

BUSINESSES IN TRANSITION: VENTURING FOR A BETTER WORLD THROUGH THE LIGHT OF THE ECONOMY OF FRANCESCO

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ABSTRACT

We are living in a time of continuous and profound changes in our societies, in which the role of businesses is being questioned and the ways they conceive of and organise themselves are being significantly reshaped, as well as their strategies, models and relationships with stakeholders. More than 180 researchers, entrepreneurs, and changemakers at the Economy of Francesco event have addressed such topics in the thematic village named Businesses in Transition. In heeding their responsible commitment, this paper aims to present the process and contributions of the Businesses in Transition village to reveal the approach and the guiding pillars that were embraced, and shed light on possible future developments in terms of both research and practical applications.

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JEL Classification: M – Business Administration and Business Economics, Marketing, Accounting.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The last few years have been characterised by continuous and profound changes for societies and countries all around the world. This epochal transformation includes the evident economic crisis, the technological revolution, and social and demographic changes. Examples of these transformations can be seen in the demographic crises of developed countries with ageing populations and decreasing birth rates (BEPA, 2001); other examples involve emerging countries, such as those in Latin America and Africa, where economies are growing rapidly but poverty, hunger, war and youth unemployment affect the lives of millions of people (OECD/EU, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as climate change and pollution, are other examples that illustrate the interconnection of human beings, as these challenges concern the lives of everyone.

Recognising that the responsibility falls on everyone in the face of such global challenges, Pope Francis has invited research economists, entrepreneurs and changemakers to “give a soul to the economy of tomorrow (...) through a common “cov-

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enant”, a process of global change” (Pope Francis, 2019). More than 2000 young economists responded to this call and started work in the 12 thematic villages that make up the Economy of Francesco event, with young economists collaborating creatively to brainstorm ideas and innovative solutions for a new economy, as well as conduct scientific research that can contribute to this new paradigm. After one year of work, Pope Francis met the participants virtually and highlighted the “the beginning of a process that we are asked to undertake together as a vocation, a culture and a covenant” (Pope Francis, 2020).

One of the thematic villages is named “*Businesses in Transition*” (BiT), recognising the need for a profound reshaping of the role of business, models and operations to address society’s challenges, as well as to contribute to integral human development (in the words of Pope Francis). BiT involved over 180 economists worldwide and has contributed to the event with 15 practical project ideas and research projects that are currently ongoing.

The purpose of this paper is to present the process and contribution of the Economy of Francesco’s BiT village and shed light on possible future developments, both in terms of research and from a practical point of view. The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the origins of the BiT village, highlighting some important theoretical developments behind the role and models of organisations in our societies. Then, in Section 3 I present and comment on the work that has been conducted in the BiT village, illustrating the four topics that have been developed. In Section 4, I point out some ideas developed in the village and their key take-aways. Finally, in Section 5 I suggest future research and practical opportunities that have emerged from the Businesses in Transition village and its interconnection with the Economy of Francesco. Section 6 offers some concluding remarks.

2. BUSINESSES IN TRANSITION: IN SEARCH OF AN IDEAL

In response to the epochal transformations described above, featuring substantial challenges that affect both developed and developing countries, companies have been called on to significantly reshape the way they conceive of and organise themselves, as well as their strategies and relationships with society (Doherty et al., 2014; Bansal et al., 2019). This transformation stems from the urgent need to respond to social, environmental and technological changes by implementing different ways of doing business, as well as different goals and means (Mair and Marti, 2006). Both new and established organisations have started to take into account their responsibility towards citizens, the environment and the entire world more generally¹. Expectations regarding the role of businesses in society have also shifted from the mere generation of *shareholder value* (the maximisation of profit) to the creation of *shared value* among all stakeholders, offering a contribution towards the full de-

¹ For further explanations, see Pasi (2014) and Maino and Ferrara (2017).

