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‘As one dies, so dies the other’?

On local complementary currencies as two-sided platforms

Jean-Baptiste Desquilbet*

Etienne Farvaque†

This version: October 2021

Abstract

Are local complementary currencies doomed? We analyse the conditions underlying the existence of these alternative monetary arrangements from the perspective of the two-sided platform theory. Considering their benefits to depend on the cross-externality generated by the presence of buyers and sellers using the alternative means of payment, we show that the possibility of the sustainability of such arrangements is weak. The result is established in a very general setting and with few restrictions on the parameters. Except in the presence of subsidies, the odds are low for local complementary currencies to survive.

Keywords: Community currency; Complementary currency; Local exchange systems; Two-sided platforms; Means of payment

JEL Classification: D42, E41, E42, E59, L11

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1 Introduction

Local complementary currencies (LCCs) have gained popularity in many countries. The global financial crisis may have been a catalyst, inducing groups of citizens in various areas worldwide to create LCCs, while hoping to shield their community from the resented negative side-effects of globalisation. Indeed, for their supporters, LCCs are ‘alternative organisational forms and tools for social change’ (North, 2014, p. 182), able to create new commons (Meyer and Hudon, 2017, 2019) or to pave the way towards more sustainable development (Michel and Hudon, 2015). The movement has taken roots, as there are more than 5 million users of the main platform currently adopted by the ‘communities’ that develop and use LCCs.¹ More than 400 LCCs in over 40 countries (as diverse as Austria and Venezuela) exist today. Thus, the issue is attracting attention, and local decision makers and politicians are tempted to consider the creation of such a system to “revitalise” communities or local economic systems. This has at least forced many countries to regulate their creation and functioning. France, for instance, has made LCCs legal since 2014.²

However, many of the LCCs do not fulfil their promises: many projects do not emerge, and the mortality rate of LCCs is probably higher than 25%. Moreover, although initially designed to create new commons beyond or even sometimes against the state, most of the LCCs that survive nowadays rely on (local) government subsidies.

This raises the question whether LCCs are doomed from the start, that is, under what conditions could they meet their supporters’ expectations and wishes. So far, most of the literature³ is based on case studies or programmatic arguments, which too often overlook economic constraints, if only the value of time necessary to create and manage an LCC. Only few analytically grounded studies discuss LCCs. Colacelli and Blackburn (2009) base their analysis on the search for a theory of money developed by Kyotaki and Wright (1989, 1993) and derive conditions for both a local and a national currency to circulate in equilibrium: scarcity of the national currency, relative transaction costs, and diversification of the local economy. They tested these conditions on Argentinian data from the early 2000s, at a time when Argentina was in deep crisis. More recently, Rietz (2019) conducts laboratory experiments to test the predictions of currency competition models, which depend on assumptions about the bargaining process and trade restrictions.

Another perspective is reported by Jayaraman and Oak (2005), who develop a Bayesian game to analyse how LCCs can enhance efficiency in the local economy in equilibrium. They argue that LCCs may ‘serve as a signal of demand to local firms’ (p. 598). In their model, a sufficiently high LCC holding is interpreted by producers as a high demand for local products, which helps to resolve uncertainty and induces producers to invest in a more productive technology, which leads to a lower equilibrium price. In equilibrium, ‘money holdings are fully revealing, leading to ex post optimality’ (p. 608).

Along a completely different line, Mailath *et al.* (2016) develop a formal model of a network of firms and consumers, without money, to explain how reciprocity in trades may trigger ‘buy local relationships’. They mention that LCCs can fit into their analysis, as a form of ‘buy local’ arrangement. They show that such

¹According to <https://www.complementarycurrency.org/what-we-do.html>. (Last consultation: April 2021).

²Most countries that regulate them do not consider LCCs as monies but simply as payment instruments.

³See the online ‘bibliography of community currency research’ at <https://www.cc-literature.org/>.

arrangements can be beneficial even if the participants are selfish agents, that is, without resorting to arguments, such as building community spirit, improving environmental conditions through lower transportation costs, or influencing the conditions of production: ‘buy local’ arrangements create surplus for a group by diverting trades from outside to inside the group, and by providing an enforcement mechanism through monitoring and reciprocity.

In the present study, we take yet another approach to delve deeper into the functioning of LCCs. Our contribution is to consider LCCs as payment schemes that are well known to work similar to two-sided platforms. As defined by, for example, Evans and Schmalensee (2007), platforms ‘serve distinct groups of customers who need each other in some way’, they ‘provide a common meeting place’, and ‘facilitate interactions between members of the two distinct customer groups’. This definition thus fits the arrangements of real-life LCCs. The two customer groups (or sides) served by an LCC are the local consumers of goods and services, or buyers, and the local producers or businesses, or sellers. We build on Evans and Schmalensee’s (2010) research to elicit the dynamics of the demand for participation in the payment scheme from both the consumer and the seller sides. We also build on Weyl’s (2010) work to analyse the supply side of payment schemes, that is, their cost structure. The framework we use is duly general to embed all forms of LCC arrangements, from tokens to labels to currency units. Nonetheless, it allows us to pinpoint the conditions under which such arrangements can exist and prosper, focussing on the relationship between the cost structure of the system and the incentives for subsets of individuals to participate. We thus provide a better understanding of the difficulties LCCs undergo in their development: we show that such systems face well-known problems of critical masses, on the buyer and seller demand sides, as well as of economies of scale on the supply side. The model we develop reveals that the main determinants of the success or failure of an LCC lie in:

1. the number of potential users of both the buyer type, including households and individuals, and the seller type, such as businesses and suppliers of goods and services;
2. the structure of user preferences, which includes the intensity of direct or same-side network externalities, the intensity of indirect or cross-side network externalities, and the users’ maximum willingness to pay to join the LCC-supporting community;
3. the cost structure of the LCC-supporting institution, be it an association or a fully private firm, either subsidised or not.

