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Beyond Alternative Food Networks

*An Agenda for Comparative Analysis of Italy's
Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS) and Districts of Solidarity
Economy (DES) vis-à-vis US Community Economies*

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Beyond Alternative Food Networks: an agenda for comparative analysis of Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS) and Districts of Solidarity Economy (DES) vis-à-vis US Community Economies

Cristina Grasseni, Francesca Forno and Silvana Signori

The emergence of Solidarity Purchase Groups in Italy

Social and Solidarity Economies are experiencing unprecedented growth in several developed countries (Ash 2009, Hart et al. 2010). Recently, a national survey of the Farmers Union Coldiretti has claimed that 18% of Italians (about 7 million people) are allegedly involved in forms of collective provisioning. These include car-pooling, condominium shopping groups, and collective agreements with farmers (Rubino 2012).¹ About 150,000 people may be involved in *solidarity*-driven collectives such as Solidarity Purchase Groups or *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (henceforth GAS). GAS are grassroots networks that collectively organize direct provisioning, mostly of food and other items of everyday use (such as detergents and basic toiletry), but increasingly also of textiles and “alternative” services such as renewable energy, sustainable tourism, or even dental insurance. Retegas.org is the GAS national network, whose Charter explains that “solidarity” means cooperation and sympathy with producers, the environment, and other GAS members, or *gasistas* as they call themselves.²

Gasistas buy “in solidarity” with producers in the sense that they take into account difficulties and costs for often small and local farming enterprises. For instance, 80% of GASs interviewed in Milan stated that in at least one case, they paid for crops in advance of seeding them. With advance payments, the farmers has cash for crop preparation and also the guarantee that whatever the season, the crop will be placed at the negotiated price. This is a radically different working condition than those imposed by large distribution crop buyers.

In 2011-2013, the CORES project *Inside Relational Capital* gathered detailed data about GAS in Lombardy through a two-tiered questionnaire, combined with qualitative insights from participant observation. The online survey was administered to *gasistas* (one for each family in a group) and to GAS coordinators (one per group), focussing on socio-economic condition, educational and professional background, and

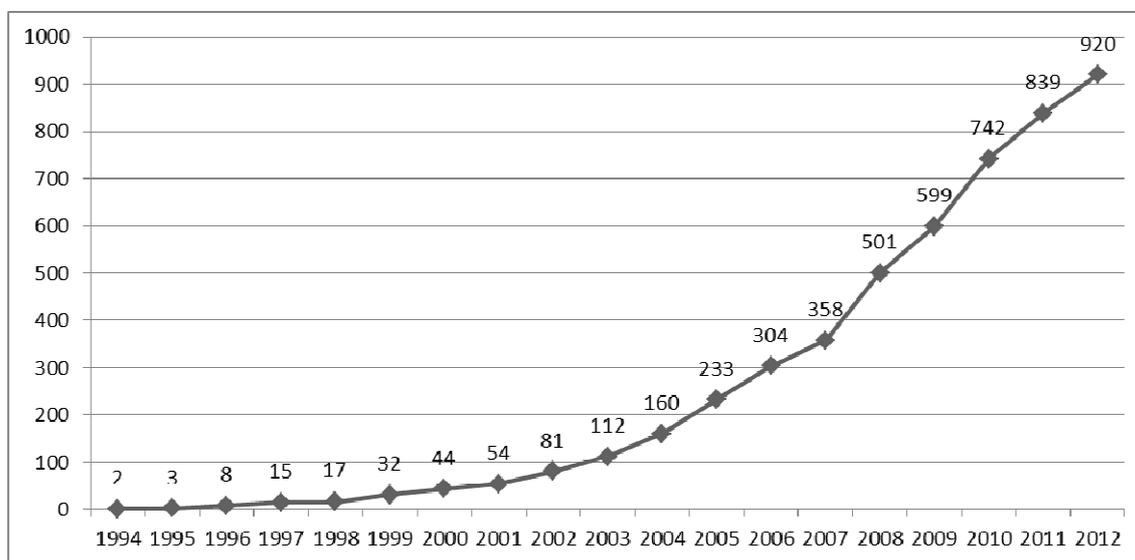
¹ Source: http://www.asca.it/news-Consumi_Coldiretti_spesa_di_gruppo_per_7 mln_Da_carpooling_a_Gas-1211852-ECO.html. Last accessed 31 October 2012.

² *Gasista* in the singular. We propose a gender-neutral plural, *gasistas*. The GAS Charter is available on line (in Italian) at <http://www.retecosol.org/docs/CartaRes0703.pdf> (last accessed 9 September 2012).

political and associative experience - as well as group logistics, organization, and communication. The survey gathered previously unavailable financial data to measure GAS impact on local and regional economies. A pilot project was completed on 62 GAS in and around the town of Bergamo in 2012. According to data about Bergamo, 35 GAS spent collectively almost 80,000 Euro per year – about 2,200 Euro per group.³ The project also contributed to charting GAS nationwide. By March 2013, 451 GAS were mapped in Lombardy. 193 group coordinators and 1,612 *gasistas* completed the CORES questionnaire on line.⁴

Since the first GAS was established in 1994, about one thousand GAS have spontaneously registered with *retegas.org* (Fig. 1), but this is only a partial census. The Bergamo pilot project mapped about double the number of previously known GAS. A parallel initiative in Rome came to similar results (Fonte et al. 2011). According to *Retegas*, it is safe to presume that at least 50% more GAS exist than the 1,000 currently registered. If each group enrolls 25 families of 4 people on average, each GAS would cater for about 100 consumers. Projecting the CORES financial data for Bergamo, 1,500 groups nationwide would account for at least 30 million Euro.