velopment of society and of ecosystems (Porter and Kramer, 2011). However, this transition has not been immediate and has been the result of a journey starting with the increasing importance placed on sustainability by for-profit companies (Bansal et al., 2019), which began integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities into their processes. These practices have been developed over years and in various countries (see, for example, European Commission, 2001). The importance of these initiatives has increased over time, alongside the rise of various environmental and social problems (poverty, hunger, low education, etc.), pushing organisations towards a *shared value* and *purpose-oriented* paradigm (Porter and Kramer, 2011; George et al., 2021a). In this view, CSR and sustainable practices are not merely an accessory to the running of the business but, rather, form an active part of their mission, management, strategies and operations (Johnson and Schaltegger, 2020). The Business Roundtable, a large group of top CEOs, issued a statement that defined the *purpose* of the corporation in terms of stakeholder terms (Harrison et al., 2020). Non-profit organisations (NGOs, associations, movements, etc.) have seen a blurring of boundaries in their purely social and environmental orientation with the rise of new revenue-generation activities. The need for such a transition for non-profit and for-profit organisations, then, led to the rise of hybrid models that focus on purpose and sustainability paradigms (Haigh and Hoffman, 2012; Doherty et al., 2014), breaking the boundaries of traditional dichotomies (for-profit vs not-for-profit and public vs private). So-called *hybrid organisations* combine missions, objectives, models and processes that are often seen as divergent (Battilana and Lee, 2014) but, in these organisations, represent a hybrid ideal in which a market-based approach (financial mission) is enacted to “pursue opportunities to catalyze social change and/or address social needs” (Mair and Marti, 2006: 333). Similarly, *Caritas in Veritate* § 41 offered a broad definition of entrepreneurship as a venturing process “to take account of this broader significance of business activity. It favours cross-fertilisation between different types of business activity, with shifting of competences from the “non-profit” world to the “profit” world and vice versa, from the public world to that of civil society, from advanced economies to developing countries” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2009).

This documented transition towards hybrid models and processes, with the core objective of addressing societal and environmental needs (in the name of *CSR*, *purpose*, *mission*, or *shared values*), is then forging new entrepreneurs and new organisations, as well as determining changes at both the ecosystem and institutional level (Saebi et al., 2019). For example, in developing economies (social and environmental) entrepreneurs and (social) businesses are applying such a hybrid approach to foster inclusive innovation and growth (Mair and Marti, 2006; Yunus et al., 2010; George et al., 2012; Ciambotti and Pedrini, 2021), alleviate poverty (Ciambotti, 2020) or contribute to sustainable development (George et al., 2016).

The call by the Economy of Francesco (EOF) to explore the role and models of organisations, management, and entrepreneurs is then propitious for shaping the current debate, illuminating ways to create a new economy. In the next section, I present the work that has been undertaken to deepen our understanding of how businesses

can shift towards addressing social and environmental needs through their purposes, strategies and models.

3. THE EOF BUSINESSES IN TRANSITION VILLAGE

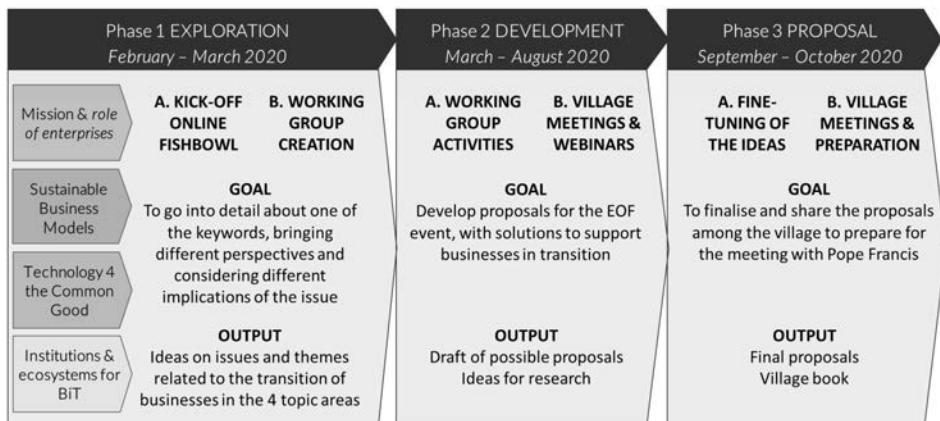
In line with the growing relevance of the role of businesses in shaping a new economy, as well as the responsibility of each of us, in the Businesses in Transition village we tried to seriously address Pope Francis’ call for “one economy that brings life not death, one that is inclusive and not exclusive, humane and not dehumanising, one that cares for the environment and does not despoil it” (Pope Francis, 2020).

The village involved more than 180 young economists, including scholars, entrepreneurs, managers and change-makers. We started from the recognition that companies are increasingly called upon to respond to profound transformations that affect not only their products and services and the ways they are produced, but also their purpose and their relationships both internally (work, governance, property, production, etc.) and externally (common good, reputation, impact, inclusion, consumption, etc.). Based on this foundation, from the beginning of the conference we worked with young economists to develop the *village’s guiding purpose*: *Our aim is to foster innovative and creative solutions – proposals, projects and research – to help businesses successfully and sustainably address the challenges of this transition.*

Guided by this overarching purpose, we then proceeded through three phases aimed at developing solutions to be presented at the Assisi event (November, 2020). The overall working process of the BiT village is shown in Figure 1.

