Innovative Solidarities in Europe’s Sustainability Transitions: A Mechanism-Based Account

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Abstract. Across Europe, practices such as climate mutual aid, community energy cooperatives, refugee support networks, and just transition alliances signal a reconfiguration of solidarity under ecological crisis. Building on recent work on altruistic solidarity, we conceptualize solidarity as patterned prosocial practice and use ›innovative solidarity‹ as a flexible label for heterogeneous forms that reach beyond bounded identities and reciprocity. Developing a mechanism-based framework, we specify how shared ethical commitments, recognition of interdependence, and deliberate cooperation across difference generate solidarities that operate across translocal, transnational, and cross-generational scales. To illustrate the framework, we draw on four well-documented European cases – youth climate strikes, community energy cooperatives, just transition coalitions, and disaster mutual aid networks – to show how these mechanisms are enacted, stabilized, and sometimes undermined in practice. The case illustrations suggest how innovative solidarities can support sustainability transitions by expanding who is included in the ›we‹ of solidarity to distant others and future generations.

Keywords: solidarity; sustainability transitions; prosocial behavior; moral economy; climate change; energy cooperatives; just transition; Europe.

1 Introduction

Solidarity has long been a foundational concept in sociology (Durkheim 1984/[1893]; Stjernø 2005), but its character is evolving under the pressures of globalization and ecological crisis in the twenty-first century. Classical forms of solidarity – built through shared class interests, national citizenship, or institutionalized welfare states – were bounded by a clearly defined ›us‹, rooted in common group identities (Stjernø 2005; Banting/Kymlicka 2017; Wimmer 2008). By contrast, contemporary global challenges such as climate change, transnational inequality, and pandemics spill across traditional boundaries and demand cooperation beyond any single community or nation, benefiting distant ›them‹ as much as the immediate ›us‹ (Bazzani 2025a). Recent scholarship suggests that global

risks are not eroding solidarity but catalyzing a cosmopolitan reimagining of it. For instance, Beck (2015) argues that worldwide hazards impose an »involuntary cosmopolitanization« of solidarity as people recognize shared threats and obligations across borders. Rather than signaling the end of social bonds, crises from climate disasters to public health emergencies have prompted new forms of solidarity that transcend established group loyalties. These responses are fueled by a sense of planetary interdependence and ecological urgency, which drives people to seek support beyond the familiar confines of nation, class, or creed (Chakrabarty 2021; Beck 2016).

Three intellectual streams set the stage for our inquiry. First, moral economy and solidarity economy perspectives show that sustainability transitions hinge on ethical values and communal relations (Bazzani 2022a), not just on technology or markets (Laville et al. 2015; Polanyi 1944). These scholars argue that moving toward sustainability requires re-embedding economic practices in principles of reciprocity, care, and social justice. This approach challenges the dominant logic of competition by insisting that transitions like shifting to low-carbon energy or circular production will succeed only if grounded in collective norms of fairness and mutual aid (Utting 2015).

Second, research on prosocial behavior asks why individuals incur costs to benefit others, especially strangers. Studies find that altruistic acts (e.g. charitable giving or helping behavior) differ fundamentally from self-interested exchanges (Simpson / Willer 2015). Solidarity builds on these prosocial impulses by elevating them from isolated acts into coordinated collective action (Prainsack / Buyx 2017). In a solidaristic arrangement, individual altruism is coordinated and affirmed as a shared project. For example, neighbors not only help each other during a crisis but also organize a community relief fund. Likewise, climate activists not only reduce their own carbon footprint but mobilize others to do the same (Bazzani 2025a).

Third, reflexive modernization and risk society theories (Beck 1992/[1986]; Giddens 1991) suggest that global risks undermine traditional securities and prompt societies to reflect and reinvent social bonds. Beck posits that transboundary dangers like nuclear accidents or global warming compel cooperation beyond the nation-state in the absence of a world government (Beck 2006; Beck 2015). The solidarity that emerges is fragile and reflexive – a conscious recognition of shared fate rather than the automatic cohesion of homogeneous communities (Habermas 2013). Indeed, even as nation-states fail to coordinate responses to issues like climate change – hobbled by free-rider problems (Olson 1965) and conflicting interests – citizens and civil society have begun forging alternative support networks across borders (Featherstone 2012). These converging debates underscore the need to reconceptualize solidarity. It should no longer be viewed as a nostalgic vestige of close-knit groups or as a mere synonym for cooperation, but rather

as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by new structural conditions and normative aspirations (Scholz 2008).

Despite these advances, a theoretical gap remains. Some contemporary scholarship still tends to read current forms of solidarity mainly through the lenses of classical categories, or else replaces ›solidarity‹ with broader notions such as collaboration, cooperation, social capital or social cohesion. In parallel, research in sustainability science and global governance frequently invokes generic cooperation mechanisms – collective action, multi-level governance, polycentric coordination – without clearly distinguishing solidaristic commitments from more instrumental, interest-based forms of collaboration. In what follows, we treat solidarity as analytically distinct from tactical cooperation or negotiated alliances and ground this distinction in a practice-oriented, prosocial definition.

We define solidarity as coordinated prosocial practices that involve some cost to actors and benefit others (Simpson/Willer 2015; Prainsack/Buyx 2017). This practice criterion makes solidarity observable in concrete behaviors, while allowing for variation in how solidaristic practices are normatively framed and institutionally organized. For example, tax-funded redistribution or just-transition schemes illustrate solidarity at the institutional level. In such cases, individual altruistic intent is not required, since solidaristic practices may also be institutionally mediated and organized through formal schemes of redistribution or protection (Morena et al. 2019). Cooperation, by contrast, often remains thin and expedient – a temporary alignment of interests that dissolves once conditions change (Bennett/Segerberg 2013). Conflating cooperation with solidarity thus risks obscuring what is novel about the emerging manifestations of solidarity. Yet we currently lack a framework to capture how contemporary forms of solidarity differ from those of the past. This article addresses that gap by asking: What makes emerging forms of solidarity qualitatively different from earlier ones, and how can we theorize those differences? Our aim is to develop a conceptual lens that recognizes the new mechanisms and scales at play in these innovations.

An array of recent developments suggests that solidarity is being reconfigured in ways not easily captured by established categories. Across Europe and beyond, communities and networks are improvising solidaristic responses to crises in ways that are neither wholly self-interested nor rooted in traditional identities (Feischmidt et al. 2019). Grassroots climate mutual aid initiatives, for instance, have proliferated in response to intensifying climate disasters (Bazzani 2023; 2024). Strangers often mobilize to support one another – opening their homes to evacuees and organizing informal supply chains after disasters – not due to expectations of reciprocity, but driven by a shared sense of vulnerability and moral duty in a warming world.

Similarly, citizens are forming renewable energy cooperatives to democratize the shift to clean power. These cooperatives reject profit maximization in favor of community benefit, reinvesting surpluses into local sustainability projects and so-

cial equity measures. In doing so, they transform what would otherwise be a market transaction (buying electricity) into a relationship of trust, mutual aid, and collective decision-making. Tellingly, such energy communities explicitly frame their mission in terms of solidarity – providing affordable clean power and community development rather than just selling kilowatt-hours (Wade et al. 2025).

Emergent ›eco-solidarity‹ alliances likewise link diverse groups around shared ecological and justice goals. For example, the organization *EcoPeace Middle East* unites Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis to jointly manage water resources and climate adaptation, bridging political divides for a common good (Peters et al. 2025). During Europe's recent refugee crisis, volunteer networks similarly rallied under the slogan #RefugeesWelcome, using digital platforms to coordinate assistance for asylum seekers (della Porta 2018). These grassroots efforts forged transnational ties of support – an emerging European solidarity from below (Koos / Seibel 2019).

Cases such as climate mutual aid, community energy cooperatives, disaster mutual aid networks, and just-transition alliances reveal solidarities that are not well captured by the dominant categories of earlier eras. Earlier socialist, communist, and feminist movements already forged powerful transnational and intergenerational solidarities, but the forms examined here differ in their explicit orientation toward distant others, future generations, and ecological limits. They are not anchored in any single identity category, nor are they purely transactional. Instead, these forms of solidarity hinge on distinct configurations of relational mechanisms (such as shared ethical commitments, recognition of interdependence, and deliberate cooperation across difference) and operate through densely interconnected scales (translocal, transnational, and explicitly cross-generational) that link local practices, transnational networks, and future-oriented publics around ecological limits and the protection of distant others. Such phenomena underscore the need for an updated theoretical framework to explain how and why solidarity is being reimagined in the context of sustainability challenges.

