COLLECTIVE FOOD PURCHASING NETWORKS IN ITALY AS A CASE STUDY OF RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION

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Abstract: Based upon fieldwork in Italy and the USA, the authors present work-in-progress insights into solidarity economies, and in particular alternative food networks, as a form of active citizenship that could re-orient the current debate on responsible innovation.

Keywords: responsible innovation, alternative, food networks, solidarity economy, citizenship, food systems.

INTRODUCTION

Faced by the environmental, financial, and social non-sustainability of current food provisioning practices (demonstrated by food insecurity, environmental concerns, malnutrition and increasing health issues in industrialized countries), grassroots networks are rethinking the core elements of contemporary society: the market, the commons, and the role of the individual: citizen, consumer, and producer. From a discussion of "political consumers" (Stolle et al. 2005) to a critique of "consumer-citizens" (Mol 2009) a rich scholarship has noted how the practice of provisioning is moving beyond mere "consumer choice" (Sassatelli 2006).

Building on our roles in the Bassetti Foundation for Responsible Innovation (Hankins 2012) and at Utrecht University, we are here presenting work-in-progress insights into solidarity economies, and in particular collective purchasing groups, as a form of active citizenship that could re-orient the current debate on responsible innovation. Questions of citizenship are raised by current

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interdisciplinary literature ranging from anthropology to rural sociology on social sustainability and economic sovereignty (Renting et al. 2012, Alkon and Agyeman 2011, Felber 2010). Firstly, the "triple bottom line" is an increasingly invoked concept to point out that sustainability not only has an environmental and economic meaning (by which an enterprise cannot be polluting or running business at a loss) but also a social one: economic development must be not only economically viable and environment-friendly but also socially equitable. Secondly, food sovereignty is at the centre of a debate that shifts focus away from the issue of food security and food safety as if they were exclusively technocratic issues – namely issues that can be solved with efficient technologies and education of the stakeholders concerned – to one of self-determination and access to resources. For example, food sovereignty would consist in being able to procure not only adequate and sufficient food at affordable prices, but to do so in culturally appropriate ways and with the capacity of not being complicit in a global system of exploitation of cheap labour in disadvantaged communities. Thus for example, sufficient grain provisioning does solve a problem of food security, but not one of food sovereignty if the consumers do not have sufficient information and alternatives to buying at the expense of other communities' environmental degradation or social loss.

Around the world, citizens' initiatives mark an increased need for sustainable global citizenship, namely ways of expressing active citizenship and sovereignty in matters of sustainability such as climate change, food provisioning, and renewable resources (Amin et al. 2009). In particular, ethnographic research can describe grassroots understandings of timely issues such as the need for a societal transition to sustainability. They do so on the basis of a fine-grained appreciation of the cultural diversity of such understandings, whether due to ethnic, class, or gender differences.

Many of the approaches that we describe bear many similarities to the rapidly developing notion of responsible innovation (RI). Although still in a phase of definition, the general characteristics of an RI-approach are that innovative developments are societally desirable, ethically justifiable, and transparent. The authors argue that provi-

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sioning activism could be seen as a bottom-up example of a responsible innovation model. We first offer an overview into current developments within responsible innovation discourse, before going on to describe some of the divergent approaches taken by solidarity economies and food activism in Italy. This article is thus based on Grasseni's ethnographic research (Grasseni 2013), and our joint involvement in the development of the concept of Responsible Innovation through our work with the Bassetti Foundation.

RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION

Responsible Innovation (RI) is a rapidly developing field of both action and study. Previously virtually unheard of, now definitions abound, and there is a rapidly expanding body of literature both from academic and non-academic sources (Owen et al. 2013, Sutcliffe (2013), Pavie et al. (2014). One of the most commonly cited definitions is that of Rene' Von Schomberg:

> Responsible Research and Innovation is a transparent, interactive process by which societal actors and innovators become mutually responsive to each other with a view to the (ethical) acceptability, sustainability and societal desirability of the innovation process and its marketable products (in order to allow a proper embedding of scientific and technological advances in our society) (Von Schomberg 2011: 48).

As we see, this definition (like many others in use today), seems to view innovation as involving science, technology, or industrial production. It involves distribution and supply process, and an end product. This very much reflects the route that current RI investment and research is taking. Current research includes placing social scientists into laboratories to enhance the scientist's own understanding of the complex consequences and ripple-effects of their innovations, as well as suggestions for ethical frameworks to bring RI considerations to bear onto both the funding and research practice areas.

