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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Innovation in Collaborative Finance: A Comparative Case Study of Grassroots Savings Practices in Ghana and China

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| ABSTRACT

Informal financial systems have long sustained communities excluded from formal banking, offering both economic resilience and social solidarity. This paper examines two enduring grassroots savings models, Susu in Ghana (developing context) and HeHui (合会) in China (developed context), as participatory systems that embody co-creation, trust-based accountability, and collective reciprocity. Both practices demonstrate how communities design financial infrastructures that are adaptive, inclusive, and culturally grounded, operating outside the logics of hierarchical and profit-driven institutions. Drawing on an exploratory comparative case study approach, the paper situates Susu and HeHui (合会) within the broader frameworks of participatory design, social innovation, systems design, and decolonizing finance. It analyses how these systems have evolved across centuries while adapting to digitalization. In Ghana, mobile money platforms and cooperative-led initiatives have extended Susu's reach, enhancing transparency while raising concerns of digital exclusion. In China, HeHui (合会) has migrated to platforms such as WeChat and Alipay, broadening participation but also introducing risks tied to corporate control, fraud, and the erosion of face-to-face trust. The comparative analyses highlight shared values of reciprocity and voluntary participation alongside divergent cultural drivers, women's agency and informal trade in Ghana, kinship and social reputation in China. It argues that Susu and HeHui (合会) exemplify hybrid socio-technical systems that blend tradition with digital tools. Analyzed within the context of participatory design, these cases underscore the need to co-create inclusive, culturally sensitive, and community-owned financial technologies. They demonstrate that innovation often emerges from the ground up, offering pathways to reimagine finance as a collaborative, equitable, and deeply human practice.

| KEYWORDS
Participatory design; Social innovation; Collaborative finance; Informal financial systems; Community-based finance; Susu; HeHui (合会); Digital financial inclusion; Decolonizing finance; Socio-technical systems.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Informal, community-led financial systems have long served as pillars of economic resilience and social cohesion, especially in contexts where formal banking is inaccessible or exclusionary. Traditions such as Ghana's Susu and China's HeHui (合会) enable people to collectively save, share, and support one another, effectively reclaiming financial agency from centralized systems often rooted in colonial or hierarchical structures. These models emerge from local knowledge, trust, and reciprocity, making them powerful embodiments of decolonizing finance (Hossein & Bonsu, 2023).

Susu and HeHui (合会) operate on voluntary contributions into a shared pool that is distributed on rotation, enabling members to meet urgent needs, from school fees and emergencies to launching small businesses. These participatory structures embody key participatory design principles*: co-creation, shared agency, and mutual accountability*. Participants typically define the rules, schedules, and governance making the system inherently democratic and grounded in community values.

Digital transformation now presents an opportunity to amplify grassroots financial models such as Ghana's Susu saving systems. The Ghana Co-operative Susu Collectors Association (GCSCA) has digitized aspects of its operations, including mobile data entry and secure record-keeping to improve transparency and service delivery among collectors and clients (Ghana News Agency, 2021; MyJoyOnline, 2013; Hossein, 2023). At the same time, research indicates that mobile money adoption remains limited in many informal sectors due to digital literacy gaps and trust concerns, highlighting the risk that digital innovations may inadvertently exclude members with limited access or comfort with technology (Osei-Assibey, 2015 [Graphic Online]; Abdulai et al., 2024; ISSER ReFinD Report, 2025).

In China, HeHui (合会) groups have migrated onto digital ecosystems like WeChat and Alipay, where peer-to-peer savings circles can now manage contributions and distributions remotely. This shift offers convenience, traceability, and scale, but often shifts relational dynamics from in-person interaction to platform-mediated trust, mediated by global corporate infrastructures (Rosengard & Huynh, 2004; Rosengard & Huynh, 2009).

Through a comparative case study lens, this paper explores how Susu and HeHui (合会) maintain participatory and collaborative core principles amid digital transformation. It examines how systems design thinking, centering technical, social, and cultural dimensions, can bridge tradition with innovation, preserving cultural integrity while leveraging digital tools. Emphasizing co-design methods, trust architectures, and hybrid socio-technical frameworks, this work positions Susu and HeHui (合会) as living social innovations that reimagine inclusive, people-centered financial systems.

