

## Drivers of transformation in the agro-food system. GAS as co-production of Alternative Food Networks.

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**Abstract:** *The growth of localized, sustainable food systems, founded on grassroots initiatives aimed at re-connecting production and consumption, is widely recognized as a significant process of innovation of the mainstream agro-food system. The authors of the paper read this process through the lens of transition theories and consider alternative agro-food networks using the concept of 'niches'. Niches develop around new techno-economic paradigms, creating alternative patterns of food production, distribution and consumption. Particular attention is paid on the experience of Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchase Groups), which the authors consider to be relational contexts where producers and consumers co-produce "novelties", potentially developing into niches. Within these relational spaces, the process of alternative socio-technical system construction comes about through adjustments of cognitive frames, organisational patterns, material infrastructures and routines, into both the producers' and the consumers' world. These adjustments are an outcome of the communication flow that develops between producer and consumer groups and of the interactions within hybrid networks to which both of them belong. The process of scaling up of this provisioning system adds significant implications to this process, particularly in the perspective of the dialectic relation between this potential niche and the regime. The paper analyses the factors conditioning the development of this experience of innovation and identifies the conditions that are necessary for the maintenance of its transformative role. Particular importance is attributed to social learning mechanisms, experimentation of innovative organizational solutions, availability of appropriate support tools and governance system.*

**Keywords:** *Alternative Food Networks, Solidarity Purchase Groups, co-produced transition*

*"Food eats us as it eats Earth, its resources, its possibility to renew itself. [...] In the world of industrial-global food this ideology [consumerism] is at its peak: we are consumer products [...] used without ever reaching a real well-being. Food eats us, we become the direct object of the sentence, we lose any chance to be active." (Petrini, 2009)*

### Analysing transition pathways in production and consumption

The need of a transition to more sustainable agro-food systems, which would solve the failures of current dominant system, is widely acknowledged. It is at the basis of many different grassroots initiatives, theoretical debate and policy. In this context, the re-embeddedness of food production and purchase into social, cultural and political dimensions has taken different forms, in relation to the different technical-organisational adjustments created within new networks which are built around new meanings attached to food. This process has been analysed by emphasizing different aspects and potentials and has been critically assessed in its "alternativeness" (Watts et al., 2005; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Holloway et al., 2007a and 2007b; Goodman and Goodman, 2007a and 2007b). It has given rise to a huge scientific literature and revitalized the cultural debate (Petrini, 2005 and 2009; Pérez-Vitoria, 2007; Shiva, 2009). It has everywhere attracted the attention of policy-makers, who are increasingly aware of its innovative potential and strongly involved in conditioning its further development.

One of the aspect, in this extraordinary richness of experiences and analyses, that we think is worthy of further exploration is the transformative role of alternative food networks (AFNs), that is their ability to develop innovation pathways. The growth of AFNs can provide the necessary diversity allowing the development of that plurality of organisational forms that is more suitable to the rising

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needs of society and in a context of strong environmental changes. At the same time it can stimulate broader and permanent changes in the current system.

The encounter of AFNs literature with transition theories (Wiskerke and Ploeg, 2004; Seyfang and Smith, 2006) has provided an useful conceptual framework and analytical tools to better explain the contribution of AFNs to broader changes.

Transition theories (Geels, 2004; Smith 2003 and 2006) suggest that: a) economic activity is embedded into relatively steady socio-technical systems, governed by coherent systems of rules and norms called *regimes*; b) most innovations, generated within regimes, contribute to the stability of existing socio-technical systems; c) when problems put existing socio-technical systems into crisis, existing paths of innovation are not able to give appropriate solutions, and a need for path-breaking innovation emerges; d) new paths of innovations are more likely to emerge when “*niches*” - socio-technical systems which experiment radically different cognitive frames, resource base, relational patterns - have already developed; e) when the conditions of the context change, the innovation paths initiated by niches contribute to a change of the dominant socio-technical system through integration or even replacement. Niches size is little enough to guarantee them a protected space of operations, but despite their modest impact in terms of volume, they may be extremely effective, as they suggest different ways of looking at things, different innovation pathways and different rules and norms.

According to the transition theory, niches create the necessary diversity in the system and provide possible solutions to crisis in political, economic, environmental contexts. Nurturing niches can be a powerful policy to strengthen processes of societal change “from below”.

The concept of “niches” is suitable to understand the development of AFNs and their “transformative role”. The carrying out of alternative provision-consumption practices entails deep cultural, social, organisational and technological changes. It indeed looks as a *radical innovation* process, involving deep changes into knowledge and values systems, techniques and infrastructures, rules, codes, organisational patterns. A process that firstly entails, within specific actor-networks, the socialization of new meanings attached to food and, then, the removal of social and material constraints (of knowledge, technical, regulatory, organisational, social nature). So doing, it moves towards a real re-configuration of the dominant socio-technical system.

At the same time, the creation of concrete alternatives to the conventional ways of producing, selling and consuming generates tensions with the context where they operate, and trigger off processes of change at higher level. For example, they express demand for new technological solutions, that may stimulate innovative research programs; they push to adapt existing regulations to their characteristics; they challenge dominant values and behavioural norms. In other words, AFNs look like drivers for system innovation. They provide the necessary diversity for the system to adapt to a changing context.

The interrelations between niches and regime represent a crucial issue in transition theories. Some of the most significant research problems consider to what extent niches may have a relevant impact on regime change, how this can happen and how to manage regime transition (Shove, 2003 and 2007). Empirical evidence shows that quantitative growth of AFNs is not necessarily an indicator of success, as scaling up may end up in deviations from innovative trajectories and absorption into existing regimes. Indeed, there is a continuous tension and dialectic between alternative and conventional networks (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Goodman and Goodman, 2007).