Contrary to models that focus on equilibrium conditions, and following Evans and Schmalensee (2010), we detail the dynamics of buyer and seller participation and show that success depends on the ability to attract, from the very beginning of the project, a sufficient number of both buyers and sellers. We also show that pricing is a critical success factor, in that too high a participation fee deters potential users from participating in the LCC, which suffices to make the LCC less attractive to all, given network externalities. Symmetrically, too low participation fees would not cover the costs of the supporting institution, thereby nipping the project in the bud. The predictions of our model are thus largely consistent with the empirical evidence on the difficulty in launching LCCs and keeping them afloat.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: first, we present the demand side of LCCs as two-sided platforms, expressing the double critical mass problem they face. Thereafter, we focus on the incentives sellers have in joining such arrangements, concentrating on the participation fees issue. The conclusions are provided in the last section.

2 A model of the demand for LCCs

2.1 LCCs as two-sided payment platforms

In the following, we consider an LCC as a two-sided payment platform. The first challenge faced by the promoters of an LCC is to attract sufficiently high numbers of both buyers and sellers. As Evans and Schmalensee (2010) show, two-sided platforms may fail to launch if they do not overcome this fundamental double critical mass problem. The analyses of payment systems that build on the two-sided platform theory usually insist on (i) indirect externalities, assuming away direct externalities, and (ii) participation fees as either an alternative or a complement to usage fees.

As regards network externalities, we build on Evans and Schmalensee's (2010) research. Their model applies to various industries, and they provide social networking sites, content sharing platforms, business to business exchanges, and payment card systems as examples. Whereas they assume either only direct or indirect externalities, we consider a situation whereby both types of externalities coexist; we assume that the preferences of users depend on both the number of users of the same type and that of the other type, that is, that buyers and sellers value both types of participants vis-à-vis the LCC arrangement. It is a reasonable assumption, given the usual practice in LCCs. Sellers naturally value buyer participation, as buyers value seller participation, since the primary objective of a payment system is to facilitate market transactions. Sellers also value the participation of other sellers, since they usually cannot get rid of the LCC they earn from sales unless they dispense it by purchasing some goods or services from other local businesses. Moreover, buyers value the participation of other buyers, either because they need an interpersonal payment scheme or because they appreciate that many people share the community values supposedly conveyed by LCCs.

Regarding fees, we assume away usage fees for two reasons. First, we want to emphasize that in any LCC arrangement, *mainly participation matters*, user utility is derived mainly from participation, because once users decide to participate, they will also use the LCC in payments.⁴ Second, we envisage LCC arrangements whereby the managing institution does not observe transactions between buyers and sellers, and thus cannot collect usage fees. Therefore, fees can be collected upon participation only.⁵

⁴In fact, some LCCs are 'melting' to induce the participants to use them: they lose face value when *not* used or have notes expiring according to a pre-announced schedule. These LCCs can be considered as having a negative usage fee. To model both participation and usage fees (which is a two-part tariff), we would have to introduce some heterogeneity among users, and assume that buyers and sellers enter in variable numbers of transactions. Clearly, usage fees are similar to participation fees in models of payment systems where users trade only once, which is a commonly made simplifying assumption, see, for example, Verdier (2011). Considering the heterogeneity of this type would unnecessarily complicate the model.

⁵Usage fees can be collected in payment card systems. So, the ability to collect usage fees in an LCC arrangement certainly depends on the underlying payment technology. If the LCC circulates as printed notes, such as banknotes, our assumption is clearly valid. If the LCC circulates through electronic cards, transactions could be observed, recorded, and charged for.

2.2 The demands for participation

We assume that some people set up an association to launch and manage an LCC in an area inhabited by \bar{N}_B potential buyers and \bar{N}_S potential sellers. We denote $N_B(t)$ as the number of participating buyers and $N_S(t)$ as the number of participating sellers at time t (we will omit the time index to simplify notations when it can be done without ambiguity). Users are endowed with an indirect utility function represented by their net willingness to pay to participate in the payment scheme and use the payment instrument:

$$U_{B,i} = b_i V_B(N_B, N_S) - P_B \quad (1)$$

$$U_{S,j} = s_j V_S(N_S, N_B) - P_S \quad (2)$$

We detail the analysis of buyer behaviour. All notations and interpretations are symmetric for the sellers (inverting indices S and B , i and j , and having s_j instead of b_i). $U_{B,i}$ is the net utility that buyers derive from participating in the LCC arrangement.⁶ P_B is the (time-invariant) membership fee charged to the buyers who join the managing association. $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ is a time-invariant function that measures the willingness to pay of the most enthusiastic potential buyer when N_B buyers and N_S sellers participate. We assume that $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ is an increasing and quasi-concave function of both N_B (as there are same-side, or direct, external effects), and N_S (as there are also, and in practice, most probably, cross-side, or indirect, external effects), and that for any $n \geq 0$, $V_B(0, n) = V_B(n, 0) = 0$, i.e., the most enthusiastic buyer is not willing to pay a strictly positive amount to participate if there is either no buyer or no seller. Parameter b_i , $b_i \in [0, 1]$, characterizes each buyer i and measures buyer i 's degree of sympathy towards the LCC: the higher b_i , the higher the utility derived from participation, all else equal. We assume that b_i is distributed among the \bar{N}_B potential buyers according to a cumulative distribution function $F_B(b)$, so that $F_B(b)$ denotes the proportion of buyers who are willing to pay at most $bV_B(N_B, N_S)$ to participate, while $1 - F_B(b)$ denotes the proportion of buyers who are willing to pay more than $bV_B(N_B, N_S)$ to participate. We denote the associated density function by $f_B(b)$.

Given $\{P_B, N_B, N_S\}$, consumer i will participate in the LCC if and only if $U_{B,i} \geq 0$, that is $b_i \geq \frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}$, and the number of buyers willing to participate (or "willing participants") is then $\bar{N}_B \left[1 - F_B \left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)} \right) \right]$.