The paper's key questions are:

1. *How do Susu and HeHui (合会) embody collaborative values in their design?*
2. *How does digital transformation reshape their inclusivity, transparency, and trust?*

This inquiry aligns with the broader aims of participatory design, creating systems with, not for, people. It also contributes to social innovation discourse, illustrating how grounded community practices, when thoughtfully paired with technology, can forge equitable systems that resist colonial legacies of control, exclusion, and extractivism.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding Susu in Ghana and HeHui (合会) in China as participatory financial systems requires drawing from multiple, intersecting frameworks: participatory design, social innovation, decolonizing systems, systems design, and comparative cultural perspectives. Together, these perspectives help position these practices not as peripheral traditions but as central, living examples of how communities co-create, govern, and adapt financial infrastructures in ways that challenge dominant financial models.

2.1 Participatory Design Principles: Co-creation, Shared Agency, and Distributed Trust

Participatory design, first developed in Scandinavia in the 1970s, emphasizes the active involvement of people in shaping the systems that affect their lives (Bødker & Kyng, 2018). Its principles include co-creation (designing *with*, not *for*), shared agency (ensuring participants meaningfully influence decision-making), and distributed trust (creating systems where responsibility is collective rather than centralized).

Both Susu and HeHui (合会) embody these principles, even if they were not conceived as "design projects." Members co-create rules, negotiate contribution schedules, and determine payout orders. Agency is shared as participants rotate between roles of contributors and beneficiaries. Trust is distributed not vested in a single authority but maintained through collective accountability. Interpreted from a participatory design lens, Susu and HeHui (合会) demonstrate that communities have always been designers of systems, embedding participatory logics into daily practices (Harrington et al., 2019).

2.2 Social Innovation and Grassroots Finance

Social innovation involves new strategies and practices that meet social needs more effectively than dominant systems, often emerging from the ground up (Murray et al., 2010; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Grassroots finance exemplifies this. Susu and HeHui (合会) are innovations from below, designed through lived experience and collective ingenuity rather than institutional mandates.

These models serve groups historically excluded from formal finance, women traders, migrant workers, and informal laborers (Boateng et al., 2022). Their importance extends beyond economic access: they reinforce solidarity, build resilience, and create spaces of mutual care. This dual function economic and social distinguishes Susu and HeHui (合会) as forms of social innovation, not merely financial instruments.

2.3 Systems Design Approach: Hybrid Socio-Technical Infrastructures

Susu and HeHui (合会) are complex systems where social, cultural, and technical elements converge. Trust, reciprocity, and reputation function as social infrastructures, while rules, contribution schedules, and payout orders form organizational infrastructures. Today, these are increasingly interwoven with technical infrastructures: mobile money platforms in Ghana, or WeChat and Alipay in China (Huang et al., 2020).

A systems design perspective highlights the need to balance these layers. Digital transparency should not erase cultural rituals; efficiency should not come at the cost of inclusion; scaling up should not weaken accountability (Manzini, 2015). Instead, systems design can enable hybrid socio-technical infrastructures that preserve cultural integrity while embracing innovation.

2.4 Comparative Cultural Perspectives: Afrikan and East Asian Collective Finance

Placing Susu and HeHui (合会) in a comparative context reveals how **culture shapes financial design.**

- In African contexts, communal finance reflects values of Ubuntu, the idea that "*I am because we are.*" Susu ties financial participation to social solidarity, providing both economic support and empowerment for women and informal workers (Abegaz et al., 2022).
- In East Asian contexts, HeHui (合会) reflects Confucian traditions of obligation, honor, and filial responsibility. Participation is often tied to kinship and community reputation, where dishonoring one's family or peers serves as a powerful deterrent against default (Zhao & Horita, 2020).

Though their details differ, both traditions share an understanding of money as relational, not merely transactional, embedded in webs of trust, reciprocity, and moral responsibility.

2.5 Synthesis of the systems

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that Susu and HeHui (合会) are not marginal or outdated but robust design systems with global relevance. They embody participatory design in practice, act as social innovations, enact decolonizing logics, and function as hybrid socio-technical infrastructures shaped by culture. Participatory and systems design researchers can view these practices as a way to move beyond Western-centric perspectives and recognize the creativity and resilience embedded in community-led finance.

This recognition opens new possibilities for reimagining financial futures that are more equitable, inclusive, and culturally grounded, futures where financial systems are designed with, and for, the people they serve.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory comparative case study approach to examine Susu in Ghana and HeHui (合会) in China as culturally embedded, trust-based financial systems adapting to digitalization. The case study method is particularly suitable because both practices are situated within unique socio-cultural contexts shaped by local traditions, values, and histories (Yin, 2018). A comparative lens makes it possible to highlight common principles, surface differences, and draw broader insights into the role of participatory design in grassroots financial innovation.