The debate on “conventionalisation” has explored the problem with reference to organic farming and fair-trade (Guthman, 1998, 2002 and 2004; Lockie et al., 2000; Renard, 2005; Seyfang, 2006b; Reynolds and Wilkinson, 2007; Jaffee, 2007; Goodman and Goodman, 2007a). Other studies have pointed up the processes of “appropriation” of values and meanings in relation to other kinds of quality products (Allen et al., 2003; Kirwan, 2004); focusing on the appropriation of the meanings related to the “local” attribute, an intense debate has grown on the strategies of co-optation carried out by corporate agri-business companies (Novak, 2008; Mitchell, 2009). All of these experiences has stimulated a fruitful debate on the trade-offs between growth, integration with the existing food

regimes and coherence to constitutive values (Goodman and Goodman, 2007a; Jaffee and Howard, 2009).

However, the strategies that may sustain successful transition pathways along with their growth have been addressed only superficially. Co-optation of alternative food practices into conventional ones may help the dominant regime to adapt to change. But adaptation is not able to deal with the regime crisis in an appropriate way and new niches may emerge with a renewed radicality. This is the case of post-organic movements (Guthman, 2003 and 2004; Moore, 2004 and 2006; Goodman and Goodman, 2007a), which include CSAs (Cone and Myre, 2000), AMAPS (Lamine, 2005) and Farmers' Markets (Kirwan, 2004; Govindasamy, 2000). These movements build upon points of weakness of conventionalised AFNs, drawing on a strong political commitment to articulate technical norms, commercial patterns and organizational rules in innovative ways.

Another issue represents a gap in transition theories: as they consider niches the starting point of innovative pathways, what happens before the niche consolidation remains unexplored. Niches are the outcome of a "closure" of actor-networks, occurring when they act as organized wholes according to unproblematic routines. Yet, before this closure, there are intense processes of negotiation and adjustments, aimed at giving stability and organization to new ways of thinking and doing. Ploeg and others have described these processes as "*novelties*" (Ploeg et al., in Wiskerke and Ploeg, 2004). In a recent paper (Brunori et al., 2009), by drawing on this new reading of transition management theories, we built a framework to analyse innovation in agriculture and in the food systems; it follows in particular the processes from the emergence of novelties to the niche consolidation.

The paper draws on the Italian case of GAS, collective forms of direct provision promoted and self-organized by groups of consumers. Pushed by the need for quality food but also by a deep sense of dissatisfaction and distrust of the conventional production-distribution system, GAS have given rise to innovative provision systems. Creating partnership with farmers, bypassing middlemen, employing voluntary work, creating alternative logistics based on private/social tools and spaces, avoiding unnecessary operations and materials (such as classification, packaging and preservation), substituting official certification with other forms of control and guarantee, these systems facilitate access to good food and create win-win situation for farmers and consumers (Brunori et al., 2007a). In the context of post-organic movements they express the willingness to reshape purchasing-consumption practices by entirely re-building the production-distribution-consumption system, expressly founding it on shared principles of solidarity, sustainability and equity (Saroldi, 2001, 2003 and 2005; Valera, 2005; Brunori et al., 2007a; Carbone et al., 2007). So doing, working to build alternative narratives for food production and consumption, GAS try to deal with the weaknesses of the previous experiences of alternative food chains like in the case of some organic or fair trade initiatives, that have progressively broken the balance between commercial goals and original principles along with their growth and incorporation into conventional chains.

From the transition theories perspective, GAS are relational contexts where producers and consumers, through "social learning" processes, co-produce "*novelties*", potentially developing into niches (Ploeg et al., in Wiskerke and Ploeg, 2004; Brunori et al., 2007a). Within these relational spaces, the processes of alternative socio-technical system construction comes about through adjustments of cognitive frames, organisational patterns, material infrastructures and routines, into both the producers' and the consumers' world. These adjustments are an outcome of communication flow that develops between producers and consumers' groups and of the interactions within hybrid networks to which both of them belong. All these processes can be read as innovation pathways that rise through progressive overcoming of "nodes" in order to find solutions to solve the problems or take the opportunities as they occur (Brunori et al., 2009; Wilson, 2008). Constraints not only belong to farmers' and consumers' world, but also to the other spheres of the regime (e.g. hygienic or fiscal regulations, consumption norms, techno-scientific approaches).

Most recently, the intense growth of this provisioning system has added significant implications to this process, particularly in the perspective of the dialectic relation between this potential niche and the regime. If, on one side, it is clear the effect of the new practices on the general discourse about

food, on the other side, there are many forces that are conditioning the further development of this reality, and can weaken its transformative role.

Using this approach we will read about the experience of GAS in Italy in the following pages. This analyses draws on the findings of the research activity that we have conducted within the European IN-SIGHT project<sup>1</sup> (Brunori et al., 2007a) and within a regional project that has been monitoring this reality since 2006<sup>2</sup>.

## **Analysing food systems transition: the case of GAS in Italy**

### **Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale**

GAS are groups of consumers' who collectively manage direct purchasing (of food and non food products, sometimes of services). Their size can range from some dozens to more than a hundred members. Each Group is autonomous in selecting farmers, on the basis of their adherence to sustainable consumption and production principles, and in organizing ordering and distribution.

Farmers, in most of cases organic farmers, are directly contacted by people acting as coordinators for single products and organize distribution according to the characteristics of the products: weekly deliveries for vegetables, fruit, bread, eggs; periodical orders for meat, cheese, wine, pasta and cereals, sauces, other fruits (e.g. citrus fruits); seasonal orders for olive oil, other fruit. Distribution is usually placed in structures made available by social and political organisations (e.g. social centres, clubs, churches).

Communication within the networks is based on monthly meetings, on Internet websites and on mailing lists. Generally, it is mailing lists that allow the circulation of organizational information as well as an intense exchange of opinions about various issues, spanning from sustainable consumption and production to broader political issues. These practices of communication allow the process of definition of common rules, building common infrastructures, organization of initiatives and the interaction with the outside.

In some cases, particularly in the big urban centres where there are many Groups, there is an inter-group co-ordination for the management of more complex orders (e.g. for non local products). At the local level, there are often other forms of interaction, such as the GAS inter-provincial meetings, which are important occasions of communication on specific issues or initiatives. Moreover, the Groups have relationships with other local networks such as farmers' markets, small farmers' associations, fair trade organizations and social movements, with which they make joint initiatives.

