

PART 4

Individual case study: “Solidarity Purchasing Groups”

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Abstract

Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) movement is a peculiar bottom-up social innovation that has been spreading over the past 20 years in Italy. It is composed mostly of self-organised groups of citizens who collectively buy from small organic producers in Italy. They promote several practices that sustain the alternative food networks in the country, such as: solidarity and critical consumption, organic and km-0 productions as ways to promote environment protection, respect of labour regulation and fair economic relations. Several authors have recognised their role in reducing the marginalization of small and micro farms in the country (Forno and Graziano, 2014; Grasseni, 2014).

The historical foundation of GAS can be traced back to the 19th century, when mutual purchasing groups had been promoted in the experience of consumers' cooperatives. More recently, the NoGlobal movement and the expansion of fair trade during the '90s have favoured the progressive increase of consumerism awareness among the middle classes (both in terms of purchasing power and in terms of cultural capital) that sustained the progressive growth of the GASs movement. GASs are now in a mature phase of the social innovation cycle and new more institutionalised forms (such as emporiums and formal associations) have now been established next to the original informal groups of consumers.

The aim of this paper is to describe origins, features and transformations of the GASs movement in Italy. Our analysis is based on documents, materials and interviews out of WP7 qualitative phase in order to sketch a case study about Solidarity Purchasing Group. Between September 2015 and January 2016 35 interviews have been conducted with social innovators belonging to 35 GASs, distributed nation-wide. GASs have been selected randomly, stratifying the sample on the basis of a composite index¹⁷⁵ aimed to capture the vulnerability of the contexts, being classified as low, medium and high vulnerable territories. The Italian team has interviewed at least ten social innovators for each type of context. In order to fully understand the life cycle of the social innovation and to trace the historical foundation of GASs movement, starting from the original experience of mutual consumer cooperatives, we have also added up 7 key-informant interviews with national and local representatives of GAS movement and with academic experts.

¹⁷⁵ The index is based on three indicators: Eurostat NUTS3 GDP per inhabitants, Istat NUTS3 occupational level, Eurostat NUTS2 at-risk-of-poverty rate.

1. Introduction: what is a GAS?

Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) are “groups of individuals that decide to organise themselves in order to buy collectively food or any other everyday good, selecting suppliers on the basis of solidarity and critical consumption” (Acanfora, 2015, p. 14). There have been numerous examples of collective consumption in the recent history of economy (§ par. 2.0), but what makes GAS peculiar is the attention to the solidarity: the main aim of the group is not to obtain better prices by avoiding intermediation or by purchasing directly from the producers. Their main aim is to have a consumption that is in line with the ethical principles of critical consumption: fair prices for producers, preference for local products, sustainability in production (i.e. organic) and transportation of goods (i.e. preference for social cooperatives as providers of services) (§ par. 1.2).

Even if GASs are part of the global movement of alternative foods networks, they represent a singularity of Italy: MAPs (Mouvement Agricole Paysanne¹⁷⁶) in France, the “Reciprocal system” in Portugal (Guadagnucci, 2007) and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) in the Anglo-Saxon countries are different in the approach as they constitute associations of producers and consumers to cultivate local fields, while GASs are usually mainly composed of consumers.

The more general trend of farmers’ markets (in Italy, one of the biggest association is promoted by professional association for farmers, Coldiretti – Fondazione Campagna Amica), even though it is in line with some of the principles of critical consumption as intermediation is avoided and local products are sold (quite often organic), still is far from the experience of Italian GASs, which is a bottom-up network of citizens that have relations with several producers not mediated in principle by any (private or public) institution. People must be part of the group or member of the GASs association to access consumption, while farmers’ markets are open to all consumers, thus losing the direct relation linking GASs and suppliers.

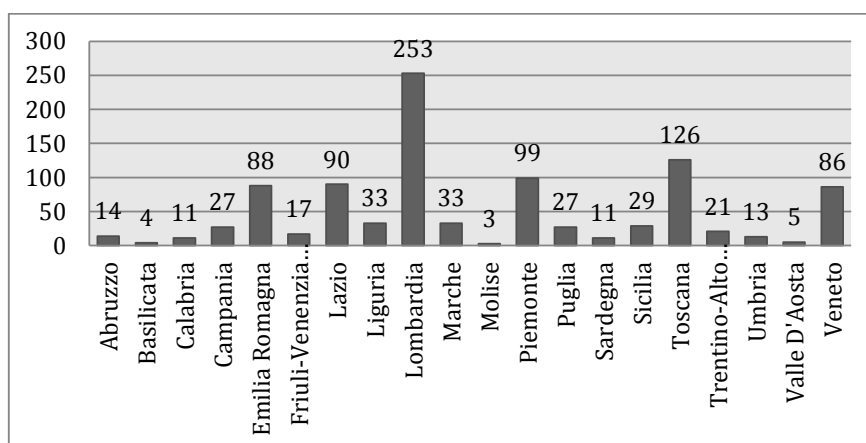
The first GAS was born in the beginning of the `90s in Fidenza (a small town of about 25,000 inhabitants in the Emilia Romagna region of Italy, which is well known for its extreme richness in association networks and bottom-up political participation). Its first motivation was to buy organic food bypassing the big distribution (*Grande Distribuzione Organizzata*, in Italian GDO). Organic food was very difficult and expensive to buy at that time: as declared by one of the founders Mauro Serventi (Acanfora, 2015), the first group had been established around this practical objective, starting from around ten families that progressively built up a purchasing group getting in touch with organic and local producers by the word of mouth. Evolving over 20 years of debate about alternative economic models, the movement has

¹⁷⁶ http://lemap.be/spip.php?page=rubrique&id_rubrique=1

progressively gone beyond the practicality of accessing healthy food or local products, introducing a strong and coherent manifesto on how to put in practice solidarity within an economic relation (§ par. 1.1).

In the following years, the number of GAS groups have kept increasing and is now estimated around 1,000 unities, mostly concentrated in the Northern part of Italy (about 25% of the total groups are based only in Lombardy, 60% in the Northern regions)¹⁷⁷. The sustained growth of the last decades has been made possible by the diffusion of ITC technologies that allowed consumers to get in contact with producers more easily as compared to the past. GASs are now a political movement that is estimated to involve 100,000 to 400,000 consumers in Italy organised at institutional level with a national consortium of networks (Tavolo RES, Economia Solidale) and local representatives (RES, DES and INTERGAS), although they still resist a process of formalisation (Guadagnucci, 2007).

Figure1: Distribution of GAS groups by Italian region, absolute values 2015



Source: Retegas, author's elaborations

As previous research made evident¹⁷⁸, citizens who join a GAS are extremely active and supportive on social and political side. They also have usually a good expense capacity and they use GASs mostly to access food and other basic everyday goods, such as clothes or detergents. The usual *gasista* (the way members of a GAS call themselves) is a middle-age woman with a medium-high educational level, who represents a family composed by children and a partner. Just a minority among *gasistas*' families belongs to working class or low-

¹⁷⁷ Estimation is based on a list published on the website www.retegas.org. The inscription to the list is completely optional for the groups: studies Forno *et al.* (2013) showed that the list is not entirely able to map the phenomenon under-estimating its diffusion in the country.

¹⁷⁸ The most important research on GAS movement in Italy has been promoted by the CORES research lab of Bergamo's University and it is accessible here: <https://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/28934#.VuGH5FYihcQ>

educational level strata of population: GASs are usually an expression of an affluent middle-class dual-workers family, even if they should more be considered part of a cultural elite than an economical one (Forno *et al.*, 2013). Thus, members are frequently counted on the basis of families more than the sole member who is responsible for purchase: the common presence of females thus is evidence of a still strong genderization that characterises food supply in Italian families (59,3% of the time devoted to food and services purchasing is provided by women in Italian families ISTAT, 2012).