3.1 Data Sources

The analyses draw on a diverse set of secondary sources to ensure both depth and reliability (see Table 1). Scholarly literature provides the historical and theoretical foundations, particularly in participatory design (Bødker & Kyng, 2018), social innovation (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), and informal finance (Aryeetey & Steel, 1995). NGO and development reports offer contemporary insights into Susu initiatives in Ghana, especially digitalization projects undertaken through the Ghana Co-operative Susu Collectors Association (World Bank, 2022). Financial cooperative data adds further detail on group structures, contribution cycles, and oversight processes. At the same time, digital platform analyses highlights how HeHui (合会) practices have been integrated into ecosystems such as WeChat and Alipay, pointing to both new efficiencies and risks (Huang et al., 2020). Finally, news features, policy briefs, and practitioner accounts enrich the academic sources by reflecting lived experiences, revealing how participants navigate the promises and vulnerabilities of digitalization in everyday financial practice.

Table 1: Data Sources Overview

Source Type	Focus / Contribution	Sources / references
Scholarly Literature	Provides historical and theoretical grounding; frames concepts of participatory design, social innovation, and informal finance.	Bødker & Kyng (2018); Cajaiba-Santana (2014); Aryeetey & Steel (1995)
NGO & Development Reports	Offers insight into contemporary Susu initiatives, particularly digitalization efforts and partnerships.	World Bank (2022) Ghana Digital Acceleration Project
Financial Cooperative Data	Supplies evidence on group organization, membership structures, contribution cycles, and oversight mechanisms.	Data from local cooperatives and community-based finance organizations.
Digital Platform Analyses	Examines how HeHui (合会) practices are integrated into online ecosystems; highlights new accountability and risks.	Huang et al., (2020)
News, Policy & Practitioner Accounts	Captures everyday experiences, emerging trends, opportunities, and vulnerabilities in practice.	News features, policy briefs, blogs, and practitioner testimonies from Ghana and China.

3.2 Case Selection: Why Susu and HeHui?

Susu and HeHui (合会) were chosen as case studies because they represent two of the most enduring and well-documented rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs). Despite emerging from different cultural traditions in West African and East Asian, they share core participatory logics: voluntary contribution, collective accountability, and trust as the foundation of financial exchange (Lowenstein, 2025). Both systems have persisted for centuries, adapting to shifting socio-economic contexts, and are now evolving under digitalization. Focusing on these cases provides a rich comparative perspective for understanding how grassroots financial practices inform broader debates in participatory design, systems design, financial inclusion and social innovation (Manzini, 2015; Harrington et al., 2019; Han et. al., 2019).

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Studying community-driven financial practices requires sensitivity to ethics and representation.This paper treats Susu and HeHui (合会) not as "informal curiosities" but as legitimate systems of design and innovation. While the study relies exclusively on secondary sources, careful attention is given to presenting these practices with dignity and cultural respect. The analyses acknowledge their complexities, including issues of trust, exclusion, and digital risk, without romanticizing or oversimplifying them (Bhambra, 2021). Positioning Susu and HeHui (合会) as social innovations and participatory systems reflects their continued significance as models of resilience and financial sovereignty.

4. Synthesis of the cases

Grounding the research in comparative case study analyses, supported by multiple data sources, allows for insights that are both contextually specific and globally relevant. This methodological framing advances understanding of how culturally embedded financial systems can enrich participatory design discourse while contributing to reimagined, decolonized, and people-centered approaches to financial inclusion (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Metaphorical illustration of the Ghanaian *Susu* system and the Chinese *HeHui* (合会), showing technology-enabled community savings, collective trust, and collaborative financial interactions across both cultural contexts. (Source: Authors' own construct).

5. Case study 1: Susu in Ghana

5.*1 Historical and Cultural Context*

The story of Susu is inseparable from the struggles, creativity, and resilience of everyday Ghanaians. Long before the arrival of modern banks or microfinance institutions, Susu existed as a community-driven savings practice. It emerged out of necessity, as colonial and postcolonial financial institutions often excluded the majority of farmers, traders, artisans, and market women who formed the backbone of Ghana's economy (Aryeetey & Steel, 1995). These groups, unable to access collateral-based credit or navigate complex bureaucracies, turned to each other to address pressing financial needs such as school fees, healthcare, weddings, funerals, and working capital for trade.

Susu functions as a rotating savings and credit association (ROSCA): members contribute a fixed sum at regular intervals into a communal pool, with each member receiving the full amount in turn. The cycle continues until all participants have had their share. This arrangement enabled access to lump sums that individuals could not accumulate alone. More than a financial mechanism, Susu has always embodied trust, solidarity, and survival. It is rooted in Ghana's cultural ethos of reciprocity, where the wellbeing of one is intimately tied to the wellbeing of all (Abegaz et al., 2022).