The GAS movement has also higher levels of coordination, at regional and national levels, where it assumes a more political character. This is strongly based on communication via Internet, together with periodical meetings.

Some GAS have formalised their organisation into associations, but in most cases they are very informal groups. This makes the quantification of the size of this reality quite difficult. On the website created by the national network of coordination ([www.retegas.org](http://www.retegas.org)) there were, at the end of 2009, 550 Groups registered, but their number is likely much higher. Only in Tuscany (one of the 20 Italian regions, characterised by 6% of population and 7% of surface) there are more than 110 groups, a number that also in this case underestimates the dimension of the phenomenon (Rossi et al., 2009). In addition to the high rate of numerical growth (the first GAS was formed in 1994), there is also a tendency to increase the size of the single groups. Although over a certain size independent spin-offs are created to keep the management easier, they grow very fast.

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<sup>1</sup> EU project *Strengthening Innovation Processes for Growth and Development (IN-SIGHT)* - FP6-2005-SSP-5A, <http://www.insightproject.net>.

<sup>2</sup> Regional project aimed at monitoring the experiences of short chains in Tuscany - Funded by ARSIA-Regione Toscana, <http://filiacorta.arsia.toscana.it>. About the reports and publications derived from that research activity, see: Brunori et al., 2006; Brunori et al., 2007b; Brunori et al., 2007c; Brunori et al., 2008.

The great development of this particular kind of direct provision is representing a very interesting opportunity for many farmers, particularly for those who are more disadvantaged in the conventional commercial relationships (small size farms, organic farms) or, more in general, oriented to find new ways of valorising their produce. This opportunity has not been able, yet, to stimulate an adequate growth of the number of farmers involved in direct selling and able or willing to co-operate with GAS. The result is that the demand is at the moment much higher than supply and, at local level, this creates many problems for both old and new Groups.

A first step in the comprehension of this reality and of its dynamics is analysing the deep changes that this re-organization of farm activity and purchase-consumption habits entails.

### **Building a new production-consumption system**

#### *Changing producing and consuming...*

The adhesion to this particular kind of direct relationship between production and consumption is a complex process for both parts. It entails significant changes in cognitive frames, cultural models and practical and organisational assets. Through these changes production and distribution systems and consumption practices together with consumers' lifeworld are deeply reshaped.

With the adhesion to GAS, consumers change their attitude and adapt their purchasing and consumption routines; this with regard to their approach to food (seasonality, diversity, greater perishability, different characteristics in comparison with ready-to use products), and the related organization of space-time habits (for food provisioning, storing, preparation). As in other AFNs, in this process of adaptation they change their attitude towards food and try to solve not insignificant dilemmas: e.g. price vs. quality, convenience vs. health, freedom of choice vs. ethics, taste for artificial additives vs. taste for natural goods. To face that, they have to adhere to different values basis (Lockie et al., 2002; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Allen et al., 2003; Spaargaren, 2003; Shove, 2003; Seyfang, 2006a; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006; Kerton and Sinclair, 2009), as well as they need new knowledge and skills (Jaffe and Gertler, 2006; Little et al., 2009; Kerton and Sinclair, 2009), and sometimes new material assets.

Dealing with direct provision consumers often need to recover skills and knowledge that have been lost along with the change of purchasing and eating habits. For example, knowing seasonality and variety of vegetables (there are a lot of species unknown to citizens), learning how to cook them (to make them edible and more tasty, but also less monotonous) and how to preserve them (vegetables and milk are "naturally" perishable, while bread lasts longer). Also getting used to different organoleptic and esthetical characteristics (meat can seem less tender and less red and fruits sometimes look smaller and imperfect). This new approach towards quality of food includes also a new awareness (and acceptance) of its monetary value.

Moreover, consumers need to accept to use their time for food provision and preparation, as well as the management of orders (which, in its turn, requires many knowledge of computer technology). In addition, at least theoretically, it is necessary to participate in the Group functioning (turns in managing the relations with farmers, meetings, communication via e-mails with the other members, etc.); also this requires time and communication abilities. In short, consumers involved in these processes are encouraged to re-define their conception of food, (re-)learn the way to handle it, re-position it in their scale of priorities and, in some cases to get motivated to adjust their lifestyles.

As each GAS consumer is also involved into personal networks, he/she needs to adapt new ways of thinking and doing with other people and overcoming some material barriers. For example, a reorganization of the family around the new consumption habits it becomes necessary, such as a definition-negotiation of priorities and redistribution of the work, sometimes with gender implications. All these adjustments at individual-domestic level create a "space of learning". Yet, GAS consumers live this experience collectively. The more consumers are connected to each other, the more learning become "social learning", in the sense that innovation is shared and become part of a common frame. This facilitates and reinforces the individual paths.

In order to cope with GAS needs and organisation, also farmers face significant adjustments. They need to adapt:

- crop planning, moving from specialization to diversification, especially when they deal individually with purchasing groups,
- methods of production, through a (not easy) conversion from conventional to organic farming (that represents a fundamental condition at least for the GAS movement in its original configuration),
- the approach and solutions for risk management, within a new partnership with their “customers” (Lamine, 2005),
- the internal organization (frequency of harvesting, orders administration, box making, box delivering, keeping the farm open),
- the equipment (appropriate transportation tools, farm infrastructures),
- the human resources, in order to manage the greater need of work in the fields, but also for all the other new activities,
- the relations with the other farmers involved in direct marketing, in order to find some forms of co-operation,
- the communication practices towards the outside, through a development of relational abilities.

Also for farmers, a different attitude and new knowledge and skills are needed. Farmers have often to change their entrepreneurship model, and develop awareness of the opportunities linked to a partnership with reflexive consumers, opportunities that goes beyond economic advantage. And, except for the “neo peasants” (Willis and Campbell, 2004), this process of awareness raising should not be taken for granted. In the same way, also the technical difficulties should not be underestimated; in many cases, farmers need to recover the knowledge get lost in the process of modernization of agriculture.

