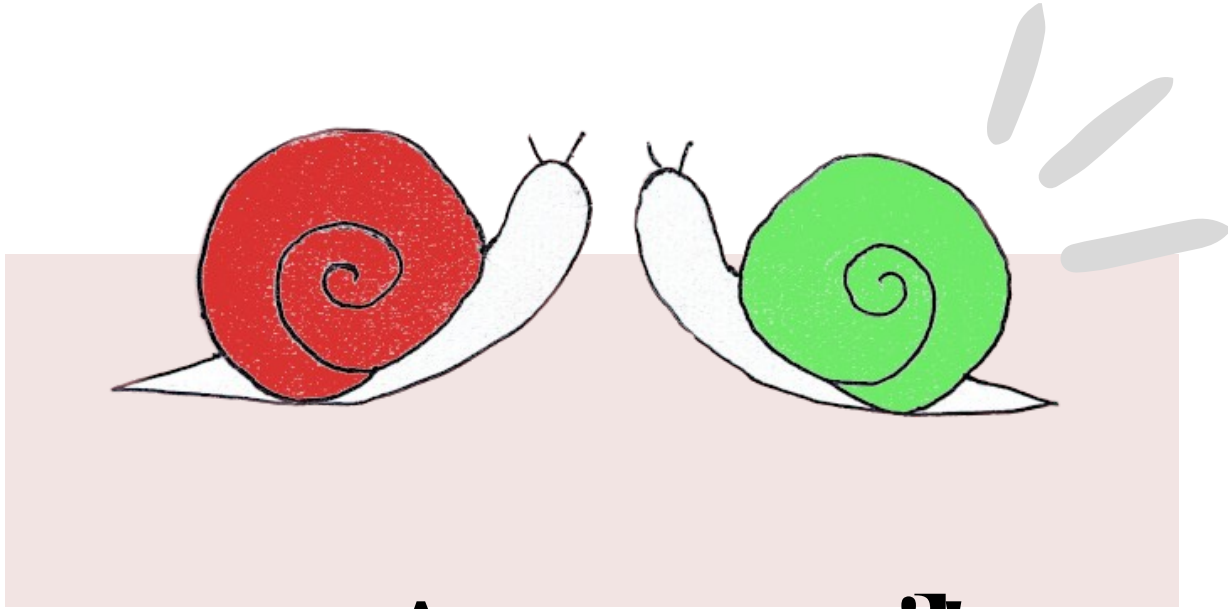


Creating a cooperative

Lucie Berat & Marianne Abdellaoui



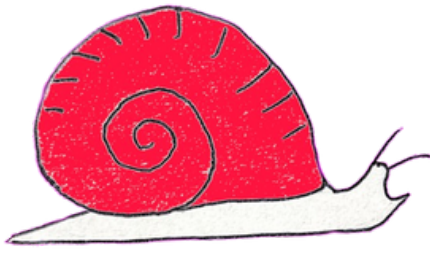
At a snail's pace

The story of Orsi, Logan,
Vincent and their friends

It's been a few months since I joined Cargonoma for an internship. I spend my days on an agroecological farm and cultivating the land, or at

events promoting cargo bike mobility in Budapest, or in discussion circles around degrowth.

All these activities allowed me to get to know Orsi, Logan and Vincent, co-founders of this beautiful initiative. Their lifestyles first made me dream a lot; and then, by getting to know them very closely, I also discovered the personal and organizational challenges faced by a self organized collective. Despite the critical eye that I have developed, there are many interesting elements in the journey of these pioneers of degrowth; I think that they will have a great influence on my future lifestyle.



It all begins with the meeting of Adrien and Vincent in Budapest. They had already crossed paths in France but this

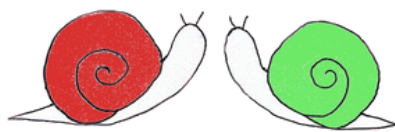
This time a common project emerges from their discussions: they want to create a research and experimentation center on degrowth.