5.2 Collaborative Structure: Voluntary Participation, Reciprocity, and Mutual Accountability

Susu thrives on voluntary participation and co-created rules. Groups often form through kinship ties, religious communities, neighborhoods, or workplaces. Members negotiate contribution amounts, set schedules, and determine the order of payouts collectively, ensuring transparency and fairness (Steel & Andah, 2003). Accountability is enforced not through courts or contracts, but through social bonds. Defaulting on contributions damages not only one's financial standing but also one's social reputation, threatening exclusion from both the Susu group and the wider community. This form of distributed trust mirrors participatory design principles: co-creation, shared agency, and accountability embedded in relationships rather than imposed structures (Bødker & Kyng, 2018).

5.3 Role of Women, Informal Workers, and Social Groups

Susu has been especially vital for women and informal workers and groups often invisible to formal banking systems. Market women rely on Susu to generate working capital for trade, with Susu collectors circulating marketplaces daily to gather contributions. For women managing households alongside businesses, Susu offers a way to cover school fees, healthcare, and investments without navigating discriminatory barriers in banking institutions (Alabi et al., 2007). Informal workers such as drivers, artisans, and street vendors, depend on Susu as well. In contexts where formal identification, pay-slips, or tax records are absent, Susu recognizes participants through trustworthiness, not paperwork. For many, this remains the only financial system where they are fully seen and valued.

5.4 Digital Transition: Innovation and Expansion

- In recent years, Susu has undergone significant **digital transformation.** The Ghana Co-operative Susu Collectors Association (GCSCA), with support from development partners, has piloted mobile transactions, secure digital record-keeping, and solar-powered servers to expand access in rural areas (World Bank, 2022).
    - Members can now make contributions through mobile wallets.
    - SMS notifications confirm payments and send reminders.
    - Rural banks act as intermediaries, adding oversight without undermining community autonomy.

Digital tools have not replaced traditional Susu practices but extended their reach, particularly among younger generations familiar with mobile money. The result is a hybrid financial infrastructure, rooted in trust and community while enhanced through digital transparency and efficiency (Boateng et al., 2022).

5.5 Challenges: Trust in Digital Forms and Digital Exclusion

The digital transition introduces new challenges. A system once grounded in face-to-face trust must now adapt to the impersonality of mobile transactions. Concerns about fraud, errors, and platform security are widespread. Older members, rural populations, and those without smartphones risk being excluded, creating generational and geographic divides in participation (Amoako & Lyon, 2021).

Corporate involvement also complicates the model. Mobile network operators and fintech providers now mediate transactions, raising questions of ownership, data governance, and profit extraction. Communities must navigate how to retain control over a system historically designed for them, while engaging with larger infrastructures that may impose fees or surveillance.

5.6 Conclusion: Susu as Decolonizing Social Innovation

Susu is more than a financial tool, it is a people-designed system that reflects how communities resist exclusion and create sustainable alternatives. Analyzed through a participatory design perspective, Susu demonstrates co-creation, inclusivity, and mutual accountability as everyday practices. Examined through a systems design lens, it illustrates how hybrid socio-technical infrastructures can integrate tradition and innovation without erasing cultural integrity. Viewed through a decolonizing perspective, it challenges imposed financial hierarchies and asserts the sovereignty of communities to design financial systems on their own terms. In Ghana, Susu continues to demonstrate that finance can be collaborative, culturally grounded, and people-centered. It stands as both a social innovation and a pathway toward decolonizing financial systems, offering lessons for policymakers, designers, and technologists seeking inclusive, equitable futures.

6. Case study 2: Hehui (合会) in China

6.1 Historical and Cultural Context

The practice of HeHui (合会), sometimes translated as rotating savings associations or credit clubs has a long and complex history in China. Historical accounts trace HeHui (合会) back to the Tang Dynasty (Zheng, 2011), with evidence of its prevalence in rural villages (Zhao & Horita, 2020; Lowenstein, 2023). Similar to Susu in Ghana, HeHui (合会) emerged as a *response to exclusion*, as banking systems were historically designed to serve elites, landowners, or state-recognized groups, leaving everyday workers without reliable access to credit (Huang et al., 2020). HeHui (合会) became a safety net for small traders, artisans, and families, enabling them to pool resources and meet financial needs. The foundation of HeHui (合会) rests on Confucian values of trust, obligation, and reciprocity, where social reputation and honor carry great weight. Participation is therefore about mutual respect and belonging, as much as it is about money (Li & Zhang, 2024). Over centuries, HeHui (合会) has adapted to changing contexts, from dynastic periods to the socialist market reforms of modern China, while remaining a steady, community-designed system that responds directly to the lived needs of participants.