The authors would argue however that RI can be seen from a much broader perspective, and that alternative food networks could be defined as a grassroots form of RI that is *poiesis*-intensive rather than capital-intensive. Fol-

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lowing the intuition of Piero Bassetti[1], *"poiesis*-intensive" innovation rethinks the way in which production processes and supply chains are organized, rather than infusing capital-intensive technological fixes into them. As we briefly illustrate in the following section, alternative provisioners (of which alternative food provisioning is only one example) do just this: they rethink the economy by re-engineering specific aspects or segments of the supply chain.

The definition of RI offered by Jack Stilgoe, Richard Owen & Phil Macnaghten seems to offer a scope that accommodates poiesis-intensive, grassroots responsible innovation of this kind: "Responsible research and innovation means taking collective care for the future, through stewardship of innovation in the present" (Stilgoe, Owen & MacNaghten, 2012: pp 3). However ill-defined, this broadly drawn definition offers space for an (as yet) undeveloped field of bottom-up RI, a field that currently seems to be the almost exclusive realm of the Bassetti Foundation, and the think tank Matter[2].

Having experience of working within the rapidly developing field of responsible innovation and social sustainability[3], we believe that the model of solidarity and food activism that is currently taking hold in Italy and that we will describe below, presents a grassroots approach to a more sustainable and responsible form of provisioning. Self-organized groups are often run on a voluntary basis, hence they are not focused on procuring funding for self-sustenance. They require an increasing and integrated set of skills, thus attuning their members to peer-to-peer and lifelong learning. They necessarily depend on developing or reacquiring knowledge about seasonality, seed saving, climate change, soil erosion and pollution, food conservation and transformation, home economics, and a number of other skills and notions that have been lost to mass consumerism. While striving to establish transparent organizations and with the need for continuous decision-making, they revisit and exercise deliberative and democratic skills that the authors believe need reviving in contemporary consumer societies and are an integral part of an RI approach.

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SOLIDARITY ECONOMY AND FOOD ACTIVISM, THE ITALIAN WAY

Collective purchasing is only one of the approaches adopted by an emerging and very diverse population of consumers who rethink their role in terms of their responsibility as local and global citizens. For the purposes of this argument we will refer to networks of "solidarity economy", a definition of which is drawn from literature on global justice and alternative economic behaviour whose aim is to counteract the increasing lack of equity in developed societies (Laville 1994, Mance 2001, Biolghini, 2007). Solidarity economy is not however the only definition given to a growing global and trans-disciplinary rethinking of economic action as politically substantive, from "social", to "human", and on to "solidarity" economy (see Amin 2009, Hart et al 2010, Kawano et al 2010).

In Italy, "*Gruppi di acquisto solidale*" (Solidarity Purchase Groups or GAS) are small networks of family units that source food (but not only) according to sets of ideas surrounding solidarity. They are informal, non contractual and fluid groups of people that negotiate both amongst themselves and between themselves and their suppliers, in order to choose and procure food and household objects according to different (and also changing) criteria: from locally sourced to organic food, to food and items produced without labour exploitation, and a combination of these and other requirements.

Solidarity Purchase Groups usually buy directly from farmers, privileging organic and local foods and paying higher prices than large distribution chains. They do so in the name of solidarity: with the producers, amongst themselves, and with the environment. Grasseni argues that GAS are establishing new types of "social networks" that involve producers and consumers in what they call "co-production". This consists in various forms of food re-localization, creating new economic circuits, favouring short supply chains and supporting local agriculture, fostering active citizenship and re-embedding the economy in relationships of trust (Grasseni 2014a).

The authors' understanding of the workings of these groups is derived from two years of joint membership in a Solidarity Purchase Group (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*,

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GAS) and participation in various regional and national meetings of the emerging network (see Grasseni 2013). Indeed many of the researchers in this field are active within the network, allowing for access while offering something in return to the participating groups. The element of trust is both deeply rooted in and derived from GAS purchasing practices, an outline of which – taken from our fieldwork experiences – may help to shed some light on the issue of responsible innovation on current 'glocal' food systems.

