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Towards a Paradigm of Proximity Economy for Competitive and Resilient Cities and Territories

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of the Proximity Economy, a human-centered model focused on short value chains and social interactions within local contexts, as a strategic response to global challenges like climate change, supply chain disruptions, and the twin green and digital transitions. Amid ongoing crises, e.g., pandemic, economic, geopolitical, and environmental, reconceptualizing economic development paradigms is crucial for fostering resilient and sustainable solutions. The Proximity Economy integrates local production, distribution, and consumption, supporting sustainable innovation and the competitiveness of local enterprises. It aligns with the European Union's industrial strategy and Sustainable Development Goals, such as climate action (SDG 13) and reducing inequalities (SDG 10). This paper reviews the socio-economic impacts of the Proximity Economy, considering its connections with the circular and social economies, and identifies relevant policies for its promotion at the European, national, and local levels. Through sectoral analysis and examples, the paper provides a framework for evaluating the economic, environmental, and social outcomes of this model, offering recommendations for its future development and implementation.

Keywords: proximity; regional development; resilience; social innovation; sustainability; cohesion policy

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1. Introduction

Local and regional economies are increasingly playing a central role in addressing global challenges, including climate change, supply chain disruptions, and the twin green and digital transitions. These dynamics unfold within a broader context of ongoing crises that manifest on multiple levels: pandemic, climate, economic, geopolitical, energy, and institutional-political. The intersection of these crises demands a profound revision of economic models, highlighting the importance of innovating governance frameworks for territorial development and rethinking economic and industrial development paradigms. This innovation must integrate resilient, sustainable, and proximity-based approaches as an alternative paradigm that enhances local production, distribution, and consumption, promoting short supply chains and social interactions embedded within specific geographic areas (Squillante et al. 2024).

This paper explores a possible conceptual definition of the Proximity Economy, which is considered a component of the European Union's broader strategic vision, aligning with the twin transitions (green and digital) and the European Industrial Strategy. It aims to enhance the competitiveness of local enterprises and sustainable innovation through the adoption of business models rooted in territories. Moreover, it aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including climate action (SDG 13), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), and reducing inequalities (SDG 10).

The analysis presented here, structured as a commentary based on prior research conducted by the European Commission (Hausemer et al. 2024) on the socio-economic performance of the EU proximity economy, focuses on the potential socio-economic impact of this model on industrial sectors and local communities. It also explores its interconnections with other economies, such as circular and social economies. Furthermore, the present study identifies policies and tools that are useful for promoting the Proximity Economy at European, national, and local levels, proposing an impact framework to guide policies and monitor its economic, environmental, and social effects.

Despite a growing body of literature on alternative economic models, such as the circular economy (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017), the social economy (Defourny and Nyssens 2013), and the collaborative economy (Schor 2016; Codagnone et al. 2016), the concept of the Proximity Economy remains under-theorized and fragmented across disciplines. Much of the existing research addresses proximity in sectoral silos (Torre and Rallet 2005; Boschma 2005) or in relation to innovation and regional development (Balland et al. 2015) but does not integrate its multiple dimensions—geographical, relational, and cognitive—into a unified socio-economic paradigm. Moreover, few studies explicitly explore the policy implications of proximity from a multi-level governance perspective aligned with place-based approaches (Barca et al. 2012).

This commentary seeks to address these gaps by advancing a conceptual synthesis of the Proximity Economy and its intersections with other territorialized economic approaches. The central question guiding our reflection is: How can the Proximity Economy be framed as a coherent paradigm capable of enhancing territorial resilience, social inclusion, and sustainability in line with EU policy objectives? Accordingly, this paper contributes to academic discourse by outlining a structured definition, proposing an integrated impact framework, and identifying policy entry points to enable the creation of a Proximity Economy within multi-level governance settings. While not empirical in nature, the paper draws on European Commission work and academic research to formulate a conceptual scaffold that may inform both future inquiry and operational action in this emerging field.

The objectives of this contribution are reflected in its various sections. Section 2 defines the Proximity Economy as a human-centered model based on short value chains and social interactions among local actors, examining its links with other sectors, as well as its key dimensions and strategic objectives. Section 3 analyzes the added value generated, providing sectoral examples and focusing on frameworks to assess the impact and to monitor economic, environmental, and social contributions. Section 4 presents four relevant examples, including OpenDot in Milan and Ibbenbüren in Germany, illustrating the application of the Proximity Economy in different contexts and industrial sectors. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the key lessons learned and offers recommendations to support the future development of the Proximity Economy.

The structure of the manuscript intentionally adopts a commentary-explanatory approach aimed at systematizing an emerging policy discourse rather than producing a rigid analytical or typological framework. The complexity and ongoing evolution of the Proximity Economy make it premature and, arguably, counterproductive to impose a tightly codified model at this stage. Instead, the paper mobilizes a synthesis of existing literature

and policy experiences to identify and articulate key dimensions—geographical, cognitive, social, and institutional—that underlie the Proximity Economy concept. In doing so, this paper avoids artificially narrowing the scope of inquiry in favor of an open, interpretive reading that reflects both the multidimensionality and the experimental nature of the subject. The selection of policy examples is not intended to produce a comparative or replicable sample in the strict methodological sense, but rather, to illuminate, through illustrative and context-sensitive cases, the ways in which proximity-based logics are being enacted across different territorial and governance scales. The goal is to support the formation of a shared conceptual and policy grammar around the Proximity Economy, which is a necessary step before the development of testable hypotheses or generalizable models becomes feasible

2. Defining Key Concepts of the Proximity Economy

The concept of the Proximity Economy builds on a robust scholarly foundation in agglomeration economies, which emphasize the economic advantages derived from spatial clustering and localized interactions. Foundational works, such as Marshall (1919) and Jacobs (1969), highlight how geographic concentration fosters knowledge spillovers, labor pooling, and resource sharing, laying the groundwork for proximity-based economic models. Subsequent studies have refined this understanding, exploring static and dynamic agglomeration effects (Camagni et al. 2016; Capello 2009), empirical patterns of urban clustering (Combes and Gobillon 2015; Duranton and Puga 2004; Rosenthal and Strange 2001), and their role in regional growth (Aritenang 2021; Faggio et al. 2017; Overman and Puga 2010; Rigby and Brown 2015). Recent research further connects agglomeration to creative and cultural industries, emphasizing localized synergies (Dellisanti 2023). These insights inform the Proximity Economy, which extends agglomeration principles by integrating cognitive, organizational, institutional, and social dimensions to enhance sustainable local development.