In the first phase – *Exploration* – we selected four themes that represent the key pillars of the current business transition: (1) *Mission and role of enterprises*; (2) *Sustainable business models*; (3) *Technology for the common good*; (4) *Institutions and*

FIGURE 1 – Working process for the Businesses in Transition village.
Author’s own elaboration



ecosystems for BiT. Each participant in the village decided which area he/she wanted to develop and collaborate in, and two participants volunteered to coordinate the activities of each section. These 8 topic coordinators worked to organise activities related to each topic and were supported by senior economists and practitioners, as well as by the village coordinators (Giacomo Ciambotti and Isaias Hernando).

For each theme, an initial fishbowl conversation took place in which all participants were able to discuss and share their insights about an issue/topic of interest related to the key pillars. The discussions were very fruitful and the fishbowl methodology assured everyone could participate. The initial engagement calls were also very important for participants to get to know each other. The participants came from different parts of the world and from a wide range of professional backgrounds. Interestingly, engagement in discussions occurred quite rapidly because everyone recognised the common objectives that had moved us to respond to the Pope's call. These objectives provided a clear and common pathway that united people from Argentina, Mexico, Cameroon, Uganda, Italy, Spain, the Philippines, etc. From these in-depth conversations, *working groups* focusing on particular topics related to the 4 key themes were developed. The working groups reflected a tentative approach of going in-depth into one key issue or aspect of businesses in transition, with the final goal of developing innovative and creative solutions to tackle this challenge. In total, participants organised 12 working groups.

The second phase – *Development* – involved the working groups identifying possible ideas and solutions to tackle the issues/topics raised in the previous phase. In order to sustain and foster creative development by the participants, the village also organised a few webinars with interesting people in the field of economics. During the development phase, ongoing interactions were very important for the building of concrete ideas in each working group. The discussions were very fruitful and guided the participants to the final step – the *Proposal* phase – which involved fine-tuning and sharing the proposals with the broader village. This was a very important moment in which participants pitched 15 proposals as the main output of the BiT village.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss these working groups and proposals in relation to the 4 overarching themes of the village outlined above.

3.1. *Mission and role of enterprises*

The first topic that the BiT village explored was the mission and role of enterprises, under the coordination of Annie Tamargo (Spain) and Maria Cristina Zaccone (Italy) and senior economists Enrique Lluch (Professor at the University of Valencia, Valencia) and John Mundel (Environmental consultant, USA). The working group took an in-depth look at the role of a corporation, discussing first why a firm exists. Corporations exist in order to address people's needs, both social and environmental (Yunus et al., 2010), thereby contributing to the welfare of societies (Pasi, 2014; George et al., 2016). A company's mission, indeed, concerns the responsibility that it holds towards the world due to the nature of the challenges that society and the

environment bring forth, which are increasingly difficult and significant. From world-wide poverty to unemployment and financial crises to inequality, companies are called on to consider and respond to a multitude of crucial issues. Similarly, scholars have recently begun contributing to developing the concept of the purpose of corporations, which captures “the essence of an organization’s existence by explaining what value it seeks to create for its stakeholders. In doing so, purpose provides a clear definition of the firm’s intent, creates the ability for stakeholders to identify with, and be inspired by, the firm’s mission, vision, and values, and establishes actionable pathways and an aspirational outcome for the firm’s actions” (George et al., 2021a).

To deepen and extend the knowledge on the topic of the mission and role of enterprises, three working groups were created to explore the following key issues:

Going deep into a firm’s mission: A first critical area of development concerns the question of why a firm exists. The discussion raised important questions and called for a regenerative business culture that seeks to create human systems capable of co-evolving with the environment. Furthermore, the working group called for a new balance between social, environmental and financial aspects, without prioritising one mission over the others.

Profit-seeker versus purpose-seeker corporations: A second group of participants investigated the characteristics of purpose-seeker organizations (George et al., 2021a). The participants in the working group highlighted that both individuals and organisations need to adjust their “purpose” by continuously asking the following questions: How are decisions made? How many and which stakeholders are involved? How do actions impact people and the environment? These are fundamental questions that serve as guidance for individuals and organisations in their daily lives. Purpose must penetrate every single decision, action and reporting.

The role of a corporation and its stakeholders: A third aspect involves the relationships between a company’s mission and the relevant stakeholders, recognising the centrality of individuals as customers, suppliers, local communities (Yunus et al., 2010; George et al., 2021a), and the whole of *humanity* (Pope Francis, 2020).

