Markets to support sustainable food production: potentials and challenges of alternative provisioning

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MARKETS TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION

Potentials and challenges of alternative provisioning

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The current styles of food production and distribution contribute significantly to the environmental degradation of the planet through the consumption of non-renewable resources (such as fossil fuels): firstly, on the farm itself, then during transport and storage, finally through the high energy costs of the packaging industry, all the way to consumer's waste and its disposal (Sage 2012). There are also negative impacts on renewable resources such as soil's decreasing productivity, excessive use of water, pollution and decreasing biodiversity. Both the Fourth and the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) conclude that agriculture, forestry and other land uses account for approximately 30% of total greenhouse gas emissions (IPCC 2007) and climate change will put further pressure on the narrow range of industrial crops that currently feed the world (IPCC 2014). Furthermore, a debated but significant portion of greenhouse gases are a by-product of intensive livestock production (Goodland and Anhang 2009). Styles of food provisioning are, therefore, one of the main issues of concern regarding food: from climate change, to loss of biodiversity.

With regard to food safety and health hazards, then, individual consumer choices and purchase cultures may, in fact, have adverse effects on the sustainability of food production – in terms of both individual health and environmental impact. If consumers *en masse* continue to make "unhealthy choices" regarding their everyday consumption habits, no pressure will be put on corporate food producers to change their offer. More and more often, citizen-consumers are, therefore, considered as both a cause of and a possible solution to food-related problems (Mol 2009). As a result, the growth of so-called "critical consumption" in recent years has generated considerable interest (Carrier and Luetchford 2012). Many of the studies on the subject, however, have analyzed this phenomenon by focusing mainly on the individual consumer and on his/her motivations and

choices – whether deliberate or unconsciously driven (Micheletti and Stolle 2012). Little attention has been placed on organized forms of alternative consumption.

The first tenet of this chapter is that organized consumer demand for more sustainable food will drive a future food agenda.[1] This expectation is by no means banal. One could assume that the majority of the world food system is in the hands of corporate food production, which is consolidated from seed to table and can, therefore, influence consumers' needs through advertising and top-down distribution. Indeed this is what is exposed and contested by critics (Lyson 2004, Hinrichs and Lyson 2009, Nestle 2007). The role of consumers in supporting nature conservation within food-production systems emerges from growing scholarship on alternative food markets, networks and consumption practices. Such scholarship straddles a variety of disciplines including the sociology of consumption, rural sociology, human geography and economic anthropology among others (Feenstra 1997, Holloway et al. 2007, Blay-Palmer et al. 2015). This literature highlights how, in the last few decades, a vast and diverse movement of alternative agro-food networks has addressed the environmental, financial and social unsustainability of current food systems (Goodman and Sage 2014, Marsden and Morley 2014).

Often, the consumers engaged in such networks aim to move beyond an individualist model of the market that envisages food procurement as an anonymous arena for "consumer choice" and spontaneous adjustments of demand and supply. Instead, increasingly, ethical and critical consumers take collective action to procure food in alternative ways: grassroots strategies for food procurement have been called "provisioning activism" (Grasseni 2013) or "food activism" (Counihan and Siniscalchi 2013). The second tenet of this chapter is that provisioning activists may develop market mechanisms for food production and consumption that will support nature conservation. However, it should be appreciated that the goal of supporting nature conservation is only one among a set of interconnected goals and objectives that are shared across different movements, each of which places more or less emphasis on food access, food safety, food security or food sovereignty.

After a brief introduction to the relevant literature, I will draw from empirical findings to look specifically at provisioning activism as one possible expression of active citizenship aimed at nature conservation, as well as farmers' social and economic resilience. I will particularly draw from quantitative data and qualitative research on Solidarity Purchase Groups in Italy. My thesis is that their response to the conundrum "how to produce enough food without endangering nature conservation?" is to transform their own consumption lifestyles, so as to make them more sustainable. In particular, they organize short food-supply chains based on direct purchase and collective transactions, with the intent of supporting local agriculture and smallholders. I will argue that alternative food networks need to be addressed in their diversity, as they are context specific. There is no unique formula to make food more sustainable: rather, Solidarity Purchase Groups involve environmental, economic and social dimensions all together.