Proximity is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond mere geographical closeness, encompassing cognitive, organizational, institutional, and social aspects (Boschma 2005). Considering the Proximity Economy as a strategic policy goal entails integrating these factors into an ecosystem focused on producing, distributing, and consuming goods and services within short supply chains, not solely in a spatial sense. This system is deeply embedded in localized social interactions within a perceived geographic proximity and is driven by the collective intention of actors to enhance livability, resilience, and sustainable development (Tricarico and Leone 2022; Tricarico and De Vidovich 2021; Hausemer et al. 2024).

2.1. Dimensions: A Literature-Based Synthesis

In the literature, the concept of proximity varies based on its field of application. The main dimensions include:

- **Geographical Proximity**: Refers to the spatial distance in which economic activities occur. This is not a fixed distance but rather a "perceived closeness" that varies by context and between stakeholders, such as small businesses and medium-to-large enterprises. A high density of economic actors in an area is often seen as a relevant factor. While spatial proximity facilitates interaction and cooperation, it is not necessarily a prerequisite for interactive learning (Malecki and Oinas 1999; Torre and Rallet 2005).
- **Cognitive Proximity**: Denotes the extent to which economic actors share a common knowledge base. This shared knowledge is essential for facilitating information exchange, fostering innovation, and developing tailored solutions, thereby strengthening economic ecosystems (Nooteboom 1999; Sánchez-García et al. 2023).

- **Social Proximity**: Relates to the quality of relationships among economic and social actors, characterized by trust, reciprocity, and cohesion. This dimension is closely linked to the concept of embeddedness, reflecting the degree to which actors are rooted in social and community networks, influencing their cooperation and interaction in local contexts (Uzzi 1996; Pel et al. 2020).
- **Institutional Proximity**: Concerns the shared norms, rules, values, and incentives that govern economic and social interactions. It facilitates cooperation and coordination, particularly when actors operate within the same social system, such as academia, industry, or government. This dimension is critical for sustaining innovation and collaboration in contexts with shared governance and well-established institutional networks (Gertler 1995; Torre and Rallet 2005; Hoekman et al. 2009; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000; Ponds et al. 2007).

2.2. Strategic Objectives

Given the different dimensions of proximity, three main strategic objectives of the Proximity Economy can be identified:

- **Environmental Sustainability**: Promoting low-impact practices, such as using local resources, reducing transport distances, and applying circular economy principles. These practices not only cut carbon emissions but also enhance resource efficiency, contributing to sustainable development goals (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017).
- **Resilience**: Strengthening local economies' abilities to withstand external shocks is a crucial goal. This can be achieved by diversifying economic activities and creating more robust local supply chains capable of addressing global disruptions and adapting swiftly to sustainability and productivity challenges (Martin and Sunley 2015).
- **Quality of Life Improvement**: The Proximity Economy aims to enhance overall community well-being by fostering local job creation, improving access to locally produced goods and services, and reinforcing social ties. This approach contributes to more cohesive and integrated communities (Healey 1998; Manzini 2021).

In this framework, digitalization plays a complementary role. Although not a prerequisite, digitalization optimizes local economic processes by improving information flow management, facilitating economic relationships, and making public services and urban mobility more accessible (Vecchio and Tricarico 2019). Digital technologies introduce innovative solutions that enhance the sustainability of local economies by fostering greater interconnection among economic actors and improving operational efficiency.

2.3. Examples of Policies and Strategies Promoting Proximity Economies

Policies that promote the development of Proximity Economies present a complex and interconnected framework at European, national, regional, and local levels. These approaches partially reflect principles already affirmed by various development agendas, particularly in terms of sustainability, efficiency, and inclusivity. They respond to global and local challenges while redefining the concept of competitiveness in an evolving industrial context.

At the European level, we observe alignment with strategic initiatives such as the 2020 European Industrial Strategy and the European Green Deal, which aim to drive the twin green and digital transition while promoting a new economic development perspective. This perspective seeks to balance regional disparities and support new technologies and organizations capable of transforming energy supply and industrial systems to significantly reduce CO_2 emissions (Net Zero Industry Act).

Among the relevant national examples, Cyprus's National Action Plan for the Circular Economy 2021–2027 represents a significant model, focusing on key materials and sectors,

with waste management as a cross-cutting component. The plan promotes cultural change through informational campaigns and training on circularity and sustainability, while also encouraging investments through consultancy services and funding for circular products and services. On the infrastructure front, it includes waste flow studies, digital platforms for resource sharing between companies, and integrated monitoring systems. Finally, it addresses urban waste management through initiatives for separate waste collection in remote areas, home composting, and the establishment of repair and reuse centers, outlining a structured approach towards a more sustainable economy.

At the national level, the German spatial planning system, known as Zentrale Orte (Central Places), is a well-established model promoting balanced development between urban and rural areas, in line with the principles of the Proximity Economy. This approach creates a hierarchical network of service centers divided into basic, intermediate, and higher-level centers to ensure equitable and widespread access to essential services. Basic centers offer daily services such as primary schools and general practitioners, while intermediate centers include secondary schools and hospitals. Higher-level centers provide regionally significant services, such as universities and major hospitals, supported by efficient transport infrastructure. This structure reduces the need for long commutes and fosters local development, incentivizing regional economies and maintaining rural communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the model demonstrated resilience due to the widespread distribution of healthcare facilities and the ability to respond swiftly to local needs.

Policies supporting proximity economies are increasingly central to regional development strategies, as they aim to strengthen ties between territories and local communities. These policies promote an economy that values endogenous resources and fosters economic and social resilience. In this context, one emerging tool is Renewable Energy Communities (RECs), which represent an innovative form of collective and sustainable energy management (Gerli and Tricarico 2024). These communities enable citizens, businesses, and local authorities to produce, consume, and share renewable energy at the local level, creating a model that strengthens territorial bonds while offering multiple advantages in terms of cost reduction, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion.

In Italy, many regions have adopted policies to support the creation and development of RECs, aiming to stimulate the local economy, promote energy efficiency, and address the challenges of ecological transition. A concrete example is the Emilia-Romagna Region, which has implemented comprehensive regional policies to support the development of energy communities, recognizing the importance of a Proximity Economy that involves not only citizens but also small and medium-sized enterprises and local administrations (Tricarico et al. 2024). The region has also introduced initiatives such as the Regional Program for Energy Transition, which provides incentives for the development of collective photovoltaic plants, local energy distribution networks, and storage systems, with the goal of making communities more autonomous and sustainable from an energy perspective. A significant example is the Funding Call for Supporting Energy Community Projects, which has enabled numerous municipalities, such as Castelvetro di Modena, to launch energy community initiatives where citizens, in collaboration with local administrations, can benefit from collective photovoltaic plants for energy production, reducing costs and improving local resource management (Sciullo et al. 2020).

