Geoforum 166 (2025) 104410

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Centering coastal communities' diverse economic practices in the blue economy

Anna S Antonova [a,*], Wesley Flannery [b], Sílvia Gómez [c], Madeleine Gustavsson [d], Maria Hadjimichael [e], Brendan Murtagh [b], Kristen Ounanian [f], Sunniva Solnør [d], Vida Maria Daae Steiro [g], Kristina Svels [h]

[a] Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, LMU Munich, Leopoldstr. 11a, D-80802 Munich, Germany
[b] School of Natural and Built Environment, Queen's University Belfast, Stranmillis Rd, Belfast BT9 5AG, UK
[c] Departament d'Antropologia Social i Cultural, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Barcelona 08193, Spain
[d] Ruralis - Institute for Rural and Regional Research, Loholt Alle 81, 7049 Trondheim, Norway
[e] Cyprus Marine and Maritime Institute, Vasileos Pavlou Square 13, Larnaca 6023, Cyprus
[f] Centre for Blue Governance, Department for Sustainability and Planning, Aalborg University, Rendsburggade 14, Level 3, 9000 Aalborg, Denmark
[g] Nordlandsforskning (NRI), Nord University, Universitetsalleen 11, 8049 Bodø, Norway
[h] Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke), Latokartanonkaari 9, FI-00790 Helsinki, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Diverse economies
Blue economy
Coastal communities
Commoning
Economic geography

ABSTRACT

Despite their stated commitment to sustainable economic development, blue economy and blue growth agendas have been criticized for replicating the same unlimited growth paradigm they purport to replace, disempowering local communities. By contrast, diverse economies literature advocates looking to communities' practices to identify alternative, socially and environmentally grounded, economic possibilities. In line with that scholarship, this article calls for a re-envisioning of the blue economy through the eyes of coastal communities and their socio-ecological relations. We draw on local knowledge acquired from research we have conducted in six coastal communities across Europe – Burgas (Bulgaria); Connemara (Ireland); Træna (Norway); Åland (Finland); Cap de Creus (Spain); and Eastern Limassol (Cyprus). From mobilizing social enterprises and commoning practices to widening the blue economy's goals to comprise environmental care and collective wellbeing, these communities' economic practices focus not only on retaining value at the local level, but also on advancing societal and environmental goals. The article investigates the possibilities and challenges that these experiences suggest for the blue economy, raising questions about the potential of diverse blue economies.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, policy interest in the blue economy has spiked, bringing together intensifying capitalist attention to a wide range of industries: from marine fisheries and aquaculture, through offshore energy generation and deep seabed mining, to maritime transport and coastal tourism (European Commission, 2025). However, despite their stated commitment to sustainable economic development, blue economy and blue growth agendas have been criticized for replicating the same unlimited growth paradigm they purport to adjust. Critics have pointed out that an economic logic resting on the pursuit of limitless growth inevitably both harms the environment and disempowers communities (Barbesgaard, 2018; Bennett et al., 2022; Eikeset et al., 2018; Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Hadjimichael, 2018a; Mallin & Barbesgaard, 2020). Further, critics have argued that a just blue economy could only be successful if it foregrounds environmental justice and empowers communities (Bennett et al., 2022; Pafi et al., 2023) following a revised economic logic not based on the current commitment to endless growth (Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Hadjimichael, 2018a).

In this article, we advance these discussions by intersecting them with diverse economies scholarship. Specifically, we take on diverse economies theorists' call to rethink the conceptual foundations of what

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Anna.Antonova@rcc.lmu.de (A.S. Antonova), w.flannery@qub.ac.uk (W. Flannery), Silvia.Gomez@uab.cat (S. Gómez), madeleine.gustavsson@ruralis.no (M. Gustavsson), maria.hadjimichael@cmmi.blue (M. Hadjimichael), b.murtagh@qub.ac.uk (B. Murtagh), kristen@plan.aau.dk (K. Ounanian), sunniva.solnor@ruralis.no (S. Solnør), vms@nforsk.no (V.M.D. Steiro), kristina.svels@luke.fi (K. Svels).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2025.104410
Received 28 November 2024; Received in revised form 29 August 2025; Accepted 9 September 2025
Available online 15 September 2025

"counts" as an economic relation and place the focus on community-driven activities that foreground social needs and environmental replenishment rather than profit (Collard & Dempsey, 2020; Roelvnik et al., 2015). By bringing these insights to bear on the blue economy agenda, we not only expand upon critical analyses of the blue economy and blue growth agendas but also contribute to long lines of scholarship that have focused on the concerns of coastal communities, both within but also going beyond small-scale fishing communities (Gómez, 2022; Gustavsson et al., 2021; Ounanian & Howard, 2024).

Through our analysis, we argue for the relevance of coastal communities as apt cases for advancing the relevance of diverse economies scholarship to pressing contemporary challenges. Coastal communities have long been geographically marginal and face heightened vulnerability to environmental change and injustice (Bennett et al., 2022; Blythe et al., 2023; Ounanian & Howells, 2024). At the same time, as liminal areas between solid and fluid, terrestrial and oceanic spaces, the coastlines offer unique opportunities to decenter and reimagine societal constructs (Freitas et al., 2022; Westerdahl, 2007). This applies especially to rethinking economic relations. Coastal and maritime spaces have long traditions of public trust and communal property ownership but, in recent decades, have faced increasing enclosure via pressures like gentrification, privatization including the introduction of fishing quotas, or resortification (Hadjimichael, 2018b; Mallin & Barbesgaard, 2020; Ounanian & Howells, 2024). Despite this, as our article will show, contemporary coastal communities retain practices that resist or reframe these economic pressures. As areas steeped in specific traditions with communal or public trust resource management and rich in experiences with enclosure across both the maritime and the littoral space, coastal communities have unique conceptualizations of economic and value relations to offer to the literature (Antonova, 2024; Hadjimichael, 2018b; Mallin & Barbesgaard, 2020; Ounanian & Howells, 2024). Yet, barring some notable exceptions (Antonova, 2024; Gómez, 2022; Mallin & Barbesgaard, 2020), coastal communities rarely feature as the focus of diverse economies or economic geography literatures more generally.

