

On the New Social Relations around and beyond Food. Analysing Consumers' Role and Action in Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchasing Groups)

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Abstract

This article aims at analysing the features and the dynamics of those alternative agri-food networks in which consumers act as initiators. Drawing on a survey of ongoing initiatives at national level and on evidence from empirical fieldwork in a specific territorial context showing a variegated and dynamic reality at this regard (Tuscany), the article analyses consumers' evolving attitudes and behaviour, around and even beyond food, unfolding during their involvement in these initiatives. In particular, it focuses on the experience of the solidarity-based purchasing groups, consumers' organisations promoted by groups of citizens aiming at getting control of the food they consume. Using an actor-network perspective, the article analyses how purchasing and consumption routines change when consumers join these initiatives. The article also discusses the potential of these initiatives as drivers of change along with the following questions: to what extent do these initiatives challenge dominant food practices and system governance? On what basis are these initiatives sustainable and are replicable in different contexts? How can they foster other forms of civic engagement? In this regard, the article tests a transition management approach, considering solidarity-based purchasing groups as socio-technical niches within broader socio-technical regimes in a macro landscape characterised by the globalisation of the food system. In particular, it analyses the critical points where niches enter in conflict with existing socio-technical regimes, and the way in which these groups act to remove legal, technological and cultural barriers to their development.

Introduction

'One of the key messages of the document 'I will if you will' (Sustainable Development Commission 2006, p. 3), which launches the framework for sustainable consumption policies in the UK, is that 'Government and business must focus fairly and squarely

on mainstream consumers, rather than expecting the heroic minority of green shoppers to shop society's way out of un-sustainability'.

From an opposite perspective, there are those who observe that, so far, green consumerism, and in general all forms of active consumer-citizenship, have not been able to change the way the system works, and fear that green consumerism may be a gate to the legitimisation of a neo-liberal ideology, with its focus on the centrality of markets and the decentralisation of decision-making.²

While it is difficult to deny that the dominant system has in itself capacities for turning potential threats to business into market opportunities and to outweigh efficiency with higher consumption levels, and that the required change cannot be obtained without the state playing a strong role, we are among those who believe that 'the political possibilities of consumption (are) less than the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism but more than merely a niche marketing opportunity' (Goodman and DuPuis 2002, p. 18).

This article tries to make a contribution to the analysis of the limits and potentials of consumers as drivers of system change, with a focus on food consumption. The key of this change, in our view, is related to the capacity of consumers to co-produce – together with other actors – new material and immaterial frames of daily life and to set new boundaries between consumption and citizenship, consumption and production, goods and services, and the private and public, domestic and civic realms.

The article is articulated in three sections. In the first section we review the literature addressing consumption as driver of change. The second section proposes an approach that frames change in consumption patterns and consumers' identities within innovation theories, and the third section analyses consumers' purchasing groups in Italy under this perspective. Concluding remarks follow.

Consumers or citizens?

In his 'Risk Society' (1992) Ulrich Beck observes that the liberal project is based on a conception of divided citizenship. According to Beck, citizens are supposed to contribute to the common good with their participation in making decisions, and notably with their vote. On the other hand, they have the right to pursue their own private interests in the techno-economic sphere, whose regulation is mainly based on non-political forces, converging in a general trend towards 'progress'. In Barry and Slater (2002) Callon argues this divided citizenship is the basis for the separation between lay people and specialists, ordinary individual citizens and professional representatives.

Callon *et al.* 2002 argue that this divide is being dismantled. As market-driven technologies create contested effects on the environment and uneven distribution of costs and benefits of 'progress', new political spaces emerge and new concerned groups proliferate to influence decision-making.

One of these new political spaces is consumption. In a traditional view, consumption is an individual activity based on self-interest and belongs to the private sphere. According to the Marxist critique, consumption plays a legitimising role for the capitalist system. The system, in fact, puts people in the position of being unable to understand the relation of exploitation behind commodities, so that prices of goods,

determined by impersonal forces, are confused with their value, which is related to their labour content. In this sense commodities are 'fetishes' that conceal the appropriation of value by the capitalists. For theorists of active consumerism, increasing evidence of the ecological and social unsustainability of the modern food systems give a new impulse to the de-fetishisation of commodities and give consumers cognitive instruments to reconcile their values as citizens with their behaviour as consumers (Allen and Kovach 2000). Provided that they are informed as to where the product comes from or how it is produced, consumers can exert their choice as a political act. Food consumption, therefore, is one of the examples of the opening of new political spaces.

If we have a look at the history of food movements, we can observe that the new political space opened has generated some effects. If, on one hand, Fred Buttel (2000) could argue that consumption-based resistance to recombinant bovine somatotropin had made little difference to the contemporary configuration of the dairy food system, we can note that 'anti' campaigns – such as the Nestlé boycott, anti-genetically modified organisms and patenting and anti-McDonalds – and 'pro' initiatives in the field of local food and organic farming have changed in depth public discourse over food. What are the conditions, then, that allow consumption to play a political role? And what are its limits?

The framework illustrated by the work 'I will if you will', one of the earliest documents to turn the sustainable consumption concept into a national strategy, is mainly based on availability of cleaner products (low-carbon cars, low-energy home entertainment and the new generation of energy-efficient lighting), on incentives and penalties and on community-based initiatives to create shared views on the ways to meet carbon reduction targets.

To countries like Italy, where during the first year of Kyoto Agreement carbon emissions have been increasing instead of getting less, this policy framework would seem a very advanced. But if we test it against the goal to generate sustainable consumption in the long term, it shows many weaknesses. For example, there is much criticism on the way organic food is sold in the supermarkets: while they broaden consumers' freedom of choice and allow for an ethical choice, the frame they create around consumers pulls them in the opposite direction (Jacobsen and Dulsrud 2007).

Even when the business sector attempts to frame consumers' behaviour in alternative ways contradictions may emerge. In his recent article, Johnston (2008) highlights the contradictions of addressing consumer-citizen hybrids via the market. Analysing marketing strategy of Whole Food Markets (WFM) a US corporate in the field of 'ethical food', Johnston shows that WFM addresses an elite of wealthy consumers with ethical concerns and appeals to their concerns by offering them a huge variety of labelled 'ethical' products. His evaluation of WFM strategy is that it plays very much on consumerism and very little on citizenship (as dedication to a common good). In conclusion, Johnston deems that WFM strategy does not challenge the existing pattern of development. A similar critique of elitism has been made for Slow Food (Donati 2005).³

According to Johnston, these weaknesses are inherent to the ambiguity of the consumer-citizen hybrid concept, which tries to reconcile individual self-interest with

collective responsibility to a common good. As Shove (2003) notes, technological innovation may make air-conditioning increasingly efficient, but it can hardly modify the consolidated meaning of comfort as part of contemporary lifestyles, which is the basis of the growth of sales of air-conditioning equipment and one of the most important causes of increases in energy consumption by families. WFM, as shown above, gives a wealthy elite a comfortable way to fill the gap between motivation and behaviour (Vermeir and Werbecke 2006).

The literature on alternative agri-food networks (AAFNs) that has blossomed in recent years shows a rich set of practices that go beyond the narrow boundaries of a corporate-driven consumer-citizenship, which still need adequate theoretical understanding. The very concept of AAFN, in fact, is based on the understanding of alternative food production initiatives (as in the case of organic farming or the Slow Food Praesidia) as hybrid networks that include new actors – mainly consumers – and exclude others, changing rules and norms of production, consumption and selling and building new technologies and infrastructures (Goodman and DuPuis 2002; Renting *et al.* 2003). Re-embedding production and consumption into new social relations and dis-embedding them from dependence on big players in the agri-food system can avoid the risk of appropriation and conventionalisation (Guthman 2004) evidenced for ‘ethical products’ and, first of all, for organic farming.

