetings. CoPs are also found in *Mode 3* research, where people from different disciplines come together, which is explicitly visible in the UrbanA community of practice. An implicit CoP can also be found in ECOLISE's lobbying coalition with CAN.

Overall, it became apparent that ECOLISE relies strongly on collaboration with partners in its strategy, especially within the EU-funded Erasmus+ and H2020 projects. In research projects, ECOLISE works with various research centres, which allows access to more funding. The formation of mainly alternative and long-term lobbying coalitions with the EESC, CAN, and SDG Watch allows easier access to EU policy processes. By working with more mainstream organisations and researchers, ECOLISE profits from advantages that it would not have otherwise.

Cooperation with partners with diverging worldviews leads to tensions, which ECOLISE is willing to balance to stay functional. Another tension is coercive isomorphism that arises from the network's contact with EU institutions. The danger thereof is to be co-opted by H1 institutions of the capital system, which is exceptionally high for ECOLISE due to its substantial financial dependence on EU funds. Co-optation is the opposite of structural coupling that ECOLISE as an H2 organisation aims to bring about between the H1 and the H3, i.e. commons initiatives. This would lead to a strengthening of the commons with the long-term goal of having them replace the current capital institutions. However, following ECOLISE, co-optation and enclosure are currently the most widespread forms of interaction between capitals and commons.

The motive of structural coupling is recurring in ECOLISE's strategy as it is concretely practised by ECOLISE in the field of research by enabling collaboration based on mutual respect between researchers from H1 institutions and practitioners from the commons movement of the H3. Furthermore, structural coupling between design and practice is established in *Mode 3* research, whereby permaculture becomes the research design.

In line with ECOLISE's goal to establish structural coupling between the H1 and H3, the network cooperates strongly with EU institutions, especially with the EU's EESC, as in the case of their co-organisation of the EDSC. The author argues that structural coupling can arise especially through

such co-created spaces by ECOLISE and EU bodies, as this can lead to balanced power relations. In this work, ECOLISE's lobby activities were classified based on Gaventa's (2006) model of spaces, revealing the predominance of the network's participation in EU's invited spaces. In other words, ECOLISE was less often actively creating spaces for its involvement in policy-making processes than being invited to get involved; this can lead to a higher risk for co-optation. The network interprets the many occasions in which it was invited to contribute its opinion as an attempt of the EU to find solutions to both its legitimacy and climate crises. ECOLISE also sees the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity for the recognition of the degrowth movement. Thereby, ECOLISE's evaluation is in accordance with the literature on the capacity of crises to be game changers for the degrowth movement. Following Henfrey's interview, the potential for structural coupling is now higher than ever before and goes back to ECOLISE's efforts in this regard. However, the real reasons for the EU's creation of invited spaces are unknown, meaning they can potentially even have the opposite effect of structural coupling, a relegitimizing of the current system.

Regarding ECOLISE's lobbying activities, it was concluded that the network mainly advocates for changes in the EU's long-term policies and funds, as opposed to short-term policies, so that these incorporate the vital role of CLIs for change and make sustainability their priority. ECOLISE has been working for years on the Smart Villages Initiative, the CLLD, and the EU's long-term climate strategy. This shows that ECOLISE seeks profound structural changes. Furthermore, ECOLISE uses a mixture of bargain and argumentation lobby tactics whereby expertise gained through its work in the field of *Knowledge and Learning* is used as a basis for arguments. The focus is on showing the policy-makers, assumed to perform their function to the best of their knowledge and abilities, alternatives that help reach, among others, climate goals. The goal is that policy-makers voluntarily support CLIs by the resulting insight, whereby structural coupling may occur. The challenge here is to operate as an insider organisation in the system that the network wants to change, which is particularly difficult due to the nature of H1 institutions to hold on to power and maintain the status quo.

Moreover, it became evident that several strategies and activity domains of ECOLISE are interconnected and complement each other, which can be seen as a strategy itself; ECOLISE combines the four domains of the CfF action plan (inspire, enable, advocate and learn) in a mutually enhancing manner and pursues a strategy of disruption and conciliation. This involves, on the one hand, pointing out the inadequacies of the current system and, on the other, simultaneously working on alternatives and communicating them to the institutions and the public in a way that they can be embraced. The successful combination of all these different strategies is a clear challenge for ECOLISE, especially since it cannot build on precedents, which indicates its innovative power in building an efficient, holistic strategy.