In the case of the conversion to organic farming this process becomes even more complicated, exemplifying an interesting reworking of ecological, economic and social relations. It entails a cognitive reframe and a relational restructuring, because of the different approaches, techniques and relationships needed. Because farmers depend on direct marketing, they must adapt to the specific needs and requirements of their consumers. Accordingly, these farms tend to have complicated crops rotation, integrated livestock, and tremendous variety. At the same time, they depend on new essential knowledge and abilities, such as relational and organisational abilities (supported also by the use of computer technologies) to deal with the consumers. As we have seen, this is a complex process of re-organization which opens up a new economic space; at the same time, within a relationship of social equality and not exclusively commercial exchange, it offers farmers new spaces of freedom and opportunities for affirmation and development.

We have analysed in greater detail these processes in other works, focusing both on processes of farming system adjustment and on changes interesting attitude and behaviour of consumers’ involved in GAS. We refer to those works for a deeper analysis<sup>3</sup>.

However, participating to GAS is not limited to a relation between two actors. Indeed, as in other AFNs, it is open to the interaction with wider networks, of which producers and consumers’ groups are part (Holloway et Kneafsey, 2000; Maye and Kirwan, 2009). The on-going experiences show that there are interactions with local farmers’ markets, with associations of small farmers, but also with other actors locally involved in building alternative food systems or, more generally, interested in

<sup>3</sup> As far as papers in English language are concerned, see:

Brunori, G., Rossi, A. and F. Guidi On the new social relations around and beyond food. Analysing consumers’ role and action, (forthcoming);

Brunori, G., Rossi, A. and V. Malandrin Co-producing transition: Innovation processes in farms adhering to Solidarity Purchase Groups (SGPs) in Tuscany, Italy. (forthcoming)

Brunori, G., Rossi, A. and F. Guidi (2007) *In-depth review on alternative food marketing strategies. Case study: Solidarity-Based Purchasing Groups*, National report in IN-SIGHT EU Project FP6, WP3 - In-depth review of innovation systems and processes / practical experiences in the field of agriculture and agricultural marketing., <http://www.insightproject.net>.

sustainable production-consumption or territorial development patterns (local administrations, technicians, NGOs, political groups).

*...through translation processes*

All these interactions constitute social structures where communication, negotiation and learning processes on different perceptions and concerns take place (Brunori et al., 2007a; Kerton and Sinclair, 2009) and where, so, new cognitive, normative and regulative institutions are developed. It is within this relational context that the changes needed to put in practice the new production-consumption model come about: from the definition of shared visions and principles at the basis of the alternative choices, to all the other material and immaterial assets needed to the re-organization of the provision-consumption system<sup>4</sup>.

Within these networks, the processes of building collective identity and of sharing common set of meanings attached to food production-consumption underpin the consumers' and producers' turn towards new responsible practices. Through interaction reflexive consumers discuss their way of purchasing and consuming, thus gaining awareness, building a new common cognitive framework and getting stimulus to behave coherently; these processes are common to other experiences in which consumers take part in collective projects of reframing of consumption patterns (Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Johnston and Baker, 2005; Seyfang, 2006a; Seyfang and Smith, 2006; Briceno and Stagl, 2006; Kerton and Sinclair, 2009). Farmers discuss their status, their way of producing and the expectations in the direct relationship with consumers (Lamine, 2005; Chiffolleau, 2009). So doing, they consolidate their new identity, develop determination in pursuing an alternative model of managing their activity, grow in awareness of their different positioning on society and develop the narrative through which they convey all that.

Together with the building of a new identity and of a new approach towards production and consumption, within these relational space other social learning processes come about. Through them new systems of knowledge and skills, which are strongly based on peer-to-peer mechanisms and on sharing of expertise, rules and organizational patterns are developed. They affect the production processes and hence the "quality" of products (with regard to a different codification of quality), as well as the practices involved in food distribution and consumption. Through them, in other words, appropriated solutions to the specific needs of this new production-consumption system are found. This is the meaning of the term "co-production", which is the key word so often used in the new shared narrative.

As a result of wider translation processes, open to the other actors involved, other significant steps are taken: legitimisation and acknowledgement is achieved, new experiences of integration are conceived and designed and consequently new opportunities for farmers are created. Also, a different discourse around food, which incorporates the equity issues, the relations between countryside and town, the multi-functionality of agriculture, the new needs of the local community and the related demand for new politics arises.,

Empirical evidence shows how the growth of GAS experience can work at local level as a revitalising factor within local communities. These new organizational patterns built around food are indeed catalysts of new forms of interrelation in different contexts (as other studies have shown, food looks as a gateway for other changes in attitude and practices). From the field of "food-citizenship" these patterns in fact extend up to other forms of reflexive consumption, all founded on alternative values with respect to merely economic values (solidarity, sobriety, equity, sustainability, etc.), creating synergies with other forms of mobilization on the territory (Saroldi, 2003 and 2005; Biolghini, 2007). The development of local collective projects aimed at establishing "solidarity economy networks" (local experiences of fair economy), a growing phenomenon in Italy, often represents an evolution of GAS initiative. In broader terms, this experience helps a collective process of awareness and

<sup>4</sup> The analysis of these aspects is greatly represented in the literature; see, among the others, Ilbery and Kneafsey, 1998 and 2000; Holloway and Kneafsey, 2000; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Hinrichs et al., 2004; Seyfang and Smith, 2006; Maye and Kirwan, 2009.

knowledge raising and then the development of a new discourse and the demand for new politics about (food) consumption and development patterns (Laville, 1998; Bonaiuti, 2004; Pallante, 2005; Petrini, 2005). It is meaningful to this regard the recent call by Carlo Petrini of Slow Food (Petrini, 2009) “to not allow food to eat us”, by seeking an alternative to the dominant system and pointing up the role of “food communities”, built as active partnerships between reflexive actors.

### Between radical search of different ways and processes of normalisation

#### *An alternative way of producing and consuming ....*

We have said above how GAS experience looks as a further effort to restructure production-consumption system in an innovative way, overcoming the weak points of other “alternative” experiences, which went through processes of conventionalisation or appropriation.