6.2 Collaborative Structure: Voluntary Participation, Trust, and Mutual Accountability

HeHui (合会) mirrors the structure of other ROSCAs: members contribute an agreed amount into a shared pool, which is distributed to one participant at a time in rotation. Rules vary, but the underlying principles remain consistent, voluntary participation, co-created rules, and mutual accountability **(**Han et al., 2019). Groups are typically formed among relatives, neighbors, or colleagues, with payout orders determined either through lottery, negotiation, or pre-agreed arrangements reflecting need or seniority (Hou et al., 2022). Accountability is grounded in social reputation rather than contracts. Defaulting on contributions risks not only financial loss but also the erosion of respect and trust within one's community, a deterrent often stronger than legal penalties (Honghui & Hiwatari, 2025). Seen through a design lens, HeHui (合会) is not simply a financial arrangement but a cultural system of participatory design, where rules are co-created, agency is shared, and members rely on collective responsibility.

6.3 Role of Families, Social Networks, and Informal Workers

Family and kinship networks have historically anchored HeHui (合会), but the practice also thrives among social groups such as workers' collectives, village associations, and trade networks. Migrant workers, for example, often form HeHui (合会) groups with peers from their home villages to navigate urban environments and sustain financial stability (Cull et al., 2022). For women, HeHui (合会) has long served as a discreet way to save and access funds for household management or small-scale businesses without relying on husbands or navigating patriarchal barriers in formal banking (Hou et al., 2022). Informal workers, street vendors, day labourers, artisans also depend on HeHui (合会), as it recognizes trust and social belonging rather than paperwork or official status. In this way, HeHui (合会) operates as both an economic mechanism and an empowerment tool for socially and economically marginalized groups.

6.4 Digital Transition: WeChat, Alipay, and Mobile Platforms

The past decade has seen HeHui (合会) undergo a remarkable digital transformation. The rapid spread of mobile platforms such as WeChat and Alipay has redefined how HeHui (合会) groups organize contributions (Huang et al., 2020). WeChat groups now function as digital meeting spaces, coordinating payments and communication, while Alipay facilitates instant fund transfers. Record-keeping apps and spreadsheets have introduced transparency and efficiency, reducing disputes. This digital turn has enabled HeHui (合会) to *scale and adapt to modern life***.** Younger generations engage in online HeHui (合会) even if they do not join traditional village-based groups. Migrant workers use WeChat HeHui (合会) to stay connected across geographic distances. At the same time, digitalization introduces new forms of *accountability and surveillance* through electronic records and platform-mediated interactions. As with Susu, the transformation brings opportunities for innovation but also raises tensions around cultural continuity.

6.5 Challenges: Trust, Digital Risks, and Exclusion

Shifting HeHui (合会) from face-to-face to digital spaces introduces multiple challenges. Trust, once sustained through embodied presence, must now be negotiated in virtual interactions. Concerns about scams, fraud, and data privacy are common, especially in larger or less intimate groups (Hou et al., 2022). *Digital exclusion* poses another concern. Older adults, rural residents, or those without smartphones often cannot participate in online HeHui (合会). While digital HeHui (合会) flourishes in cities, these groups risk fragmenting along lines of class, geography, and digital literacy (Zhao & Horita, 2020). Finally, reliance on corporate platforms such as Tencent (WeChat) and Ant Group (Alipay) introduces *systemic risks***.** These corporations exert control over data flows and monetization strategies, raising concerns about profit extraction, surveillance, and the commodification of grassroots practices (Honghui & Hiwatari, 2025).

6.6 Conclusion: HeHui (合会) as a Hybrid, Evolving System

HeHui (合会) exemplifies how communities design their own financial systems to meet needs overlooked by formal institutions. Rooted in cultural values of trust and reciprocity, it has shown resilience by adapting across centuries. The digital shift demonstrates HeHui (合会) ability to evolve into hybrid socio-technical systems, yet highlights vulnerabilities related to trust, exclusion, and corporate mediation. Examined critically through a participatory design lens, it demonstrates how communities embed principles of co-creation, inclusion, and accountability into everyday practices. Interpreted from a systems design standpoint, HeHui (合会) underscores the importance of balancing tradition with technology to sustain both efficiency and cultural integrity. HeHui (合会)

is therefore more than a financial mechanism, it is a living social innovation, a reminder that meaningful systems design often begins at the grassroots, where people design not only for economic survival but also for dignity, solidarity, and belonging.

7. Comparative Analyses

7.1 Similarities

(1) Grassroots Innovation and Community as a Complex Adaptive System

Both HeHui (合会) in China and Susu in Ghana were not designed by economists or financial institutions but emerged organically from local communities as complex adaptive systems.