Figure 1: GAS registered with *retegas.org* per year.



Source: *retegas.org*

³ The data about the Bergamo pilot study are available online as Osservatorio CORES (2013), *Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni: Provincia di Bergamo. Indagine Osservatorio CORES e Tavolo Nazionale RES*, Bergamo: CORES Working Papers, No. 1. <http://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/27485>.

⁴ The data presented here are part of a wider research project, *Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni*, carried out by the CORES Research Group under the scientific direction of Francesca Forno, Cristina Grasseni and Silvana Signori at Bergamo University (www.unibg.it/cores). The study was endorsed by the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (Tavolo RES www.retecosol.org) and carried out in collaboration with Davide Biolghini and Giuseppe Vergani of Tavolo RES.

CORES appointed a number of “facilitators”, *gasistas* themselves, who would scout and chart existing GAS and liaise with each GAS coordinator, to request permission to interview the group. The survey was designed in tight collaboration with representatives of *Tavolo RES*, the nationwide Working Group for a Network of Solidarity Economy in Italy. The questionnaires were tested on about twenty representatives of as many GAS networks, at a training workshop sponsored by Tavolo RES. Bergamo was chosen as a pilot project because of CORES good knowledge of the context, and because all three of CORES co-directors were *gasistas* themselves. The mapping effort happened in close collaboration with a nascent network of local GAS, *ReteGasBergamo*, established in October 2009.

Thanks to this preparatory work, by December 2011, 62 GAS were charted in the Bergamo area alone, 42 of which agreed to participate in the survey, namely 71%. These included large and long-established groups serving up to one hundred and fifty families, as well as small groups with no more than eight families. The online survey closed in March 2012. This procedure established a protocol, which CORES replicated in Lombardy and is currently being extended to Sicily and Friuli, in collaboration with local “facilitators” with comparable knowledge of the local contexts.

Our survey of 1,612 *gasista* families in Lombardy further established that 44,8% of the groups engaged between 21 and 40 families each, whilst 34,4% involved between 1 and 20 families. Larger groups do exist but the majority are small- to medium-sized networks of families, which get together to establish strategies for collective and solidarity-driven purchase.

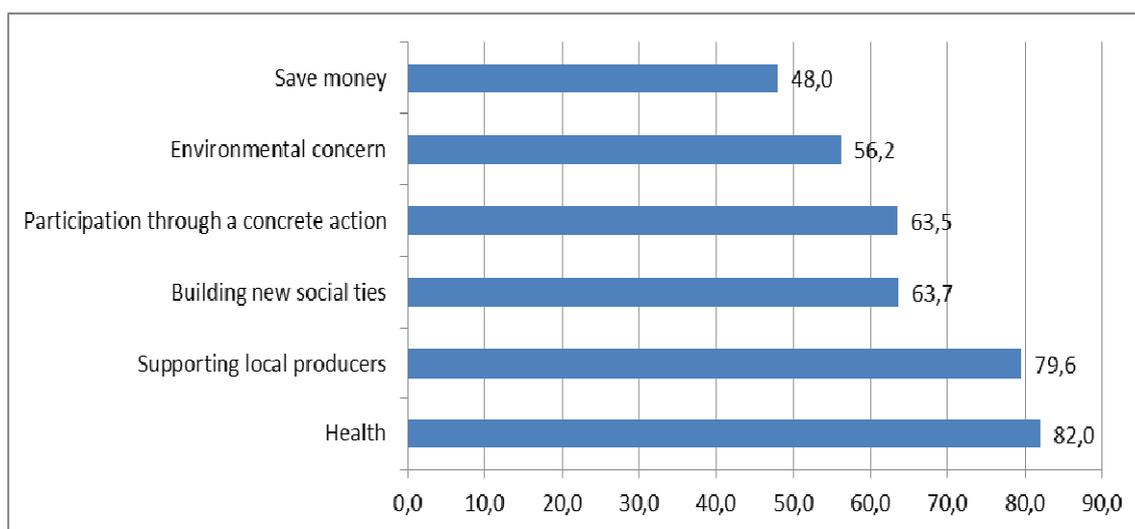
In the next section, we outline in detail *gasistas*’ statistical portrait. Our claim is that participating in a GAS socializes one in alternative socio-economic circuits, which empower consumers seeking direct and collective relationships with providers. In the following two sections, we argue that GAS not only increase families opportunities for affordable and quality food in times of crisis, but also re-embed provisioning in a relational fabric. GAS have a political impact on context-specific regional economies, increasing social engagement and active citizenship, for instance vis-à-vis the role of the mafia in Italian economy. In sum, GAS function as de Tocqueville’s “schools of democracy”, building social capital beyond mere consumption. Finally, we highlight some elements of similarity and difference between Italian Districts of Solidarity Economy and Massachusetts Community Economies, as promising parallel developments of Solidarity Economy in comparable contexts.

Solidarity Purchase Groups as family-driven collectives

Who are *gasistas*? 60% of them work as clerks, teachers, professors. We should think of them as mostly office workers. 47,2% are couples with children over 5 years old, whilst another 24,6% are couples with children under 5 years old. On the whole, *gasistas* are unmistakably *families*: only 6,9% are single. 37,8% of the interviewees has a degree or a higher degree, another 37,7% has high school diplomas.