In this perspective, GAS pursue their strategy (narrowly linked to a rising political commitment) in a more coherent way, rebuilding radically all the elements that affect the food provision, from the cognitive framework to the systems of values, from the organisational patterns to material assets (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Differences between conventional and GAS system of provision.

	<b>Conventional</b>	<b>GAS</b>
Outlet	Supermarkets	Community distribution points
Delivery to distribution points	Specialised companies	Farmers
Organization of orders	Retail companies	Consumers / farmers
Origin of product	Delocalized	Localized
Technique of production	Various	Organic
Price	Large range, from discount to premium	“fair price” (based on costs of production, with reference to principles of environmental and social sustainability) negotiated between farmers and consumers
Quality standards	Eurep GAP, private schemes	Negotiation between farmers and consumers
Communication about origin, quality	Label	Direct interaction farmers / consumers
Approach to consumption	Producers must adapt their organization to consumers’ demand	Producers and consumers should adapt reciprocally taking account of natural and social constraints
Approach to consumer satisfaction	Value for money	Looking to different meaning for satisfaction

Within this system an organic vegetable is supposed to be fresh, seasonal, locally produced, free from useless packaging, guaranteed through the farmer’s reputation (built by means of a closer acquaintance and social control), paid a fair price to the producer and consumed with awareness and ability. This represents a way of commercialising-purchasing organic food very different from the one taking place in supermarkets, where the respect of principles of sustainability, in its social, economic and environmental dimensions, is strained and little is built in the relationship with costumers, starting from the knowledge (a label, bearing the organic certification and the indication of the provenance, is not enough to that end). In other words, in conventional marketing channels, consumers are not helped to know more about the food they purchase and the world behind it and, even if already aware, they can have some difficulties to behave coherently (Conner, 2004; Smith, 2006; Seyfang, 2006b and 2006c).



The fact that there has been an overuse of the term “alternative” (Holloway et al., 2007a and 2007b; Goodman and Goodman, 2007b) does not mean that a real search of different ways does not exist. It is coherence that makes a difference.

Indeed, in a context of increasing awareness and criticism towards un-sustainability of current agri-food system and of development of a new discourse about quality of food and food production system, this concrete implementation of an alternative approach in food production and consumption marks a turning point. It is no more only the expression of reflexive choices of producers and consumers within a given supply of partial options (Shove, 2005), often grounded on a trade-off between different principles, such as the willingness to save the environment, the cultural heritage, localised (far or close) economies, the health). It represents an effort to concretely build “another” system, in which a shared, coherent set of meanings, principles and goals, defined within new structures of communication, is translated into new social practices, made feasible by a series of material and immaterial adjustments (codes, rules, technological and organisational arrangements, artefacts)<sup>5</sup>. By using other words, the experience of the GAS is the result of a process of direct social shaping based on mobilization of a different way of conceiving food production and consumption and of a willingness to play an active role and recover decision power about food practices (McMeekin and Southerton, 2007). A process that involves individual lives making changes affordable through a collective dimension; a process through which radical changes enter gradually in domestic routines, substituting the conventional habits along with the process of awareness raising and overcoming of difficulties<sup>6</sup>.

*... being challenged by processes of normalization*

The stronger claim of alternativeness however does not save this experience from pressures towards normalisation, whether they come from strategic counter-movements of conventional system or from internal weak points (the border between the two factors being very thin). This dilemma appears again and again: when alternative networks start to work, they face barriers to growth which impose the adoption of more conventional approaches to business: this is not a bad per se, but it is also clear that in this process they deviate from their innovation path and converge with conventional ones.

The further growth and the consolidation of this novelty is linked to the capacity of the involved actors to align in the process of construction of new socio-technical systems, to overcome material and immaterial difficulties, and thus build that coherence that makes the new system sound. We have mentioned the various aspects that intervene in this process for each of the main actors. Yet, as we said above, this process is also affected by the continuous tension between the willingness to maintain the coherence with principles of the origins and the need to survive on the market.

The development of GAS experience in Italy seems now to be going through this dialectic phase. Let's analyse some of the empirical evidences of that.

For a long time GAS have remained almost “invisible” to the public opinion. Their birth goes to the beginnings of 1990s, when this initiative promoted by consumers was recognised within the world of alternative movements as an expression of civic resistance to globalised, industrial food system. After a fifteen-year period of silent spread and growth, into a private, self-organized and fully informal dimension, in the most recent years the phenomenon has gained visibility and has attracted much attention. In a short time, this special adjustment of direct marketing has become an arena of increasing interests, even more than other close successful experiences of “short chain”, such as farmers' markets. This likely happened because of their greater potential to deeply change the approach towards consumption, allowing both a wide substitution of (food and not food) provision system and the translation of a political attitude into practices.

<sup>5</sup> A process that is not far from that of other experiences of grassroots greening (Shove, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The change is radical, because of the deep changes in the socio-technical system, but, into an evolution perspective, its translation into individual practices can be partial, so allowing “hybrid behaviors” (people can continue to go to supermarkets for some goods). Anyway, as empirical evidences show, also in this case the change of attitude has already started and, to some extent, is lasting (people behave differently into supermarkets).

The emphasis media are giving in Italy to these direct systems of food provision, as a possible alternative to face the uncertainty created by food scandals and the more and more known inequity of big chains, is a clear sign of the change that is taking place. It is emblematic the impact of a special report within a well-known TV broadcast (Report, Rai3, June 2006; [www.report.rai.it](http://www.report.rai.it)) focused on the rising experience of GAS and on the related “background” (critical conditions of farmers in the conventional chains, environmental impacts of industrialised agriculture and of distribution system, impoverishment of food nutritional quality, new consumers' demands, etc.). In the following days the number of the requests for joining a GAS was enormous, with thousands of people calling directly the television. Equally significant are other forms of promotion given to these initiatives by local and national press (including important newspapers traditionally focusing on economics), magazines, national radio and other TV broadcasts. This promotion has doubtless favoured the diffusion of information outside the “alternative arena” of committed citizens-consumers or activists, arousing the interest of a large number of people.

