

The digitisation of complementary local currencies in Brittany: debates, controversies and feedback.

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Introduction

At the end of 2020, 9 of the 12 existing complementary & citizen local currencies (CCLCs) in Brittany announced their decision to converge towards a common regional digital currency by 2022⁶. Their goal is to pool the efforts and costs of digitisation, to allow exchanges with the same currency between several living areas (especially for professionals) and to extend the use to territories not yet covered by associations. However, the evolution of local currencies towards a digital version is not self-evident. The article's objective is to study the controversies and the impacts of this digitisation movement in the Breton context.

CCLCs are "units of account put into circulation as a complement to the national currency, on the initiative of groups of citizens gathered within a limited territory and whose rules of operation are defined by them" (Derudder, 2012: 72). Since 2014 in France, CCLCs fall under the Hamon law, which stipulates that local currency securities can only be issued by legal entities under private law that must be constituted in the form of cooperatives, mutual insurance companies or unions under the mutual insurance code, foundations or 1901 associations, or commercial companies with the status of Social and Solidarity Economy

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⁶ Link to the announce (French) <https://www.breizh-info.com/2020/12/27/156202/une-monnaie-locale-pour-toute-la-bretagne-en-2021/>

companies. These local currencies, backed by the euro, are part of the history of alternative currencies that can be traced back to the years of economic crises (the Wörgl, 1932 in the Austrian Tyrol or the Wir in Switzerland, 1934). The CCLC projects display strong values of solidarity and relocation of production and exchange within a circumscribed territory. Some associations have established "entry" criteria for professionals (non-membership in large-scale distribution, transition to the production or distribution of organic products) to direct consumers towards providers favourable to local development and ecological and socially responsible practices (Martin, 2018). In addition, the aim is to regain control over the social institution that is money, its role and its governance, which would then become democratic. In this sense, these CCLC projects are close to the "real utopias" analysed by E. O. Wright (2020), i.e. "practical cases of institutional innovations [...] that embody emancipatory alternatives to dominant social organizations" and that can be "built here and now".

The literature review highlights the various tensions generated by digital technology, the difficulty of mastering it for active members of associations, and the renewed questioning of the relationship between money and territory. Of the 83 existing local currency projects in France, only a little more than a dozen circulates a digital currency (including one in Brittany), in addition to a paper currency (Sol, 2021). The results show that digital technology is indeed a test for these "real utopias", forcing the project's bearer groups to re-examine their own situation and to develop the desired compromise between capacity, control and ambition, which for the actors corresponds to a process of inquiry in the sense of Dewey (1993, 2010).

Methodology and Fields of study

Data Collection and Analysis

Our survey material is made up of about 15 semi-structured interviews with members of nine local currency projects in Brittany (7 active currencies, 1 in the process of being launched, 1 not yet constituted as an association) and two interrupted projects. We interviewed them about their CCLC project and about the importance or lack of attraction that the digitisation of the currency had for their association.

This material was processed using lexical analysis tools (Alceste-Iramuteq), in order to highlight the different semantic universes mobilized by the actors (Paraponaris and Rohr, 2020). This brief exploratory analysis was enriched by an in-depth reading of interviews and "official" documents such as the charters of the currencies and the minutes of the general assembly.

Elements of Context

The 11 Breton local currencies studied are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1. Galleco, in the department of Ille-et-Vilaine, could not be included in our study. In addition, we contacted an actor from the Bigaille, an aborted project in the Saint-Brieuc area, as well as a person from the Cornouaille project, which has not yet been created in the Quimper area.