The following chart records the types of motivation for joining a GAS. As one can see, despite the crisis, the main drive is not to get a better quality/cost bargain, but to protect one's own health, implying that *gasistas* seek better quality food (in most cases, organic) through support to smallholders (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Motivations for joining a GAS (% very much agree/agree)



Unpublished data, CORES Project "Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni".

We asked only one person per family - the one that does most of GAS-related work - to fill in the questionnaire. 62% of them were women, 49,6% aged between 30 and 44 and 42,9% aged between 45 and 60. This hardly fits the stereotypical portrait of the political activist. *Gasistas* are *provisioning activists*, in that they are the same people that would typically bear the burden of providing for their families (namely mostly working middle-aged women). They re-fashion that burden, by socializing it in a Solidarity Purchase Group. GAS buy collectively bread, pasta, flour, milk, dairies, oil, fish, meat, detergents, wine, preserves, juices and jams, fruit and vegetables. About half of them also buy clothes through a GAS. Most of them organize this form of collective

purchase through monthly meetings, where *gasistas* meet face to face and discuss what to buy, from whom, in which quantities, and product referents report on their activity of liaising with each producer involved, regarding prices, logistics, product quality etc.

Gasistas are not rich and they should not be confused with gourmet food lovers. Conviviality may play a part in GAS practice, with farm site visits and occasional dinners or fairs. But GAS are first and foremost solidarity-driven provisioning collectives. In Lombardy, where the cost of living is more expensive than elsewhere in Italy, their family income ranges between 2,500 Euro and 3,600 Euro (monthly, gross) in 34% of cases and between 2,000 Euro and 2,500 Euro in 22% of cases. This is why any changes in their consumption and provisioning styles are significant, as one assumes that they are not dictated by a radical chic fad or by a question of taste only, but by learning new lifestyles though operating within the constraints of fairly tight family budgets.

The CORES survey shows how their shopping basket, consumption styles, and even styles of civic participation changed, sometimes dramatically, after joining a GAS (Tabs 1, 2 & 3).

Table 1: Changes in consumption habits

	Increased	decreased	Introduced	No change	n.a.	Total
Vegetable	50,4	0,4	0,7	47,4	1,2	100
Organic	79,4	0,2	7,7	11,6	1,1	100
Wholemeal	52,9	0,6	10	35,2	1,4	100
Legumes	38,5	0,5	3,7	56,3	1,1	100
Local	80,6	0,2	5,4	12,6	1,1	100
Seasonal	68,1	0,1	2,8	27,8	1,2	100
Cereals	45,1	0,3	12,8	40,5	1,3	100
Meat	3,1	42,5	0,2	52	2,2	100
FairTrade	39,6	1,4	5,6	51,8	1,5	100
mafia- free	44,6	0,6	14,7	38,5	1,5	100
Ecological	41,4	0,6	25	31,9	1,1	100

Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

Table 2: Changes in lifestyles

	Yes	No	Already did	n.a.	Total
Decreased purchasing pre-cooked food	24,8	5,1	69,4	0,7	100
Decreased shopping in supermarket	41,4	47,9	9,7	0,9	100
Increased purchases in local shops	27,5	33	37,9	1,6	100
Started producing food at home	38,3	31,9	29	0,9	100
Started growing vegetable	16,2	54,8	27,6	1,4	100

Started to use less the car	17,6	46,9	34,5	1	100
Increased recycling	32,5	6,7	60	0,9	100
More attention to energy consumption	29,3	22,9	46,3	1,4	100
More attention to water consumption	28,6	6,1	64,3	1	100

Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

Table 3: Changes in styles of participation

	Yes	No	Already did	n.a.	Total
More interested in problems concerning my town of residence	26	30,3	42,5	1,2	100
More interested in politics in general	7,9	35,8	55	1,3	100
More able to cooperate with people in general	39,7	16,1	42,9	1,4	100
Feeling more able to influence public policy	23,9	60,8	13,8	1,6	100

Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

Nevertheless, *gasistas* do not present a rosy picture about themselves. Critical points highlighted are the effective involvement of *all* members in the running of the group (57%), and the difficulty of finding volunteers for new tasks (13,5%). Managing a GAS is time consuming: most of them are organised on a system of volunteered task-sharing, to ensure the smooth running of finance, logistics and operations at no additional operational cost. The vast majority of groups are organized around a simple mailing list (no Facebook pages!) and meet in person once a month to make consensual decisions about orders, deliveries, and all other activities. 62,7% of *gasista* reported that “we try to rotate roles and tasks, but they tend to remain allocated to the same people”. Logistics plays an important role. The main reason for abandoning a producer is allegedly “logistics problems that are down to the producer”.

Qualitative and quantitative data highlight that solidarity economies work both as coping strategies for young families with children, and as a social, economic, and political laboratory. Nevertheless, as we wish to highlight in the next section, they develop different dynamics in different regions, drawing on specific territorial political subcultures and socio-economic contexts.

Re-embedding the economy into society

CORES has focused on the repertoires and networking strategies of GAS networks in Lombardy and Sicily, as they expand in two very different economic and social contexts. Lombardy and Sicily are large regions (respectively, 9,200 and 9,900 square miles, roughly the size of Massachusetts). While Lombardy has approximately 10 million inhabitants, Sicily has about half, though still the fourth most populous Italian region (with 5 million inhabitants). Lombardy's GDP is comparable with that of Massachusetts, whilst Sicily's GDP is about one fourth. GAS have flourished mostly in North and Central Italy, endowed with a lively and capillary associative fabric, but there are 59 registered GAS in Sicily.