In the AAFNs consumers do not have to restrict themselves to use their freedom of choice within a given supply system; and in many cases they perceive their role – and are perceived by producers – as being active components of new systems of provision and new frames for creation of meaning. The choice to join community supported agriculture (Cone and Myhre 2000; Sharp *et al.* 2002) or to shop regularly in farmers’ markets (Lyson *et al.* 1995; Govindasamy *et al.* 2002), for example, implies an engagement in processes in which new structures of communication between farmers and consumers are built and, through them, new shared meanings for food production and consumption are created.

The analysis of AAFNs gives empirical evidence of the ways through which consumers can deploy their political action:

- They exert their freedom of choice in a radical way, as they change not only one or several items, but the whole shopping environment.
- They participate in food movements aimed at changing rules affecting the food system.
- They co-produce – together with producers and with a variety of other actors – new systems of food provision.
- They reconfigure the way that food is embodied into socio-technical practices.

In many cases, the consumers who animate these networks belong to minority groups. But most of them do not live in isolation. For a great part of their daily life, consumers involved into AAFNs live in the same relational context as conventional consumers. The shift from the second category to the first one has therefore to be understood as a process of building of new networks, detachment from old networks and attachment to new ones, and of the creation and destruction of coherence between sub-spheres of daily life. Time, space and social patterns of life may enable as well as constrain these processes of attachment and detachment.

To assess the transformative capacity of consumption we need therefore a framework focusing on dynamics rather than statics, on processes rather than on structures: to capture the fact that the alternative networks of yesterdays may be dominant networks of tomorrow.

AAFNs as drivers of regime innovation

Sustainable consumption cannot be obtained by addressing individual consumers alone. On the contrary, it is necessary to look at the social, legal and physical constraints that individuals face when they try to adopt new patterns of behaviour (Sanne 2002). Sustainable consumption paths start from the social, symbolic and material contexts where consumers live.

One of the most relevant features of AAFNs is that they reconfigure the boundaries between political action and consumption, between public organisations and business, and between citizenship and private interests and lay actors and experts. They try out concrete alternatives to the conventional ways of producing, selling and consuming, and at the same time, as they create tensions at the interface of the context in which they operate, they trigger processes of change at a higher level. For example, they express a demand for new technological solutions and provide hints that may feed innovative research programmes. They create pressure to adapt existing regulation to their characteristics. They challenge dominant values and behavioural norms.

In other words, AAFNs are drivers for system innovation. They provide the necessary diversity for the system to adapt to a changing context. Examined under this lens, AAFNs appear less as heroic minorities and more as laboratories for experimenting with new solutions to the problems emerging in society. Why, then, not use them as target groups for innovation policies?

Seyfang and Smith (2006) have proposed applying the theory of transition management (Rip and Kemp 1998; Rotmans *et al.* 2001; Geels 2004; Kemp and Loorbach 2006) to the study of sustainable consumption. Transition management theory builds on the basis of evolutionary theories (Dosi 1982, 1988; Nelson and Winter 1982), according to which there are two types of innovation. The first, called incremental innovation, is based on step-by-step improvements generated by learning-by-doing processes and supported by techno-scientific knowledge produced within a given paradigm. The second, which can be called radical innovation, is based on new paradigms and therefore on new knowledge and resource bases. In the agricultural field, incremental innovation is characterised in the shift from chemical production to integrated pest management methods, and radical innovation is found in biodiversity-based organic farming.

Transition management theories (1) shift the loci of innovation from technology, engineers and production to the whole network created by producers, distributors and users; (2) understand the context of innovation as socio-technical systems; and (3) apply a multilevel framework that links micro with meso and macro processes. Notably, they define niches as protected spaces in which new paradigms are tried out that may, when external conditions are favourable, be scaled up and consolidated by being linked up with other niches.

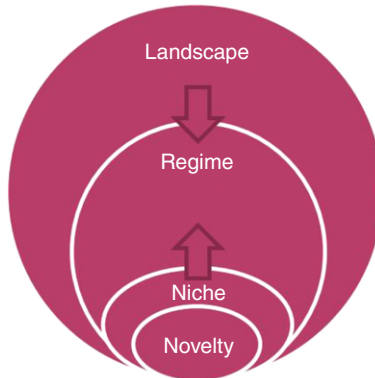


Figure 1: *Transition framework*

Their narratives can be shaped around actors that, animated by specific goals, activate the processes of search – problem definition, identification of possible solutions, trial and error, reflection – that involve human and non-human agents. Networks created along these processes end up with a closure into routine patterns of interaction that produce and reproduce socio-technical systems.

In a recent article (Brunori *et al.* 2008), we have drawn on transition management theories to build a framework to analyse innovation in agriculture and in the food systems. It focuses in particular on the processes that produce novelties from the emergence of new ways of doing (and thinking) things to niche consolidation. The process of innovation, according to this framework, are described in Figure 1.

The figure illustrates the increasing level of complexity implied when moving from novelties to higher levels. The dynamics of the framework can be described in this way: the system is regulated by a set of meta-rules, the regime, that provide resources for and constraints to actors in their daily decisions and actions. Within the system, innovative practices may emerge from the society and, if successful, consolidate into established patterns of relations between actors, rules and artefacts, which are called niches. Within a specific regime, niches may be tolerated, encouraged and contrasted.

Niches can be drivers for changing the system and at the same time can save the system from collapse. In fact, a system crisis can be caused by change in the state of landscape drivers or by internal contradictions. Emerging niches and their proliferation or scaling up can create pressure on the system and accelerate the crisis. Change may also occur as an effect of anticipating an expected crisis: the state or dominant regime actors (such as food corporations) may open spaces to niches, as in the case of social responsibility initiatives, and individuals or groups that once followed conventional rules may turn to alternative practices.

The intensity of a crisis and its outcomes, therefore, may depend on available alternatives provided by niches. Along with a change, in fact niches can provide the organising principles for a new regime or may be incorporate and subsumed into the old one.

In the food sector we have experienced something similar when the bovine spongiform encephalitis epidemic occurred in Europe, which we could consider an internal crisis of the existing food regime. The crisis, as we now know, occurred in the context of deregulation that had changed technical standards for the feed industry and consequently increased competitive pressure on the livestock industry to adopt business models based on price. When the crisis occurred, consumers lost trust in the system and demand collapsed (Smith 2006). Organic farmers, who had initiated their activity in contrast with the industrial business model, faced a huge demand for their produce by concerned consumers or by retailers willing to react to the crisis of consumer trust. On this occasion organic farming gained higher visibility and legitimacy, while the sector was re-regulated by the European Union with a strong emphasis on quality and food safety. In this case, this could hardly have happened if 'pioneer' organic farmers had not put alternative production and consumption paradigms into practice.

Climate change and energy crises, that we may locate at the level of the landscape, may open a crisis in the existing regime, accelerating social and technical innovation to adapt to change and political pressure to mitigate it. Also in this case, niches may provide embryonic forms of new patterns of social and technical organisation.