We address this gap by focusing on the community practices in six case studies of coastal communities across Europe: Burgas, Bulgaria; Connemara, Ireland; Træna, Norway; Åland, Finland; Cap de Creus, Spain; and Eastern Limassol, Cyprus. Together, these case studies offer a diverse range of both economic practices and non-market values, which alternatively reclaim or diversify the regional iterations of the dominant (blue) economy. We illustrate these experiences in detail. By elevating existing community knowledge within the blue growth agenda, we hope to enable ethical, just, and mutually constitutive social and ecological relations in a more broadly conceived blue economy. However, our article also raises questions as to the scalability of diverse practices beyond the community level. Further, we also debate the inherent tensions involved with constructing a successful blue economy that *seriously* considers local economic diversity.

2. Theoretical background: A diverse economies approach to the blue economy agenda

Emerging from feminist political economy, diverse economies literature argues that the contemporary conceptualization of "the economy" is a relatively modern construct and that neither neoliberal capitalism nor its perceived benefits are monolithic (Gibson-Graham, 1996; MacKenzie et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008). Feminist scholars have shown how an enclosure of economic thought paralleled the enclosure of common lands (Federici, 2004; Gibson-Graham & Miller, 2015). As a result, although capitalist production and profit can be shown to rest on a wide set of social relations and material realities—like the work of social reproduction, care work, or the sustaining role of life-giving systems—capitalist logic has tended to treat these as externalities to which it rarely ascribes monetary or conceptual worth (Federici, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 1996; Gibson-Graham & Miller, 2015; Mies, 2014).

By contrast, the commons in both its material and immaterial expressions is characterized as a relational process, often a struggle, involving the negotiation of access, use, benefit, care, and responsibility (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Hence, the commons and the concept of commoning, defined as the everyday practice of making and re-making the commons, could support diverse economies in examining socio-natural transformations and exposing issues of inequality, power, and privilege (Clement et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2021). Emerging from these observations, diverse economies scholarship engages strongly with noticing, giving attention to, and uplifting the wide variety of economic practices that already exist on the ground (Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2014; Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). Empowerment for those largely excluded by the current conceptualization of economic thought and institutions is central to diverse economic scholars' agenda (Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2019; Werner et al., 2017).

Reading for difference alongside the task of understanding hegemonic forces equally applies to the realm of marine governance (Boucquey, 2019). As McAteer and Flannery have noted (2022), the distancing of coastal communities from economic knowledge has played an important role in their marginalization. Empowering communities in the blue economy, read through a diverse economies lens, means not only uplifting their existing practices but also activating alternative forms of knowledge. This task includes ecological knowledge and the diverse economic practices grounded in communities' relations with and within their environment. Diverse economies scholars have contested the dominant view that tends to conceive ecologies as "natural resources" external to the process of production and consumption in the economy and advocated for a theoretical perspective that envisions economic activity as including, but also going beyond, the work that humans do and how they are 'making a living' by producing, consuming, and distributing as part of their "socio-natural becomings" (Gibson-Graham & Miller 2015; Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017; Miller, 2019). In this way, these scholars show how ecology can drive societal adaptation and retain livelihoods, thereby making the "economy" ordinarily dependent on the more-than-human. These observations open an important critical perspective on the blue economy agenda, which seeks to mobilize blue space for economic growth (Mallin & Barbesgaard, 2020).

In short, diverse economies theories uphold a broader set of economic values than those defined by neoliberal market exchange worth (Gibson-Graham, 1996; 2014; Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020; Gibson-Graham & Miller, 2015; Roelvnik et al., 2015). Analytical work in the field has shown how community practices can engage with the dual meaning of the word "value"—in its iteration as both a monetary *and* a moral signifier (Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2019; Collard & Dempsey, 2020). Diverse economies scholarship has tended to straddle the line between reforming and contesting capitalism. Theorists in the field either call for widening the scope of what gets valued within capitalism to also comprise labors of care, trust, reciprocity, and environmental replenishment (Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017) or else for dismantling capitalist structures altogether and developing postcapitalist possibilities in their stead (Roelvnik et al., 2015; Zanoni et al., 2017). However, the possible combinations and clashes between radical degrowth literature and diverse economies approaches have rarely been explored (Smith, 2024). Thus, while the blue growth agenda has already been criticized from a degrowth perspective (Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Hadjimichael, 2018a), a diverse economies take on the blue economy is still largely lacking. Our contribution addresses this gap.

3. Methodology and research context

In this article, we enter these discussions through the perspective of six coastal communities and their practices targeted at either reclaiming or diversifying the (blue) economy. Our analysis draws on data collected during 2022–2024 as part of the Horizon Europe funded project, EmpowerUs, which sought to encourage and facilitate transitions towards more just and sustainable coastal economies in co-creative work with local case study teams. The project team selected the six case

studies illustrative of the challenges faced by other communities around each of Europe's sea basins: the Atlantic (Connemara), Baltic Sea (Åland), Black Sea (Burgas), Mediterranean (Cap de Creus and Eastern Limassol) and Arctic (Træna) (Fig. 1). These contexts exemplify a cross-section of coastal communities in Europe, exhibiting variation in terms of their specific geography and population. Some, like Burgas and Eastern Limassol, are urban or semiurban in character: Burgas is Bulgaria's fourth- largest city with 200,000 inhabitants, while Eastern Limassol is a developing region in Cyprus' second-largest urban area (Limassol's population is about 100,000). Others, like Cap de Creus and Connemara, are less populated areas (respectively at about 30,000 and 15,000 inhabitants) characterized by their significant natural heritage and traditional practices: Connemara, home to Ireland's largest *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking area), is well-known for its wild coastal landscapes, whereas Cap de Creus is a natural park with strong fishing and horticulture heritage. Træna and Åland, finally, are archipelagos characterized by their remoteness and relatively low population numbers: Åland's ca. 30,000 inhabitants are spread across 60 populated islands, the largest of which, Mariehamn, has a population of 12,000; whereas the population of Træna municipality is only about 450 (Flannery et al., 2023). Thus, together the case studies span a spectrum from urban to rural, densely to scarcely populated, networked to remote, and northern to southern, allowing for characteristics observed across all six to be broadly generalizable.