Provisioning activism in support of sustainable food production

Provisioning activism movements range from so-called community-supported agriculture (CSA) in the USA (White 2013) and Japan (*teikei*: Kondoh 2015) to the Association pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne (AMAP) in France (Dubuisson-Queller 2014), to the Solidarity Economy Networks of Italy (Graziano and Forno 2012; Forno, Grasseni, Signori 2015), and also the global movement Via Campesina originating in South America (Holt-Giménez 2009), the "degrowth" movement promoted by French economist Serge Latouche (Martínez-Alier 2012), the German movement for an "economy of the Common Good" (*Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie*: Felber 2010), Slow Food, with its Foundation for Biodiversity and its alliance with the American organic food movement (Siniscalchi 2013), as well as the widespread interest in permaculture and agroecology within the "Transition" movement (Hopkins 2008). These associations and networks share a renewed interest in the local dimension of production – beginning with food production. Especially in the case of Via Campesina and Slow Food, they do not eschew using the word "peasant" (*contadino* in italian, *paysan* in French) in a conscious re-appraisal of the role of the smallholder as a key social actor in rethinking food provisioning and nature conservation (Grasseni 2014c).

These movements recast the role of food consumers as "co-producers" *qua* consumers, namely as natural allies of local farmers rather than as end-recipients of long and impersonal supply chains. They stress their duty of "critical consumerism" (Sassatelli 2006), cast in terms of "sustainable citizenship" (Micheletti and Stolle 2012) or "ecological citizenship" (Seyfang 2006). Alternative food provisioning opposes consumer "deskilling" (Jaffe and Gertler 2006) through "civic agriculture" (Lyson 2004), "food agency" (Friedland 2008) or "food justice" (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). One of the main ways of achieving this is to shorten the food chain: alternative food networks are often forms of short food-supply chains (Sonnino and Marsden 2006).

Some forms of consumer–producer collaboration have in fact become known as "alternative food networks" (Goodman et al. 2012). Alternative food networks may be direct marketing relationships, either between an individual farmer and a network of consumers, or between a network of consumers and a number of individual farmers, or between a network of consumers and a network of producers. Producer may include not only farmers but food manufacturers, or farmers and breeders who carry out on-site food manufacturing (such as preserves, jam, flour mills) or on-site slaughtering (Grasseni 2014a). The stress is on the idea of the network as an organized whole, namely a collective arrangement through which people can express preferences, obtain information, discuss together, negotiate, place orders, make payments, deliver and pick up the produce.

Alternative food networks may give preference to seasonal and organic foodstuffs, avoid packaging waste or develop forms of CSA. These may involve, for instance, subscribing to collective contracts with local smallholders. Such crop

"shares" engage (indeed bind) a number of families to absorb the entire agricultural production of seasonal fruit and vegetables of one or more farms, within a negotiated price range but with ample margins for variation in quantity and price. While guaranteeing the farmer an income, this in turn provides each family with organic, local, fresh fruit and vegetables, although this is limited to produce that is in season.[2] While the French AMAP and the American CSA have in common the idea of "signing up for a crop" in advance, thus economically supporting and sharing the entrepreneurial risk with local producers, numerous other formulas and practices of direct marketing have also developed: from animal-sharing to city farms, to farmers' markets, many new "worlds of food" coexist (Morgan et al. 2006). These types of arrangement are commonly associated with a rediscovered sense of food seasonality and a renewed sensibility for nature conservation.