Table 1: The presentation of the Breton CCLC projects studied

Name of the Currency	Project start date	Association Creation Date	Currency launch Data	State	Area of distribution	Population concerned (approx.)
Héol		June 2015	January 2012	existing, with a digitized version	Pays de Brest	400,000
la Sardine	End of 2011	Dec. 2012	December 2012	Project stopped	Concarneau	30,000
la Maillette		July 2012	May 2014	Existing	Pays de Rance	290,000
le Galais	2013	May 2015	November 2015	Existing, digital version stopped	Pays de Ploërmel	40,000
Le Buzuk	2013	2013	October 2016	Existing, Digital version forecast in 2021	Pays de Morlaix	130,000
La Bizh		June 2015	January 2016	Existing	Pays de Vannes	200,000
Le Ségal		January 2015	January 2018	Existing	Pays de Lorient	270,000
L'Ourse		2017	September 2018	Existing	Pays de Basse Vilaine	30,000
Le Pezh	End of 2018	April 2019	June 2021	Existing, Digital version planned	Trégor-Goëlo	110,000

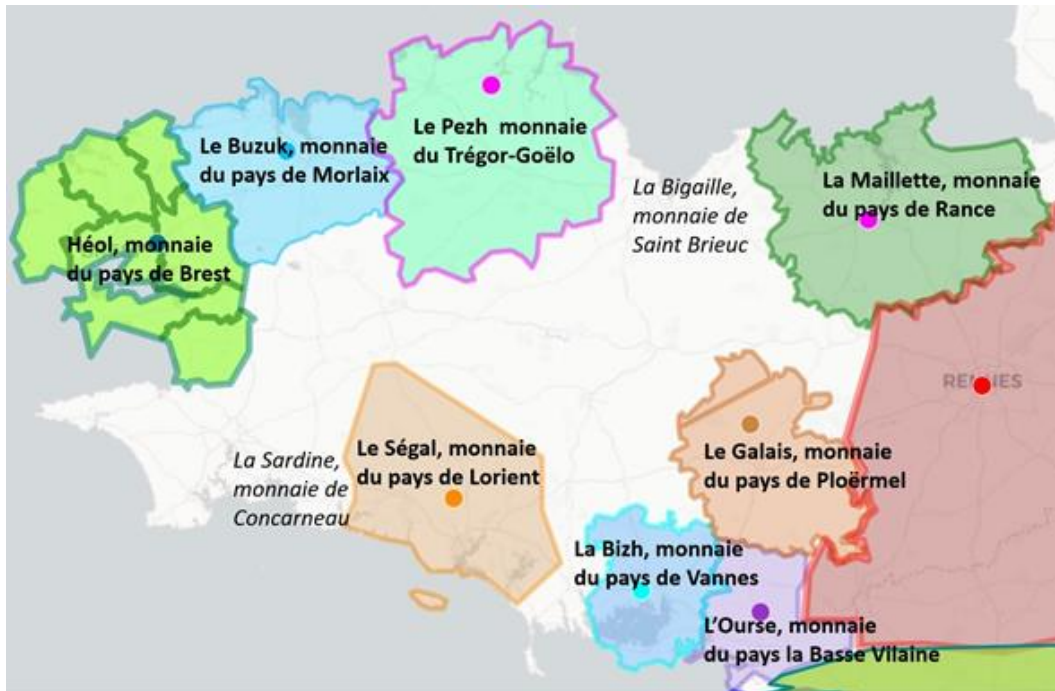


Figure 1: The geographical distribution of the Breton CCLC projects studied

Résultats: a real utopia tested by the digitisation

Digitisation, one test among others

The textual analysis, a syntactic proximity study of the words, revealed four semantic universes mobilized by the actors (Fig. 2): 1) the collective or the organization around the project, the association, its functioning (class 1 = 29%, in red); 2) "the currency" as a tool-project integrated into a local economic, a social and solidarity project, on a local territory (class 2 = 26% in green); 3) the currencies and their network (class 3 = 28% in blue); 4) digitisation (class 4 in purple), which represents only 17% of the classified text segments. Digitisation appears to be a rather peripheral topic to the project as a whole, seen a priori as a tool or a simple means of increasing critical mass and reaching other populations.