Our aim is to make a specific case study – based on prolonged participant observation – relevant to a conceptual category – that of responsible innovation – that does not easily appear as such in debates about alternative provisioning and the "new" economies. However, we believe that the skills and hurdles that arise from the case study are precisely those advocated and prefigured in the RI debate. The skills are those of an enhanced social capacity to be informed and responsibly active in a global sphere, that of food systems. Each consumer is a global consumer, and food activists attempt to become *responsible* global consumers – both by making their provisioning chains more local, and by making them more transparent, as often the two go hand in hand. We believe that these grassroots realizations and experimentations are relevant to a debate about RI that invokes transparency. Such macro-analysis however has so far privileged a view of individual agencies (those of the scientist's, the "innovator's" or the "end-stakeholder's" rather than that of social networks. We need a more complex understanding of how collective agencies and capacities can be achieved. This micro-ethnography of grassroots self-organization in the realm of food provisioning provides just one example.

BEING A MEMBER

We are members of a GAS that contains about 20 families. This is a typical size, as too large a group becomes difficult to manage and the participatory process becomes more complicated. In cases where the groups become too popular they typically splinter. To use GAS terminology they "seed" or "bud" into another group. The two groups

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may maintain a good relationship and pass on the names of potential or available suppliers and suggest products, but they remain independent and therefore their criteria is self determined.

Groups have a well-defined division of labour. Each family is responsible for sourcing and procuring a single product. Once a new product has been identified, for instance olive oil from a previously unknown producer, the family responsible may bring it to the group regular meeting (in our case in the local library once a month). The product is tasted, and its credentials checked as far as possible with available information sourced directly from the producer or across the activist network.

Typically, to propose a new producer one member explains how they found the producer and their practices. They are interested not only in the production but also the circumstances surrounding the operation. They typically visit the production site, meet with the producer, discuss techniques, and relay this information to the group. There is a widespread expectation that producers should treat their workers correctly and pay their taxes, even though no formal procedures to check their credentials have been developed yet. Certainly in our experience produce is not acquired in such a way that it could aid the producer to evade taxes, and when this was expected of them (such as cash payment expected by the producer in exchange for a discount) a strain on the relationship developed.

Beyond such specific cases, the group regularly revises and discusses producers, quality, and satisfaction. As stated above, criteria are fluid and negotiable. Some individuals feel that local is better regardless of other factors, and it may be that non-organic products that are produced locally could be valued higher than organic from 200 km away. Or that a locally produced wine may lose out to wine produced by a farmers' cooperative, especially if working for social inclusion or employing fragile workers. Once the debate comes to a close one product is favoured over others, and typically a trial quantity is purchased. The "product referent" places the order and collects the produce. They then contact the other members of the group who collect their portion. Here trust and obligation become reciprocal, since one member has (and has

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paid for) all the cheese, another has the wine, a third the rice and so on.

The collection serves a dual purpose however, as it is also a time to socialize and exchange information and gifts of home-produced stuffs. The social aspect of group membership is also strengthened through the many social events promoted by the different groups and networks. Local and home produced products may be cooked in company and shared at social gatherings, but there is also an increasing interest for using public spaces such as local libraries for meetings, and an awareness that local administrations could and should be involved, for instance by requesting spaces to stock and distribute the merchandize. In Milan's "District of Solidarity Rural Economy" (*Distretto di Economia Solidale Rurale*, DESR), a number of municipalities such as Corsico for example have become involved in providing market spaces and cultural activities to make the GAS transactions more public.

THE NETWORK ADVANTAGE

As noted, in general, GAS pay their trusted providers higher prices than they would receive from large distribution networks, which can make a real difference for the producers. The farmers may be "marginal" in many ways: they may be practicing organic farming without certification (because they cannot afford the bureaucratic costs of certification), aging local farmers or neo-rural young entrepreneurs. The fluidity of the criteria that the individual GAS groups apply means that many unseen factors are taken into account when evaluating the producers, and a relationship of trust can be built.

GAS groups are also organized into regional and national networks – again often informally. The geographic expansion of these alliances has meant media exposure (not always welcome), as well as increasing interest on the part of political parties to embrace the solidarity economy agenda to incorporate them in their manifestos. While promising in principle, these plans have sometimes been met with scepticism of potential co-optations (see also Grasseni 2014b)[4].

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Through their networks, small groups have greater information and access to alternative products. To give an example members of the network receive regular emails regarding environmentally friendly personal hygiene items and compostable baby nappies. Sometimes orders are gathered across individual groups or may be placed individually, for instance for shoes. Sometimes products can be ordered in bulk from suppliers (sometimes also internationally) for later individual distribution.