Notoriously, the mafia has solid roots in Sicily, but there is increasing evidence of its economic ramifications at all levels and in every region of Italy. For instance, journalists and administrators have denounced how the Milan area is ripe with money-laundering activities. Specifically, the Sicilian mafia historically grew with agricultural monocultures, and mafia "infiltrations" in lemon cultivations have been documented since 1872 (Rizzo 2011). Current-day mafia activities span from the importation of illegal immigrants to exploit them in fields and greenhouses, to the disposal of toxic waste in agricultural lands (so that profit is made twice: by the mafia-owned waste disposal agency, *and* through the mafia-owned crops that grow on it). Anthropologist Naor Ben-Yehoyada has identified a seamless connection between the Sicilian fishermen fleet and circuits of mafia-sponsored immigrants by way of shipwreck-and-rescue at sea, as one of the ways in which borders between northern Africa and southern Italy were and remain porous in contemporary and recent history (Ben-Yehoyada 2011, 2012). The Italian Federation of Agricultural Workers (a section of the national trade union CGIL) has recently produced the first white book on "agri-mafias" (FLAI 2012). The report analyzes mafia infiltrations in agribusiness all over Italy and estimates that agro-mafia business turns over between 12 and 17 billion Euros (between 5 and 10% of the entire estimated mafia-led economy). Mafia rackets control the entire food supply chain, from workers recruitment to logistics and distribution, including significant sales of fake Made in Italy foodstuffs, and the recruitment of slave-like labor (an estimated 400,000 workers) through *caporalato*, namely the dependency on local bosses that recruit teams of day workers.

Because of this, farming cooperatives that work the lands expropriated from mafia clans struggle to find access to distribution networks (Forno 2011). Gaining direct access to dedicated customers is a condition of survival for these producers. Symptoms of the active search for this kind of direct transactions are the many letters that GAS receive from agricultural cooperatives and family farmers, both at national and at local level. According to Mauro Serventi, the founder of the first GAS in Parma in 1994, two hundred GAS were founded in Southern Italy in the wake of the 2008 GAS Assembly which took place, significantly, in Sicily. There, GAS meet the specific local need of supporting a “clean”, mafia-free local economy in a context of tragically high unemployment.⁵ As financial uncertainty and the environmental crisis fuel food and energy prices, networks of organic producers in Sicily attempt to match the request for organic and transparent provision of fruit and vegetable (notably olive oil and citrus fruits) from northern Italian GAS. “Districts” and “Networks” of Solidarity Economy aim precisely to enable a reciprocal encounter between critical consumers and virtuous producers. One significant example is “Sbarchinpiazza” – literally *Dropping the anchor in the square*, an itinerant sale of Sicilian oranges that was organized by the agricultural consortium *Arcipelago Sicilyah* from Sicily in early 2012. The Archipelago, namely a network of orange growers working in partnership with GAS, hosted orange fairs in about twenty towns in northern and central Italy. The special liaison between GAS and orange producers was fore-fronted: only producers already known to local GASs could participate in the fair. The point of holding a public market instead of just unloading trucks of oranges for *gasistas* was to make these transactions visible and to increase their appeal to a larger public. *Sbarchinpiazza* is publicly performed as an act of economic transaction combined with social pedagogy: *gasistas* buy oranges from Sicily “in solidarity” with southern farmers. Actually meeting them gives them a chance to learn how re-engineering supply chains is a necessary condition to break up complex chains of corruption and organized crime. For instance, some of the oranges sold at “landings” are produced by cooperatives working on mafia-confiscated lands.

This example shows how within *gasista* experience, questions of practice precede, inform, and literally unpack wider political and epistemic strategies. Figuring how to deliver oranges from a farm in Sicily to a Lombard family a thousand miles away, is literally the way through which that particular economic circuit can be liberated from a mafia-ridden distribution chain. In *Sbarchinpiazza* the economic transaction was

⁵ “Serventi a Radio Onda d’Urto”, November 2011 <http://navdanya.radiondadurto.org/2011/11/26/verso-des-garda-incontro-con-mauro-serventi/> Last accessed 8 August 2012.

obviously key, but the surrounding seminars, speeches, and entertainment informed and sensitized both *gasistas* and the general public to the fact that environmentally concerned consumers should also be socially and politically concerned, too (De Musso 2012). For instance the public presentation of Marco Rizzo's journalistic report on *Supermarket mafia* at Bergamo University made the orange-buyers conscious of the fact that the mafia-ridden economic circuits selling tangerines at low prices can do so *because* they exploit paperless immigrant workers and monopolize distribution circuits through laundered cash, extortions, and intimidations. Certified organic or not, these citrus fruits are obviously not "sustainable". Following the example of the Archipelago and its landings, a Solidarity Economy Network of the South (RESSUD) developed, coordinating consortia, associations, agricultural cooperatives and GAS of the Abruzzi, Basilicata, Apulia, Campania, Calabria and Sicily. Its aim is to facilitate a direct interaction between self-governed producers and informed consumers, in such a way that all actors involved contribute to build ecologically sustainable and solidarity-driven supply chains.⁶

Forno and Gunnarson (2010) have studied *pizzo-free* entrepreneurship in Sicily. They maintain that promoting mafia free shops through "buy-cotting" innovate the political repertoire of antimafia activism through critical consumerism⁷. *Sbarchinpiazza* is a further example of how GAS offer a neutral meeting ground to different types of political activism, of economic subjectivities, and of social aspirations that would otherwise not necessarily intersect in fruitful ways. GAS, as circuits of alternative provisioning, work as "second-order networks". In our research experience, in fact, the key protagonists of the solidarity economy movement have had prior exposure to environmental activism, unions, or the global justice movement. Solidarity economy networks offer them a common ground to liaise through novel and collaborative projects, starting from the basic act of food provisioning.