In response to these gaps, we use the term »innovative solidarity« as a flexible descriptive label for heterogeneous contemporary forms of solidarity emerging under conditions of ecological crisis and global risk, rather than as a rigid typology or a normative ideal. Building on recent work on »altruistic solidarity« (Bazzani 2025a), our approach shifts attention from solidarity as an abstract value or cultural idiom to solidarity as patterned prosocial action. This practice-oriented, consequentialist lens treats solidarity as collective action that provides benefits to others at some cost to actors, while allowing such practices to take different normative and institutional forms. Defining solidarity in terms of observable prosocial behavior (Simpson / Willer 2015) offers a concrete criterion for identifying when genuine solidarity is at work (as opposed to mere rhetoric or coincidental cooperation). It also allows us to distinguish forms of solidarity based on whom

they benefit – whether in-group members, distant strangers, or future generations – and on the motivations and norms that sustain them.

Adopting this perspective, the remainder of the paper develops our argument in several steps. In this article, by ›theory‹ we mean an explanatory account that identifies generative mechanisms linking conditions to observable solidaristic practices. By ›theorizing‹, we mean the iterative process of formulating, refining, and delimiting such mechanism-based explanations (Abend 2008; Swedberg 2012). In the next section, we elaborate a mechanism-based theoretical framework of solidarity, drawing on classical theory as well as contemporary debates on prosociality, moral economies, digital activism, and risk. We then propose a set of analytical propositions to explain how new solidarities form and why they depart from classical patterns. Finally, we discuss a set of case illustrations to assess the plausibility of these mechanisms in practice, before concluding with implications for theory and policy. These cases serve as empirical illustrations for assessing the plausibility of the proposed mechanisms.

Our aim is to clarify how emergent forms of solidarity shape the prospects for collective action under conditions of ecological crisis.

2 Theoretical Framework

This section develops the conceptual and explanatory framework for analysing emerging forms of solidarity in sustainability transitions.

2.1 Conceptualizing Solidarity as Prosocial Practice

Solidarity refers to coordinated prosocial practices that involve some cost to actors and benefit others (Bazzani 2025a). This behavioral criterion sharpens the concept: solidarity manifests when people tangibly support one another at a cost to themselves, not merely when they feel empathy or declare loyalty (Prainsack 2020). Notably, solidarity does not require purely selfless intent; even strategic or duty-driven acts can count, provided they generate prosocial outcomes for others (Prainsack/Buyx 2017; Simpson/Willer 2015). In other words, reciprocity and enlightened self-interest can still yield solidaristic outcomes under the right normative conditions (Molm et al. 2007). Defining solidarity in terms of observable prosocial practice distinguishes it from generic cooperation or social capital, which may involve coordination or reciprocity without the same distribution of costs and benefits toward others (Portes 1998). Crucially, this practice-based view asks who benefits from a solidaristic act, leading to a distinction between mutualistic and altruistic solidarity (Bazzani 2025a). In mutualistic solidarity, helping others also benefits the actor (via reciprocity or shared payoffs) – for

example, a labor strike for higher wages aids one's coworkers *and* oneself. In altruistic solidarity, by contrast, actors incur costs with minimal expectation of return, primarily to benefit others. Many emerging sustainability solidarities tilt toward this altruistic form. For example, climate mitigation in wealthy societies often requires present costs (lifestyle changes, transition costs) whose benefits largely accrue to poorer communities and future generations – a one-sided cost (Markowitz/Shariff 2012). Defining solidarity through prosocial practice and distinguishing its mutualistic vs. altruistic forms gives us an analytic handle on the concept. It anchors our framework in concrete actions and highlights a qualitative shift: from the inward-looking, reciprocal solidarity prevalent in the twentieth century to more outward-looking, unilateral forms of solidarity oriented toward ›distant others‹ in the twenty-first century.

2.2 Classical Theories of Solidarity

Classical social theorists provide a baseline for understanding how today's solidarities differ. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim (1984/[1893]) contrasted mechanical solidarity, the cohesion of individuals in a homogeneous, tradition-bound community, with organic solidarity, the interdependence binding people in a complex, differentiated society. As societies modernized, Durkheim argued that solidarity shifted from mechanical to organic forms. Organic solidarity was thought to emerge from mutual dependence: since each person's livelihood depends on others, a shared interest should arise. Around the same time, Tönnies (1887) described a similar transition from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (society). *Gemeinschaft* entails intimate, affect-laden ties in familiar groups (family, village) – solidarity grounded in loyalty. *Gesellschaft* denotes the looser, impersonal associations of urban-market life, where bonds are more contractual. Both Durkheim and Tönnies were concerned with how solidarity could extend beyond particularistic, tight-knit groups to larger, more abstract collectivities. They assumed that even in large modern societies, solidarity remained bounded by a sense of ›we-ness‹, often defined by national citizenship, class, or other group identities and buttressed by institutions like the state, church, or unions (Anderson 1983).

Mid-twentieth-century theorist Polanyi (1944) introduced the concept of the »double movement« and the need to re-embed markets in social relations. He observed in *The Great Transformation* that unfettered market expansion disembedded economic activity from social constraints, eroding communal supports and creating insecurity. Society pushes back with a protective counter-movement: through social policies, cooperatives, and other mutual aid mechanisms, communities reassert social solidarity and moral principles in economic life. Early labor movements and welfare states exemplified this: they institutionalized

solidarity (e.g. pensions, public assistance, union funds) to protect people from market instabilities. Polanyi's analysis anticipated the notion of a moral economy guided by norms of fairness, duty, and communal well-being (Thompson 1971; Bolton/Laaser 2013). Later scholars likewise stressed that market behavior is embedded in social relationships and norms (Granovetter 1985). Importantly, historical solidarity movements were usually bounded at the local or national level, assuming a delineated community of solidarity (citizens protecting each other via social insurance, workers supporting one another through unions). Thus, classical solidarities were predominantly inward-looking – confined to in-group members – and often reciprocal (grounded in mutual self-interest or shared identity) (Wimmer 2008).

2.3 Beyond Boundaries: New Perspectives in Late Modernity

Developments in late-modern society have stretched and challenged these classical views of solidarity. Research shows that even when structural interdependence or a shared identity exists, people will not automatically act in solidarity; certain conditions must be met (Lindenberg et al. 2006). Factors such as trust, perceived fairness, effective leadership, cultural framing, and emotional cues all influence whether group members actually help one another. For example, individuals are more likely to aid in-group members if they feel a moral obligation and see peers setting an example (van Zomeren et al. 2008). Moreover, the question of who is included in the moral circle of ›we‹ has become central. Berman's (2006) history of European social democracy shows that expanding solidarity from class to nation was contentious but did broaden the community of obligation (though greater internal diversity can complicate broad solidarity (Putnam 2007)). Today, a similar question is posed on a global scale: can solidarity extend to all humanity, to non-citizens, or even to future generations? Some theorists invoke the idea of *cosmopolitan solidarity*, an ethic of solidarity that looks outward to include strangers and distant others (Beck 2006; Giddens 1991). Empirical evidence suggests this is possible: individuals who strongly identify as global citizens are more willing to make personal sacrifices to address global problems (Buchan et al. 2011). This resonates with research on transnational activism: in causes like migrant rights or climate change, activists deliberately frame issues in terms of commonality that bridges national and ethnic divides, enlarging the perceived ›we‹ (della Porta 2018; della Porta/Steinhilper 2022). Public attitudes during Europe's 2015 refugee influx showed both the limits and possibilities of extending solidarity to outsiders: while some reacted with hostility, others demonstrated a willingness to help, especially when humanitarian appeals struck a chord (Koos/Seibel 2019). Similarly, storytelling and participatory practices can foster solidarity among people who

initially have little in common by cultivating shared identities and moral commitments (Polletta 2002; Polletta 2016).