Alternative food networks approach the issue of nature conservation and sustainable food production from the point of view of a critique of the current global food system, which they identify as the main contributor to a number of problems: agricultural waste, inefficient and unsustainable food logistics, unfair prices to producers (who are in turn the prime actors in local nature conservation) and minimal food sovereignty on the part of the citizen/consumer. For example, the calculation that in order to feed the planet's population crop production needs to double in the next 30 years can be radically questioned in the light of claims that between one-third (FAO 2011) and half (IMECHE 2013) of the food produced is discarded at some point in the food-supply chain. Furthermore, these data do not take into consideration the crops that are actively withdrawn from the market as "excess" to avoid the collapse of agricultural prices.[3] Food activists thus address the challenge of nature conservation in food production in an *indirect* way: instead of providing a technological fix to the need for increasing food production worldwide to feed a growing global population while safeguarding nature conservation, they stress the unsustainability of current consumers' lifestyles and of global food provisioning systems. They propose to change such lifestyles and simplify such systems, in order to decrease their global and local impact – not only on natural resources but on the sustainability of rural livelihoods.

Understanding food production and consumption as transactions that remain embedded in local settings and often uneven economic relationships, food activists rethink environmental and social sustainability through the interconnected issues of food sovereignty, the viability of food production as a local and small-scale economic activity and the resilience of farming-based rural livelihoods. For example, food activists offer to pay a "fair" price to farmers, so that farmers are less pressured into increasing productivity to break even, thereby allowing farmers to address issues of soil fertility and hydro-ecological resilience (Bellarby et al. 2008). Food activists address the issue of price volatility and commodity speculation in the food market, for example, by providing advanced payments on crops (Lamine 2005). In times of difficult forecasting, this also allows farmers to better withstand the adverse effects of climate change challenges.

A second area of intervention is the direct collaboration between farmers and consumers to design organic production protocols or to plan a transition to more sustainable crops and farming techniques: for instance, community-supported agriculture may use participatory certification (IFOAM 2011, Lamine et al. 2012 on France and Brazil, Contessi 2015 on Italy). This means that the quality of the food produced is not certified by costly and remote third parties but, rather, it is assessed and negotiated locally among relevant representatives of both producer and consumer constituencies. In addition, some public administrations are being increasingly sensitized to local provisioning by the vocal action of local consumers who want to be consulted about strategies and guidelines of public procurement (see, for example, FLPC 2013 on school procurement in Massachusetts).

Third, food activists may intervene in the way in which the market works as a space for trade and exchange. The need to adopt coherent and integrated strategies to support alternative food networks was underlined by the European Commission in its November 2010 communication: *The CAP towards 2020: Meeting the food, natural resources and territorial challenges of the future*. In relation to rural development policies, this document stresses the importance of farmers (including smallholders) not only as food producers but also as agents of nature conservation. One of the suggested actions is the development of direct-to-customer sales, including farmers' markets. As said, collective forms of food activism such as the French AMAPs, American CSAs and some Solidarity Purchase Groups in Italy make advance payments to farmers for their entire crops at fixed prices. Some networks of Solidarity Purchase Groups go further and negotiate part or whole of the farm's business plan, including the types and quantities of products to be farmed and the specific cultivation methods. With the help of agronomists, they self-certify organic farming plans or negotiate for *ad hoc* compromises about weed killers or animal diet integrators. Typically, smallholders can convert from industrial crops such as maize, rice or grass for dairy farms to more remunerative crops such as fruit and vegetables for farmers' markets, sometimes reintroducing local cultivars of wheat or maize (Tavolo RES 2013).

In my ethnographic experience, the actual market square on market day can be transformed by consumers' associations. "Citizenship markets," for example, are grassroots forms of farmers' markets that are directly organized by networks of consumers. They differ from other forms of farmers' markets because they are not built on a logic of supply and demand but, rather, on *organized* demand of a *specific* type of supply. According to the code of conduct of the citizenship markets observed by Grasseni (2013) in northern Italy, such food must be organic, accessibly priced, locally sourced and ethically produced in compliance with tax and labor regulations. It should be noted that such alternative markets support sustainable food production not only through direct sales but also through a pervasive activity of consumers' (self)-education on why and how the food-supply chain should be re-engineered on a local basis. For example, alternative markets may host cultural events such as book promotions, talks and debates on issues such as migrant labor exploitation in agriculture. A relevant topic in Italy is the effects of mafia infiltration into large

distribution chains, so that the recycling and disposing of waste is firmly in the hands of criminal organizations who systematically dump dangerous materials in natural areas or even on agricultural land (Caggiano and De Rosa 2015).