The wider project drew on an adapted living lab approach, where academic and local organizations developed local partnerships to design, test, and evaluate solutions for sustainable coastal development through community empowerment (Flannery et al., 2023; Gustavsson & Solnør, 2022; Sørensen et al., 2025). By developing formal academic-local collaborations in each context, the project team sought to adopt the strength of the living lab approach in advancing co-productive experimentation but also to address its recognized weaknesses in terms of ensuring longevity for its results (von Wirth et al., 2019; Voytenko et al., 2015).

As part of the project's adapted living labs approach, we developed workshops to discuss challenges and co-design pilot projects to be tested within the project timeframe. These workshops aimed to include the widest possible spectrum of local stakeholder representatives as defined by the project's local partners, following critical principles of leaving no-one behind (Flannery et al., 2023; Gustavsson & Solnøor, 2022). In addition, we collected data on the functioning of governance and power in these six communities through a total of 134 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders across the public, nongovernmental, private, and community sectors in the fall and winter of 2022–2023, as well as document analysis and participant observation (in the field, at workshops and within living labs). Interview participants were selected according to a standardized purposive sampling methodology developed specifically for the project (Flannery et al., 2023). Comprising an original stakeholder mapping approach, this sampling method was designed to capture different perspectives relevant to each context's challenges (Ibid). Thus, the interviewees' profiles varied locally but always included representatives from local, regional, and national governance departments (the public sector), NGO members, businesses, citizen associations, and people inhabiting the case study areas and related users of the sea more generally (see Table 1). These interviews were conducted according to nationally applicable ethical standards in each context, with formal ethical review completed by the respective researchers' institutions where required.

Fig. 1. Map of Europe indicating the location of the six coastal communities. Source: The Authors, 2025.

Document analysis was also conducted as part of the same process. These documents were likewise selected via a purposive approach and comprised national, regional, and local policies, plans, programs, and relevant legislation. The scope also involved regulatory processes, including Environmental and Strategic Environmental Planning assessments, zoning regulations, and planning appeals cases. Together with the interview data, these documents were analyzed through a discourse analysis approach that explored, above all, sites of argumentation, i.e., concrete stakeholder narratives and their interaction with conflicting or competing narratives (Flannery et al., 2023). For this article, given its overarching scope across all six case studies, we present predominantly aggregate information to illustrate emerging themes and have used direct citations from across these materials sparingly.

As is typical for many coastal areas (Bennett et al., 2022; Blythe et al., 2023; Ounanian & Howells, 2024), the six case studies share concerns with changing demographic structures, especially the outmigration of youth, with the availability of affordable housing, with a limited labor market, and with the health of their local ecosystems, especially in the context of the changing climate (Flannery et al., 2023). Further, as the article will show, an important common theme emerging from the data collected in all six was the concern that the drive for blue growth has distanced the economy and its benefits from the communities and natural landscapes that produce such benefits.

Our work takes on a definition of "community" that recognizes both the complexity and the potential of the coastal socio-ecological context. Hence, we see communities as forming around both shared meaning and participation in local governance (Ounanian et al., 2021). Accordingly, the community practices we observe, along with their experiences of the blue economy, are diverse. For the purposes of this article, we have aggregated these patterns into two overarching themes. In some of the cases we analyze, communities struggle with recapturing the monetary, economic value extracted by the dominant industries their regional blue economy growth agenda supports (Theme 1, "Resisting extractive blue growth"). Elsewhere, communities can draw on historic practices or seek to work with wider interpretations of economic relations to expose the often-invisible values of care and shared societal and ecological wellbeing that underpin the existence of a successful blue economy in the first place (Theme 2, "Centering socio-ecological values"). We present these diverse experiences, drawing on examples from Burgas, Connemara, and Træna in the first theme, and Åland, Cap de Creus, and

Table 1
Distribution of profiles for those interviewed across all six case studies.

Interviewee Profile	N across all six case studies
Community	39
NGOs	19
Public	36
Private	33
Other	7

Eastern Limassol in the second (see Table 2 below).

While each thematic grouping best illustrates an analytical perspective—respectively of contesting the blue growth paradigm and seeking to reclaim economic profit (Bulgaria, Ireland and Norway) or of widening the blue economy to foreground commoning, community care, and other nonmonetary values (Finland, Spain and Cyprus)—each subtheme is also present to a varying extent in all six case studies. Altogether, the six case studies raise questions about the scale at which the blue economy can operate. While we argue that a successful blue economy depends on nourishing the diverse practices generated by coastal communities' unique needs – which depend on diverse individual practices – we also show how these practices can struggle to assert themselves as viable economic pathways on the national or supranational policy level.

4. Resisting extractive blue growth

For most coastal communities, the success of the blue economy is a matter of survival. In the cases of Burgas, Connemara, and Træna described in this section, developments in the marine and coastal sectors are vital in the face of all three communities' pressing challenges with employment and the retention of young people and professionals. Spread over several islands set at a large distance from the mainland, the municipality of Træna is Norway's fourth least populated. Like most of rural northern Norway, Træna has experienced depopulation since the 1960 s as a consequence of growth in high productivity industries and urbanization, and larger proportions of youth grow up in or move to the city with little or no connection to rural areas (NOU, 2020: 15). At the same time, northern Norway experiences a labor shortage. Facing similar pressures, Connemara is located on the west coast of Ireland along with its Aran Islands. The area is designated as an Irish-speaking Gaeltacht—a region of Ireland where the Irish language is the predominant vernacular—and has historically struggled with limited job opportunities beyond small-scale fisheries and agriculture, and a related out-migration of young people (Ó Sabhain & McGrath, 2020). Finally, while Burgas on the Black Sea coast is Bulgaria's fourth-biggest city, and thus comparatively less affected by rural area dynamics, it too struggles with limited diversity and offering of employment opportunities, which results in many young professionals leaving.

