



Partecipazione e CONflitto
* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 10(3) 2017: 955-982

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v10i3p955

Published in November 15, 2017

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ARE SOLIDARITY PURCHASING GROUPS A SOCIAL INNOVATION?

A study inspired by social forces.

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ABSTRACT: The Social Forces theory was proposed by Beckert (2010) to study the interconnecting dynamic interrelations between institutions, networks and cognitive frames that underlie economic phenomena. In the context of this article, this theoretical perspective was applied to study Solidarity Purchasing Groups as a social innovation and to assess their capacity to create a new process of social inclusion for their suppliers. Despite being the most relevant alternative food networks in Italy, Solidarity Purchasing groups are only partially able to fulfil the promise of social innovation (by increasing the participation of beneficiaries and challenging pre-existing socio-economic dynamics) through the establishment of an alternative supply-chain alongside the one proposed by mass retailers. The results were obtained from an empirical investigation of 35 solidarity purchasing groups (2015/2016, nationally based), under the frame of the EU-funded CRESSI project.

KEYWORDS: Social innovation, alternative food network, solidarity purchasing groups, cognitive frame, network, institution

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1. Introduction

The concept of social innovation has undoubtedly gained momentum in both academic and policy-making discourse over the last five years. Following decades of reduced state intervention, grassroots-based and innovative solutions originating in citizens' initiatives now have the potential to fill the institutional gaps currently left open by neoliberal markets and to reverse the top-down logic of public sector intervention (D'Alisa *et al.* 2015). Additionally, the participatory nature of social innovation may promise a more equitable distribution of benefit (Moulaert *et al.* 2013) by favouring the empowerment of marginalised social groups and individuals (Rehfeld *et al.* 2015). However, despite the numerous studies investigating this matter, to date few scholars have focused on the effective capacity of social innovation experiences to reduce the socio-economic marginalisation of those who benefit from their activities.

There is a clear need for social innovation in the domain of agriculture and food. Both scholars and activists have expressed a growing interest in the increased mobilisation around food in both northern and southern countries, which is demanding more equity and transparency throughout the supply chain. This is a result of the progressive marketization and institutionalisation of the delivery of food and primary goods given the success of mass retailers, which calls into question whether people have fair access to essential goods (Bentham *et al.* 2013). Social movements around the world are thus promoting new forms of re-embedding economic activities into the food sector, particularly since the financial crisis. These include Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs), which over the last 20 years have become more widespread in Italy as alternative food networks have increased in prominence (Graziano and Forno, 2012; Forno and Graziano, 2016). SPGs are mostly comprised of self-organised groups of citizens who collectively buy from small organic producers. Activists are driven by the idea of generating new forms of social relationships between consumers and farmers by promoting alternative forms of consumption that abandon the logic of profit maximisation (Graziano and Forno 2012). SPGs' activities actively promote political consumerism (Micheletti 2003; Arcidiacono 2013), in which solidarity and the sustainability of production are key ingredients (Graziano and Forno 2012; Maestripieri 2018). In fact, the main difference between SPGs and previously existing purchasing groups is the call to solidarity as a founding principle (Maestripieri 2018); a solidarity that in principle addresses those who supply products to them. As is empirically demonstrated throughout this paper, this is sustained by several previous contributions from SPGs' opinion-makers (Saroldi, 2001; Valera, 2005; Tavolo per la Rete Italiana di Economia Solidale, 2013; Altraeconomia, 2015).

The hypothesis in this study is that SPGs can be read under the framework of debate on social innovation, as they explicitly promote new processes that open new end-markets for their suppliers (for example small organic producers, local artisans or social co-operatives that employ vulnerable individuals), with the declared goal of favouring their inclusion in society and enhancing their proximity to final consumers. Applying Beckert's (2010) theoretical framework shows that their activities are socially innovative because they aim to modify institutions (formal norms and informal practices that regulate food consumption), cognitive frameworks (consumption styles and values associated with food) and networks (relationships between consumers and producers). The scope of the article is to open the black box obscuring the functioning of SPGs, to understand to what extent they are able to foster the participation of marginalised suppliers in their activities, and to examine the extent to which the processes they promote address the structuration of their disadvantage (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017). The two dimensions (participation and challenging the pre-existing dynamics of marginalisation) are considered the primary actions promoted by social innovations (Moulaert *et al.* 2013; Rehfeld *et al.* 2015; von Jacobi *et al.* 2017).

The study provides new insights into SPGs within the Italian national context, thanks to a primary data collection process promoted in 2016 within the context of the EU-funded CrESSI¹ project. Previous studies have so far focused on the capacity of SPGs to empower their members in terms of political and economic participation (for example Graziano and Forno (2012), Fonte (2013), Forno *et al.* (2013), Grasseni (2014), Guidi and Andretta (2015)). Shifting the focus onto suppliers provides new evidence concerning the potential social and economic impact of SPGs as a form of social innovation in the food supply chain (Bentham *et al.* 2013).

2. A social grid model to study social innovation

Defining what social innovation implies is not an easy task (Moulaert *et al.* 2013; Ville and Pol 2008). As the concept has gained theoretical and political appeal, the number of associated definitions have increased accordingly (Nicholls and Ziegler 2018)². Moulaert

¹ This article was produced with the support of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration (contract nr. 613261 - project CRESSI). The information and views set out in this article are those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union. For more information about the project: <https://goo.gl/FlquEt>

² The success of the term carries the risk of it becoming a buzzword because of its over-simplistic use in several policy practices and as a legacy of the increasing number of studies it has inspired. This discussion is

and his colleagues (2013: 1) propose that the term “*refers broadly to innovation in meeting social needs of, or delivering social benefit to, communities – the creation of new products, services, organisational structures and activities that are ‘better’ or ‘more effective’ than traditional public sector, philanthropic or market-reliant approaches in responding to social exclusion.*” More broadly, Pol and Ville (2008: 4) define social innovations as all those innovations that have “*the potential to improve either the quality or the quantity of life.*” In this sense, social innovations are not driven “*by the profit motive nor by marketability, but characterised by social objectives that activate and accelerate the innovative potential of society*” (Rehfeld *et al.* 2015: 4).