In sum, a concern with societal resilience and social equitability ("food justice," "food access") is intrinsically bound up with the sustainable use of natural resources (Forno and Graziano 2014). Societal understandings of sustainability are central to the actual success of the agenda expressed in this book, namely, rethinking agriculture as working with nature so as to ensure sustainable food supplies Such understandings include a number of phenomena and factors such as ethnic, class and gender differences as well as age, health and status.[4]

A rediscovered sense of moderation and a wish to re-acquire lost skills are often associated with the cultures of food activists. Inside and across alternative provisioning networks, information and recipes are exchanged on various topics: from homesteading (for instance, how to store excess fruit for winter) to better awareness of how the food systems actually work (logistics, for example, or how to read and understand certification labels). For many adherents, this is a novel social and practical experience that acquaints them with rhythms, locations and skills of food production which they would not develop as part of their everyday professional or personal lives. New skills are also created, for example, meeting the relational and organizational needs of the groups, but also increasing know-how of the supply chain and technical expertise about organic certification. In other words, within these networks, mechanisms of mutual support and education *about food sustainability and nature conservation* may emerge, *beyond* the foundational activity of food procurement. Thus, alternative provisioning can be conducive to significant societal processes of education *towards* sustainability in the sense that consumers become more thoughtful about nature conservation in their everyday consumption lifestyles (Forno, Grasseni and Signori 2015).

In the next section, I focus on qualitative and quantitative data that illustrate the relationship between agricultural production and nature conservation in the eyes of Italian Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS). I will show how GAS function and draw some preliminary conclusions about how, and if, consumers' self-organization will develop into new market mechanisms that support sustainable food production and nature conservation.

Italy's GAS: collective action for food sustainability through alternative forms of purchase

Sustainable food production is a primary site of action in the realm of "diverse and community economies" (Cameron, Gibson-Graham, Healy 2013). The community economies approach consists of acknowledging the diverse ways in which people forge sustainable economies – often on a local scale – by innovating production and distribution practices. Nature conservation features as one of the primary concerns of such initiatives, together with equity and social justice. Community economies may include community gardens, community-supported

agriculture schemes or workers' cooperatives. In line with this approach, CORES LAB, an academic research network of social scientists based in Bergamo (Italy) and Utrecht (the Netherlands) studies grassroots sustainable economies. CORES LAB carried out a qualitative and quantitative investigation on the economic and environmental, as well as social and political significance, of alternative food networks in Italy. The research "Inside Relational Capital" focused on an in-depth analysis of a very successful network called Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchase Groups, henceforth GAS).[5]

The first GAS groups were established in 1994. The census conducted by the GAS activists' network, RETEGAS (www.retegas.org) registered the existence of about one thousand groups nationwide by the end of 2013. However, considering the existence of many informal groups, it is estimated that significantly more than one thousand groups are actually active. For example, CORES LAB mapped 429 GAS groups in Lombardy alone. Lombardy is a significant site for studying alternative provisioning since, among Italy's 20 administrative regions, it is home to almost 10 million inhabitants (one-sixth of the Italian population) and produces about one-fifth of the national GDP.[6]

An interdisciplinary group – composed of a sociologist of consumption, a business economist and myself (a sociocultural anthropologist) – worked with mixed methods. My own two-year participant observation in one GAS group and one network of more than 30 GAS groups, RETEGAS Bergamo, conducted from 2009 to 2011, was followed by a two-tiered questionnaire, structured in consultation with representatives of the GAS national network (Tavolo RES) and based on first-hand knowledge of GAS practice.

According to my ethnographic study, GAS invest in sustainable food production and nature conservation via their privileged relationship with food producers. It is not only a matter of placing pressure on farmers to conduct farming activities that benefit nature. *Gasistas* (this is what GAS activists call themselves) envisage their role as "co-producers" *qua* consumers. Namely, their role is to enable, support, facilitate and protect sustainable food production by local farmers though group purchase (hence the words "group," "purchase" and "solidarity" in their acronym).