Denote the difference between the number of willing participants and the number of actual participants by $\Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t))$ the difference between the number of willing participants and the number of actual participants.

$$\Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t)) \equiv \bar{N}_B \left(1 - F_B \left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B(t), N_S(t))} \right) \right) - N_B(t) \quad (3)$$

We assume simple dynamics of adjustment in the number of actual participants⁷. If the number of actual

⁶It is probably easier to think of utility as measured in terms of the national currency (for instance, dollars or euros), although this does not matter for the arguments we develop in this article. In practice, the exchange rate of an LCC is generally fixed in terms of the national money. It is equal to 1 by law in the French case, for example.

⁷Evans and Schmalensee (2010) do not detail the dynamics of their model, but it follows the same lines. According to their study, we have :

$$\text{sign} \left\{ \frac{dN_B(t)}{dt} \right\} = \text{sign} \{ \Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t)) - N_B(t) \},$$

participants is smaller than the number of willing participants, then it increases by some fraction of the difference, viz. :

$$\frac{dN_B(t)}{dt} = \theta_B [\Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t)) - N_B(t)] \quad (4)$$

where θ_B , $0 < \theta_B \leq 1$ is the speed of adjustment (with $\theta_B = 1$, all willing participants who are not already participating would join, and all participants who are no longer willing to participate would quit).

The participation dynamics is the same for sellers, with the appropriate changes in notations :

$$\frac{dN_S(t)}{dt} = \theta_S [\Phi_S(N_S(t), N_B(t)) - N_S(t)] \quad (5)$$

where :

$$\Phi_S(N_S(t), N_B(t)) = \bar{N}_S \left(1 - F_S \left(\frac{P_S}{V_S(N_S(t), N_B(t))} \right) \right) - N_S(t) \quad (6)$$

In equilibrium, $N_B = \bar{N}_B \left[1 - F_B \left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)} \right) \right]$: the share of the population of buyers that choose to participate, $\frac{N_B}{\bar{N}_B}$, is equal to the share of the population willing to pay, $1 - F_B \left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)} \right)$. The symmetric equilibrium condition applies to sellers.

The equilibrium demands for participation are then simultaneously given by:

$$\Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t)) = 0 \quad (7)$$

$$\Phi_S(N_S(t), N_B(t)) = 0 \quad (8)$$

Equations (7) and (8) are the conditions for ‘constant buyer participation’ and ‘constant seller participation’, respectively.

2.3 The equilibrium condition for buyer participation

We now detail the equilibrium condition for buyers, equation (7), under a set of very general technical assumptions⁸. We show that it relates N_S to N_B as an implicit function that is globally U-shaped on the $[0; \bar{N}_B]$ interval, in the loose sense that it is strictly decreasing for low values of N_B and strictly increasing for high values of N_B , but may be increasing or decreasing for intermediate values of N_B . We then show how this equilibrium relationship is affected by changes in P_B and changes in the distribution function $F_B(b)$.

By construction, $N_B(t)$ is constant alongside the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve. Assume that, from an initial position on this curve, N_S increases, all else equal. Then, $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ increases, that is, the value of buyer participation increases, so that $1 - F_B \left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)} \right)$ also increases, that is, the proportion of buyers willing to pay and participate increases. It follows that $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S)$ increases and becomes positive. As a result, the number

$$\text{sign} \left\{ \frac{dN_S(t)}{dt} \right\} = \text{sign} \{ \Phi_S(N_S(t), N_B(t)) - N_S(t) \}.$$

⁸The same analysis applies to the equilibrium condition for sellers, equation (8), with appropriate changes in the notation.

of participating buyers increases ($dN_B(t)/dt > 0$), above the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve, where $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) > 0$, and it decreases, $dN_B(t)/dt < 0$, below the curve, where $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) < 0$.

Proposition 1: (a) For $0 \leq N_B \leq \bar{N}_B$, the relationship between N_B and N_S along the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve may be either positive or negative. (b) When N_B is low (approaches 0), there is a negative relationship between N_B and N_S along the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve. (c) When N_B is high (approaches \bar{N}_B), there is a positive relationship between N_B and N_S along the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve.

Proof: Assume numbers N_B and N_S exist in their respective admissible intervals, such that the condition for constant buyer participation is satisfied : $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$. The slope of the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve is given by:

$$\frac{dN_S}{dN_B} \Big|_{\Phi_B=0} = \frac{V_B^2}{\bar{N}_B P_B f_B V_{BS}} - \frac{V_{BB}}{V_{BS}} \quad (9)$$

where V_B represents $V_B(N_B, N_S)$, f_B represents $f_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)$, V_{BB} represents $\frac{\partial V_B}{\partial N_B}(N_B, N_S)$, and V_{BS} represents $\frac{\partial V_B}{\partial N_S}(N_B, N_S)$.

(a) The first term in (9) is non-negative because all the factors involved are non-negative. The second term is negative, from the assumption that $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ is increasing in both arguments and quasi-concave. Therefore, for $0 \leq N_B \leq \bar{N}_B$, the slope may be either positive or negative, depending on the properties of $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ and $F_B(b)$.

(b) When $N_B \rightarrow 0$, the first term in (9) tends towards 0. The second term is the slope of the $V_B(N_B, N_S) = P_B$ curve, which is negative. Thus, as $N_B \rightarrow 0$, the slope of the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve tends towards the slope of the $V_B(N_B, N_S) = P_B$ curve, and it is therefore negative⁹.

(c) When $N_B \rightarrow \bar{N}_B$, then $(\bar{N}_B - N_B)/\bar{N}_B \rightarrow 0$ and for $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S)$ to remain equal to 0, $F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)$ must tend to 0. This will be the case if $\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}$ tends to 0, that is, if $V(N_B, N_S) \rightarrow +\infty$. Given N_B , this implies that N_S should become very large, such that the relationship between N_B and N_S along the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve must be positive (almost vertical). QED.