These challenges, and accordingly the local needs that a thriving blue economy could support, are recognized in all three cases by local civic and governance actors. Burgas' municipal development plan places an emphasis on attracting digital nomads and developing new opportunities for coastal tourism, including business, health, and cultural tourism (Burgas Municipality, 2021). In Norway, blue growth is meant to make remote communities more attractive and create opportunities for living "the good life" all over Norway, focusing on development and value creation through increased availability of jobs, housing, and services (Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, 2023). While the municipal societal plan does not refer to blue growth specifically, diversifying the economy to reduce vulnerability is one of the main objectives to be reached by 2030 (Træna Municipality, 2017). The municipality has in recent years invested in a larger wharf and welcomed new investments by tourism and land-based aquaculture businesses. In Connemara, many of the schemes proposed to address unemployment—including the Páirc na Mara marine innovation park, the Wild Atlantic Way coastal tourism attraction, offshore wind development, and the expansion of the port—center on the use of marine and coastal resources for economic development. The visions of development in each context thus depend on more opportunities and more growth, echoing what Gibson-Graham (1996: 7) have identified as the "heroic" narrative of capitalism as the ultimate vector of modernity and prosperity.

Unfortunately, in all three cases, the blue growth agenda has exhibited some extractive characteristics—albeit to different extents. In Ireland and Bulgaria, especially, this pattern is highly pronounced as few of the profits from the coastal tourism industry remain with the communities themselves, while the consequences remain locally felt. In Bulgaria, the dominance of the tourist and speculative property industries, leading to overinvestment in urban and tourism development over the late 1990 s and throughout the 2000 s, resulted in rapid and high levels of urbanization along the coastline, as well as sweeping landscape change (Antonova & van Dam, 2022; Antonova, 2024). The profit gains rarely stay within local communities since the larger properties do not tend to be locally owned (Stanchev et al., 2015; Yanev, 2019) and many interlocutors in Burgas feel that entrepreneurship has been alienated from local communities and that economic policy on the coastline supports the short-term gains of "businessmen *businessmen-ing*" (Interview, 2023). Similar to Burgas, in Connemara, second home ownership, Airbnb properties, and private renting have restricted housing supply for local people and driven up prices. This tendency adds to the blue industries' wider material and immaterial pressures on the coastline, from "ghost" estates to feelings of lost landscape identity (Pafi et al., 2023). As in Burgas, therefore, the consequences of blue growth industries' value being taken away from the community are all the worse for the community's dependence on the blue economic sector.

While the extraction of profit from the local community seems to be less pronounced in Træna, concerns with the negative consequences of blue growth likewise have been shared by local actors. In interviews, some shared seeing the municipality as "being blinded by outside capital" and "sell[ing] [their] soul a little bit," while others disclosed feelings of Træna's "mountains, […] clean air, clean ocean" being exploited (Interviews, 2023). Indeed, Træna's development has strategic relevance in national and regional plans (as opposed to just local regional plans) because the blue growth potentialities in northern Norway are seen as crucial to transitioning the economy towards a low-emission society (Norwegian Ministries, 2017; Norwegian Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fishery & Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, 2017). In short, Træna faces potential blue economy pressures on its coastline and its communities similar to those that are already felt in Burgas and Connemara.

Table 2
Summary of the two conceptual themes, their features, and the coastal communities/case studies and their practices.

Theme	Features/Practices	Coastal community/case study
Resisting extractive blue growth	Reclaiming economic profit Social enterprises Institutionalized community practices	Burgas municipality, Bulgaria (Burgas) Connemara Gaeltacht, Ireland (Connemara) Træna municipality, Norway (Træna)
Centering socio-ecological values	Commoning Community care Multispecies relations	Åland islands, Finland (Åland) Cap de Creus peninsula, Spain (Cap de Creus) Eastern Limassol region, Cyprus (Eastern Limassol)

4.1. *Reclaiming economic profit through social enterprises and institutionalized community practices*

Given the blue economy's importance to all three contexts, local initiatives in Burgas, Connemara, and Træna increasingly turn to social enterprises aimed at retaining value from blue industries within the coastal community. Defined as trading businesses owned collectively by local people, rather than shareholders, social enterprises align directly with models defined by diverse economies approaches. They do so in a number of ways: they reinvest their profits for social purposes; promote a different form of ethical rather than financial value; have an explicit concern for environmental resources; and provide goods and services based on what people need, rather than for profit (Ridley-Duff & Bull,

2019). The extent to which these approaches are adopted into local governance differs in all three contexts. In Bulgaria, they are almost exclusively bottom-up, while in Connemara and Træna, regional or municipal policy actors support their establishment. However, in all three cases, mobilizing (or remobilizing) the social enterprises works toward building more solidarity-oriented economic practices on the coast to retain value within the community.

The types of social enterprises advanced in each of these communities differ. Notably, in Bulgaria, cooperatives were well-established throughout the country and on its Black Sea coastline pre-socialism (Antonova, 2024). In the contemporary context, local practices that aim to strengthen the Burgas community's economic agency often foreground social equity, environmental replenishment, and environmental education in patterns akin to those of the pre-socialist cooperatives. Similar to the cooperative model and examples identified by diverse economies scholars (Gibson-Graham 1996; Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020), these alternative practices often function within the existing dominant economic system even while contesting its extractive logic. For example, one Burgas entrepreneur developed a seafood restaurant that serves only products developed from sustainably farmed fish, where educational lunches and cooking lessons for children, as well as music evenings for adults, are frequently held. While the restaurant prioritizes a range of social functions, it nevertheless also functions as an offering within the local tourist landscape. Similar initiatives foregrounding societal or environmental values have been developed or are in development within the contexts of ecotourism and nature conservation (Antonova, 2024).

In Connemara, the semi-state agency responsible for economic development across Gaeltacht areas, Údarás na Gaeltachta (Údarás), launched a new social enterprise strategy in 2022 (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2022). The 18 social enterprises Údarás identifies in the Gaeltacht have a fixed asset base of €15.4 m and gross profits of €452,000 or 31 % of turnover. While the social enterprise sector is not numerically large, it is asset-rich, profitable, and operates at scale. The social enterprises operating in Connemara can be categorized in three different ways. Some are *community anchor organizations*, which are multifunction, territorial businesses that provide a mix of services including industrial units, work integration, transport and housing. Others can be viewed as *transition projects*, which tend to concentrate on heritage-based tourism and in particular, language education, although there is also an emerging community energy sector, especially on the islands. Finally, some social enterprises in Connemara are *emerging projects*, comparatively smaller, often by localized groups, that engage with trade but are more reliant on grant aid and focus mainly on community and social programs. These varying projects aim at different goals, like protecting and enhancing the Irish language; increasingly, they diversify into tourism, walking and glamping holidays, and interpretive heritage, based on the cultural history of the West Coast. To illustrate, Venture Out Wilderness was formed in 2015 as "a socially-just, sustainable society, more integrated with nature and the outdoor environment" (Venture Out Wilderness Project, n.d.). They take a person-centered approach to mental health, supporting individual resilience and building emotional intelligence through engagement with nature. The connection between "blue health," use of the outdoors and a social enterprise model underscores the potential of nature-based solutions across coastal communities (Hudson et al., 2022).