Solidarity Purchase Groups as laboratories for sustainable citizenship

GAS originate for the vast majority (39,4% of cases in Lombardy) from pre-existent networks of friends, and in a further 21,2% of cases, from pre-existent GAS.

⁶ www.ressud.org Last accessed 8 December 2012.

⁷ The project *Turning the Vicious Cycle Around: New Frontiers in the Fight Against the Mafia* is funded by the Swedish Research Council (2010-2013) and is a collaboration between Uppsala University and Bergamo University.

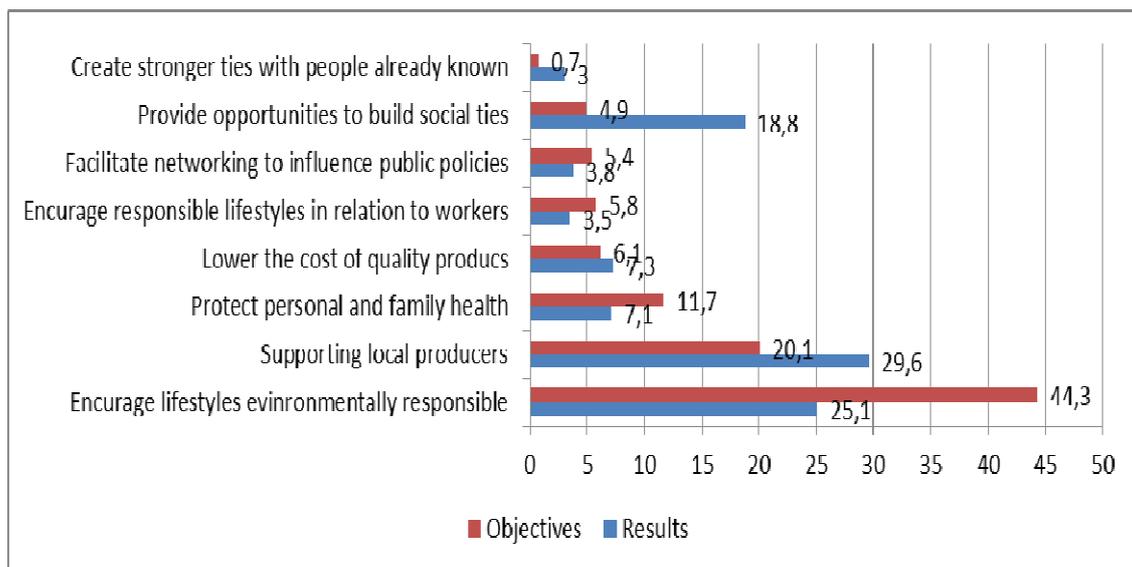
Gasistas often use metaphors such as “budding” and “grafting”, but also “nurturing seedlings”, “sowing seeds”, to describe their own diffusion. Most of their growth trend is concentrated in the austerity years of 2010-2012. This has important reverberations on unprecedented media exposure, rising demand for joining the groups, and offers from self-promoting producers. This can also create some parasitic behavior, in associations that depend on voluntary work. In fact, this is a key difference between GAS and a consumer cooperative, which can delegate assignments to salaried workers, but charges running costs to its membership. In other words, GAS practice is solidarity-driven also because it equally allocates workloads to the group members. In 72% of cases, in fact, every member is a “product referent”, namely he or she is responsible for gathering orders for that particular product, liaising with the producer, picking up deliveries, organizing distribution to the other members of the group. Only 4.7% of GAS in Lombardy allocate this task to a consumers cooperative or a service provider. In 19,7% of cases though, the GAS is run by a tighter group that coordinates, manages and distributes deliveries to all the other members.

Crucially, amongst the limits of GAS is a lack of formal collaboration with local and regional administrations and governments: 72% reply that they have none. Whilst 70,5% state that they collaborate with NGOs and citizens’ associations. This is telling of the degree of mistrust for political institutions in Italy and in Lombardy, which is counterbalanced by an equal degree of activism in local associations, NGOs, and grassroots initiatives. Then again, only 23,3% of Lombard GAS have taken on a formal profile as “association”, despite the injunction by law to do so if the GAS wishes to have one’s activity recognized as tax-exempt by the Italian government.⁸ Nevertheless, 93,7% of *gasistas* have participated in some form of association in their lifetime. A varying range between 3 and 30% of them currently participates in specific associations, from women’s rights to pacifist, to environmentalist or religious associations. 80% of them participated in the mobilization against the privatization of water, 64% against the reintroduction of nuclear power plants in Italy, 52% in defence of public schooling. What lacks is thus not an associative culture, which is on the contrary capillary present in society. Rather, GAS actively resist a pressure to “professionalize”, organize, and normalize their associative activity. It is telling that in Lombardy, only one of the many networks of GAS has established a workers’ cooperative as a way of managing logistics and commercial activities.