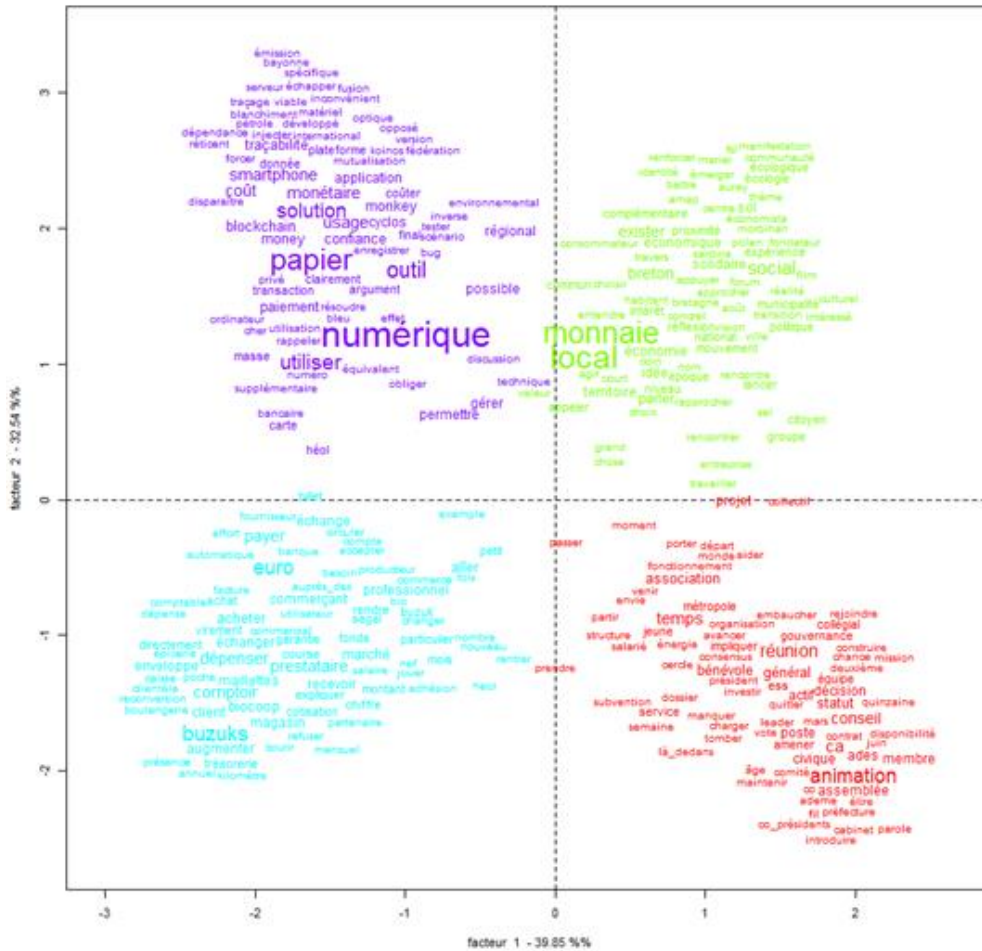


Figure 2: the analysis of the 15 interviews corpus

The project: to build a local action through money

Local currencies associations actors' motivations were and are the re-integration of the economic into the political and social, by taking back the hand on the currency, by a democratic governance registered in the statutes, and by promoting its circulation and its uses on the scale of a territory which they defined. Integrating the objectives of the Social and Solidarity Economy, they aim to strengthen social ties and revitalize local production and exchanges, often with an ecological focus.

Digital does not play a role in the initial motivations of the associations, but rather later, once the currency has been created, even if for Heol or Galais, the subject comes up "fairly quickly". The Breton CCLCs interviewed are all confronted with what they consider to be an insufficient circulation of the local currency: the network of individuals and professionals is limited.