Gasistas directly manage the logistics of collective purchase and choose their products and providers on the basis of principles of respect for the environment: this mandate is interpreted on a local basis by each group's collective decisions. For instance, some GAS groups prefer to purchase local products over distance-sourced products (even if they are Fair Trade certified) in order to cut down the environmental costs of food logistics. Some exclusively buy organic because they believe that genetically modified crops are, by definition, detrimental to biodiversity. Some others embrace more stringent collective practices of moderation, to cut down their waste production: for example, they not only purchase from local farmers but also barter produce from their own gardens, bake their own bread, or recycle items at second-hand markets. Those who favor organic farming often encourage "conversion" of their producers, for example, by pledging to buy out the harvest at a fixed price, whatever the quality or quantity actually produced.

There are both limits and opportunities associated with this type of food activism. The first opportunity relates to understanding food procurement as a responsible collective act that goes beyond "food shopping." Only if it is proactive can consumers' demand for more sustainable food actually drive a future food agenda. *Gasistas* organize on-site visits to producers to inspect crops and livestock or to pick up produce. They also host public debates, book presentations and reading groups on ways of getting engaged with the food system. *Gasistas* are motivated to acquire a set of new skills: from online software for administering orders more efficiently, to in-depth knowledge about issues of food safety. On the other hand, this form of communication and self-education can be one sided, especially when consumers' wishes are articulated by a well-educated, high-income sector of society, while smallholders' needs and capacities are hampered by farm size, heightened bureaucracy or simply insufficient human resources to staff stands at farmers' markets. For example, the long working hours (and weekends) entailed by CSA schemes or farmers' markets *on top of* routine agricultural labor have been exposed and critiqued (Galt 2013).

A further opportunity relates to the capacity to inspire and encourage producers' self-organization in response to GAS demand: as GAS tend to purchase from a palette of individual producers, this may drive them to network, strengthening and coordinating their production capacity. In several Italian regions, for example, GAS coordinate themselves into RES (Solidarity Economic Networks) or DES (Districts of Solidarity Economy). RES and DES contact new producers and encourage them to coordinate the logistics of direct purchase in a more efficient way (Grasseni 2013, d'Amico 2015). The limitation observed is that, as GAS groups depend on voluntary work, activists are often overworked with projects, which may lead to burn-out and make their initiatives volatile.

A survey allowed CORES to contextualize these anecdotal observations against a much wider sample: 204 out of Lombardy's 429 GAS groups participated in the survey, answering detailed questions about membership, expenditure and type of products purchased. In total, 1,658 individuals replied, each individual representing a buying member in a GAS group (usually a family with two children). The survey, conducted in 2011 and 2012, addressed the coordinators of the GAS groups and GAS group members separately, with different sets of questions and was administered online through internal distribution, group by group (Forno, Grasseni, Signori 2013a: 140).

The survey showed that *Gasistas* are generally families with children, with higher education and a secure but not lavish lifestyle. They are mostly employed in the professions or the service sector and rarely have manual jobs. They participate intensely in associations of all types: environmental, but also political and religious. They understand their engagement in GAS as multi-faceted: their motivation to join a GAS group, for example, includes "to give support to local farmers" (79.6%) and "to address environmental problems" (56.2%), but also "to preserve one's health (food safety)" (82%) and "to engage in concrete action" (63.5%).[7]

Gasistas buy mainly food through GAS: more than 90% of them buy their cheese, fruit, flour, pasta, oil and vegetables through a GAS group. More than

80% also buy their preserves, cereals and detergents through a GAS group. More than 60% buy meat, wine, fruit juices, milk and yoghurt through a GAS.[8] The criteria for choosing which producers to support are stringent: 70.1% request certified organic produce, 79.9% prioritize so-called "zero-miles" production, namely producers in the immediate surroundings; 81.9% monitor "respect for the environment."[9] Recalling that GAS actually visit their producers on their own premises, the latter may include landscape conservation (such as the preservation of natural woods and hedges on the farmstead) as well as inspecting the size and state of the buildings, manure deposits and animal sheds.