⁸ Legge finanziaria 2008 – Legge n. 244 del 24 dicembre 2007, art. 1 commi 266-268.

What's most interesting is that there is a discrepancy between the motivations for joining a GAS (Fig.2), and the objectives and results achieved after joining them (Fig.3). We believe that there is a seamless connection between the practice of solidarity within GAS (namely, the way they work as collective micro-organizations) and this result. In detail: 82% of interviewees maintained that their main motivation for joining a GAS was their own health. Nevertheless, to the question: "what are the main objectives and results of being in a GAS", the highest response was "to encourage more responsible lifestyles towards the environment" (44,3%) and only 11.7% listed "to protect one's health and that of one's family". In other terms, whilst individual motivation may well be selfish, participation results in the awareness of broader goals of social and political relevance, such as responsibility towards the environment. Notably, *gasistas* enlist their "support to local producers" as a "result" in 29,6% of cases, whilst 79,6% of them mentioned it as a motivation for joining a GAS. In *gasistas'* perception, then, there are still ample margins for increasing support to local economies.

Figure 3: Main objectives and results of being in a GAS (%)

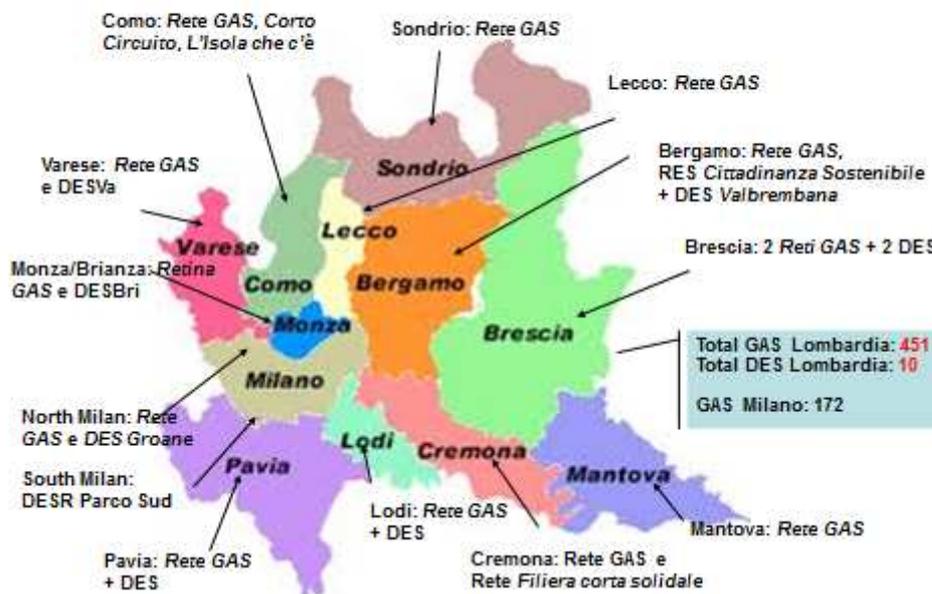


*Unpublished data, Project "Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni",
CORES/Tavolo RES*

Our thesis is that through GAS practice, specific relations of trust are built or extended across networks, thus facilitating virtuous feedback, cooperation amongst different groups, and the establishment of new economic circuits (Forno 2013, Grasseni 2013). In fact in Lombardy, which hosts the highest number of GAS in Italy, second-order networks begin to connect GAS with agricultural co-operatives, ethical banks, time banks, and entrepreneurs. These networks have been described as "Districts of

Solidarity Economy” or DES (Biolghini 2007). DES (*Distretti di Economia Solidale*) are networks of associations, providers, and consumers that exchange goods and services in the name of shared principles of solidarity.⁹ Retecosol.org is the portal for Italy’s DES. *Tavolo RES* is the National Working Group that promotes, supports, and connects DES projects. 10 of the 25 publicized DES projects are located in Lombardy.

Map: Distribution of GAS networks and Districts of Solidarity Economy in Lombardy, January 2013. Courtesy of Davide Biolghini. Data from CORES.



Ethnographic observation confirms that GAS work as laboratories for “sustainable citizenship” (Micheletti and Stolle 2012). “Citizenship Markets” have been established in the Bergamo area since 2011. These are a “solidarity-driven” version of Farmers markets, to which farmers are only admitted via previous screening by a solidarity economy activist association, “Market and Citizenship”. Through a self-evaluation questionnaire, which *Market and Citizenship* devised in collaboration with local GAS, each producer wishing to sell at the market is asked to identify their own position vis-à-vis “food sovereignty”, “food democracy”, “food justice”, “food

⁹ The notion of solidarity economy “district” follows the definition of Italy’s “Industrial Districts” (Beccattini 2000, Trigilia 2005). This was considered the Italian “Third way” to globalization, celebrated in the 1980s and 1990s as a way of avoiding consolidation, with a diffused network of small-scale, often family-business driven, but highly specialized enterprises, thriving in the world market in terms of design, logistics and high quality manufacture.

responsibility”, and “food quality”.¹⁰ Under the name *Beyond Farmers Market (Mercato Agricolo e non solo)*, citizenship markets feature fortnightly in three locations in and outside the town of Bergamo.¹¹ In brief, these GAS-monitored farmers markets make the produce of GAS providers available and visible to a wider public, often within the framework of other events, such as book presentations, solidarity economy fairs, or public debates on sustainable agriculture, clean textiles, and transparency of price. Whilst featuring local foods, they are not just about food and provisioning, as they aim to reweave citizenship into economic transactions.