This subject is far from new for Vincent: **spokesperson for the party for degrowth in France since 2007, he joined the alter-globalization movement - which he considers to be a precursor of the degrowth movement - at the age of 18.**

It must be said that he grew up in an environment that was extremely favorable to his commitment. His parents - a mother who was an educator and a father who was a psychologist - were very committed left-wing intellectuals. Added to this is the socio-cultural context in which he grew up in Vesoul, where he met people of varied origins: he had friends who came from the countryside and others from the cities.

This is not the first time that Vincent has set foot in Hungary either. He did an internship there as part of his engineering studies; then, once he had his degree in hand, he returned to Budapest and worked there, among other things, at the French embassy.

Since his last visit, he has acquired a new perspective on Budapest. *"I am returning to Hungary, with a lot of activism and civil disobedience actions in France. **I had seen the emergence of an alternative life in Budapest from the beginning of the 2000s, but I had not connected that with degrowth.** It is through the ZAD of Notre Dame des Landes or the squat movement in Paris that I connect the two."*



So here we are in 2011, Vincent and Adrien are roaming Budapest looking for a building for sale where they could set up their research and experimentation center on degrowth.

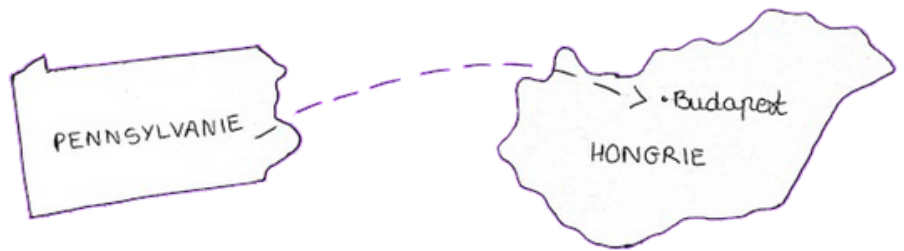
Everything is ready, the investors found, the papers almost signed, when the owner of the premises suddenly refuses the transaction. Far from being discouraged, **Vincent and Adrien decide to think smaller, to start with what they already know how to do**, and what will come will come. This is how the **bicycle manufacturing and repair workshop Cyclonomia was born.**

At the same time, **Vincent moved into the Szalon**, a 350 m² apartment where Adrien lives with his girlfriend and at least five other people. It is one of the alternative places in Budapest where **people live bohemian and frugal lives.**

An “alternative life” is therefore being set up in this self-managed shared accommodation, soon joined by Levi, then by Logan.

The latter is a young American who came to finish his studies in Europe and, one thing leading to another, he decided to stay there. **He grew up in Pennsylvania, and is part of the first generation to go to university in his family:** his father is a welder, his mother a secretary, his grandparents worked all their lives in coal mines just like his great-grandparents before them.

“The area is pretty depressed so teachers would push young people with potential to try to do something to leave the area. I was pretty neutral about this when I was young but I was always curious what was beyond the place where I grew up.”



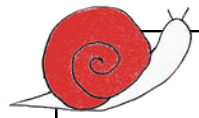
It was this curiosity that led him to **leave his birthplace to discover life in the big American cities, then to leave the United States to visit other countries, and finally to land in Hungary.** Concerned about food and climate issues, he got involved in food systems and ended up working on the **organic food world in Central Europe.**

The latest person to join the Szalon is Orsi. Originally from Szeged in southern Hungary, her mother is a secretary and her father is an entrepreneur. Like him, she studied in economics.

She then specialized in ecological economics and, **as her studies progressed, became aware of the social and ecological issues:** *“It became clear for me that what I studied before - the growth economy, capitalism and so on- is just one way we can organize the economic and social life.”*

What strikes me most about her journey is when she tells me about her refusal, once she finished her studies, to go and work in a company, to the point of finding herself doing odd jobs for a while. I completely identify with her reluctance to go and do *“CSR or something like that, because it would just be greenwashing.”*

Orsi, for her part, took six months to find her way. She was finally contacted by her former supervisor who offered her the chance to **join a research project on non-monetary valuation of ecosystem services.** Before that, the idea of working in academia had never crossed her mind; and yet, she liked it! Nevertheless, while working on research was the best option for Orsi to meaningfully address social and ecological issues, she was missing having concrete impact on local community and engage in more concrete, hands-on activities. So when she met Adrien, Vincent, Logan and Levi, she was working on three projects in parallel and was about to start her doctoral studies.