The dynamics of the four levels may also produce different outcomes: dominant forces of the regime may anticipate change by adopting and integrating niches into their operations, while keeping control of the core rules of the regime. This process is largely discussed in the literature of AAFNs and is to a great extent related to the strategies adopted by multiple retailers (Guthman 2004). Transition approaches offer a conceptual framework to solve the dilemma between remaining the niche while keeping principles and deeds in a coherent relationship, and scaling up, which necessarily implies compromises and, sometime, homologation (Smith 2006).

Consumer-initiated AAFNs: shifting the epicentre of innovation

Most AAFNs described in the literature are initiated by producers or by producer-consumer partnerships, as in the case of community supported agriculture. They increasingly target concerned consumers, and start a fruitful interaction with them that contributes to create awareness around sustainability and motivates them to use their power of choice in a reflexive way to become food activists.

In this article we analyse an AAFN initiated by consumers. In this way, we try to shift our focus from the field of production to the field of consumption. To do so we adopt the definition of consumption as 'processes related to appropriation of items in the course of engaging in social practices' (Warde quoted by McMeekin and Southerton 2007, p. 6) and this allows us to shift our focus from an individual concept of consumption to the world of consumers, that is, the variety of social practices in which the consumer is involved, and to understand the role that goods and services can play in them.

If we looked at AAFNs under the producer's lens, we would probably focus on the way farmers have to organise their activities in order to adapt to new structuring principles such as organic food, short chains, local food and so on. In examining them under the consumer's lens, we have to explore what lies behind individual choices. In fact, we have to take into consideration the knowledge, values and prejudices that

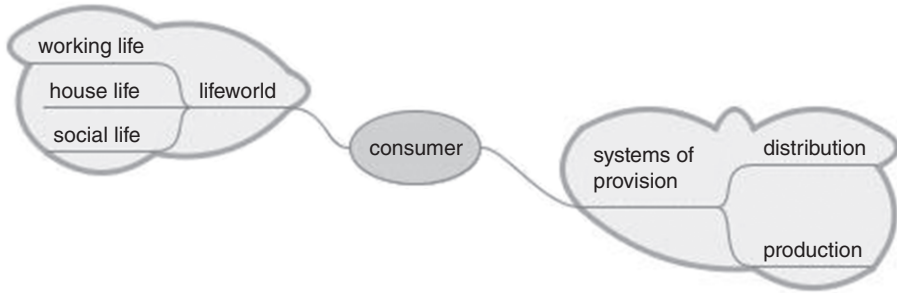


Figure 2: *Focus on field of consumption*

frame decisions and analyse how these aspects are influenced by the social networks in which consumers are embedded; as well as looking at the durable and consumable goods available to them, in the time–space configurations of daily life (Figure 2). Moreover, instead of considering every act of consumption as a deliberate choice, we need to look at how daily consumption routines consolidate, how they fall into crisis and how they change.

Alternative consumers can be considered as second level innovators, as they aim at reshaping the worlds of consumption, production and distribution according to principles that are alternative to the dominant ones. In our perspective, we suggest that patterns of innovation should be analysed according to a research strategy that stresses the constraints that consumers face when they try to act according to their values. These constraints are not only in the production and distribution side, as a great part of them are an integral part of their own life-worlds. Purchasing and consumption routines, in fact, are based on socio-technical systems that link systems of provisions together with consumer goods (a house, white goods, a car) and public goods (road infrastructure, parking and public services) (Geels 2004). It is hard to imagine systems of provision based on supermarkets without the existence of private cars and refrigerators. Moreover, behind these goods there are people, knowledge, values, skills, rules, norms: any change in each of the elements of the system is likely to generate adjustments to all of them.

For our purpose, we identify four categories of consumers: (1) conventional consumers, those who accept regime rules without putting them into question; (2) concerned consumers, who follow regime rules but are aware of its problems; (3) active consumers, who look actively for alternatives and interact (more or less occasionally) with alternative food networks; (4) active consumer-citizens, who are fully involved in alternative food networks and are co-producers of new systems of provision. In a transition approach we should see these categories as a continuum. Consumer identities evolve as an effect of daily practices, internal dilemmas and external pressures and constraints. The pathways that allow conventional consumers to become active consumer-citizen' are based on continuous reflection, change and learning by doing.

In a transition framework, innovation can move from the level of producers and civil society to affect progressively higher degrees of complexity. Consumer with no

family constraints, according to their available budget, can adjust their own purchasing and consumption routines by assembling already existing alternatives, for example, preferring environmentally friendly products, buying at farmers' markets, optimising waste management, reducing meat consumption, re-balancing kitchen work with services embodied into products. Consumers living in a family will have to negotiate part of their choices with the other members of the family. For example, if they are the 'food manager' they will have to implement a strategy to introduce a diet based on a lower proportion of meat or on a higher quantity and variety of vegetables. They will have to learn how to replace meat without altering the meal's nutritional balance and make the change acceptable to other family members. If innovators are not the food manager of the household, they will have to convince the food manager to buy or prepare an alternative to meat.

Change in purchasing and dietary patterns may imply changes to the organisation of the family. For example, the choice not to use ready-prepared meals implies more preparation work, and consensus over this choice could imply a redistribution of the work within the family, that may have gender implications. Given that these changes are feasible, there are barriers to sustainable consumption beyond which families cannot operate on their own. For example, in order to recycle home waste a differentiated garbage collecting system should be in place. In order to reduce the ecological (and economic) burden of family equipment, consumers may introduce patterns of consumption based on shared use, as in the case of cars, laundry and kitchen facilities (Mont 2004). To solve technical problems or to get information on goods and services they should belong to peer-to-peer learning networks. To gain autonomy from conventional retailers a stable system of direct food provision from farmers should be created.

Consumers' purchasing groups as second level innovation networks: an introduction

Gruppi di acquisto solidale (GAS) (n.d.) (solidarity purchasing groups) were born in Italy⁴ as networks run by citizen-consumers animated by the goal of applying the principle of solidarity in daily purchase–consumption activities. In an official document published in 1999 on its website (<http://www.retegas.org>), the GAS movement identifies in the opportunity offered by consumers' power the reason for engaging in this type of initiative:

The act of shopping is not ... a private act involving only the consumer, her/his taste, her/his needs, her/his wallet. It can have a strong and clear social, economical and political value. Gaining awareness of this power may allow us to influence the way firms source, distribute and produce. (ReteGAS, 1999, p. 1)

The strategy of GAS is synthesised into the following principles:

- reflexive consumption, pursuing social justice, environmental sustainability and a different meaning of quality

- solidarity within the group and with producers aimed at improving employment and working conditions
- socialisation, that is, satisfying the need to share ideas and decisions
- developing synergies, that is using social links to generate economies into food production and distribution.

These principles are translated into several organisational criteria:

- choice of products based on seasonality and on organic production methods
- logistics based on local sourcing
- support to small farms specialised in direct selling
- regularity of sourcing, through agreements with producers
- planning purchasing and consumption
- reducing packaging
- filtering the pressures of the media and of the market system and developing new meanings for consumers' needs
- social control of quality through shared information and dialogue with producers
- promoting trust and co-operation within the network
- reflecting on function, maintenance, assistance of durable goods.

GAS are based on the organising principles of the networks. In most cases there is not a formal membership and consumers can enter and exit from the groups without problems.

Organisation

The structure of a GAS is illustrated in Figure 3.