By purchasing from trusted and selected producers, customers ensure that they are not complicit with the exploitation of indentured or illegal labour (as in the case of the Sicilian oranges). Vice versa, they promote organic farming and shorter food supply chains, supporting the cultivation of crops for consumption instead of monocultures, thus increasing local food availability. In doing so, GAS are facilitated by the fact that they often operate in a scenario of geographical, social, and temporal proximity with small scale agriculture.

Nevertheless, GAS activism does *not* always necessarily develop into DES. Ethnographic research in the Bergamo area proves that even networking amongst different GAS is laborious and time-consuming. Whilst logistic best practices spread quickly across networks (for instance on how to organize collective orders and deliveries), strategic investments on new projects are more difficult to make (Grasseni 2013). Ethnographic observation shows how positive contamination of repertoires happens only across networks that have an effective overlap via specific people and practical collaborations. In fact, districts tend to develop where a tight-knit group of activists develop GAS-supported pilot projects, and obtain external seed funding. This would happen more easily if GAS routinely supported ethical banking, but as a matter of fact 56% of interviewed *gasistas* in Lombardy say that they do not practice forms of ethical banking, and only 7% invest their entire savings in Ethical banks.¹² Participant

¹⁰ The full project is available on line: <http://resbergamasca.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/progetto-mercato-mc-6-3-2012.pdf> Last accessed 26 December 2010.

¹¹ The self-evaluation protocol measures the following criteria: degree of environmental and health preservation, degree of engagement in social work, local provenance and food miles, degree of involvement in a relational economy, and participation in the activities to foster and diffuse the mission of a citizenship market. <http://resbergamasca.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/disciplinare-mercato-mc-6-3-2012.pdf> Accessed 26 December 2012.

¹² Ethical banks and ethical finance cooperatives support approved projects with funds provided by members (Signori 2006). Ethical Bank (Banca Etica) provides basic banking services and investment funds to customers who wish to invest in closely monitored projects and transparently managed funds. It has only 15 offices nationwide but operates through a network of travelling bankers who meet their clients on an ad-hoc basis or through email. It had about 35,000 members by the end of 2010 for a capital

observation with the Bergamo GAS network in 2009-2010 also recorded significant stumbling blocks on issues of delegation, leadership, and conflict management, as well as an initial gender imbalance between the largely male steering committees and working groups and a 70% female composition of the “base”. This was tempered following more inclusive debates and assemblies in 2011 and 2012.

On the whole, *Gasistas* creatively rethink provisioning, making use of both social media and face-to-face sociality. Through practice and collective deliberation, *gasistas* re-appropriate their role of “co-producers” as well as critical “consumers”: they contribute with everyday collective choices to a more sustainable food-provisioning system and participate in a cultural effort to re-socialize consumers to the contexts of production. The most successful Districts, such as DES Monza-Brianza, successfully manage short supply chains (for instance, for bread from locally harvested wheat), collective contracts for green energy provisioning, and solidarity-driven dental insurance.¹³

Towards an agenda for comparative analysis

Our analysis of GAS and DES follows a “substantivist” model that re-embeds economic practice into social relations (Polany 1968, Gudeman 2012). As Gibson-Graham and Roelvink argue, “a different representation of the economy” enables “new economic subjects who can begin to take ethical action in the economic realm” (2011: 29). Enacting “an ethics of the local”, they “recognize particularity and contingency, honor difference and otherness, and cultivate local capacity” (Gibson-Graham 2003: 5).

GAS and DES embody such “performative efficacy” as they organize and inspire novel economic circuits that are directly supported by local actors. From this point of view, GAS are in many ways similar to a collaboratively and collectively organized form of “community-supported agriculture” (CSA). CSA is a phenomenon born in Massachusetts at the end of the 1980s (White 2013) that is significantly contributing to making alternatives visible in contemporary American foodscapes (Hinrichs and Lyson 2009). Nevertheless, while CSA usually operate by initiative of one or more farming entrepreneurs, GAS are organised networks of consumers that trigger ethical entrepreneurial response. For instance, it was the demand for “ethical” as

of 37 million euro (figures presented at the Conference *Voglia di Etica nella Finanza*, April 2011, Bergamo University).

¹³ The activities and projects of DES Brianza (DESBRI) are described at www.desbri.org.

well as organic oranges from GAS that encouraged Sicilian smallholders to join forces and propose themselves as an “archipelago” of suitable producers for GAS networks. Through a networking dynamic, a variety of social and economic actors coalesce to create novel economic circuits, which respond to community needs. This is more typical of the cooperative culture than of what is largely identified as “alternative food networks” (Goodman et al 2012).

The uniqueness of Solidarity Purchase Groups lies in their collective dimension and in their motivation to consider themselves not as merely end-user of a shortened supply chain, but as “co-producers” of the very conditions of production, in that they enable the farmers to produce outside conventional market constraints. Participatory Guarantee Systems, transparency of price (namely, being explicit about which factors contribute to determining the end-price of food items), and protected farmers markets all contribute to re-weaving active citizenship and the worth of relational capital in economic practice, running counter a de-politicisation of consumption.