2. ICS - Social problem addressed

2.1 Problem area

As published in the GAS official presentation (Retegas), we can highlight the main problem areas addressed by the movement. It regards mainly household food supply and basic good production. Interrelated effect can be highlighted to be prevalent in the following fields

- Labour regulation and health protection of workers
- Sustainable economy
- Supply chain power relations

The main objectives of the movement are:

- To put in practice the critical consumption:
 - by acquiring ethical and organic products (to respect humans and environment, to have healthy food, to improve solidarity among members and towards suppliers, to be sustainable, to be closer to natural rhythms)
 - by informing and improving the knowledge about critical consumption
 - by limiting isolation on the market and frustration towards GDO as individual consumer or producer
- To create solidarity and awareness
 - Creating occupation in local territories
 - To improve working conditions for suppliers
- To promote sociality
 - Creating a network of friendship and solidarity among members
 - Creating a direct relation between consumer and producer

- To use the collective as a political power
 - Promoting local products and small producers
 - Increasing the affordability of ethical and organic food
 - Reducing time devoted to purchasing
 - Maintain local production and local cultural heritage

References: GAS official document (Retegas).

2.2 Targeted beneficiary group(s)

The targeted population is twofold. First, it is composed by a plethora of small and family-run businesses that produce basic good for household consumption (food or everyday products such as clothes and detergents) with sustainable procedures. This target is considered to be exposed to marginalisation in the following several dimensions:

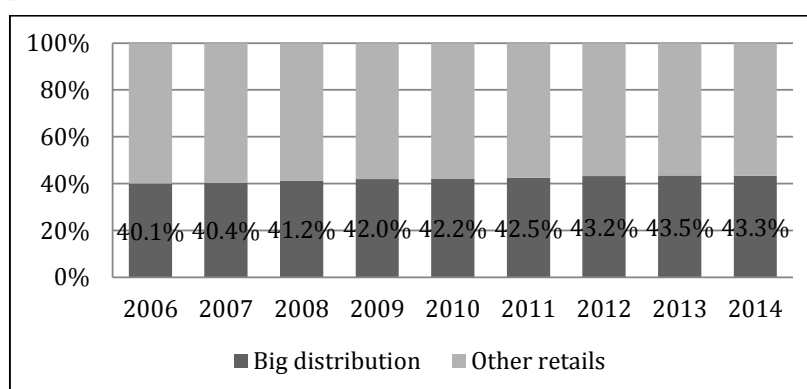
- Their small dimensions might lock them in a subaltern position in economic relations within the market. Intermediaries and GDO are in a power position that is usually used to reduce the buying prices for their goods.
- Again, the small dimensions don't allow them to access regular markets as they don't have the production's volumes required to access organic supermarkets or big retailers.
- The familial management might expose them to possible risks of inefficiency in conducting their business.
- The geographical distribution of some productions (placed in deprived areas as it is the case for examples for oranges or oils, or in isolated territories) might impede access to alternative food networks already established in the most affluent areas, such as farmers' markets.
- The choice of organic production increases costs and it might result in being less competitive with traditional production (price-based concurrency). At the same time, their small dimensions might impede their access to organic certification.

A second type of beneficiaries can be found in social cooperatives, which usually produce the same goods as the target one, or they are active in providing services for consumption such as food delivery, intermediation or logistic services. In addition to the previous risks, we can add that they usually employ individuals that are exposed to the risk of labour market marginalisation: people with physical or mental handicaps, migrants, women or men that experienced negative episodes in their past (i.e. prostitution, imprisonment, drug addiction).

2.3 Problem background

The emergence of the social problem can be linked to the progressive success of big distribution becoming the main supplier for families' needs, which can be traced back to the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s (Zamagni *et al.*, 2004). The emergence of big groups – even if they were an expression of more social initiatives as consumption's cooperatives as in the case of COOP (§ 2.0) – has progressively eroded the distribution channels for small and local producers, who rely mostly on small distribution. The impact of the recent financial crisis has thus only magnified the structural trend of concentration that has already been established in food purchasing in the previous years, with the progressive erosion of market quotas in favour of big distribution retailers.

Figure 2: Distribution of retail purchasing by type of retails, percentages 2006-2014



Source: Osservatorio nazionale del Commercio (Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico), author's elaborations.

The GDO also promoted an increasing concentration in the agriculture sector, mostly relying on the system of consortiums or local territorial cooperatives, as long as the standard company dimensions in Italy are very small and family-run based in general (Ranci, 2012): in order to satisfy the volume required by GDO to increase the productivity of soils and cultivations, an increasing use of chemical additives has been documented: in 2012, ISPRA (the Italian institute for the protection and research on environment) has monitored the presence of chemicals in about 60% of its water sample, for a total of 175 different substances. In general, there is a trend for augmentation of chemical pollution in superficial and subterranean waters (ISPRA, 2014). In addition, the preference for organic and sustainable production that it is common among GASs suppliers implies that volumes of production are reduced and more costly as compared with traditional agriculture or food transformation. Small producers who

didn't follow the trend toward the use of chemical fertilizers and additives neither were substantially able to stay on the market, nor to access the costs of organic certifications that had been established under the European directive (REG. CEE 2092/91).

The system of certification in Italy is run under the supervision of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Forestry Policies (Ministero delle politiche agricole alimentari e forestali). Private companies which previously have been authorised by the Ministry provided controls on the procedures of production and emanate the certification. This system guarantees that each company has followed specific criteria about the fertility of soil, fighting against parasites or infesting herbs and the origin of seeds. Each region publishes the names of the organisations that are certified for organic production¹⁷⁹.

3. ICS - Solution, influences and relevant context factors

3.1 The historical foundation of GASs

When GASs were born, other experience of critical consumption were spreading, as ethical finance or fair trade. [...] They were different groups, in general made of people who were engaged in different forms and in different domains. There were also some leaders, as Alex Langer, Alex Zanotelli, Francesco Gesualdi in the area that gave birth to Rete Lilliput around the NoGlobal movement. It was a clique that debated on the injustice of actual economic model and that claimed the need for a change. [KII]

The peculiarity of the Italian GASs movement can be better understood in the light of the social and economic history that roots back to the history of cooperation, both secular and catholic. The first example of collective consumption of food and everyday basic goods traces back to 1854, when the General Society of Workers in Turin decided to open an emporium for its members in order to give them access to basic necessities at an affordable price (Zamagni *et al.*, 2004). The idea of the first consumption cooperatives was to buy at wholesale prices and then distribute the products to its members without adding a mark-up on the buyers' prices. This initiative was part of a more general trend that saw mutualism's initiatives spreading in industrial areas of the Northern part of the country and that involved housing, access to health and affordability of food. In fact, one of its main characteristics (thus already deviating from the GASs experience) was to make consumption accessible to the lower and most marginalised strata of the population, as working-class or low-educated individuals, thus combating diseases caused by a difficult access to a healthy nutrition. Only during the last