Self-organization and emergence: Without central control, these systems rely on simple local interactions, such as regular meetings and verbal agreements, to generate bottom-up order, including credit cycles, risk management, and dispute resolution (Smith, Fressoli & Thomas, 2014; Lowenstein, 2025).

Dynamic adaptability: They show strong resilience and flexibility, adapting to economic reforms or market fluctuations by adjusting rules such as contribution amounts and cycle lengths. This demonstrates that they are living systems capable of learning and evolution.

Community as the unit of innovation: Innovation arises collectively rather than individually. Shared norms, traditions, and collective memory encode local knowledge, making these community-based systems resilient and sustainable over time.

(2) Shared Values: Trust, Voluntary Participation, and Reciprocity

Both Susu in Ghana and HeHui (合会) in China are grounded in trust-based collaboration. They are not externally imposed but grassroots systems where people voluntarily pool resources, co-create rules, and share responsibility. Trust serves as the backbone: it enables members to contribute regularly, wait for their turn to receive payouts, and hold each other accountable (Lowenstein, 2023; Harrington et al., 2019; Han, et al., 2019).

Voluntary participation ensures that members enter these systems through mutual agreement, not coercion. Reciprocity reinforces the cycle, as participants know that contributions made today secure access tomorrow, while reliability sustains group integrity. Participation extends beyond finance, it affirms belonging within networks of solidarity and shared destiny.

These shared values resonate with *participatory design principles* such as co-creation, shared agency, and distributed accountability (Bødker & Kyng, 2018). They also illustrate *social innovation in practice,* where communities generate adaptive solutions outside formal institutions (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

(3) Digitalization: Opportunities and Risks

Both systems are undergoing rapid transformation through digital technologies, though in culturally specific ways.

- In *Ghana*, Susu has been supported by the Ghana Co-operative Susu Collectors Association and rural banks, which integrate mobile money, digital record-keeping, and SMS notifications. These tools enhance transparency and appeal to younger participants, but gaps in digital literacy and rural infrastructure risk excluding older or low-income members (World Bank, 2022; Amoako & Lyon, 2021).

- In *China,* HeHui (合会) has migrated to mainstream platforms such as WeChat and Alipay. Digital tools allow for instant transfers, coordination through group chats, and transparent record-keeping (Huang et al., 2020). While this broadens participation and efficiency, it also raises concerns: reduced face-to-face trust, greater exposure to fraud, and reliance on corporate infrastructures that may not prioritize community needs.

Digitalization enhances efficiency, transparency, and accessibility, yet it simultaneously introduces vulnerabilities. Technology risks reinforcing inequalities when access is uneven or when control shifts from communities to external corporate actors (see Table 2).

7.2 Differences

Table 2: Comparison of Susu (Ghana) and HeHui (合会) (China)

Dimension	**Susu, Ghana**	**HeHui (合会), China**
Traditional origin	Emerging from colonial-era financial exclusion, representing a form of financial decolonization.	Originated as informal community-based finance.
Cultural & Social Foundations	Based on community solidarity and market trust, often among women traders.	Rooted in Confucian culture and acquaintance networks, relying on trust and obligation.
Organizational Structure	Linear structure with collector-client relationships, scalable and standardizable.	Complex network structure of chairperson and members, with joint liability.
Demand Situation	Targets broad, growing needs, especially traders and low-income communities; demand continues to rise.	Serves niche, localized groups; demand declining.
Evolutionary Direction	Remains active, integrated into formal finance, moving toward mobile money and microfinance.	Transforming in a semi-legal space, shifting from offline HeHui (合会) to digital community finance or regulated funds, with ongoing risks.

8. Comparative Reflections on Susu and HeHui

A collective reflection on Susu and HeHui (合会) demonstrates that financial innovation often originates not from formal institutions or high-tech labs but from the creativity of communities. Their evolution in the digital age shows how grassroots systems adapt while preserving cultural integrity. Reflecting from participatory and systems design, these cases invite us to imagine financial futures that are collaborative, inclusive systems that embrace innovation without abandoning tradition, and that place human relationships at their core.

8.1 Implications for participatory design

The comparative analyses of Susu in Ghana and HeHui (合会) in China demonstrates that grassroots financial practices are not static traditions but living systems of design. They are continually crafted, negotiated, and sustained by communities under changing socio-economic pressures. Their ongoing evolution in the context of digitalization raises important questions for the field of participatory design, particularly in relation to hybrid systems, inclusivity, cultural integrity, and systemic transformation.