Based on the previous statements, social and novel aspects are understood to be the basic elements of social innovation: it should imply a change in previously existing social relations that is brought about through a mobilisation-participation process (Moulaert *et al.* 2013). Although scholars disagree about the meaning of social innovation (Pol and Ville 2008), a common grassroots perspective (Cruz *et al.* 2017) concerns the pre-eminent role of communities compared to other actors in the welfare diamond (public, market, family) (Jenson 2012). The social needs that social innovation aims to address are not pre-determined, but are rather contextually defined (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2013). Conversely, because of their participatory nature, solutions proposed in the framework of social innovation are said to be more effective and equitable than conventional solutions that rely on market or public intervention, or on philanthropic initiatives (Moulaert *et al.* 2013). Being socially innovative “*in their ends and their means*” (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2013: 2) implies two axes of analysis when following this reasoning. First, social innovation should be explicitly aimed at enhancing the quality of life of those who are involved in its processes (in their various roles) and, secondly, they should operate at the local level and rely on the mobilisation of communities to attain this goal (Cruz *et al.* 2017).

In fact, the above definitions stress the idea that the main goal of social innovation must be a reduction in marginalisation for those who benefit from the activity of social innovation. Marginalisation is the negative outcome of market and policy failures: marginalised groups or individuals cannot fully participate in economic and social life due to institutional obstructions and the pre-existing dynamics of exclusion (Rehfeld *et al.* 2015). Exclusion can be identified on the basis of what marginalised individuals are lacking, in terms of opportunities, resources or power, which can determine the processes by which these are distributed across society (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017).

Social innovation can therefore be defined as a grassroots response to socio-economic patterns that are responsible for the processes of marginalisation and force individuals

outside the scope of the article, but the author is aware of the possible shortcomings of the decision to use the framework of social innovation to study the experiences of solidarity purchasing groups.

into a bi-dimensional definition as consumers, economic actors or welfare recipients (Nicholls and Ziegler 2018). The position at the margins is ambivalent: on one hand, marginal individuals are excluded by economic processes driven by those who occupy the centre; on the other, their exclusion allows them to develop alternative ideas and solutions that might be more effective and equitable than standard ones. A marginal location thus has a potentially disruptive effect on mainstream economic, cultural and social processes (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017). Unlocking the potential of marginalised individuals or groups is beneficial for society as a whole and it is the main objective of social innovation (Rehfeld *et al.* 2015; Cruz *et al.* 2017). Social innovation has the potential to create a space for marginalised people in two ways: on one side, social innovations foster the participation of those involved in its processes; on the other, the process aims to tackle the socio-economic dynamics that potentially replicate the condition of marginalisation (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017; Cruz *et al.* 2017). From this perspective, two main roles that can be conceptually identified in each social innovation experience: social innovators, citizens who promote, manage and lead social innovation, and the beneficiaries, marginalised individuals who benefit from participating in social innovation activities. In the case of SPGs, members of the groups are social innovators, as they are responsible for the functioning of groups and actively manage the everyday operations necessary for their maintenance, while beneficiaries are small family farmers and social cooperatives who sell their products to the groups. Social cooperatives and small farmers can be defined as marginalised by their position in the food supply chain: small dimensions, family management, remote localities and low productivity are all factors that prevent their successful integration into the mainstream system of food distribution, which is dominated by mass retailers (Maestriperi 2016). In fact, the presence of big distribution chains in the basic goods sector (food, clothes or hygienic products, such as detergents or cosmetics) (Scarpellini, 2008) makes it harder for small producers to access the marketplace (Saroldi, 2001; Saroldi 2005; Valera, 2005; Altraeconomia, 2015; Andretta and Guidi 2017).

The conceptual tool proposed in this article to explain and analyse the processes generated by social innovation is the so-called social grid model (Beckert 2010, 609-610). This highlights the interplay of different irreducible social forces (networks, institutions and cognitive frameworks) in shaping economic phenomena, such as social innovation. The social forces involved can be defined as follows: i. networks are the visible structures of social relationships, which enforce a horizontal perspective; ii. cognitive frames are "*mental organizations of the social environments*" (Beckert 2010: 610), intended as the instruments used by individuals to interpret reality; iii. institutions are formal social structures, such as rules or practices, based on a vertical perspective. The dynamics of

their interrelationships structure the process through which individuals fall into marginalised or central positions, highlighting how processes arise as components of cultural, institutional and societal embeddedness (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017). In summary, the “*opportunities and choices of individuals are directly affected by social forces, for example, with whom we get in contact through existing networks; which and whose rights are protected by existing institutions, or which cognitive frames drive our decision-making*” (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017: 152). The social grid thus enriches any analysis of the outcomes of social innovation because it takes into account the extent to which social innovation is able (or not) to generate space for the marginalised individuals involved in its processes (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017).

The strength of Beckert’s theory lies in considering social forces as irreducible, meaning that change is the outcome of the interplay of the three (Ziegler *et al.* 2017). In fact, for Beckert (2010), following a rich tradition that goes back up to Bourdieu (2005), alterations in one of the social forces produces changes in all the others to which it is connected, modifying the power relationships and connections between actors. For example, cognitive frames provide legitimisation for certain behaviours (codified into institutions): social innovation can operate in two senses, by provoking the need of new institutions to sustain new cognitive frames or by disrespecting existing institutions that are considered not congruent with the cognitive frames sustained by social innovators. At the same time, the opposite process can occur: existing institutions make values socially relevant, while social innovation can promote new values through new practices. The interactions between social forces generate six axes of analysis: cognitive frames -> institutions, cognitive frames -> networks, institutions -> cognitive frames, institutions -> networks, networks -> cognitive frames, and, finally, networks -> institutions (Beckert, 2010). However, as recommended by Beckert (2010), from an analytical point of view, it is important to analyse institutions, cognitive frames and networks separately when these concepts are applied in the empirical analysis of a particular phenomenon. If the objective of social innovation is to change relations (Moulaert *et al.* 2013), the three social forces serve as conceptual tools to analyse the social and economic outcomes of the actions of social innovations. In fact, the interaction between social forces can reproduce marginalisation or support its reduction (Ziegler *et al.* 2017). In the quest to a change pre-existing socio-economic relations, social innovation should target the three social forces simultaneously with the aim of reducing the marginalisation of the beneficiary involved in its processes (Ziegler *et al.* 2017).