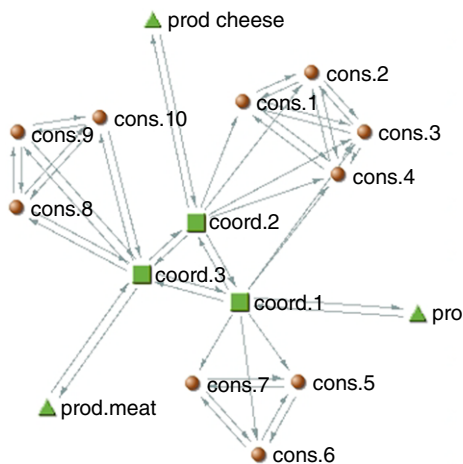


Figure 3: *The structure of a gruppo di acquisto solidale. Cons, consumer; coord, coordinator; prod, producer*

The basic operation units of GAS are purchasing sub-networks. They are initiated by voluntary co-ordinators appointed on a rotation basis. Co-ordinators make periodical calls for cycles of orders by informing members about the organisation of the orders: the set of products that can be ordered, the producer/s who supply the products, the length of time of the cycle, prices, frequency of delivering, the point of collection, the time when the product is distributed, methods of payment (in advance or on delivery) and who will collect orders. In general, points of delivery and collection are places made available by political and social organisations (social centres, clubs, churches), whose members are also members of the GAS.⁵

The sub-networks can be activated and inactivated with a great deal of flexibility: when no-one is willing to be co-ordinator or there are insufficient members they lapse. There is also much flexibility on how the sub-networks can be formed: they can respond to logistic needs (consumers closer to a certain collection point), to specific characteristics of the product (for example, Parmigiano Reggiano cheese needs large orders and the frequency of delivery can be lower than for other fresh products), to producers' criteria (those who are frequent customers of a specific producer).

When cycles start to work, a lot of internal interaction is needed to adjust the logistics (including people to focus on delivery, subgroups arranging collection and redistribution, and timing). As delivery is normally restricted to specified times and places, collection points become places of face-to-face interaction between consumers. Often also producers are present at the delivery points so that consumers can interact directly with them.

A key of GAS organisational life is its periodical meeting, normally organised on monthly basis, in which any of the members of the group can participate. In practice, participants to meetings constitute a small percentage of all the members. The objects of discussion here are issues related to the organisation of operations, criteria for the selection of producers, new initiatives and outreach activities. The main tool for organisation and communication is, however, the Internet group members interact in a daily and intense exchange of e-mails and this in part balances the low participation in the assembly.

Some GAS have formalised their organisation into associations, but in most cases they are very informal groups. Informality implies that decision-making needs to be synchronised with the pace of the meetings.

As GAS grow, independent spin-offs are created to keep management easy. In only a few cases, that are characterised by strong internal relationships, the groups do not split in spite of organisational disadvantages of remaining intact.

GAS and their environment: networks of networks

From the outset, GAS tend to mobilise resources available in other networks. Participants, in fact, share their personal competencies and skills as well as their social capital. The most important examples are logistic facilities – without which it would be hard to conceive of any GAS – that normally are borrowed from other organisations. Another example is information technology infrastructure: websites and mailing lists are hosted on other organisations' servers, whereas the software used is normally open source software run by volunteers with information

communication technology (ITC) skills. Of course the other way round may also happen: other organisations can benefit from links to GAS to disseminate information and to consolidate and enlarge their image and recognition.

Not all networks have an easy approach to external visibility: some of them are reluctant to open up, as they fear their ideas and activities will be appropriated and used instrumentally for other purposes or they are afraid of a loss of cohesion when the groups were too open.

GAS tend also to create higher level networks with peer groups. They activate joint operations with neighbouring groups, for example, when the number of participants to a product sub-network requires a minimum threshold to be economically viable – or simply to exchange ideas and experiences. Meetings are often organised at provincial and regional level, so that coordination instruments are created. There is also a network at national level, and national meetings have started to be held yearly or more often.

The creation of second-level networks is facilitated by availability of ICT that allow information to circulate, to record the information circulated, to give external visibility to the network and to echo media coverage of the GAS.

Moreover, GAS tend to link up to and make joint initiatives with other cousin networks, such as fair trade organisations, farmers' markets, small farmers' associations and local currencies organisations.

Consumers' purchasing groups as second level innovation networks: the case of GAS.P!

GAS.P! is the largest GAS of Pisa province and of the whole of Tuscany.⁶ It is mainly made by about 400 families. Most of initiators are activists in other associations and groups (for example, fair trade organisations, cultural and environmental associations); more generally, the members are people whose age ranges from 30 to 60 years and who are characterised by having a medium to high educational level. They are all looking for 'good food' (organic, seasonal, fresh, local) at a fair price and many of them are more consciously seeking to free themselves from the conventional retailing system, which is perceived to be unsustainable and untrustworthy. The desire to be part of an alternative social community, within which they share a different approach towards needs satisfaction and citizenship, is another important factor.

Food producers who supply the groups are generally organic/biodynamic small-scale producers who specialise in direct selling. Most of the farmers involved can be classified as new farmers, a definition that describes producers who have broken away from the industrial agricultural model and carry out multifunctional methods of production processes based on diversification and a connection between tradition and innovation. In this group a meaningful segment includes the newly rural farmers, a term that points to their urban origin. These producers consider agriculture to be a lifestyle choice and are very important for communication with consumers as they share many of their cultural codes.

In addition to the farmers and breeders there are other suppliers of non-food items. They generally make handicrafts and run small-scale enterprises, adhering to the ethical principles of the group. Presently, GAS.P! manages about 20 products, of which five are non-food items (Table 1).

Table 1: *Products managed by Gruppi di acquisto solidale of Pisa*

Product	Sub-networks (n)	Producers (n)	Maximum distance (km)
Organic vegetables	6	2	10–30
Organic bread	3	1	36
Organic oranges	1	4	1200
Organic apples	1	2	100
Organic summer fruit	1	2	40
Parmigiano Reggiano cheese	1	1	213
Organic pasta and legumes	1	1	35
Organic beef	2	2	35
Extra-virgin olive oil	Direct contact with producers	3	10
Wine	1	1	35
Ecological detergents	1	1	80
Water filters	1	1 (installed by the plumbers of solidarity purchasing group of Pistoia)	347

In the presentation on the GAS.P! website, a profile of producers is described, normally aimed at highlighting their values and their alternativeness.

Organic vegetables sub-networks are the oldest and the most complex ones. The system of provision is based on box schemes. Consumers pay in advance for a cycle – that can be between 1 and 3 months – and receive a weekly box that can range in weight between 1 kg and 5 kg, containing at least four vegetable products. At the beginning of the season the sub-networks agree with producers on the types of products so that they can make a production plan. The vegetable producers of GAS.P! normally serve several GAS. They have co-evolved with GAS and have progressively specialised into box schemes.

The organisation of other sub-networks is easier, as they deal with single products with a longer durability. Some of them – such as Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, organic oranges and apples – are those where direct contact between consumers and producers generates the highest advantage to both.

GAS.P! network

GAS.P! has solid relationships with other GAS, especially those closest to Pisa. With nearby groups the link opens possibilities of collaboration in purchasing operations. For example, some items (oranges from southern Italy and apples from northern Italy) require a minimum number of participants to order the goods, so that groups nearby can add their orders. An outstanding example of the potentiality of the network is the sub-network on water filters. These are considered to be an alternative to bottled mineral water, which consumes a lot of energy in packaging, waste and transportation. Thanks to a link with GAS of Pistoia, in Tuscany, GAS.P! has started to source water filters from a producer in Ivrea, in northern Italy, and the installation

is done by plumbers selected by GAS of Pistoia. More generally, the relations with other groups provide an exchange of information, debate on specific issues and the identification of common initiatives.