3.2. Sustainable business models

The second thematic area concerns sustainable business models, with the working groups coordinated by Cristina Santhià (Italy) and Rodrigo Miranda (Mexico) in collaboration with Marco Nicoli (Senior Financial Sector Specialist, East Asia Pacific, Finance Competitiveness and Innovation at The World Bank). The working groups recognised that sustainable business models are most suitable for companies that want to have a positive impact in society and the environment. Among others, social entrepreneurs and B Corps need recognition and theoretical/practical development. For instance, social entrepreneurship is defined as “a process involving the innovative use and combination of resources to pursue opportunities to catalyze social change and/or address social needs” (Mair and Marti, 2006). Thus, social enterprises represent a valuable model to address challenges (George et al., 2016), contributing to

sustainable development (Schaltegger et al., 2016; Saebi et al., 2019), to overcoming resource constraints of developing economies such as Africa (Ciambotti and Pedrini, 2021), to poverty alleviation (Ciambotti, 2020) and to peacebuilding (Sottini and Ciambotti, 2021).

In so doing, sustainable business models are considered orchestrators of environmental transformation and social change, through profitable means (Bansal et al., 2019; Johnson and Schaltegger, 2020). However, building sustainable business models presents several challenges (Ciambotti, 2020) mainly related to combining the processes of value creation for stakeholders and of value capture in order to remain financially viable. In response to Pope Francis' call, much attention has been paid to human-centered business models (such as the one promoted by an OECD initiative²) that put people and the planet first in a hybrid way (Doherty et al., 2014). Participants in the working groups investigated the following questions: What components and ingredients are necessary to build a sustainable business model? How can companies create, deliver and capture value? What are the models inspired by the Economy of Francesco? These questions were the starting point for the process of developing ideas and solutions to be presented at the Assisi event, with the general aim of starting a process that can continue into the future.

3.3. *Technology for the common good*

The third topic revolves around how technology can offer the opportunity to develop the common good. This topic was coordinated by Tatiana Fleming (Brazil) and Annelisse Fernández (Guatemala) in collaboration with Prof. Emanuele Carpanzano (Professor and Director Department of Innovative Technologies, Scuola Universitaria Professionale della Svizzera Italiana – SUPSI). Concerning the role of technology in organisations, the participants in the working groups highlighted three important questions to be addressed in the village:

The purpose of tech and humans: Technological progress has many benefits, including bountiful zero marginal-cost products, free services like Google Maps, lower weekly working hours, and artificial intelligence (AI)-based aid for production and sustainability goals. On the other hand, there are also clear downsides: wealth shifting from labor to capital, growing inequality among market participants (companies and workers), the automation of lower-educated and lower-paid jobs, and bias and misuses of AI.

Technological accessibility and its challenges: Access to tech is a human right, and the current economy must evolve alternative ways of fostering tech accessibility for

² Human-centered business models, retrieved at: <https://www.oecd.org/dev/human-centred-business-model-hcbm.htm>

people living with disabilities, elderly people and young people, especially in emerging economies.

Technological ecosystems for governance: the “Tech for Governance” working group identified a range of issues related to the challenges of the technological ecosystem in achieving a governance plan that can represent an opportunity for all socioeconomic actors (firms, media, civil society, etc.).

3.4. *Institutions and ecosystems for BiT*

The fourth theme involved institutions and ecosystems for businesses in transition and was coordinated by Anna Maria Nowak (Poland) and Tiago Guerra (Brazil). The senior economist involved in this theme was Prof. Alicia Caballero (Dean at Universidad Católica Argentina, UCA). Overall, the young economists who participated in these working groups shared the goal of understanding “*what and how to create an institutional ecosystem that is more inclusive and equal and ensure access to resources and rights for all, including vulnerable people*” (Institutions and Ecosystems group). More precisely, we recognise the need to support institutions in moving towards inclusive economic development and, at the same time, that businesses should shape existing and new institutions by adopting a more inclusive attitude. In discussing this theme, participants addressed three main aspects of business in transition:

The role of business in supporting institutions where/if they are weak: How can businesses change to address institutional problems? Lobbying activities and promoting an institutional environment that serves the interest of people has been recognised as a priority. This was also emphasised by the Pope during the meeting in November 2020, who highlighted that the integral development of individuals must be taken in consideration (Pope Francis, 2020). In addition, businesses can play a role in orchestrating the ecosystem, creating and managing interactions between cross-actors (public and private) to lead the development agenda. This is important considering the role of NGOs or public movements, as well as the overall Economy of Francesco movement. Finally, the important role of businesses in addressing institutional voids is also recognised (Sydow et al., 2020). In particular, businesses that implement an inclusive approach to growth (George et al., 2012; Doherty et al., 2014) may provide support to vulnerable and marginalised individuals, for instance, by giving them a job and a workspace or providing them with services and products (e.g. education) in contexts where institutions are weak (Kaplan et al., 2018).

