

# The community economy of the extended farm household of WWOOF hosts and volunteers

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A flourishing grow-it-yourself/together trend in post-industrial societies connects participants through alternative and community economies – because of economic necessity, political activism, lifestyle choice, or leisure activities. An example for this trend is the growing international WWOOF movement (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms). Taking WWOOF as my empirical context, this article explores the complex socio-economic interactions between small-scale farm hosts and their live-in helpers. By drawing attention to alternative economic activities the article illustrates how community economies constitute everyday realities that provide a multitude of resources, offering resilience and independence that allow participants to pursue alternative lifestyles.

## Introduction

Alternative economies are increasingly present in post-industrial societies and post-growth discourses, as political activism and leisure activities, austerity measures and attempts to increase self-sufficiency while lessening individual dependency on the market economy. Car sharing, cloth swaps, and communal living reveal the scope of these diverse economies that pool and redistribute resources and skills. Alternative food networks and collective food production initiatives, such as CSAs, food co-ops, and community gardens, in particular are gaining prominence. Taking the international WWOOF movement (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) as my empirical context, this ethnographic study investigates the complex socio-economic relationships of hosts and their live-in volunteers who share production and consumption of resources on small-scale farms.

An organisation with an estimated 12,000 signed-up hosts in more than 100 countries<sup>1</sup> and an unknown but certainly substantial number of volunteers, WWOOF emerged as a self-governed network of users. Yet,

members as well as observers of WWOOF have largely overlooked this remarkable organisational setup. Political scientist Elinor Ostrom points out:

Scholars who draw on traditional conceptions of ›the market‹ and ›the state‹ have not recognized these self-organized systems as potentially viable forms of organization and have either called for their removal or ignored their existence. It is paradoxical that many vibrant, self-governed institutions have been wrongly classified or ignored in an era that many observers consider to be one of ever greater democratization.<sup>2</sup>

From the early 1970s, WWOOF has created, maintained and distributed an international register of alternative farmers and growers interested in hosting volunteers – a common social resource facilitating a non-monetary exchange.

Participants in the non-monetary WWOOF exchange describe their shared households as temporary communities and extended families, sharing work, company, solidarity, and knowledge. In order to investigate this alternative economy, firmly situated by its participants within the communal realm of economy, and the complex socio-economic relationships between hosts and helpers, I apply a theoretical framework of community economy and commons, particularly as developed by Stephen Gudeman and expanded by J.K. Gibson-Graham. Community economy, in this empirical context, is not understood as constituted through shared legal rights to resources (such as land, labour, property, capital, knowledge), but based on non-profit socio-economic relationships allowing members to pursue alternative lifestyles and socio-economic relationships outside market-regulated structures.

The feminist economic geographers Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham remind us to make »the plethora of hidden and alternative economic activities that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration«<sup>3</sup> the focus of research, making them more present as everyday

- 1 Amanda Pearson: Revisiting our Roots. In: WWOOF UK News 242, 2014, pp. 4–5.
- 2 Elinor Ostrom: Tragedy of the commons. In: The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics, <http://www.dictionaryofeconomics.com>, 2008 (access: 31.1.2015).
- 3 Cited as J. K. Gibson-Graham: Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for ›Other Worlds‹. In: Progress in Human Geography 32, 5, 2008, pp. 613–632, p. 618.

realities. The aim of this article is to investigate the WWOOF exchange within this context of alternative economic activities that contribute to the social as well as economic well-being of the participants by extending and sharing a household. Karl Polanyi considers »householding« an embedded economic form of pre-industrial societies, but dropped the concept later in his typology of mechanisms of distribution.<sup>4</sup> Different to Polanyi, whose concept positions community economy »off the typological map«, recent theory on community economy places it in dialectical relation with the market.

Gibson-Graham draw on Gudeman's concept of »community« and »market« – dialectically connected value domains opposing as well as overlapping one another. Communities are »real, on-the-ground associations and [...] imagined solidarities that people experience. Market designates anonymous, short-term exchanges.«<sup>5</sup> A community economy creates, maintains and shares its »base« – its foundation or commons (a shared interest or value). Rather than the negation of capitalism, Gudeman understands commons and community as a social sphere of value »not devised to serve market life; irreducibly social, they operate for themselves as they relate to self-interests and the world of trade.«<sup>6</sup> Gudeman's examples of communities include anything from eating clubs, health maintenance organisations and charitable foundations, to self-sufficient households.<sup>7</sup>

Based on Gudeman's concept, Gibson-Graham define community economy in similar terms, yet seemingly modelled more closely on the idea of the ethically responsible citizen consumer, stating how community economies are

motivated by concerns for surviving together well and equitably; distributing surplus to enrich social and environmental health; encountering others in ways that support their well-being as well as ours; maintaining, replenishing, and growing our natural and cultural

4 Chris Gregory: Whatever happened to householding? In Chris Hann and Keith Hart, eds.: *Market and Society. The Great Transformation Today*. Cambridge, New York 2009, pp. 133–159.