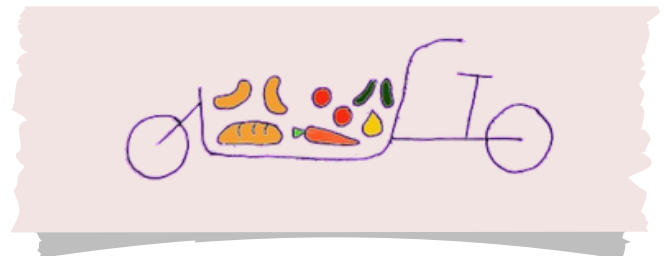
This is how the happy founding team of Cargonomia is complete: there is **Adrien the Franco-Hungarian cargo bike builder**, **Vincent the political activist for degrowth from France**, **Levi the Hungarian social entrepreneur**, **Logan the American who practices and teaches agroecology** and **Orsi the Hungarian researcher in ecological economics**. From this union was born in 2015 Cargonomia!

Of all the possible definitions for this initiative, the one I like the most is that of **a group of very committed friends joining forces to invent another model of society**. I like this image of very different personalities who take advantage of the strength of the collective to bring about projects that they could not have carried out alone. Vincent sums it up with humor by saying: *"If you want to go far, you go slowly and you go with others. If you want to go fast, you go alone and you break your neck"*.

Concretely, what is born from the union of these five brains is a **degrowth cooperative**, economically and philosophically inspired by this movement. It takes advantage of the fertile ground that is the context of the time in Budapest where, following oppression and scarcity during the communist regime, affordable abandoned industrial spaces created the right environment for the **informal establishment of knowledge sharing spaces, workshops and creative venues**.

They created projects around these "commons": for example, there is the fleet of **cargo bikes which could be borrowed on a donation basis**.

Similarly, Cargonomia supports the agroecological farm Zsamboki Biokert in the **distribution of their weekly fruit and vegetable baskets in Budapest, including by cargo bike**.



In 2021, the group acquired a garden plot which contained an abandoned adobe dwelling in the same town as the farm with the aim of establishing a **community house and educational garden** there; since then, participatory renovation projects for the traditional mud-brick house have been organised every summer.

So, Cargonomia is *"an organization which gives services to the people"* as Orsi would say. In addition to giving them access to commons, another objective, particularly dear to Logan, is *"getting people to do something"*. This is done by **organizing various events**: bringing groups to the farm, going to events to promote mobility by cargo bike, etc. The **traineeship program** in which I participate particularly illustrates this desire to give the opportunity to those who wish to take action.



The aim of Cargonomia is thus to go beyond theoretical reflections on what a world respectful of humans and non-humans could be, but to propose concrete actions, while empowering others to engage in their own social outreach activities. But **all these activities are a pretext** as Vincent explained to me: *"The impact of the practical activities of Cargonomia is unfortunately **insignificant compared to the societal challenges it addresses**" ; for him "Cargonomia makes sense as it is first about enjoying an alternative way of life and it explores degrowth theory through concrete experimentation. But even more, **the real impact of Cargonomia is its potential to create and promote new narratives and imaginaries** around sustainability, conviviality, economy, work, and enjoyment of life. To bring creativity and hope."*

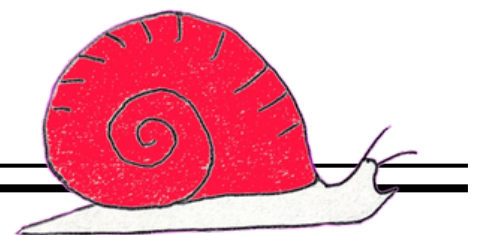
But then what is Cargonomia, if its reason for being does not revolve around the activities carried out? According to Logan it is "a space for experimentation, a **network** for trying to link together". Orsi, she prefers the term **community** "because we are also doing these things for ourselves : like cargo bikes, anybody can use them, but it's great for us as well to have them around us."