GAS.P! receives logistical support and human resources by two social centres, politico-cultural clubs with a radical-left orientation. Historically, these clubs tended to target young people and to isolate themselves from the rest of the community. Through this partnership, they have opened out and, when necessary, have received political support to carry on their activity. GAS.P!, in its turn, is stimulated through this relationship to take part in many political initiatives in urban contexts. An example of this co-operation is represented by the support given by the group to one of the centres during 2008 and 2009 in its fight with the municipal administration to defend its space. Other important occasions of involvement in mobilisation have been initiatives of protest against planning decisions.

GAS.P! has also established a strong partnership with the local farmers' market, thanks to the fact that some of the initiators of GAS.P! are also initiators of the farmers' market. The farmers' market is held monthly in a central square of the town. Some of the farmers participating in the market are also suppliers of GAS.P!, so that the farmers' market is an occasion for consumers to have a face-to-face exchange with them. The market itself is also used as logistic platform for some products of GAS.P! and, sometimes, also for communication about GAS.P! activities. Farmers' market initiatives are largely publicised by the GAS.P! website. When farmers' market experienced problems with health authorities, GAS.P! echoed their claims towards the public administration.

We may say, therefore, that the triangle formed by these networks constitutes an integrated local food system in which innovations at one point can be translated into changes at others (Figure 4). In this triangle, farmers' markets are an important entry point to the system, as citizens who do not belong to any GAS may be made aware of

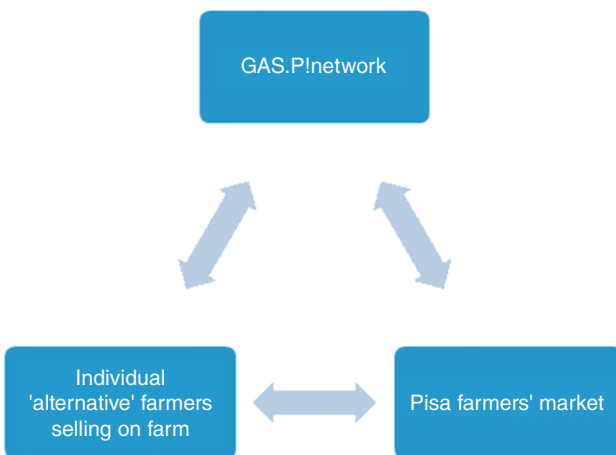


Figure 4: A local alternative agri-food system: Gruppi di acquisto solidale of Pisa (GAS.P!)

Table 2: *Classification of e-mails according to their subject*

Issue of e-mails	%
Political communication	35.99
Organisational issues	20.06
Communication about the network	9.87
Principles and criteria	9.71
Meetings	7.48
New products and producers	3.34
Diversification	2.71
Information exchange and barter	1.91
Others	8.92
	100.00

alternative agriculture, stimulated to know more and, eventually, to join a GAS or to buy directly at a farm. The collective effort to organise a farmers' market is rewarded by a higher visibility that can turn into a bigger turnover.

Another important connection is that with the local association engaged in the promotion of practices of fair economy in the territory, in its turn involving most of the no-profit organisations and social movements active locally. This relationship, based also on shared membership, offers the group further occasion for mobilisation, favouring the growth of a civic engagement that goes beyond the creation of an alternative system of food provisioning.

Internal communication: face-to-face vs. on-line

We have analysed GAS.P! activity through the collection of e-mails circulated in GAS.P!'s mailing list over a period of 3 years.⁷ The database provides us with interesting insights on the processes of consolidation of this innovative actor-network into a niche.

We have classified messages according to their content. Table 2 shows the distribution among the types of content.

Political communication

The biggest share of messages (35%) is related to political communication. As described above, many GAS.P! members belong to activist groups of various kinds (generally left wing), so the list is used as a communication infrastructure. The type of communication is mostly based on local events and initiatives, for example, those related to land planning and social and environmental matters or political initiatives related to broader events. This type of communication may have not direct links to the operative mission of the group but it contributes to consolidate the participants' sense of identity and their set of values, as well as to develop their attitudes towards civic engagement. Furthermore, the debate on purely political issues has the same effect. Participants show a strong sense of the autonomy of the group and feel it is necessary not to become an instrument of any political party; at the same time, they give space to exchange their opinions about politics, viewing this as an opportunity to practise citizenship.

Organisational issues

About 20 per cent of the messages are about the internal organisation of the sub-networks activities. As explained above, each sub-network has a co-ordinator who launches the call for participants and defines the rules for ordering, time of delivery, logistics, price and other organisational issues. The mailing list is used by the co-ordinators to give real-time information to participants (such as delivery delays and change of place of delivery and of collection). Other participants use the mailing list to signal problems (the most frequent of which is related to losing or exchanging boxes, the impossibility of collecting the box at the right time and requests for practical information). The volume of this type of communication has progressively been reduced, as most of information related to it has shifted to the website. This is a clear sign that routines are in a process of consolidation: consumers are aware of organisational rules and progressively are learning how to cope.

Another issue is related to improvements into organisational procedures. For example, the problem arising with box schemes (the quality and composition of the box, and its weight and price) with one producer (who eventually left the scheme) have been progressively tackled by activating monitoring procedures and a more intense communication with producers.

An interesting novelty in the use of the mailing list is the active participation of producers in it. Recently, indeed, some producers have started to communicate through it, in order to involve more directly the purchasers of their products in the running of their production activity. Through very detailed mails, GAS.P! members have thus learned of the reasons behind some unexpected problem in production of fruit and vegetables, as well as receiving invitations to visit the farms.

Communication about the network

As stated above, GAS.P! has established relations with other neighbouring GAS and with second-order networks such as the co-ordinations of GAS at regional and at national level. Through these relations information about common initiatives circulates and specific matters are debated. This kind of communication has become particularly intense during the last 2 years as a reaction to the increased public interest in GAS. Indeed, these communication spaces are important for consolidating identity and to define common strategies for managing internal activity as well as interaction with the outside world.

Principles and criteria

One of the most interesting areas of discussion in the mailing lists concerns the principles related to consumption and purchasing. In fact, this is the area where consumers reflect on the coherence between values, motivation and behaviour.

One of the recurrent objects of discussion of the list regards the producer-consumers' relationship, and notably the question of quality and price. How far removed should the quality of organic products be from the quality standards of food purchased in conventional stores? What should the distribution of costs and

benefits between producers and consumers be? Often new entrants pose very basic questions such as 'the price of vegetables is not lower than in the supermarkets', and older participants explain that the objective of GAS is not a lower price but a fairer price. The mailing list also reports on participation at the meetings of farmers discussing their economic, technical and organisational problems, the structure of the agri-food system, the condition of small farmers and so on.

Moreover, the direct use of the list by farmers has a strong effect on shaping consumers' knowledge and value systems. This communication (that in many cases concerns basic knowledge about the production and characteristics of the goods), promotes a learning process among the participants that reinforces their awareness and motivation for their purchasing choice. From a different perspective, it shows that farmers establish relations among peers with consumers. Even when they establish exclusive relations with them there is no subordination. On the contrary they play an active role in shaping organizational processes.

A significant example of the issues under discussion in the internal exchange of e-mails is how the GAS.P! logistics can change consumers' routines. For some consumers, walking to pick up the weekly box, instead of taking the car to go to the supermarket, has become a pleasant weekly routine. For others, this is a further burden on them. This discussion intensified when a member of the list proposed to set up a (solidarity) service of home delivery, to which some replied that walking instead of using the car was inherent the membership of the GAS.P!, while others stated that not all consumers have the luck to be able to walk, be it because of their age or for their time constraints.

