



# LINKING IT ALL TOGETHER: USING DATA TO CONNECT THE SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

by Dan Whiteley  
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**D**ata can be used for good, ill, and is usually used for both. But to organise people, or for people to organise themselves, information needs to be accessible. The way in which the data is collected and made available, and which data is considered important has a strong influence over whether it benefits people, or exploits them.

It could be argued that democracy made progress in society by collecting data on people's preferred ruler, usually out of a choice of two or three candidates. However, in this system, data on people's more detailed preferences are not deemed to be important. A lot of social life now takes place on the internet, where corporations such as Facebook and Google are the powerful organisers of our data. They collect vast amounts of data and help us by making it partially accessible—but it's the data they don't let us access that gives them their enormous power. We are now also seeing the rise of platforms such as Uber and Airbnb, whose data maps the economic needs and activity of consumers, but whose monopolisation allows them to ignore the economic needs of their workers.

The Solidarity Economy (SE) is about addressing our needs in a way that doesn't give away power, and also doesn't ignore needs that aren't marketable, such as the health of our ecosystem. An important part of this puzzle can be solved by deciding what data is important and how to collect and distribute it democratically.

## Data Projects in the SE

The most basic use of data within social movements is an initiative directory. This is a simple list of the names, locations and contact details of relevant projects with whom you might want to contact, collaborate or trade. It's the most basic requirement of any organisation—being able to find the right person to contact. This information is usually collected by national associations who have to regularly survey their paying members to update their records. It is an easy step to take a directory and turn it into an online map. If you go to the websites of the Permaculture Association, Co-ops UK, or another similar national federation, you will be able to find local and relevant projects.

But imagine if you could see all sorts of Solidarity Economy initiatives on the same map, with the inclusion of initiatives unrepresented by national federations. Wouldn't it be great to make all those small local community efforts—Food Surplus Cafes and Swap Shops—more discoverable? It's not so easy to do, but there are a few projects attempting it.

Shareable, a US nonprofit promoting the sharing economy, approaches the problem by hosting "MapJam" events to, "bring communities together

in cities around the world to connect the dots and map grassroots sharing projects, co-operatives, community resources, and the commons." These are fun community get-togethers in themselves, which turn local efforts into a global event. Also take a look at [solidaritynyc.org](http://solidaritynyc.org) to get a sense of the diversity and magnitude of activity in New York.

On the national scale in the US there is the Data Commons Co-op, which aims to collate data from several overlapping sources and share the costs of maintenance. Members contribute their own datasets and funding, then the co-operative formats, licenses, and creates tools to publish it on their behalf.

Back in Europe, Transformap is going for a more distributed approach. They are focused on developing a 'taxonomy' of initiatives, which categorises the breadth of the movement: contributors can then add their own initiatives to the online tool, based on Open Street Maps. They have also been collaborating on the Sustainable and Solidarity Economy project (SUSY), which is curating data for more educational purposes.

Apart from seeing initiatives' locations on maps, there are other kinds of information that can help our movement. By analysing the values and strategies of organisations, we can see what is missing and what is overdone, what works and what's failing. There are several organisations that collect richer data through surveys; The World Cooperative Monitor and Co-ops UK have each recently conducted a census. Then there's the Panorama Survey by RIPESS Europe, and the Real Economy Lab who are analysing the various 'tribes' in the New Economy movement, seeing where their principles and activities intersect. Their hope is that this will enable initiatives to 'connect, converge and catalyse', finding common values and new ways of acting collaboratively.

Finally, we come to the more data-complex realms of online 'platforms'. Today, platform corporations such as Airbnb and Uber are giants in the corporate landscape, with Airbnb recently surpassing the value of hotel-chain billionaires Marriott. However, it could be argued that the humble origins of such platforms were in fact in the Solidarity Economy, since the internet allowed people to share simple data about what they needed and could provide, leading to sites where you could find a free place to stay the night, or to collect things that others were throwing away, or to share a car ride to work. These beautiful examples of mutual aid between complete strangers has now been marketised and enclosed by these platforms. The network effect means that only the most capitalised corporations can monopolise through heavy marketing and regulation lobbying. Platform Co-operatives have begun the monumental task of wresting back some of this territory by providing more ethical services and



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distributing the surpluses and power more evenly.

#### More Fundamental Issues Underlying the Data Infrastructure

If we want to build new forms of organisation, ones that are less hierarchical, what would be a good underlying data infrastructure to use? The structure of data is a separate issue to its content or potential use; if the infrastructure is right, then anyone can build an application on top of it: a map, platform, or something entirely new. The Internet itself is an example of an incredibly powerful and liberating infrastructure. Anyone can write files, publish and distribute them, and these files can include links that jump to other files, creating a great tangle of linked documents to browse. We need data to be published and collected in a similar, decentralised way.