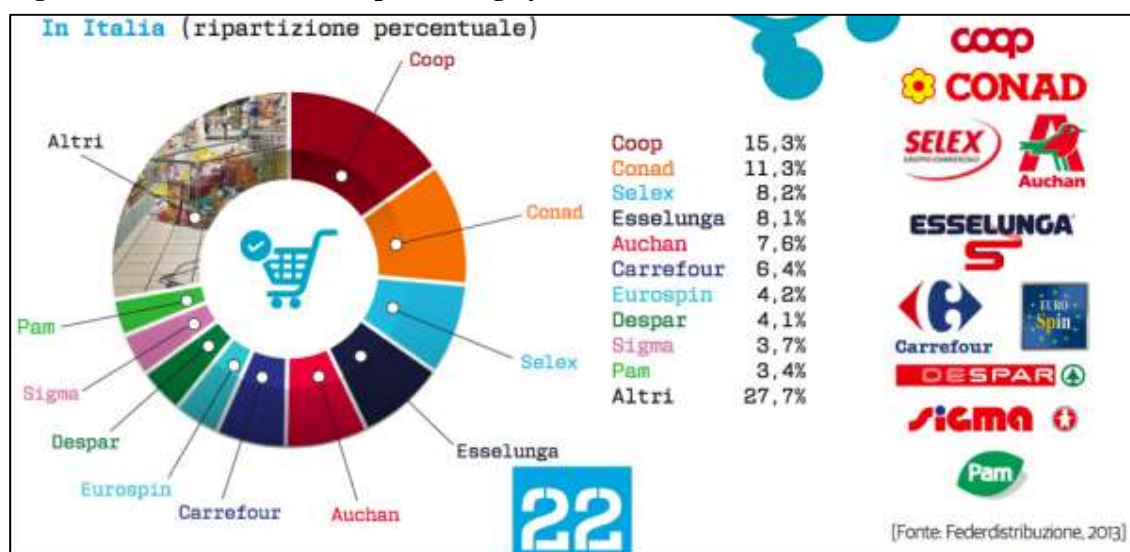
¹⁷⁹ (See: http://www.coldiretti.it/organismi/inipa/area%20formazione/cd%20probio/files/03_Normativa.htm for more information).

decade of the XIX century, the consumption cooperative has been extended to middle-class employees, with the birth of the Unione Cooperativa in Milan (1886) firstly oriented to clothes and only in a second moment to food (Zamagni *et al.*, 2004). At the first general meeting of the Italian cooperative movement (1886), there were already 248 different societies with very different ideological orientations: catholic, socialist, liberal and working class. They were mostly cooperatives for production and consumption (129 societies out of 248), popular banks and mutual aid society, for a total of about 74,000 members involved (Guadagnucci, 2007).

GASs pick the more mutualistic dimension of cooperative experience, but it gives priority to other aspects apart from the economic one. It is not only because their social basis belongs to middle-class, but it is also because in their history they were close to the environmentalist movement. In the S of solidarity lies their meaning. Historically, solidarity was oriented to cooperative members and related only to the economic aspect, while for GASs solidarity is oriented towards environment, towards nature, towards small farmers, towards land. GASs were born from an experience that is similar to the historical cooperative movement, but it finalises its action first in environmental sense and then in a course of social transformation, which is not immediately linked with other experiences. [KI5]

After a period of dismantling due to Fascism, the years after WWII showed an increased success of the consumption cooperatives that started to be influenced by the progressive transformation of the commercial sector, from small and traditional shops to the modern GDO, made possible by the diffusion of durable goods as fridges and cars. Italy was late in this transformation as it lacked a spread wealth that was reached only after the economic miracle in the '60s, when consumption started to boom even in this country. However, GDO reached a significant quota of consumptions (10%) only in the '80s. Consumption cooperatives followed the trend, reorganising under the brand COOP: just after the war, cooperatives were one of the main instruments to access consumption for the middle and lower classes, also acting as an access to labour market for their workers. In the beginning, they were organised in a network of small and local shops that progressively merged into a national network (the actual COOP) with several big retail stores (Zamagni *et al.*, 2004). At the end of the '90s, big distribution weighted about 40% of the food consumption in Italy.

Figure 3: Distribution of retail purchasing by brands, 2013



Source: Centro Nuovo Modello di Sviluppo, 2013

In 2015, the most important operator of the big distribution in Italy is the direct descendant of the agglomeration of the consumption cooperatives originally oriented to the needs of workers and employees (it controls about 15% of the GDO market¹⁸⁰). One of the critics that GASs movement put forward against consumption cooperatives is that they have aligned to the logic of GDO, creating big intermediation structures that have forgotten the social principles that had determined their birth. Even if now there are no direct connections with the consumption cooperatives movement (although at local level there is a network of small social cooperatives and mutualistic associations that collaborates with GASs), it is undeniable that principles of solidarity and reciprocal aid have been taken from this strand too.

However, while Italian consumptions were catching up adjusting to the general trends that characterise advanced western societies, several bottom-up movements were establishing to promote alternative supply chains as an alternative to GDO. The first to be established was the fair trade, which has had a strong impact on the following evolution of the GASs movement. Started in Europe around the '60s on the route of missions in third world, it reached a nation-wide success towards the end of the '90s on the impulse of the rising NoGlobal movement. Fair trade promotes equity in the relations between Northern and Southern countries in the world economic system: affluent consumers from North try to buy exotic goods as coffee, tea or tropical fruits with the shortest distribution chain possible, reducing the profitability of the exchange for final distributors (most of fair trade shops are

¹⁸⁰ https://www.mbres.it/sites/default/files/resources/rs_Focus-GDO-2015.pdf

managed by volunteers) but assuring fair prices for producers. The Italian fair trade movement usually prefers suppliers that are cooperatives of farmers or small companies: in order to be included in the process, producers have to guarantee the minimum standard of labour rights for their workers and sustainability in the production, as for example avoiding the mass use of chemical fertilizers or additives (Barbetta, 2006). The same logic has been applied by GASs with local producers: they try to reduce the distribution chain by getting in contact directly with suppliers, agreeing upon a fair price with them and usually preferring small unities or social cooperatives (as an explicit reference to solidarity).

Italian solidarity economy has a peculiarity: it is strongly political. In fair trade movement, it is extremely evident: it is still a strong radical movement. Among the solidarity economy, it is the most structured one: it has shops and companies that give work to thousands of people, with turnovers that exceed 100 million of euro. But still Italian fair trade refuse the guarantee of fair trade brand, because it sustains that to be sustainable it must be entirely a fair-trade product, because if the same brand is commercialised by Nestlé, then it might be good but it is still Nestlé. Italian fair trade pays a lot of attention to the organisation: if you want to establish a fair trade, you must have a cooperative and democratic organisation in the Southern countries, which produces following determinate criteria and which sell its products to a cooperative and democratic organisation in Italia, then selling on to Italian cooperatives made of members or volunteers. It is the entire process that must be coherent with the fair trade product. [K14]

Fair trade is similar to the GASs movement in terms of the strong element of solidarity that characterises the economic relations: it is not oriented to the maximisation of the profit for each of the actor involved in the trade exchange, but it is oriented to create equal opportunities for the producers given the following criteria: respect for workers' right, fair price, sustainability. With the increasing diffusion of the GASs principles, even fair trade movement started to modify itself by progressively introducing local social cooperatives with strong ethical characteristics (Barbetta, 2006): some of them help marginalized people entering the labour market (i.e. imprisoned or drug addict individuals), some other fight against the local mafia organisations (i.e. [Libera](#)), and more recently in Milan the fair trade distributors have started to promote fruits and vegetables of local producers through the network of organic suppliers of COOP¹⁸¹, the GDO emanation of the original consumption cooperatives. One of the most important shared appointments is the national fair "Fà la cosa giusta" that each year gathers suppliers from fair trade and GASs movement in Milano (the last edition was held 18-20th March 2016); in 2016 it reached its thirteenth edition.

¹⁸¹ <http://www.chicomendes.it/index.php?id=759>

However, consumption as a form of political activity has also been strongly interrelated with the rise of the NoGlobal movement, which has peaked in Seattle '99 and Genua '01 protests. Nevertheless, the critical consumption's movement was born in Italy before the two mass protests, mostly in the lively environment of Catholic groups. One of the most radical examples, which can be called an ancestor of the GASs movement, is the justice balancers movement (*bilancisti*, as they called themselves): families that compile detailed templates about the distribution of their consumptions in order to critically redistribute them in a more ethical and sustainable way. They were born in 1993 as emanation of “Beati I costruttori di pace”, a Catholic association of the North-East that sustained the refusal of wars with its most famous representative father Alex Zanotelli (active in the NoGlobal networks and in its local emanation Rete Lilliput) and at the zenith of their prevalence they involved about one thousand families. Although limited in the participation, the movement has been extremely important in the consolidation of the rhetoric that characterise the GASs movement: the concept of sobriety (see as reference the important book of Francesco Gesualdi Gesualdi, 2005) has been one of the pillars around which groups as GASs have oriented their consumptions, relying on sharing durable resources (as cars) or exchanging used goods (as clothes or accessories for children) (Guadagnucci, 2007).