The same concerns apply to the decision related to the frequency of deliveries of some products (such as apples and potatoes) which highlights the domestic difficulties to be faced (such as no space for storing large amounts of produce) and the related conflict with other needs, particularly the desire to reduce transport.

Equally significant is the intense debate about the risk of conventionalisation of this alternative provisioning system. Indeed, as the membership of the group increases the concern of losing coherence (the shopping trolley syndrome) grows among the long-standing participants.

Meetings

The core decision-making place of GAS.P! take place at the monthly meetings, which are announced on the mailing list and the agenda echoes the themes discussed to the assembly. After the minutes are circulated, members of the list follow up with their opinions and encourage new discussion. This information about meetings organised within other networks of GAS, at local or broader level has the same usefulness.

New products and producers

In general, new producers are presented to the network by one of the members of the GAS.P!. The presentation of producers and products is based on the GAS criteria mentioned above. Sometimes visits to the farm are organised to make consumers

aware of the environment where the farmer lives and stories of the visits and impressions are reported in the networks.

On other occasions, the producers write directly to the list and introduce themselves to the consumers. This has happened mainly since GAS.P! activity started to be covered in the national media. GAS.P! reacts to this first contact by making further contacts.

Information exchange and barter

Increasingly, the group members use the mailing list to exchange information related to technologies of consumption. A recent example is the self-production of yogurt. As milk enzymes are needed for this, spare enzymes have started to be circulated in the network. Very frequently the mailing list has become the place to acquire or relearn the knowledge and skills necessary to cook raw food (how do you cook celeriac?) or to cook some of the 'hard' vegetable (like cabbage, which is in the weekly box for the whole winter) in a more varied and attractive way. Other examples are the exchanges of information about energy sources or energy-saving systems (such as the use of low-energy lamps and the installation of solar panels) or about recycling regulations and systems.

The object of communication in the mailing list has progressively broadened to include the exchange of goods: baby-seats, bicycles and furniture. In the most cases, people give them away, as they are no longer needed but people don't want to throw them away. The impressive recent increase of the use of the list for offering or looking for goods is an expression of the process shaping and sharing different attitudes towards needs and different ways to fulfil them.

Others

Among other subjects on the mailing list is a discussion about media coverage of issues such as food, ethical consumption and environmental issues, as well the specific problems that members have to face as citizens (such as school management, the organisation of school canteens and waste disposal) or, on another level, about local cultural and entertainment initiatives.

Consumer action as drivers for innovation: analysis

To understand consumers participating in GAS we need to understand better their life-worlds, the way food consumption is related to them and the way changes in consumption patterns may modify them. In the literature on sustainable food consumption there is a wide debate on such matters as the relationship between needs and wants and between basic and superfluous needs (Reisch and Røpke 2004). A strategy for sustainable consumption should be able to create new shared meanings of what is basic and what is superfluous, what is sustainable and what is unsustainable.

GAS can be drivers of the evolution of consumers from one category to another. In the transition between conventional (Type A) and concerned consumers (Type B) GAS

can create awareness through appropriate communication; the shift from Type B to Type C can occur when GAS (integrated with other alternative food networks) provide realistic – and not occasional – alternative systems of provision. The status of Type D (active consumer-citizens) is the outcome of a process of active involvement into GAS, if these are sufficiently open to participation.

Given that consumption behaviour is embedded in social life, alternative food networks should provide consumers with enough incentives to detach them from conventional networks and to attach them to alternative ones. In these new networks, changing consumption patterns rest on the change of patterns of relations, the adoption of new rules and breaking down of old ones, the use of new artefacts and the abandonment of old ones. This process is the basis, as said above, of the construction of a new socio-technical system (Geels 2004; Smith 2006).

To understand the relevance of barriers to change, we have to understand that consumers' behaviour follows routine patterns that relieve them from the burden of evaluating every act of consumption. This applies also to Type B and Type C consumers. In fact, reflexive consumers could not sustain the burden of making endless calculations or searching for quantities of information every time they buy a good; rather, they take for granted large part of their choice to concentrate on new and problematic aspects. Routines are black boxes, taken for granted patterns of behaviour consolidated after the resolution of dilemmas into bodily dispositions (Bourdieu 1984), taste (Guthman 2002), discourse and narratives. The breakdown of these routines occurs after a certain level of dissatisfaction has reached a point that justifies opening the black box.

The search of consumers for different equilibria leads eventually to a novelty, that is, a new way of perceiving and doing things. The process is not just an individual act, but is performed by making use of all the resources available in the external environment. When the problem is not individual but common to a network, the search is a collective effort that turns into social learning practices. The context (critical events, social reward or punishment) may generate dilemmas that bring the old order and the old narratives and discourse into debate (Figure 5).

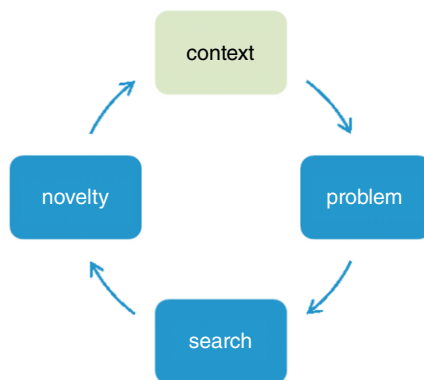


Figure 5: *The process of creating novelties*

Table 3: *Changes in the socio-technical system of citizens-consumers*

	Conventional	Box scheme of a gruppi di acquisto solidale
Functional		
Convenience (time, skills, certainty of results)	High	Low
Health (content of nutrients)	Low	High
Freedom of choice	High	Low
Education	Low	High
Hedonic		
Variety	High (off-season and high distance products) Low (biodiversity)	Low (reduced choice to seasonal products) High (formerly unknown products, local varieties)
Taste	Low (no freshness, no seasonality) high (artificial vs natural flavour)	High (fresh, seasonal)
Aesthetic	High	Low (according to conventional criteria)
Symbolic	Food as social distinction Food as identity service	High in the appropriate social context
Ethical	Low	High
Linkages	Low	High – participating in solidarity purchasing groups as a way to feel part of a community

From marketing theory we may classify the benefits that consumers enjoy from their goods and services into functional, hedonic, aesthetic, symbolic, ethical and social linkages. Any good or service has characteristics that act as satisfiers of these needs, and consumers' routines reflect the way their taste, narratives and discourse evaluate the characteristics of the goods according to these needs.

The goal of AAFNs is to create a coherent set of meanings that can solve consumers' dilemmas and satisfy their needs in different ways. It is not just a matter of information. Information, in fact, cannot solve dilemmas like price versus quality, convenience versus health, freedom of choice versus ethics, taste for artificial additives versus taste for natural goods (this is very much the case for children). In order to shift from conventional consumption patterns to alternative ones consumers need discourses and narratives that help them solve their dilemmas and provide them with arguments to defend their choice in their own social context (primarily, the family).

Table 3 shows how GAS modify the mix of benefits that consumers can enjoy from box schemes compared with conventional purchasing patterns. GAS consumers enjoy benefits of ethical and social linkages that conventional consumers can scarcely ever enjoy. Purchasing and consumption, in fact, are embedded in chains of acts that develop both the sense of 'doing something right' and at the same time activate social links with other GAS consumers.