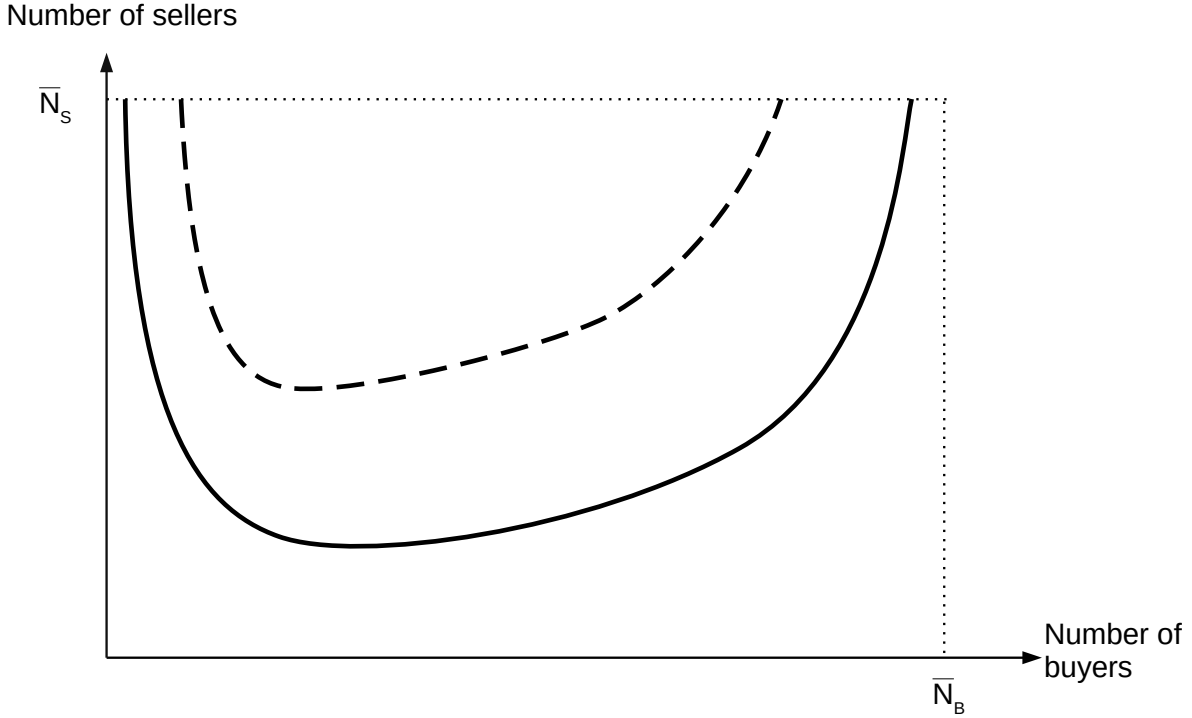
As a consequence of Proposition (1), we cannot, without imposing some restrictions on $V(N_B, N_S)$ and $F_B(b)$, ascertain that the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve is convex, and that its slope is increasing with N_B , which would be necessary and sufficient to obtain a strict U-shape¹⁰. However, the double critical mass problem argument we want to make does not depend on the strict convexity of the equilibrium condition for buyers (or sellers).

Proposition 2: *Ceteris paribus, an increase in P_B induces an upward shift of the $\Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t)) = 0$ curve in the (N_B, N_S) map.*

⁹Notice that the slope of the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve is greater than that of the $V_B(N_B, N_S) = P_B$ curve when $N_B > 0$. When $N_B \rightarrow 0$, then $(\bar{N}_B - N_B)/\bar{N}_B \rightarrow 1$ and for $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S)$ to remain equal to 0, $F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)$ must tend to 1. This will be the case if $\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}$ tends to 1, that is, if $V(N_B, N_S)$ tends to P_B . It follows that, when $N_B \rightarrow 0$, the $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve converges to the $V(N_B, N_S) = P_B$ curve, which is a decreasing indifference curve in the (N_B, N_S) map.

¹⁰Using a constant elasticity of substitution function for $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ and a beta distribution for $F_B(b)$ yields, the convexity of the equilibrium condition for buyers is verified for a wide range of parameters.

Figure 1: Constant buyer participation



Note: The continuous line represents the condition for constant buyer participation, assuming its convexity, for a given participation fee and a given distribution of the willingness to pay of buyers; the dashed line represents the same condition for a higher participation fee (Proposition 2) and a first-order stochastically dominated or more right-skewed distribution of the willingness to pay of buyers (Propositions 3 and 4).

Proof: All else equal, an increase in P_B induces an increase in $F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)$, that is, the share of the population of potential buyers who do not participate. Then, $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S)$ decreases, from 0 at the initial level of P_B , to a negative value at the new level of P_B . It follows that the $\Phi_B(N_B(t), N_S(t)) = 0$ curve shifts upwards in the (N_B, N_S) map, especially as we have $\Phi_B < 0$ below the curve. QED.

The intuition is easy to grasp: a given number of buyers still participate if an increase in the number of sellers N_S compensates for the higher membership fee. This is illustrated in figure 1.

Proposition 3: If the distribution of b_i across the population of buyers changes, such that the new distribution first-order stochastically dominates the initial one, then the new $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve lies below the initial one in the (N_B, N_S) map.

Proof: If $G_B(b)$ denotes the new cumulative distribution function of b_i , $G_B(b)$ first-order stochastically dominates the initial function $F_B(b)$ if and only if $G_B(b) \leq F_B(b)$ for all b , with strict inequality for some b . Then, given $\{P_B, N_B, N_S\}$, we have $\frac{(\bar{N}_B - N_B)}{N_B} - G_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right) \geq \frac{(\bar{N}_B - N_B)}{N_B} - F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)$, and for any $\{P_B, N_B, N_S\}$ such that $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) \equiv \frac{(\bar{N}_B - N_B)}{N_B} - F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right) = 0$, the inequality $\frac{(\bar{N}_B - N_B)}{N_B} - G_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right) \geq 0$ holds. The $\{N_B, N_S\}$ point lies on the initial equilibrium curve, and above the new one, which therefore lies below. QED.