Summarizing, the GASs movement has several ancestors, none of them being entirely representative of the movement's peculiarity. The similarities that can be found are the following:

1. Early history consumption cooperatives: self-organised collective purchasing, but also a space for a collective reflection on consumptions.
2. Fair trade: consumption as a way to dismantle the unequal relations between consumers, intermediation and production.
3. Critical consumption and Justice Balance: as a stimulus to reduce unnecessary consumptions and improve the sustainability of families' habits.

3.2 Solution approach

GASs constitute a solution as they allow producers and suppliers to have a direct contact with consumers, based on a trusted and long-term relation. The social problem is thus addressed by an overturning of the traditional logic of economic relation: from the maximisation of profit and reduction of the price to the definition of a fair price that is bargained between producers and consumers without any intermediation actor (that could increment the price for final consumers without giving a surplus benefit to the supplier). The novelty that GASs members propose must be found in the collaborative system of bargaining at the basis of the economic relation. Producers are not usually (solely) selected on the basis of the prices proposed for

their goods (as in the traditional economic model), but on several criteria that pertain the critical consumption's approach: to respect the shortest production chain, to favour local products, to sustain specific projects considered of social relevance (i.e. integration of people at risks or a conversion towards organic production of a new supplier), to protect the environment and to increase the sustainability of food supply.

Basically, [the GASs movement] has begun from the need of satisfying a demand for goods and services, by logics aimed to create relations instead of the normal logic of demand/supply. [...] The activation of a trusted relationship was the fundamental element that generates well-being [...]. It was something that we can confirm again, the supporting element in order to start the transformation, which cannot be obtained with contrast or search for the right, but only creating a relational channel of trust that allows generating well-being for the actors involved. [KI2]

The main activities to highlight in this sense are:

- Eliminating intermediaries
- Definition of a fair price bargained in a horizontal relation between consumer and producer
- Human and moral support in case any problem might arise
- Share the risk of the production (pre-financing)

An interesting innovation is the system of pre-financing (which is the base also for experiences as MAPs or CSAs, although on the contrary the system of pre-financing does not foresee that *gasistas* become members or business partners as it happens in CSA). A group of citizens decide to devote a sum to a supplier before receiving the goods; the supplier can thus proceed in increasing the productivity of farms (by acquiring specific machinery) or overcoming a financial difficulty. One of the most important episodes in this sense is the rescue of the cheese factory Tomasoni at the beginning of the years 2000. This factory (which far rooted back to history as it was founded at the beginning of XIX century) had converted to organic production by the end of the '90s, while at the beginning of the 2000s it encountered a deep financial crisis, which was linked to the management of a stock of grana cheese. While the production lines were in action (numerous GASs were already clients of Tomasoni), the traditional financing institutions refused to help the factory during its financial crisis. A bottom-up mobilisation made up of several actors of the alternative economy movement, relying on pre-financing from several GASs and a loan from Mag2 (a self-managed mutual aid society active in the financing of projects of solidarity economy), allowed the factory to survive the difficult moment. This system is not systematic and continuous, as it is for community-supported agriculture: it is used only as a solution for temporary emergency situations, although some experience – as the RiMaflow project in Milano or Arvaia in

Bologna – are trying to establish it as their main form of financing.

3.3 Actors and networks

One of the main strong points of the GASs movement is to be found in the capacity to build up a network of local groups, which is extremely adaptable and geographically dispersed. The added value of their organisation is, in fact, the informality and the bottom-up character of their meso-level organism, the so-called DESs (District of Solidarity Economy), which works mostly at province level. They operate by putting in contact the groups at local level and they are usually functional for organising certain purchasing, which are more efficient and effective when operating on a wide basis: for example oranges, detergents, or pasta. Although each group is totally autonomous and there is no obligation for the group to purchase through the networks, the concentration in DES has favoured relatively bigger dimensions of producers that deliver these products, such as for example “Le Galline Felici” di R. Li Calzi for oranges or Cooperativa IRIS for pasta which are not accidentally the biggest companies specialised in GASs supplying. However, DES is not a level of intermediation, but only of coordination: there is no mark-up on the final price but there are only volunteers who take care of the organisation of single shipping toward an area. One of the most effective network at local level is GAS Torino: it works as a second-level group that organises purchasing for the entire city of Torino, leaving the autonomy to the single GAS to decide if they want to purchase through their suppliers network or not.

DESs usually promote also working groups and informative exchange between the group and the general associative environment at local level, while it is very rare that they operate as advisory organs for public bodies (even at local level). Although it is a very effective tool of participation and intervention of local policies, it suffers from its fundamental character of volunteering: it is very hard to have good practices in this sense, because it relies on the participation of the individuals who have to devote part of their free time to the cause.

The evolution is comprehensible: from one side, producers have less need of GASs, from another the age is increasing and the crisis bites, you need availability of time and resource, it is not elitist being part of a solidarity purchasing group, but for sure the young precarious worker have difficulties in being part of a GAS, this is evident. You need cultural capital, you need time, you need things that since 10 years on have become scarce. [KI4]

Another factor that favours the network structure is connected to the fact that GASs tend to prefer to multiply the numbers of groups instead of promoting groups of larger dimensions. In the sample of our research, the average dimensions of groups are about 30/45 families (even bigger than the value observed by Forno et al. in 2013 , which was around 10 to 25 families). One of the reasons is connected to the minimum threshold by which a GAS can have

difficulties in operating and sustaining the cost of periodic shipping that is usually considered to be below 10 families, while over 50 it is increasingly complicated for volunteers to manage the volumes of shipping. The process of gemmation – as they call it – has favoured the creation of the bottom-up network as budded group still usually maintain closer relations with their “mother” GAS. Some of the biggest groups rely on supporting companies as social cooperatives for the service of shipping receiving and distribution of goods. In some cases, the same function is provided by the fair trade shops’ network: especially in the smallest towns, volunteers from fair trade shops and GASs activists superimpose.

The organisation of the GAS network, characterised by strong territorial entrenchment and small nodes, is similar to the one promoted by the Rete Lilliput network, one of the main institutional formalisation of the NoGlobal movement in Italy. This was especially interesting for the GASs movement as long as it draws inspiration for its functioning at national level: it was composed of a second level network of local networks, in which each of the different components that was recognised in the NoGlobal Italian movement (from Catholic to Extreme Left) could have a single national referent. The advantage of this organisational model was the protection of the internal differences, its horizontal expansion (instead of a vertical hierarchy) and the valorisation of the territorial base node within the network (Rete Lilliput, Manifesto).

It is hard to say what came first, if the chicken or the egg – speaking about NoGlobal movement. The Rete Lilliput – who inherited the NoGlobal movement – was a starting base, not really for GASs network, but for their evolution that were the solidarity economy districts. It is on the wave of the same impulse of NoGlobal movement that GASs were born, but with a practical logic and not by events. You can protest against a certain model by programming a protest then the following one and so on, organising an assembly in the middle that is going then to finish with organising another assembly. But the spaces that are left void, they must be filled up with practices, don't they? And then what in my opinion is going to be inserted in the middle and what we try to insert in the middle is the DES: it is everything you can do between one appointment and another, between one seminar and another. If not, you have nothing to tell if you don't do anything. Then, NoGlobal movement is for sure connected [with GASs] regarding values and prospective. [KI5]

Speaking about individual leaders, those who can be recognised in the GASs movement are Mauro Serventi (who was the founder of the first group in Fidenza), Andrea Saroldi as one of the main spokespersons and popularisers and Francuccio Gesualdi. The last one has been the director of the research centre “Centro Nuovo Modello di Sviluppo” who developed theoretical reflections and handbooks on how to put in practice critical consumption.