5 Stephen Gudeman: *The Anthropology of Economy. Community, Market, and Culture*. Malden, Mass. 2001, p. 1.

6 Cf. Gudeman (as in *fnnt.* 5), p. 27.

7 Cf. Gudeman (as in *fnnt.* 5), p. 25.

commons; investing our wealth so that future generations can live well; and consuming sustainably.<sup>8</sup>

Reduced, they define community economy as »people and environment centred economies«. <sup>9</sup> The delegates at the international WWOOF conference phrased WWOOF's mission statement in similar terms as »people/organic principles before financial considerations«<sup>10</sup> referring to the organisational level as well as to the exchange between hosts and helpers. Both levels are connected, creating, maintaining and sharing their base with their members. Based on ethnographic research this article contributes to interdisciplinary discourses on commons and resources, as well as multiple, alternative and community economy theories by investigating the shared household as a realm of diverse economic practices.

The ethnographic study presented in this article is largely based on my doctoral research on the international WWOOF movement, with field research carried out from 2009 to 2012 in Austria, New Zealand, the UK, and Australia, supplemented by document analysis and online correspondence with additional WWOOF directors. My involvement with the organisation began in 2001 as a WWOOF volunteer and is still ongoing. Field research involved participant observation as a WWOOF volunteer on eight and nine farms in Austria and New Zealand, respectively, each stay lasting for a week or longer. These two WWOOF groups are not only geographical opposites, operating in different contexts, but also differ significantly in their size, age and organisational structure. WWOOF New Zealand, operating as a company, is one of the oldest and biggest groups with more than 1 000 hosts<sup>11</sup> of various backgrounds (*Pākeha*,<sup>12</sup> Maori, immigrants). They are involved in growing at any scale – from suburban homes with a vegetable patch to self-sufficient eco-villages. WWOOF Austria is a non-profit association governed by

8 J. K. Gibson-Graham: Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory. In: *Current Anthropology* 55 (S9 Crisis, Value, and Hope: Rethinking the Economy), 2014, pp. 147–153.

9 J. K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink: The Nitty gritty of Creating Alternative Economies. In: *Social Alternatives* 30, 1, 2011, pp. 29–33.

10 Conference Report 2006, [http://www.WWOOFinternational.org/office/2nd\\_international\\_WWOOF\\_conference\\_report.pdf](http://www.WWOOFinternational.org/office/2nd_international_WWOOF_conference_report.pdf) (access: 17.6.2010).

11 <http://www.wwoof.co.nz/standard-search> (access: 9.1.2015).

12 Descendants of European settlers.

an elected board. It is half as old and comparatively small with about 260 hosts,<sup>13</sup> predominantly Austrian, many with small-scale family farms.

Participation as a volunteer offered me the opportunity to immerse myself into the lifeworlds of my host participants, frequently alongside fellow volunteers. Some recorded, semi-structured interviews with hosts took place. However, this method did not prove useful in a farm setting where most conversations took place spontaneously while working and eating together. I therefore kept a research diary as my primary way of recording data. In addition, I stayed with Sue Coppard, the founder of WWOOF, for two days as a volunteer in her suburban English home. I also stayed and conducted semi-structured interviews with former and current directors of WWOOF Austria, New Zealand, Australia, and the UK.

This article investigates WWOOF on an organisational level as well as on the host-helper level. When analysing the relationship of participants in an organisation, it is crucial to investigate the organisation itself first – its history, intentions, and values that shape the movement and draw people in. Therefore, the article will firstly provide a short overview of WWOOF's development. The main focus of the article is on the extended household of hosts and helpers – related and unrelated household members providing productive as well as reproductive activities through unpaid household and farm labour, pooling resources and sharing consumption. The community economy becomes part of participants' everyday realities that allows them to pursue alternative lifestyles and socio-economic relationships outside market-regulated structures.

### »We just wanted it to happen« – the mediating structures

In 1971 Sue Coppard, a secretary in London, created Working Weekends on Organic Farms – a free association between likeminded people keen to spend their weekends on local farms.

I wondered whether I could find a farm which would let me stay? Perhaps in return for my help with their work? But maybe it would be lonely without companions to chat to. I wondered whether anyone else would like to do the same thing? I'd just heard of organic

13 <http://www.wwof.at/de/hofliste-woofen/farms.html> (access: 16.12.2015).

farms while doing some administrative work for ›Resurgence‹ magazine and it occurred to me – correctly – that such places might be more inclined to use unskilled labour than a big, commercial farm. So I set about finding a place to try out the idea.<sup>14</sup>

