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redistributive
imaginaries

Stakeholder Workshop

How are digital platforms shaping
meanings and practices of
redistribution in civil society and beyond?

Briefing document

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How are digital platforms shaping meanings and practices of redistribution in civil society and beyond?

In this briefing document we present key findings from Redistributive Imaginaries: Digitalization, Culture and Prosocial Contribution, a research and knowledge exchange project investigating meanings and practices of redistribution in the context of digitalization.

The research data is drawn from fieldwork in the UK, Finland, Montenegro, Spain and Switzerland, carried out between 2023-2025. We interviewed 35 representatives of digital platforms designed to facilitate fundraising for welfare and social causes. We also interviewed 88 individuals who volunteer or work for civil society initiatives that deliver diverse forms of welfare support.

We present seven redistributive imaginaries, or collective ways of thinking about societal contribution, social solidarity, and the affordances of the digital. Each redistributive imaginary has been summarized using a persona – a character who condenses ideas, beliefs and ways of thinking that we found expressed by many individuals in the research data. Each persona statement is followed extracts from interview data.

Redistributive imaginaries

Community empowerment

'Let's get going!'

Sofia is a partnerships manager for a non-profit foundation. She believes people are naturally inclined to help those around them, and that they want to donate to causes that will improve the lives of people in their communities. For Sofia, voluntary giving helps to reinforce social bonds, creating stronger, more resilient communities. Community-led initiatives contribute to a sense of belonging and participation: they empower those involved and ensure that people feel ownership over their locality.

In her daily life, Sofia sees how the empowerment of communities can make a real difference. But she also recognizes that community spirit often seems to be suppressed and inhibited, both by people's busy lives and an individualistic culture. She believes digital innovation can unlock this latent potential by activating communities and helping them to 'get going'. She observes that digital platforms provide a forum for connection, helping communities to expand in reach, and a convenient and faster means of managing community fundraising and voluntary giving.

Research data

'The role of our platform is to help […] projects to activate their own community. It is to create the connection to funding. It is, of course, also to expand the community, that is, to provide access to a larger community through our community than what the individual brings with them.'
– Non-profit platform representative

'The base of the project is the community, the local community that we're in. It was a year after COVID that we began to think about how we could open this space, where we saw a lot of mutual aid and lots of supportive projects that ran during lockdown and post-lockdown […]. So the idea was that we create something that is for us and by us.'
– Voluntary initiative participant

'Everything we do is around making things much easier and faster and frictionless for local communities to get going […]. Historically if you wanted to go about creating an initiative in your community and you needed funding for it, you would apply for a grant from the local council. Now, in a lot of places that still exists and it works well; what we've tried to do is speed up that process.'
– For-profit platform representative

Pragmatic competition

'A tough and competitive world'

Ana is the director of a small NGO. In her years of working in the sector, she's grown accustomed to fighting for the survival of her organization. The reality, she recognizes, is that every cause must compete for the attention of potential donors and public institutions in order to stand a chance of securing funding. It is not enough to be putting forward a valuable project. That's vital, but it's also imperative to raise the profile of the social cause, to make it more visible to donors and funders. Attention is the gateway to funding: that's how it works.

It's a tough and competitive world. Certainly, Ana recognizes, some organizations won't have the resilience to keep going. Ana believes that digital tools help her organization to meet these challenges. Platforms enable her initiative to have equal prominence with more established organizations, and to draw attention to over-looked causes. Survival in this cause market place takes significant effort. You need to produce great content that engages donors and funders, and you must constantly im-prove your metrics, so Ana is always looking for new volunteers with expertise in digital marketing.

Research data

'The financial situation in the country affects us directly and it also affects us through the continuously increasing competitiveness of fundraising. And we have plans, different kinds of thoughts about how to increase our visibility on the website.'
– Voluntary sector organization representative

'If we had this conversation in a year's time, and nothing has changed, and we've not got our social media off the ground, and another 5% of the populace that read Facebook or TikTok or whatever are unaware of us, and we haven't done some crowdfunding, made our donation system easier [...] we're doomed.'
– Voluntary sector organization volunteer

'Our role is […] to elevate causes that no one sees and problems that no one sees. One of the things we've been told the most in all the studies we've done is that, unlike other places, [our platform] gives equal prominence to [both small and large social initiatives], because if the project is good, if what you're doing is good, I don't care. In fact, I think it's amazing. So I believe our role on platforms should also be to democratize and make access to resources a bit more horizontal.'
– Non-profit platform representative

Welfare complementarity

'Striving for complementarity'

Nora is a project coordinator at an NGO that supports vulnerable families. Nora's organization steps in where state support is lacking, offering targeted aid. Over the years, Nora has seen market and civil society organizations take on a more substantial role in welfare provision. She is convinced that public institutions, non-profit organizations, and private actors must offer complementary initiatives in order for the support system to work as a whole.