At the local level, an example of a policy and practice community that has embraced the concept of Proximity Economies is the innovative “15-min city” model (Moreno et al. 2021), which has been strategically tested in cities such as Paris, Rome, Munich, Utrecht, Milan, and Dublin, among at least 16 others. This strategic idea focuses on creating self-sufficient communities and neighborhoods where residents can access essential services

within walking distance, thereby reducing dependence on long-distance transportation and enhancing quality of life. The "15-min city" and all related activities clearly demonstrate how social innovation at the local level can create sustainable solutions to global problems.

In particular, a mix of top-down and bottom-up policies represents a fundamental and particularly interesting approach in defining the conceptual framework of the Proximity Economy, as it actively involves communities and intermediary actors in creating and implementing economic development strategies (Bragaglia 2024).

A significant example is the three-year investment plans of the Municipality of Milan, aimed at supporting neighborhood commerce, craftsmanship, and local services. In May 2024, the Municipality of Milan launched three funding calls under the 2024–2027 Three-Year Program for the Proximity Economy, allocating nearly EUR 5 million to support profit and nonprofit economic activities in city neighborhoods. One project funded through this program is "La Scuola dei Quartieri" (The Neighborhood School), a municipal initiative aimed at developing projects and services conceived and implemented by citizens themselves, with the goal of improving neighborhood life (Selloni et al. 2024). This project offers training, personalized support, and grants of up to EUR 30,000 to support the creation of new nonprofit initiatives in city neighborhoods. Informal groups of at least two people, with no age or educational restrictions, as well as nonprofit organizations established for less than three years, are eligible to participate. Milan's Three-Year Program for the Proximity Economy also includes other calls, such as "Mi15—Spaces and Services for a 15-Minute Milan" and "Civic Crowdfunding 2024–2025," all aimed at supporting projects that strengthen the local, social, and economic fabric.

In Paris, the "Vital'Quartier" initiative acted as an urban revitalization system between 2004 and 2022. The goal was to maintain and develop local commerce in districts with a weak commercial fabric. The initiative was run by a local organization empowered by the city of Paris to purchase commercial premises in certain areas and implement activities that adapt to the needs of the residents. The premises were then sold, prioritizing existing traders and including a clause guaranteeing the continuation of the activity in question. Over the course of 18 years, more than 400 premises were secured, profoundly transforming the neighborhoods, combating commercial desertification, and attracting additional businesses from private initiatives as a spillover effect. The established activities also had a positive impact on local employment, resulting in the creation of 478 jobs, mainly in the fields of culture and food. In 2021, the Paris Municipality adopted the Parisian Pact for Proximity, committing to major changes that would bring public decision-making closer to the residents of Paris and involve them in the maintenance and beautification of the neighborhoods. As of 2022, a total of 250 projects have been selected, corresponding to an investment of EUR 339 million.

Notably, Proximity Economies have also emerged in rural contexts, where these approaches have been experimented with for several decades. For instance, Local Action Groups (LAGs) play a crucial role in promoting the Proximity Economy through the European LEADER program, which emphasizes participatory local development. These public-private partnerships develop sustainable development strategies by actively involving local communities, ensuring that policies are tailored to specific territorial needs. A significant example is the Central Trentino LAG in Italy, which has developed a Participatory Local Strategy (PLS) to promote sustainable development actions in the Rotaliana-Königsberg, Cembra Valley, and Lakes Valley communities. This approach has enabled the involvement of key public and private stakeholders in the LEADER area, fostering the creation of projects centered on enhancing local resources and strengthening Proximity Economies.

As another example, the Pohjoinsin Lappi LAG in Lapland, Finland, has developed a social innovation model that enables residents to secure jobs in their home villages by

providing social services for senior citizens and families with small children. This has the dual benefit of providing employment opportunities to locals, as well as delivering services to the community in remote areas. Organized as a local cooperative, this initiative unifies service customers, the municipality responsible for service provision, professionals, and local workers within a new service framework. The cooperative employs one full-time staff member to oversee operations and coordinate service requests among 26 part-time workers across 11 remote villages. This model was created as part of the "Services for Villages" project, which was planned and implemented in close collaboration with the municipality and local communities. While the diffusion of proximity-based policy approaches across European regions signals their growing relevance, it is critical to acknowledge that these agendas, varying in scope and ambition, must navigate significant trade-offs to ensure effective implementation. In the short term, inclusive local governance is an urgent priority, as fragmented or top-down decision-making risks alienating communities and undermining policy legitimacy, particularly in less-resourced regions. Similarly pressing is digital inclusivity, given that unequal access to technology threatens to exclude marginalized groups, limiting the social cohesion central to proximity models. In the medium term, balancing localization with global competitiveness demands attention, as excessive focus on local supply chains could erode regions' integration into EU markets, jeopardizing economic resilience. Over the long term, infrastructural investments in transport and digital connectivity are essential to scale proximity economies, especially in rural areas, while achieving market sustainability ensures reduced dependence on public funding. By prioritizing governance and digital access now, European regions can build equitable foundations for proximity economies, deferring scalability and self-sustainability to longer-term strategies.

2.4. Some Considerations on Territorial Approaches to the Proximity Economy

As demonstrated above, from a territorial policy perspective, it is essential to recognize that the concept of the Proximity Economy must be articulated differently between urban and rural contexts. In urban areas, proximity is often associated with the "15-min city" model (Moreno et al. 2021), which involves redefining physical and temporal distances to bring citizens closer to basic services and promote social cohesion. Conversely, in rural areas, the proximity dimension takes on different characteristics, with a greater focus on strengthening local economies through sustainability-oriented practices, such as responsible agriculture and shared governance of natural resources (Landi 2018). However, limited infrastructure availability and reduced access to advanced technologies could hinder the full development of this model (Bertoncin et al. 2018).

Observing the diversity of territorial contexts highlights the need to rethink production systems and industrial policies from a proximity perspective, especially considering the challenges posed by international mobility and global supply chains due to exogenous shocks such as geopolitical crises and the pandemic. While proximity-oriented economies have historically been countered by the expansion of a mobility-based economy focused on transport infrastructure growth (roads, railways, merchant ships), recent global transformations necessitate efforts to enhance the competitiveness of production systems based on multidimensional proximity phenomena, ensuring resilience and reducing the vulnerability of industrial systems.

Over the past few decades, the phenomena of mobility and the offshoring of productive and commercial activities to low-cost global peripheries have dominated the economic landscape, favoring the growth of central urban areas and concentrating consumption (Tricarico et al. 2021). This mobility-based economic model has encouraged the dispersion of activities while also exacerbating the separation between production locations and consumers.