All these results serve to answer the posed question of how ECOLISE has tried to achieve change at the EU level. Since this is an open question, the answers are inexhaustible. However, in this thesis, ECOLISE's main activities, strategic approaches, underlying perspectives, and goals have been

presented, including contextual factors. Thus, a comprehensive picture of ECOLISE's work and experienced reality could be created. In addition, essential insights could be gained regarding the attitude of the EU and some of its institutions, representatives, and bodies towards the degrowth movement from the perspective of a degrowth organisation. In general, the dominance of the green growth doctrine in the EU prevails. However, the analysis identified different supporters of ECOLISE in the EU policy context, such as the EESC, various DGs from the EU Commission, and MEPs (see especially 4.4.2). Besides, the important EU's financial measures supporting ECOLISE's work were shown. It was visible that community initiatives profit mostly from the CLLD programmes, whereby degrowth organisations primarily make use of funds for research within the H2020 and FP7 framework. Therefore, it is useful that ECOLISE engages in the academic community.

Besides, the study contributes to the consolidation of the concept of structural coupling by showing concrete interactions with the aim of its implementation between EU institutions and the European degrowth movement based on a case study. Furthermore, it was shown to what extent an organisation already implements structural coupling in the field of science.

What cannot properly be answered in this work, but would also be relevant in examining degrowth lobbying, is to what extent ECOLISE's strategy is effective. The focus was on ECOLISE's perspective, which revealed that it describes its work as successful. How this corresponds to reality was not tested although some authors do have a convergent position on how successful lobbying may be conducted. Having demonstrated "how" ECOLISE attempts to achieve change, future research could build on this to examine if these attempts are purposeful and how they might be optimised.

Besides, to get a better picture of the context that influences the development of a degrowth transformation, it would be helpful not just to take ECOLISE's perspective but also to study the viewpoint of the EU's policy-makers.

Due to the specific study of ECOLISE's strategy, no general conclusions can be drawn regarding the whole degrowth movement at the EU level. However, as this was qualitative research examining the empirical world of an individual network, the study nevertheless provides valuable and meaningful results. Moreover, ECOLISE represents a large part of the European degrowth movement through its numerous members. To our knowledge, there is no comparable degrowth organisation doing lobby work in the EU. The analysis showed that ECOLISE sees itself as the most radical part of its lobbying coalitions, which makes clear that in the context in which ECOLISE operates, it is the only degrowth organisation of this form. Future research could look at the whole EU lobbying community concerning the representation of degrowth ideas to identify more relevant interest groups. This master thesis can also serve as a basis for comparative studies with other organisations in this context.

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ANNEXES

Annex A



INFORMED CONSENT

The present study arises in the context of a master's dissertation underway at Iscte - Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. This study concerns to analyze how ECOLISE has been trying to achieve changes at the EU level.

The study is carried out by Barbara Klobucaric (barbara.klobucaric@hotmail.de), who can be contacted if you have any questions or comments.

Your participation in the study, which will be highly valued, as it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this field of science, consists of an approximately one-hour semi-structured interview. There are no significant expected risks associated with participation in the study.

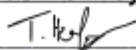
Participation in the study is strictly voluntary: you can freely choose to participate or not to participate. If you choose to participate, you can stop your participation at any time without having to provide any justification. At a later point in time, you will receive a version of the thesis to check your statements included in it. These can be changed or removed if you wish before the submission of the thesis.

I agree that my name may be mentioned in the thesis with reference to my statements in the interview under the stated conditions. I declare that I have understood the objectives of what was proposed and explained to me by the researcher, that I have been given the opportunity to ask all the questions about the present study, and for all of them, to have received an enlightening answer, and I accept participate in it.

Cartaxo, Portugal

(location), November 1, 2020

Name: Thomas Henfrey

Signature: 

Annex B

Informed consent on the future use of interview material and treatment of the data

Individual statements from the interview that are particularly relevant for the master's thesis are transcribed and incorporated into the text of the thesis. They serve as additional information, explanation and presentation of the ECOLISE research coordinator's perspective on the network's developments under investigation. The completed master thesis will be made freely available to ECOLISE in case the network may have a use for it. The work will be submitted by me, Barbara Klobucaric, to ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon but will not be published anywhere else.

I, Barbara Klobucaric, will keep the taped interview, the transcription and the internal documents concerning ECOLISE's strategy in a secure place on my laptop, in a folder that only I can access with a password. After 5 years, counted from the end of the study, I am going to delete all the data in conformity with the applicable ethical and legal requirements, with particular consideration of the general principles of the confidentiality, protection and safety of the participant.

I, Thomas Henfrey, agree with the conditions above.

Location, date: **Cartaxo (Portugal, May 25th 2021)**

Signature: 