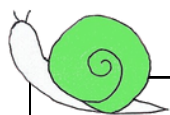


All these facets of Cargonomia are perfectly illustrated in the **action research work carried out by Orsi**, which is a way of getting out of the current posture of research cut off from the real world, but of really taking part in what we are studying. She has indeed managed to combine the useful with the pleasant by **reorienting her thesis subject towards the study of Cargonomia**. *"During those reflection times, it became clear that all of us, we gain a lot from Cargonomia, which is not in money, but in a lot of other things which improve and contribute to our well-being. Like this sense of belonging to this community, which makes you feel great when you wake up in the morning. "*

Although no one draws a direct source of income from Cargonomia, Orsi has observed that several of them have professional **activities directly related to the cooperative**. Of course, there is her own research work, allowing her not to have to juggle her source of income with her desire to invest in the cooperative.

Similarly, Vincent has managed to invent a rhythm in which **a third of his time is devoted to Cargonomia's own activities**, on a voluntary basis. The remaining two thirds, he presents himself as a **speaker, consultant, essayist, researcher on degrowth topics**. The goal is to spread the ideas of degrowth, in particular by promoting the example of Cargonomia, in all possible environments: for example, he gives conferences *"both in ZADs and in multinationals, in political institutes, think tanks at the European Parliament or the European Commission, in universities and research institutes, and this, all over Europe"*.





Logan also has sources of income closely linked to Cargonomia: he **works three days a week on the farm where they help distribute vegetable baskets**. From his experience of agroecology lived on the ground, he also carries out **action research by making the link between the issues of agricultural transition and the degrowth movement**. He also teaches on these subjects at the Central European University once a week.

I find it very interesting the balance he has found in his life, **mixing physical and intellectual activities**. He explained to me the important interaction between these two facets of his life: *"If I need to think about something complex intellectually, I would likely get the best idea for what I want to do on a day when I have to just be in the garden and work by myself and do something over and over."* He has also overcome the dilemma of living in the city or in the countryside: he spends **half of his weeks in a European capital, a cultural and social hub, and the other half in the quiet of the Hungarian countryside, surrounded by plants and birds**.

This is the first time I have met people who juggle so many hats.

than Vincent and Logan. This idea of **multi-activity** intrigues me, I see a strong potential for the life that I am trying to invent for myself. For our two protagonists, such a lifestyle is obvious: *"I can't imagine life any other way than this."* Vincent once told me, *"Anything that is routine bores me to the highest degree; doing the same thing two days in a row drives me crazy."*

Logan shares this observation but with more nuances: *"if you can handle it, it's wonderful because you don't get bored."*

Indeed, the "if" is important here because **this lifestyle is far from being made for everyone**. It seems dangerously easy to me to want to juggle too many projects at the same time and to lose your footing. Besides, if Logan and Vincent are holding out, it is because they have **monstrous work capacities**. For example, Vincent's work rate is 40 hours per week without weekends or holidays. This lifestyle is perhaps adapted to his hyperactive character - and because he compensates with an intense social and festive life in the evening - but I am not sure I can see myself there... It is also **somewhat paradoxical to see people advocating degrowth and therefore a global slowdown in our societies imposing such a frenetic pace on themselves**.