Nevertheless, the Proximity Economy, founded on geographical and social proximity among economic actors, has continued to play a fundamental role. The historical significance of the proximity concept is deeply linked to the structuring of economic activities and urban development. Traditionally, the physical closeness of economic actors has facilitated resource sharing, improved public services, and fostered cooperation among businesses, thereby strengthening specialization and the division of labor within territorial clusters. This organization has optimized the use of local resources, creating competitive advantages derived from cooperation and direct interaction among economic actors in a defined context. According to Giuliano and Redfearn (2007), the paradigm of agglomeration economies describes how firms can benefit from being located in proximity, gaining external advantages such as shared labor pools and suppliers, as well as the ability to exploit economies of scale.

However, advancements in ICT infrastructure have raised doubts about the sustainability of this model, suggesting that new technologies have reduced the need for physical proximity for productive economic exchanges. Despite the emergence of "digital proximity" and the decreasing necessity of physical closeness for productive interactions, contemporary debate has shifted towards a new interpretation of proximity, emphasizing the importance of relational and social connections.

Innovation today no longer solely depends on the physical closeness of economic actors but also on the quality of social networks and reciprocal connections that develop within these ecosystems (Tricarico et al. 2023). According to Tricarico et al. (2021), this shift has paved the way for new innovative hubs, where relational proximity plays a crucial role in facilitating bottom-up innovation—one that emerges from locally and socially rooted contexts.

In this context, knowledge sharing within the context of cognitive proximity also plays a role. Cognitive proximity—which is the extent to which actors share the same knowledge base—best facilitates innovation when there is an optimal and complimentary balance of knowledge between actors in the Proximity Economy (Squillante et al. 2024). According to Balland et al., cognitive proximity dynamics involve a social learning process that relies on the combination of existing knowledge between actors. When individuals or groups work closely together, they engage in a process called interactive learning, which helps reduce the cognitive distance between partners, meaning their knowledge bases become more aligned. In the Proximity Economy, this process of learning and collaboration is crucial for driving innovation, as it enables actors to identify and develop complementary knowledge configurations, leading to new ideas and solutions (Balland et al. 2015).

In this sense, the importance of innovation hubs and the necessity of creating collaborative proximity ecosystems have become key aspects for understanding how the Proximity Economy can evolve in a post-pandemic context focused not only on resilience but also on sustainability, innovation, and social cohesion. Although the rise of digital technologies may support proximity dynamics in many contexts, the true strength of these economies lies in intensifying social relationships and creating collaboration networks among various local actors.

Nonetheless, for the Proximity Economy to move beyond its conceptual appeal and produce tangible, inclusive outcomes, it is essential to account for the infrastructural and institutional constraints that particularly affect rural and under-resourced territories. While urban contexts can more readily activate proximity-based models thanks to denser infrastructures, diversified economies, and institutional capacities (Tomaney 2016), rural areas often lack the physical and administrative infrastructure needed to enable effective territorial embeddedness and connectivity. These asymmetries not only risk reinforcing existing territorial disparities but also pose significant barriers to the scalability and long-

term viability of proximity-driven approaches in peripheral contexts (Barca et al. 2012). A further concern emerges from contemporary critiques of localized development models, particularly around issues of equity, efficiency, and governance. While proximity economies can promote social embeddedness and place-based value creation, they may also inadvertently privilege socially or economically dominant groups in a territory and overlook broader redistributional logics (Mayer 2016; Rodríguez-Pose 2018). Additionally, the call for proximity must be balanced against the need for critical mass and operational scale, which are particularly important for sectors where economies of scale are central to innovation and competitiveness. As Pike et al. (2016) argue, rethinking regional development in polarized contexts demands a nuanced perspective that does not romanticize "the local", but critically engages with power asymmetries, institutional capacities, and the ability to foster structural change. Therefore, while proximity strategies can act as catalysts for socially and environmentally rooted innovation, their success hinges on embedding them within broader multi-level governance architectures and sustained investment frameworks, capable of addressing uneven territorial conditions and ensuring that localized strategies contribute to systemic resilience rather than fragmentary solutions. Such an approach calls for a pragmatic reading of the Proximity Economy that combines its relational and cognitive dimensions with material infrastructure, administrative competence, and equitable governance, particularly in contexts at risk of marginalization.

In summary, the Proximity Economy is assuming a pivotal role not only in post-pandemic recovery but also in redesigning urban and economic development logics. It emphasizes the strengthening of relational and collaborative networks between various nodes of the production chain, raw material sourcing, and consumers. Proximity is no longer viewed solely as a geographical factor but as an element encompassing social and cognitive relationships, essential for promoting efficiency and competitiveness at the local level in both urban and rural settings (Carrosio 2019).

3. Added Value and Impact Framework

Short value chains represent one of the distinctive features of the Proximity Economy, marking a shift towards localized models of production and consumption. These economic chains are characterized by a high concentration of interactions among actors within a limited geographical area, effectively reducing the distance between production and consumption. This approach aims to generate economic and environmental benefits, thereby strengthening the resilience of local communities and promoting sustainability. Now, we will examine its various dimensions.

3.1. Economic Contribution

The Proximity Economy model offers significant opportunities for fostering resilient and financially stable economies through a community-driven demand system. As discussed in this section, value creation is embedded in this model through enhancing supply chain efficiencies, leveraging local resources, supporting competitive pricing, and promoting local economic development, thereby creating a virtuous cycle of growth and stability. However, it is important to recognize that adopting elements of the Proximity Economy, such as shorter supply chains or more bespoke offerings, may sacrifice certain cost-saving advantages associated with the traditional economy. This includes the financial benefits associated with economies of scale and mass production. As a result, an upward pressure on prices may also arise, which must be balanced against the positive economic contribution of the Proximity Economy (Hausemer et al. 2024).

The proximity between production and consumption leads to a significant reduction in logistics-related expenses, a factor particularly relevant in sectors where materials are

heavy or bulky, such as agriculture and certain manufacturing industries (Hausemer et al. 2024). A further benefit lies in the increased added value resulting from the reduction of intermediaries; by eliminating "extra steps" in the chain, producers can retain a larger share of the value created, which offers clear advantages for small agricultural businesses that can enhance their profit margins by selling directly to consumers (Grant and Startz 2022). Moreover, short value chains promote local economic growth, stimulate job creation and foster integration among local businesses. This contributes to strengthening the economic resilience of local communities, supporting more inclusive and sustainable growth (Tricarico and De Vidovich 2021).

An example of the potential added economic value derived from a proximity perspective emerges from the analysis of traditional sectors, particularly through the study of intra-regional short value chains. To support this analysis, existing literature has been reviewed to assess the prevalence of proximity-based economic activities (in this case, intra-regional) within the EU. A relevant line of research focuses on the proportion of value created at the intra-regional level in Europe, i.e., the value generated within a specific geographical region through the production and exchange of goods and services. A study by Almazán-Gómez et al. (2023) provides a detailed analysis of how European regions participate in value chains from an added value perspective. In other words, the study evaluates the proportion of added value embedded in goods and services sold: (i) within the same region, (ii) to other regions in the same country, and (iii) internationally. In this context, added value is defined as "the value added generated by sector i in region r that is embedded in the final demand of sector j in region s". Analyzing 63 sectors across 297 NUTS2 European regions, the study reveals that Europe exhibits strong intra-regional linkages: on average, 65% of the added value is embedded in goods and services sold within the same NUTS2 region, compared to 16% sold to other regions in the same country and 20% exported.