The interest demonstrated by public institutions has contributed to accelerate this process of increase of visibility and appeal. To that regard, an important factor was, in 2008, the approval in the Parliament of a law amendment that acknowledged GAS as possible no-profit associations, in practice protecting them from accusation of tax evasion. This acknowledgement is not always appreciated by the Groups, afraid of losing their autonomy (because of the necessary constitution as formal associations); anyway, it represents an advantage in the interaction with public institutions (thanks to the possibility to participate in projects and make contracts) and in terms of greater visibility. And this is particularly important at local level, where administrations and other institutions are starting to consider GAS as an important social actor to deal with. After the Ministerial initiative, some Regional Governments have legislated in favour of GAS, confirming their interest in them, and the same are doing some Municipal administrations.

As an effect of this process of legitimization and increase of visibility, new favourable conditions for the growth of this provisioning system have established and new spaces for a more political role have arisen.

On the other side, it is starting to look evident that this strong interest and involvement are “simplifying” the operational meaning of this experience, with the possible consequence of hollowing it out of coherence. Indeed, if these initiatives originally responded to principles of sustainability, social justice and solidarity in the re-organisation of provisioning system, in the new narrative that is spreading they now are often described as comfortable and economical ways to purchase “good food”. Sometimes the meaning of this “good quality” is reduced to freshness and, sometimes, to a limited conception of sustainability in terms of food miles. Socialization of alternative conceptions and practices, consequent full and direct engagement into a collective project (the GAS and the partnership with the farmers), acceptance of a fair higher price, a rigorous idea of sustainable farming and distribution, the search for a different way to be happy with food... all these things progressively take second place if are not quite forgotten within this new rhetoric of “short chain”.

A significant contribution to this simplified representation of the new partnership between producers and consumers is also made by mainstream Farmers' Unions. During the last years they have produced an intense communication activity on the benefits of food re-localisation and production-consumption re-connection and have promoted concrete initiatives as public events, farmers' markets, services on web-sites, etc.. The effect of such initiatives on GAS experience comes from the power of their representation on the public opinion and on farmers. In the first case, it has heavily affected the perception of food quality and food system quality as well as the related narrative (they introduced the successful term “zero kilometre”, the Italian version of “food mile”, so focusing the attention on geographic re-localization). Moreover, they have emphasized very much the need to assure an economic saving to consumers (by assuming as reference price, to be further reduced, prices of supermarket chains...), so neutralizing any chance to redefine and reposition food value. With regard to farmers, this representation has contributed to change the attitude and the organisational approach towards this “opportunity” they have been given. Indeed, the increasing demand expressed by GAS represents an attractive new outlet, for single farmers but even more for

co-operatives (in both of the cases mostly conventional). This is not negative in itself, but certainly it looks a very reductive interpretation of this “opportunity”.

Within this context of potential re-orientation of farming activity to respond to the new demand expressed by consumers, other significant initiatives take place. There is for instance the growth of brokering services between farmers (eventually collectively organised) and GAS. While these services fill a gap in the new provision system, they contribute to increase the distance producers and consumers, not only in terms of prices, but also in terms of the quality of the relationships, that inevitably suffer from absence of direct contact.

We said above how some signs of change are already apparent also at consumers’ level. Along with the development of this new representation of the direct relationship between production and consumption, some consumers’ groups have started to assume other features and other names, such as those of GA (that is Purchase Groups... without Solidarity) or GAC (Collective Purchase Groups) or GAP (Popular Purchase Groups), wherein low price gains an increasing importance. This process has stimulating an intense debate within the national and regional networks of GAS movement, which is reading it as a potential weakening process with regard to the achievement of its original goals<sup>7</sup>.

Together with this reordering of priorities around prices, another possible direction of this process of drifting is represented by the temptation of GAS consumers to return to past routines. While they demand seasonal and organic, more and more they also demand variety and continuity in time, which cannot be granted given the characteristics of this type of business. Getting out of habits is hard. For example, there are cases of farmers who have proposed to their GAS to participate in planning crops, in order to better organize the production. The groups have answered enthusiastically and, on the basis of all the personal requests of the members (but ordered in a very democratic way), they have prepared very long lists of crops, leaving the farmers speechless. To some extent this kind of requests is comprehensible and acceptable, and indeed it is stimulating farmers to co-operate and to look for some organizational adjustments in order to guarantee a constant and more varied supply. On the other hand, if farmers are not able to effectively communicate the problems related to natural and physical constraints, the system may undergo a deviation from the original goals.

We have already highlighted the current inadequacy of supply to satisfy the demand. There is, first of all, a limited number of “new farmers” open to this choice, mainly because of the technical-organisational difficulties to be faced in the radical re-organization of the activity. Difficulties that become even more hard to be overcome when they need to turn to organic.

Also organisational capabilities to respond to the increasing demand through local networking often lack. Sometimes this happens when farmers establish close links (and loyalty) with a group of consumers, so that outsiders may be seen as competitors (Chiffolleau, 2009).

In front of these constraints, consumers groups try to find alternative solutions and sometimes accept compromises. For example, they start to accept the idea that there should be more flexibility concerning the distance or the method of production. Some GAS have started to look for their food also in other regions, if necessary even purchasing conventional food. In this way, they re-adapt the meaning of “good food” to re-include convenience and to remove constraints to local availability. In some cases this search is still “reflexive” and managed through the farmers partners of the Groups, who add “out of standard” products to the basket as an integration in emergency situations. In other cases, this brings to the entrance of professional brokers.

Equally significant are the limitations on the production side. Even when conventional farmers decide to turn to GAS, their transition is often incomplete: organic methods are adopted without any radical change of farming systems; communication with consumers is limited to economic exchange; co-operation is managed through conventional organisational patterns that weaken the collective dimension of these initiatives.

<sup>7</sup> This was a central issue debated at the last annual meeting of the network, in June 2009 in Sicily, and is continuing to animate the internal communication.

All these are examples of the forces that are thus affecting the further development of GAS experience. They act by playing on or introducing from the beginning some “weaknesses”, and so interfere in the process of structuring of the new socio-technical system, favouring the normalisation of this innovative experience.

