



CONSUMER GROUPS AS GRASSROOTS SOCIAL INNOVATION NICHES

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Purpose

The paper draws on the theoretical framework based on grassroots social innovation niches to analyse how and to what extent participation in consumer groups helps to foster food-related sustainability changes (both at individual, niche and potentially regime levels).

Design/methodology/approach

The data have been collected via two online questionnaires: 204 consumer groups (named GAS, from the acronym of Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale) and 1,658 families belonging to the same groups participated in the research.

Findings

The findings reveal that participation in GAS not only makes individuals more responsible towards their consumption choices and lifestyles, but also makes consumers more willing to collaborate with others, more interested in politics (especially local politics) and increases their sense of social effectiveness.

Practical/social implications

The article shows how collective consumption can represent a way to increase and foster sustainable behaviours, with the potential to modify socio-economic regimes. Interesting implications are advanced on the relationship between consumers and mainly local and small-scale food producers and on local public governments' policies.

Originality/value

Due to the very high number of respondents, this research represents a unique opportunity to observe a phenomenon which is difficult to study with surveys and questionnaires because of its informal nature. Understanding the mechanisms and processes that give rise and sustain such forms of collective action is highly relevant for

finding ways to promote grassroots initiatives and community actions, which are an often neglected area of system-changing innovation towards sustainability.

Keywords

Grassroots social innovation, sustainable consumption, sustainability niches, consumer groups, sustainability.

Type of paper

Research Paper

Introduction

The food system has been increasingly acknowledged to be one of the main challenges for moving societies towards sustainable development: the type of food eaten and how it is produced have a significant impact on the environment and on society. Consequently, food sustainability challenges both the socio-economic context, the production systems and the consumption dimension (Sage, 2015).

Indeed, methods of food provisioning are being highlighted as one of the main issues linked to climate change, as well as biodiversity and health hazards (Bellarby *et al.*, 2008) and, consequently, consumers are increasingly considered to be both a cause and a possible solution to sustainability related problems (see, for example, the UN Sustainable Development Goals on sustainable consumption and production). In fact, consumers can promote a more sustainable society both through their act of consuming (or not consuming) goods and by the influence they can exert on other actors (peers, producers, local governments, etc.) (see, for example, Smith, 2007 and Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014).

Furthermore, there is a growing trend in food production and provisioning that reassesses the importance of local initiatives, in particular those related to local, sustainable agriculture (Jarosz, 2008). These experiences encourage the sense of community where the people involved can share and develop values, rules and responsibilities (Cox *et al.*, 2008; Sage, 2003). This is an important aspect as the lack of

community-based relations ('social disengagement') is seen as one of the causes of corporate and consumer irresponsibility with regard to social and environmental justice (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014). Indeed, it has often been highlighted that it is mainly through social and collective action that a certain awareness can actually lead to concrete changes in terms of market and societal transformation (Gendron *et al.*, 2009). Referring specifically to food consumption, sociological studies underscore how networks of consumers, especially when they are "bound together by place", are capable of transforming individuals from passive consumers into active food citizens (Lyson, 2005: 92) able to "support, rather than threaten", the development of a more sustainable food system (Wilkins, 2005: 271). Renting *et al.* (2012) advance the idea that these kinds of groups could help to (re)establish the link between citizens (consumer-citizen), markets (producers) and (mainly local) public institutions. Despite this potential, community action is still a neglected area of innovation (Moulaert *et al.*, 2017). Following the call to understand community action in sustainable development through the lens of grassroots innovation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007: 599), this paper aims to investigate the ability of consumer groups to respond to sustainability challenges. To do this, it will focus on a type of consumer group which has been developing in Italy over the last 20 years, namely Solidarity Purchasing Groups (hereafter GAS from the acronym of the Italian term "Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale").

GAS will be considered as grassroots social innovation niches with the aim of uncovering how and to what extent these consumer groups help to foster food-related sustainability changes both at the individual, niche and potentially regime levels. In the following pages, the concept of grassroots social innovation niches will firstly be introduced to offer a theoretical framework for analysing the case of GAS groups. Subsequently, after a presentation of the context of analysis and a description of the research design and data collection, the article offers a discussion on the main findings, conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Understanding grassroots social innovation niches

The academic field of innovation, which developed initially from technology, has been addressed by many different disciplines and from various perspectives (Dawson and Daniel, 2010). One of the most promising fields of application has been ‘social innovation’ (for an overview of the nature of social innovation see Nicholls and Murdock, 2012 and Mulgan, 2012). Indeed, in recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need for innovations that contribute towards sustainability and societal well-being (Dawson and Daniel, 2010).