Two sectors particularly relevant to the Proximity Economy are the automotive and agri-food industries, which provide concrete examples of how short value chains can be applied to create intra-regional value.

A specific example from the automotive sector is provided by a study conducted by the United Nations Economic and Social Council, prepared by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) (Economic Commission for Europe 2024), which explores the intra-regional distribution of added value in relation to the automotive sector. This sector accounts for approximately 7% of the EU's GDP and supports around 3.5 million jobs across the Union. The study focuses on the Automotive Regions Alliance (ARA), which includes 58 NUTS2 regions actively involved in the industry, predominantly concentrated in Germany, Italy, and France. The analysis aims to assess the share of Gross Value Added (GVA) attributed to the global final demand for motor vehicles that remains within ARA regions due to regional trade, compared to the share attributable to trade with regions outside the ARA. The results show that, on average, 61% of the GVA generated by the automotive industry in ARA regions is linked to intra-regional effects (i.e., trade among these regions), with the highest values observed in German regions, where in some cases the figure exceeds 70%. This highlights the strong economic ties and integration among regions, confirming that geographical proximity and local supply chains are key determinants in enhancing economic performance (European Commission and European Network for Rural Development 2024).

In the agri-food sector, examples such as the Grööntüügs project within the Open Food Network in Germany demonstrate how local food networks can benefit from short value chains. This model enables producers to sell directly to consumers, reducing reliance on intermediaries and increasing profits for local producers. Studies suggest that spatial

proximity in regional food chains leads to lower transport costs and greater added value, albeit with variations depending on the type of product (Bertram et al. 2021).

The economic value generated by the Proximity Economy can be monitored through specific indicators that assess the effectiveness of local policies in terms of growth, innovation, and sustainability.

To conclude, from an economic value perspective, the following indicators can be cited as examples:

- **Revenue growth, profit margins, and market shares** linked to collaborative dynamics, measuring the competitiveness of local entrepreneurial ecosystems (Porter 1998; Baumol and Strom 2007).
- **Investments in capital goods**, annual volume of joint investments, and their percentage growth, evaluating financial sustainability (Mazzucato 2018).
- **Research and Development (R&D) investments** tied to open innovation processes, monitoring the innovation capacity of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Chesbrough 2003; Bouncken et al. 2018).
- **Number of new products and processes developed**, patents filed as indicators of market differentiation (Feldman and Audretsch 1999).
- **Collaborations between businesses, research centers, and local institutions**, measuring the level of cooperative proximity among organizations dedicated to local development and innovation (Fitjar and Rodríguez-Pose 2014).
- **Digitalization of businesses** as a parameter to assess the construction of digital proximity between businesses and consumers (Caragliu 2022).
- **Creation of local jobs**, ensuring stable incomes and dignified working conditions, as well as upskilling the local workforce (Rodríguez-Pose and Wilkie 2019).

3.2. Environmental Contribution

Short value chains offer significant environmental benefits, primarily through the reduction of long-distance transportation requirements. The proximity between production and consumption enables cost reduction and decreases greenhouse gas emissions, thereby contributing to a smaller carbon footprint. This dynamic is especially advantageous in agricultural and manufacturing sectors, where materials are bulky and difficult to transport. For instance, in the agricultural sector, reducing the distance between producers and consumers can result in a substantial decrease in fuel consumption and emissions from goods transportation (Kneafsey et al. 2013). Moreover, the adoption of circular practices such as reuse, repair, and recycling fosters resource optimization and waste reduction. Short supply chains encourage material reuse, reducing the need for new raw materials and helping to minimize the environmental impact associated with production and waste disposal (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2015). The use of local renewable resources, such as solar and wind energy, can further enhance the sustainability of the production process by reducing reliance on external sources and improving the energy resilience of local communities (Hvelplund et al. 2017). However, it is important to consider potential drawbacks, such as the increased local traffic that may arise from a greater concentration of production nearby. Specifically, the risk of congestion in urban centers and local transportation could negate the environmental benefits if not properly managed. Continuous monitoring of logistical flows and production practices is essential to ensure that ecological efficiency is maintained (Rodrigue et al. 2017).

Environmental aspects related to short value chains can be monitored through indicators that assess the effectiveness of local policies in reducing ecological impact. Relevant indicators include:

- Reductions in transport distances and the lowering of greenhouse gas emissions (Taptich et al. 2016).
- The adoption of circular practices, such as reuse, repair, and recycling, to optimize resource use and reduce waste production (Badhotiya et al. 2022).
- The percentage of materials reused as opposed to newly produced materials, to measure efficiency in resource reuse (Cooper and Gutowski 2017).
- The use of local renewable resources, such as solar and wind energy, to reduce reliance on external sources and enhance energy sustainability (Khorasany et al. 2018).
- The monitoring of traffic flows and local congestion to assess the impact of transport on environmental quality (Sanchez et al. 2020).
- Evaluations of material life cycles and ecological sustainability in local production practices to ensure overall sustainability of economic processes (Hellweg and Canals 2014).

3.3. Social Contribution

In addition to economic and environmental benefits, the Proximity Economy generates significant non-financial value, playing a key role in strengthening social cohesion and enhancing the well-being of local communities. Among these advantages, the following can be identified:

- **Social Networks**: The Proximity Economy fosters an environment in which social interactions intensify due to geographical closeness. This leads to the development of stronger social networks, where trust, cooperation, and cohesion among community members are enhanced (Granovetter 1985; Putnam 2000). Such connections are vital for creating a sense of belonging and solidarity, which in turn stimulates community engagement and mutual support. These reinforced social bonds can improve the quality of life and community resilience (Tricarico et al. 2023).
- **Resilience**: Local economies strengthen the ability of communities to face crises and economic challenges. Community projects, such as energy cooperatives, not only promote energy self-sufficiency but also the creation of local jobs, contributing to economic and social security. This type of initiative boosts both economic and environmental resilience, enabling communities to adapt and recover more quickly from adverse external events (Iacobucci and Perugini 2021).
- **Well-being Improvement**: Direct access to locally produced goods and services, often using sustainable methods, contributes to an overall improvement in well-being. This improvement encompasses not only the economic aspect but also social dimensions, enhancing quality of life through the promotion of healthier lifestyles, social inclusion, and the reduction of inequalities (Dempsey et al. 2011). Well-being is further supported by activities that involve socially vulnerable groups, promoting their integration and active participation in the community (Adro and Fernandes 2022).