In Connemara, where social enterprise initiatives are partially formalized through the support of a semi-state agency. By contrast, in Træna community practices that seek to retain value from the blue economy receive backing from local governance. Træna's municipal plan does not explicitly engage with "blue growth," but highlights quality of life and the cultural sector as important aspects of societal development, and recognizes that "traditional economic development, where the main focus is to increase the number of jobs, is no longer sufficient to appear attractive," (Træna Municipality, 2017). Interviews conducted with Træna community members align with these views, which see vulnerability in relying on a few cornerstone companies based on primary industries (Interviews, 2023). Similar to the case of Burgas, alternative or non-profit economic activities live alongside for-profit industries in Træna. This coexistence can be illustrated by the organization *Trænafestivalen*, a non-profit music festival that draws thousands of visitors every summer and hence contributes to a great proportion of other local businesses' turnover. The festival is embedded in Træna's unique geographical, ecological and historical setting, and contributes to building pride and identity in the local community. Its uniqueness is also recognized by international media outlets (Coldwell, 2015; Bruton, 2019). The festival's surplus supports local activities and community groups, such as the youth club, and finances community buildings. Many of the 450 inhabitants volunteer during the festival, together with people from the rest of the country and abroad. At the same time, the community has pushed back against the festival growing too large and putting pressure on the *dugnadsånd* (spirit of collective, common effort or community volunteering, a historical, cultural practice in Norway) (Simon & Mobekk, 2019). Its organizers have restructured it to make it smaller, noting that "Sustainability is now more important than eternal growth" (Interview, 2023). Thus, the festival's management recognizes an economic agenda and function for the initiative that deviates from a vision of simple growth and instead prioritizes supporting the local community.

While these initiatives offer constructive new pathways for each of the three communities, there are also risks with the social enterprise sector in the development of diverse economies. Not all businesses will survive; while some actors like *Údarás* in Connemara or the *Trænafestivalen* in Træna have been able to create a sustainable core of institutionalized community practices through social enterprises, failures and skills gaps in these processes remain. There are also issues of scale and the extent to which these kinds of social practices have less penetration in value-added sectors where salaries and profits are higher. Furthermore, issues arise if the sector is positioned as an alternative to welfare, enabling the state to withdraw from its commitments and offload responsibility for incomes, services and in particular social care. The potential for displacement within and between *diverse economy* sectors is an issue in scaling alternatives to the market. Enabling networks to understand their relationship to state and private markets is part of the continuing political and technical education needs of a more socially engaged economy. Thus, in all three cases, the formalization of community practices and social enterprises aims to retain profits from the blue economy within the community, thereby focusing on recapturing and reinvesting primarily *monetary* value in the local context as a way of accomplishing societal or environmental goals.

5. Centering socio-ecological values in the blue economy

For this next section, we shift our attention to three cases in which local initiatives contest or shape the regional blue economy by foregrounding values *outside* monetary gain, such as care, ecological replenishment, or community wellbeing. In two of these cases, Åland and Cap de Creus, these efforts are advanced by local communities' ability to rely on strong traditions of the commons and commoning practices. Both Åland and Cap de Creus seek to retain these practices and the non-monetary values they generate against external pressures. By contrast, the case we describe in Eastern Limassol debates alternative economic imaginaries as a way of bridging wider gaps in the socio-ecological fabric of its coastline, such as contradictory blue economy development projects and the missing connection between local communities and the sea. Together, the three cases show how each community's material links to its coast, along with the intangible benefits they bring, can influence both the direction of the local blue economy and its challenges.

In Åland, the value from the regional blue economy's driving force—capture fisheries and fish farming—is retained by communities thanks to traditional practices of commoning and water ownership.

Spread over more than 6,700 islands, 60 of which are populated by 30,344 inhabitants (ÅSUB, 2021), the province of Åland is an autonomous, demilitarized, and Swedish-speaking region consisting of almost 90 % water. Accordingly, its fisheries and fish farming are of less importance for the national economy, but of substantive importance in terms of local culture, identity, and economy, with local people in the archipelago often fishing for household consumption and identifying strongly with the fishing role, e.g., "I only know about fishing cod" (Interview, 2023). Crucially, these local communities are also water owners with the rights and obligations not only to fish but also take part in local fisheries management (Svels, 2017). As elsewhere in Finland, the Ålandic coastal and inland waters have traditionally been under private ownership and associated with the possession of land (Svels & Åkerlund, 2018). Today, the commons are instituted under the Finnish Law of Commons (Finlex, 1989) and the water commons on Åland are regulated by the Åland Fisheries Law (Government Åland, 1954). While water owners do not always have any personal interest in fisheries, many of the active decision-makers are typically local household fishers. As large local water owners, the commons are powerful local stakeholders, with both access to and control of water and land (Svels & Åkerlund, 2018). They are thus disposed to draw a significant stream of revenue from the multiple uses of marine ecosystems and natural resources.