Especially, this last person has also been one of the leaders of the so-called movement for degrowth in economy, which prescribes a reduction of consumptions and engagement in the labour market as a radical critique to the sustainability of the actual economic model. In the last years, there has been an increasing closeness between the GASs movement and the degrowth movement, with overlapping of groups especially at the local level. Main representatives of the degrowth movement at national level such as Paolo Cacciari usually participate in the national encounters of GASs movement – as happened in Bergamo, March 2016.

Although the main aim of GASs is to create a direct relationship with producers, only a couple of GASs in our sample has succeeded in having strong and systematic partnership with producers or associations of producers, while the rest is mostly limited to the usual commercial exchange that characterises the relation between GASs and their suppliers. Two best practices are to be found in the area of Bologna and Milano. In the first case, local groups are trying to promote the activation of producers via an established network of daily farmers markets (GASs in Bologna supply fresh fruit and vegetables through this project called “Campi Aperti”) and the promotion of a CSA, which is supported by the Municipality. The “Arvaia” association – as the first Italian CSA is called – has been given by the municipality of Bologna the allocation of the first field belt that surrounds the areas, mostly of public propriety. The association of producers are entitled with the management of these areas, while GASs support them by pre-financing their activities and buying the products. In Milano area, it is the system of agricultural production chain that has been privileged: GASs sustain the projects by acquiring their final product as bread or flour (Spiga and Madia for the local DESBRI in northern area and the wheat production chain for DES Parco Agricolo Sud for the southern area), while different producers cooperate all along the production chain (from spike to bread). Local DESs act as coordinators for the producers involved in the production chain and for the promotion through the area.

GASs main collaboration’s networks are to be found in the lively bottom-up associative environment that characterises Italian society at local level. The partners coming from associations are extremely various and they do mirror the extreme variety of the GASs environment: environmental movements, small catholic organisations (local parishes, missionary groups, groups for the promotion of families and vulnerable young), small experience of local promotion and integration. No political societies are to be found in their network and groups only rarely establish a systematic collaboration with public bodies (with the exclusion of political organs): mostly, they are supported by local cultural entities as public libraries, associations’ council or single individuals that want to promote their activities at local levels (as for example, assessors or council members who are particularly sensitive to

these themes). GASs however don't want to get involved in politics although they recognised that their activities are intrinsically political, because they don't believe in the traditional system of parties: the only real request to local bodies is to provide a space at affordable prices where 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 an association.

Thinking about the evolution of their ideological result, the determinants have been the fair trade movement, the justice balance movement and the environmental movement for sustainability (§ par 2.0). However, a determinant role of catalysis has been given by mainstream media who started to speak about GASs from 2004/2005 with the highest peak of media visibility reached in 2009, when REPORT – a well-known broadcast on the public TV station – dedicated an entire episode to the rising phenomenon of GASs. The exposure toward potential members, as REPORT is mostly an inquiry journalism broadcast privileged among aware individuals and political activists, has determined a rapid growth in the diffusion and births of new groups, which the movement has not been able to manage. In fact, the media coverage opened up the groups also to members that were not already being politically active, thus changing the social composition of the groups and starting a period of stagnation and contraction that it is still on-going (§ par. 3.1).

What has worked was the media attention, which at a certain point was very strong: mainstream journals, but above all REPORT with its episode on GASs determined their explosion. This has been for good and for worse at the same time: because it brings in everybody at every level of engagement. That is, how do you react facing this growth crisis? When your numbers expand until you are made of hundreds of families? What is the model that works better? Gemmation or big organisations with supply chains as Aequos or Buonmercato? In my opinion, at that moment there was the mistake: facing the expansion, [GASs] were not able to really consolidate. If that has happened because they really couldn't consolidate, I don't know. Maybe there was a course that has not been followed? I don't know it either. What is certain is that the consolidation has not happened, when GASs movement could become something systemic: cooperatives have made it when they become a system founding COOP, either we like them or not, but they made that jump, solidarity purchasing groups have not, maybe they couldn't for definition, I don't know, but this is something that has not happened. And as it always happens when there is a production peak in a non-renewable source the decline has started, because innovation has lacked. [KI4]

While GASs entered their crisis – not accidentally in the same period while Italy was living a strong economic downturn in 2013 – a multiplication of adapters started to establish, although especially lively in the most affluent areas of the country. Firstly, a series of private shops that

sells the products of the GASs suppliers have been inaugurating in the last years, as for example organic or short production chain shops. Some of the shops have emerged directly from GASs experience: as in some cases, they are GAS that institutionalised their role by taking up the form of an emporium or social cooperatives selling the products directly to consumers, in parallel with logistic and distribution services to groups. Secondly, partly promoted by the associative environment, partly promoted by trade association (as Coldiretti) and partly by public bodies, farmers' markets have multiplied all around the biggest and smallest cities smoothing the access to the final market for local producers. Thirdly, some of the biggest GASs groups – as Aequos in the area of Como, RiMaflow and Buonmercato in the area of Milano – have implemented experience of GASs with easy access, mostly comparable to on-line shops that allow aware consumers to access the GAS purchasing without having to provide volunteer work for their functioning, with just the minimum mark-up for repaying the running costs (§ par. 2.5).

Finally, a series of private actors – some of them applying models developed in France or in the Anglosaxon countries, as Bioexpress, Cortilia or Portanatura – have diffused in the most inhabited areas as Milano, Bologna, Turin or Genoa, providing a door-to-door services of fresh products distribution and relying on the same plethora of small organic producers. Especially the last private services have been strongly criticised by the GAS movement as they're not transparent in their intermediation (on the contrary of GASs emanation where the mark-up is transparent to the final consumer) and they might reproduce the unfair relation between producers and consumers that has been strongly attacked by the movement in the course of its evolution. This is because the GASs movement is still strongly divided between two main souls: from one side, members have the practical goals of accessing healthy food at affordable prices and from the other, they have the political ambition of intervening in the production chain by changing the power relations between producers, intermediation and consumers. Only for the second soul, private services of food distribution is a problem: for the rest, the least engaged members of the GASs movement services allow to access the healthy consumption, which is their main goal (§ par 2.3).

It is true in the sense that when I associated to a GAS and my objective is the product, now I'm able to access all the alternatives I want, thanks also to the contamination that the movement has produced. But, yet when my objective becomes also the process, that is what stays behind the product, exactly, if I go at those places I'm not able to or I have to put further effort to know where the product come from and how it has been produced. To me, the situation does not create any problem, but to many gasistas intermediation is an issue, as those services are in practice an intermediation. Because you as a buyer have not a direct relation with the supplier. [K15]

3.4 Narratives and discourses

As said, the GASs movement has developed a strong and coherent discourse along the way in its twenties. Two main discourses can be identified: one coming from the concept of product promoting a more practical goal that is accessing more healthy food, and one coming from the concept of process representing a more ideological strand devoted to the critics of the actual economic system of food production (§ par. 1.1). The two strands are interconnected: the access to food, which was the first that sustained the birth of the movement, was progressively substituted by the second, since the access to organic and local food was made easier by the emergence of similar initiatives such as organic department in supermarkets, organic stores or farmers' markets.

The more practical aim of accessing food is composed of two discourses being the preference for organic and healthy food and the preservation of local productions, which are often at odds: especially in the area of bigger cities, the closer belt of agricultural production has been in the past contaminated by industrial production and in the present by pollution. Groups divide themselves on the basis of this preference: in general, a priority on local production has to be found in groups from the southern areas of the country, while organic food (although not always certified, as we will see in the next paragraph §2.4) in the most affluent areas. That is also due to the spending capacity of GASs members that changes in relation with the economic disparities within the country.

