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COMMUNITY CURRENCIES

Community currencies have emerged as a means to empower the economically marginalized and to build social capital. This alternative social movement, comprised of autonomous, local systems, has proliferated in the past two decades. While all local currencies differ, each is premised on an alternative currency as a medium for the exchange of services and goods. Unlike conventional bartering (where two actors trade directly with one another), local currencies expand commerce by connecting a network of people (and often businesses). The provider of a service or good receives credit in the form of the community currency that can be used for making purchases from other participants in the system.

There are three notable systems in operation: Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), time banks, and hours systems. LETS (originating in British Columbia in 1983) have been the most widespread form of local currencies. Although LETS have never been widely pursued in the United States, there have been an estimated 1,500 LETS groups in 39 countries. Yet, researchers have concluded that LETS activity peaked in the mid-1990s and that a substantial proportion of LETS are no longer operating.

The Time Dollar Network was launched in 1983 in Miami, Florida, as a diverse and flexible program to formalize volunteering among the socially marginalized, that is, the young, the elderly, the poor, and the disabled. Whereas some of these programs are part of existing organizations, others are independent, alternative economies (e.g., LETS). These local currencies, now known as "time banking," continue to expand in the United Kingdom (where there are 80 active banks and more than 25 in development) and the United States (where there are over 40 programs).

In 1991, an activist in Ithaca, New York, started Ithaca Hours, a printed local currency. This paper format makes Ithaca Hours quite different than LETS and time banks. The latter require substantial coordination and organization as every transaction is accounted for. With paper notes, neither computerized accounting system nor accountant is needed. Since Ithaca Hours was founded, 82 communities in the United States have replicated the model. However, only about 20% of these systems are currently active.

Researchers have identified several major areas of difficulty that community currencies face. They include the recruitment of dedicated administrators, the continual recruitment of participants, redundant listings and the lack of useful services available in the systems, and insufficient resources to administer the systems.

Considering the movement as a whole, it is evident that LETS and hours systems have been less successful in surviving than time banks. The success of the latter is at least partially attributable to the fact that they tend to formally employ staff to broker exchanges, and they are often based in existing organizations. Participants in time banks differ to some extent from those in LETS and hours systems too. Whereas LETS and hour systems are favored by educated, alternative, and progressive people, time banks tend to be used more by the elderly and the poor. Although all of these efforts can be considered community currencies, it is clear that there are substantial differences in the actual practices.

—Ed Collom

See also Alternative Movements; Community Organizing

Further Readings

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COMMUNITY GARDENS

Community gardens are tracks of land, jointly tended by local residents for either collective or mutual individual benefit. Participants share resources and engage in cooperative decision making about the use of the land. Although community gardens may be located in rural areas, urban community gardens, established in the United States in the late 1800s, often make news as they have come to be understood in relation to a variety of purposes and processes necessary in industrialized areas. Community gardens are increasingly being embraced for providing the physical and spatial context for educational, social, and individual or environmental health purposes, through which the processes of ritual building and communal experience can also occur. Existentially, community gardens also provide a lingering memory of the physical and social landscape prior to the days of extensive privatized land division. As such, community gardening, through its combined spatial and process dimensions, serves as a symbol of sustainable human connection amid the forces of individualized conceptions of urban life and development.

From an education standpoint, community gardens can become laboratories for learning about nature and ecology. For youth, participation can also facilitate a sense of pride and an awareness of community responsibility. For teens, lessons may become more relational in terms of social skill building, cooperation for a common goal, and leadership development. For adults, community gardening can enhance a sense of belonging, providing an opportunity to collaborate with others and build support groups. Adults can

also role-model cooperation and engage in cross-generational learning with younger participants.

Community gardens can provide social opportunities for isolated individuals and for cultural building. When gardened by individuals from similar backgrounds, the gardens offer a space for maintaining traditions centered on nature. When utilized by diverse individuals, community gardening can facilitate cross-cultural and cross-racial exchange, serving to break down barriers through common activity and dialogue. As a cooperative urban agriculture endeavor, community gardens are also slowly becoming appreciated for their role in microeconomics wherein low-income communities provide resources to their residents.

Community gardens can support health, both on an individual level in terms of good nutrition and environmentally in terms of air quality, open space, and city aesthetics, although the extent of their contribution to air quality and overall beautification is debated. When used for rehabilitative purposes, specific healing community gardens can provide a community space for people dealing with mental or physical disorders, for those that need help readjusting to social interactions, or for those that need assistance in the self-esteem building necessary after physical or emotional abuse. Community gardening can also provide opportunities to build communal reliance and a sense of holism, experiences that are not always accessible in industrialized systems of compartmentalized production.

Community gardening is not without challenge. When utilized within institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and schools, community gardening risks becoming co-opted as a placating activity to reduce challenges to the forces of control, rather than being considered as an arena for cooperation and collaborative skill building and democracy. In addition, issues of property ownership, zoning regulations, short leases, public liability insurance, resource needs, and the pressures of capital development threaten the sustainability of community gardens. Community gardens have been threatened in cities across the country, with politicians and government planners tending to support community gardening when property values are low and when funds are available through blight, education, anti-crime, and environmental programs,