Coppard advertised her idea in »London's trendy ›Time Out‹ magazine«<sup>15</sup> and together with two fellow volunteers she spent a weekend at a farm in Sussex. After this successful trial weekend the movement grew rapidly. Initially, WWOOF consisted of an informal base, an active group of people with a shared interest in sustainable agriculture and communal activities – small-scale farmers and urban volunteers who offered their help in exchange for an opportunity to spend time in the country and learn about alternative farming methods. Coppard stated: »People, especially the town-bound, were dying to get into the country for their fix of Green ›Vitamin C‹. Fortunately, farms and smallholders also heard about us and invited us to come and help them«<sup>16</sup>. Organic farming was marginal in the UK at the time but through initial contacts with the emerging organic scene Coppard became an enthusiastic member of the movement.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of sharing the alternative rural lifestyle with interested others has a long tradition, particularly with rural communes.<sup>18</sup> WWOOF turned it into an organised scheme where one no longer needed personal contacts, but joined WWOOF in order to gain access to a large network. This network became WWOOF's most important resource – a directory containing contact details of all the participating farmers and growers. By maintaining and developing this network and its distribution, WWOOF enabled strangers to come together outside and independent from market relations. Coordination and administration was done by Coppard as a »labour of love«. She stated: »it never occurred to me that it would grow as it did – or I might have secured some income from it! In fact, I've

14 Meg Pier: *Peer to Pier. Conversations with Fellow Travellers*, 2011 <http://www.viewfromthepier.com/peertopier/sue-coppard-WWOOF> (access: 15.8.2011).

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Elisabeth Kosnik: »Nourishing Ourselves and Helping the Planet«. WWOOF, Environmentalism and Ecotopia. Ph.D. thesis, Wellington 2013.

18 Lucy Sargisson and Lyman Sargent: *Living in Utopia. New Zealand's Intentional Communities*. Hants, Burlington 2004.

never received a penny for my work for WWOOF«.<sup>19</sup> WWOOF UK, the original WWOOF group, still operates as a charity today.<sup>20</sup>

However, Coppard soon discovered that the network needed guidelines and boundaries in order to operate successfully and remain sustainable. These guidelines are still valid today: several hours farm work alongside or under guidance of the grower, and sufficient food, preferably organic, and warm, dry and safe accommodation for the helper. Membership became an official status linked to a membership fee. Coppard remembered: »I charged a modest (infinitesimal by today's standards!) annual subscription, so that WWOOF was not running at a loss with me footing the bill.«<sup>21</sup> Participation in the WWOOF exchange was intended to be available to those with similar interests in rural lifestyles, sustainability and community: farmers and growers engaged in non-conventional sustainable practices, such as organic, biodynamic and permaculture, and »reliable« volunteers who had to prove themselves on trial weekends before being allowed to arrange a farm stay for themselves.<sup>22</sup>

In 1973 WWOOF became a non-profit service cooperative with members facilitating the operating of the organisation on an egalitarian basis. Coppard remembered:

WWOOF became a co-operative when I knew I wanted to travel abroad and invited all the (35) members to a meeting to discuss what should happen. About 15 people came along and it was then that the administration was split into several people's jobs [...] the question of pay for the organisers just never arose as I hadn't been making any money from it. We just wanted it to happen.<sup>23</sup>

Regional and community organising was common for the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>24</sup> led by the middle-class youth who attached »the cooperative principle to a presumed ›new holism‹ of a communal and ecological lifestyle«<sup>25</sup>. Since then, WWOOF volunteers were

19 E-mail, 2012.

20 <https://www.wwoof.org.uk> (access: 18.8.2015).

21 E-mail, 2012.

22 This practice was later dropped.

23 E-mail, 2012.

24 Jefferson C. Boyer: Reinventing the Appalachian Commons. In: *Social Analysis* 50, 3, 2006, pp. 217–232.

25 Mary Mellor, Janet Hannah, John Stirling: *Worker Cooperatives in Theory and Practice*. Philadelphia 1988, p. 154.

a fairly homogenous group of middle-class, well-educate mobile urbanites, mostly of European descent (and increasingly East Asian), and predominantly (but not exclusively) young.<sup>26</sup> Knowledge about WWOOF continued to spread by word-of-mouth, constituting a group of users (hosts as well as volunteers) with similar interests, technologies, skills, and views of their shared resources – one factor, according to Ostrom, that facilitates the effective running of a commons.<sup>27</sup>

Until the internet became widely available in the 1990s, WWOOF was only known among a group of likeminded people within the organic movement. New, independent national WWOOF groups emerged slowly, first within the British Commonwealth, and since the mid-1980s in northern and central Europe. With the internet WWOOF began to grow rapidly, through faster communication and easier access to information about the movement. Between 2000 and 2014 48 new groups were established worldwide. Today, WWOOF is operated by over fifty independent national governance units, each adapting WWOOF to their own specific contexts. The organisers keep in contact through informal and formal networks.<sup>28</sup> Sue Coppard describes the international movement in terms of an extended family:

WWOOF is like an extended family. Like when you go to weddings and christenings and funerals [...] you meet all the branches of the family, and that always makes me think of that. Hatches, matches, and dispatches, that is when you meet all your greater family, you see. WWOOF always makes me think of that, it's like having an extended family all over the world, really. I think the whole organic movement is a bit like that, really, but WWOOF is a bit more specific.<sup>29</sup>

26 Cf. Kosnik (as in ftnt. 18), Alison McIntosh and Susanne Bonnemann: Willing Workers or Organic Farms (WWOOF). The Alternative Farm Stay Experience? In: *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 14, 1, 2006, pp. 82–99, Margo Lipman and Laurie Murphy: ›Make Haste Slowly‹. Environmental Sustainability and Willing Workers on Organic Farms. In: S. Fullagar, K. Markwell, E. Wilson (eds.): *Slow Tourism. Experiences and Mobilities*. Bristol 2012, pp. 84–96, Anthony Ince: From Middle Ground to Common Ground. Self-Management and Spaces of Encounter in Organic Farming Networks. In: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 0, 0, 2015, pp. 1–17.

27 Cf. Ostrom (as in ftnt. 2).

28 <http://wwoofinternational.org> (access: 9.1.2015).

29 Interview with the founder of WWOOF, England: 2011.

Most groups are non-profit organisations operated by their users (often WWOOF hosts and/or volunteers themselves) who implement policies, guard boundaries, and allocate benefits.

Some groups however, like WWOOF New Zealand, more recently turned their organisation into privately owned businesses. Many members were displeased with the development – from communal realm to market realm – as a European WWOOF director expressed it:

I hate to say this, but I think Australia, New Zealand, and Japan's main priority is cash [...] almost everyone apart from these guys I found to be interested in the principles of [the WWOOF movement]; people dedicated time and didn't ask for money. Where I found those three weren't really running WWOOFs, they were running backpacker organisations, they weren't inviting co-operation, they were selling a product.<sup>30</sup>

However, other directors argued that operating »green businesses« and »socially responsible firms«<sup>31</sup> was in accordance with the WWOOF ideals of sustainability.<sup>32</sup> Values of mutuality, non-profit, and sustainability are also dominant in the exchange between hosts and helpers. Yet, their self-mediated relationship<sup>33</sup> has to be negotiated and adapted to individual situations.

### Extending, maintaining and sharing a household

Participants did not discuss their experience with the WWOOF exchange in terms of maximisation or profit. Rather, they focused on how extending their households to include more people made their alternative lifestyles of self-sufficient and sustainable farming possible and more enjoyable. Amy, a New Zealand host, stated: »I like to do things that involve more people, it gives things more meaning.«<sup>34</sup> The WWOOF exchange constitutes one strategy among participants' diverse economic

30 Interview with former WWOOF director, 2011.

31 Cf. Gibson-Gaham (as in ftnt. 3), Sue Seymour: What IWA? A Consultation Report for WWOOF, unpublished document, Newcastle 2007.

32 I explore this tension between the groups in much detail elsewhere (as in ftnt. 18).

33 Ince (as in ftnt. 27).

34 Field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

practices that increased their socio-economic well-being. For Gudeman, the »central activity in community is maintaining the group and its values«<sup>35</sup>. His concept of base derives from his research in rural Panama and the management of household economies of subsistence farmers. In this context, base »refers to the reason and comportment that are needed to handle agriculture and the household.« In the WWOOF exchange the base is constituted in this very sense – as the extended household of small-scale farmers.

Several of my hosts in Austria were three-generation households, while some hosts in New Zealand shared their homes permanently with extended family members and boarders. However, there was no general tendency towards collaborative housing among hosts, who also lived in nuclear families and single households (many with children). Yet, they all shared their homes customarily not only with WWOOF volunteers, but with other work-exchange volunteers, au-pairs, home-stay students, employed farmhands, and interns from secondary and tertiary schools.<sup>36</sup> Like Sue Cppard, who compared the WWOOF movement to an extended family, hosts and helpers used kinship terms to describe the extended household. Lynn, a New Zealand host who emigrated from Ireland, said: »You extend your family. As an immigrant you don't have so much family around. Some people don't have the need to fill up their life with additional people. For us, it's nice to have someone else around the table, it's an extended family.«<sup>37</sup> Similarly, Evelyn, a Maori host, stated: »the WWOOFer is part of my family. I make them feel at home; when I have guests I expect the WWOOFer to act as part of the family, to make my guests feel at home, offer them a cup of tea, talk to them.«<sup>38</sup> Some hosts intended to extend their households permanently through WWOOF, like Theresa who lived with her brother and their elderly parents on a dairy farm in southern Austria. She had joined WWOOF with the expressed purpose to find a wife for her brother. Some volunteers

35 Cf. Gudeman (as in ftnt. 5), p. 32

36 Elisabeth Kosnik: *Work for Food and Accommodation. Negotiating Socio-economic Relationships in Non-commercial Work-exchange Encounters*. In: *Hospitality & Society* 4, 3, 2014, pp. 275–291, where I analyse how the shared household is extended through reciprocity.