Bottom-up initiatives: This group considered the role of civil society for businesses in transition, and in particular providing investments that foster the actions of communities, NGOs, associations and educators at the local level. For instance, microfinance has been a valuable tool for fostering entrepreneurial initiatives from the ground up (Doherty et al., 2014; Santos et al., 2015) and its relaunch should be

oriented towards sustainability and inclusivity, with greater attention paid to societal and environmental impacts.

Balance between public & private powers: The relationship between the quality of institutions and access to quality education is recognised as another critical point for integral human development. In particular, collaboration between governments, non-governmental organisations and private companies is an important driver of innovation and shared ideas for the sustainable development of developing countries (Ciambotti and Pedrini, 2021), as well as to support human welfare development in more developed economies (Pasi, 2014).

Overall, the active work, shared experience and continuous dialogue around the unified ideals of the village have been successful in pointing out relevant challenges for businesses in transition. In a period in which “time is money”, the village brought together people involved in a common dialogue, reflecting the call by Pope Francis for “the development of a model of international solidarity, capable of acknowledging and respecting interdependence between nations and favoring mechanisms of control that prevent any kind of subjection. And working for the promotion of the most disadvantaged and developing countries, for every people is called to become the artisan of its own destiny and that of the entire world” (Pope Francis, 2020). In the next section, I comment on the main results of this process, which generated 15 project proposals.

4. DEVELOPING BUSINESSES IN TRANSITION: IN SEARCH OF NEW PERSPECTIVES

The core of the work undertaken in the Businesses in Transition village was conducted in the development and proposal phases. In particular, starting from the challenges identified in the working groups, the participants worked to develop innovative and creative ideas to contribute to the call by Pope Francis for an integral human development.

Besides the activities in the working groups, participants were also involved in organising webinar sessions. These virtual public events had the purpose of discussing the experiences of business leaders and actors who have carried out initiatives to change our society or address the great challenges of our era. The opportunity to share experiences with senior individuals inspired young economists to reflect on, reshape and sometimes redirect their efforts in developing solutions with their working groups.

We then virtually met Robert Bilott³, an American environmental lawyer famous for a class action against DuPont chemicals and winner of the International Right

³ For more information on Dr Robert Bilott, please visit <https://www.taftlaw.com/people/robert-a-bilott>.

Livelihood Award (also known as the “Alternative Nobel Prize”). He had recently been recognised in a movie called *Dark Waters* based on his experiences. The webinar⁴ we organised on July 22nd was entitled *Dark waters: business and environmental responsibility* and was aimed at discussing the social and environmental responsibilities of organisations. We also organised another webinar (July 31st) with Oscar di Montigny (Chief Innovability and Value Strategy Officer at Banca Mediolanum, a writer and expert communicator). He inspired participants in a cross-village dialogue addressing questions and discussing issues around sustainability and innovation. The title of the event was *Business, care, vocation and gratitude. A dialogue with Oscar di Montigny*⁵ and linked together participants from various Economy of Francesco villages, such as the Businesses in Transition, Vocation and Profit, and Work and Care villages.

The webinar participants shared important insight on how to be resilient in achieving sustainable outputs in a world that continuously seems to fight against these (sustainable) values and means of adhering to them. Thus, the webinars nurtured the working groups, offering additional insight for them to develop and present their ideas and solutions, which are detailed in the next paragraphs.

4.1. *Project proposals*

The twelve working groups focusing on particular aspects of the four BiT themes developed 15 project proposals. These project ideas address key points raised in the initial phase and are still under development. Some are still at the seed stage, while others have already begun to be implemented. For the purposes of this paper, I briefly describe some of the 15 proposals, grouped by thematic area, while examples of ongoing projects will be presented in the next section.

4.2. *Mission and role of enterprises*

Person-centered education of young economists and entrepreneurs: making civil economy courses part of the curriculum in Catholic colleges and universities.

Marketplace for small/medium sustainable businesses and entrepreneurs: creating a platform that links existing marketplaces to small/medium-sized sustainable businesses and entrepreneurs, with the support of ecosystem organisations such as B Lab, Cooperatives, EoC, etc.

⁴ A video of the webinar organised with Robert Bilott can be found through the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELJybrwB95M&t=4s&ab_channel=TheEconomyofFrancescoINTERNATIONALEVENT.