Digitalization appears as a possible solution that is explored and questioned at different stages: first as an hypothesis, then as a series of choices to be made (choice of technical solution, financing method, etc.) and as an implementation action. The exploration is nourished by the experiences of other local currencies in France, and by observation and exchanges between Breton projects.

Confronted to the monetary circulation problem, the digital hypothesis

Informing, distributing and convincing users of the currency takes time, as does organizing exchanges and conversions, when volunteer resources are limited. The digitisation, total or partial, of exchanges, because it reduces these "transaction costs" appears to be an almost "obvious" solution.

A "solution" to be experimented...

The arguments put forward are threefold: internal, on the management of exchange operations, and external, on the diffusion of local currency (the number of users), and on its speed of circulation (the number of transactions per local currency unit in circulation).

In the discourses, digitisation would simplify the management of the supply of local currency to individuals for volunteers and increase its availability. Some respondents develop an argument in favour of a common Breton digital currency, which would make it possible to cover "white zones" in the region, where no association has yet been formed. The interviewees also point to a general context of increasing dematerialization of everyday money (contactless payment, payment cards, etc.) accentuated by the health crisis period. A digital currency would make it possible to "reach a younger audience" while providing an alternative to bank cards, thus avoiding the potential uses of purchasing habit tracking. A third objective, they unanimously advocated is to simplify and facilitate the circulation between professionals "via the online account and the mobile application". Indeed, the payment of suppliers in paper money is not well adapted to the professional activity for legal and practical reasons (important amount of payments). Finally, the networks of effective circulation of products question the articulation of the different territorial scales: area of living and trading area.

Despite all these advantages, and the initial enthusiasm, the experimentation raises as many problems as it solves.

... which generates a new series of problems and questions about the project

For Heol, as was the case for the Galais experiment, the results fall short of expectations: there are not so many new structures joining because of the digitisation, nor is there a significant increase in payments between professionals. The attraction seems to be a little stronger among individuals, new members seduced by the digital version. But many volunteers are aware that beyond the technical implementation, a lot of work remains to be done “with communities or with individual members or associations so that the currency actually circulates on the territory”. The Eusko’s digitisation experience has already stressed the importance of this diffusion support (Sol 2021), and this experience remains a model for many Breton projects, and a reference for all (the Eusko is the currency of the French Basque Country and Europe's leading CCLC in terms of monetary mass).

Digital currency implies new commitments for volunteers (preparation of an application for administrative authorization from the Autorité de Contrôle Prudentiel et de Résolution, search for financing to purchase and adapt the solution), which exceed the personal investment initially anticipated in the project: the hiring of a salaried employee is then envisaged, a source of additional responsibility.

The idea of simplification through digital technology is then challenged: the technical nature of digital money is beyond the initial skills of many volunteers. The risk is, according to them, that they will lose the quality and the control of decision-making to an external third party (the supplier of the IT solution, the host, etc.) Finally, several respondents emphasize that dematerialisation reinforces the encouragement to consume by facilitating the act, and has a significant environmental impact, two elements that are contradictory to the association's primary objectives.

The digitisation project would therefore require financial and human resources disproportionate to the means of the associations and the volume of currency in circulation. Within the association, it calls into question the trade-off between autonomy and the desired social impact. A currency such as Héol has thus entered into a closer relationship with the Brest Métropole local authority, which is financing this development over three years (2019-2021); Buzuk and Pezh have chosen to rely on a European Leader grant over three years for the conduct of the digitisation project. The Galais has retained its autonomy but has not been able to overcome the failure of its digital solution’s technical supplier. The Segal has been opposed to digitisation in order to maintain its independence.

However, all the respondents noted the essential role of local authorities in the development and dissemination of the currency in the territory, in terms of awareness and legitimacy. They would like to see local governments become partners to accelerate the circulation of the currency (e.g., accepting payments in local currency for municipal services). This partnership seems a prerequisite to initiate a change of scale to be able to invest in the dissemination of the currency to a larger number of members and thus intensify its circulation (Pinos 2020). The place of the local currency and of the association in the public space is then a matter of negotiation with the local authority representatives. And the Breton CCLCs have so far failed to establish sufficient partnerships with them, who are often indifferent to their project.