The intuition here is that, under the new distribution, there are more potential buyers willing to pay a higher price to participate in the LCC arrangement, that is, more potential buyers being ‘enthusiastic’ about the LCC. Therefore, it requires less sellers to attract the same number of buyers at any given value of the membership

fee. Figure 1 also illustrates this proposition.

Proposition 4: If the distribution of b_i across the population of buyers changes so that the skewness of the new distribution is greater than the skewness of the initial distribution, then the new $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ curve lies below the initial one in the (N_B, N_S) map.

Proof: Again, denote $G_B(b)$ as the new cumulative distribution function of b_i . There are several ways to compare the skewness of distributions (see, e.g., Chiu (2010)). Here, we use Van Zwet’s (1964) definition as given by Chiu (2010): $G_B(b)$ is more skewed to the right according to Van Zwet (1964) if $G_B^{-1}(F_B(b)) \equiv H_B(b)$ is convex. Because $H_B(b)$ maps $[0; 1]$ to $[0; 1]$, with $H_B(0) = 0$ and $H_B(1) = 1$, assuming $H_B(b)$ is convex implies that $H_B(b) \leq b$. Given $\{P_B, N_B, N_S\}$, if $H_B(b)$ is convex then $G_B^{-1}\left(F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)\right) \leq \frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}$, therefore $G_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right) \geq F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right)$. If $\frac{(\bar{N}_B - N_B)}{N_B} - F_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right) = 0$, then $\frac{(\bar{N}_B - N_B)}{N_B} - G_B\left(\frac{P_B}{V_B(N_B, N_S)}\right) \leq 0$. The $\{N_B, N_S\}$ point lies on the initial equilibrium curve, and below the new one; therefore, the new equilibrium curve lies above the initial one. QED.

Figure 1 also illustrates this proposition. The intuition is as follows: the positive skewness of the distribution of b_i on the $[0; 1]$ interval means that the distribution is relatively more concentrated on lower values of b_i . A greater skewness means that the concentration of potential buyers on the lower values of b_i increases, and that there are relatively less “enthusiastic” buyers, who are endowed with a higher b_i and willing to pay the given participation fee to the LCC, given the number of participating sellers. The number of participating buyers would be unchanged if either the number of sellers increases, or the participation fee decreases.

2.4 The double critical mass problem

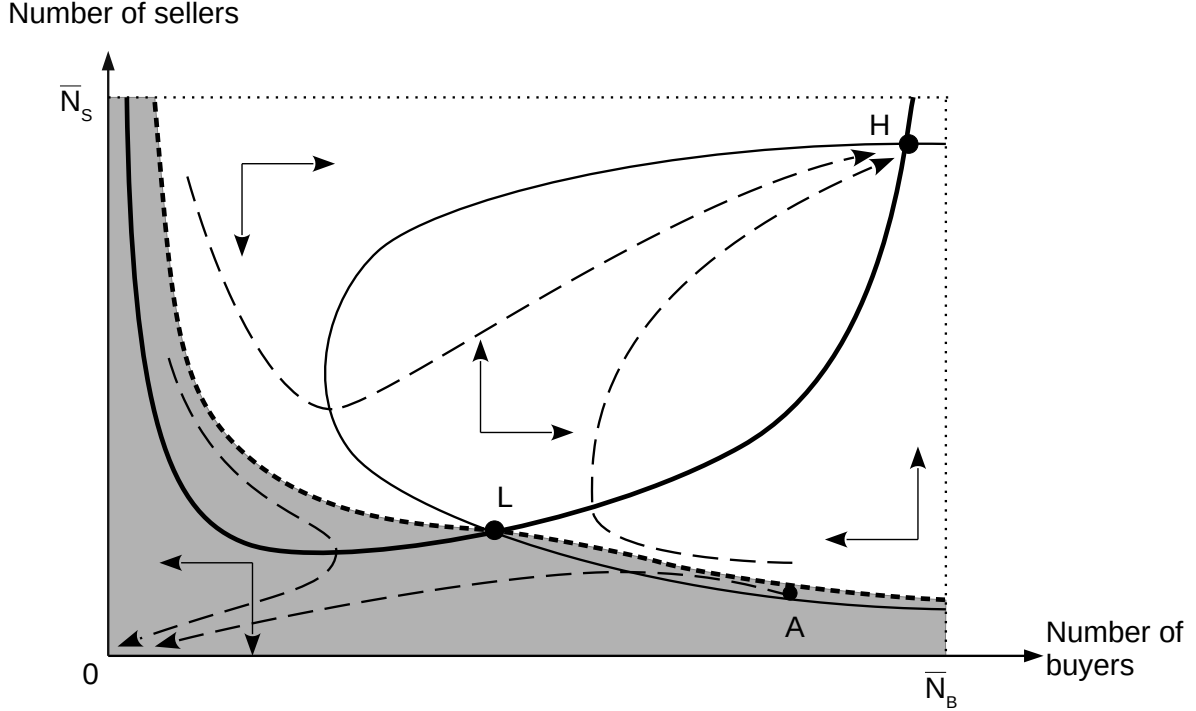
To be a viable arrangement, as shown by Evans and Schmalensee (2010) for other two-sided platforms, any LCC arrangement faces a double critical mass problem, because of the direct and indirect network externalities: it has to attract a sufficiently high number of both buyers and sellers.

Figure 2 displays a benchmark case, in which the demand model has three stationary equilibria, as shown by the phase diagram. The first equilibrium is the origin, a stable no participation’ equilibrium, with $N_B = N_S = 0$. The other two are such that the membership fees are sufficiently low for some buyers and sellers to participate. One equilibrium (L) is a ‘low participation’ saddle-point equilibrium, while the other (H) is a ‘high participation’ stable equilibrium¹¹.

This benchmark case illustrates the double critical mass problem. If the LCC association fails to attract combined numbers of buyers above the separatrix, the number of users initially participating will gradually revert to 0. For example, if the LCC initially attracts a high number of buyers but a small number of sellers (point A), more sellers are attracted by the popularity of the LCC among buyers and join, while some buyers quit, as they may be disappointed by the smaller number of places where they can use the LCC. After some time, depending on the adjustment speeds of buyer and seller participations, the adjustment path crosses the line of constant seller participation; then, both types gradually quit, and the LCC ends with no participants at all.