Drawing on this theoretical perspective, this article investigates the organisational functioning of SPGs, hypothesising that it constitutes a social innovation in the domain

of agriculture and food production. The hypothesis was tested by analysing how the interplay of institutions, networks and cognitive frames might positively interrelate to obtain the two main objectives of social innovation (improved participation and reduction of marginalisation). The following sections, after providing a methodological overview of the study, first discuss SPGs as social innovations and then analyse how the three social forces (cognitive frames, institutions and networks) structure SPGs' activities. The role of SPG members as social innovators will be discussed on the basis of the empirical analysis, especially in relation to their capacity to foster better economic and social conditions for suppliers who should be the beneficiaries of their actions. In fact, the extent to which the benefit is distributed among the SPG's members and the beneficiaries of its activities (the suppliers of an SPG) is not entirely clear, although it has been argued that the members of SPGs favour suppliers. The following paragraphs open this black-box.

3. Methods

This study is based on an empirical investigation of Italian Solidarity Purchasing Groups (2015/2016), which were analysed as part of the EU's 7th Framework Programme CrESSI project. The analysis presented in the present chapter is derived from 40 interviews: five with *key informants*, local and national representatives of the SPGs and scholars who have investigated the phenomenon, which serve as general background³; and 35 semi-structured interviews with members of SPGs, representatives of 35 groups distributed throughout Italy. The SPG groups interviewed were randomly selected⁴ from

³ Extracts from key informants' interviews are not reported in full, but the information was used to inform the discussion of the reported materials.

⁴ The range of the analysis covered the entire Italian area to ensure an equivalent proportion of SPGs in affluent contexts, prevailing contexts and at-risk contexts, were surveyed on the basis of an index of vulnerability (Chiappero Martinetti *et al.* 2017). This was determined using a combination of three different indicators: the at-risk of poverty-rate (NUTS2), occupational level (NUTS3) and GPD per person (NUTS3). The first extraction selected 100 groups out of a population of 990 groups, which corresponded to about 10% of the entire population of active groups. Groups were extracted based on the index of vulnerability, which was assigned according to the geographical context in which they operate (based on NUTS3). The extraction comprised 30 groups belonging to the group of affluent contexts, 30 groups belonging to prevailing contexts and 40 groups for vulnerable contexts as it was assumed by the research team that the latter would be more difficult to contact and to be persuaded to participate in the research. All 100 groups selected were contacted at the same time, while a second reserve extraction was made in case the first sample was not successful in covering the envisaged number of groups (10 groups in affluent contexts, 10 groups in prevailing contexts, 10 groups in vulnerable contexts). No further differentiation was made between the groups: all groups belonging to the same province (NUTS3) had the same probability of being extracted to become part of the

the national list of SPGs published on the website www.retegas.org⁵. The empirical investigation was also informed and enriched by several participant observation sessions in internal SPG meetings⁶ and in a national meeting of SPGs' coordination bodies (February 2016).

Each group was studied via a short questionnaire (self-completed by members before the interview) and a semi-structured interview with the author⁷. The questionnaire aimed to collect timely and numerical information about the group, namely the number of volunteers and members, running costs, the date of foundation, and the funding received. The semi-structured interviews mostly reconstructed how each SPG was created and how it operates, its social forces (networks, institutions and cognitive frames) and how they interact to foster the social integration of suppliers. The interviews aimed to assess: i. whether SPGs can be considered a social innovation; ii. the role of social forces in their functioning; and iii. the actions that groups promote towards suppliers.

Some semi-closed questions were used in the interviews to make it easier to compare the results with the three empirical cases from the EU-funded CrESSI project (von Jacobi *et al.* 2015). In these cases, the mobile dashboard for the study of social innovation comprised a battery of prompts that were proposed to the interviewees, who were asked to assess the extent of their group's fulfilment of specific requirements, as theorised by the

study. The 35 interviews are the result of this procedure: 12 interviews from affluent contexts, 13 from prevailing contexts and, finally, 10 from vulnerable contexts. The latter case had a particularly high number of refusals and inactive groups, forcing the team to resort to using four cases from the reserve list in the 10 final interviews (despite the initial oversampling). In the case of affluent and prevailing contexts, the composition of the sample mirrors the number of groups agreeing to participate in the study, which was slightly higher than the planned target of 10 groups.

⁵ The list published on retegas.org is the most comprehensive database available for assessing the number of SPG groups currently active in Italy and constitutes the usual data source for research into SPGs (Forno and Graziano, 2016). However, the list may be incomplete, as there is no obligation for groups to subscribe to it and many of the most informal groups may not be present or, on the contrary, many groups who are still listed are no longer active. It is not possible to assess the reliability of the list when mapping the phenomenon. The population at the date of the sample selection (September 2015) was composed of 990 groups, which includes only the SPGs and not their network aggregation (about 11 networks). Given the limits associated with the population list, the study did not aim to examine the statistical representativeness of the phenomenon in Italy, nor its scope.

⁶ The author has actively participated in two SPG groups. The first is located in an affluent city (active from November 2015 to June 2017), the second in a town and prevailing area (between January 2017 and June 2017). Both belong to Lombardy.

⁷ All 35 interviews in the study were conducted and analysed by the author; 29 interviews were face-to-face and six were conducted via a Skype videocall. There were 10 collective interviews, as two or more members participated in the interaction. Two interviews were conducted during the general SPG meeting, resulting in 10 or more participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Atlas-Ti v.6 for Windows. Categorisation was made partly according to the categories of the extended social grid model and partly to the categories proposed by interviewees in their accounts.

scientific debate on social innovation. These prompts were divided into the following dimensions: newness (“promote innovation”), participation (“create new relations”, “open to participation”), diversity (“mind-changing”, “encounter different people”) and marginalisation (“improve the life conditions of someone”, “favour the inclusion of marginalised groups”). For each prompt, the interviewee(s) were also asked to justify their positive or negative response(s). The newness of the SPGs as a social innovation was also studied with a subsequent question: “Thinking about the SPG experience in general, would you say that SPGs’ activities are innovative?”.