Is digitisation a "solution" to the problem of circulation for a CCLC? The digital issue, like other concrete actions before it, questions the adequacy of the collective's current capacities with the new ambitions that are emerging and being debated.

Discussion and Conclusion

Whereas the Eusko was conceived from the beginning as one means among others to pursue a social and economic policy that had been pursued by associations and the private sector for several decades, and that was backed by a proven discourse that had already been widely disseminated (Edme-Sandurjo et al. 2020), the Breton projects focused on the currency that the associations thought would unite them by itself. They discovered that they had to build and adapt a political discourse to convince and bring on board each one of the individuals, private, associative and public actors.

Digitisation underlines the lack of resources essential to the life of the association, a problem that was already there for other areas of development, such as extending the network of service providers. It re-challenges the projects and their bearers on three dimensions: 1/ Which actors (notably institutions) should be involved? 2/ How should they be involved and what risk does this entail for the autonomy of the project? 3/ Between the economic reality of the exchanges and the definition of a place to live, what is the relevant territory?

The project, through its trials and tribulations, of which digitisation is a part, leads to experimentation and learning that disrupt and transform the experience of the people who lead it. Some volunteers leave, some new ones arrive, but most of them keep their membership in the association. Even if the paths of the different CCLC associations are similar, as are the trials they go through and the problems they face, it is always a singular, different

collective that experiences them. This explains why, despite a real sharing of experience between the associations, the trials are repeated from one territory to another. Experimentation, in fact, does not consist in applying a "knowledge" and a "doing" to an object that would be given and constituted in advance. It is constitutive of the process of "investigation" according to Dewey and is at the foundation of the exercise of democracy. This approach articulates daily activities and the learning of knowledge and skills, both theoretical and practical, which makes the CCLCs part of a practice claimed to be popular education.

Our work allows us to better understand the announcement of the Breton currency, in a process of investigation that is prolonged and renewed at the same time. New issues, new hypotheses and a new experimentation are envisaged: the need for a double level of circulation of the currency (local for individuals, and on a larger territory, even regional for professionals), the desire to pool the costs of digitisation, and that of obtaining greater legitimacy from the various public, local, departmental and regional institutions.

The question of defining the "right" scale is a challenge, a "trial" in the sociological sense, for the functioning of the projects. This resolutely original mode of extension is opposed to the "Winner Takes All" model commonly observed in digital contexts, which would have it that a digital actor can only survive by conquering a sufficiently large geographical space, even internationally. In the case of these local currencies, it is the very idea of the project that is intended to spread, but in no case is it envisaged or conceivable that one association could take precedence over the others.

This re-questioning of scale and territory and the "solution" found are classic issues of collective action. In their technical dimension, they refer to the creation of "solutions", of cooperative platforms that make users less dependent on large technological platforms⁷. Their governance dimension echoes the question of the dynamics of collective action, as formalized by Marwell and Oliver (1993): can such a project be built little by little, or does it require a significant initial investment to generate support and create a self-sustaining collective dynamic? Is there not a risk that dilution will diminish the interest of the project for its initial initiators, causing them to leave? If the project is a success, are the volunteers of the various associations ready or able to commit even more of their time to a project that could end up slipping away from them? This underlines the tension, which can be found in particular in the

7 See, for example, the "[platforms in common](#)" initiative, led by the coop des communs (In French).

management of commons, between adequacy to the objectives of a restricted group that is at its service, and growth, which leads to institutionalization and negotiation of more heterogeneous objectives, a governance that becomes more complex and that can go as far as to lose sight of the objectives of the initiators and de facto exclude them.

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