The criticism on the traditional economic system has in origin mostly revolved around the opposition towards the GDO, in general identified by supermarkets. *Gasistas* accused the system of unfair treatment of their suppliers, of an indirect promotion of unsustainable production as industrial agriculture and intensive farming, of favouring the lowest price instead of local products. Some groups also affirm that supermarkets favour an unleashed consumerism, as with sales and special offers induce people in buying more food than they need for their sustenance thus being responsible of the increasing diffusion of squandering that affects western societies. As a positive alternative to this system, GASs developed in collaboration with other actors of the alternative economy (as the already cited network of bottom-up associations, fair trade, NoGlobal movement and *bilancistas*) a proposal revolving around the idea of collaboration in the economic relations to replace the role of concurrency (§ par. 2.1).

However, the strong ideology behind the movement has not always been an advantage for its innovation. After the turning point of the crisis, GASs suffered from a reduction of numbers of members on their base and difficult governance at the national level. The horizontal structure of their network, the substantial autonomy of each group and the rigidity of their positioning towards certain phenomena (as for example the refusal of the institutionalisation

or intermediation) has certainly inhibited a process of incremental innovation that was needed in a context which was strongly modified by the financial crisis, in terms of spending capacity of *gasistas* and in terms of an increasing vulnerability and concurrency among producers.

Another problem arises with the incapacity of the national movement to develop a spokesperson or a spokes-organ to take up an intermediation role with media or public bodies. At local level, discourses and narratives promoted by GASs could be transmitted through the lively local civil community and through the mediation of DESs. The jeopardised results however depended on the completely voluntary and personal character of the movement: where people could be mobilized and could get in contact with relevant opinion leaders and institutions (as for example in region Trentino or in region Emilia-Romagna), achievements such as the participation to council organs or coherent laws on solidarity economy were accomplished. However, at national level it was not possible to create a structure of governance (the participation to national tables are on voluntary basis and the connection between the local organs and the single group is weak).

The instruments of transmission mostly were centred on the ICT technologies, as website or mailing list (§ par 2.4), but it has mostly been limited to GASs members: only the bigger producers have participated in the national encounters, even if at local level a slightly wider participation of beneficiaries could be improved through the system of DESs. However, the intrinsic functioning of the GASs movement has not favoured a mirrored reorganisation of producers, who persists in being dispersed and individually in contact with the groups. In fact, GASs groups, who perceived it as a potential risk of creating an unnecessary intermediation, have not favoured the creation of organisation among producers.

There is no relationship with producers' association or network of suppliers: this is also because it is against the gasistas' logic that is working with single producers, at the local level possible without any agreement at national level. It is one of the reasons why at national level the solidarity purchasing groups' movement is extremely weak, one of the reasons why the last national encounters have been centred on solidarity economy because groups are extremely jealous of their autonomy and individuality, one of the reasons why succeeding in organising by keeping the individuality at national level has been very difficult since the beginning. Now [the GASs movement] has become more a network of GASs networks, that is Intergas or DESs organised at provincial or regional level, at national level you can spread the culture but it does not create bonds or interactions with other association in order to create involvement immediately apt to be spend locally for the local groups activities. [KI3]

3.5 Rules, norms, and policies

The logic of GASs approach's development has to be considered an incremental bottom-up process that has been mediated mostly by the periodic national and local encounters among the different groups. Even if the model has been drawn upon the Fidenza GAS's experience (although some groups have started even before it), the resulting manifesto (§ par. 1.1) has become definite by horizontally sharing experience within round tables and networking, thus preserving the richness and the extreme diversity of the groups that are the expression of different components of Italian societies (from catholic associations to extreme-leftist community centres). Each local best practice has thus been reported to national network and incorporated in the model proposed in several documentation and publications for those who wanted to start a new group (see Retegas; Economia Solidale; Acanfora, 2015). Instruments such as mailing lists have been determinants both in the functioning of the group and in the development of a bottom-up network without any formal structure or hierarchy.

Before 2000, people who participate in GAS were persons that were already active even in other domains, to this activation they added up the activity of GAS, so that groups were in sensitize circles. After 2000, there was Seattle and Genoa, with people getting to GAS without having a previous experience of activism. You could discover a way to engage through this world: it might happen that a person gets involved for very practical reasons and then while participating the person discovers more ideal motivations. Because the horizontal environment of GASs is really favouring participation and ideas' exchange because teaching goes person to person at equal level, thus it is an environment that it is more favourable to change your opinion and to learn. [K11]

[GASs movement] has been a product that defined itself in time from experiences and needs of the people who started this course. There were medium-class persons, without big economic problems but without being wealthy, persons that had time and culture to do these things, a very slow course without any structure or leadership, but very welcoming and with a lot of autonomy. This has allowed that in the annual encounters there were just the narrations of the single experiences that were offered in a single agora, without having the intention of generating a process for creating shared parameters, but just with the aim of reciprocal exchange of information. This has favoured with a bubble mechanism the emersion of the most significant elements that became the reference's points. [K12]

Another interesting example of norms produced by a bottom-up process can be found in the movement for the participated organic certification that GASs have promoted in the last years. One of the biggest obstacles to the diffusion of organic production has been individuated in

the costs of accessing the organic certification, which is provided by private entities in Italy (§ par. 1.3). Even if some regions do subsidize farmers, especially for the smallest companies it is quite difficult to become sustainable in costs. That is, single groups or DESs (especially remarkable is the project promoted by Retina in Brianza area) have sustained what they called participation certification, which is a control mechanism that is operated directly by *gasistas* on the production in order to check if producers respect the rules of sustainability and respect for the environment that characterises the philosophy of GASs movement. This system has also favoured and accompanied the conversion of producers towards organic farming.

For what concerns the relation with beneficiaries, some of the GASs have institutionalised a template of assessment for the new producers, in order to evaluate how far the newcomers are in line with the principle of consumerism promoted by the group. The template usually revolves around the methods of production, the type of contractual integration offered to dependent workers and collaborators, the transparency in the supply of raw material (when it is the case). It is also usually completed by periodical visits to the producers, which are promoted by groups not only to increase and to promote the trusted relation with the suppliers, but also to control the respect of environment and law regulation among their suppliers.

Speaking about public policies, GASs have persisted in being invisible to public institutions until very recently. The first intervention was related to fiscal treatment (General financial Law 2007, L.244/07) and solved one of the biggest issues for the groups, regarding who was supposed to pay VAT in the exchange between producers, the GAS as an “intermediation” entity and final consumers. The law prescribed that GASs who had formalised in associations could not be considered commercial entities as long as they don’t operate any mark-up in the original price and if they limit the purchasing only to those who are member of the association. The law has actually been promoted thanks to the engagement of a single deputy who could act as a sort of spokesperson in the matter with the general government and it was not the result of a lobby action of the GAS movement. At regional level – as previously said (§ par. 2.3) – when a fruitful collaboration is established with local groups, good laws on solidarity economy could be promoted, mostly not prescribing any intervention in terms of funding or direct preservation, but determining principles and definition of the general character of solidarity in economy. At the same time though, in other regions where the communication between the network and the public entities was less supportive, a series of laws have been promoted that actually used the GASs to open a series of public funding that in practice did not benefit the groups. This situation was mostly derived by the necessity of defining a sort of criteria by which GAS could be identified, which badly collided with a reality consisting of diversity and heterogeneity.

Most of the laws or public calls for funds, public spaces or merely recognition (even included the L.244/07) require a formalisation in association that many groups still resist, thus affecting their capacity to be formally accepted as interlocutor by public entities and entitled with funds or spaces. This situation of course affects their capacity of intervening in tackling marginalisation as long as they sometimes are invisible to institutions, and only on individual basis and initiative they could promote systematic intervention. It inhibits their capacity of acting as a lobby at local level by intervening on food policies; however, this situation is only rarely lived as a problematic point is that most of the groups prefer to preserve their total autonomy from any actor instead of acquiring power and influence on public policies. For this reasons, norms and policies only rarely contribute to promoting a systemic change and only at local level (as it happened in Trentino or Emilia-Romagna), where the fruitful collaboration has also allowed to pose the tackling marginalisation as a central and explicit outcome of the promotion of solidarity economy.