This article also relies on the sections of the interview that investigate social forces: with regard to networks, interviewees were required to list the main actors in their collaboration networks; on cognitive frames, interviewees were asked to declare which values are upheld or opposed within their groups; and on institutions, they were asked which norms or practices favour/impede their activities. The data collection for networks was carried out by means of a short questionnaire that used a structured grid with closed questions. This included the name of the partner, its type (public, private or individual), and the degree and extent of collaboration. Institutions and cognitive frames were investigated during the interview: the interviewees were first required to list up to five items via a semi-closed question, after which the interviewer proceeded to further investigate each of the items listed⁸. All of the information about social forces was collected with the aim of understanding their impact on the activities promoted by the groups with regard to sustaining the economic activities of their suppliers.

Extracts from the interviews with representatives of the SPG groups in the sample are distinguished by region. On average, the groups had about 40 members, although there was some discrepancy in numbers (the median value was 17). Only 15 out of the 35 cases had decided to formalise their activity by forming an association. In addition, 19 groups are active in cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, while 16 are located in a town. Further information is given in Table A1 of the Annex.

Finally, the study employed a qualitative approach and, as such, its goal is to offer an in-depth representation of SPGs and a thick description of their functioning, analysed under the conceptual framework of the social grid. It did not aim to offer a statistical representation of SPGs that could be generalised at the level of the entire population of groups that identify themselves as part of these alternative food networks.

⁸ Different questions were used for the sections on cognitive frames and institution. For each prompted cognitive frame (up to five), the interview guide focused on the influence on activities, diffusion in the context of reference, and an example of a behaviour that represented the value. Institutions were divided between facilitators and barriers: for each of the prompted institutions (up to three facilitators and barriers), the guide focused on legal enforcement and the level of application (closed questions), influence on the activities and diffusion among the other groups in the context of references.

4. Solidarity purchasing groups as a case of social innovation

Solidarity Purchasing Groups (SPGs⁹) are “(local) networks of people which decide to share consumption decision following specific solidarity criteria with respect to the environment (buying environmental friendly products, i.e. seasonal, organic, locally manufactured, etc.), to producers (by creating primarily social bonds, they often reduce the profit maximisation imperative which guides mainstream capitalism) and the SPG members themselves (by collectively sharing the burden of order and delivery of the products, providing mutual assistance in case of need, tutoring the newcomers, etc.)” (Graziano and Forno, 2012: 123). Each member is responsible for one (or more) type of products: one person (called a referent) maintains correspondence with producers, organises purchasing and shipping, and distributes the items to other members. Each producer is usually only in contact with the assigned referent and not with the entire group. As there is no formalised national or local board, each group is fully autonomous, not only in terms of the selection of who to include as members or suppliers, but also in its capacity to make decisions about the functioning of the group, although guidelines are available on the SPGs’ websites¹⁰.

When asked if their SPGs are a form of social innovation, interviewees became hesitant. Almost half of the interviewed groups were reluctant to attribute newness to their activities. When asked about this directly, the respondents stated that their group promotes innovation by recovering old-style practices that the industrial food supply chains have eliminated, such as a closer relationship with family farms and a small scale of production. In line with this approach, groups are conservative about their functioning and resistant to any organisational or functional change (see Table A2 in Annex). In contrast, respondents were more likely to agree about the social nature of their activities. However, these usually occur at the level of a neighbourhood or at small town level, on the basis of the participants’ existing primary networks (recruitment occurs mostly between friends, acquaintances or neighbours). As such, co-option reduces internal diversity and only a minority of organisers regularly propose external communication activities (websites or events). Only a limited number of groups thought that their activities would favour the inclusion of marginalised groups, as shown in Table 1.

⁹ Solidarity Purchasing Groups is the English translation of the Italian term “Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale”, which is usually given the acronym GAS by activists and scholars.

¹⁰ See for example: <http://www.economiasolidale.net> or <http://www.retegas.org>

Table 1 – Interviewees’ opinions of the characteristics of SPGs: the number answering yes for each prompt associated with the definition of social innovation.

<i>Prompts</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Partially</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Promote innovation	16	14	4	1
Create new relations	34	1	0	0
Open to participation	34	1	0	0
Mind-changing	30	1	1	3
Improve life conditions	34	1	0	0
Favour the inclusion	10	22	1	2
Encounter difference	31	2	2	0

Source: Author’s elaboration on CrESSI semi-structured interviews to SPGs

Table 2 – Who benefits from SPGs activities – count of citations¹¹

<i>Prompts</i>	<i>N° citations</i>
Suppliers	28
SPGs members (and their families)	30
Networks of people involved in SPGs (i.e. friends, extended family)	11
Local community	2
Local non-profit organisation	1
Those who are in trouble	1
Society	1
Environment	3
Individuals employed by SPGs	3
<i>Number of cited beneficiaries</i>	<i>80</i>

¹¹ This question allowed up to five citations for each interviewee. Even when they were not cited at the beginning (seven cases), the author, as interviewer, relaunched the category to ask the respondents if they thought suppliers were benefitting from their activities. All the interviewees confirmed that suppliers can be considered as beneficiaries of SPGs, confirming the hypothesis of the research team.

The SPGs have three main beneficiaries: small family farmers, social cooperatives that cooperate with SPGs, and, of course, SPGs' members, who can access high-quality primary organic goods at cheaper prices compared to the mainstream food supply chain. The most cited beneficiaries are consumers (and their extended network of friends and family). In fact, the main concern of SPG members is themselves (usually, members are the first to be cited), followed by their suppliers (28 citations, and in seven cases only after specific prompting from the interviewer¹²). Only one group cited the community (notably: "*the neighbourhood*") or local non-profit organisations: the lack of interest in external actors shows the groups are only partially interested in (or aware of) the possible positive impact their SPG might have on the local community. Instead, they mostly focus on the personal network of the participants involved in the group. This partly contradicts the embeddedness that the SPGs show when asked about the networks of actors with which they collaborate (§ par. 4.2).