8.2 Supporting Hybrid Systems (Traditional and Digital)

Susu and HeHui (合会) show that financial systems can thrive when *traditional practices and digital tools complement rather than compete*. Digital technologies expand reach, enhance transparency, and attract younger generations. Yet the cultural logics of reciprocity, trust, and belonging remain at the heart of these models (Huang et al., 2020; World Bank, 2022). Participatory design has a crucial role in supporting these *hybrid socio-technical systems.* Designers working alongside communities as co-creators rather than external problem-solvers, can help ensure that digitalization adds value without eroding cultural integrity (Bødker & Kyng, 2018). The challenge is to balance efficiency with care, and transparency with relational trust.

8.3 Designing for Inclusivity, Transparency, and Cultural Integrity

Digital transitions reveal significant risks of *exclusion.* Older adults, rural populations, and those with limited digital literacy are often sidelined when practices migrate online (Amoako & Lyon, 2021). Participatory design can address these risks by co-designing inclusive tools: simple interfaces, multilingual support, offline functionalities, and culturally resonant metaphors (Boateng et al., 2022). Trust must also remain central. Without it, both Susu and HeHui (合会) collapse. Participatory approaches can guide the co-design of *transparent record-keeping and notification systems* that reduce disputes while respecting privacy (Harrington et al., 2019). Equally, cultural integrity must not be compromised. Susu and HeHui (合会) are not only financial systems but *cultural practices of solidarity*. Participatory design must resist one-size-fits-all fintech models, ensuring instead that digital tools amplify the rituals, values, and social bonds that sustain these systems.

8.4 Community-Driven Fintech in the Global South

The lessons of Susu and HeHui (合会) highlight the potential of community-driven fintech solutions across the Global South. Frequently, financial technologies are designed in Western or corporate contexts and imported into local economies without regard for cultural fit (Donovan, 2012). Participatory design offers an alternative: enabling communities to articulate needs, co-create features, and govern platforms. When people see themselves as co-owners of financial tools, they are more likely to *trust, adopt, and sustain them*. Community-driven fintech not only strengthens adoption but also repositions the Global South as an *active site of financial and design innovation*, rather than a passive recipient (Bhambra, 2021).

8.5 Systemic Implications: Resisting Extractive Models and Fostering Equity-Oriented Innovation

Formal banking systems, shaped by colonial legacies and global capitalism, frequently reproduce inequality through high fees, interest charges, and exclusionary practices (Nissanke & Aryeetey, 2006). Digital platforms, when controlled by powerful corporations, risk replicating these extractive logics through surveillance, monetization of data, and profit-driven priorities (Honghui & Hiwatari, 2025).

Participatory and systems design have a transformative role to play in resisting extractive models and fostering equity-oriented innovation. This involves designing platforms for community data ownership, fair governance, and solidarity-driven models of finance. Rather than simply optimizing efficiency, participatory design can contribute to reimagining finance as a public good, a collective infrastructure that nurtures resilience, dignity, and justice (Manzini, 2015).

8.6 The Comparative Circular Ecosystem Model

Figure 2 presents an integrated ecosystem model emerging from the comparative analysis of Susu in Ghana and HeHui (合会) in China. The model illustrates how collaboration, participatory design, and socially embedded financial practices intersect within community-centered systems (Figure 2).