¹¹These properties are inferred from the direction indicators.

Figure 2: The double critical mass problem (benchmark case)



Note: The heavy continuous line through points L and H represents the condition for ‘constant buyer participation’ (7) and the thin continuous line represents the condition for ‘constant seller participation’ (8); the dotted line through L is the separatrix that converges to L; the combined thin straight arrows are the direction indicators; the curved dashed arrows show examples of trajectories.

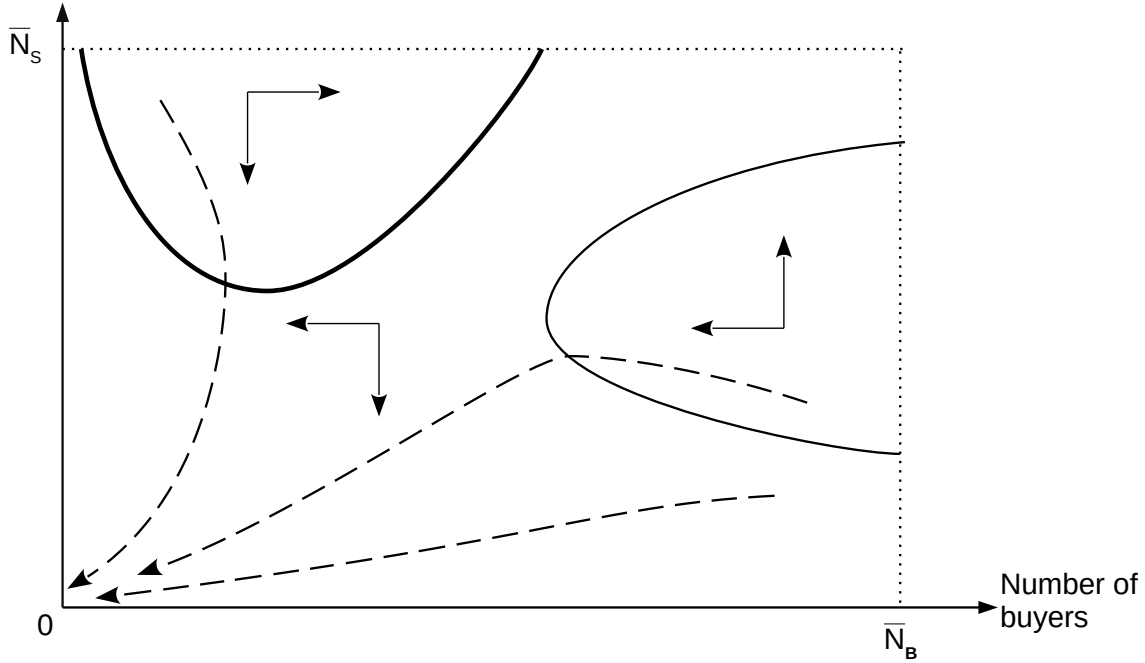
It is evident from the mathematics of phase diagrams that the position and shape of the separatrix depends on the characteristics of both equilibrium conditions, (7) and (8) and on that of the functions on which they are based, $V_B(N_B, N_S)$, $V_S(N_S, N_B)$, $F_B(b)$, $F_S(s)$, as well as on the assumed speeds of adjustment, θ_B and θ_S . The important point is that, both numbers of participants N_B and N_S must be sufficiently high at the same time, above the shaded area of figure 2 to trigger dynamics leading to the high equilibrium, otherwise the no participation equilibrium will be reached.

In figure 3, we present a case in which membership fees are too high, so that there is no participation in equilibrium. The membership fee of each side is not too high *per se* because the two ‘constant participation’ curves do fit in the $[0, \bar{N}_B] \times [0, \bar{N}_S]$ quadrant. However, the two conditions for ‘constant participation’ cannot simultaneously hold for any positive (N_B, N_S) pair. This shows that the pricing strategy of the institution that manages the LCC is of utmost importance for the success of the arrangement.

Figure 2 also illustrates the influence of another parameter, the degree of enthusiasm (i.e. the degree of sympathy towards the LCC). If potential users on either side are characterised by too low a degree of enthusiasm, then there is no participation in equilibrium. This is the case when the distributions of b_i and s_j are positively skewed, so that the buyers with low b_i and sellers with low s_j are relatively more frequently encountered in the population. In such a situation, the association managing the LCC could attempt to compensate for the lack of enthusiasm by lowering the participation fee. However, as we explain next, this may ensue other issues, as supply side considerations also prevail.

Figure 3: No participation when membership is too expensive or when enthusiasm is low

Number of sellers



Note: The heavy continuous line represents the condition for ‘constant buyer participation’ (7) and the thin continuous line represents the condition for ‘constant seller participation’ (8); the combined thin straight arrows are the direction indicators; the curved dashed arrows show examples of trajectories.

3 The supply side of LCC

As our framework makes clear, the key success factor for LCCs is participation on both sides. This feature is generally overlooked in the literature on LCCs. This because these projects are promoted by activists, who consider that local firms and citizens will benefit, unambiguously, from the implementation of such parallel currencies, if only for the feeling of ‘belonging-to-a-community’ the LCC will create. They also insist that firms will gain from acting in a short-circuit economy. However, this is assumed, not proven, and disregards the fact that potential LCC users, either buyers or sellers, optimally trade off the costs and benefits of the LCC in their decision-making process. And an important parameter in the decision to participate, and thus, as shown above, a critical condition of existence for LCCs is the price requested to participants to belong to the arrangement.

Generally, LCC advocates ignore the pricing mechanisms because (1) they tend to consider LCCs as monies, not as payment platforms, and neglect emission costs, and (2) they most often adopt a social or so-called citizen-based point of view and tend to equate not-for-profit organizations with not-costly organizations. To determine under which conditions LCCs could really thrive and prosper, pricing mechanisms have to be considered.