When addressing the social contribution of the Proximity Economy, it is important to recognize that alongside the benefits, there are significant obstacles that need to be addressed to ensure the success of this model. Among the main challenges are opposition from local residents and urban planning regulations, which often hinder proximity production or make it unfeasible, especially in manufacturing sectors. A concrete example is the difficulty of integrating light industrial units or production activities into residential areas. Local resident may understandably oppose such projects for various reasons, such as noise pollution, increased traffic on local roads, or the negative perception of having a production facility near their homes. Furthermore, urban planning regulations, in many cases, do not support the proper integration of these activities into urban fabrics, making proximity initiatives more costly or even unfeasible (Moroni 2016). In highly industrialized and urbanized regions, the expansion of proximity manufacturing activities faces strict

urban planning regulations and local opposition, despite the considerable economic and employment benefits these activities could generate. This highlights the importance of an integrated approach that balances economic, social, and environmental needs, adapting urban planning rules to promote harmonious coexistence between productive activities and local communities. Including these aspects in the discussion on the social contribution of the Proximity Economy not only underscores the intrinsic complexities of the model but also strengthens the argument in favor of policies and strategies that proactively address these challenges. For example, it may be beneficial to promote citizen participation in planning processes and develop incentives for innovative design solutions, such as sustainable urban production hubs or low-impact production units (Evans and Karvonen 2014).

Relevant indicators to consider include, by way of example:

- **Community Engagement**: Measured by the number of community initiatives involving local residents and the success of civic proposals, reflecting direct citizen involvement in local decision-making (Cortés-Cediel et al. 2021).
- **Market Inclusivity**: Observation of how local economic activities integrate individuals from diverse social, ethnic, or economic backgrounds, reducing discrimination within the community (Micelli et al. 2023).
- **Talent Development for Disadvantaged Groups**: The number of training and retraining programs organized locally for target categories (e.g., NEETs), aiming to prepare the workforce for upcoming economic opportunities (Corradini et al. 2023).
- **Community Well-being**: This indicator considers the improvement in quality of life through access to locally produced services and goods, positively influencing health, education, and leisure within the community (Kent and Thompson 2014).
- **Income Equality**: Monitoring how the local economy distributes economic benefits among residents, focusing on the accessibility of earning opportunities for all socio-economic levels within the community (Florida and Mellander 2017).
- **Housing Market Accessibility**: The impact of local economic activities on the cost of living and access to affordable housing, maintaining community unity and inclusivity (Haffner and Hulse 2021).
- **Community Resilience**: Assesses a community's ability to maintain or increase its local population, indicating that the Proximity Economy offers sufficient opportunities to live, work, and grow within one's neighborhood or city (Kapucu et al. 2024).

4. Relevant Examples

This section presents four examples that have enabled the emergence of Proximity Economies in different modalities, sectors, and countries. Building on prior research conducted by the European Commission, we show how different types of social innovations at the local level were able to provide sustainable solutions to local—and global—problems, highlighting their exemplary outputs and success factors[1].

4.1. OpenDot and Fondazione TOG (Italy, Milan): Industrial Innovation with High Social Impact

- **Location**: Milan, Lombardy, Italy
- **Sector**: Digital Innovation and Health
- **Stakeholders Involved**: OpenDot (FabLab), Fondazione TOG (TOgether to Go)

4.1.1. Project Description

OpenDot, a FabLab based in Milan, stands out for its innovative approach that combines digital fabrication, local economy, and a strong commitment to projects with social and environmental impact. Founded in 2014, OpenDot is a shared space that provides access to advanced technologies such as 3D printers, laser cutters, and tools for digital pro-

totyping. One of its flagship projects is the collaboration with Fondazione TOG (TOgether to Go), an organization specialized in rehabilitation pathways for children with cerebral palsy and other complex neurological disabilities. The project emerged from the need to create innovative and customized rehabilitation tools using digital fabrication technologies. The co-creation process actively involves families, therapists, designers, and university students, who contribute to the design as part of their academic training.

4.1.2. Exemplary Output

A prominent example of this collaboration is the "Everyone's Bike", a three-wheeled bicycle with an ergonomic seat and adjustable components. This solution is specifically designed to meet the needs of children with motor disabilities, ensuring both localized and sustainable production. Each bicycle takes four days to manufacture thanks to digital technologies that reduce time and costs compared to traditional methods. This product is part of "Unico—The Other Design", a registered product line that integrates solutions created for Fondazione TOG and offers them to external clients, ensuring the economic sustainability of the initiative. In addition to the bicycle, OpenDot has developed other rehabilitation tools, such as customized ergonomic supports and interactive games, designed to stimulate movement and learning in children with disabilities.

4.1.3. Success Factors

- **Proximity**: OpenDot operates within a locally rooted ecosystem, collaborating with universities, public institutions, and other local entities. Most of the suppliers are located within 30 min of Milan, which shortens the value chains compared to traditional bicycle manufacturers, who operate on national and international scales.
- **Social Innovation**: The project has involved university students and other local actors, fostering the acquisition of skills and promoting social interactions at the territorial level. The direct beneficiaries are the children of Fondazione TOG, their families, and therapists, who can rely on innovative and customized tools. Co-creation allows the development of solutions that meet the specific needs of the local community, improving access to advanced technologies for artisans, SMEs, and end-users.
- **Environmental Impact and Sustainability**: Thanks to digital fabrication and the proximity of suppliers, OpenDot reduces the consumption of raw materials, encourages local production, and contributes to territorial resilience. The production process uses recycled or reclaimed materials and relies on local suppliers, contributing to a shorter and more sustainable production chain.

4.2. Grööntüügs (Münster, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany): Food Networks and Short Supply Chains

- **Location**: Münster, North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany
- **Sector**: Agri-food and Circular Economy
- **Stakeholders Involved**: Grööntüügs (Open Food Network Germany)

4.2.1. Project Description

Grööntüügs is an initiative that originated in the rural areas around Münster, utilizing the Open Food Network (OFN) platform to reorganize local food networks, fostering direct connections between producers and consumers. The platform allows producers to register as "Hubs" or "Shops", enabling them to sell their own products or those from other local producers, thereby reducing the number of intermediaries in the supply chain and improving transparency and efficiency. The idea for Grööntüügs emerged during the COVID-19 crisis, when the demand for local food products saw a significant increase. The initiative is managed by a local farmer who sells products directly from his farm, such as

seasonal vegetables, and collaborates with other regional producers to expand the offering. This model helps build a community of conscious consumers, who can order products through the platform and collect them at nearby pick-up points.

