

The Making of Solidarity: Social and Digital Participation in Neighbourhoods

Executive summary:

This project examined how neighbourhoods make solidarity possible, fragile or unequal in a context where sustainable urban development, social participation and digital communication are increasingly presented as levers of resilience. We asked how newly built or recently transformed neighbourhoods enable citizen engagement and everyday solidarity, what forms of formal and informal involvement emerge, and how digital platforms reshape local relations.

The project adopted a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The empirical work covered six Swiss neighbourhoods in Lausanne, Zürich, Marly and Vernier, with a stronger qualitative focus on the French-speaking sites. The qualitative research combined document analysis, ethnographic observations of civic activities and everyday situations, commented visits, interviews with residents, associations and professionals, and informal discussions. The quantitative component was based on an online survey of residents involved in digital neighbourhood groups (N=151), analysed using structural equation modelling to examine the relationships among offline social activity, digital activity, virtual group commitment, and neighbourhood commitment. The project also included Junior Labs with young people, using webtoons as a creative research device to discuss the future of neighbourhood life.

The findings show, first, that space matters. Neighbourhood organisation and place design strongly condition engagement. Shared terraces, gardens, cafés, community rooms, pedestrian continuities and local events can support encounters and collective involvement, but only when they are accessible, equipped, governed and socially activated. Conversely, closed facilities, unclear responsibilities or weak mediation infrastructures reduce residents' capacity to turn everyday problems into collective issues.

Second, the project shows that sustainability and participation are unequal. Eco-districts and socially mixed developments may promote inclusion, ecological practices and resident involvement. Still, these expectations require unevenly distributed resources: time, energy, money, social networks, confidence in collective settings and familiarity with participatory codes. In the Lausanne case, social mix does not simply remove segregation; it may reorganise inequalities at a micro-scale through different residential trajectories, unequal spatial affordances and selective recognition of what counts as legitimate participation.

Third, the project demonstrates that neighbourhoods are increasingly hybrid. Digital platforms, messaging groups and community apps facilitate information sharing, coordination and mutual aid. However, they do not replace face-to-face interaction. The quantitative analysis shows that offline social activity is strongly associated with digital activity, which in turn strengthens commitment to virtual neighbourhood groups and, subsequently, neighbourhood commitment. Trust remains the strongest predictor of attachment to the neighbourhood. Digital engagement can therefore extend and mediate existing relations, while also reproducing inequalities linked to age, length of residence, digital skills and local embeddedness.

Overall, solidarity does not emerge automatically from proximity, social mix or technological tools. It is made through spatial, social, institutional, and digital infrastructures that enable residents to meet, recognise one another, organise, care, disagree, and act together. The policy implication is clear: resilient neighbourhoods require more than well-designed buildings or participatory ideals. They require low-threshold spaces, visible interlocutors, hybrid tools connected to everyday life, formats that address diverse publics, and recognition of less visible forms of neighbouring, co-presence and practical support.

Research Team

- Prof. Muriel Surdez: Co-leader, Department of Social Sciences, University of Fribourg; project coordination, qualitative research and public sociology.
- Prof. Markus Gmür: Co-leader, Institute for Association, Foundation and Cooperative Management (VMI), University of Fribourg; organisational, cooperative and quantitative expertise.
- Dr Diana Betzler: Senior researcher, VMI, University of Fribourg; responsible for the quantitative component, including survey design and statistical modelling, with a focus on German-speaking contexts.
- Dr Lucien Delley: Senior researcher, Department of Social Sciences, University of Fribourg; responsible for the qualitative and ethnographic component, including fieldwork and interviews, with a focus on French-speaking field sites.

Impact and Outcomes

SCIENTIFIC

- *Publications / Working papers:*
 - Betzler, D., & Delley, L. (in preparation). *Triangulating qualitative and quantitative data from hybrid neighbourhoods*.
 - Delley, L., & Surdez, M. (in preparation). *“Faire plus qu’habiter”? La participation dans les nouveaux quartiers à l’épreuve des trajectoires résidentielles et de l’espace urbain*.
 - Betzler, D. (2026). *Digital mediation in urban neighbourhoods: The link between online and offline social activity, and commitment* [Manuscript submitted for publication].
- *Presentations / keynote speeches / webinars*
 - Betzler, D. (2025, December 2). *From the traditional village to virtual togetherness: Rethinking community in the digital age* [Public lecture]. University of Fribourg, Digital Society lecture series, Fribourg, Switzerland. <https://www.unifr.ch/lettres/de/news/events/?eventid=18419>
- *Scientific conferences*
 - Betzler, D. (2026, August). *Hybrid neighbourhoods: The role of digital activity in neighbourhood commitment* [Conference paper abstract accepted]. European Sociological Association (ESA) Congress, Warsaw, Poland.
 - Delley, L., & Surdez, M. (2026, August). *Unequal access to sustainable living: Everyday frictions and participation in Swiss eco-districts* [Conference paper]