Similar to Åland, local communities in Cap de Creus have also retained a strong agency in the shaping of the blue economy of their coastal environment. A peninsula on the Costa Brava in northeastern Catalonia, Cap de Creus became a natural park in 1998 following locals' advocacy to preserve the unique natural and cultural heritage. Traditionally an area of fishing and horticulture (e.g. vineyards and olive trees), from the 1960s and 1970s, Cap de Creus has increasingly seen these activities become secondary to tourism (Gómez & Lloret, 2017). This in turn has led to fishing communities together with local social groups from the civil society advocating for nature preservation in the face of growing tourist-related pressures on the coastline, threatening traditional livelihoods such as small-scale fishing (AAVV, 2018). As in Finland, the fishing economy in Spain has historical experiences in resource management rooted in community and communal law, especially through fishers' guild institutions, or Confradías (Ortega, 2013). The Confradías maintain their social and economic role in several ways. First, they regulate access to local resources by establishing "territorial limits" between fishing ports, determining fishing hours and time, and controlling the incorporation of new fishers (Franquesa, 2005). Second, they remain relevant by regulating the first sales at the fish market via auction (Franquesa, 2005). And third, the Confradías help the community mitigate the negative impacts of contemporary fishing policy like fleet reductions or fishing day caps under the Common Fisheries Policy, since compensation measures offered by the CFP often fail to consider the community's vital onshore contributions to the fishing economy (Álvarez et al., 2024; Gómez & Maynou, 2020 & 2021a). In these ways, both the Confradías and other alternative initiatives remain paramount in sustaining the social fabric that supports the economic development and long-term viability of the sector through mutual help and exchange networks beyond the pure productivist aspect (Gómez & Maynou, 2020).

Whereas Åland and Cap de Creus communities can thus draw on a long history of communal and commons-driven decision-making for the coastline and its resources, the communities of the Eastern Limassol have been increasingly disconnected from their local coastal landscape, both physically and spiritually. Situated at the upper side of a 1978 motorway approximately three kilometers away from the south coast of Cyprus, the three neighboring communities, Moni, Monagrouli, and Pentakomo that form this area are poorly connected to the sea. Compared to Åland and Cap de Creus, they have also seen limited blue economy-related development historically—instead, the area includes industrial facilities like an old cement factory, a water and waste treatment facility, recycling facilities, an old power station, and quarrying zones. Additionally, it is adjacent to the country's (expanding) Energy Centre (Vassilikos Energy Centre), a space which dominates the view towards the east for all visitors and inhabitants in the area. With priorities at the EU level driving a blue growth strategy over particularly the last decade, marine aquaculture facilities—the main driving mechanism for the Cypriot blue economy—have been placed in the area, with Eastern Limassol becoming host to Cyprus' most prominent facilities in the industry.

Over the last two years, local communities have reacted strongly against the proposed creation of a marine aquaculture harbor. The simultaneous designation of the Marine Protected Area of Ayios Georgios Alamanos as a Natura 2000 site intended to preserve a mosaic of marine habitats and the endangered Mediterranean Monk Seal has also spurred debate and protest. These negative reactions stem from long-standing and widely spread community distrust towards decision-making in the area, strongly correlating with government inattention to both the ecological importance of the area and the development needs of the community. To community members, "There is no cooperation between the local and the national government when it comes to our development. The decisions are taken from the top. If you go to the National Government to talk about Governor's Beach, they will say that what is there is the gulf of the Vassiliko Energy Centre," (Interview, 2023). Thus, while Eastern Limassol could be seen to stand on the opposite side from Åland and Cap de Creus on communal cohesiveness and communities' empowerment within the decision-making process, the case illustrates how community socio-ecological imaginaries can be shaped by top-down blue economy narratives, which are often contradictory.

5.1. *Commoning, community care, and multispecies relations*

Congruent with diverse economic theorists' arguments that capitalist production and profit depend on healthy social relations and material realities (Gibson-Graham & Miller, 2015; Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017; Roelvnik et al., 2015), Åland, Cap de Creus, and Eastern Limassol together show the importance that a strong social fabric, interwoven with a robust coastal environment, hold for the regional blue economy. Åland and Cap de Creus do so through the strong histories of commoning and their success. Eastern Limassol, conversely, demonstrates this point through its communities' relative disconnection from both the coastline and its governance. Moreover, in all three cases, communities strive to foreground the societal and environmental pillars that uphold the local blue economy that capitalist economic analyses usually overlook (Federici, 2004; Gibson-Graham, 1996). To do so, each context promotes community care through social and infrastructural support, advancing knowledge about the marine environment and the community's role in its management, and upholding environmental stewardship.

Traditions of the commons play an important role in these efforts in the Finnish and Spanish cases. In Åland, the water commons denote environmental and nature conservation for the benefit of sustainable fish populations by stocking fish fingerlings in combination with keeping coastal areas clean: "Out of the funds [annual financial report], approximately €4,000 goes directly to fish stocking," (Interview, 2023). In practice, support for the fisheries sector is locally significant, with commons allowing access to and construction on their shore land for purposes such as fishing harbors, boathouses, and other related facilities, while the uplifted, pristine land can in some cases be sold, accumulating profit to the commons. The commons benefit from the archipelago's recreational values, mainly through selling fishing licenses, leasing second home plots and in some cases summer cottages, and also by letting out restaurant facilities. The social "repayment" from the commons, accumulated from the mentioned diverse income streams, differs, however. In most cases, the return of funds goes into the coastal communities, for example as streetlights in remote areas, boat ramps, piers and landings to be publicly used without remuneration. As one

interviewee described it, "Based on the annual financial report there's a distribution key, which depends essentially on how large a share you have in the water common. Then there's a sum that goes to the village councils […] it's mostly just about circulating the money and using it, for example, to build things," (Interview, 2023). Thus, the burden of distribution is shared proportionally while the benefit is commonly distributed.

Similarly, communitarian initiatives and collaborative efforts in Cap de Creus over the last 20 years and more have built on the Confradías' and self-management historical experience by working towards alternative ways of understanding economy to generate community-based transformative change. Intertwined in a wider network, these initiatives strengthen each of their particular actions and redirect values by integrating an environmental activist aspect: "In fact, a federation of environmental organizations has been created, called SOS Costa Brava, with 27 organizations, including IAEDEN,[1] also one of the most powerful and strongest organizations […] So, we have been here for 30–40 years in this type of activism," (Interview, 2023). Altogether, the more than 25 initiatives inventoried in Cap de Creus so far are diverse: heritagization processes of maritime culture, wellness activities, the promotion of cultural heritage and community-supported fisheries as a "two-way environmental" engagement linking sustainable producers and responsible consumers (Gómez & Maynou, 2021b).