37 Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

38 Conversation with WWOOF-host, field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

indeed stayed indefinitely with their hosts, like a volunteer who became a »voluntary grandmother«<sup>39</sup> to another host family in southern Austria.

What frequently compelled hosts to share their homes with strangers was the need for assistance. Several of my hosts stated that their initial motivation in joining WWOOF was the prospect of affordable help.<sup>40</sup> Non-conventional farming and sustainable practices are labour intensive and growers are repeatedly in need of additional help. In her study on WWOOF hosts in Canada, Cynthia Ord finds that over a third of all hosts were dependent on the help provided by volunteers in order to operate their farms.<sup>41</sup> Some hobby farmers too expressed a need for additional helpers, many of them artists, artisans, self-employed, retired, or out of work. Daisy was a weaver from the North Island of New Zealand, her partner an artist. Together they had three children and a non-commercial backyard farm with vegetable patches, fruit trees, a horse and goats. Daisy said: »We take anyone we can get; we need the help – as long as we can feed them.«<sup>42</sup> Most farm labour – whether on commercial, subsistence, or backyard farms substituting their income with home-grown produce – remains unpaid family labour. In their discussion of agricultural economy, Chris Hann and Keith Hart state that »unpaid family labour continues to play a pivotal role in the agricultural sectors of the most advanced capitalist economies«.<sup>43</sup> Farm volunteers are part of the unpaid family labour force that sustains the shared subsistence household.

While most farms were privately owned (or communally owned such as intentional communities and ancestral land) and partly commercially operated, their extended households were shared communities. Gudeman discusses the tension between property and base:

Today, with the widening influence of global markets, the relation between property and base takes many forms. Base becomes property, property becomes base; each may support the other, one may be seen as the other, and their intersection may become a point of conflict. For example, a house, supported by the market returns of

39 Leihoma

40 Cf. Kosnik (as in fnt. 37), also Ince (as in fnt. 27).

41 Cynthia Ord: Contribution of Volunteer Tourism to Organic Farms. An Analysis of the WWOOF Exchange in Canada. In: ECOCLUB 2010.

42 Field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

43 Chris Hann and Keith Hart: Economic Anthropology. History, Ethnography, Critique. Cambridge: 2011, p. 134.

its members, makes up a sharing community. A family usually does not rent its bedrooms or bathrooms to its members but apportions their use. Market calculations, however, may not stop at the doors of a house, which may be colonized by calculative reason when the relative financial contributions of members are used to apportion allowances, chores, or use of the family car.<sup>44</sup>

Just like market economy contains elements of mutuality, the community realm of economy includes calculations; both realms absorb features of the other. Yet there is tension at the intersection of market and community.

Hosts who sold their produce commercially were treated with suspicion by subsistence lifestylers and volunteers. Making a profit, in particular with the help of volunteers, was seen as controversial. The WWOOF New Zealand director observed how sustainable lifestylers judged commercial organic farmers: »The really 100 per cent organic people say the BioGro<sup>45</sup> certified people are not really organic because they don't really live sustainable.«<sup>46</sup> This tension is reminiscent of the »green business WWOOF operations« who turned their base, what used to be a common resource, into property, upsetting many members who reject the advancing insertion of market relations into the communal realm. Identifying themselves as sustainable growers, many of my hosts used the image of the agro-business in their narratives to distance themselves from impersonal, unsustainable and unethical farming practices.

Trying to recruit cheap workers through work exchange schemes is, at any rate, not a successful practice, it seems, as volunteers are under no obligation to stay with a host. Additionally, because volunteers are unskilled farmhands, several hosts stated that they did not provide a benefit in economic terms and even drained the resources. Hosts noted the time it took to train the unskilled volunteers and told stories of WWOOFers who broke machines and destroyed crops instead of weeds because of their lack of agricultural knowledge. For these hosts, the benefit of sharing their work and lives with volunteers lay elsewhere. Like Jenny Germann Molz states how CouchSurfing »is not just about the

44 Stephen Gudeman: *Economy's Tension. The Dialectics of Community and Market*. New York, 2008, p. 86.

45 BioGro is the organic certification body for New Zealand and the Pacific.

46 Interview with WWOOF-NZ directors, New Zealand: 2010.

furniture«,<sup>47</sup> WWOOF is »not just about the work«. Anna emigrated from Germany and lived in an intentional community in New Zealand, where she was responsible for the coordination of the volunteers. She reflected on how much time and energy was consumed by introducing them to her work and lifestyle, stating: »Well, some people would say, all that energy that goes into it, it's not really worth it. But I think it is, because it's not just about the work, it's about so many other things as well.«<sup>48</sup>