Irrespective of how they perceived the benefit to be distributed, the interviewees explicitly claimed during the interviews that their activities are intentionally oriented towards sustaining the economic activities of their suppliers. None of the interviewed groups disagreed with this principle. Although they also recognise their own benefit from the SPGs' consumption (accessing organic food at cheaper prices compared to the retail system), when asked about the main aim of their activities, arguments always revolved around sustaining suppliers who are considered deserving of their SPGs' help for various reasons (such as organic production, operating on a small scale, safeguarding local production or the labour market integration of vulnerable individuals).

We never focused only on the side of... savings and of particularly... it was, it was an idea of doing social activity, by buying from producers who have to be sustained from an ethical point of view, from... an environmental point of view. [Veneto]

The interviewees opined (this was in general confirmed by *key informants*) that compared to traditional purchasing groups, SPGs have the added value of the S of solidarity (Saroldi, 2001; Saroldi, 2005; Valera, 2005; Graziano and Forno, 2012; Altraeconomia, 2015; Maestripietri 2018)¹³. In fact, by helping certain types of producers, activists practice criticism of the mainstream economy (Saroldi, 2005) and state their distinctiveness from "normal" purchasing groups. Solidarity becomes embedded in the purchase of suppliers' goods via SPGs' collective consumption (Valera, 2005; Altraeconomia, 2015).

¹² If the interviewees did not cite suppliers as beneficiaries during their answer, the interviewer relaunched the category to see whether SPG members agreed that suppliers may be considered as their beneficiaries.

¹³ See also the manifesto of SPGs: <http://www.retegas.org/upload/dl/doc/GASDocumentoBase.PDF>

Long-term relationships between members and producers avoid the risk of becoming merely an organic purchasing group.

When asked about how they exercise solidarity towards producers, interviewees' answers explicitly revolved around the idea of socially including suppliers and improving their economic conditions by buying their products. Small producers find an end-market via the practices of SPGs (Saroldi 2005). Interviewees were of the opinion that this has become possible as a result of the fair price principle and by avoiding the intermediation of mass retailers. Fair prices and no intermediation are in line with the ethical principles of *political consumerism* (Micheletti 2003; Arcidiacono 2013). In this rhetorical positioning, access to high-quality food is a positive externality of their main interest in suppliers.

[It improves the life condition] of producers, I really think yes, maybe also ours. Of producers, because we allow them to earn the fair price, because they are those who make the price, we are not those who decide. So, if I buy a product at 100, for example, this is because they decide that this product has that value. [Lombardy]

However, the participation of suppliers in the activity of the group with the same rights as members is not considered to be a priority to achieve the goals of SPGs. In fact, although the main aim of SPGs is to create a direct relationship with producers, which should result in their empowerment, only a couple of SPGs in the sample have succeeded in having strong and systematic partnerships with producers or associations of producers. The rest is mostly limited to the usual one-to-one commercial exchanges, usually mediated only by the referent and not by the group in itself. Conversely, only a minority of SPGs involve themselves in other activities (see Table A3 in the Annex).

The separation between consumers and producers is reflected in the social composition of the two groups: urban and cultured for consumers (Forno *et al.* 2013), rural and disconnected for producers (Maestriperi 2018). As such, the relationship with producers is pre-eminently characterised by power disparities, and SPG members are sometimes willing to use their purchasing power to encourage suppliers to act according to their desires, while they rarely allow them to influence their decision-making. They use their spending to exert pressure on suppliers' behaviour; it is worth noting that the expense capacity of the SPG groups is the same tool they claim to use to reduce the economic marginalisation of suppliers. The risk of succumbing to paternalistic practices is sound (Maestriperi, 2018), if paternalism is defined as the practices promoted by an upper-class individual (in this case, the SPGs' members or consumers) towards marginalised social groups (SPG suppliers) that circumvents the agency of the individual.

We bought [the rice] from a very big farm (the ***), which is a farm that has always been in the area, a farm that also makes organic certificated rice and for years we were supplied by them [...] but at a certain point we got to know that [...] the owner of the farm had sold the land or was about to sell it to a project that they wanted to do. But maybe they're not going to do it, I wish that they wouldn't do it, we don't know, I mean it is a kind of big racetrack which should interest I don't know 2 millions of square metres [...] which is something that is so absurd and we absolutely don't agree with their method [...] because of all that falls behind [this kind of projects] and then we said no!! We give our money to you and then you sell your land to do a racetrack, a motor-dome or whatever the hell it is, no! That's no good and then we established a relation with another farm. [Veneto]

For producers, on the contrary, they improve a lot because they sell [...] their products at a price which is much superior to the one they could normally sell at, and moreover they can get known in a viral way as you... as you can say, by word of mouth, because we Italians in practice lean on the word of mouth for everything and... then, that is, suppliers when... when producers become suppliers of SPGs they make a jump... decisively positive, until they don't disappoint them, because when they disappoint them, they are abandoned (she laughs). [Lombardy]

In conclusion, SPG members are more willing to see the contribution in social terms rather than in terms of the innovative characteristics of their experience. Groups consider suppliers to be one of the main beneficiaries of their actions, together with their primary networks. The actions of SPGs mainly consist of offering an end market characterised by fair prices. However, the positive effect of SPGs is undermined by the willingness of their members to intrude on the productive practices of the suppliers. If the positive impact of the SPGs activities is to be found in the acceptance of the price proposed by producers and the fairness that characterises it, the negative impact is a rather paternalistic approach that characterises their activities.

5. The role of social forces

With the aim of studying SPGs as a form of social innovation, the following paragraphs apply the social grid to highlight the main socio-structural dimensions of SPGs as suggested by Beckert (2010): network, institutions and cognitive frames (§ 1). The next paragraphs take each social force into account separately: networks define the spaces of actions for individuals and organisations, institutions delimit the power assigned to each

actor, ratifying the approved behaviours, and, finally, cognitive frames inform how players interpret the field in which they are operating (Beckert 2010).

5.1 Cognitive frames

In the literature on economic sociology, the activities of groups like SPGs have been framed in the debate about political consumerism (Stolle *et al.* 2005; Graziano and Forno, 2012; Arcidiacono 2013; Forno *et al.*, 2013; D'Alisa *et al.* 2015; Guidi and Andretta 2015, 2017). This concept indicates the political awareness of a consumer as expressed via his/her own consumption choices when preferring certain products or services on the basis of their own political principles: “*political consumers choose particular producers or products because they want to change institutional or market practice*” (Stolle *et al.* 2005, 246). The individual action of consumption becomes political and collective (Forno and Graziano 2014) as it is mediated by groups – such as SPGs – in which the principles of consumption are shared and implemented in organised political action in order to sustain processes of *voicing* (Arcidiacono 2013). Political consumers do not simply ask for products’ requirements; they also demand certain behaviour from producers in line with their political views (Forno and Graziano 2014).