That is clear in what we have described: in the redefinition of value of food, through the dilution of the new meanings added (sustainability, equity of food systems); in the tendency to return to conventional purchasing habits; in the frailty of the positioning of eating in values scale and in space-time patterns; in the persistency of the logic of the prevalence of “consumption sovereignty” on any other need; in the acceptance of traditional organisational schemes to manage relations with farmers.

All this may become very far from the ideal of “co-production”, grounded on a full engagement of consumers, in material and immaterial sense, in the construction of a different food system together with farmers. On the other hand, it is to be acknowledged that solution to these problems lays not only in a tighter discipline of network members and a greater availability to ‘sacrifice’, but also in the capacity to frame differently constrains as opportunity (as in the case of bio-diversity related to seasonality) and to mobilise new knowledge, new technologies and new organizational skills.

### **Supporting transition towards sustainable food provision system**

If these are the threats and the weaknesses in the process of consolidation of this niche and in its relationship with the regime, what are the enabling factors?

How can the re-configuration of the socio-technical system challenge the regime?

We said at the beginning how this process entails the building of new values and cognitive frameworks, organisational arrangements, technical solutions, through processes of social learning that are the result of the interactions within hybrid networks, involving different actors, resources, tools. The GAS experience was born as a grassroots initiative aimed at implementing a radical change in food provisioning, and has grown through the alignment of its main actors around this shared project.

But now, as we saw, the interests have become more numerous and the approaches are often different. In this renewed relational space the process of alignment around the fine-tuning of material and immaterial assets can continue and the niche can remain faithful to its goal by enrolling actors of the dominant system, thus in some way contributing to its change. At the same time, the dialectic between the niche and the regime shows how a broader transition to a sustainable food system, that is widespread radical changes in social practices around food, demands changes at higher levels, including general food culture, knowledge and technological systems, farming patterns and agriculture support mechanisms, regulatory and institutional frameworks, land management. This is inherent in the nature of food, at the centre of intermingling terrains and scales of action, which condition both everyday life and more complex social dynamics at local and global level (Johnston and Baker, 2005).

Into this perspective, thus, the search for a sustainable food provision system that this special space of experimentation is conducting goes through other important integrated actions that see other actors involved and called to co-operate.

*Building knowledge and problem solving: integration of different systems and peer-to-peer mechanisms*

Consumers’ frailty in remaining coherent to original principles shows the importance of the processes of innovation. On one hand, new shared cognitive and value frames should be strengthened enough to face the dominant cultural models and lifestyles and consolidate alternative meanings for satisfaction and well being. With regard to food and its benefits, it is apparent the need to change their positioning in social preferences. To this end, focusing on positive features of “good food” (such as pleasure of taste, advantages of nutritional value, enrichment of knowledge and culture, new opportunities for social interaction, etc.) can make change of habits more sound and

attractive for society. Cognitive and value frames, however, cannot compete with dominant ones if they are not supported by technical and organizational innovation in this field. Innovation should be able to break the most important constraints to the development of efficient and effective systems of provision, that maintain together coherence to the principles and joy.

The role of the media, food movements, as well as that of education and training look crucial on this respect. They can foster that more generalised “cultural change” widely acknowledged as really necessary. To this regard, some organisations have in a short time contributed enormously to revitalising the culture of food and food systems, to show its broader importance, to create appropriate narratives. The example of Slow Food is the most meaningful: it has been able to reposition food as a source of pleasure and, at the same time, to show the greater implications of food practices for the quality of life on the planet, so calling for a moral commitment to changing consumption attitude.

Other actions are however needed to foster further innovation based on the principle of co-production. On this respect, research plays a central role in the processes of creation and evolution of knowledge about food and related practices. It can facilitate those cognitive changes needed to make possible both the consolidation of these innovative approaches to food provision and the permeability of the dominant regime to the lessons that come from them. But, to do that, it needs to change its logics and methods. In front of the signs of necessary change of the production-consumption patterns coming from below (other actors than powerful economic actors of mainstream system) and from the “landscape” of broader pressures (environmental problems, political tensions, economic crisis), research policies have to review their goals and methodological approaches. For that it becomes essential to ground the processes of creation/legitimation of knowledge and practices on the acknowledgment of the equal dignity of the different knowledge systems and on giving space to experimentation and to innovation from below. In other words, a process of de-institutionalisation and democratisation of research (Pimbert, 2006), founded on the abandon of “the continuing primacy of academic disciplines in designing and conducting research about food” (Hinrichs, 2008). Through an action research approach (Stringer, 1999) and within a collective and interactive process, involving different scientists as well as stakeholders and policymakers, it can so foster the creation of “learning spaces” enabling local networks built around food issues to find a common language and to interact in the process of “alignment”.

Through this different approach, it is possible to analyse the various facilitating and hampering factors at the basis of transition towards sustainable food systems, so pointing up different attitudes, potentials and weaknesses, providing input for support measures. Moreover, it is possible to define feedback mechanisms useful to assess and communicate the potential of different transition pathways (and related practices). It is important, to that regard, that research highlights the wide-ranging beneficial economic, social and environmental impacts of alternative approaches to food provision-consumption (for instance with regard strengthening of local economies and livelihoods, processes of community-building or of citizenship raising) (Seyfang, 2006b). This with the purpose of stimulating awareness of the interrelated aspects and dynamics involved in food provision systems and so to underpin the fine-tuning of adequate policy choices and governance systems.

In addition to the needs manifested by consumers, the need of appropriate mechanisms of creation of knowledge systems is apparent in the production world too. To this regard, in front of the difficulties expressed by farmers to re-orient and re-organize their activity and, even before, to adopt the right attitude towards the opportunity of re-positioning their role in society, it emerges the need of radically new approaches. As GAS experience shows, the presence of peer-to-peer mechanisms creates favourable conditions for innovation. Within their network of relations, farmers exchange information and advices, share skills and equipments, discuss about values and objectives<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, empirical evidence shows what benefits can stem from an intense interaction between

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<sup>8</sup> Chiffolleau (2009), analysing alternative food networks, defined five kinds of relations among farmers, describing their specific function.

different sources of knowledge, such as scientists, farmers, technicians, consumers (Brunori et al., 2009). Indeed, the initiatives at the moment on-going confirm that the interaction between farmers and technicians can be very fruitful when there is a common commitment to solve problems by co-producing solutions. And the advantage is even greater if this process also involves consumers. It is in this way that novelties develop into niches, that consolidate and become able to interplay with the regime.