Historical experiences of solidarity anchored in labour and feminist movements have long relied on ›thick‹ ties, durable organizations (e.g. unions, strike funds, mutual-aid committees, consciousness-raising groups), and predominantly redistributive claims within bounded constituencies (Fantasia 1988; Silver 2003). By contrast, contemporary solidarities responding to global challenges are more outward-oriented: they mobilize for beneficiaries beyond the in-group (distant others and future generations), coordinate through networked and digitally mediated action, and often hinge on prosocial practices that do not presume reciprocity from recipients (Bennett/Segerberg 2013; Tufekci 2017; Simpson/Willer 2015). This contrast is analytical rather than dichotomous: labour-environment coalitions and feminist care infrastructures show how legacy solidarities can be reconfigured toward cosmopolitan aims, combining classic power resources with expanded moral communities (Schmalz et al. 2018; Htun/Weldon 2012).

Digital-era transformations further enable solidarity to transcend boundaries. New communication technologies allow *networked solidarity* to form rapidly across vast distances: a hashtag, viral video, or online campaign can ignite collective concern and coordinated action among people who have never met – a phenomenon of ›connective‹ action (Bennett/Segerberg 2013; Tufekci 2017). These digital solidarities can be remarkably powerful, but they also face challenges: lacking the formal organizations and enduring structures of old social movements, their persistence is uncertain (Tufekci 2017; Loader et al. 2014). Another important shift has been a revival of *moral economy* principles in response to crises. Economic life is always underpinned by moral values, and times of crisis can make this fact visible (Sayer 2015; Beckert 2020). The 2008 financial collapse and ensuing austerity, for example, sparked protests and grassroots initiatives in Europe that explicitly appealed to solidarity – from community kitchens in Greece to Spain's *indignados* movement for social justice (della Porta 2015; Arampatzi 2017). Such instances suggest a return of solidarity-infused moral economies, where citizens collectively affirm values of equity and care in opposition to impersonal market forces (Rakopoulos 2016). In Polanyian terms, efforts to re-embed markets in social relations have taken on transnational dimensions under neoliberal globalization (Banting/Kymlicka 2017; Lahusen/Grasso 2018): civil society networks now span across countries to demand that global markets be tempered by solidarity and fairness. This trend was anticipated by earlier studies of transnational advocacy showing how NGOs and activist coalitions build cross-border ties to pursue moral goals (Keck/Sikkink 1998).

At the micro level, contemporary research sheds light on what drives individuals to contribute to the common good. Social norms and network dynamics critically shape altruistic behavior. If generous norms are publicly honored, or if helping others boosts one's reputation, prosocial actions proliferate (Hardy/

van Vugt 2006). Likewise, experiments show that witnessing others behave generously can trigger cascades of solidarity through emotional contagion and normative influence (Fowler / Christakis 2010). These findings challenge any assumption that shared interests or identities alone will automatically produce solidarity. Instead, they point to the importance of activating mechanisms – social influence, interpretive framing, institutional incentives – that prompt individuals to contribute to collective welfare (Simpson / Willer 2015). In the context of sustainability challenges, this means that even though all of humanity faces a risky global problem like climate change, solidaristic action does not simply materialize; it must be consciously cultivated through the kinds of processes discussed above.

Emerging forms of solidarity diverge from classical patterns in several ways. First, the scope of solidarity is expanding beyond traditional boundaries. Twentieth-century solidarity was often circumscribed by nation or class; by contrast, many contemporary cases involve solidarity with out-groups (e.g. refugees or distant strangers), with future generations (Bazzani 2022b), and with projected life chances not yet realized (Bazzani / Vignoli 2022), and, in some cases, with non-human nature. Classical theory assumed solidarity would emerge almost automatically from social structure or habit, whereas today it often must be actively constructed and continually maintained. Third, new solidarities are more reflexive and value-explicit: participants consciously invoke ethical justifications for their actions, rather than simply following tradition or self-interest. This reflexivity makes solidarity more inclusive (open to all who share the values) but also more dependent on sustained commitment (since it is not cemented by unchangeable ties like kinship or place). Fourth, many recent examples blur the line between community and society. For instance, an urban renewable energy cooperative can create a quasi-*Gemeinschaft* of neighbors within the impersonal *Gesellschaft* of the market, and online activist networks form intentional ›families‹ of support within global social media systems. This kind of hybridity – small communities of solidarity nested within complex modern systems – is a hallmark of innovative forms.

2.4 Mechanisms of Solidarity in Sustainability Transitions

To analyze how these new forms of solidarity take shape, we adopt a multi-level, mechanism-based framework. Following broad mechanism-based approaches in explanatory sociology (Hedström / Swedberg 1998; Hedström / Ylikoski 2010), and drawing on Maurer's systematization of sociological mechanisms (Maurer 2016), we treat mechanisms as recurring generative social processes that specify how identifiable conditions give rise to solidaristic practices through situational, action-formation, and transformational pathways. In this paper, these general pathways are specified primarily as meso-level social processes – such

as deliberation, moral economy, shared risk framing, institutional embedding, and boundary bridging – through which solidaristic practices are generated, stabilized, and, under adverse conditions, undermined.

Solidarity operates across three levels (Bazzani 2025a): individual, collective, and institutional. At the individual level, it appears in personal sacrifices for others (riding a bike to cut emissions, volunteering at a community garden); at the collective level, in coordinated group efforts (youth climate strikes, neighborhood mutual-aid networks); and at the institutional level, in formal policies (a city fund for climate refugees or the EU's *Just Transition Fund* supporting regions and workers in decarbonization). These levels interact dynamically: individual altruistic acts can aggregate into social movements; successful collective actions can spur supportive policy changes; and robust institutions in turn encourage more individuals to participate by lowering the risks and costs of acting in solidarity. A multi-level perspective reminds us that solidarity is not a one-off event or a mere sentiment —it is an evolving process that can scale up and stabilize. To endure over time, solidarity typically needs alignment across levels (for instance, personal commitments reinforced by organizations and public policies) (Prainsack 2020).

Within this multi-level picture, we focus on five key mechanisms that appear crucial for the emergence and persistence of solidarity under novel conditions. Our contribution to mechanism-based approaches is to specify a mid-range set of mechanisms tailored to solidarity in sustainability transitions, and to outline their observable implications for comparative assessment across cases and scales. These mechanisms often intersect across micro, meso, and macro contexts, but examining each one highlights how solidarity is enabled in new circumstances. The five mechanisms are: (1) communicative deliberation, (2) moral economy, (3) shared risk framing, (4) supportive institutionalization, and (5) boundary-bridging networks, each elaborated below with examples.

Communicative deliberation. Open and inclusive dialogue can forge solidarity by allowing people to reason through differences and discover common ground. Habermas (1984/[1981]) argues that egalitarian communication can build consensus on shared norms and goals. In practice, when diverse individuals jointly deliberate about a problem, they often develop a felt sense of ›we‹. Such interaction rituals can generate collective effervescence and feelings of unity (Collins 2004), helping transform separate individuals into a community. For example, citizens' assemblies on climate policy in countries such as France, the UK, and Ireland have convened people from different walks of life to discuss climate risks. Through facilitated discussion, participants frequently report a greater appreciation of others' perspectives and a realization of shared purpose, even when they begin from divergent positions. The outcome is not only better-informed policy proposals but also a reflexive solidarity: people support collective action because they have reasoned together and agreed on its necessity. Deliberation thus legitimates solidarity by grounding it in reasoned agreement rather than in mere sentiment or tra-

dition. It also builds interpersonal trust and empathy, as hearing one another's experiences can humanize those who were initially ›others‹. Empirical studies of community renewable energy cooperatives find that regular meetings and participatory decision-making increase members' commitment to the group's solidaristic goals (Hicks / Ison 2018). In social movements, likewise, spaces for dialogue – from online forums to local general assemblies – help activists forge collective identity and morale. Polletta's research shows that horizontal, participatory practices (for instance, the general assemblies in the Occupy movement) deepened solidarity because participants felt heard and saw their values reflected in group decisions (Polletta 2016). In today's diverse societies, communicative deliberation has become a key glue for solidarity: rather than being assumed, solidarity often must be ›talked into existence‹. Especially with abstract or unevenly distributed risks like climate change, only through inclusive dialogue can people recognize their interdependence and build the trust needed to act together.