Work as an unpleasant requirement of life that belongs to the market realm, separated from the sphere of home and leisure, is a dominant perspective in post-industrial societies. Subsistence farmers and alternative lifestyles, however, deliberately merge work and home life, challenging mainstream assumptions about market and community as strictly divided realms. The perspective also fails to recognise work as a social activity and opportunity to share skills and knowledge.<sup>49</sup> For many hosts, sharing knowledge was a vital part of the WWOOF exchange, deliberately creating opportunities for discussions and teaching. In the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* Tom Stehlik reflects on his experience as a WWOOF host, stating that WWOOF is a form of alternative adult learning outside mainstream institutions.<sup>50</sup> Gudeman states how the base is a repertoire of knowledge and skills, »often developed in relation to the material space a people occupy. [...] Such accumulated knowledge, transmitted through apprenticeship and explicit instruction, seemingly cannot be depleted.«<sup>51</sup>

Nicole, a New Zealand host with a largely self-sufficient garden, heavily depended on the help of volunteers. Yet, she said: »It's about getting more people into the garden, make an impression in their lives, change something.«<sup>52</sup> She was adamant to educate volunteers about gardening and sustainability, proudly recollecting several cases where volunteers changed their lifestyles after staying with her, like a US-American

47 Jennie Germann Molz: CouchSurfing and network hospitality. »It's not just about the furniture«. In: *Hospitality & Society*, 1, 3, 2011, pp. 215–225.

48 Field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

49 Cf. Kosnik (as in fnnt. 37).

50 Tom Stehlik: Willing Workers on Organic Farms. Cultural exchange and informal adult learning in an organisation that is voluntary, non-profit and environmentally friendly! In: *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 42, 2, 2002, pp. 220–226.

51 Cf. Gudeman (as in fnnt. 45), p. 33.

52 Field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

volunteer who gave up his job as a toxic waste manager and became a social worker. Intellectual and cultural commons, Donald Nonini states, are regenerated through social exchange and sociability, »the more intense and frequent the social interactions, the greater the use-value of the intellectual cultural products that come out of them«. <sup>53</sup> Like many of the hosts in my study, Nicole hoped volunteers would bring back what they had learned to their everyday life, buy local and organic, have their own garden, and »spread the word« of a sustainable lifestyle.

Through participant observation, sharing my hosts' everyday life, I came to understand that »help« went beyond physical labour on the farm. As it transpired, emotional support, company and solidarity was considered an important benefit by most members. The exchange relationship offered an opportunity for company, having a confidant and likeminded person in the house. This is of great importance to participants in work exchange encounters, as multiple studies have demonstrated. <sup>54</sup> A host of French origin from an eco-village in a remote part of the South Island of New Zealand pointed out: »Workwise, yes, you do get more work done, but also in terms of social contact [...]. We are out here, we don't meet people.« <sup>55</sup> Rural living often means limited sources for entertainment and social interaction. Helga, a goat farmer from Austria, said about the WWOOF exchange: »I can't leave, so I bring the world into my home«. <sup>56</sup>

Lynn, a nurse and WWOOF host in the North Island of New Zealand, had a large vegetable garden and fruit trees in the backyard of her suburban family home. For her, the social aspect of the exchange was paramount: »It's nice to get some work done in the garden but really it's about meeting someone. I rather have a weak worker but great personal relationship than someone who works six hours instead of four

53 Donald Nonini: Introduction. The Global Idea of »the Commons«. In: *Social Analysis* 50, 3, 2006, pp. 164–177, p. 167.

54 See for example: McIntosh and Bonnemann (as in *ftnt.* 26), Germann Molz (as in *ftnt.* 47), Carrie Yodanis and Sean Lauer: Foreign Visitor, Exchange Student, or Family Member? A Study of Au Pair Policies in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. In: *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 25, 9, 2005, pp. 41–64; Dawn Lyon: Intersections and Boundaries of Work and Non-work. The Case of Eldercare in Comparative European Perspective. In: *European Societies* 12, 2, 2010, pp. 163–185.

55 Field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

56 Field notes, Austria: 2009.

but who doesn't connect.«<sup>57</sup> Through their shared interests and values, volunteers also provide solidarity with hosts who felt socially marginalised and experienced a negative attitude towards their alternative lifestyle from their local communities, and even their families. Non-conventional farmers are frequently treated with apprehension by their conventional neighbours.<sup>58</sup> For many hosts working alongside likeminded people meant receiving new encouragement for their lifestyle choice, as an Austrian host said »it's just really nice when someone else is interested in your work«.<sup>59</sup>

The volunteers are part of a community sphere where production and consumption merge. Jefferson Boyer, who draws on findings on small-scale family farms in the US, refers to their economic dependence on informal networks as the »maintenance of multiple-livelihoods strategies for individuals and families«,<sup>60</sup> or »extended-kin commons« operating through kin and community networks pooling labour and resources. It is Gibson-Graham's multiple economies »that contribute to social well-being and environmental regeneration«.<sup>61</sup> Susana Narotzky states: »Social scientists have been increasingly aware that provision of the means of livelihood occurred not only in the connected realms of market production and consumption, but also in the realms of reproduction, leisure and non-market exchanges of goods and services«.<sup>62</sup> In the WWOOF household this not only includes self-provisioning labour but also the provisioning of social resources, company, solidarity, entertainment, schooling, as well as housework and family care.<sup>63</sup>