#### *What contribution from policies?*

In addition to a new approach in building knowledge systems, other adjustments are required in order to face the deep changes needed for a broader change in social practices around food. They are related to policies for food, agriculture and rural development, territorial planning, education, training and innovation. Also in this case an integrated approach is needed, which opens to cross departmental borders.

Supporting farming systems in the process of transition, making them more able to respond to social demands and expectations, is, as we said, one of the priorities that emerge. To that regard, the case analysed shows the importance of the identification of ways to support the different processes of farming adjustment, at both individual and collective level. We have highlighted how crucial is to favour the development of awareness and new attitudes, as well as to eliminate the technical hurdles that limit the adhesion of greater segment of agriculture to this choice. On the other side, policies should pursue in a more rigorous and coherent way the goal of awarding virtuous behaviours (first of all supporting sustainable farming), through an appropriate review of the institutional and regulatory system (Conner, 2004). Obviously, this implies to deal with the issue of power relations in shaping agro-food system and food practices (Sonnino and Marsden, 2004; Jaffee and Horward, 2009).

More generally, looking at grassroots initiatives on the whole, it is evident the importance of nourishing innovative socio-technical practices by creating a favourable institutional environment able to encourage and sustain them without eroding their innovative potential. This implies the presence of a public support system open to innovative projects and so addressed to experimentations, in order to fine-tune innovative institutional arrangements (Seyfang, 2006a; Brunori et al., 2007a). The assessment of benefits that can stem from alternative practices, through an approach able to catch all the implications involved, represents the further step towards the definition of appropriate support initiatives.

Sustaining innovation processes needs policies able to adapt to the specificities. The specific features of the local relational and material contexts are indeed central in conditioning the initiatives that can develop, as other empirical evidences show (Maye and Kirwan, 2009). Through more targeted tools, public support could be able to recognize and encourage the necessary and specific pathways of change at territorial level (of which GAS and the other grassroots initiatives around food are part), so creating favourable conditions for the development of local food systems.

At the basis of the creation of the adequate conditions to valorise innovation processes and through them to promote transition is the existence of equitable governance systems. At different scales, they could be the contexts where to identify the needs for policies adjustments and to define institutional arrangements, as well as to create spaces for civic experimentation, so pushing in the direction of food democracy (Welsh and MacRae, 1998; Lang, 1999; Whatmore et al., 2003; Hassanein, 2003; Johnston and Baker, 2005; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; DuPuis and Gillon, 2009; Jaffee and Horward, 2009). In front of the current tendency to simplify the meaning of this experience, the presence of an adequate system of representation is crucial to ensure the preservation of its innovative potential. At local level, within systems open to social experimentation, GAS - as already established partnerships around alternative food conceptions and practices -, look able to assume a key role, favouring learning processes and so the development of new attitudes and approaches.

The importance of the creation of a favourable institutional framework does not mean that there are no difficulties, as empirical evidences and theoretical debate show (Shove, 2007; DuPuis and Gillon, 2009). But this, again, seems to confirm the opportunity to define a targeted research agenda.

## **Concluding remarks**

The experience of GAS represents the fine-tuning and the experimentation of an alternative food system, grounded on a radical innovation and addressed at coherently reshaping all the material and immaterial assets of production, distribution and consumption. Its role is meaningful. In a phase in which a food system basically shaped according to an unique dominant model increasingly appears un-adequate to answer the new demands expressed by the society and the new challenges emerging from environmental crises. The amazing success that this initiative is experiencing demonstrates how it meets real needs.

As we have seen, its potential transformative role is evident in the rising of a new public reflection on sustainability of food consumption and of the whole food system. As already happened for other alternative experiences, however, the process of scaling up of this provisioning system is adding significant implications to this process, particularly in the perspective of the dialectic relation between this potential niche and the regime. There are in fact many forces that are conditioning the further development of this reality, and that can weaken its innovative features. The creation of favourable conditions for the consolidation and the spread of the innovation that it embodies is then decisive.

Knowledge raising processes, reinforcement of the capacity of mobilization at grassroots level, through the interaction among the different actors involved and adoption of innovative organisational solutions are important steps in that direction. Also, increasing the capacity and possibility to interact with institutions and, then, assumption of a more political role. The further challenge is the initiation of broader changes in social attitudes and practices, by acting on cognitive and value frames and on the technical and organizational constraints, which would hamper a lasting and satisfactory transition towards alternative patterns of provision.

Research and policy have a particular responsibility in this process, because of the role they can play in supporting niche consolidation and stimulating and steering regime transition.

Research can create spaces for social learning processes, according to an approach based on the integration between different kinds of knowledge, on co-participation in problem solving and on the assessment of the effectiveness of innovation pathways. Policies system, through a necessary multi-scaled, integrated and long-term approach, can translate the lessons learnt from this space of experimentation in an adaptation of the institutional-regulatory framework and in the definition of appropriate support tools, as well as in adjustments to policies in order to foster the broader changes needed.

Looking at this, it emerges the importance of the definition of a specific policy and research agenda, in a perspective aimed at seeking to bridge division still existing between theory on sustainable production-consumption models and social practices. That is, in other words, a perspective open to create the conditions for a change of paradigm.

Along with this action of support to processes of transition, grassroots movements should be aware of their commitment to create new pathways of innovation. That demands the capacity to adopt an evolutionary approach, which looks not only at the consolidation of new patterns but also to further innovation by moving to other fields and to more advanced objectives. Innovation in social practices around food, as empirical evidences show, can encourage broader changes in consumption behaviours (beyond food and beyond purchasing of goods), and to stimulate other processes of awareness and citizenship raising (about more general issues, such as development patterns and their environmental and social implications).

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