Like technological innovation, social innovation occurs when individuals or groups recognise a social need and try to answer it with new solutions (Westley *et al.*, 2014).

Through a historical reconstruction of the uses and interpretations of the term, Moulaert *et al.* (2017) emphasise two main approaches to social innovation. The first is called “practical” or “social business oriented” as the focus is more on identifying and promoting solutions that are ‘practical’ within the framework of the existing economic and social order. Social innovation is, therefore, an answer (mainly economic and individual based) to market and state inefficiencies. Conversely, the second approach foregrounds social innovation for socio-political transformation. In this case, social innovation is interpreted as the satisfaction of human needs “through the transformation of social relations: transformation which ‘improves’ the governance systems” (Moulaert, 2009: 12). Prominence is given to the concept of *bottom-linked* governance (Miquel *et al.*, 2013), which is a form of governance of the (local) territory that engages various actors (local governments, civil society, private sector, etc.) in a dynamic learning process of cooperation.

Following this approach, this paper considers social innovation as concerned with “new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet socially recognized social needs (more effectively than alternatives) *and* create new social relationships or collaborations, that are both good for society *and* enhance society’s capacity to act” (Mulgan, 2012: 35). This is also in line with the three dimensions suggested by Moulaert *et al.* (2017: 10), that is: 1) collective satisfaction of unsatisfied or insufficiently met human needs; 2) building more cohesive social relations; 3) working

towards more democratic societies and communities through socio-political bottom-linked empowerment.

Emphasising the role of communities, Seyfang and Smith (2007: 585) introduce the concept of community-led grassroots innovation to describe “networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions”. They theorise these networks as particular forms of innovation niches. In this growing body of work, niches are considered the loci of “promising (but marginal)” socio-technical innovation (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016: 2) that could potentially move society towards more sustainable regimes (Smith, 2004; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). In fact, a shift is required as incumbent systems are channelled in unsustainable directions by a set of ruling, structures, organisations and practices that characterise the dominant ‘regime’ (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). Crises of the existing regimes prompt experimentation through the creation of new answers in terms of expectations and innovations (Olsson and Galaz, 2012). It is in these contexts that grassroots social innovation niches develop and grow (Kemp *et al.*, 1998; Raven, 2012).

In a similar way, food crises such as the BSE outbreak, adulteration of wine or fruit juices as well as rising concern about climate change and the unsustainability of conventional food systems (Horlings and Marsden, 2011) all constitute critical junctures, external shocks and windows of opportunities that “can potentially be used

productively to stimulate experimentation, innovation, novelty, and learning within society” (Olsson and Galaz, 2012: 235).

From this perspective, niches are often defined as ‘protected spaces’ where innovative solutions can develop away from regime pressures (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012: 383). Such protective spaces help the development of a common identity, shared values and discourses, support the build-up of social networks to sustain collective action (Kemp *et al.*, 1998). Niches also provide an empowerment function facilitating, for example, the circulation of positive expectations about the future (Smith and Raven, 2012).

In this regard, Seyfang and Smith (2007) highlight two main types of benefit that grassroots social innovation could generate: ‘intrinsic benefits’ linked to (local-level) improvements of skills and confidence among those involved in the innovative initiatives, and ‘diffusion benefits’, more ideological in scope and with the intent of leading to transformations of the dominant regime. Although small-scale and geographical rootedness sometimes makes scaling up difficult, niche innovation theory identifies three ways in which grassroots-led innovation can influence the regime: a) by replication of a project within the niche; b) by scaling up and attracting more participants (growth in scale); and c) by translating niche ideas into a mainstream setting (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Westley *et al.*, 2014).

Even though grassroots innovations may aim to contribute critically towards change at the regime level, the actual study of how this takes place in practice has remained under-researched (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016; Moulaert *et al.*, 2017; Hossain, 2016).

This paper seeks to contribute towards filling this gap by analysing the factors that have given rise and sustained the action of Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS). In particular, GAS will be investigated by using the framework of grassroots social innovation niches with the aim of uncovering how and to what extent these consumer groups help to foster food-related sustainability changes both at the individual, niche and potentially regime levels.