⁵ A video of the webinar with Oscar di Montigny can be found through the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXuMtJd2ff8&t=1467s&ab_channel=TheEconomyofFrancescoINTERNATIONALEVENT.

African E-store for fashion and lifestyle products: providing the opportunity for Ugandan-based local designers to reach international markets with their products. The name of the company, based in Uganda, is *Fafa Business Solution ltd*⁶.

The ideal corporation and its stakeholders: research project to create a matrix to identify stakeholders and the characteristics the ideal corporation should pursue with regard to each given stakeholder.

4.3. *Sustainable business models*

List of the top 100 business leaders for a sustainable transition and human-centered business models: increasing the visibility of business leaders who are more oriented towards socio-environmental issues and are directly or indirectly pursuing the Economy of Francesco spirit.

Sustainability KPI Framework: creating new key performance indicators (KPIs) that address environmental, social and economic aspects equally, helping companies to build, to transition to and/or to maintain sustainable business models over time.

Towards a metamorphosis: Laudato Si and SDGs in business: developing an online platform for capacity building and mentoring support for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises that want to align their business to the SDGs/Laudato Si principles.

4.4. *Technology for the common good*

A computer in every school – Bridging Zambia’s technical education gap: elevating the level of technical schooling in Zambia through a local organisation named *Pacar* (a tech start-up focusing on improving the use of tech for a better society).

Fighting against fake news and encouraging dialogue as a foundation for solid and healthy governance: developing a body that can validate organisations in every country, detecting fake news and disseminating reliable information.

4.5. *Institutions and ecosystems for BiT*

Eco-Hereditas in Veritate: maximising the potential of European cultural and religious heritage as assets whose (enhanced) participatory management could: a) foster cooperation between young professionals and religious institutions, leading to job

⁶ Company under development; see: www.fafabs.com.

creation and better management of abandoned or underused religious properties; b) enhance a culture-driven vision of inclusive and sustainable local development.

For a fraternal green finance: developing a participatory and context-specific green microcredit methodology using a consortium benchmarking technique, to be implemented through an online platform intended to facilitate the intersection of the demand and supply of small- and medium-sized funds for projects with social and environmental impacts.

Research on how to create an institutional ecosystem that is more inclusive and equal and ensures access to resources and rights for all: research project conducted at the individual, community and global level to foster knowledge about supportive ecosystems oriented toward inclusivity and sustainability.

4.6. Academic research projects

The practical and creative approach that has guided the Economy of Francesco has been the leading contribution of the village. In fact, proposals developed by the working groups were presented to Pope Francis during the Assisi event (November 2020). However, many researchers also actively participated in the group sessions and significantly contributed to animating the village. Indeed, an important aspect of the call by Pope Francis is that it is relevant also to scholars who contribute with new theories and evidence that inspires and develops the current body of knowledge in economics and related disciplines. Thus, in the village we tried to stimulate research projects designed in collaboration with other participants and organisations. One such research initiative involved the publishing of a book chapter in the book entitled *Responsible Management in Emerging Markets. A Multisectoral Focus*, edited by E.K. Adae, J.P. Kosiba, R.E. Hinson, K. Kakra Twum, N. Newman and F. Nutusgah and published by Palgrave Macmillan. This research project involved four researchers, Gisel Machain (Argentine Catholic University, Rosario, Argentina), Giacomo Ciambotti (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan), Cristina Santhià (Università degli Studi di Torino, Italy) and Maria Fernanda Figueroa (CONICET-Universidad Austral, Buenos Aires, Argentina), and investigates green accounting standards in an emerging economy, namely Argentina. In fact, such countries are particularly affected by vegetative growth, price volatility and the uncontrolled extraction of natural resources, which may be considered obstacles to sustainable economic progress (Machain et al., 2021). Inspired by the desire to verify and deepen our knowledge on the quality and relevance of green accounting standards, we conducted a quantitative study that has now been published under the title *The quality of information of GRI standards in an emerging economy: Evidence from green accounting practices in Argentina*. The results set out new guidelines to study sustainability reporting standards in emerging economies. The study also reveals the need for an extending commitment to *synergetic work* among society and the public and private

sectors to develop local and regional actions towards sustainable development. Collaborations in research are very significant because they can contribute to establishing the point of view of the Economy of Francesco movement (and of Businesses in Transition scholars) in the global scientific community.

5. RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FROM THE BIT VILLAGE

The activities of the Businesses in Transition village have been very valuable in terms of both research and practical applications. The outcomes were made possible through an established sense of community throughout the entire village and deeply rooted in the different working groups. Through this collaborative spirit, the results of which are documented in the previous paragraphs, new avenues for practice and research also emerged. First, it is possible to continue and extend the project's activities, both in terms of exploiting the ideas and solutions originating from the work undertaken in the village (see Section 4) and developing new projects in an area of interest related to the overarching theme of businesses in transition. Second, research at the international level would benefit both by studies investigating organisations through the lens of the Economy of Francesco and studies that extend extant entrepreneurial theories in light of Businesses in Transition village evidence and frameworks. In this section, I discuss such opportunities in more depth.

5.1. *Entrepreneurial projects leveraging EOF pillars*

A first important opportunity involves the development of project ideas originating from the Businesses in Transition village. More specifically, 15 projects ideas were generated from working group activities, and these – currently in different stages of implementation and focusing on different geographic areas – could be further developed. For instance, in this regard, it is interesting to highlight the story of the Pacar School⁷. This project was developed by participants focusing on the *Technology for the common good* theme, and more specifically by Patrick Mwanza (Italy), Luca Campanella (Switzerland), Tatiana Fleming (Brasil), Anne Fernandez (Guatemala), Raissa Lauer Navarro (Brasil) and Martin Mapopa (Zambia). The team tackled the challenge faced by low-income Zambian students, who at the end of their technical high school programmes are not ready for the job market and mostly aim to access universities or college. However, after enrolling in higher education, most of these students cannot afford the ongoing costs and thus drop out of school, often remaining jobless. In fact, “high school dropouts are more common because they wish to pursue unskilled jobs as a way of survival” (Pacar School website). Thus, with the motto of *a computer in every Zambian school*, the Pacar School is an inclusive project offering each and every student free admission to suitable online courses (developed

⁷ For more information, please visit the following website: <https://pacarschool.com/>.

based on the ICT needs of the Zambian economy and of employment in this sector)⁸. This project represents an inspiring story of real-world action based on BiT village activities.

Thus, the Pacar School is an example of how the stirring call by Pope Francis in 2019 has been translated into a (social) entrepreneurial initiative that has a real impact and fosters inclusion in an emerging country. Scholars recognise that inclusive growth involves “the development and implementation of new ideas which aspire to create opportunities that enhance social and economic wellbeing for disenfranchised members of society” (George et al., 2012, p. 653). This was also reflected in the *Caritas in Veritate* encyclical, as an entrepreneurial initiative that moves from the public world to that of civil society, from advanced economies to developing countries (Benedict XVI, 2009). Much work needs to be done in this direction, and the inspiring ideas generated in the village can be useful to orient these types of entrepreneurial efforts.

5.2. *Research projects on the business transition*

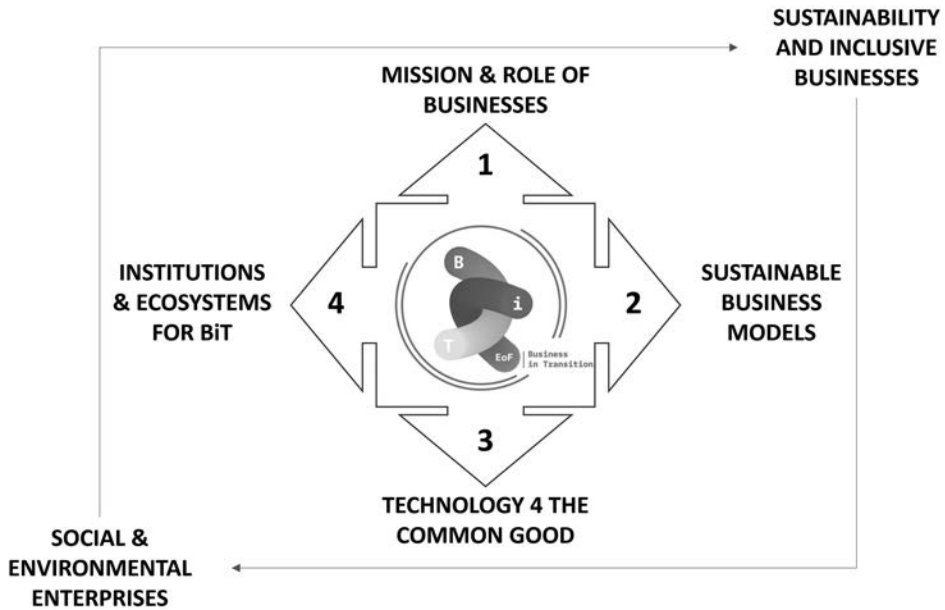
A second important opportunity has been offered to the scientific community and Economy of Francesco scholars to develop research that analyses organisations in terms of the four themes developed in the BiT village. Figure 2 presents the four-topic framework implemented in the village, which can contribute to current knowledge and theories.