For Nora, digital platforms and tools provide an infrastructure that helps actors in the mixed economy of welfare to achieve complementarity. Nora believes that one of the strengths of her organization is that it can intervene quickly when and where need is greatest – something that public institutions struggle to achieve. Digital platforms support this agility, providing an efficient and rapid means of managing donations. Recently, Nora's organization used crowdfunding to top up their traditional sources of revenue.

Nora believes in the welfare state and doesn't want to see US-style welfare solutions come to Europe. But she feels that it's inevitable that more charitable fundraising will be needed in the future. The state won't have the capacity to cope with all the challenges that lie ahead.
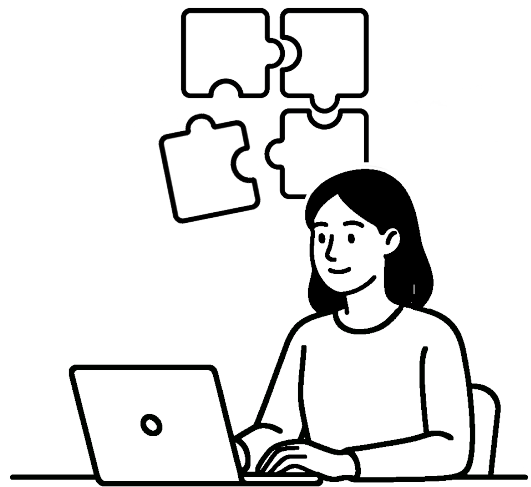
Research data

'I believe that all actors need to get involved in order to change the situation in the country. Whether it's citizens, NGOs, or government organizations – it doesn't matter. If everyone contributed in their own way, only then could real change happen.'
– Voluntary sector organization representative

'Our purpose is not to work on top of each other, but together. And to increase cooperation and increase trust in the authorities as well. And the importance of voluntary work is rising and is emphasized by the fact that it is not produced in the same way as a public authority.'
– Voluntary sector organization representative

'We also think there are things that should not necessarily be covered by crowdfunding, because we also think that the state naturally has a role to play. Right now, with things like a children's hospital. But there are also projects where [other] organizations work better, i.e. on a donation basis [...]. And crowdfunding, let me say, is a super important and good tool when it's really not about long-term financing.'
– For-profit platform representative

Welfare consumerism

'Heard by my wallet'

Toma is a partnerships manager for a non-profit digital innovation hub. They don't have a problem with paying taxes, but they also want to exercize some choice over where their money goes. Toma has always made donations to the causes that they care about, and they believe that charitable giving enables individuals to participate in important decisions about how social need should be met.

Toma's work coincides with their views. They believe that digital tools are really valuable in fundraising, making it easier for people to express their preferences. For example, algorithms can filter consumer preferences, delivering social causes to donors that will resonate with them personally. Toma is confident that the digital shift has made for a more democratic fundraising environment that ensures that every consumer's decision will be consequential. Toma is also persuaded that digital tools help to maximize donation income. People are easily distracted and sometimes forget to make their donation. Mobile payments and other digital tools ensure that transactions are seamless, enabling fundraisers to intervene in the moment, when the donor is really engaged by a cause.

Research data

'I know some people view it as a negative thing that we have to go and give to these charities, but it's also an amazing thing to be able to give some of your money to the causes that you care about. And that shouldn't be replaced by, in my mind, a kind of homogenous funding strategy of the government. I want to choose where my money goes, I want to give to the causes that I care about.'
– Non-profit digital fundraising initiative representative

'We wanted to give donors the option to choose where their money goes. For example, they could select categories like buying essential groceries, purchasing medicine, scholarships, or a few other options. This way, donors would have the chance to express their preference on how their donation is spent.'
– Civil society organization representative

'I believe we are moving toward a public-private combination model where our taxes cover a certain extent […] However, to go a little further, the private sector comes into play, allowing us to choose where we want our money to go. And that, too, is something very beautiful.'
– Non-profit platform representative

Welfare solutionism

'Digital solutions for social problems'

Marta works in an infrastructure development role in the 'tech for good' sector. Marta believes that there is enough money to go around, but the way that people have tried to solve social problems in the past has not always been cost-effective. A more data-led, evidence-based approach will optimize the resources available to those on the ground. She thinks it's essential that the private sector is encouraged to get involved in tackling social issues, because people in these businesses can offer expertise, insights and a unique problem-solving perspective.

Marta believes that technological innovation helps us to overcome the obstacles that stand in the way of positive social intervention. Digital platforms make it possible to build networked problem-solving communities and to share knowledge about the most effective solutions. When it comes to digital fundraising, Marta has seen how digital innovation makes the process of donating easier and faster. She thinks that digital platforms also provide accountability to donors, enabling them to feel confident that their money has been put to good use.