Similarly, in Massachusetts a number of environmental justice groups, food justice groups, and workers co-ops are engaged in economic practice that serve local community needs such as in urban farming, recycling, and weatherization.¹⁴ Rather than in consumer cooperatives, their economic practices find expression in groups for community-oriented collaborative action and collective self-provisioning, which include collective preparation of preserves and yoghurt from locally harvested staple foods, and raw milk clubs (Morrow 2012). Furthermore, cooperative models of solidarity economy in Central and Western Massachusetts in sectors such as tourism, mechanics, or printing expand the scholarly understanding of solidarity economies well beyond their dismissive reading as “alternative food networks” (Cornwell and Graham 2009).

Districts of Solidarity Economies and Community Economies equally challenge an orthodox distinction between producers and consumers and an orthodox definition of “economy”, as suggested by JK Gibson Graham’s diverse economy framework (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013: 13). They share styles and repertoires of participation with the cooperative movement, and contribute to the diffusion of a context-based and voluntary work-based cooperative culture, devoid of the disenchanting effects of the professionalization of cooperative entrepreneurship (Forno 2013).

¹⁴ Current qualitative research is being carried out on this phenomena by a number of scholars in the *Community Economies Collective*, see <http://www.communityeconomies.org>.

In the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, for instance, several scholars are studying a flourishing of community economies based on cooperative development (Healy and Shear 2011), which share with DES the primacy of volunteer work, a stress on collective self-provisioning and self-help, and a focus on community well-being as common objective. Italy's Districts of Solidarity Economy and these US Community Economies are comparable and complex processes that re-embed the economy into a social and relational fabric of reciprocity. Though rooted in locally specific associative cultures, GAS/DES and Community Economies share the ambition of creating sustainable and just economies, and bring them about through co-research with scholars (Tavolo RES 2010, Democrazia KmZero 2012), to achieve a perspicuous representation of solidarity economies as embedded and diverse. In the case of CORES, collaboration with local GAS leaders and with the nationwide Tavolo RES was a vital precondition for obtaining access and widespread support for the online survey, which was endorsed by the founder of the first GAS and reaped an exceptionally high turnout (71% in Bergamo, 45% throughout Lombardy), despite *gasistas'* well-known suspicion of formal investigation of their activities. In Central and Western MA, on the other hand, collaborative research with local scholars is helping chart and organize nascent solidarity economies, for instance through community mapping initiatives, and training in ethnographic interviewing skills. Local projects for neighbourhood empowerment are also active in developing green job opportunities for youth, social and visual media, as well as community events.¹⁵

Whilst groups such as Worcester Roots are active decontaminating and reclaiming urban soil for farming, in Lombardy participatory guarantee systems are being negotiated by DES to involve both farmers and GAS representatives in lieu of institutional certification for organic farming. This involves identifying consensual protocols for "converting" conventional farms to organic, or for keeping pesticides at a minimum, in case-by-case negotiations.¹⁶ Participatory guarantee systems take into account viable and local solutions to usually compromised starting points, such as nitrogen pollution in the soil and water from excessively fed cattle grazing the land. The potential toxicity of post-industrial grounds, loss of fertility in fields that have been

¹⁵ See the activities of the Worcester SAGE Alliance (Solidarity and Green Economy) on <http://www.worcesterroots.org>

¹⁶ The participatory guarantee systems were the focus of a workshop at the latest edition of Kuminda in 2012: <http://www.kumindamilano.org/> (last accessed 5 January 2012) and the project was launched by the DES of Como, Monza-Brianza, and Varese with a public conference on 16 February 2013. PGS are envisaged as a key "scaling up" action for three Lombard DES, thanks to funding from a CARIPLO Banking Foundation project for education to sustainability, and staff from a Solidarity Economy cooperative, *Corto Circuito*.

intensively farmed for decades, and land-grabbing by large-scale certified organic agribusinesses, are all concerns of these actors. Rather than applying an abstract evaluation grid in the name of audit-like accountabilities, GAS/DES activists prefer to invite transparency from the producers about their actual hurdles, so that a protocol and a roadmap can be agreed upon collaboratively.

Amongst the many parallels between the two phenomena is the grassroots capacity to put in place solidarity actions that “fill the gaps” of top-down redevelopment agencies, either in post-industrial decline or in the wake of natural calamity. In Italy, GAS collectively mobilised to buy from Abruzzese farmers struck by earthquake in 2009 and Parmesan producers struck by another earthquake in 2012. Buying at “solidarity prices” from locations where logistics and produce conservation had become critical due to post-quake circumstances was a way of acting economically but beyond mere profit.¹⁷

These many parallels between phenomena that have developed largely without awareness of their reciprocal existence confirm Amin’s definition of social economies as an outcome of local circumstances and contexts (2009), but also CORES thesis that the main wealth created within solidarity economies is the capacity to rethink economic practice in terms of active citizenship. Many factors remain open to observation and subsequent investigation, such as the diversity of local interpretations of cooperative culture and their capacity for a flexible adaptation of roles and expertise, as networks scale up and a certain degree of specialization of professional roles sets in.

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¹⁷ Information about how to act in solidarity with Parmesan cheese-makers was made available, amongst social networks, by 6aprile.it, a grassroots follow up to the April 6 2009 earthquake, which destroyed the town of L’Aquila in Central Italy (<http://www.6aprile.it/news/2012/05/28/terremoto-emilia-ecco-come-acquistare-il-parmigiano-reggiano-terremotato-convenienza-e-solidarieta.html>) last accessed 19 March 2013). A comparable initiative is New Zealand’s “gap filler” (<http://www.gapfiller.org.nz/about/>), which seeks to reactivate vacant urban sites by facilitating legal and organizational aspects in lieu of top-down redevelopment plans.

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