Moral economy. A second mechanism is the deliberate embedding of moral values into economic life through practices of moral economy, including alternative monetary and exchange arrangements explicitly oriented toward collective benefit and ecological goals (Bazzani 2019; Bazzani 2020; Bazzani 2022a). Many sustainability initiatives explicitly prioritize ethics and community welfare over profit, creating alternative models such as cooperatives, community-supported agriculture, time banks, and sharing platforms (Bazzani 2021). These moral economies foster solidarity in at least two ways. First, by asserting shared principles of fairness, mutual aid, and stewardship, they form a normative community among participants (Laville et al. 2015). For example, members of a food cooperative who commit to affordable prices and volunteer labor are united by an ethic of solidarity with low-income consumers and local farmers; they treat economic exchange not as a cold transaction but as a collective effort to support each other and uphold common ideals (Jaklin et al. 2015). Second, these initiatives generate concrete mutual support through their practices. The spread of time-banking systems –where people exchange services based on hours of work rather than money – illustrates this dynamic: participants regularly help neighbors with tasks like childcare or home repairs outside the cash economy, fostering reciprocity and trust (Naughton-Doe et al. 2021). In the broader sustainability transition, a prominent example is the rise of renewable energy cooperatives. By the mid-2020s, thousands of renewable energy co-ops had spread across Europe, engaging millions of citizen-members (REScoop.eu 2025). These co-ops operate on solidarity principles: members pool resources to invest in clean energy, share the benefits within the community, and often implement ›solidarity tariffs‹ to make electricity affordable for lower-income households (Caramizaru / Uihlein 2020). Such practices reinvest surpluses into social or green projects instead of maximizing private profit, echoing Polanyi's counter-movement on a decentralized scale. They demonstrate that communities can successfully govern shared

resources through cooperation and trust – findings consistent with Ostrom's studies of self-organized resource management (Ostrom 1990). The cumulative effect is to normalize solidarity as an economic logic. As people witness these models succeeding, it challenges the notion that self-interest must dominate markets. It shows that economic arenas can be governed by collective norms and mutual aid (Laville et al. 2015), which in turn inspires further solidarity initiatives and pressures larger institutions to accommodate values beyond profit.

Shared risk framing. A distinctive catalyst for contemporary solidarity is the recognition of shared global risks and actively framing those risks in moral terms. Modern hazards like climate change or pandemics create objective interdependencies – everyone is vulnerable, albeit in unequal ways (Beck 1992/[1986]). But translating shared risk into solidarity often requires conscious narrative work by movement leaders, media, or institutions. Activists and policymakers who cast a crisis as a common challenge can spark a sense of united purpose. For instance, climate justice movements frame global warming not only as an environmental or technical problem but as a matter of collective survival and fairness. Slogans such as ›we are all in the same boat‹ convey that people around the world share a fate and therefore should support one another to avert catastrophe. The 2019 Global Climate Strike vividly demonstrated this dynamic: millions of young people across continents marched in unison – one of the largest climate protests in history (Wahlström et al. 2019) – with many explicitly invoking solidarity across generations and with harder-hit regions of the world (IPCC 2022). By highlighting the universality of the threat and the injustice of who suffers most, such framing helps construct a cosmopolitan ›we‹: participants feel solidarity not only with their local peers but also with distant others who bear the brunt of the problem. Shared-risk framing thus converts awareness of danger into a moral impetus for solidarity. That said, this mechanism is fragile – competing narratives can undermine it. If people interpret risks in zero-sum, exclusionary terms (›protect our own, exclude others‹), solidarity will fracture along national or ethnic lines. During the COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive appeals like the maxim ›no one is safe until everyone is safe‹ (urging equitable vaccine distribution) competed with nationalist responses; where the inclusive frame prevailed through global cooperation and grassroots mutual aid, cross-border solidarity emerged (Mould et al. 2022). Beck described this potential as »emancipatory catastrophism« – the idea that confronting a catastrophe can liberate society from parochialism and generate new cooperative bonds (Beck 2015). In essence, when people come to view a looming disaster as a shared fate, their circle of moral concern can expand dramatically. Solidarity grounded in shared risk is not about direct reciprocity or similarity; it is about recognizing common vulnerability and a moral responsibility to others in the same peril, even if they are distant or will never reciprocate. It aligns ethical motivation with our collective risk horizon, prompting present sacrifices to safeguard others and the future.

Supportive institutionalization. Grassroots solidarity efforts often begin informally, but their long-term durability may hinge on support from formal institutions, including legal and administrative arrangements that secure recognition and access for vulnerable groups (Pasqualini / Bazzani 2021). This mechanism involves incorporating solidarity into laws, policies, and organizational structures to amplify and stabilize nascent prosocial practices. It can occur bottom-up, when organic community initiatives gain recognition or resources from authorities, or top-down, when institutions proactively design programs to foster solidarity. A bottom-up example occurred during Europe's 2015–2016 refugee influx: across many cities, local volunteers spontaneously organized to assist arriving refugees with food, shelter, and integration. In cities like Barcelona and Berlin, officials set up liaison offices to assist citizen refugee-aid groups with meeting spaces, logistics, and funding (García / Jørgensen 2018; Cantat 2020). This official support enabled local solidarity networks to persist beyond the initial crisis and expand their reach, while also conferring legitimacy – helping strangers became not just a private charitable act but a recognized part of public policy. Institutionalization also allows solidarity to scale up. When state or international bodies get involved, they can connect and standardize isolated efforts into broader programs (Hopman / Knijn 2022). At the European Union level, the *Just Transition Mechanism* explicitly embeds solidarity principles: wealthier member states are expected to help finance decarbonization in coal-dependent regions, and policies aim to protect workers and vulnerable communities during the green transition. By creating dedicated funds and inclusive planning processes, the EU is institutionalizing solidarity across countries and social groups. More generally, formal mechanisms – legal mandates, funding streams, organizational infrastructure – help ›lock in‹ solidaristic behaviors, making them less contingent on fleeting goodwill. History suggests that many solidarities became truly powerful only after they gained institutional footing: for instance, postwar welfare states transformed informal worker mutual aid into nationwide social insurance, vastly increasing the scale and stability of solidarity. Likewise today, innovative local experiments (renewable energy co-ops, youth climate groups, neighborhood aid networks) can spread and endure when buttressed by supportive policies – such as subsidies for community energy projects, legal recognition of citizen initiatives, or public funding to coordinate volunteers. To be sure, institutionalization can introduce bureaucracy or require compromises, potentially dampening grassroots energy. But without some formal integration, many solidarity initiatives would remain isolated sparks vulnerable to burnout or shifting political winds. A mechanism-focused view therefore pays attention to feedback loops between civil society and institutions: when civic solidarities are recognized, resourced, and embedded in governance arrangements, solidarity becomes an expected norm of collective life. For example, if a city routinely mobilizes volunteers for community gardens or disaster relief through an official program, residents may come to see such par-

ticipation as a normal civic duty. In these ways, embedding solidarity into institutions helps transform episodic acts of mutual aid into a stable social infrastructure.

Boundary-bridging networks. The final mechanism involves building networks and cultivating brokers that link different social groups, enabling solidarity to leap across divides that traditionally kept people apart. Many of the most novel solidarities today are *bridging* in character; they connect individuals and groups across cleavages of ethnicity, class, nationality, or even species. Such bridging seldom happens automatically; it often relies on intentional brokerage or organizational forms that span boundaries. Consider the emergence of ›just transition‹ alliances that bring environmental activists together with labour unions – constituencies that have often been uneasy partners. In Europe, such coalitions have frequently depended on institutionalized social dialogue, mediating organizations, and cross-sector forums that enabled actors to negotiate common goals across environmental and employment agendas (Molina 2022; Eurofound 2025). Through these interactions, labour and climate actors increasingly articulated shared claims around fairness, worker protection, and green employment pathways. Public slogans such as ›There are no jobs on a dead planet‹ condensed this convergence into a widely communicable solidarity frame (ILO 2014).