Often GAS collaborate with local Fair Trade shops, and sometimes with socially inclusive agricultural cooperatives. The main idea is not only to re-localize provisioning to decrease one's ecological footprint but also to regain citizens' control of the supply chain to the advantage of transparent pricing and socially acceptable conditions of labour for all those involved (Gesualdi 1990; Saroldi 2001)[5]. The creation and maintenance of such networks however is not an easy task. In her book *Beyond Alternative Food Networks* (2013) Grasseni describes the trials and tribulations in the creation of a GAS coalition. Provisioning activists have a number of reasons and philosophies that underlie their lifestyle choices, and in a consensus-based model of decision-making many are difficult to resolve. She recounts the almost total collapse of the first public assembly of our field network RETEGAS, and the effect upon its presence at the following national assembly.

The national network however fares better, with annual national meetings to which local coalitions and networks participate regularly. A long-standing example of self-organized logistics, with regard to food provisioning through coalitions of GAS groups, is the short bread chain that has been reinvented on a territorial basis by the District of Solidarity Economy (DES) of Brianza near Milan (De Santis 2010). Entirely self-funded, the project established an alliance between local farmers, a local organic mill and about five hundred families each members of GAS groups, to grow local autochthonous grain varieties and distribute the bread produced from it through a system of pre-orders and pre-payments. Unfortunately, the cultivated fields were expropriated for an infrastructural expansion, the *Tangenziale Est Esterna* of Milan or TEEM. It is somewhat ironic that local self-sustained projects of

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sustainable self-provisioning are lost to the blind workings of an urban planning machinery that responds to the needs of global logistics – namely that of increasing the mobility of commodities[6].

In general, the expansion and tightening of the network owes much to the organizational labours of those involved at the local level but also provide space and peer-help to develop collective notions of active citizenship and responsible participation in the global economy (Forno, Grasseni, Signori forthcoming).

CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM FOOD ACTIVISM FOR RESPONSIBLE INNOVATION?

What is then the larger significance of alternative provisioning? Firstly, for global supply chains, its main significance is that of contending top-down solutions for logistics and for quality certification with grassroots understanding and decision-making of what are the most pertinent criteria for "quality" in the first place, as these may vary depending on context. For example, local food movements are rethinking the logistics of food and water provision in several European countries and also in the United States, with very active networks on the East Coast and in the Bay Area (see Loh and Lyon 2013). However, "local food movements" that do not address the issues of food sovereignty and food justice may be accused of being elitist.

Food justice is just one of the ways in which the drastic divisions in income and opportunities are structured in advanced capitalist societies (Alkon and Agyeman 2011, Gottlieb and Joshi 2013). In many urban centres in America, the youngest generation has virtually no knowledge of what fresh foods look like, while disadvantaged and underemployed workers have two or three part-time jobs that do not yield enough to include fresh nourishing foods in their family diets. Dependency on fast food outlets and convenience stores has long been termed as equivalent to living in "food deserts", and though some community supported agriculture schemes or mobile farmers markets address this, it is far from being a solved problem in American urban and social planning. Natural-

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ly, this weighs heavily on issues of public health especially when it comes to the so-called "obesity epidemics" or the widespread diffusion of type B diabetes among disenfranchised urban and often migrant populations. These are not technically "epidemics" but rather widespread illnesses resulting from lifestyles that are not sustainable for the human body.

This points to the added political significance of specific types of "local food movements" such as GAS, which add an entirely new dimension to the current critique of the global food systems in light of their internal deliberative practices. Their significance is of course context-dependent, so it would be unimaginable for Italian solidarity purchase groups to pose the problem of food desertification at the level and scale in which it has impacted American society. However, GAS members, networks, and coalitions are increasingly engaged in petitioning against new outlets that would kill off local economies and are often exposed by investigative journalism as offering breeding ground for mafia-connected money laundering activities (Rizzo 2011, Dalla Chiesa and Panzarasa 2012, Forno 2012). The GAS-type food activism also encourages thinking actively about equity in a society where the income gap between professionals and working class is increasing, though still not reaching the peaks of the American model.

We have highlighted the advantages, as well as problems and trials, of alternative food networks for the purpose of establishing short-chain logistics and to reconfigure the role of the citizen/consumer in the global food system. What can be learned from these make the idea of RI more concrete? We argue that those interested in defining and promoting RI and possible responsible approaches can benefit from the experiences gained by groups such as those described in this paper. Although as argued above the RI approach has yet to be exhaustively defined, examples are already being offered of responsible products (see J. Van Hoeven's recent Dutch examples offered at the 2014 Responsible Innovation conference in The Hague)[7]. Ethnographic research into the production and decision-making processes involved in these examples can reveal the environmental, social and organizational

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situations that give rise to the adoption of such processes as models.