Criticism of the traditional economic system mostly revolves around the opposition to mass retailers, namely supermarkets. Groups accuse the retail system of unfair treatment of their suppliers, of an indirect promotion of unsustainable productions, such as industrial agriculture and intensive farming, and of favouring low prices over local products. Some groups also affirm that supermarkets favour unleashed consumerism, as sales and special offers induce people to buy more food than they need, thus causing the high levels of waste that affect western societies. Conversely, political consumerism favours the dimension of solidarity, expressed by sustaining specific suppliers that meet specific ethical principles, such as sustainable and worker-friendly production. The practical effect of assuming political consumerism is the main cognitive frame mostly affects the selection criteria of producers, who have to fulfil the requests of consumers in terms of environmentally friendly methods of production, respect for tax and labour legislation, and a short production chain.

We force the producers to give us the invoices and when this is possible to account for... for those who produce fruits and vegetables or similar products, they have to account for how they produce, who they hire, who works for them and how, which type of contract and things like that. We don't ask for the signature of a contract or necessarily a dossier, but we usually go to control who does what and how. In the case

of meat or other things like that, it has already occurred to us... if we had to assess a new supplier maybe we go to see where they live... where they grow up the animals, what are their conditions and something like that. Clearly we're not experts, but we can surmise. [Lombardy]

In general, cognitive frames are shared with beneficiaries and the SPG network, although this is something that is usually taken for granted (the customary argument is "*if they collaborate with us they must share the principles of the solidarity economy*"). However, the author is under the impression that deviant mentalities are not encouraged either. An interesting episode in this regard concerns one of the oldest SPG suppliers, who has supported SPGs' activities since their nascence. In this context, this farmer was one of the most popular producers of apples and juices, until he decided to stand as the Lega Nord candidate in the local elections. This created a wide debate among SPGs and some of them decided to freeze all commercial contact with him. This is a form of boycott, applied when a producer is no longer perceived to be in line with the principles of the solidarity economy as promoted by the groups; in this case, his alignment with extreme-right party politics that propose an anti-migrant political programme at the national level. This occurred even though the farmer continues to respect the principles of organic production and there have been no cases reported of the exploitation of migrants or workers in his chain of production.

For example, you heard that several SPGs have decided to cut their relations with *** because he has declared in favour of Lega Nord, but now on this matter I don't feel like I followed them, in the sense that now if you tell me that the producer *** exploit minors or unregistered workers or hence has non-ethical attitudes, I agree let's cut him, but if he has expressed ideas that I don't share, I don't feel like... [...] if he produces ethically anyway and if his political ideas are not shared by me, I will still buy from him. [Liguria]

The idea of political consumerism is fully rooted in the activities of social innovation, as the actions are based on the active participation of consumers. The main aim is to foster a change in pre-existing socio-economic settlements. However, criticism of mainstream economic system occurs entirely in terms of capitalism and market relations, as there is a subject who buys and a corresponding subject who sells, without sharing the market's risks of production or the objectives and goals of the social innovation, as occurs in other examples of alternative food networks (such as Community Supported Agriculture). In general, groups show strong conformity in proposing ideological principles based on political consumerism. This is quite surprising considering the lack of national coordination

between groups (Maestriperi 2016). This conformity has certainly been facilitated by the number of documents and manuals promoted by SPGs' opinion leaders over the years (Saroldi, 2001; Valera, 2005; Tavolo per la Rete Italiana di Economia Solidale, 2013; Altraeconomia, 2015).

In conclusion, despite their very loose coordination at the local and national level (Maestriperi, 2016), SPG activists strongly share the vision of *political consumerism*. The strength of their assumptions makes it very difficult to accept deviant behaviour, even if they occur outside the domain of the consumers-producer relationship.

5.2 Networks

One of the main strengths of SPGs is their capacity to build up a network of local groups that are geographically dispersed and extremely adaptable to a particular context (Valera, 2005). The shape of the SPG network is a legacy of how the groups have grown in recent years, namely through the multiplication of groups, rather than by enlarging pre-existent SPGs. However, it is interesting to note that groups report their lack of relationships with other SPGs active in the same area. Only half of the monitored groups are in contact with intermediate level organisations such as the DES (District of Solidarity Economy). Four of the groups have no partners.

Table 3 – Main collaborators of SPGs. Number of citations¹⁴.

<i>Type of partners</i>	<i>N° citations</i>
Producers	7
Other civil society associations	25
Local intermediate-level SPGs organisations	19
Other SPG groups	11
Public actors	5
Individual subjects	3
No partners	4
<i>Number of cited partners</i>	74
<i>Number of SPGs with no partners</i>	4
<i>Number of interviews</i>	35

Source: Author's elaboration on CrESSI questionnaire to SPGs

¹⁴ Each interviewed group could cite up to five partners with whom they collaborate.

Actors from civil society associations constitute the main partners of SPG groups. They are extremely varied and mirror the diverse origins of SPGs: environmental movements, Catholic organisations (local parishes, missionary groups, groups for the promotion of families and vulnerable youth), and local societies supporting the cultural promotion or social integration of marginalised groups. Some of the biggest groups rely on supporting companies, such as social cooperatives, for the services of shipping, receiving and distributing goods; the same function is also provided by fair-trade shops. Surprisingly, however, collaboration with the fair-trade movement is not as systematic as might be expected. It occurs only in three cases located in towns and is quite likely a result of the fact that volunteers or supporters of local fair-trade shops gathered together to organise a purchasing group based on their previous friendly relationship revolving around their activities. Although this might appear to contradict the previously sustained indifference towards communities (§ par 3), the amount of collaboration with civil society at the local level conceals its substantial strategic function. Most collaboration occurs because of the logistic and practical needs of the groups (such as spaces for meetings or support in the delivery of goods). Only a minority of groups collaborate with other actors for community purposes, such as local projects or events. Additionally, limited interaction with producers is also evident when the types of contacts they have established are examined in more detail. It is not only a matter of quantity (only seven groups have systematic relations with them), but also a quality issue, as the interactions usually occur at the commercial level (see Table A3 in annex).