Let's get back to our Cargonomia team. Since the founding of this great initiative and its launch, a number of upheavals have taken place. First, there was the **departure of Adrien**

who, following yet another re-election of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, decided to return to live in France. Then there was the Covid crisis, bringing with it its share of disruptions. **Levi**, who is not lucky enough to have his remunerative activities linked to Cargonomia, **no longer has the time to invest in the cooperative.**

There was another big change during Covid, a joyful event this time: **Orsi and Vincent welcomed a child into the world!**

As you might expect, Artur's arrival in their lives requires a phenomenal amount of energy and time: **parenting is a full-time job.**

I had never realized it as much as when talking with them. It is amusing to me to observe the tireless Vincent giving in to a four-year-old child: *"It's paradoxical but, when I do a week without Artur, I don't sleep all week, I work on 50,000 things, and I'm never tired. When I do half a day with Artur, I have to take a nap."*

Orsi, for her part, has had to change the way she takes care of herself. Before, her source of energy was being surrounded by people at events related to Cargonomia; today, she enjoys more **the time she spends alone to recharge her mental capacities.**

This is compounded by the inflation that has been raging in the country ever since. This poses many

problems for the team of three people who now remain at the helm of the cooperative. Initially, as Vincent explains, *"Cargonomia was designed to **create surplus in order to buy autonomy** from the constraint of money, in an increasingly commodified society."* Thus, the organization always had six months or even a year's budget in reserve, and the rest of the exchanges were made in a non-commercial manner, in the form of exchanges of good practices between sister organizations.

Today this financial security is no more, and the economy of reciprocity is becoming rare following the tearing apart of social ties brought about by confinement. At the same time, they also have **more concrete projects that have costs**: the community house, renting their own space in the city, etc. This is a challenge on the one hand, but also the natural evolution of an organisation on the other.





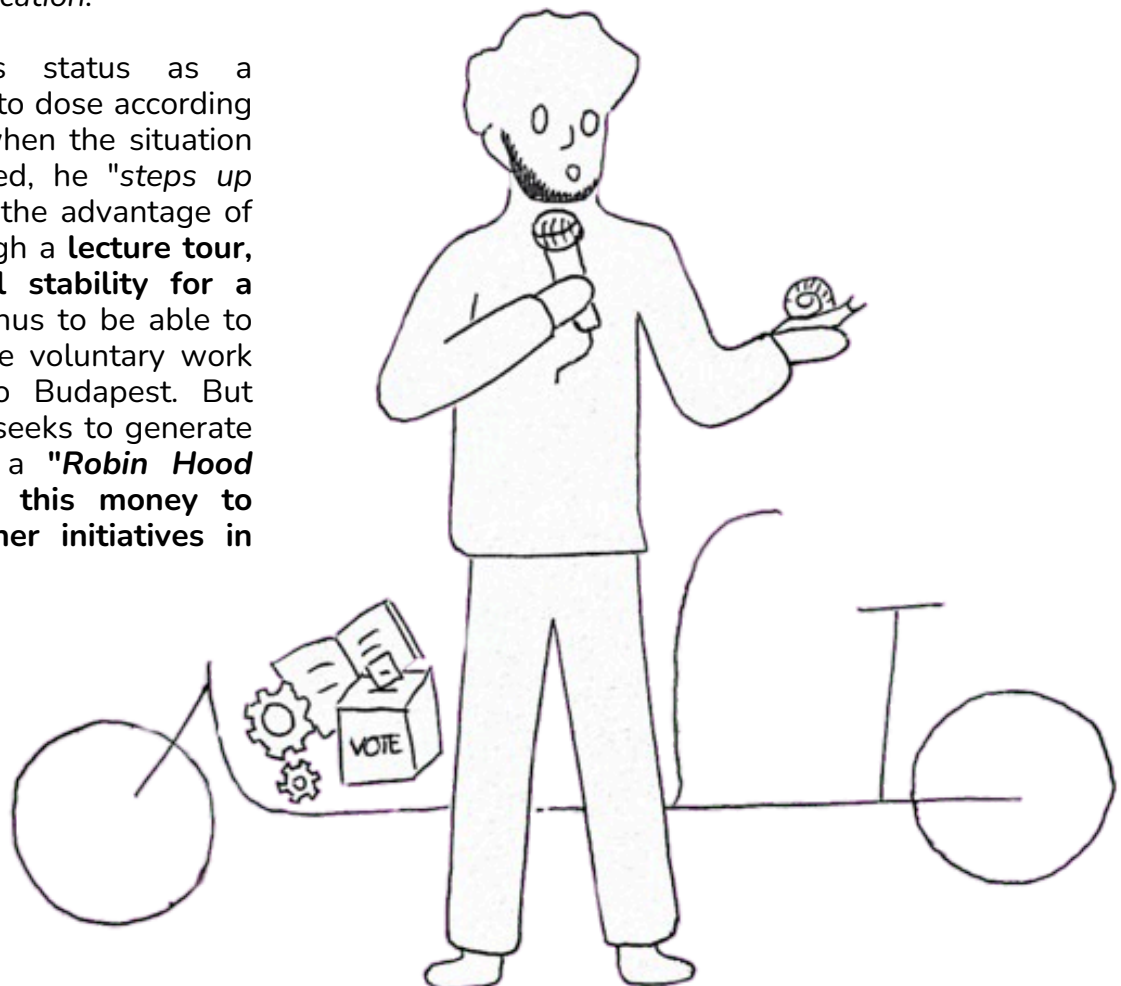
The economic situation in Hungary also affects our three friends on a more personal level. They need to work more to ensure the same standard of living as before, and therefore have less time to devote to Cargonomia.