Another example comes from the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis. Pan-European volunteer networks emerged to aid refugees, with activists from multiple countries coordinating via social media and relying on a few multilingual hubs to channel information and resources between local groups and international supporters, thereby greatly reducing barriers to cooperation (Keck/Sikkink 1998). Research shows that when bridging ties exist, cooperative norms and resources diffuse much more widely (Granovetter 1973; Centola 2018). Boundary-spanning actors today include international NGOs, transnational advocacy networks, epistemic communities linking experts with activists, diaspora groups connecting their homelands and host countries, and digital influencers rallying global audiences. Digital connectivity in particular has spawned new ad hoc brokers: for example, Twitter hashtags like #FridaysForFuture and #ClimateStrike acted as hubs linking climate-concerned youth worldwide. This way, a single teenager's school strike in Sweden (Greta Thunberg) was amplified into a coordinated movement of millions (Tufekci 2017), generating an unprecedented transnational youth solidarity for climate action. Similarly, Indigenous communities partnering with environmental NGOs against deforestation, and food-delivery couriers in China using company chat apps to organize collective action, show how disparate actors can unite against shared threats (Lei 2021). In general, bridging ties overcome mistrust and unfamiliarity, weaving different communities into a broader fabric of mutual support. As globalization renders some traditional boundaries more permeable while new divides (digital or infor-

mational) persist, intentionally cultivating cross-cutting networks is crucial for spreading solidarity to more diverse constituencies.

Together, these five mechanisms form a framework for understanding innovative solidarity. The next section outlines the research design used to illustrate and assess the plausibility of these mechanisms across a set of well-documented cases.

3 Research Design and Methodology

This article develops a theory-informed comparative synthesis of four well-documented cases to examine how innovative solidarities manifest across diverse contexts in Europe's sustainability transition. The cases were selected as illustrative and theoretically relevant examples that allow us to probe the plausibility, scope conditions, and comparative relevance of the proposed mechanisms (Yin 2018). Four empirical cases were selected as critical exemplars of emergent solidarity: the Fridays for Future youth climate strikes (Kowasch et al. 2021), community-led renewable energy cooperatives (Končalović et al. 2023), ›Just Transition‹ coalitions bridging labor and environmental groups (Velicu/Barca 2020), and grassroots mutual aid in disaster response (Mould et al. 2022). These cases represent different domains – social movements, economic cooperation, policy coalition, and crisis relief – providing variation in conditions under which solidarity is mobilized. Taken together, the cases illuminate the five theorized mechanisms (communicative deliberation, moral economy, shared risk framing, institutionalization, boundary-bridging) in practice.

The discussion of each case draws on published case studies, policy documents, movement materials, media reports, and existing scholarly analyses produced mainly between 2015 and 2025. For example, the Fridays for Future discussion draws on published studies of movement communication and participation (Wahlström et al. 2019), while the energy cooperatives case draws on EU directives and existing case studies of local projects. A mechanism-based interpretive approach guides the discussion (Hedström/Ylikoski 2010). This means that rather than treating solidarity as a vague cultural trait, we use the case material to assess the plausibility of recurring meso-level generative social processes – such as deliberation, moral economy, shared risk framing, supportive institutionalization, and boundary bridging – through which solidaristic practices may be generated, stabilized, and sometimes undermined. The argument is grounded in a comparative reading of documentary and scholarly materials, but it should be read as theory-building and interpretive synthesis rather than as a report of original fieldwork or systematic comparative coding. The article is qualitative and interpretive in orientation, situating each case in its socio-political context and using existing documentary and scholarly materials to illustrate the mechanisms

proposed in the theoretical framework. Importantly, the definition of solidarity guiding this inquiry is that of coordinated prosocial practices that involve some cost to actors and benefit others. Such practices may be direct or institutionally mediated, and may take mutualistic or altruistic forms depending on how costs and benefits are distributed. This definition (as developed in the theoretical framework) underscores that solidarity entails practical acts of mutual support rather than merely feelings of compassion and does not require purely altruistic motives (Prainsack/Buyx 2017; Bazzani 2025a). It also permits institutionalized forms of solidarity, recognizing that formal organizations and policies can channel solidaristic behavior. Adopting this conceptualization, the analysis treats solidarity as an observable pattern of action (e.g. resource-sharing, collective protest, aid-giving) rather than an inherent group property. Accordingly, the empirical sections should be read as theory-guided comparative illustrations based on existing materials, not as claims derived from original data collection or newly produced empirical analyses. In what follows, each case is discussed with attention to how these meso-level generative processes emerge, interact, and shape solidaristic practices in context.

4 Case Illustrations: Innovative Solidarities in Practice

To illustrate the theoretical framework, this section discusses four European cases – the youth climate movement *Fridays for Future*, citizen-run energy cooperatives, ›just transition‹ coalitions, and disaster mutual aid networks. Together, the cases illustrate how the proposed mechanisms of innovative solidarity (communicative deliberation, moral economy, shared risk framing, supportive institutionalization, and boundary-bridging) take shape in practice and how they link grassroots action with broader structural change.

4.1 Fridays for Future: Youth Climate Strikes and Intergenerational Solidarity

Fridays for Future (FFF) emerged in 2018 as a youth-driven wave of transnational climate protest, beginning with Greta Thunberg's lone school strike and quickly expanding into weekly demonstrations by millions of students across Europe (Wahlström et al. 2019; Han/Ahn 2020). The movement grew through horizontal, grassroots organizing: local FFF groups held open assemblies and online forums to voice grievances and co-create demands, even collaborating with scientists to draft detailed climate policy proposals (Wahlström et al. 2019). This inclusive, deliberative approach grounded the movement's solidarity in reasoned dialogue,

helping diverse young activists forge a shared purpose rather than following any partisan line.

FFF's discourse also framed climate action as a moral obligation and a shared fate. By walking out of class, youth signaled personal sacrifice for the common good of both vulnerable communities today and future generations to come. Slogans like ›our future‹ and ›there is no planet B‹ captured norms of intergenerational justice and a sense of common vulnerability (IPCC 2022). This ethical and cosmopolitan framing broadened FFF's appeal beyond youth: parents, teachers, and other allies formed ›For Future‹ groups in solidarity with the strikers, united by the idea that everyone has a responsibility to ensure a livable planet (Parents For Future UK 2019; della Porta 2018). By challenging market-centric values with calls for fairness and duty, the school strikers built a moral community that legitimized their cause and pressured authorities to respond (Fisher/Nasrin 2021).

Although FFF began outside formal institutions, it soon made inroads into policy arenas. Dozens of city councils across Europe endorsed the strikes or declared climate emergencies in line with the students' demands, and movement representatives gained audiences with national and EU leaders, contributing to stronger climate pledges (such as the EU's 2050 net-zero goal) and just-transition funds that echoed FFF's calls for solidarity (European Commission 2019a). At the same time, the movement cultivated broad coalitions across social divides. ›Parents for Future UK‹, ›Scientists for Future‹, and trade union partners joined forces with the youth, demonstrating an unusual cross-generational and cross-sector alliance for climate justice (della Porta 2018). By welcoming anyone who shared their goals, the youth strikers helped transform climate activism from a niche concern into a broad societal cause. FFF thus exemplified how innovative solidarity can be actively constructed – through inclusive dialogue, normative appeals, shared-risk narratives, and strategic engagement with institutions – to mobilize support well beyond a single group (Tufekci 2017).

4.2 Energy Cooperatives: Local Solidarity Economies in the Energy Transition

Thousands of local renewable energy cooperatives have sprung up across Europe, enabling communities to jointly invest in clean energy and share its benefits (Bauwens et al. 2016; Wierling et al. 2018; Caramizaru/Uihlein 2020). These citizen-led initiatives operate on principles of solidarity and equity: members each have an equal vote regardless of investment size, and profits are reinvested in local projects or used to lower costs for vulnerable households rather than maximizing private dividends (Caramizaru/Uihlein 2020). Such practices embed moral values into economic life, cultivating a ›community energy‹ ethos of mutual aid and responsibility, while also showing how economic and monetary

infrastructures can be institutionally designed to support solidarity and environmental sustainability (Bazzani 2022a; Bazzani 2025b). Cooperative decision-making further reinforces solidarity – regular member meetings and democratic control give residents a sense of ownership and trust in the venture, building broad support for renewables in the community (van der Schoor / Scholtens 2015; Walker / Devine-Wright 2008). Projects that locals co-design and co-own face less opposition and more enthusiasm, as neighbors view the energy transition as our collective endeavor rather than an external imposition (Walker / Devine-Wright 2008).