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- abstract accepted]. European Sociological Association (ESA) Congress, Warsaw, Poland.
- Delley, L., & Surdez, M. (2026, July). *Micro-segregation in a planned social-mix eco-district: Residential trajectories, spatial design and the participatory (re)production of inequalities* [Conference paper abstract accepted]. International Sociological Association (ISA) World Congress, Vienna, Austria.
- Betzler, D. (2024, September 18–20). *Platform ecologies in the cultural and creative industries* [Conference paper]. 22nd Interdisciplinary European Conference on Entrepreneurship Research (IECER), MCI | The Entrepreneurial School, Innsbruck, Austria.
- Betzler, D. (2024, July 18–19). *The making of neighbourhood communities: Urban and digital spaces of the common?* [Conference paper]. Fachtagung “Social proximity from a spatial distance,” Institute of Social Sciences, University of Kiel, Kiel, Germany.
- *Teaching activities (general or specialized audiences)*
 - Seminars and teaching: University of Fribourg, 3 BA/MA research seminars in sociology (autumn 2024 and autumn 2025, around 20 students each), producing 45 student interviews :
 - Surdez Muriel, with Lucien Delley: BA Sociology: "Seminar Research", Future of food in a Ecoquartier (Marly)
 - Surdez Muriel, with Lucien Delley: MA Culture, Politics and Religion in Pluralist Societies: Seminar ""How platforms and uberisation are changing our lifestyles ? Research into social and digital relations in an eco-neighbourhood (Marly)"
 - Surdez Muriel, Bachelor's seminar "Sociological research: food in the Marly eco-district"
- *Panel discussions / roundtables*
 - Delley L. (2024, June 6), “s’appropriier l’espace public”, Presentation and participation as expert in the roundtable “Apéros citoyens” organised by the City of Meyrin, Geneva.
- *Associated third-party project*
 - "Connect4Community. Ein Benchmarking zur Förderung von Partizipation und Zusammenhalt in Nachbarschaften" (Innockeck - Innosuisse, Projektdauer: Juni 2025 bis Februar 2026, Praxispartner BeUnity, Leitung: Diana Betzler).
 - Delley, L. (2025). *Nouveaux quartiers : générer de la cohésion sociale au travers de la participation : Rapport d’évaluation des démarches menées dans le quartier de l’Étang à Vernier*. Research report submitted to the City of Vernier and to the Swiss Confederation, November 2025.

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NON-ACADEMIC

- Knowledge transfer for Mobilier:
 - Project poster for Opening of Center for Resilience, 22nd of April 2026
 - Final reporting for the Mobilier Center for Resilience, highlighting key findings on spatial conditions of engagement, unequal sustainability and hybrid digital participation
 - Public exhibition/presentation at Kornhausforum, Bern (under discussion).
- Knowledge transfer to public partners:
 - Delley, L. (2026). *Accompagner la création d'un nouveau quartier : partage d'expérience à partir du quartier de l'Étang*, talk at the National Tripartite Conference, Bern, 22 January 2026
 - Betzler, D. (2026, April 16). *Solidarität in Nachbarschaften* [Workshop]. *Soziokultur & Bubbles: Fachtagung Soziokultur 2026*, Verband Soziokultur.
- Teaching / youth engagement:
 - Junior Labs as research activities : 1 session in Collège St-Michel (Fribourg) and 3 session in Collège du Sud (Bulle); guided tour in Marly; cocktail dinner and discussion format with young adults and teachers on the future of neighbourhood life ; three completed webtoons; data production for affiliated research projects, in collaboration with Caroline Pictet.
- Artistic and cultural outreach:
 - one-month residency with the theatre company Cécile D. to develop and test a research protocol on food practices, conviviality and neighbourhood solidarity. Article and video on the UNIFR website:
<https://www.unifr.ch/alma-georges/articles/2025/gastromancie-ou-lart-de-la-divination-culinaire>
- Interviews and media coverage:
 - Gmuer, M. (2026, May 25). *Digitale Plattformen fördern Partizipation und Solidarisierung in Nachbarschaften*. SES Webzine – University of Fribourg.
<https://www2.unifr.ch/seswebzine/2026/05/25/digitale-plattformen-fordern-partizipation-und-solidarisierung-in-nachbarschaften/->.
 - Chevillat A. (2025) « La générosité nous rassemble », Article based on an interview with Muriel Surdez and Lucien Delley, published in the French-language edition of *Coopération*, 22 December 2025, pp. 18–20 :
https://www.unifr.ch/mobiliercenter/de/assets/public/files/Toute_l_editi on Coopération 2025-12-22.pdf

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- Michaud, P. (2026, March). *Connais-tu ton voisinage? universitas*, 01(2026), 12–15 (Interview with Betzler, D. & Delley, L.) :
<https://www.unifr.ch/universitas/de/ausgaben/2026/la-ville/connais-tu-ton-voisinage.html>
- Delley, L. (2026 -forthcoming) interview in *La Liberté*, July 2026
- Delley, L. (scheduled for 2026, September 7). Live radio interview for *Tribu*, RTS La Première, with journalist Julien Magnollay, on social and digital networks in neighbourhoods.
- Public outputs:
 - Online publication of three webtoons produced through the Junior Labs :
https://www.webtoons.com/fr/canvas/webtoon-ton-quartier/list?title_no=1046221
 - Factsheet for non-academic audiences (in the making).