Previous research on GAS has so far focused on the economic and political role of consumers participating in these groups (see, for example, Graziano and Forno, 2012; Forno *et al.*, 2014; Fonte, 2013; Grasseni, 2013) or on the relationships between producers and consumers (Migliore *et al.*, 2014). A few studies have considered GAS as a form of social innovation, but they mainly focused on the suppliers' side emphasising the potential to improve small producers' social inclusion (Maestripieri, 2017), or to co-create transition (Brunori *et al.*, 2011b). Brunori *et al.*, (2011a), in particular, consider GAS as socio-technical niches and analyse the way in which these groups act to remove legal, technological and cultural barriers to their development. They adopt a methodology based on a single case study analysis and they focus more on the organisational dimension.

The novelty of the present paper lies in the scope of the analysis (the large number of GAS groups and GAS members participating in the questionnaire) and in the use of the grassroots social innovation niches framework to interpret the role of consumer groups in fostering sustainability changes at the regime level.

After introducing the object of analysis and the methodology adopted, the paper presents the discussion of the main findings following seven key features which have emerged as particularly relevant in the literature and research on social and grassroots-led innovation discussed above, namely: (i) regime failure and landscape pressure; (ii) niches formation; (iii) managing expectations; (iv) shared learning and empowering; (v) building social networks; (vi) niche protection; (vii) diffusion. While discussing these characteristics, specific attention will be dedicated to understanding how consumer groups as grassroots social innovation niches could (or should) influence the dominant regime.

Research context and data collection

As defined by Brunori *et al.* (2012b: 31), GAS are “groups of consumers who purchase collectively through a direct relationship with producers, according to shared ethical principles (the ‘solidarity’ concept)”. The first GAS was established in 1994 and over the last decade this practice has become widespread throughout Italy, even though there

is a greater concentration in the northern regions of the country. According to data available from retegas.org (the national network that connects and informs those GAS wishing to register with the website), the number of GAS in Italy has risen from 153 in 2004, to 394 in 2008, 518 in 2009, to the current number of 867 (retegas.org, last accessed 17 October 2017).

The informal nature of GAS and their rapid spread, necessitated an *ad hoc* research strategy as well as the limitation of the study to a restricted and well-defined territory. The choice was Lombardy, situated in the north of Italy, as it is the most densely populated Italian region with about ten million inhabitants and, following the retegas.org census, it is estimated to be the region with the highest concentration of GAS.

The study began with a detailed mapping of Lombardy-based GAS groups which involved the collection of data from several sources (i.e. archival data, email exchanges and lists of GAS drawn up by the groups themselves), as well as establishing personal contact with GAS group coordinators active in the territory. As a result of the mapping, a total of 429 GAS were identified (a much higher number than the 227 self-registered groups reported by the national network retegas.org).

After the completion of the mapping, detailed data concerning GAS groups and GAS members were gathered via two distinct self-reported online questionnaires, which were conducted during the period 2011–2013 with the help of GAS group coordinators. A

first questionnaire was designed for the representatives of each individual GAS and was aimed at gathering information about the operational characteristics of the group, such as the number of families belonging to each group, its internal organisation, logistics, and means of communication. A second questionnaire was addressed to individual members and was aimed at collecting information about the characteristics of *gasistas* (i.e. the members of the GAS), such as their socio-economic profile, educational and professional background, reasons for joining, perceived achievements of the group and changes in lifestyle. In both cases, a questionnaire consisting of approximately fifty closed-ended questions was adopted.

Of the initial lists, 204 GAS volunteers decided to participate in the study. Altogether, these groups involved 7,122 families of which 1,658 completed the online questionnaire proposed for individual members. The link to the questionnaire was forwarded directly to the members by the coordinator of the group. In June 2012, the research was presented and “endorsed” at the GAS National Annual Meeting held in L’Aquila.

At the end of the data collection, 47.55% of the initial 429 groups and 23.28% of the individuals belonging to these groups had completed the online questionnaires. This represents a notable outcome especially considering that web-based surveys usually have a much lower response rate compared with other survey modes (Lozar Manfreda *et al.*, 2008) and that participants were not given any incentives to encourage them to participate in the research.

Solidarity Purchasing Groups as grassroots innovative niches: main findings and discussion

Regime crises or landscape pressures are often a precursor for the formation and development of niches (Olsson and Galaz, 2012). For this reason, the presentation of data on GAS will start from precisely this point. Then, the data will be presented and discussed following the main features highlighted in the literature and research on grassroots social innovation.