Energy co-ops also embody solidarity through risk-sharing and reciprocal support. By localizing energy generation, members insulate themselves from volatile fossil fuel markets and power outages, strengthening community resilience (Bauwens et al. 2016; Wierling et al. 2018). Many co-ops explicitly spread transition burdens fairly – for example, some set aside funds or energy credits to help members struggling with bills, treating energy security as a shared responsibility (Lowitzsch 2020). These grassroots efforts have been amplified by supportive policies. The EU's Clean Energy Package (2018) urged Member States to recognize and assist ›renewable energy communities‹, prompting national measures like feed-in tariffs and grants that helped co-ops flourish (Caramizaru / Uihlein 2020; Lowitzsch 2020). In countries that provided enabling frameworks, small volunteer-driven projects scaled up into a significant force for a just energy transition, whereas onerous regulations stifled co-ops elsewhere (Caramizaru / Uihlein 2020). By institutionalizing support for community power, governments effectively ›lock in‹ solidaristic models of energy provision (European Commission 2019b).

Finally, energy cooperatives bridge social and sectoral divides. A single co-op venture often brings together rural landowners, urban consumers, local officials, and engineers in a common enterprise, uniting stakeholders who rarely collaborate. Cooperative networks also link communities across regions and countries: through federations like REScoop.eu, veteran co-ops share knowledge and microfinance with newer groups, spreading the model transnationally (REScoop.eu 2025). Energy co-ops demonstrate how alternative economic institutions can align material interests with solidarity norms. By pooling resources democratically and distributing benefits broadly, these initiatives turn abstract principles of fairness and sustainability into concrete practices at the local level (Bauwens et al. 2016; Wierling et al. 2018).

4.3 Just Transition Coalitions: Bridging Labor and Climate Justice

As Europe phases out coal and other carbon-intensive industries, ›just transition‹ coalitions have formed to ensure the burdens and benefits of decarbonization are

shared fairly (Morena et al. 2019). These alliances unite unlikely partners – labor unions, environmentalists, local communities, and policymakers – turning what could be a ›jobs vs. environment‹ clash into a common effort at solidarity. Inclusive dialogue has been key. In Germany, for example, a national Coal Commission in 2018 brought together union leaders, industry, environmental NGOs, and local officials to negotiate a coal exit; after months of deliberation, they reached consensus on phasing out coal by 2038 with a package of support for affected mining regions (Gürtler et al. 2021). This hard-won compromise demonstrated solidarity through reasoned consensus: former adversaries recognized each other's concerns and crafted a plan to protect both the climate and coal communities. Similar multi-stakeholder forums in Spain, Poland, and other countries have reframed ›jobs vs. climate‹ conflicts into joint problem-solving exercises, building trust and mutual understanding for the transition (Morena et al. 2019).

Just transition coalitions build on shared principles of justice and mutual care. Members insist that workers who fueled past prosperity should not be left behind, and that climate action must go hand-in-hand with economic fairness (Räthzel/Uzzell 2019). In practice, these coalitions demand concrete solidarity measures: income protection for displaced workers, retraining programs, and investments to revitalize hard-hit areas (Morena et al. 2019). By recognizing both the planetary risk of climate catastrophe and the socioeconomic risk of an unjust transition, activists and unions find common cause, identifying shared threats and pushing for solutions that create green jobs and cut emissions together (Räthzel/Uzzell 2019). This broad framing expands the constituency for climate policies and underpins measures like the EU's *Just Transition Mechanism and Fund* (European Commission 2019a; European Commission 2021). In one notable instance, German FFF youth coordinated with transport workers for joint mobilizations linking climate mitigation with better public transit – an emblematic example of boundary-spanning solidarity (Räthzel/Uzzell 2019; Tufekci 2017).

Institutional support has rapidly reinforced these solidaristic efforts. The European Green Deal established a Just Transition Mechanism to channel substantial funds and aid to coal-dependent regions, embedding the principle of solidarity into EU policy (European Commission 2019a; European Commission 2021). Many national governments have followed suit by creating just transition task forces and legal mandates that give workers and communities a voice in climate planning (Morena et al. 2019). This formal recognition provides resources and legitimacy to the coalitions, though activists remain watchful that ›just transition‹ rhetoric is matched by real inclusion and not co-opted for show. Such boundary-spanning partnerships give the movement greater power and credibility, countering divide-and-rule tactics (Räthzel/Uzzell 2019).

4.4 Mutual Aid in Disasters: Solidarity in Times of Crisis

When disasters strike, ordinary people often self-organize to support one another, displaying spontaneous solidarity even before official aid arrives. Recent crises in Europe – from extreme floods to the COVID-19 pandemic —have shown this grassroots resilience. During the catastrophic floods in Germany's Ahr Valley in July 2021, local residents and thousands of volunteers mobilized overnight to rescue neighbors and begin cleanup, forming ad hoc ›mud brigades‹ and field kitchens when state response was delayed (Connolly 2021a). Under such shared threat, social barriers quickly fell: strangers worked shoulder-to-shoulder in the mud, and everyone pitched in as first responders (Connolly 2021a). Many volunteers described a powerful feeling of common fate and unity that transcended their usual social differences, a phenomenon long noted in disaster sociology as the emergence of »therapeutic communities« (Fritz 1996; Tierney 2014).

Disaster mutual aid operates on a horizontal, reciprocity-based ethos summed up by the slogan ›solidarity, not charity‹. Rather than one-sided giving, assistance is exchanged among equals: everyone both gives and receives support as needed (Spade 2020). In the flood relief camps, for instance, local survivors and outside volunteers ate together and took care of one another – one moment a person shovels debris from a stranger's home, the next they rest and share a donated meal (Connolly 2021b). Similar neighbor-to-neighbor support networks sprang up during COVID-19 lockdowns, with community groups delivering groceries, medicines, and homemade masks to the vulnerable (Hall 2022; Aldrich 2012). These acts are driven by a shared sense of duty: in a crisis, ›we take care of us‹. Crucially, such bottom-up solidarity also highlights gaps in the formal system. It arises partly because neither state nor market fully met people's needs, compelling communities to step in; volunteers often improvise solutions faster than bureaucracy can, but they cannot shoulder the entire burden (Quarantelli 2008; Tierney 2014). Indeed, participants in the Ahr Valley effort later felt abandoned when authorities withdrew support even as huge rebuilding tasks remained (Connolly 2021b). The lesson is that civic solidarity works best as a supplement to – not a substitute for – robust public aid and infrastructure (European Commission 2021; Spade 2020).

Moments of crisis-driven solidarity also tend to bridge social divides – if only temporarily. In disaster response, people who might never interact in normal times find themselves working side by side as equals; in the 2021 floods, native Germans shoveled debris alongside Syrian refugees who volunteered to help their adopted community (Bier et al. 2023). Such inclusive solidarity can fade once the immediate emergency passes; as life returns to normal, pre-existing inequalities and tensions often resurface (Tierney 2014; Aldrich 2012). To sustain the initial spirit, deliberate efforts are needed during the recovery – open community meetings, inclusive planning, and continued mutual support – so

that people remain united rather than drifting apart when attention wanes (Aldrich 2012). Another challenge is coordinating grassroots efforts with formal institutions: early on, volunteer teams typically act independently while official agencies are overwhelmed; over time, authorities may integrate citizen helpers into the broader response, but mismatches in communication and hierarchy can cause friction (Quarantelli 2008; Tierney 2014). At higher scales, solidarity is also institutionalized: the EU Solidarity Fund and cross-border civil protection agreements pool resources to help any member state hit by disaster (European Commission 2021). Taken together, these experiences show that in dire situations people have a remarkable capacity to unite across differences and care for each other; disasters reveal solidarity in its most visceral form and underline the importance of strengthening both community ties and public support systems before the next crisis (Aldrich 2012; Mould et al. 2022).