Amy, in addition to five hours help on her biodynamic vineyard, expected her volunteers to cook, clean, and spend time with her three young children. She considered this an essential aspect of the volunteers' experience of her lifestyle. It was also an essential aspect of the help she received from her volunteers – »social resources created by specific

57 Field notes, New Zealand: 2011.

58 Naoimh McMahon: Biodynamic Farmers in Ireland. Transforming Society Through Purity, Solitude and Bearing Witness? In: *Sociologia Ruralis* 45, 1/2, 2005, pp. 98–114.

59 Field notes, Austria: 2009.

60 Cf. Boyer (as in *ftnt.* 25), p. 222.

61 Cf. Gibson-Graham (as in *ftnt.* 3), p. 618.

62 Susana Narotzky: *New Directions in Economic Anthropology*. London 1997, p. 39.

63 J. K. Gibson-Graham: *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis, MN 2006, p. 71.

kinds of human labor«. <sup>64</sup> Within the host-helper relationship of a shared household, both sides contribute to the social resources. Hosts frequently do household tasks for their volunteers, such as cooking, cleaning and laundering; some volunteers even expect these services from their hosts. Many hosts, in return, expect their helpers to contribute to housework. When asked to provide housework and childcare in addition to farm work, however, some volunteers felt exploited as unpaid domestic workers. <sup>65</sup> The extended household is a sphere of shared resources, however it is also a space open to conflict, exploitation, and unequal power relationships.

### Community economies and the contested ideals of equality and altruism

There exists an inherent power imbalance in a work exchange arrangement that participants have to negotiate. To a large extent it is the host who controls the setting of the exchange: the working hours and break times, allocation of tasks and methods of working, the meals and accommodation, and to some extent even the leisure activities. Gibson-Graham claim that community economies »are simply economic spaces or networks in which relations of interdependence are democratically negotiated by participating individuals and organizations«. <sup>66</sup> Where this might be an ideal, reality often differs. Simon and his wife, hosts in western Austria, had a goat farm and cheese manufactory. Previously, three volunteers and one intern had stayed at the farm but Simon was disappointed that they could not handle farm-related responsibilities. He was particularly upset when a US-American volunteer confused the chemicals used for cleaning the milking machine, causing some damage. The volunteer was a young college student without farming experience; Simon had left him in charge of the milking job for several days while he was gone on a

64 Cf. Nonini (as in fnt. 53), p. 167.

65 Others have argued how this logic is employed to make child care and live-in domestic help affordable to western middle-class families. See Carrie Yodanis and Sean Lauer (as in fnt. 55); Dawn Lyon (as in fnt. 55); I have extended this argument elsewhere in more detail, see GfE Berlin, Jan 2015, [www.gfe-online.org/cms2/index.php/tagungen.html](http://www.gfe-online.org/cms2/index.php/tagungen.html) (access: 3.1.2015).

66 Cf. Gibson-Graham (as in fnt. 3), p. 627.

business trip. All four helpers left Simon's farm before the agreed time period was over.

Simon's case does not only illustrate unequal power structures inherent to the community of the shared household, it also shows how volunteers are able to exercise a degree of control within the encounter.<sup>67</sup> Helpers can end the exchange or hide their skills, as Kathryn Nimmo reports about a WWOOF volunteer: »Despite being a skilled cook, Joyce chose not to reveal these skills to her hosts, as she did not want them to be abused«. <sup>68</sup> Gender roles, particularly in regard to household and care work, are a common issue in the shared household. Hosts who practice a gendered division of labour in their households replicate this behaviour with their volunteers. A New Zealand host »confessed« her gender bias with ambivalent feelings: »It feels easier to ask girls to do housework... when I'm really honest...now I said it I'm ashamed of myself«.

Some hosts assigned chores strictly according to gender. Ingrid's three-generation farm household in southern Austria was a small-scale dairy farm producing organic ice-cream. Her husband and his parents were occupied with farm and garden work. Ingrid, the primary caregiver of her three children, found out about WWOOF when she was looking for affordable help. Initially, she considered an au-pair but found them too expensive, »and then they don't do anything in the household or help around the house«. She then considered an intern for the farm »but they are more likely to be male« and would therefore only work with her husband. Ingrid thought a female WWOOF volunteer would be the ideal solution because she would help Ingrid with her tasks on the farm, as well as family care and the household. Where reproductive activities are predominantly provided by the female members of the group, this is often extended to include female volunteers.

