

Community Economies _ Revealing Genks' Invisible Hand

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Key words: work, economic model, networks, community economies, low dynamic regions

Today's patterns of work are very much defined by the 'lean enterprise' practice, taking form in organizations that are more competitive, customer driven and agile on the one hand (Womack, Jones, 2003) and the separation of economic activity from time and space on the other (Hochschild, 1997).

This abstract builds on the case of Genk, an important economic pole in the Limburg Region of Belgium, with a specific focus on Winterslag neighbourhood. Genk's development has always been related to labor-intensive industrial activities. Nevertheless, its economy is now facing new challenges as the area, a low dynamic region, is shifting from a centralized economic model towards new civic platforms for work and community economies. We will further develop on the challenges in making these economic models sustainable, guided by two main questions: (1) (how) Are small urban entrepreneurs and micro socio-economic networks able to adapt to the large scale impacts of economic change? and (2) How can this adaptation be traced in the urban structure?

Economic restructuring correlates with the increase in self-employment rates amongst ethnic minorities in Genk. Of broader significance is that with increased urbanisation, the quantity and diversity of cultures participating in the retail life of Winterslag amplified, pointing to the interplay between social and cultural networks, and economic and regulatory frameworks and its relationship with urban locale. By setting aside the paradigm of demise often represented flatly across the local low dynamic landscape, an empirical exploration of adaptation opens up understandings of the situated short-term and long-term strategies adopted by independent proprietors, as well as the limits of small-scale adaptive capacity in the face of economic and regulatory change.