No political organisations are found in SPG networks, and single groups rarely establish a systematic collaboration with public bodies even at a local level: if this does happen, they are usually in contact with local cultural entities such as public libraries or association councils. They sometimes contact individual politicians for specific purposes (for example assessors or council members who are particularly sensitive to sustainability). No examples of systematic collaboration were found between the groups and municipalities or neighbourhood committees in this study.

The missing link with local entities occurs because SPGs do not wish to become involved in politics, although they recognise that their activities are intrinsically political (Graziano and Forno 2012; Forno *et al.* 2013). They do not believe in the traditional system of political parties: the only real request to local bodies is that they provide an affordable space in which to meet and distribute their purchasing, which is not always easy, especially in the biggest cities or if a group has not decided to constitute a formal association. On the contrary, more traditional political activities are regarded with suspicion by the activists, thus hindering their transformation into a political movement in the traditional sense. This shared suspicion of politics calls into question the capacity of

SPGs to affect public policies. In fact, their isolation might also lead to their activities remaining invisible to others and remain confined to the private sphere of SPG members.

I have the suspicion that we are... we are a gang of anarcho-individualists too, atomic anarcho-individualistic at the end... in some cases, at some assemblies also happened to hear 'I don't want anything from the state, for God's sake, no no no, for God's sake', Unabomber style substantially, you stay in your home and I stay at my place. [Lombardy]

To conclude, although SPGs have strongly affirmed their role in creating significant personal relationships in terms of economic exchange (Valera, 2005), the analysis of SPG networks shows that their activities are limited in terms of the impact on local communities. With the exception of some cases of best practice, in which groups have succeeded in coordinating a local informal structure, groups are frequently disconnected from local communities (as the results in Table 2 show). Although their activities are claimed to be intrinsically political, they mostly occur at the level of individual activists' private lives and personal networks, but groups are reluctant to enter the local political arena as interlocutors.

5.3 Institutions

In general, SPGs are not fully aware of the institutional environment in which they are active. In general, groups state that external norms rarely influence their activities, either positively or negatively, although they can influence the group's internal activities. Consequently, the most debated issues regarding norms concern the internal regulation of the groups and, in particular, the institutionalisation of their own activities.

The problem lies in how to distribute tasks between members. Groups are divided between centralised groups in which core members are in charge of distributing purchases for the passive members (those who do not actively provide volunteer work, such as organising distribution or shipping); groups in which general tasks (such as distribution, management or secretarial services) are periodically rotated between members; and fully horizontal groups in which all members have an active role and take decisions together, without a proper executive committee. If the group has opted to create an association, the most active members may be appointed to the roles of president, public relation coordinators or treasurer; if the group remains informal, individuals usually refuse to lay claim to a specific position in the group (*"We are all referents" "I'm not the*

spokesperson, I'm just a member"). Tension between core active members and passive free-riders was one of the biggest internal problems reported by interviewees. This constitutes a barrier to the evolution of groups into more institutionalised forms, as it creates disparities between SPGs members in terms of their power and centrality in the group.

The main rule, apart from those I have written, should be the participation, but I repeat again that these are... difficult points, because again another time... it is a problem of mentality, there is always this mentality of benefitting and never putting yourself on the line. Therefore, for me the SPG should be participation and precisely with participation we have the strongest difficulties. [Campania]

Furthermore, informality may affect groups' capacity to tackle marginalisation. Most of the laws or public calls for funds, public spaces or merely recognition (even including the L.244/07¹⁵) require a degree of formalisation that many groups still resist, thereby affecting their capacity to be formally accepted as an interlocutor by public entities. It also means that groups are not entitled to funds or spaces that might allow them to grow or acquire political visibility. However, this situation is only rarely seen as problematic. Most of the groups prefer to preserve their total autonomy rather than to acquire power and the ability to influence public policies. Conversely, collaboration with public actors is also limited (see Table A4 in the annex).

We have a cultural impact for sure. In fact, when there are the municipal elections they look for us to know what we think about and so on, but we always turn them down [she laughs], because SPGs members don't want to be involved in politics. [Lombardy]

In conclusion, groups reported their incapacity to have an active impact on the decision-making process: firstly, because a single group is too small to be interesting, especially if it has not been formalised as an association; secondly, because they do not wish to become involved in politics or to have a relationship with public bodies. The issue of groups' limited impact on decision-making, however, does not appear to be particularly important to them.

¹⁵ L. 244/07 is the most important law regulating the activities of SPG groups in Italy. It allows products to be purchased and distributed without being subject to VAT, as normal intermediary enterprises or companies would be.

6. Conclusions

The objective of this study was to investigate the role of SPGs as a form of social innovation by examining the social forces that characterise it. Networks, institutions and cognitive frames (Beckert, 2010) were the conceptual tools that guided the analysis. The main objective was to assess the extent to which the solidarity actions of SPG groups towards their suppliers meet the two main objectives of social innovation: the improved participation of their beneficiaries and a backdrop of processes that create their marginalisation.

SPGs show strong and coherent discourse: as a result of the proposal of cognitive frames based on political consumerism (Stolle *et al.* 2005; Arcidiacono 2013), they oppose the mainstream food supply chain and favour a certain type of family-based organic farming. Their coherence effectively produces change in the mentality of the SPG members, and has a potential role in replacing mainstream ideas and provoking a cultural change in the entire community. However, the analysis of how SPGs function clearly reflects the image of social innovation, which only partially addresses the communities in which they are embedded as interlocutors. Strongly rooted in the primary networks of their participants, groups are becoming configured as elitist networks that are rarely open to external partners in terms of communication and involvement.