As Gudeman observes »communities are hardly homes of equality and altruism, and they provide ample space for the assertion of power and exploitation from patriarchy to feudal servitude.«<sup>69</sup> Like equality, altruism does not necessarily apply to the communal realm of economy. Hosts and volunteers employ calculative reasoning too. Some hosts make

67 Cf. Kosnik (as in fnt 18 and fnt 37).

68 Kathryn Nimmo: *Willing Workers on Organic Farms. A Case Study*. M.A. thesis, Wellington 2001, p. 161.

69 Cf. Gudeman (as in fnt. 5), p. 28.

strategic decisions, for example, by insisting on a minimum length of stay so they do not have to constantly invest time in training new volunteers, like Amy, who did not accept volunteers for less than a week because »they are tourists and I am no hostel!«<sup>70</sup> Mechanisms of exclusion observed by myself included rejection of volunteers with specific dietary requirements (as this would mean more work and expenses for the host), and of those who might work less than others, such as very young volunteers not used to a daily work-routine and domestic chores, as well as single parents travelling with small children, and smokers and physically unfit people. Several herbal gardeners in Austria as well as New Zealand preferred female volunteers to work with the plants, since they considered men to be »naturally« incapable of delicate garden work.

Volunteers calculate too, for example in regard to their work hours. Some participants – particularly urbanites new to farm life – experienced the blurring of farm work, household help, and leisure activities as unsettling. Uncertainty over what is considered work in a community economy can cause tension between hosts and helpers, particularly where the community economy »becomes colonized by market practices and language«.<sup>71</sup> Some helpers expected »work« to be a clearly defined concept of time and tasks as it is common for contemporary market societies. However, market concepts of labour do not apply in the WWOOF exchange. Much farm work depends on external circumstances and work hours can vary greatly. On the organisational level, WWOOF avoids the term »work« altogether for legal as much as ideological reasons, since »work« does not comply with the idea of sharing someone's life – a concept that includes not only helping on the farm and doing one's share in the household, but also being part of the community. Some hosts as well as volunteers indeed stated that separating »work« from »leisure« does not apply within this community setting.<sup>72</sup>

By applying theories of community economies and commons, this article investigated the extended household of farm hosts and their live-in helpers as socio-economic practices that, as Gibson-Graham phrase it, contribute to people's economic and social well-being. Hosts sustain their small-scale subsistence households and non-conventional farms in

70 Field notes, New Zealand: 2010.

71 Cf. Gudeman (as in *ftnt.* 45) p. 87

72 Field notes, Austria: 2014.

post-industrial societies through participation in a range of diverse economic practices. They join local currencies and time banks, bartered with neighbours, and sell their produce on markets. Similarly, many volunteers partake in a range of alternative economies too. The WWOOF exchange is one strategy to enrich the base by extending it. However, community economies are not necessarily spheres of equality and democratic decision making, yet social control is not completely one-sided. Neither are they based on altruistic behaviour; instead, community economy emphasises economising and thrift, rather than profit-making,<sup>73</sup> basing social, ecological, and economic decisions on the needs of the community.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

WWOOF, operated and sustained by its international users, maintains and distributes a directory of contacts – its common social resource – to those who share a belief in sustainable agriculture and community-oriented lifestyles. As mediating structure it connects farmers with volunteers who provide each other with help and support, interpersonal relationships kept for their own sake, and opportunities of sharing knowledge. It is a community economy of shared resources and skills provided by a number of unpaid, related and unrelated, permanent and temporary household members. On an organisational level as well as within the work exchange, WWOOF members refer to their social relationships in terms of community and extended family. On both levels tensions arise when the communal realm is »colonized« by market language and practices, such as turning assets of the community – their intellectual, social, and »extended-kin commons« – into private profit. Yet, community economies are not autarkic units, they are intertwined with other communities and exist in dialectical relation with the market realm. The article demonstrates how in post-industrial societies people pursue alternative lifestyles, seeking and employing diverse socio-economic practices outside market relations, thereby challenging the hegemony of capitalism and the advancing insertion of market relations into the environment and all aspects of life.

73 Cf. Gudeman (as in *fnnt.* 5), p. 154.

74 Cf. Gibson-Graham (as in *fnnt.* 64).

Der aktuelle Grow-it-yourself/-together-Trend in post-industriellen Gesellschaften kreiert alternative und Gemeinschaftsökonomien, die TeilnehmerInnen aus vielfältigen Gründen, wie Notwendigkeit, politischen Aktivismus, Lifestyle oder Freizeitvergnügen, zusammen führt. Die internationale WWOOF-Bewegung (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) kann als Beispiel für diesen Trend gelten. Anhand von WWOOF wird in diesem Beitrag die komplexe sozio-ökonomische Beziehung zwischen den TeilnehmerInnen einer Gemeinschaftsökonomie, den Hosts und ihren Live-in-VolontärInnen untersucht. Der Artikel zeigt dabei auf, wie Gemeinschaftsökonomien als Alltagsrealität eine Vielzahl an Ressourcen schaffen, die es den TeilnehmerInnen erlauben, alternative Lebensmodelle zu verwirklichen.