3.6 Resources

GASs mostly rely on personal resources of their members, both in cash and volunteer work provided. Only one among the social innovators interviewed declared to have received in the past a funding from local authorities (a call in region Piemonte offered a reimburse of 60% of expenses aimed to improve logistics and equipment). In general, they don't require a big amount of money to run their activities (between 90-400 euro per month on average): the expenses are mostly linked to the management of the bank account or the association (if they are a formal group) and the rent for the delivery's spaces. The highest costs are to be found in Milan, where the lack of public spaces available to GASs forced them to hire private spaces as garages to stock their goods. In the smallest towns, the groups are usually able to access more easily low-priced spaces offered by associations or public institutions through their personal networks.

In most of the cases, each member is required to provide a certain amount of voluntary work in order to ensure the general functioning, although some groups are more hierarchical with a core of activists more active than the mere "buyers".

Table 1 Volunteer work, WP7 qualitative interviews

Hours per week	Absolute values
One hour	3
Two/three hours	13
Four hours and more	6
Total	32

Source: WP7 interviews to social innovators, Giroletti's elaborations

3.7 Social and technological innovation

The main driver of the diffusion of GASs has been Internet and in general the ICT technologies (§ par. 3.1). These innovations have increasingly simplified the direct contact between consumers and suppliers, even if the population of beneficiaries might not always be skilled in the use of Internet communication (some of the groups reported that there is a need of extreme patience and human support to maintain relations with some of their producers, who have no access to Internet or difficulties in accessing it). For the internal communications among members and in order to develop the informal networking at local and national levels, mailing lists and websites have also been pivotal.

Speaking about incremental innovation, most of GASs reported the implementation of new ICT services (as clouds services or management application) as one of their main recent improvements. However, the GASs that innovated their process were a minority among the contexts analysed, as shown by the following table.

Table 2: Incremental innovation activities, WP7 qualitative interviews

Type of innovation	No improvement	Examples of innovations
New methods of production	32	Collectively buy old seeds and make flour for GAS needs; social gardens.
New methods of logistics	28	Changed locations; management of delivery (i.e. new software); collaboration with cooperative for delivery.
New method of supporting activities	26	Online payment systems (i.e. virtual cards); online modules on clouds 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	-

Source: WP7 interviews to social innovators, author's elaborations

3.8 Social impact measurement

To our knowledge, the GASs movement has not implemented any impact measurement at the present time, neither oriented to groups' members nor to beneficiaries. The only systematic quantitative analysis so far has been mostly concentrated on GASs groups and their members (Forno *et al.*, 2013), but none of the previous researches have shown interest in the impact of GASs experiences on suppliers' marginalisation (Forno *et al.*, 2013; Grasseni, 2014; Forno

and Graziano, 2014, 2016). The informal and networked structures that characterise the movement at national and local level might have impeded the formalisation of approaches for impact measurement at institutional level

It is possible that in the past some experiments of impact measurements have been carried out at local level, but we have not encountered any in our literature review nor in our empirical investigation until the present time.

3.9 Further drivers and obstacles for the diffusion of the SI

The recent downturn of the austerity crisis (2013) has been an important turning point for the GASs movement. It has had several negative consequences on the diffusion of the social innovation:

- It has increased the difficulty for previous members to access the generally higher prices of food and supply through the system of GAS;
- It has increased the difficulty in access and permanence in the market for producers, as long as the demand of GASs has contracted;
- The relative success of the previous years has increased the concurrency among producers with several newcomers that tried to get in contact with already established groups once the traditional selling channels contracted.

Many social innovators and key informants have reported a situation of stagnation, if not of recession in the diffusion of GAS. Since 2013, the national movement is discussing how to face this situation of crisis (INES 2015 “Sconfinamenti”, Tavolo RES 2014 “Colpo d’Ali”). One of the possible solutions is to favour the introduction of solidarity intermediation actors who could promote easier access for the individuals who don’t want (or cannot) join a group for several reasons, but at the same time enlarging the end market for producers.

GASs were born to address self-sufficient consumers, those who have the aim of improving their quality/price ratio in the context of a redefinition of market’s concept, but inside the economic relations. A redefinition that consists in the production chain, in the direct relation, in the definition of transparency and trust relationship. All these activities have been addressed fundamentally to fully self-sufficient subjects and completely able to afford a higher level of spending and with free time. None put this in relation with the crisis and with the exertion that now affects producers. There is the need for redefining the pact between producers and consumers, in the redefinition of an intermediate role, of a role that allows this pact to remain sustainable and to overtake contradictions. [KI2]

4. ICS - Social innovation development and impact

4.1 Development of the SI

As already mentioned (§ par. 0.1), the GASs movement was born “officially” in 1994, with the constitution of the association of GAS Fidenza, even if autonomous groups already started their activity before this year and without any coordination. After 20 years, it is now possible to identify a series of different steps in its evolution, which has been influenced by the economic cycle of the country but also by the diffusion of the ICT technologies among the population and among the producers:

- Before 1994: the precursors phase. Scattered groups were forming in order to collectively buy food or fair trade products; there was no coordination at the moment or a defined model.
- 1994: the Fidenza group – which has already started its activities in the previous years – was born as an association; it defined the name of the experiences (solidarity purchasing groups) and set up the benchmark that was used in the following years to create new groups.
- Between 1994 and 2001: the pioneering phase. In this phase the number of groups started to grow, although with a relatively slow pace. According to Forno and Graziano (2016), the number of groups passed from 2 in 1994 to 54 in 2001. The first article on *Altroeconomia* (the main journal for alternative economy in Italy) appeared in 1999.
- From 2001 to 2007: the sustaining phase. The pace of diffusion of the groups started to increase (from 54 to 358 groups: Forno and Graziano, 2016); mainstream media began to devote articles to and broadcast on the phenomena. This is what has been called the phase of activists by many of the key informants: fairs as “Fà la cosa giusta” were born (2003), the main website got online (2004), the first meeting at national levels started to be organised.
- From 2007 to 2013: the scaling phase. The number of the groups increased rapidly (reaching 977: Forno and Graziano, 2016), also thanks to the increasing attention given by mainstream media and especially by the broadcast REPORT (§ par. 2.2). Key informants reported that in this phase the opening of the social innovation to the general public has put in question the uniformity of their identity, with many persons joining groups only to access a different form of consumption rather than for political activation against the traditional economic system.
- From 2013 to now: Systemic change or stagnation?

It is very hard for the persons actually involved in the movement or for experts to assess what the phase of the social innovation is now. Some of them agreed that a systemic change, at least at cultural level, was achieved in the last years: the increasing success of organic and

local products has leaked out also in the GDO system, with many supermarkets offering more and more space to products that come from sustainable and local production. However, for the most radical activists this constitutes a sort of “betrayal” of the original aims: it is the mainstream economic model that incorporated and normalised the revolutionary spirit of purchasing through GASs, without neither questioning the problem of power relation within the economic exchange nor the traditional forms of consumerism.

The challenge now is how the movement is going to evolve in the next years and if they will be able to sustain the innovation within their functioning, going beyond the simple access to organic and local products. If the cultural impact is evident (although it is not easy to define if the cultural change has been a consequence of the GASs activity or GASs groups have been just precursors or pioneers of the cultural change), consumption in Italy has not inverted the trend towards concentration in the big distribution and there is no available data to effectively assess how many persons do participate in the groups. Forno et al. (2013) estimates that *gasistas* usually devoted about 10% of their consumption through GASs suppliers, but still this estimation is questionable as long as it is limited to Lombardy (this region is the one with the highest number of groups and also one of the most affluent of the entire country).