As in other parts of Spain, in Catalonia a significant percentage of these initiatives are led by women from fishers' families, who take on "an increasingly pivotal position in initiatives related with blue economy" (Álvarez et al., 2023: 2). In the interstices of the conventional fish market, these initiatives set their sights on moving towards food sovereignty together with alternative food systems as counter-hegemonic and postcapitalist alternative seafood systems in the Mediterranean (Gómez & Maynou, 2021b; Prosperia et al., 2018). At the same time, Cap de Creus' initiatives are widely based on alliances between different social actors, such as artisanal fishers, scuba diving clubs, local entities and associations dedicated to environmental conservation. Social connections are central to these alliances and how they link up, as expressed by one interviewee, "They are governance networks. Ok? (…) you have to think about those people, or those institutions with which you have a relationship (…) Informal knowledge exchange, information exchange with managers, management of subsidies and economic resources, complaints and denunciations, material resources and exchanges, etc.," (Interview, 2023). Thus, these initiatives function together as a networked approach to socially oriented governance.

Conversely, concerns with environmental care and stewardship come at the heart of blue economy tensions in Eastern Limassol. Although the area comprises several different types of ecologically significant coastal and marine habitats (including sand-dunes, reefs, Posidonia meadows, and sea caves) and gives home to important flora and fauna (including the endangered *Neurada procumbens*, the Mediterranean Monk Seal, and fruit bats), the ecological importance of the area has been underappreciated and further undermined by governmental policies. Nevertheless, the fact that the area has been 'promoted' for more industrial activities over the past decades has kept big parts of the coastal area rather pristine and untouched by the badly planned tourism infrastructures in other coastal cities of the Republic of Cyprus. With the expansion of the blue economy translating to placing marine aquaculture in conflict with conservation, Eastern Limassol also raises the question of how alternative imaginaries can be created, or even accepted by local communities, when top-down decisions create binaries with respect to uses of the sea and coastline. Such binaries contract choices to environmental protection or economic growth. The incoherency of the two policies and the engendered false dichotomy has produced further distrust towards decision-makers. To work towards combatting these dynamics, recent efforts in Eastern Limassol have focused on building stronger links between the community and the coastline. For example, the last two years have seen efforts to involve the community into a new Cape Dolos Strategic Community Development Plan seeking to redress challenges like the community's poor connection to its coastline, through among other, an increased appreciation for its environmental and societal significance. Parallel ocean literacy activities with local primary schools made efforts to introduce children and their teachers to this natural wealth, and to create feelings of pride and belonging, as well as to inspire future marine stewards.

Indeed, Cap de Creus, Eastern Limassol, and Åland all demonstrate activities meant to empower communities in the blue economy through advancing knowledge on the material entities and intangible values upholding their existence on the coastline. In Cap de Creus, a web app (https://www.naturcap-empowerus.eu/) promotes local understanding of the marine environment much in the same way that the event for primary school children in Eastern Limassol sought to popularize understanding of the coastline's unique ecology. In Åland, meanwhile, workshops, leaflets, and other ocean literacy events aim to encourage water owners to better understand their role in local commons and thus to spur them to engage more in fisheries management in the islands. In this way, communities focus on nonmonetary values that have either been left behind by an enclosure-like development of the blue economy (Hadjimichael, 2018b) or that remain vital for the maintenance of the strong social-ecological fabric that underpins more successful and lively iterations of the blue economy.

6. Discussion: Towards diverse blue economies?

In both diverse economies literature and broader critiques of capitalism, radical calls for dismantling the existing system often war with more moderate analyses that argue for its diversification or reform from within. To some extent, this debate is an existing one within the diverse economies field itself (Collard & Dempsey, 2017; Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017; Zanoni et al., 2017). Yet the need to suggest alternatives also remains an open question for degrowth scholarship, as well as one to which the as-of-yet tenuous links between degrowth and diverse economies literature point (Smith, 2024). In taking on criticisms of the blue economy and its blue growth mandate (Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Hadjimichael, 2018a, 2018b; Ounanian & Howells, 2024), this tension between radical postcapitalist imaginary or diverse and alternative approaches likewise holds sway.

The six cases we have examined in this article align with the diversifying agenda, demonstrating a pragmatic approach to the challenges that the blue economy raises for each coastal community. In all six cases, communities' practices adapt, remake, or contest the blue economy either by imbuing economic practices and enterprises with the logic of care and solidarity (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Roelvnik et al., 2015) or by drawing on knowledge and commoning practices from their regional historical experiences (Clemens et al., 2019; Healy et al., 2021). Thus, while each of the coastal communities tries to offset the extractivism of the blue growth, local practices in each context nevertheless adapt to and work from within the existing economic system. These practices fight to retain the benefits of the blue economy at the community level through the promotion of social enterprises (as in the cases of Burgas and Connemara); diversify the blue economy by mobilizing communities' historic legal and economic practices, especially those pertaining to the commons and practices of commoning (as exemplified by the Åland and Cap de Creus cases); or expose the blue economy's dependence, even in a classic "growth" iteration, on aspects of care, stewardship, equity, or collective wellbeing for human and more-than-human members of the community (as both the Easter Limassol and Træna cases show).

Taken together, however, the six also raise questions about whether diverse economic initiatives are robust enough to resist dominant

[1] IAEDEN (Institució Alt Empordanesa per la Defensa i Estudi del Territori) is an entity created by civil society defending the Emporda Marshes Natural Park and the Cap de Creus. The organization has been advocating for environmental protection since the 1980s.

growth agendas or answer recent calls for blue degrowth (Ertör & Hadjimichael, 2020; Hadjimichael, 2018a) by providing alternative models of development. They unlock perspectives as to the different blue economies that are considered, and (more importantly) that influence the public sphere or shape dominant narratives—alternatively towards the importance of socio-ecological factors or towards the significance of socio-economic blue growth. These questions can also be thought of as challenges of scale: as St. Martin et al. (2015) have pointed out, diverse economies projects need to transcend the local and work on wider networks and systems of economic relations in order to be successful; yet at the same time, turning to wider scales carries an inherent risk for leaving behind the local. In the Burgas, Træna, and Connemara cases, there is tension as to whom and for which purpose the blue growth serves. For example, the communities' aims of encouraging local development in conjunction with social vitality exist against a broader, nationally significant wage-labor employment model that concentrates most job opportunities in the urban centers, leaving peripheral communities at a disadvantage. Similarly, the Cap de Creus and Eastern Limassol cases highlight issues of scale dimension, such as local decisions and efforts to re-invent either blue food systems or spatial planning and find themselves in potential opposition to dominant management and economic organizations at national and EU levels.