4.2.2. Exemplary Output

A representative output of the project is the creation of local food hubs which act as logistical centers for the collection and distribution of agricultural products. This model allows consumers to access fresh food with short supply chains, while local producers benefit from higher profit margins compared to traditional distribution. For example, over 80% of the customers are located within a 15-min drive of the main hub, which strengthens the concept of the local economy.

4.2.3. Success Factors

- **Proximity**: Grööntüügs operates as a local hub, where 82% of customers live within a 15-min drive. These data highlight the centrality of territorial proximity in the economic model, significantly reducing logistical complexity and transport costs. Moreover, the strategic positioning of the hub in an area with high customer density optimizes order frequency and community participation. The physical and relational proximity between producers and consumers strengthens the local economy, creating a more direct and transparent system compared to traditional supply chains.
- **Social Innovation**: Grööntüügs uses the Open Food Network (OFN) platform to facilitate the connection between producers and consumers. The platform allows producers to register as hubs or shops, selling their own products in combination with those of other local actors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Grööntüügs responded to the increased demand for local food products, demonstrating the adaptability of the model to rapid changes. Through the OFN, local producers gain access to new markets, contributing to economic diversification and the building of direct relationships with customers.
- **Environmental Impact and Sustainability**: The reduction in the distances travelled by products along the supply chain results in significant savings in CO_2 emissions, contributing to a more sustainable model of production and distribution. Grööntüügs encourages the use of local resources and the regeneration of the territory, with a particular focus on reducing food waste. The economic model is supported by regenerative agricultural practices, while the collaboration between local producers reduces reliance on external resources and limits environmental impact.

4.3. Križevci Solar Roofs (Croatia, Križevci): Local Solar Projects and Citizen Participation

- **Location**: Križevci, Croatia
- **Sector**: Renewable Energy and Community Participation
- **Stakeholders Involved**: Green Energy Cooperative (ZEZ), Municipality of Križevci

4.3.1. Project Description

The Križevci Solar Roofs project, initiated in the city of Križevci, Croatia, is a pioneering initiative in the renewable energy sector that aims to promote community participation through the creation of local energy communities. The primary idea was to install photovoltaic systems on the roofs of two public buildings: the Development Center and Technology Park Križevci and the Franjo Marković Public Library. The distinctive feature of the project is its financing model, based on crowd-investing. The project is coordinated by the Green Energy Cooperative (ZEZ) in collaboration with the Municipality of Križevci. The financial model is innovative: the Municipality of Križevci pays for the electricity consumed based on 2017 utility bills, stabilizing costs despite rising energy prices, and uses

operational savings to repay loans to citizens. Once the loans are repaid, the ownership of the systems passes to the Development Center and Technology Park, which will benefit from free electricity for an additional 20 years.

4.3.2. Exemplary Output

The project directly involves 90 citizens who have contributed micro-loans totaling EUR 50,000. Citizens, motivated by fixed annual interest rates (4.5% for ten-year loans or 3% for five-year loans), have the opportunity to participate in the energy transition of their city and earn a return on their investments. The photovoltaic plants, each with a capacity of 30 kW, produce energy that is used by the buildings themselves, while any surplus is sold to the electricity grid, generating additional revenue for the community.

4.3.3. Success Factors

- **Proximity**: The project is an exemplary case of the Proximity Economy in the energy sector. It fosters direct interaction among citizens, local institutions, and the ZEZ energy cooperative, reducing dependence on large energy market operators and focusing the benefits within the local community. Approximately 25% of the investments raised came from Križevci residents, ensuring a strong territorial grounding and stimulating a sense of community ownership. Moreover, the model demonstrates that it is possible to promote local energy independence without relying solely on public funding or large private investors.
- **Social Innovation**: One of the most innovative aspects of the project is the direct involvement of citizens through a participatory financing model. This approach, the first of its kind in Croatia, allows residents to become co-financiers of the project and receive economic benefits. The initiative has also led to the creation of the Križevci Laboratory for Innovation in Climate (KLIK), a community energy hub that promotes education and awareness of climate and energy issues, helping citizens develop new sustainable projects. KLIK has become a point of reference for creating innovative solutions in the environmental and social sectors, expanding the project's reach to agriculture and education.
- **Environmental Impact and Sustainability**: The project is having a significant environmental impact by reducing CO_2 emissions and promoting the adoption of renewable energy sources. It is estimated that the installation of the solar panels will save 412.5 tons of CO_2 over ten years, making Križevci a tangible example of a city committed to combating climate change. Additionally, the initiative supports the Municipality's goal of becoming energy independent by 2030, integrating renewable sources and engaging the local population.

4.4. Materialenbank (Belgium, Leuven): Circular Economy in Construction Materials

- **Location**: Leuven, Flanders, Belgium
- **Sector**: Construction and Circular Economy
- **Stakeholders Involved**: Materialenbank, City of Leuven, KU Leuven, Circular Flanders

4.4.1. Project Description

The Materialenbank (Materials Bank) project, launched in Leuven in 2017, is a groundbreaking initiative in the construction sector that focuses on the recovery and reuse of construction materials. Through a partnership between the City of Leuven, KU Leuven, and Circular Flanders, the project aims to reduce waste in the construction industry and promote a circular economy. The initiative involves creating a digital platform that allows users to access information on the availability of reusable construction materials, as well as providing guidelines for recycling and reusing building materials. It also includes a

physical warehouse, where construction materials that have been decommissioned from old buildings are stored and made available for reuse. The project's success relies on a combination of technological innovation and policy support.

4.4.2. Exemplary Output

One of the key results of the project is the establishment of a digital platform where construction materials can be listed, tracked, and traded. This platform helps to reduce waste, increase the lifespan of building materials, and promote sustainability in the construction sector. Furthermore, the project offers consultancy services to help businesses and contractors adopt circular construction practices.

4.4.3. Success Factors

- **Proximity**: Leuven's strong circular economy ecosystem has contributed to the success of the Materialenbank project. The proximity between the university, local authorities, and private businesses allows for rapid dissemination of knowledge and practice, creating a robust circular construction industry in the region.
- **Social Innovation**: The project introduces a new approach to the construction industry by encouraging the reuse of materials and reducing waste. It also engages local communities by raising awareness of circular practices and offering consultancy services to businesses and contractors.
- **Environmental Impact and Sustainability**: The Materialenbank project has a significant environmental impact by reducing construction waste and promoting the reuse of materials, lowering the carbon footprint of construction activities.