Research data

'This is about an ideology and a movement whose basic idea is to think about how can we do the most good most efficiently […] We think together what the good even is, what it consists of, how do you define it, how can you count it. And also [we think about] efficiency; how can we compare different means and their efficiency in different frames of reference.'
– Voluntary initiative member

'If we could properly filter beneficiaries, connect all relevant stakeholders, and create a verified list of those in real need, public trust would increase.'
– Voluntary sector organization representative

'Both the [public administration] and the foundations actually have a similar problem. The funds they have available need to flow to the right place. The idea behind crowdfunding is to combine this with social proof […]. You can say that funds only flow into projects that are somewhat more broadly supported.'
– For-profit platform representative

Welfare
state enhancement

'Ideally, charities shouldn't exist'

Since **Luka** retired from full time work, he has volunteered for a charity that helps families in poverty. He feels passionate about helping people who are experiencing difficulties. The demands on the charity seem to increase every year, with more and more families needing help.

It strikes him that social needs are never going to be met by charities. Although they can provide some temporary relief, it's never enough. Only the state has the capacity to deal with problems of this scale. Luka would like to see the government take more responsibility for families like those the charity tries to help. He thinks that the tax system is unfair – rich people seem to get away without paying their fair share, and that's making society far too unequal. The government could take steps to ensure that it has the funds to deliver better care, housing, and public services for everyone. In an ideal world, Luka thinks, his charity wouldn't even exist.
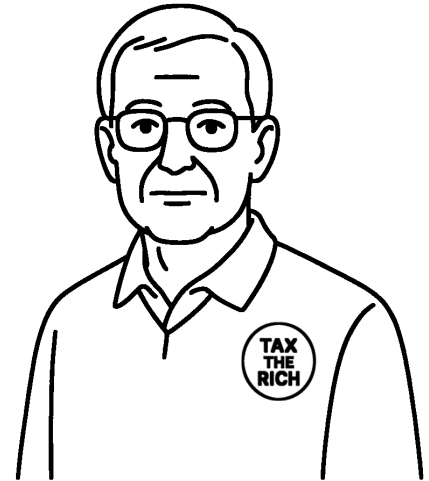
Research data

'But for me, of course, the public sector should cover a lot more than it does now. I think we should have certain things guaranteed. I'm very much in favour of paying taxes and making sure they're well distributed.'
– Non-profit platform representative

'These resources exist, yet we end up in a situation where an organization or an individual has to collect donations for medical treatment or food. This reveals a dysfunctional system where roles have been reversed. In my view, the [government department] and other institutions should be the ones handling this.'
– Voluntary sector organization representative

'We fill gaps because the state is not taking responsibility. I don't think that's actually our job. But we […] can't wait for the state to organize things, we have to help people now. My wish would be that [the initiative] no longer existed. Then it would be good. […] My wish would be that we could reduce our staff. But no, we always need more because more and more people are coming. It's not a nice situation. Nevertheless, we are needed. When all these services are no longer needed, then the world will be in order.'
– Voluntary sector organization representative

Welfare transnationalism

'Sharing beyond borders'

Oliver sees that the world is unjust. He volunteers in an organization that offers support to refugees. Oliver perceives that the distribution of wealth is globally unequal, and that prosperity in the country where he lives is conditional on poverty and extraction in the global South. Oliver recognizes that war, destitution and climate breakdown cause people to leave their homes in search of a better life. When refugees reach more prosperous nations they often face further barriers when they are unable to access healthcare, housing and public services. To Oliver, borders and nation states are an obstacle to the fair redistribution of resources.

This perspective has led Oliver to take action: he feels that assisting someone in his neighbourhood or donating to people elsewhere in the world can help to alleviate injustice. Here, Oliver sees the benefits of digital platforms that make it possible for support to cross borders and overcome barriers. While the scale of such actions may be small, they offer a glimpse of a different way of living together. Oliver thinks that digital community-building can connect people across borders and help to spread this vision.

Research data

'[Our initiative] has a more than average amount of people who feel that the world as a whole is a community. A lot of what we do is about income transfers from rich countries to poor countries. So I think that borders of states are an obstacle if we want to follow the principles of [our initiative].'
– Voluntary initiative member

'People have always moved around and have the right to do so. We invented nation states and borders. And who gives us the right to exclude others from an area just because we were born here?'
– Voluntary initiative representative

'For me personally, this is a part of prefigurative politics for a world where we don't have a state and where we help each other out and make use of the abundant resources that there are, that are being diverted off to a very small group of people.'
– Voluntary initiative participant

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