In fact, the inventor of the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee, leads the way in building this new data infrastructure. He advocates for data to be Open and Linked. Berners-Lee advises that a basic first step is just publishing the data in any open format, so it’s available for those who want to use it. Often basic directories and maps don’t do this, which means that lots of work has to be redone to format the data. A step further is to format the data well, for example in an Excel spreadsheet, or even better, a CSV file. So far this is just Open Data, now we have to make it Linked. To do this each bit of data has to have a ‘Uniform Resource Identifier’ or URI, like an address that is unique to a data point. For example, our office is in <http://dbpedia.org/resource/Oxford>, and if other datasets use that same URI then everyone knows we’re talking about the same entity. This is the basic idea of a Linked Open Data infrastructure, where many diverse datasets can be connected and accessed by anyone.

While the original web is designed for humans, so we can read documents easily, what’s needed for distributed data is a ‘machine-readable’ web. This would mean you could write a program to go and fetch large quantities of data from various sites

distributed across the web, and the data would all link to the same meaningful concept. Here’s where the URIs get really powerful. The meaning of the data relationship can itself be linked to, so that machines can understand when relationships fit the same category. So instead of saying “Radical Routes is a Co-operative”, you would write the relationship as three URIs (shortened here): `<../radicalroutes><../legalForm><../cooperative>`. The ‘legalForm’ URI links to more data about what the author actually means by legal form, and it gives the data ‘semantics’ that a machine can use when combining datasets from various authors.

This approach to formatting data is particularly good for networks of relationships. One illustrative example is the [linkedjazz.org](http://linkedjazz.org) research project, which uses Linked Open Data to discover meaningful connections between artists.

#### ISEs Approach

I work for the Institute for Solidarity Economics, and we are working on applying Linked Open Data to the Solidarity Economy.

Our work with Linked Open Data is in its early stages but we’re hoping to support wider adoption by creating user-friendly, open source tools and providing consultation. Part of this approach is to create a reference implementation, so that others can see our documentation on how we’re implementing Linked Open Data, and then they can do it themselves.

It’s good to have a really robust vocabulary of semantic terms, so that lots of different projects can link to the same meaning. Our starting point for this is the ESSGlobal vocabulary, written by Mariana Curado Malta. She created it to underlie an ‘Open Value Network’, which is an interesting example of what could be possible when initiatives share important data to organise. The idea is that you’d be able to see everything that goes into making products as they pass through a supply chain, and be able to value them differently to a market mechanism.

The reference implementation we are creating is a Linked Open dataset, based on the open data published by Co-ops UK on more than 13,000 UK co-ops. We are using the ESSGlobal vocabulary, and will provide an example of how to deploy and use this dataset (with a SPARQL endpoint) to power a mapping application.

We believe that a Level of Detail infrastructure, along with the right suite of open source tools and a rich enough vocabulary that allows us to explain what is important to us about our initiatives, will facilitate a whole new wave of sharing and collaboration and become a key component of our solidarity economy. ●

**Dan Whiteley** is a social justice activist who has campaigned on climate issues, with a background in physics and web development. His role at ISE currently focuses on a linked open data project.

## SUSY: Putting Solidarity on the Map

by Natalie Bradbury

The ‘Social and Solidarity Economy’ is diverse and it’s growing as people look to shared solutions in uncertain times. Unfortunately, not everyone knows that alternative ways of organising work, education, leisure, care and consuming are well-established and, in many cases, highly successful. That is why the Co-operative College has got together with partners from 22 other European countries to make sure people know what the Solidarity Economy is, and to shout about it via our three-year project—SUSY. The first stage of the project involved each partner reaching out to solidarity initiatives, and stakeholders such as local councils, apex bodies, MPs and MEPs. After interviewing these stakeholders about the Solidarity Economy in their own areas, each partner was asked to create short films showcasing best practice initiatives to exemplify the values and methods of the Solidarity Economy. The College chose Manchester Home Care, an employee-owned care provider, and Shared Interest, an ethical investment company based in Newcastle. The next stage is to put these initiatives on the map, as part of a

collaborative, open data map. At this part of the process each project partner contributes its data, pinpointing successful and innovative initiatives in their area. Our aim isn’t to map each and every initiative, but to convey the spread and diversity of the Solidarity Economy. That’s why, alongside long-established and well-known initiatives such as co-operative groceries Unicorn and 8th Day, we’ve chosen to include sectors such as tree management, community energy, ethical fashion and waste management. So far we’ve identified just over twenty of the most exciting solidarity projects in Northern England, but we hope to keep adding to the map, and that it will keep growing. Our UK partners Think Global have been undertaking a similar exercise for London and the South East. Together with contributions from the other 45 project partners, it will help to compile a picture of the Solidarity Economy across Europe. ●

SUSY is Sustainable and Solidarity Economy.

[www.solidarityeconomy.eu](http://www.solidarityeconomy.eu)