5. Conclusions: Proximity Economy and European Policies

The Proximity Economy represents a model that aims to strengthen the resilience of local economies through the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services within short value chains, enabled by local social interactions within a specific geographical area. This document analyzes the potential of this model to contribute to the sustainable, innovative, and resilient development of European regions, emphasizing its interconnection with emerging economies such as circular and social economies. Local policies in this context are crucial for supporting and enabling the growth of the Proximity Economy, which manifests in a wide variety of entrepreneurial models, all oriented towards reconciling economic competitiveness, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. Growing attention towards the Proximity Economy therefore paves the way for more targeted policies while at the same time highlighting some challenges related to integrating this model within European policies. In particular, the adoption of integrated policies focused on environmental sustainability, innovation, and social inclusion can be key to achieving the European objectives of cohesion and development.

However, we want to consider several crucial trade-offs that emerge when integrating the Proximity Economy within the framework of European policies:

- **Globalization vs. Localization**: Although the Proximity Economy aims to strengthen local economies and reduce dependence on global supply chains, the EU is committed to maintaining free trade and competitiveness in international markets. This creates tension between promoting localization and the need to preserve the benefits of globalization. However, it is important to recognize that proximity is not incompatible with globalization. EU policies should encourage localization in strategic sectors and specific stages of the value chain, where it adds significant value, without compromising global competitiveness. A key element is the concept of "added value"; the Proximity Economy does not represent a universal solution but should be promoted when

its contributions outweigh those of traditional economic models, either in absolute economic terms or by also considering environmental and social benefits. This raises the need for proper measurement of the "added value" generated by such practices, challenging the adequacy of GDP as the sole indicator of progress and economic value. In this regard, it may be useful to connect to broader research programs, such as those focusing on the "Beyond GDP" or "GDP + 3" approaches, which aim to integrate indicators of well-being and sustainability in measuring economic and social progress. For example, the recent Competitive Sustainability Index 2024 developed by the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (2024) represents an innovative model for European competitiveness that goes "beyond Draghi". This index incorporates elements of well-being, environmental sustainability, and innovation, offering a framework to measure economic progress more comprehensively and consistently with the EU's sustainability goals. Integrating such tools into EU economic policies could help to better balance the needs of localization and globalization, fostering a model that values proximity without sacrificing European competitiveness on a global scale.

- **Economic Competitiveness vs. Social and Environmental Goals**: Proximity-based businesses and production ecosystems tend to focus not only on economic competitiveness but also on social and environmental values, such as social inclusion and sustainability. While these goals often reinforce each other, especially in the long term, trade-offs may arise in the short term, related to the distribution of costs and benefits among different actors. In such cases, it is essential to find a balance that maximizes the overall benefits. European policies, such as the Green Deal and the digital agenda, can facilitate this process through tools such as economic incentives, sustainable public procurement, and support for social enterprises, helping to reduce disparities and promote a fair transition.
- **Standardization vs. Local Specificity**: The EU promotes standardization policies to facilitate trade and mobility, while the Proximity Economy thrives on valuing local specificities. European policies must allow sufficient flexibility to experiment with local solutions without compromising common regulations. Smart Specialization Strategies (S3) are an example of how the EU is promoting innovation based on regional strengths, fostering territorial approaches that address global challenges in a locally adapted way.
- **Digitization vs. Inclusivity**: Digital technologies can enhance the Proximity Economy, but the risk of digital exclusion must be addressed through policies that ensure all citizens have access to these technologies, as well as the necessary skills. European policies should promote inclusivity, ensuring that digital transformation does not exclude the most vulnerable groups. The European Commission should incentivize the development of digital skills, integrating digital transformation into local economies, ensuring it does not become a barrier for certain social groups.
- **Public Support vs. Market Sustainability**: Proximity-based businesses often initially rely on public support (subsidies, favorable financing) to emerge but must be able to grow to become self-sustaining in the long term. European policies should ensure that proximity businesses can develop sustainably, avoiding permanent reliance on public support. EU state aid rules must be considered in such a way as to allow support for emerging businesses while ensuring they can operate independently once they reach a certain level of stability.

To situate the Proximity Economy within broader academic discussions, this commentary aligns with ongoing research on sustainable urban development and territorial cohesion. Scholars such as Hambleton (2015) highlight the importance of place-based approaches in fostering inclusive urban economies, emphasizing how localized models

like the Proximity Economy can enhance social cohesion and environmental sustainability. Likewise, Barca et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of place-based policies, exemplified by the EU's Smart Specialization Strategies, which harness local strengths to tackle global challenges. These frameworks suggest that the Proximity Economy contributes to the discourse on re-localization and sustainable development by offering a model that integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Furthermore, the "Beyond GDP" debate, as advanced by initiatives like the Competitive Sustainability Index (Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership 2024), provides a theoretical lens to evaluate the added value of proximity-based models, moving beyond traditional economic metrics to include well-being and sustainability indicators. These connections highlight how the Proximity Economy not only supports EU policy goals but also enriches academic discussions on balancing local and global dynamics in urban governance.

In conclusion, the Proximity Economy is emerging as a strategic pillar for the future development of European regional economies, capable of contributing to environmental sustainability, social innovation, and inclusivity goals. However, the success of this model depends on the adoption of targeted policies, balancing trade-offs, and building a territorial vision of development that addresses global challenges with a local approach. Only through consistent, integrated, and long-term policies can the Proximity Economy become a winning model that contributes to the creation of more resilient, fair, and sustainable European cities and territories.

Roadmap for Future Research and Operationalization of the Proximity Economy Framework

To strengthen the Proximity Economy framework, future research must critically address its empirical gaps and operational challenges. Comparative case studies in contrasting regions, like urban Lisbon versus rural Trentino, should test the framework's claims using mixed methods—interviews to probe governance barriers and surveys to quantify proximity-specific indicators like Community Engagement (Cortés-Cediel et al. 2021) or Market Inclusivity (Micelli et al. 2023). These studies must confront the framework's idealized assumptions, particularly regarding scalability in under-resourced areas. Pilot projects, tied to Smart Specialization Strategies or Green Deal initiatives, could operationalize indicators like reductions in transport distances (Taptich et al. 2016) by tracking local supply chains or the adoption of circular practices (Badhotiya et al. 2022) but must acknowledge trade-offs, such as higher costs in remote regions. A proximity-focused index, building on "Beyond GDP" approaches like the Competitive Sustainability Index (Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership 2024), could integrate indicators like Community Resilience (Kapucu et al. 2024), but this approach risks oversimplifying complex local dynamics if not grounded in context-specific data. Leveraging EU programs like Horizon Europe is feasible, but without rigorous testing, the framework risks remaining a theoretical exercise disconnected from the messy realities of localized economies.

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Note

[1] Building on prior research conducted by the European Commission, we show how localized social innovations have delivered sustainable solutions, emphasizing exemplary outputs and success factors. However, due to their illustrative nature, these examples lack a structured comparative framework or standardized benchmarks, reflecting their role as contextual snapshots rather than generalizable models. Their relevance lies in illuminating the varied policy contexts of Proximity Economies across European regions.

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