The optimal pricing theory in multi-sided monopoly platforms has been thoroughly analysed by Weyl (2010), who presents a general model which encompasses that of Rochet and Tirole (2006) and Armstrong (2006), among others, and applies to payments platforms, and so on. In this model, tariffs set by platforms can have several components, as membership and interaction are assumed to be costly to, and priced by, the platform. Weyl (2010) discusses several conditions for optimal pricing, depending on the objective function of the platform, maximizing total social value without or with achieving a minimum absolute profit, or maximizing private profit,

and on the sources of heterogeneity among users. He also underlines the different types of price distortions that affect multi-sided markets, and some technicalities have been commented on by Tan and Wright (2018).

Weyl (2010) demonstrates the *interior* optimal price structure under Ramsey pricing, where ‘social welfare is maximized subject to achieving a minimum absolute profit’ (p. 1653). He introduces the case for Ramsey pricing by stating that ‘achieving first-best prices may be infeasible in practice as it would require subsidies whose granting, given the cost of raising public funds, political economy constraints, and imperfect information, would be more costly than the monopoly distortions they seek to address’ (p. 1653). This is the closest he comes to the question we address here. However, he does not consider the maximum level of profit the platform can obtain.

3.1 The problem of setting participation fees

Regarding other platforms, the two critical masses that any LCC faces are endogenously formed and, as shown above, they depend crucially on the level of membership fees. The difficulty here is that, to determine the optimal level of fees, the institution promoting the currency would have to explicitly state its objective function, and be aware of its own cost structure. Both conditions are often not met in real-life LCCs, as the objective of the institutions or communities supporting LCCs are often loosely written and vaguely described, while the cost structure is often considered as nil, due to its reliance on voluntary work from the community members.

To analyze the economics of local currencies in a consistent way, we assume that:

1. the association promoting the LCC is a nonprofit organisation, as is the case for most real world LCCs;
2. the LCC services are produced with increasing returns to scale;
3. it sets participation fees so as to maximise a given objective function, denoted $W(N_B, N_S)$;
4. the association determines optimal memberships, N_B and N_S , as in Weyl (2010), from which optimal prices can be computed.

Regarding the cost structure, the managing institution incurs variable as well as fixed costs. Costs reported in financial statements include staff costs, selling and marketing costs, premises costs, and general administrative costs¹². It should be noted that, even before permanent staff are hired, the functioning of the institution generally relies on volunteer activity, which is not a monetary cost to the association, but should nevertheless be valued, according to Financial Accounting Standards. Moreover, even from a purely social perspective, it is important to consider volunteer time and to value volunteer contributions to evaluate, as precisely as possible, the social benefits of the LCC. On an annual basis, most costs are independent of the number of users. Variable costs would include, for example the cost of processing membership applications. Issuing the LCC paper notes and organising the digital emission and electronic payment system, disseminating and updating information, including marketing spending and maintaining a website, can also be considered as expenses mostly independent of the number of users.

¹²See, for example, the financial statement of the Bristol Pound Community Interest Company, <https://beta.companieshouse.gov.uk/company/07346360/filing-history> (Last accessed: 30 July, 2021).

We therefore consider that the supply of an LCC exhibits increasing returns to scale. The cost function of the LCC managing institution is thus characterized by constant marginal costs (with respect to the number of users), plus a fixed cost:

$$C(N_B, N_S) \equiv c_B N_B + c_S N_S + K \quad (10)$$

where c_B and c_S are the marginal costs attached to each type of participant, and K represents the institution's fixed cost.

The association's gross surplus is then defined as follows:

$$\pi \equiv (P_B - c_B) N_B + (P_S - c_S) N_S \quad (11)$$

and its profit, or net income is equal to: $\pi - K$.

Regarding the objective function, denoted $W(N_B, N_S)$, we will consider that, as a non-profit organisation, the association that runs the LCC does not aim to maximize its profit. To embed more real-life cases, we rely on a more general form than profit, and we consider that the objective function is increasing in the number of buyers and of sellers, with a specific trade-off between the two types of users. Assuming that the LCC association maximizes the welfare of users, measured as the total surplus of participating buyers and sellers, is a special case of the assumption we make, since the total surplus is the sum of individual net willingnesses to pay, which all depend on the number of participants.

The choice problem of the LCC association can thus be formulated as follows:

$$\text{Max } W(N_B, N_S) \quad (12)$$

s.t.:

$$\pi \geq K, \text{ where } \pi \text{ is defined in (11),}$$

$$\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0,$$

$$\Phi_S(N_S, N_B) = 0.$$

Note that the two conditions for equilibrium participation, $\Phi_B(N_B, N_S) = 0$ and $\Phi_S(N_S, N_B) = 0$, determine each respective inverse demand function¹³:

$$P_B = F_B^{-1} \left(\frac{\bar{N}_B - N_B}{\bar{N}_B} \right) V_B(N_B, N_S) \equiv P_B(N_B, N_S) \quad (13)$$

$$P_S = F_S^{-1} \left(\frac{\bar{N}_S - N_S}{\bar{N}_S} \right) V_S(N_S, N_B) \equiv P_S(N_S, N_B) \quad (14)$$

Technically, then, the maximisation problem resembles a standard Ramsey pricing problem (see, e.g., Baumol, 2008), which can be solved in terms of the numbers of participants. However, we do not need to compute the optimal prices to discuss the viability of the LLC.¹⁴

¹³The elasticities of prices with respect to same-side participation may be positive or negative as prices are computed as the product of two factors: the first increasing with, and the second decreasing with, same-side participation. The cross elasticities are positive: on the buyer side, as $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ is increasing in N_S , so is $P_B(N_B, N_S)$; and the same applies on the seller side.