Particularly interesting is the self-perception of *Gasistas* as reforming their lifestyles toward more sustainable food procurement – including a reduction in usage of water and energy and an increase in recycling: according to the CORES survey, 79.4% of *Gasistas* report an increase in consumption of organic produce and 80.6% an increase in consumption of local products, as well as a decreased use of shopping malls or supermarkets (41.4% of interviewees), more food self-production (38.3%), more food production from their own garden (16.2%), more visits to local shops (27.5% of interviewees), more recycling (32.5%), a reduction in water consumption (28.6%) and energy consumption (29.3%).[10]

When asked what *results* had been achieved through being members of a GAS group, the focus on shortening the food supply chain emerged clearly. "Supporting local producers" was perceived as achieved by 29.6% of interviewees.[11] Crucially. 39.4% of GAS purchases come from farmers within a range of 60 kilometers.[12] However, the main reason for ceasing to source produce from a certain farmer (in 29.9% of cases) were "logistic problems of the producers," indicating that there are ample margins to strengthen the production capacity of smallholders in the area, especially regarding logistics and distribution.

How may this approach have broader benefits for nature conservation without risking food production? GAS aim to have, first and foremost, a financial and economic impact (namely, liberating small producers from chronic dependence on agricultural aid or from the exploitation of large distribution contracts). The idea is that, if directly supported by organized networks of consumers, producers can genuinely invest in nature conservation and the sustainability of their own farming, for example, by maintaining biodiversity on site, by introducing multiple crops rather than mono-crops and by introducing organic certification or self-certified organic farming schemes. Such local agreements introduce important innovations, for example, exposing smallholders to sustainable technological innovation and production cycle design. Some of these formulas have the potential to contribute to reducing the environmental impact of local agricultural production as well as to retune it towards local food needs.

The *Gasistas*' search for more sustainable livelihoods and healthier lifestyles is also a reaction to the helplessness of *both* producers and consumers when they are individually confronted by global market forces.[13] Particularly relevant are the cultural and social dimensions of revaluing local production through shortening the food supply chain (Grasseni 2014b). Empirical examples confirm that *Gasistas*' support, at very least, does not pose a risk to food production. On the contrary, there is

evidence that such a "moral economy" motivates consumers to support food producers, even when they have to accept higher prices, either because of the higher quality demanded or to support the farmers and food producers. For example, the Tomasoni case – a business case which has been studied by economist Silvana Signori – is emblematic. Tomasoni, a family-run creamery producing organic cheese in northern Italy was rescued from bankruptcy in 2009 by a network of 200 GAS customers who provided the funds needed to overcome the credit crunch (Signori 2010).

With regard to issues of contamination and pollution, GAS accept honest recognition of production difficulties, but only after establishing direct contact and undertaking an on-site assessment. In some cases, such dialogue develops into local schemes for Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) following the IFOAM guidelines for self-certified organic farming (IFOAM 2011). Rather than forms of third-party accounting, this model aims to introduce transparency between producers and consumers through a self-evaluation of the farm's practices, including composting, preparation of the soil, procurement of seeds and disclosure about how the land was previously used. In PGS producers and consumers adopt non-mandatory production protocols on a voluntary basis; however, they also include information on employees and working conditions on the farm, and give the commissioning consumers a very detailed idea of farm practice. This self-assessment protocol is aimed at inducing reflexivity about farming in both producers and consumers, convincing them to shift economic resources towards changing production processes when needed.

In Sicily, sociologist Francesca Forno conducted in-depth interviews with producers, shop-keepers and anti-mafia activists to study how GAS groups support specific agricultural and commercial enterprises. Her findings show not only that structured groups of provisioning activists can orient farmers to meet their demand for "mafia free" products, but that the very same conversations increase awareness and motivation regarding environmentally meaningful "ethical" choices such as those regarding the management of natural resources (soil, water, biodiversity, etc.), the production processes (organic farming) and energy saving (through shorter food production chains) (Forno 2011). This is hardly surprising, considering that mafia infiltration into the agricultural process does not only imply that criminal activities are carried out against people (such as through the detention and forced labor of undocumented migrants in food production: Oliveri 2015) but also against the environment (typically by illegally managing waste recycling sites or conducting agricultural activities on contaminated land).