Precisely because they pose the problem of the viability of an agriculture of proximity, solidarity purchase groups make the re-localization of provisioning *thinkable*: not as a form of return to the past but as an innovative and engaged act of citizenship. At least In Europe where a farming class is still existent and active, so-called alternative provisioning networks provide an opportunity for local farmers to have a dedicated outlet for their small and diverse crops[8]. While small holders do not qualify for a global market because of small quantities and lack of specialization, precisely these characteristics make them attractive to educated urban audiences that wish to be informed and politically active through their consumers' choice. From the point of view of those who practice an everyday engagement with the act of provisioning, smallholders are a model to be held against the many evils of intensive agriculture, vertically integrated agribusiness, and consolidated logistics. Industrial agriculture is a highly polluting activity, at least locally, and increasingly a biohazard, as one can deduce for example from current fears of a spreading "porcine epidemic diarrhoea virus" (PEDV) in industrial pork breeding plants.

In particular, the GAS model can help widening our understanding of the concept of sovereignty in relation to provisioning, especially in the light of recent literature on "food sovereignty" and "food democracy".[9] Unlike many other sustainable initiatives the GAS approach may be labour intensive in terms of organization, but it is not as investment heavy as many other more favoured models. It is locally situated, socially valued and supports the local economy, it creates community and can be self-governing.

Finally, alternative provisioners are and see themselves as veritable activists, engaged not only in consuming ethically, but in proposing a civic vision of food (and provisioning in general) that is at once sustainable and discerning. Self-determined provisioning means in particular the active exercise of solidarity (not only among consumers but with producers), to disband the expectation that price alone (or a calculation of value for money) matters. Specifically, alternative provisioners abhor being complicit in a global food system that bases low food

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prices on the systematic exploitation of migrant labour and on the environmental destruction of substantive portions of the planet.

We would argue that the members of the GAS described above are following an RI approach and that the on-going results have become part of how they organize their system and by extension their lives. The Italian case relies in particular on the thriving role of civic associations and NGOs in the social fabric of society, and on the survival of personal skills (such as cooking, gardening, seasonal harvesting) that are still widespread across generations and types of employment in this particular culture. However, civil society alone cannot reinvent the global food system or set up alternative logistics to feed the urban masses. This is why their critical inputs and solutions should be of interest for national and sovranational governance that is increasingly vested in responsible innovation.

We would argue that the operating practices that we find within GAS and their networks are concrete examples of a Grassroots Responsible Innovation model. The process shares many of the aims and goals that Responsible Innovation practitioners promote: the process is deliberative, transparent and open. New short supply chains have emerged for certain products. The results are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable, all of which are piecemeal goals of a responsible model. As we noted above in the brief outline of the development of the concept of RI, the current positions tend to be institutional, structural and somewhat top-down. We argue that the definition and understanding of RI could be much more broadly drawn and envisaged, so that grass-roots experiences could add to the analysis and development of necessary social frameworks.

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NOTE

[1] http://www.slideshare.net/FondazioneBassetti/la-fondazione-giannino-bassetti http://www.fondazionebassetti.org/it/focus/2007/04/la_moda_responsabile.html

[2] http://www.matterforall.org/

[3] The authors co-presented posters at both the 2014 INSS Annual Meeting in Charlotte, USA and the NWO Responsible Innovation 2014 Conference in The Hague, Netherlands based upon this work.

[4] See for example the grassroots criticism of a first draft of regional law proposal by the Democratic Party (PD) elaborated in 2011: http://www.pdregionelombardia.it/approfondimenti/gas/GAS.asp. The comments posted on line by a number of GAS representatives sum up concerns about mandatory formalization, and the skewed results of introducing monetary incentives to the creation of new groups.

[5] Documentation is plentiful on the GAS website (www.retegas.org).

[6] The rationale of the project, its expansion over seven years of operations, and the lawsuit against the TEEM-related land expropriation are documented on the web site of the District: http://des.desbri.org/spigamadia/tangenziale. The lawsuit, addressed to the European Court and self-funded by the GAS coalition, is unprecedently cast in terms of the infringement on their "food sovereignty".

[7] Video of the key note speakers is available online via the MVI Community Channel https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5BYjD1Gn4g

[8] Particular attention has been given for example in France to the AMAPs or *Associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne*. These organize advance payments and collective provisioning contracts from local farmers and have been studied by Claire Lamine (2005) and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier (2014), Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine et al. (2011).

[9] See Alkon and Agyeman (2011) for further discussion.

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