Taken together, the cases demonstrate how and why new solidarities emerge – insights we now synthesize to refine the broader theory of solidarity in sustainability transitions.

5 Discussion and Theoretical Implications

Across the cases studied, a unifying narrative emerges: Solidarity is critical for Europe's sustainable transition, but it does not arise spontaneously – it is actively generated by specific mechanisms under certain conditions. The comparative discussion suggests that communicative deliberation, moral economy, shared risk framing, institutionalization, and boundary bridging are recurring processes shaping when and how innovative solidarities take form. In this section, we synthesize insights from the cases to build a mechanism-based theory of contemporary solidarity, address potential criticisms, and draw out implications for both theory and policy.

Mechanisms in Interaction. A key finding is that the five proposed mechanisms are interlinked and mutually reinforcing rather than operating in isolation. For example, communicative deliberation often sets the stage for boundary bridging: in both the FFF youth climate movement and just-transition coalitions, inclusive dialogue helped different actors recognize common ground and forge broader alliances (Wahlström et al. 2019). Likewise, shared risk framing and moral economy frequently work in tandem: recognizing a common threat (e.g. climate catastrophe or community collapse) triggers ethical imperatives of shared responsibility (Chakrabarty 2021; Mould et al. 2022). In the energy cooperative case, for instance, awareness of collective energy insecurity (shared risk) coincided with the decision to adopt equitable principles of operation (moral economy) to address that risk (Caramizaru/Uihlein 2020). Institutionalization can amplify other mechanisms by providing stable forums for deliberation (e.g. Germany's Coal Commis-

sion as an institutionalized communicative process) and by codifying moral commitments (such as the principle of ›no one left behind‹ in EU just-transition policy) (Sarkki et al. 2022; European Commission 2020). Boundary-spanning brokerage, meanwhile, is often necessary to translate moral or risk-based appeals across social divides – for example, union organizers reframed climate science in terms of job security, and climate activists couched environmental demands in social justice terms, effectively aligning different moral registers (Fisher / Nasrin 2021).

Theoretically, these patterns show that solidarity emerges from a configuration of mechanisms: rarely will a single mechanism suffice. Instead, innovative solidarity is constructed through an ensemble of social processes that together reshape interests and identities. It echoes classic insights: Durkheim would recognize new forms of organic solidarity being forged between disparate groups (youth with elders, workers with environmentalists), while Tilly would highlight how social movements succeed by expanding repertoires and coalitions (i. e. boundary-spanning alliances) (Tilly 2004; Bennett / Segerberg 2013). Our cases validate these perspectives in updated form for contemporary challenges.

Reflexivity and Modernization. Another theoretical implication is the crucial role of reflexivity in late-modern forms of solidarity. Beck's »risk society« thesis predicted that global risks would spur new cosmopolitan solidarities by rendering traditional divisions less relevant (Urry 2011; Juris 2012). Our findings partially support this: shared climate risks and even pandemic threats did inspire solidaristic actions cutting across nations and social strata (e.g. transnational youth climate strikes and pan-European volunteering during COVID-19). However, risk awareness alone proved insufficient – reflexive processes, where actors actively interpret and debate these risks, were essential to translate awareness into collective action (Habermas 1987; Mould et al. 2022). The FFF movement is a prime example of reflexive solidarity: young activists engaged in critical dialogue about the failures of older generations and the need to redefine values, essentially a grassroots exercise in reflexive modernization (Beck 2015). Just transition coalitions likewise demonstrated reflexivity within institutions: stakeholders revisited entrenched assumptions (such as ›coal mining = jobs forever‹) and negotiated new social contracts in light of ecological imperatives (Beck 1992/[1986]).

These cases refine Beck's thesis: global risks provide an objective basis for solidarity, but communicative and interpretive work by social actors is what actualizes that solidarity. Habermas's theory of communicative action complements this view – solidarity is strengthened in the lifeworld when people deliberate on norms and achieve mutual understanding, which can then influence system-level change (Habermas 1984/[1981]; Habermas 1987). In practice, the European Green Deal's use of public consultations and just transition dialogues illustrates an institutional effort to inject such communicative rationality into policy, acknowledging that legitimacy and solidarity are co-produced through inclusive discourse.

Institutionalization vs. Autonomy. Our cases highlight a tension between grassroots solidarity and formal institutions. On one hand, institutional support has clearly been vital: EU funds for energy co-ops and coal regions, legal recognition of community energy projects, and government involvement in climate-transition planning have provided resources and stability that purely bottom-up efforts might lack (Caramizaru / Uihlein 2020; Sarkki et al. 2022). Institutionalization can consolidate gains and scale up solidaristic practices (for example, enshrining volunteer protections or creating funding mechanisms ensures solidarity initiatives do not rely solely on fleeting goodwill). On the other hand, too much institutional control can risk co-optation or bureaucratic inertia that blunts solidarity's transformative edge (Sarkki et al. 2022; Mould et al. 2022). Within FFF, for instance, activists debated whether engaging with government initiatives (like youth climate councils) would lead to genuine influence or just tokenism (Sarkki et al. 2022). Many mutual aid organizers likewise prefer to remain outside formal structures to preserve their agility and ethical integrity (Mould et al. 2022).

The emerging view is that solidarity thrives with a balance of autonomy and institutional embeddedness. Too little institutionalization and efforts may fizzle or remain niche; too much and they may lose public trust or radical vision. Successful examples like Spain's negotiated coal miners' transition or Germany's institutionalized energy co-ops suggest that institutions can empower grassroots initiatives without fully subsuming them (Morena et al. 2019; Bauwens et al. 2016). This balance has implications for policy design: effective ›solidarity policy‹ should be participatory and resource-supportive, yet still protect space for civil society initiative and dissent. For sociological theory, it reinforces the importance of multi-scalar analysis: solidarity is co-constructed at the micro (interpersonal), meso (organizational), and macro (institutional) levels simultaneously. Local cultures of solidarity (e.g. regional traditions of cooperativism or activism) intersect with national and European institutional frameworks, underscoring the need for contextual and institutional sensitivity in theorizing solidarity.

Culture and Identity. The cases also underscore the cultural dimension of building solidarity. While we focused on mechanisms, these processes operate within cultural contexts that make solidarity more or less likely. Europe's history of labor movements, welfare states, and community organizations provides a rich reservoir of solidarity norms and narratives that contemporary movements can draw upon (notably, the term »just transition« itself has roots in late-twentieth-century trade union discourse). We observed cultural framing at work in each case: youth activists evoked the moral force of past civil-rights struggles (Greta Thunberg's speeches echo themes from historical justice movements); unions embraced environmental slogans; and community disaster responses invoked a wartime spirit of unity (›we stand together‹ rhetoric was common in pandemic mutual aid). These examples show how cultural repertoires act as both resources and constraints for new solidarities (Tilly 2004; Bennett / Segerberg 2013).

The performance of solidarity – whether a strike, a cooperative meeting, or a volunteer brigade – often taps into familiar collective narratives like brotherhood, unity-in-diversity, or stewardship of the commons to motivate participation (Polletta 2006; Jasper 2018). This implies that mechanism-based explanations must account for meaning-making: processes like moral economy or deliberation inherently involve cultural content, since what is considered ›moral‹ or who is included in the collective ›we‹ is culturally defined. Interestingly, we see a revival of ›solidarity‹ as a public value in European sustainability discourse. EU officials and national leaders now routinely invoke solidarity in discussions of climate action and crisis response (Lahusen / Grasso 2018), marking a notable discursive shift. Some may dismiss this as mere rhetoric, but language matters – such discourse helps legitimize certain actions and sets expectations.

A critical question, however, is whether these new invocations of solidarity are truly expansive and cosmopolitan, or if they also create new exclusions. European climate solidarity, for example, might still overlook voices from the Global South if definitions of ›us‹ are not sufficiently inclusive. Even within Europe, otherwise inclusive movements can inadvertently alienate certain groups (e.g. climate campaigns led primarily by urban, educated youth may alienate some working-class or rural communities unless deliberate boundary-bridging efforts are made). Future research should therefore examine how solidarity narratives draw boundaries of inclusion: who is embraced, who remains at the margins, and how such lines might be shifted toward greater inclusivity.