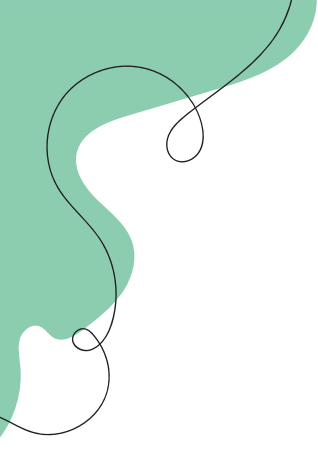
But they each have a **privileged enough situation to have a social safety net** in case the situation becomes too complicated. They are surrounded by friends and relatives they can count on. In addition, each has **limited needs and daily expenses**. *"If I have a roof, a chair, a table, a bed and a computer, an internet connection and good evenings, I don't need anything else"* says Vincent who lives with Orsi and Artur in a home they own.

As for Logan, he lives mostly off vegetables from the farm where he works, and has never invested in a car or a home. When I ask him how he feels about his situation, he says, *"I think it would be hard for someone who is 38 years old to say « I have nothing that is mine, really, besides the things I have in a flat in Budapest». I don't feel in a completely unstable position, because if I lose all those things, then I think I feel skilled, experienced and well connected enough to be able to do something which gives me room to sleep in and a way to grow my own food, which is what I need."*

They have the possibility to activate extra sources of income. In the case of Orsi and Logan, in the academic world they *"both have a professionally recognized background and experience to lean on during challenging periods. This is a privilege in a sense, but one that came with work, input and dedication."*

Similarly, Vincent's status as a lecturer allows him to doze according to his needs and, when the situation becomes complicated, he *"steps up the pace"*. This has the advantage of allowing him, through a **lecture tour, to ensure financial stability for a given period**, and thus to be able to concentrate on more voluntary work once he returns to Budapest. But above all, he often seeks to generate surpluses, and, in a **"Robin Hood logic"**, **redistribute this money to Cargonomia or other initiatives in financial difficulty**.



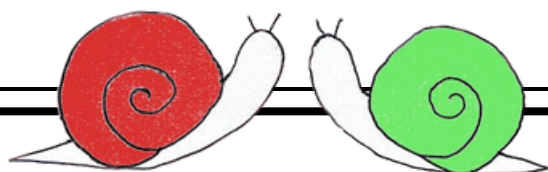


All of these recent changes have palpable consequences for the cooperative.

For example, they mean spending more time looking for money, and therefore less time on cooperative activities. The arrival of a child also considerably reduces the free time of both parents. All this running after time puts the **three co-founders in a difficult position**.

However, they pride themselves on 'not selling out Cargonomia's original values - i.e. turning into a traditional NGO that spends 80% of its time looking for the next funding opportunity'. 'This is something we have successfully resisted during our time in business,' explains Logan.