Key informants mostly go for the increasing important role of DESs, which are going to be the arena in which the stakeholders (consumers, producers and local institutions) should get together and work collaboratively in order to create best practices, as it already happened in the case of agricultural production chains. However, at national level the movement is still very weak, so what is going to happen in the future is very difficult to foresee.

The GASs movement has reached the goals that resolved at the beginning, to the point that we think that the market has withdrawn many of the principles we have proposed: the need for a direct relation between producers and consumers, the short production chain, the zero KM, the need for transparency and branding, even if we have always rejected the last one since our brand is the trust. I think that these objectives have been achieved, but what we're now realising is that those are not sufficient anymore today, so that we have numerous encounters of RES table to which all the districts that want to be part of it collaborate. Those districts have been founded 7/8 years ago, as a place of need convergence and a space to satisfy these needs at local level. Producers, consumers and institutions are together at the same table to collaborate to the creation of a new economic model, creating concrete experience to manage such a process of satisfaction of consumers' needs. We aim at the direct participation of producers and one of the teams of last encounters of RES table is how we can develop such a participation that allows to develop a pact between consumers and producers, a pact to be reciprocally binding and useful. Producers at the present time are suffering a lot.
[KI2]

In my opinion, a transformation has happened both in the collective thinking and in the practice of the people who participated. On the other hand, things to do are still a lot and if one faces the problems of course there is still a lot to do. Twenty years ago, people who discuss about these problems were two in a basement, considered a bit funny. But, yet now a cycle has finished: GASs have given their contribution and now this period has finished, we need to think about something new. To me, these new is the network of solidarity economy, in order to connect GASs with other entities on the territory, in order to create circuits and give answers to go beyond gasistas to reach the other citizens. [K11]

Another evolution can be the implementation of CSAs also in Italy, where by now there is only one experience in Bologna. This solution could be extremely effective in reducing the marginalisation of producers, as long as it creates a formal bond between consumers and suppliers that sustains them with a real share of risks in production. However, from one side the extreme independency of the single GAS group has until now inhibited the creation of a system of CSA and on the other the difficulty in coordinating the producers has been evident even in the more informal solution of DES.

[With CSA] you obtain the commitment to buy, while GASs is unstable per se, one day is here and the other is there: it has not a liable and structured relation with a producer. [...] The relation between groups of consumers and groups of producers can be done through DESs and even more with the experiences of CSAs. If you took the approach of Arvaia and you apply it as a model to the production chain of wheat, creating a CSA and becoming member of this experience, then the GAS evolves from a consumption cooperative to a consumption and production cooperative, in a single entity – still virtual at this time – there are producers and consumers at the same time. Then GAS put themselves on the line, renouncing to buy bread from another producer and obliging to buy it from you, but you as a producer renounce to a piece of your sovereignty (as you not decide everything anymore, how you sow and where, how you transform and the price), we all decide everything together. This the CSA logic I want to reproduce: in this sense, it is not easy to involve GASs, because GASs are jealous of their autonomies and that's ok, but if you want to step forward you have to be available in getting in relation with others. [K15]

4.2 Impact of the SI

The point is that GASs movement at national level is still very weak and actually, it has not elaborated any systemic goal or country-level objective, they are more concentrated on short-range aims as practices. I would say that GASs have not ultimate goals as

other social movements have or even political parties, they have practices to sustain and spread. It might look as a semantic differentiation, but in reality it is a substantial point: if we have a very ambitious list to achieve, then such an objective is clearly unreachable. Then, GASs have never posed systemic goals; they have proposed micro-goals as to expand horizontally at local level to implement sustainable practices, as practices are everywhere and multiply along the time, but no other forms of actions were available and then it is impossible to say if they have reached more ambitious goals or not. [KI3]

In general, it is impossible at the moment to assess if the social innovation has impacted positively or negatively on beneficiaries. Even though the GASs as a political and consumerism movement has been widely studied in the last years, to our knowledge no research has focused on their impact on suppliers, nor on their eventual configuration as a social innovation (§ par. 2.7). However, the impression of the key informants is that suppliers in general had positive returns on their collaborations with GASs, especially those who have been actively involved in DESs: this impression is valid especially if we focus on the biggest GASs suppliers, who have been involved and sustained all along their productive life by the groups, as happened for “Le Galline Felici” or “Tomasoni” who benefitted from the system of prefinancing.

What were the aims of the GASs movement? First, they had the healthy goal for sure and to my opinion they have reached on the point of view that a higher sensibility is now becoming mainstream, but they have also the aim of filling up that S, which was being jointly responsible with small producers. In my opinion, they have reached this goal, but in dispersed manner, that is a GASs who decided to sustain a small producers and then decide to leave for another one and then to another. There can be thousands of motivations and if those motivations are not structural and connected with the ethic of those producers, then you have not reached the objective. Because you could reach the goal of being healthy with an organic production or even with KM zero, that is the nearest producer, but you have not fulfilled the goal of sustaining in systematic manner a model, to my opinion, as you sustained a demand by creating an offer that it is disarticulated. And then here are the numbers of GASs who have decided not to enter or not to be in relation with solidarity economy district, which poses systematically the problem of sustaining the producers and put them in relation with consumers as a collective. In DESs, producers have the obligation of getting together. Another objective was to sustain south world producers and the relation with fair trade. This has been fulfilled in general, but it is not so common to find groups that have a relation with fair trade shops, they just go there individually [...] And then there was the protection of the territory, solidarity with nature and environment, again it has been achieved in terms of

culture that has tried to spread, but still I see the limit instead of seeing organisation to reach the objective, of missing relation to fulfil it. And we have still a course to follow, which is, I repeat, the necessary transformation of DES into CSA. [KI5]

Finally, an important impact must be identified looking at the dispersion of experiences, which GASs have promoted and sustained in the traditional economy, such as for example emporiums or solidarity intermediation (§ par. 2.2). These experiences – although interesting only to a minority of traditional consumers, mostly the high-spenders – are particularly interesting as they usually employ persons with marginal labour market profiles or allows GASs suppliers' products to be accessible to general public without passing through a group. Although a numerical assessment is not possible at the present state, it is our impression that it is a growing trend that might expand the access to market for beneficiaries in the near future.

5. ICS - Discussion and key lessons

Given the preliminary state of our inquiry at the moment, up to now we can summarize the main findings in the following key lessons:

- **Social innovators:** the groups at the moment are mostly dispersed and their activities are jeopardised on the territory. The role of DES should be implemented, especially with a special orientation to policy makers and referents of the local institutions. At the same time, GASs should work collaboratively with the most resourceful producers in order to activate a process of organisations among them that could promote a counterbalance of GAS among beneficiaries. To overcome their limits, bigger groups should overtake the logic of totally voluntary activity in order to create intermediate situations of volunteers and workers, following the model of fair trade institutionalisation.
- **Policy makers:** they should be more aware of the presence of a network of people active in their territory, as they could be activated not only in electoral terms. The participation of GASs representatives in the recent movement for food policy for example should not be neglected. Secondly, a successful project like Community Supported Agriculture, which is standard in Europe and in North America for promoting alternative food networks, should be encouraged and implemented especially in the areas that surround the biggest metropolises. A positive model could be the one promoted in Bologna, where unused agriculture fields of public property have been assigned to farmers through a public competition in order to offer a starting land capital for the CSA activity.

- **Investors and funders** (resource structure): the GASs movement until now has been mostly relying on the individual resources of *gasistas*, a situation that ensured their independence but that, at the same time, demonstrates its weakness in a period of crisis as it is now. However, public investors should go to the direction of sustaining and promoting the organisation of farmers and producers, which represent the weakest part of the relation. Projects like CSA or Agricultural chain should be supported by public or private funding (as for example, Fondazione Cariplo – a private foundation of one of the biggest Italian banks).

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