¹⁴Jain and Townsend (2021) show that, in a Walrasian world of competing, for-profit, platforms, the sum of fees paid has to

3.2 Are LCCs doomed?

Our model helps to frame the situations where the LCC succeeds. The implicit assumption of our model is that buyers and sellers can always use the official currency that the LCC complements locally.¹⁵ The LCC could typically succeed if a crisis virtually eliminates the official currency¹⁶, or in a local area where inhabitants have a very strong attachment or sense of belonging to their region, or a very strong regional culture¹⁷, the willingness to pay to join the LCC scheme may be very high, which then makes cost-covering pricing easily acceptable to users, and participation large. In our model, this would be represented with high $V_B(N_B, N_S)$ and $V_S(N_B, N_S)$, as well as with cumulative distribution functions $F_B(b)$ and $F_S(s)$ that would be concentrated towards the high values of b and s . Although they appear as special cases of our model, such a situation probably deserves a more thorough analysis¹⁸. In other words, LCCs may succeed in areas where people are strongly convinced beforehand, but this sheer feature may reduce their appeal to promote another economic system in a convincing, broad, way.

The LCC may be doomed, however, and this may happen even before considering optimal pricing. This is notably the case if the *cost structure* is very unfavourable given the potential participations on both buyer and seller sides. This case occurs typically when participation is deemed ‘too expensive’ by potential buyers or sellers, as discussed above, even if membership fees are set as low as the level of marginal costs, $P_B = c_B$ and $P_S = c_S$. Such a pricing structure does not cover the fixed costs, and may not even trigger a sufficiently high participation. In such a situation, the project is stillborn.¹⁹

Another reason for failure is *mispricing*: participation fees are often set by the rule of thumb, without a careful ‘market’ survey. However, even an optimal pricing policy may yield optimal participation and membership fees such that costs are not covered by receipts, if the market is too narrow, as is well known from the economics of natural monopolies, that is, when prices that maximise gross surplus do not generate a maximum surplus that is adequately high to compensate for fixed costs (in such a case, there are no levels of N_B, N_S allowing that $\pi \geq K$). Cross-subsidising participation can be explored, in the case where participation is too expensive at marginal cost pricing on one side only, but this may not suffice to offset the first effect.

One can also view the failure of LCC associations as rooted in *cost underestimation*: running an association cover platform costs to reach an efficient equilibrium. And allowing different fees to be charged would only increase the complexity of the system, its management costs, and reduce its attractiveness for many potential users. For an example of complex pricing, see Anderson and Bedre-Defolie (2021).

¹⁵This assumption is made in all models analyzing payment systems (for instance, payment card users can always use cash as an alternative).

¹⁶The Argentinian experience with the *Credito* in the early 2000s is such an example. The Swiss *WIR* was launched in such a crisis context, in 1934, and rapidly reached a high number of active members (Stodder, 2009).

¹⁷For example, people in the French Basque Country have developed the *Eusko* that seems to expand, albeit with strong financial support of local, national and even European public authorities, as advertised on their website (<https://www.euskalmoneta.org/> - last accessed April 2021). The successful development of the *Sardex* in Italian Sardinia is another example. In this specific case, the ‘critical mass’ problem was recognised early on, and the system took-off after three years thanks to a 150k€ private investment in the network infrastructure (Litera et al., 2017).

¹⁸If, for example, a strong local culture induces inhabitants to reject not only the official currency but also all the other institutions, up to the point where secession from the main territory is considered as a viable alternative. In this case, multiple costs would have to be considered, in a discussion that refers to the macroeconomic analysis of optimal currency areas, multiple currency monetary regimes, dollarisation, and goes well beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁹Obviously, the number of unborn projects is unknown, and many projects can live, borne out by their supporters, until the point where their enthusiasm wanes. In the case of France, in which many projects are discussed and many LCCs circulate, we have counted 65 projects that have been or are still active at the time of writing. Among these, 11 (17%) have been stopped, with an average age at death inferior to 3 years.

is time consuming, even for volunteers, and this (social) cost is often underestimated ex ante. Additionally, LCCs may fail because of the sheer lack of volunteers for managing associations²⁰.

Of course, it can be argued that the LCC provides community services and that the managing association does not have to break even. This argument implies that the LCC association would have to be supported by public subsidies, such as subsidies from local authorities. This would obviously solve the issue but at the cost of introducing another problem: notwithstanding their own cost of funds, local authorities are typically confronted with competing demands by communities, associations, etc. They should then carefully check the relative efficiency of alternative ways to achieve the same goals as LCC. For example, if an LCC is supported as a way of promoting local activity (typically, local organic food production), it should be compared to other means, including specific labelling and advertising. Or, if an LCC is promoted as a way to enhance the sense of togetherness, the question becomes whether other policy measures could more efficiently reach the same goal. To which recipient are subsidies best allocated: a sports club, a musical society, a cultural organization, among others, or an LCC ?

4 Conclusion

We analyse LCCs, drawing on the economics of payment systems considered as two sided platforms. Our results explain why LCCs generally fail, viz. either the demand side, where two critical masses must be reached simultaneously both in buyer participation and in seller participation; or the supply side of the LCC sector, where the cost structure and pricing decision matter; or both. Proponents of these schemes often fail to acknowledge that the pricing mechanisms matter, because they either consider LCCs as monies, while they de facto are payment platforms, or because they equate not-for-profit organizations with not-costly organizations.

To determine under which conditions LCCs could really thrive and prosper, the pricing mechanisms have to be considered. However, as we have discussed, the cost structure of the LCC-managing institution gives rise to economies of scale and complicate the satisfaction of the conditions under which the scheme could operate in a sustainable way. Consequently, one may argue that local authorities should step in and foot the bill. As public funding is at stake, such a prescription should then be based on a clear economic analysis, comparing the costs and benefits of the different, competing, claims made on the public purse. Another possibility is that LCCs could be an inefficient instrument to an otherwise socially valuable goal (namely, favouring local producers and reducing transportation needs and costs). If this is the case, an alternative public policy instrument, such as local labelling, should at least be considered.

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²⁰The slow implementation process may even discourage volunteers, which could result in an LCC never being launched (see the previous note).

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