The networks in which SPGs operate seldom demand collaboration with producers or producers' associations, even at an informal level. Although SPGs are part of a wider global movement of alternative foods networks, they are unique to Italy. MAPs (Mouvement Agricole Paysanne) in France, the "reciprocal system" in Portugal and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) in the Anglo-Saxon countries are different, as they constitute cooperatives of producers and consumers (Guadagnucci 2007). On the contrary, SPGs are solely composed of (mostly informal) groups of consumers and do not involve producers in their functioning and decision-making. This might explain the separation between the two categories of producers and consumers, who do not appear to be involved with each other to any degree. In fact, SPG networks only rarely involve producers or groups of producers in the management of their groups. The relationships that SPG members succeed in establishing with their suppliers are mostly oriented towards commercial activities.

Furthermore, the relationship with political institutions is hindered by a suspicion of traditional forms of political engagement. In fact, given their informal nature and the rejection of any form of institutionalisation, SPGs have not succeeded in configuring themselves as pressure groups, and their political activity remains segmented in different territories. The most innovative and interesting experiences are concentrated in

those districts with a stronger solidarity economy (Guidi and Andretta 2015). None of the groups reported any jointly promoted activities in recent years, such as petitions, political events, meetings with party candidates or the group taking direct intervention as a collective actor in local political debates. Their potential to act as pressure groups (Graziano and Forno 2012) has declined since the financial crisis, and is linked to their choice to remain as small self-organised groups that mostly rely on the volunteer activity of their members. SPG members clearly wish to maintain a separation from traditional politics, which potentially hinders their relevance as social innovators.

In terms of defining SPGs as a social innovation, it is possible to affirm that SPG activities only partially respond to requirements. Their intention to change power relations and favour the empowerment of their suppliers was clear in the interviewees' stances and arguments, but the extent to which SPGs are effective in achieving this goal still requires further investigation. More research into the producers' perspective is needed (Andretta and Guidi 2017), as the debate on political consumerism and solidarity purchasing groups in particular has so far mostly focused on the perspective of consumers, creating a blind spot as far as producers are concerned. Previous research has demonstrated that in certain cases the producers constitute the main engine for the politicisation of certain groups, for example in the case of "Mondeggi Bene Comune" (Andretta and Guidi 2017). Investigating the point of view of producers, especially focusing on the economic impact that alternative food networks might have in terms of ensuring the survival of small family farmers, is fundamental if solidarity purchasing groups are to be considered an example of successful social innovation and if we are to avoid taking their positive impact for granted, as has sometimes been the case in previous studies.

Social innovation needs to offer multi-scale and coordinated solutions if it is to be effective (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2013). Investigating both sides of the consumer/producer relationship is central from this perspective, as it allows the relational dimension of SPGs to be viewed as a political experience (Andretta and Guidi 2017) and to examine their potential disruptive impact on existing socio-economic dynamics (von Jacobi *et al.* 2017). The results of this study suggest that SPGs risk becoming elitist groups disconnected from and isolated in their own communities. In line with critical perspectives on alternative food networks (Fonte 2013), the full exercise of solidarity (Maestriperi 2018) should imply a reflexive criticism of how groups promote the effective participation of their suppliers and should consider how to achieve a significant impact on policies, albeit at a local level.

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The article received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 747433. The study has been funded under project CrESSI 7th Framework Program (contract nr. 613261).

Annex

Table A1 – Distribution of interviews with social innovators by Italian region¹⁶

Region	N° inter-views	Mem-bers	Suppliers	Turnover	Year	Cities	Associa-tion
Abruzzo	3	19	8	7.500	2010	2	1
Campania	2	50	11	5.000	2009	1	1
Emilia-Romagna	4	66	21	52.342	2009	3	2
Lazio	1	39	7	3.000	2005	1	1
Liguria	3	61	17	53.000	2006	3	3
Lombardia	7	29	24	36.548	2008	5	3
Marche	1	49	16	20.000	2008	-	0
Piemonte	4	36	14	13.667	2010	2	1
Puglia	1	15	12	-	2010	-	0
Sardegna	1	30	18	13.130	2011	-	1
Toscana	2	28	20	23.000	2007	1	0
Trentino Alto-Adige	1	38	30	26.000	2010	-	0
Veneto	5	64	19	74.451	2002	1	2
Total	35	43	18	33.846	2007	19	15

Source: Author's elaboration on CrESSI questionnaire to SPGs

Table A2 – Intensity and types of incremental innovations introduced in the last three years – Italian cases.¹⁷

Type of innovation	No change	Examples of innovations introduced in last 3 years
New methods of production	32	Collectively buy old seeds and make flour for GAS needs; social gardens.

¹⁶ The table shows the following information: the number of groups in cities above 100,000 inhabitants, the average year of foundation, the average number of members, the average number of beneficiaries and the average amount of money that each group spends yearly on consumption.

¹⁷ This set of questions was adapted from the Community Innovation Survey, EUROSTAT, and included the response options: "no"; "yes" and "I don't know".

New methods of logistics	28	Changed locations; management of delivery (i.e. new software); collaboration with cooperative for delivery.
New methods of supporting activities	26	Online payment systems (i.e. virtual cards); online modules on cloud services; management software; personalized labels; website; mailing list.
New methods of business practices	35	-
New methods of organisation	27	Management committees; elimination of cash payments; distribution of responsibilities; decentralised decision making.
New methods for external relations	28	Pre-finance; registration in the municipal register of associations; new agreement for prices; social cooperatives for services.
New methods of financing	35	-
Total number of interview = 35		

Source: Author's elaboration on CrESSI questionnaire to SPGs

Table A3 – Type of interactions with suppliers – count no. of citations

Type of interactions	N° citations
Commercial contacts	35
Presentation of suppliers' products for SPG members	8
Visits of SPG members to suppliers	3
Suppliers participating to SPG assembly	4
Total number of interviews	35

Source: Author's elaboration of CrESSI semi-structured interviews with SPGs.

Table A4 – Collaboration with public actors

Type of collaboration	N° citations
Public actor is one of the promoters	0

Collaboration (informal and formal) ¹⁸	8
Currently no relations	26
Total number of interviews	35

Source: Author's elaboration of CrESSI semi-structured interviews with SPGs.

¹⁸ A formal collaboration occurs when the role of social innovation groups is acknowledged formally by the public institutions (as for example being part of a consultancy body). Informal collaborations occur when relations mostly rely via personal contacts with individual council members or politicians.