As for functional benefits, GAS box schemes compensate for consumers' reduced convenience and freedom of choice with higher nutritional quality and the possibility of learning. As for the hedonic benefits, they replace variety based on long-distance transport and on artificial production processes with a higher number of local species and varieties, and absent or artificial taste (which is in processed food often obtained with the addition of synthetic or artificial flavours) with genuine taste linked to seasonality. As for aesthetic benefits, consumers are motivated to adopt different criteria for judging aesthetics, becoming aware of the manipulation and chemicals needed to make the products 'perfect', while appreciating natural colours and the variety of size and forms produced in nature. Finally, GAS consumers allocate an alternative symbolic function to food: instead of it differentiating social status on a vertical basis (high/low) GAS food creates an alternative distinction between conventional and concerned and thus becomes a component of group identity.

Network detachment and reattachment is established when a new pattern of consumption is turned into routines that work: the weekly appointment is no longer forgotten, the quantities purchased are adjusted to weekly consumption, the price is deemed reasonable, the family adapts to the new menu and tastes, new roles in the family have consolidated, new skills are learned in cooking and conserving food are learned.

The same process of adjustment can be analysed at the level of the other components of the integrated food system: together with consumers, the change of routines involves producers, collecting points, co-ordinators, rules and tools for managing orders and problem-solving devices, as described above. The establishment of a new niche lies in the alignment of these various components and their new routines.

In Table 4 we identify some aspects of the process of behavioural change implied in a transition. Most choices in a change in consumption patterns often imply the resolution of conflicting concerns, which in turn depend on the strength of the internal and external rewards and penalties related to the choice. We define critical points as those aspects that may cause conflicting concerns and that therefore need an effort to be solved.

For example, Type B consumers are sufficiently motivated to consume more organic produce, privileging seasonal and local food and reducing the consumption of meat, increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, while respecting family budget constraints. How can they fulfil their goals?

A first problem for Type B consumers (who are aware but remain attached to the conventional system of provision) is to belong to a community in which their choices are not sanctioned (as being eccentric, deviant, elitist, and so on) and, on the contrary, are morally rewarded. Belonging to such communities means being involved in a common process of searching based on common values and interaction among peers. Belonging to these communities diversifies their access to sources of information about food so they can avoid being trapped into a one-way communication with retailers. GAS can be such a community, built up via the Internet and face-to-face relations. To enter into the network, our consumer may start with an occasional purchase of some GAS item through friends and then become progressively involved. Another entry point could be the website, and a third could be participation in meetings and events organised by GAS. Entrance is facilitated as soon as ICT

Table 4: Evaluation grid and comparison between conventional vegetables and box scheme vegetables

Problem	Actors		Rules		Artefacts	
	Innovation	Critical points	Innovation	Critical points	Innovation	Critical points
How to be part of a solidarity purchasing group?	Joining the Internet list, receiving a box through a member, participating to periodic solidarity purchasing group meetings	Political or ethical differences between members. Lack of entry points to the network	Peer-to-peer interaction vs top-down communication (learning)	Communication rules not well defined and conflicting concerns.	ICT software and hardware, meeting places	Availability of a computer and Internet access.
Making the daily diet more seasonal	Sourcing from local producers Getting agreement in the family	Not enough produce to satisfy demand	Learning what is seasonal and what is not (cognitive rules). Accepting giving up what is not available in the season (consumption norms). Learning how to eat (to prepare) non-conventional vegetables (technical norms)	Access to information Capacity to learn with peers Time to dedicate to learning	Diversification of products purchased	Not enough produce to satisfy demand Not enough diversity in the farmers' supply
Respecting family budget constraints	Family members, producers, members of the networks developing a context for negotiation of price and quality	Trust among components of the network; availability of information	Accepting the concept of a fair price (ethical norms) Changing value hierarchies among consumption goods (consumption norms) Changing practices to reduce the cost of purchased products Reducing unnecessary consumption	How to fix the fair price in practice Access to information Capacity to learn with peers Time to dedicate to learning Time to dedicate to changed practice	Packaging, products and tools to support changing practices	Sustainability of the new arrangement

Shifting from occasional to regular pattern of consumption	Sufficient producers' organisation Establishing a trusting relationship with local producers Getting agreement in the family Effective organisation of the GAS Establishing a cooperative relationship with other group members	Insufficient local producers Weakness of the GAS organisation (low number of active members in the group)	Radically changing practices of provisioning Extending the new approach to all forms of consumption (coherence with respect to a different scale of values and principles)	Time to dedicate to learning Time to dedicate to changed practices	Availability of the necessary products Tools to support changed practices	Sustainability of the new arrangement
Broadening the list of goods purchased through the GAS to non-food	Establishing direct relationships with non-food producers Sufficient numbers of active members in the GAS Getting agreement s in the family	Weakness of the GAS organisation (low number of active members in the group) Difficulties in changing consumption practices	Radically changing practices of provisioning Extending the new approach to all forms of consumption	Time to dedicate to learning Time to dedicate to changed practices	Availability of necessary products Tools to support changed practices	Not enough produce to satisfy demand
Contributing to GAS activity with voluntary work	Establishing a cooperative relationship with other group members	No radical change of attitude towards provisioning The group is too large: lack of involvement of all members	Radically changing attitude towards provisioning	Capacity to learn with peers ICT skills Time to dedicate to learning a different approach Time to dedicate to participation and engagement Capacity to communicate and interact	Time to dedicate to group activity ICT software and hardware Availability of time	Availability of a computer and Internet access Availability of time

infrastructures are made friendlier, meeting places can be reached more easily and social capital already exists. The barriers to entry that must be removed are cultural, political and generational differences, a lack of computer literacy and the lack of human 'gateways'.

More practical problems are related to an effort to make the diet of the family or the individual more seasonal and more local. In the actors' sphere, readjustment are needed in their relations with the family (to obtain consensus on the change), their new contacts with local farmers and a partial detachment from their habitual shops. GAS can help this process, as they can provide arguments to support convincing the family, links and channels of communication to local farmers and a more or less stable system of provision. Box schemes reduce consumers' anxiety by relieving them from continuous acts of choice. In the sphere of rules, many rules change when shifting from a conventional mix of products to a local or seasonal basket. First of all, consumers should have adequate knowledge of the agricultural cycles and awareness of the range of seasonal products available (cognitive rules); secondly, they have to accept abstaining from goods that are not available in a particular season (and this may imply sacrifices, at least in the beginning) and learn to introduce new products into their diet; thirdly, they must learn how to prepare the newly introduced products. In the sphere of artefacts, the process is supported by software and hardware for communication, forms to fill in to manage their orders, food items components of a basket, kitchen tools.

Very similar considerations are involved when trying to reduce the meat content of diet or to reduce the size of meals. In these cases, GAS can provide alternative food to meat or, through peer-to-peer interaction, support to individual or family strategies to reduce consumption.

A third problem is related to family budgets. Along with the economic crisis of the last years this has become a key problem, and GAS are now perceived as a response to the crisis, as the way to buy organic and quality food while keeping prices reasonable and not exploiting farmers. In fact, as GAS avoid intermediaries and use voluntary work, they redistribute saved added value between consumers and producers. Detachment from conventional shops reduces consumers' exposure to convenience foods that are much more expensive and energy consuming. The basket of products supplied by GAS may contain cheaper products (such as carrots or potatoes or less valuable beef cuts) and peer-to-peer interaction can support consumers to prepare and consume them. Ethical norms prevent these consumers from bargaining with farmers: in GAS there is awareness that the social bond with producers entails negotiation on a fair price rather than on the lowest price (Kirwan 2004). The new norms driving consumption make consumers reassess the value of goods consumed and rank food higher among their habitually consumed goods. To give an example, a decision to retard upgrading home technologies (the television, computer, mobile phone, or playstation) may generate savings to be spent in food of better quality.