- *Regime failure and landscape pressure*

Over the last few years, a succession of crises in the agricultural sector have increased consumers’ fears relating to food quality and safety (Wandel, 1994; Horlings and Marsden, 2011). GAS represent a bottom-up solution which attempts to respond to regime failure and landscape pressure in order to achieve a healthier and more sustainable food provisioning system.

A specific set of six questions were included in the questionnaire to measure individual motivations for joining a GAS (respondents were asked to rank the different motivations on a Likert scale of 1-5, where 1 was the lowest level and 5 the highest level of agreement): protecting one’s own health and the health of one’s family proved to be the main reason why people become GAS members, being indicated by 82% of

the respondents (values from 4 to 5 are considered “high”), while just less than half of the respondents declared that they had joined a GAS in order to “save money” (48%). Other motivations in order of importance were: supporting local producers (79.6%), the desire to create new relations (63.7%), the possibility to participate through concrete action (63.5%) and environmental concerns (56.2%).

From this first data it emerges that GAS represent a “practical” answer to food and sustainability challenges. Following the distinction made by Moulaert *et al.* (2017), GAS are seen to be a concrete answer to market and state inefficiencies. What is more, the desire to create new relationships highlights the potential of GAS to become a promoter of social change.

- *Niche formation*

GAS have spread as a result of informal relations mainly amongst people who are acquainted with each other. Most of the GAS analysed were set up on the spontaneous initiative of groups of friends or due to the division of a pre-existing group. Furthermore, numerous respondents of the questionnaire stated that they had learnt of the existence of GAS by reading the news on the web/internet or through conferences/meetings.

Although the data confirm that these groups differ considerably in size (from less than 20 families to more than 60 families), the majority of GAS that took part in the research present organisational models that are very similar to each other, so much so that it suggests that the model organisation itself – an organisation based on informality and reciprocity to ensure an equal level is maintained amongst the members – should be considered part of the repertoire of action of these groups (see also Grasseni, 2013). In actual fact, most of the GAS analysed provide for an equal division of the tasks. A large percentage of the 204 GAS which answered the questionnaire (72%) subdivide responsibility for the collection and distribution of the orders amongst the members in such a way that there is one contact person for each product. In a few cases, there is a group of people within the GAS who organise the purchases, while occasionally (4.7% of the cases) a cooperative is in charge of this duty. GAS members are also directly involved with the distribution of the purchases. In fact, it is the families themselves who belong to the GAS who provide space for the storage and distribution of the goods.

- *Managing expectations*

The decisions regarding the purchases not only concern the choice of producers and products but, more in general, the principles behind the GAS that are discussed jointly during plenary meetings.

The way GAS organise their work and the particular ‘socialised’ purchasing environment seem to enable the challenge to improve consumers’ sustainable behaviour to be tackled.

In two different questions, respondents were asked to list the principal aims of the group and the main results achieved (Figure 1). It is interesting to note that for half of the GAS members, who answered the questionnaire, the main objective of these groups is to stimulate lifestyles that are environmentally or socially more responsible, while the greatest result achieved by the GAS is acknowledged to be the ability to back small producers. Furthermore, people who answered the questionnaire emphasise the opportunity that this type of participation offers to rebuild social ties by encouraging meetings and discussions amongst people who do not know each other. Influencing public policies appears to be neither an objective nor a result of this kind of initiative.

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From an organisational perspective, GAS seem to aim “only” at ‘intrinsic benefits’ (Seyfang and Smith, 2007) that are pursued in order to improve the quality of life of participants of these initiatives, whether directly (consumers) or indirectly (producers). ‘Diffusion benefits’, leading to transformations of the dominant regime, are not

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9 apparently a main objective of these groups. Nevertheless, looking at the individual
10 level opens a new perspective: what really seems to be “innovative” about these
11 experiences is the transformative and educational role that consumption assumes.
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19 • *Share learning and empowering*