In particular, research fields focusing on sustainable and inclusive businesses (George et al., 2012; Pasi, 2014; Schaltegger et al., 2016; Bansal et al., 2018; Johnson and Schaltegger, 2020) as well as social and environmental entrepreneurs (Doherty et al., 2014; Ciambotti, 2020; Sydow et al., 2020; Ciambotti and Pedrini, 2021) may benefit from greater and deeper knowledge addressing the following (non-exhaustive) questions:

- What is the role and mission of today’s organisations and how do they influence perceptions of and relationships with external and internal stakeholders? (topic #1, mission);
- How can companies build and scale up sustainable and inclusive business models? How can social and environmental entrepreneurs build and scale up business models to better develop innovative ideas addressing social and environmental challenges? (topic #2, sustainable business models);
- How can technology be integrated to contribute to a common good? How can technology enable sustainable and inclusive solutions both in developed and developing countries? (topic #3, technology);
- How can sustainable/inclusive organisations and entrepreneurs support (or even build) institutions in contexts in which they are weak? How can governments

⁸ Cfr. Pacar School, Aim and Mission.

FIGURE 2 – *Four-topic framework for research on businesses in transition.*
Author's own elaboration



Research from the BiT village: bringing a new perspective to theory development

and ecosystem apparatuses support and sustain the operations of organisations such as social enterprises, B Corps or other NGOs? (topic #4, institutions and ecosystems).

A second opportunity for scholars involves building on the impact of Economy of Francesco's perspective in the field of businesses and management. In particular, the BiT village and the overall Economy of Francesco paradigm can be a valuable lens through which to investigate organisations and entrepreneurship theories and models, as well as their drivers, processes and outcomes. Through the four themes of the BiT village, future research can contribute to theories in sustainability and social/environmental entrepreneurship in various ways. For instance, while the current literature is exploring many different topics such as CSR initiatives and inclusive growth (George et al., 2012; Pasi, 2014), technological developments in sustainable ventures (George et al., 2021b), and entrepreneurial (hybrid) actions to tackle societal and environmental issues (Doherty et al., 2014; Ciambotti and Pedrini, 2021), etc., the activities of our village expand this knowledge with new reflections and provoking questions. To offer a concrete example, a body of research is investigating the difficult balance between social and financial goals (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ciambotti and Pedrini, 2021), trying to figure out how to lessen the tensions that may arise in such hybrid ventures (Doherty et al., 2014). By further investigating the role and mission

of (social) enterprises and their sustainable business models, scholars can contribute to our knowledge on how to connect and leverage such seemingly divergent objectives, shedding new light on existing theories. Current research may thus greatly benefit from the new perspective brought about by Economy of Francesco researchers. Indeed, the (forthcoming) special issue of the *Journal of Spirituality, Management and Religion* entitled “The Economy of Francesco process: ongoing perspectives for a new economy”⁹ has the purpose of fostering new research from the perspective of the Economy of Francesco. The special issue is edited by village coordinators and representatives such as Giacomo Ciambotti (Università Cattolica), Andrea Roncella (Università di Siena), Antonietta Riccardo (Università di Pisa), Lucia Marchegiani (Università degli Studi Roma Tre) and Matteo Rizzolli (LUMSA University).

6. CONCLUSIONS

The overall purpose of this article has been to present the work undertaken in the Businesses in Transition (BiT) village at the Economy of Francesco event. The paper discussed the outcomes of the village, which brought together around 200 young academics, entrepreneurs, managers and policymakers from around the world. The work conducted has been very inspiring and practical, and allowed the participants to move from extant knowledge regarding the challenges and problems faced by today’s organisations, entrepreneurs and managers towards new perspectives.

Village activities generated many project ideas that are now at different stages of development. In this sense, the path forward has been outlined and the promise of great results is already starting to come to fruition, with both research and practical projects in the spirit of the Economy of Francesco to be deployed by participants who animated the village with their creativity, passion and knowledge. As Pope Francis emphasised in his message at the 2020 online event, “We need change; we want change and we seek change”, which will be made possible by “blazing trails, broadening horizons and building common bonds” (...) to finally forge “new ways to make history” (Pope Francis, 2020). This is more than just a wish, as promises are already being fulfilled and the Economy of Francesco is already impacting research and practical processes in the transition of businesses.

⁹ The special issue’s call for papers is available through the following link: https://ignited.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/pdf/2020/Call%20for%20Papers%20-%20The%20Economy%20of%20Francesco%20Process%20-%20JMSR%20Special%20Issue_0.pdf.

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