Conclusion

The GAS movement is a form of organized consumer action to procure more sustainable food, aimed at re-engineering the food supply chain on a more transparent and local basis. Its overall goal is to change consumption lifestyles so that they are more sustainable for the environment, for farmers and for consumers. From a strictly economic point of view, the CORES survey established that the actual expenses for the GAS groups in Lombardy amount to about €4.6 million

per year.[14] Even assuming that the non-surveyed groups might spend about the same, thus up to about €9 million per year altogether, this is a very limited amount for a region of 10 million inhabitants. This confirms the perception of alternative food networks as a niche phenomenon – unlike previous projections that had been elaborated by the GAS groups themselves and reproduced by press and media, which increased that figure by up to 10-fold (Ceresoli 2012). For a movement that claims as its objective the reform of the provisioning system by collectively harnessing the economic power of consumers as "co-producers," this is a substantial limitation.

From a broader perspective, research on GAS proves that alternative food networks actually change lifestyles to benefit the sustainability of food procurement (and, indirectly, nature conservation). This happens mostly through self-education and public initiatives: for example 49.7% of public events organized by GAS are about sustainable agriculture, 36.8% about food education (including food waste, food safety and moderation; 35.8% are about alternative energy procurement, 17.6% about anti-mafia action and 13% about reading produce labelling, understanding quality certification and recognizing logos (such as those of the Forest Stewardship Council, of Fair Trade or of third-party Organic Certification).[15] Thus, most of GAS outreach and communication activity is either directly or indirectly about food sustainability and environmental issues.

The idea of alternative food networks such as GAS is to impact on the food system not through technological fixes aimed at producing more food but, rather, through trusted partnerships between local producers and consumers, so that both their business and their environment is resilient against external pressures and threats. The potential benefits for nature conservation come from safeguarding the only local actors who have both the skills, and the interest, to maintain a farming environment that is both productive and resilient: the farmers, and especially the smallholders (Grasseni 2014c). The role of their skilled knowledge emerges from the in-depth observation of such networks, for example, in participatory guarantee schemes (Contessi 2015). Additionally, considerable time is required of both consumer representatives and producers that engage in alternative food networks. We need more in-depth comparative research to assess the limits, opportunities and results of provisioning activism in support of sustainable food production and, specifically, nature conservation in food procurement.

Notes

1 This paper includes preliminary data from a comparative analysis of solidarity economies in Italy and the USA. This was an ethnographic project funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research: Seeds of Trust. A Comparative Analysis of Solidarity Economy Networks in Lombardy (Italy) and Massachusetts (USA), grant number 8643.

2 See Lamine (2005) on the French AMAP, or Henderson and Van En (2007) on the American CSA.

3 See also on this topic Chapter 10 in this book.

4 Williams-Forson (2014) highlights a fourth, cultural dimension as a fundamental addendum to the environmental, economic and social aspects, regarding for example the cultural foodscapes of migrants. Regional diversities are also relevant to an ethnographic

contextualization of alternative foodscapes, especially in countries with important internal diversities such as Italy. Interviews with food activists in Sardinia highlight further possible fault lines along, for example, gendered agency (Counihan 2012).

5 See www.unibg.it/cores and http://coreslab.wikispaces.com/

6 These data are retrievable on the official website of the government of the Region of Lombardy: http://www.regione.lombardia.it/shared/ccurl/890/419/Ita.pdf (last accessed 4 June 2015).

7 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013a: 143). The complete data of the CORES survey are available on open access, for the pilot study of the Bergamo province alone, at http://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/28934.

8 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013b: 25).

9 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013b: 33).

10 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013a: 149).

11 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013a: 147).

12 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013b: 34).

13 On the politics of food, and particularly on the deeply entrenched presence of corporate representatives in state offices and institutions that should regulate and monitor corporate behavior, see Nestle (2007).

14 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013b: 26).

15 These data are published in Italian in Forno, Grasseni and Signori (2013a: 148).

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