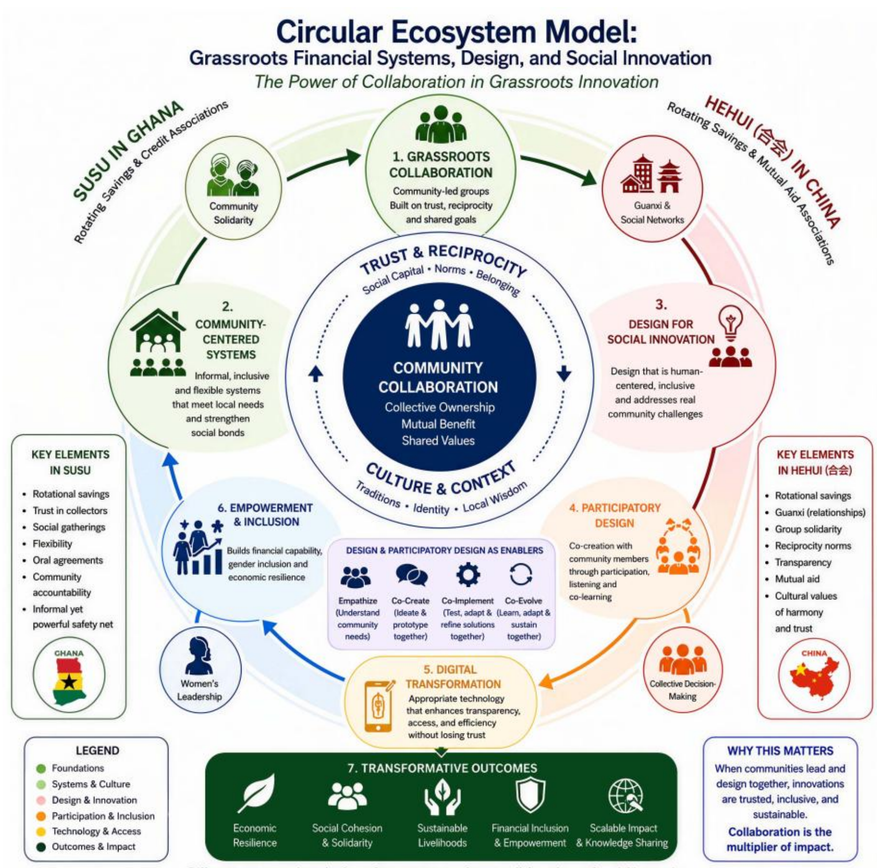

Figure 2. Circular Ecosystem Model of Grassroots Collaboration and Social Innovation in Susu (Ghana) and HeHui (合会) (China). (Source: Authors' own construct).

At the center of the model is community collaboration, sustained through trust, reciprocity, collective participation, and shared cultural values. The framework highlights the role of participatory design and social innovation in supporting the evolution and continuity of these indigenous financial systems. The Model further demonstrates how digital transformation can expand accessibility, transparency, and inclusion while also introducing challenges related to trust, technological literacy, and digital exclusion. The outer layer of the model illustrates broader outcomes such as financial inclusion, social cohesion, empowerment, sustainability, and transformative social innovation. Collectively, the framework positions grassroots financial systems as living examples of culturally grounded collaboration and participatory approaches toward inclusive and sustainable futures.

Reflection on Design and Grassroots Collaboration

The cases of Susu and HeHui (合会) highlight that design does not happen only in laboratories or corporate settings, it also happens in everyday community practices. Participatory design has a responsibility to learn from these grassroots systems and to support their hybrid futures. Designing for inclusivity, transparency, and cultural integrity can sustain financial systems that are not only technically efficient but also equitable and decolonized. Such systems foreground human relationships, community ownership, and social innovation, offering pathways to more just and resilient financial futures (see Figure 2).

9. Conclusion and recommendations

The cases of Susu in Ghana and HeHui (合会) in China demonstrate that community-led financial systems are not remnants of the past but living and resilient practices that continue to evolve in response to changing socio-economic realities. Both embody participatory values, voluntary membership, co-created rules, trust-based accountability, and collective reciprocity that have enabled their survival for centuries. Their adaptation to digitalization highlights both their remarkable flexibility and their enduring relevance, as they remain firmly grounded in cultural logics of trust, solidarity, and belonging.

In line with the Participatory Design Community (PDC), these case studies reaffirm the importance of recognizing grassroots financial practices as design artifacts in their own right. They remind us that design is not solely the domain of professionals but also a communal process that emerges wherever people organize to meet shared needs. Susu and HeHui (合会) illustrate design as social innovation, producing systems that are collaborative, inclusive, and culturally embedded. They also represent forms of decolonizing finance, offering alternatives to hierarchical, extractive banking models through community ownership and participatory governance.

The lessons extend well beyond financial practice. Both cases reveal the value of hybrid systems that integrate traditional practices with digital infrastructures, while also exposing risks of exclusion, cultural erosion, and corporate capture if participatory principles are overlooked. For designers and researchers, this underscores the responsibility to ensure that emerging financial technologies foreground inclusivity, transparency, and cultural integrity.

9.1 Recommendations

- **Participatory Fintech Co-Design**: work collaboratively with communities to co-create digital tools that extend traditional financial practices rather than displace them.
- **Cross-Cultural Learning**: facilitate dialogue and exchange across regions for example, between African ROSCAs and East Asian HeHui (合会) systems, to enrich global participatory design practices.
- **Policy Engagement**: partner with regulators and financial institutions to safeguard community-driven systems from exploitation while ensuring equitable access to digital infrastructures.
- **Research Agenda**: investigate how hybrid financial models can inform broader systemic transformations toward equity-oriented and decolonized financial futures.

Concluding Reflections
Susu and HeHui (合会) remind us that meaningful innovation often emerges from the ground up. They demonstrate that communities are not only users of systems but also designers of financial futures. In closing, within the context of participatory design, the challenge and opportunity lie in supporting these grassroots systems as they adapt, ensuring that finance in the digital era remains collaborative, just, and deeply human.

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