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21 If the purchase is the central activity of every GAS and the choice of products and
22 producers occupies the greater part of the discussions amongst members of the GAS,
23 according to the respondents, the activity and results achieved by these groups go far
24 beyond just the purchase.
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31 Specific questions aimed at investigating the changes that occurred in consumption
32 behaviour and in other personal, sustainable and political lifestyles were introduced in
33 the questionnaire for participants. Tables 1 and 2 show the main results.
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46 What is valuable in these groups is their strong cultural impact on changing attitudes
47 and general behaviour: after joining a GAS and experimenting this kind of shared
48 economic practice, people not only change their consumption habits, but they also feel
49 more collaborative and trusting towards others, become more interested in politics and
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9 have an increased sense of social effectiveness. More than a way of saving money, GAS
10 seem to represent new spaces in which individuals can participate and experiment new
11 practices, strengthen their commitment towards the issue of sustainability and devise
12 and test concrete alternatives to an economic food system considered to be
13 unsustainable. In other words, GAS are places where people acquire skills, confidence
14 and empowerment to face sustainability challenges and to promote socio-political
15 transformations (Moulaert *et al.*, 2007). This is a crucial point as citizens' empowerment
16 and cross-sectoral collaborations are part of the agenda for social innovation in Europe
17 (Brandsen *et al.*, 2016; Moulaert *et al.*, 2017).
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32 • *Building social networks*
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34 The (re)establishment of relationships of trust among consumers and between
35 consumers and (mainly local) producers and governments is, therefore, a crucial
36 challenge. In fact, one of the main results that GAS members specify is stronger
37 relationships among consumers and with producers. Engagement in and with local
38 governance is different. The data show that while participating in the collective practice
39 empowers GAS members who feel more interested in problems concerning their town
40 of residence and more effective in influencing public policy, the desire to affect local
41 public policies is neither an aim nor a result of the GAS activity.
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GAS rarely participate in public debates as a group, while single members have started to be more active in different economic and political activities (organising farmers' markets and community gardens, founding a group inspired by the Transition Town movement and, in a few cases, expressing a keenness to participate in public governance).

Interestingly, the socio-political bottom-linked empowerment, evoked by Moulaert *et al.* (2017) takes place but more at an individual level rather than an organisational (niche) one. This could be connected with the desire to protect the niche from external influences.

- *Niche protection*

Niche protection is important for defending against external pressures so that innovation development and empowerment can be nurtured in order to transform regime systems (Smith and Raven, 2012; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). However, what the present study shows is slightly different. GAS, as a group, prefer to keep a certain level of informality and detachment from the political arena. For example, although the Italian Parliament approved a specific law recognising GAS as non-profit organisations, few groups have seized this opportunity to become a 'formal' association. Most of them (76.1%) preferred to maintain an informal structure, overcoming problems of representation and delegations. This choice protects the niches from internal and

external pressure but also precludes the possibility to influence the regime in a more effective and direct way (Seyfang and Haxeltine, 2012).

- *Diffusion: replication, scaling up and translating niche ideas into a mainstream setting*

Following Seyfang and Haxeltine (2012) and the three ways they suggest a niche can influence the regime, it emerges from the analysis that GAS can quite easily replicate their experience. The growth in the number of the GAS in Italy bears witness to this possibility. Their informality, as well as the freedom to join and to leave an experience, mean that there is also quite a strong possibility to scale up by founding new groups or increasing the number of participants. In the event of an excessive growth in the number of participants per group, which would make not only managing the purchasing but also the personal relationships among the group quite problematic (Westley *et al.*, 2014), there is frequently a division into two or more groups, spin-offs or a renewal of the internal structure of the organisation.

Furthermore, a growth in scale could be achieved by formal and informal relations with other groups and other actors in the local area for the purpose of sharing principles, ideals, objectives, etc. (Migliore *et al.*, 2014). This is an aspect that is still underestimated by GAS who concentrate more on preserving their role and scope rather

than looking for partnerships. GAS need to be suitably linked to other relevant actors to give weight to their actions and to spread their proposed norms, logics or practices, in other words to transform the dominant regime.

The study underscores two main domains of possible changes in existing regimes: the local agricultural-economic systems and local public policies.

The fact that these groups are characterised by continuous, daily actions by which and through which they define and construct meanings of their role in economic processes, encourages active engagement with the firms they deal with. GAS usually organise visits to producers, meetings and other ways of exchanging experiences, needs and commitments. Dialogue and social interaction between firms and their stakeholders (in this case, their customers) are crucial for shaping firms' sustainable behaviour (Smith, 2007; Signori, 2017).

Furthermore, small farmers engaged in consumer-producer networks are less exposed to market pressure and, therefore, provide an excellent context for trying out innovative agricultural techniques and for developing and testing innovations for production and distribution (Brunori *et al.*, 2011b; Maestripieri, 2017).