Shifting the focus of analysis from producers to consumers does not necessarily mean getting back to the asymmetry Goodman and DuPuis (2002) have described: on the contrary, the challenge to researchers is to analyse how organised reflexive consumption generates innovation in the producers' world.

Let us see changes that GAS operate in the production field. In fact, GAS open up opportunities for farmers to undertake or to consolidate alternative development paths. Table 5 shows the range of changes farms have to make in order to be consistent with GAS operations.

In order to cope with the needs and organisation of GAS, farmers have to adapt their crop planning, their internal organisation (such as the frequency of harvesting, administering orders, making up and delivering boxes, communication with the outside world, opening the farm to visitors), their equipment (like transportation tools, the physical space to store and pack the produce and human resources). As farmers establish a link with GAS, they are encouraged to diversify and to re-organise their activity to meet consumers' demands, sometimes by interacting with other components of their network or establishing new relations. Some farmers have involved other farmers in the GAS, co-operating with them to fulfil their orders; and, as box schemes require a high diversity of tasks, other have been able to involve people who are often at the margins of the production process, like older members of the family or even people with mental or physical handicaps (in specific projects in collaboration with public social services). In this way, also farmers' networks are encouraged to innovate. We should not see the process as unidirectional. When farmers interact with consumers, they may anticipate their needs by proposing solutions to them.

Once niches are consolidated, to grow or scale up they need to adapt aspects of the existing regime.⁸ By challenging existing technological, scientific, legal and ethical regimes they are drivers for innovation at higher levels.

An example of how GAS in Italy have succeeded in challenging existing regulatory regimes is the approval in Parliament of a legal amendment that defines GAS as 'no-profit associations constituted with the aim to perform collective purchase and distribution, without any mark-up, exclusively to members'.⁹ The amendment is the result of intense lobbying based on an alliance with a representative of the Green Party. While protecting GAS from accusation of tax evasion, the amendment has a structuring effect as it implies that GAS should be constituted as associations to be externally visible. Once they are formally recognised, they can participate in public administration projects, undertake contracts and obtain more visibility in the media.

Other changes are related to the new general discourse growing around the quality of food and of food production system, in narrow relation with an increasing criticism of the unsustainability of current agri-food system. The emphasis that media are giving to these direct systems of food provisioning¹⁰ as a possible alternative for meeting the uncertainty created by food scandals and the increasingly well-known inequity of big food chains, is a clear sign of the change that is taking place.

Concluding remarks

The case of GAS shows that consumers can play a transformative role. Their action creates new discourses, narratives, relational and material infrastructures for consumption, and it reframes consumption patterns, giving new meanings and contents to goods and services. The individual use of freedom of choice can be a first step in a

Table 5: *Changes in farming related to gruppi di acquisto solidale operations*

Consumer	Producer	
	Old operation	New operation
Demand for organic	Conventional farming	Organic farming
Turn to seasonality	Specialisation	Diversification
Adapting to seasonal production uncertainties	Producing various vegetables all year round	
Adapting to buying weekly, prepaid boxes	Adopting box schemes	Synchronising harvesting, packing, delivering
Need for trust	Building trust	Organisation coherent with the direct relationship with reflexive consumers Developing communication skills and multiplying occasions to communicate
	Separate management of orders, production, delivery	
	Organisation suitable for other commercial relationships	
	Being opaque to consumers	

process that ends up in collective action supporting the restructuring of daily patterns and technologies of consumption and distribution. In this process, GAS co-produce food systems of provision with producers.

The success of the initiatives can influence the way conventional players behave. Enterprises adopting corporate social responsibility rules may be pressed to adapt their internal rules and their mission, and public authorities, pressed by growing criticism of the dominant system and by claims coming from alternative groups, may be induced to adapt rules and procedures. More generally, a new attitude towards sustainable consumption and of the whole production-consumption system may spread through civic society.

Whether this action can be absorbed into the system or not depends not only on the reflexivity of the regime but also on the capacity of alternative networks to adopt an evolutionary approach, which looks at a consolidation of new patterns and at the same time at ways to further innovation by expanding activities to other fields and to more advanced objectives. We have shown that a consumers' network starting from food can easily move to other consumption goods, and that organisational innovation can turn into institutionalisation, which is a milestone to articulating new networks.

In addition, the growth of these alternative production-consumption networks can provide the necessary diversity to a system basically shaped according to a unique dominant model, allowing the development of that plurality of organisational forms that is more suitable to the needs of society and of the environment.

Whatever the potential of these experiences, this study also offers some hints for public policies for sustainable consumption. If innovation is the key to sustainable consumption, innovation policies should be adapted to this goal. At the moment, innovation policies are mainly addressed at enterprises and are often linked to conventional models of the creation and spreading of innovation. In a new framework, targeting consumers' networks can add new drivers and processes for innovation. This, in its turn, extends the range of possible instruments of support, including the field of education, in order to favour (through integrating peer-to-peer learning mechanisms) the growth of awareness and knowledge, as well as the creation of equitable governance systems that can guarantee the representation of different approaches and interests. And clearly this also stimulates academic and corporate research into new and sustainable directions.

Notes

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¹ The article draws on the findings of the research activity conducted as part of the EU project 'Strengthening innovation processes for growth and development (IN-SIGHT) – FP6-2005-SSP-5A', <http://www.insightproject.net>.

² See for example, Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007). This is also the critique Goodman and DuPuis (2002) make of Buttel (2000).

³ Defenders respond to this critique by showing the complexity of the politics activated by Slow Food movement in its capacity to evolve by setting new and more radical goals (Brunori 2007).

⁴ The first Gruppo di Acquisto Solidale was created in northern Italy in 1994. In October 2009 one of the two national websites of GAS, <http://www.retegas.org>, provided a database of 399

GAS and 10 provincial or regional networks. However, because of the informal character of these groups, which do not always make themselves visible by registering in the national organisations, their number is likely to be higher. A precise quantification is made more difficult by the high rate of growth of the number of the groups.

- ⁵ This shows that GAS create a common platform for organisations operating in different contexts or even belonging to different political fields.
- ⁶ Tuscany is interested in the considerable growth of the number of GAS, but, at a national level, it is hard to exactly quantify it. There were about 130 groups directly contacted by the Regional Agency for Development and Innovation in Agriculture during 2008–2009, but their number is likely to be higher because of their local dimension (and consequently are not for external agents to spot) and their continuous re-organisation (growth and splitting). The provinces of Pisa and Florence are experiencing a greater development of these initiatives.
- ⁷ The list is open, as it is sufficient to make an automatic subscription to participate.
- ⁸ See also Allen and Kovach (2000). Fundamental change, therefore, is not likely to occur through the market alone. There are ways, however, that the organics market could contribute to a broader movement leading to collective action. For instance, the organic market tends to undermine commodity fetishism in the agri-food system, thereby strengthening civil society. In addition, the market provides space and resources for social movement activity, such as in the struggle over the National Organic Standards.
- ⁹ Amendment to art. ART. 5 D.D.L. Legge Finanziaria 2008.
- ¹⁰ During the last 2 years GAS were object of several TV and radio broadcasts, as well as being the centre of attention of many magazine and newspapers articles.

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