A new page in the history of Cargonomia is therefore being written. This project, which started as a critique of our current system, is being overtaken by it. It is therefore time for reinvention. Our three protagonists must now find the time to sit around a table to find a way to **continue this beautiful initiative** while preserving the **well-being of the people taking part in it**. Knowing the creativity of Vincent, Logan and Orsi, the solutions found will surely be as intelligent as they are surprising. I can't wait to see what happens next in the story!



Conclusion

"The most important thing in life is to have laughed! It's being serious without taking yourself seriously, it's doing beautiful things without taking yourself seriously."

Vincent

Belonging to a group, a community

Doing things that are meaningful, that make me happy

The ingredients of a beautiful life

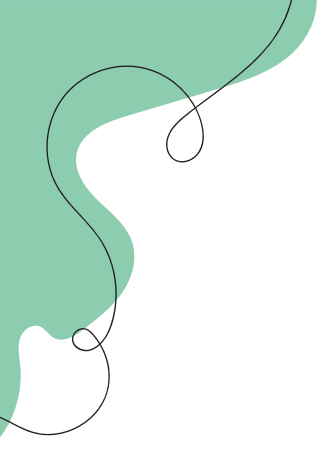
Being free, in the sense of autonomous

Doing things that keep me healthy

Playing games and having a festive life

"It's funny because five years ago I wouldn't have said that, but now I see that to have social security and the material security -somewhere to go home, good food, means of transport- this type of thing is important."

Orsi



Food for thought and advice

Here is the discussion that Orsi, Vincent and Logan had when I asked them what advice to give to people who, like me, are in dissonance with their studies or their daily activities:

Orsi: **Experiencing** the different types of activities you can do in your life is very useful, especially when you are a student. At that time, you have a lot of possibilities thanks to Erasmus.

Logan: **It's never too early to start thinking about it.** Income-generating activities that are fulfilling, socially conscious, and intellectually stimulating don't come easy. A lot of **the best opportunities you have to create for yourself.**

Also ask yourself what makes you happy: what are you doing in your free time which makes you feel really functional and why is this not what you're pursuing right now?

Vincent: Another important thing is to **observe and find out what is around you** in terms of know-how, skills, networks... Start with patience and humility from these observations, and ideally **not alone.**

Orsi: You have to be **brave and creative** to choose something other than the conventional path, which seems less stable. In a way, we are privileged. But **not to engage ourselves in a company and earn a lot of money, it's not luck but it's a choice.**

Vincent: And then you also have to know how to **get out of your comfort zone a little** and immerse yourself in other things; go into networks where people will not necessarily all share the same values, at least in appearance.

Logan: Who are the people who you think are doing inspiring work? Have you spent time with them before? Have you spent a day with them? If you did, that's very good. If not, you should, and I promise you **if you spend enough time with them and show that you're functional, they're not gonna send you away.** They're gonna try to keep you around and this will probably lead to a job.

Vincent: We also have to be realistic: we live in a world that is imposed on us. So we have to find a balance: **not putting ourselves in danger** by marginalizing ourselves and not being alienated, being taken by the system. It's not easy.

Some resources to go further

Cargonomia's website
(<https://cargonomia.hu/>)

Cargonomia partner initiatives

- The agro-ecological farm of Zsamboki biokert
- The Cyclonomia bicycle repair cooperative
- Veloma, the cargo bike and cart manufacturing company founded by Adrien on his return to France [*in French*]
- The cargo bike delivery company Golya futar

To go further on the subjects of degrowth

- The low-tech lab's investigation into Cargonomia
- *Degrowth, fake or not?*, an introductory manual on the subject written by Vincent
- Orsi's thesis on Cargonomia: An Ecological Economics Inquiry into the Social and Solidarity Economy - Insights from an Action Research
- An article by Logan on the link between agroecology and degrowth: chapter 6 of the book *Food for degrowth, Perspectives and Practices*