Positioning the Mechanism-Based Account in Current Debates. We address key alternative readings in the solidarity and sustainability literatures and clarify how our mechanism-based propositions contribute to ongoing debates about boundaries of ›we-ness‹, institutionalization, and the conditions under which solidaristic practices endure or fade. First, one might argue that some instances of ›solidarity‹ we observed are driven more by self-interest or necessity than by shared norms or altruism. For example, are renewable energy cooperatives simply collections of people trying to save on electricity bills? Our evidence suggests otherwise: While material incentives exist, co-op members' willingness to freely share surplus power and commit to community goals indicates a solidaristic orientation beyond pure self-interest (Caramizaru / Uihlein 2020). Our definition of solidarity does not require perfect altruism – enlightened self-interest may also contribute to prosocial practices that benefit others.

A second critique is that state-led mechanisms like the EU's *Just Transition Fund* are top-down and thus not ›real‹ solidarity in a sociological sense (since individuals are not voluntarily sacrificing). We counter that political decisions to redistribute resources to vulnerable regions represent a form of institutionalized solidarity: taxpayers collectively bear costs for others under a normative commitment to fairness. This impersonal, policy-mediated solidarity aligns with Durkheim's

notion of organic solidarity in a complex society, where mutual interdependence is often managed through institutions rather than direct personal ties.

A third concern is the longevity of these solidaristic initiatives: are they merely short-lived responses to crisis that will fade once conditions normalize? Admittedly, sustaining solidarity over time is challenging. For instance, the initial surge of mutual aid during COVID-19 was followed by volunteer fatigue, and climate protest waves like FFF have ebbed and flowed (FFF's momentum dipped after 2019 and required new alliances to sustain it) (Fisher / Nasrin 2021). Nevertheless, some solidaristic outcomes have been institutionalized (e.g. new climate policies, organizations, or funding streams), meaning each wave leaves a residue that can rekindle collective action later. Social movement theory (Tarrow's »cycles of contention«, Melucci's »submerged networks«) suggests that solidarity networks often go dormant but do not disappear, instead remaining latent and ready to reactivate in new forms. Our mechanism-based approach points to factors that help solidarity endure: Repeated deliberative interactions, formalized networks, and resource support tend to prolong commitments, whereas one-off mobilizations without follow-up structures quickly dissipate. The implication is that concerns about impermanence can be mitigated by consciously investing in mechanisms that maintain engagement (such as ongoing forums, civic education, and network-building) so that solidarity becomes a sustained practice rather than a one-off event.

Finally, some may question the Eurocentric scope of our study – are these mechanisms particular to Europe, or do they hold more generally? We argue that the fundamental mechanisms (deliberation, moral framing, shared risk recognition, etc.) are not unique to Europe; they are basic social processes. However, their successful activation is context-dependent. Europe's relatively high social capital, robust civil society, and supportive institutions likely facilitated the solidarities we documented. In settings with repressive governments or low interpersonal trust, similar efforts might face greater obstacles or take different forms (perhaps relying more on kinship networks, religious communities, or even clandestine organizing). This points to a valuable direction for further research: applying our framework in different cultural and political contexts to identify which mechanisms are universal and which are contingent on local conditions.

Synthesis into Theory. In light of these findings, we propose a mechanism-based theory of contemporary solidarity in sustainability transitions. In essence, solidarity in the pursuit of sustainability arises through iterative social processes that align interests, identities, and norms among diverse actors, thereby enabling costly collective actions for the common good. Five processes in particular–communicative deliberation, moral (re)framing of social and economic relations, shared risk recognition, supportive institutional embedding, and boundary-spanning network building – consistently generate and stabilize such solidarity. The outcome, when these mechanisms coalesce, is the construction of a broad-

ened collective identity (for example, ›we the climate generation‹, ›we the energy citizens‹, or ›we the community of fate‹) that motivates coordinated prosocial practices ranging from protest and volunteering to cooperative enterprise and resource redistribution.

This perspective moves beyond classical views of solidarity as either a given (mechanical solidarity based on sameness) or an abstract civic virtue. Instead, it sees solidarity as actively made and remade in response to structural challenges – in our case, the intertwined ecological and social crises of the twenty-first century. It also recognizes a plurality of ›innovative solidarities‹ at different scales – local, national, transnational, issue-specific, institutional, interpersonal – that nevertheless share underlying generative mechanisms. Emphasizing mechanisms helps to explain variations in outcomes: for instance, why youth climate strikes coalesced into a widespread transnational movement (thanks to the confluence of shared risk awareness, digital networks, and a resonant moral narrative), whereas efforts to build EU-wide solidarity for refugee resettlement have been more uneven (perhaps due to weaker deliberative engagement and insufficient boundary spanning to counter xenophobic frames). A mechanism lens encourages us to dissect cases of both success and failure by pinpointing which processes were present or absent. In the refugee case, for example, strong nationalist counternarratives actively undermined solidarity framing. Our theory thus not only explains how solidarity is built when it succeeds, but also why it sometimes fails to materialize when expected.

6 Implications and Conclusion

A strength of mechanism-based theorizing is that it identifies actionable levers – communication arenas, moral-economic arrangements, institutional supports, and boundary-bridging infrastructures – that can be targeted to cultivate solidaristic practices under ecological risk. Understanding these solidarity-generating mechanisms offers concrete guidance for policymakers, activists, and community leaders seeking to foster solidarity in sustainability transitions:

- *Communicative deliberation*: Create inclusive forums (e.g. citizens' assemblies on climate policy, as piloted in countries like France and the UK) to enable open dialogue. Such deliberation builds shared understanding and trust among diverse participants, which can then radiate outward and strengthen broader solidarity.
- *Moral economy*: Promote economic models and policies that embed solidarity principles. For example, support cooperative enterprises, fair-trade and ethical-labelling initiatives, or community-supported agriculture. These ap-

proaches normalize the expectation that economic activities align with social justice and environmental stewardship values.

- *Shared risk framing*: Invest in public education and dialogues that highlight interdependence and common threats. By helping different groups (urban and rural, young and old, etc.) see how issues like climate change or pandemic risk affect everyone's well-being, leaders can cultivate a shared ›community of fate‹. For instance, some European cities have formed solidarity purchasing groups linking urban consumers with local sustainable farmers, fostering urban – rural solidarity around food security.
- *Institutional embedding*: Incorporate participatory and distributive-justice mechanisms into formal policy processes. The EU's inclusion of labor unions and other stakeholders in Green Deal planning is a start, but more can be done. Governments could institutionalize citizen panels or co-management boards (modeled on successful local energy co-ops) to ensure that affected communities have a voice and stake in sustainability initiatives. Such institutionalization provides stability and resources while keeping policies accountable to solidaristic values.
- *Boundary spanning*: Encourage and fund cross-sector collaborations that bring together unlikely allies. Grant programs, for example, could require partnerships between environmental NGOs, labor unions, businesses, and researchers to jointly design transition projects. By forcing interaction and cooperation across social divides, these initiatives build bridging networks and mutual understanding crucial for broad-based solidarity.

Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that broad alliances, inclusive deliberation, moralized economic practices, shared risk framings, supportive institutions, and boundary-bridging networks can generate and stabilize solidaristic practices under conditions of ecological disruption. More broadly, the analysis points to a historical paradox: rather than being displaced by modern individualization or globalization, solidarity is reconfigured through the very pressures of global risk and systemic transformation. Our mechanism-based account thus revisits a classical sociological problem – how forms of we-ness are generated and stabilized – by showing how ecological risk and sustainability transitions reshape boundaries of belonging, obligations toward others, and the institutional conditions under which solidarity can endure. In the European context, the solidarities emerging around sustainability transitions are therefore not epiphenomenal to technical change; they are integral to the transition process itself. The contribution of this article is to theorize these developments in mechanism-based and practice-oriented terms: solidaristic practices are generated, stabilized, and sometimes undermined across scales through recurring social processes under conditions of ecological risk.

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