Diverse economic approaches to the blue economy do not always entail direct resistance but a way of governance. Sometimes, as in the cases of Åland or Cap de Creus, the robustness of alternative economic practices comes from the ability of communities to approach the blue economy from a strong historical background that has allowed them to retain practices of commoning in their context. In Connemara and Burgas, likewise, social organizing is vital for finding new approaches to envisioning local development and retaining its benefits at the local level. At other times, as in the cases of Eastern Limassol and Træna, the blue economy's growth agenda evidently cannot be successful in the first place without relying on practices of care and ecological relations that often remain invisible at the agenda-setting level. These observations align with the ways in which diverse economies scholars contest conceptualizations of ecologies as "natural resources" external to the process of production and consumption in the economy (Gibson-Graham & Miller, 2015; Kay & Kenney-Lazar, 2017; Miller, 2019). Much as in these theorizations, Træna and Eastern Limassol illustrate how ecology can drive societal adaptation and retain livelihoods, making the "economy" dependent on the more-than-human.

While the commoning work in Åland and Cap de Creus and the profit-retaining efforts in Burgas and Connemara reflect ways to operate within the dominant blue economy frames, we can reflect on whether scaling up these efforts would be possible—or whether scaling up is even the goal at all. Reflecting on diverse economies in a scholarly discussion, Elizabeth Barron (personal communication, 11 June 2024) wondered whether scaling up practices needed to be part of diverse economies work or whether it was satisfactory (or maybe sufficient) to embrace a network approach in which different practices in different locales exist independently but with awareness of each other. Such provocation seems to be situated in Gibson-Graham's "thick descriptions, weak theory" ethos (2014), emphasizing that the robustness of the diverse economies approach lies in its contextualization. Indeed, these six cases demonstrate resistance in shared directions and under similar problematizations. Nonetheless, an open question remains as to whether it is enough to identify and develop a network of cases of diverse economies operating within hegemonic blue growth and blue economy agendas, or whether scaling up these initiatives will be necessary and possible for sustainable and just transformations.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have examined six coastal contexts located across five European seas to evidence how community practices re-envision the blue economy. Together, these case studies provide real-world perspectives on the ideas, concepts, assumptions, and ambitions of diverse economies' theoretical scholarship. Aligning with that scholarship's call to dispute the hegemonization of economic thought (Gibson-Graham, 1996; Mitchell, 2008; Werner et al., 2017), the cases we have visited demonstrate the layered motivations and visions embedded in different community practices. Over the preceding sections, we have highlighted two broad patterns: advancing community practices that retain monetary value and profit on the coast to support socio-ecological networks or placing attention on more-than-economic relations that prioritize ecological and societal rather than simply economic values. These two themes tease out some of the inherent tensions that come up with foregrounding community practices as a way of diversifying the blue economy. Burgas, Connemara, and Træna each exhibit how social needs can be met through blue economy activities. Åland, Cap de Creus, and Eastern Limassol speak to how environmental renewal over profit can guide blue economy initiatives and work to reunite coastal communities with their adjacent marine ecosystems. Together, these cases nuance our understanding of how local initiatives grapple with global agendas such as blue growth. In doing so, they also progress diverse economies thinking on what constitutes an economic relation, as well as highlighting an ongoing debate within the scholarship between the need to either *diversify* or *dismantle* dominant growth-oriented logics.

In practical terms, these reflections raise a wider point: namely, for whom the blue economy is designed, and whom it is meant to serve. The tensions reflected in each of the case studies we have examined arise from the varying scales on which the blue economy is supposed to operate—from the local and its human (and even nonhuman) coastal community inhabitants, through regional revenues, to national and even supranational priorities and GDP goals. At the core of the thematic division we have identified among different coastal community practices sits the key issues of knowledge and empowerment. As demonstrated in our six cases, coastal communities hold a great deal of knowledge of their constitutive social and ecological relations, as well as beliefs in an embedded blue economy that meets values of justice and collective wealth. As we have shown, communities intend not only to resist maladaptive and unsustainable iterations of the blue economy, but also to harness the blue economic wave for their own needs and purposes. In this sense, we call for critical blue economy scholarship to move away from an either/or conceptualization to one embracing local distinctions and diversity. However, the question remains as to how these local visions of a more just and emplaced blue economy will scale to wider policies (or practices) at higher (governance) scales—while retaining its commitment to communities' needs and their social and ecological relations.

Future research might tackle these questions by engaging diverse economies literature more frequently in discussions of the blue economy. The rise of the blue growth agenda makes the coastal context an underexplored opportunity to bring this body of economic geography scholarship to bear on concrete, contemporary policy concerns. As the blue economy conversation grows ever louder at the governance level (European Commission, 2025), more geographic research is needed on local understandings of what the blue economy is and could be in terms of emplaced relations. Such research might map the forms of exchange and reciprocity that communities engage in while navigating the blue economy; it might foreground the role of more-than-human perspectives and ecological labor for economic production; or it might address specific socioecological concerns to widen the lens from the wage-centric view that still dominates the blue economy conversation. In making this appeal, we also argue for more geography scholarship to consider the specifics of the coast and the unique conceptual opportunities it offers to rethink dominant discourses of our time.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Anna S Antonova: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data

curation, Conceptualization. **Wesley Flannery:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sílvia Gómez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Madeleine Gustavsson:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Maria Hadjimichael:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Brendan Murtagh:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kristen Ounanian:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sunniva Solnør:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Vida Maria Daae Steiro:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kristina Svels:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the participants in their research for their ongoing support.

The research conducted in this article has received funding from the European Union under the Horizon Europe Program, Grant N° 101059957 (EmpowerUs). Anna Antonova additionally received support for this publication from LMUexcellent, funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Free State of Bavaria under the Excellence Strategy of the Federal Government and the Länder. Sílvia Gómez additionally received support from the ICREA Academia.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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