Another potential lever for translating niche ideas into the mainstream is the possibility to influence local public food policies. The change in the consumers' attitude towards local policy and the possible collaboration that could arise within these groups are

important opportunities for promoting sustainable local food practices and policies. Public authorities (especially acting at the local level) play a fundamental role in the spreading and institutionalisation of the effects of these practices in a broad context (Verplanken and Wood, 2006). Although the modification of public policies does not fall within the aims of the GAS or within the results achieved, local governments may be interested in the activities promoted by GAS for the positive social and environmental externalities they create, such as safeguarding employment in environmentally sound activities, regenerating rural landscapes through the preservation of sustainable agricultural-ecological land use patterns, reducing environmental damage, energy, transport and packaging and resource use to name just a few. Furthermore, there could also be public health benefits due to the increased consumption of fresh, seasonal and healthy food. Public authorities should also be responsible for ensuring that 'good food' is accessible to all their citizens. The presence of niches of citizens and producers, who are already motivated, skilled and connected, can help implement these policies. Moreover, these initiatives foster a shared sense of community and educate both citizens and producers about sustainability (Caruana and Chatzidakis, 2014).

Conclusions

Previous research emphasised the potential of using the concept of grassroots social innovations, as a form of niche, “to understand the ability of local food networks to develop the capacity of communities to respond to locally identified problems and to effect more widespread, sustainable change” (Kirwan *et al.*, 2013: 830). Nevertheless, further studies were required to uncover how niches function and how, “in practice”, they could influence the regime (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016; Moulaert *et al.*, 2017; Hossain, 2016).

By adopting a grassroots social innovation perspective, this paper aimed to contribute towards a better understanding of the potential and need for grassroots initiatives to foster more sustainable food systems. Focusing on community-based experiences helped to recognise the role of socialisation in both individual learning and empowerment and in building relations among different actors. In fact, the analysis shows how consumption could become a transformative and educational experience. From a practical answer to satisfying the need for healthy food, participating in a GAS becomes a way for building more cohesive social relations and empowering people for socio-political transformation (Moulaert *et al.*, 2018).

The data show that some changes occur at niche level, while others at individual level. In fact, these grassroots innovations are able to generate transformations in production-consumption systems in a way that individuals cannot. In contrast, groups seem more interested in a conservative approach as far as engagement with local governments is

concerned. They do not seek to influence local policies, probably due to the wish to defend their specificity from the risk of mission drift and co-optation. On the other hand, as a result of the niche practices, individuals can remodel their political capabilities and engage in and with local public governance.

Even though a person joining a GAS is, in most cases, already a ‘concerned consumer’ (Brunori *et al.*, 2011a), the scheduled organisation of purchases and the social context offered by a shared consumer policy favour the translation of intentions into actual behaviour. This leads people to assume the role of ‘active consumers’, which is an important distinction as ‘concerned consumers’ are aware of the problems of the regime but continue to follow its rules, while ‘active consumers’ look for and actively exercise alternatives (Brunori *et al.*, 2011a). Furthermore, working with other people and building meaningful relationships empower participants that feel more confident with problems concerning their town and more able to influence public policy. These new ‘politically empowered citizens’ could be called ‘*social change consumers*’, owing to their ability and willingness to modify the political regime. This adds a new level to the categorisation suggested by Brunori *et al.* (2011a).

In the discussion some potentials and implications for producers and local governments are also advanced.

Limitations and further paths for research

Although representing a quite unique study due to the very high number of respondents our research has several limitations.

Firstly, there may have been a sort of self-selection bias as members of the GAS decided themselves whether to answer the questionnaire or not. It is possible, in fact, that only the most involved and highly motivated members of the GAS decided to participate in the research project. Notwithstanding this possibility, the high percentage of answers received reduces this risk.

Secondly, the study was limited to the analysis of one specific phenomenon (GAS) in a specific national, economic and cultural context (Lombardy). As in other countries, Italy, too, is observing a mushrooming of top down and bottom up initiatives which try to mobilise the consumer (Barnett *et al.*, 2010) of which GAS represent only a very specific experience. Therefore, this study could be taken further by comparing different contexts and initiatives (such as CSA in the USA, AMAP in France, etc.) to discover possible similarities and differences.

Finally, our research only focused on the consumption side of the economic spectrum, while the analysis has also shown interesting implications from the production and public policy side.

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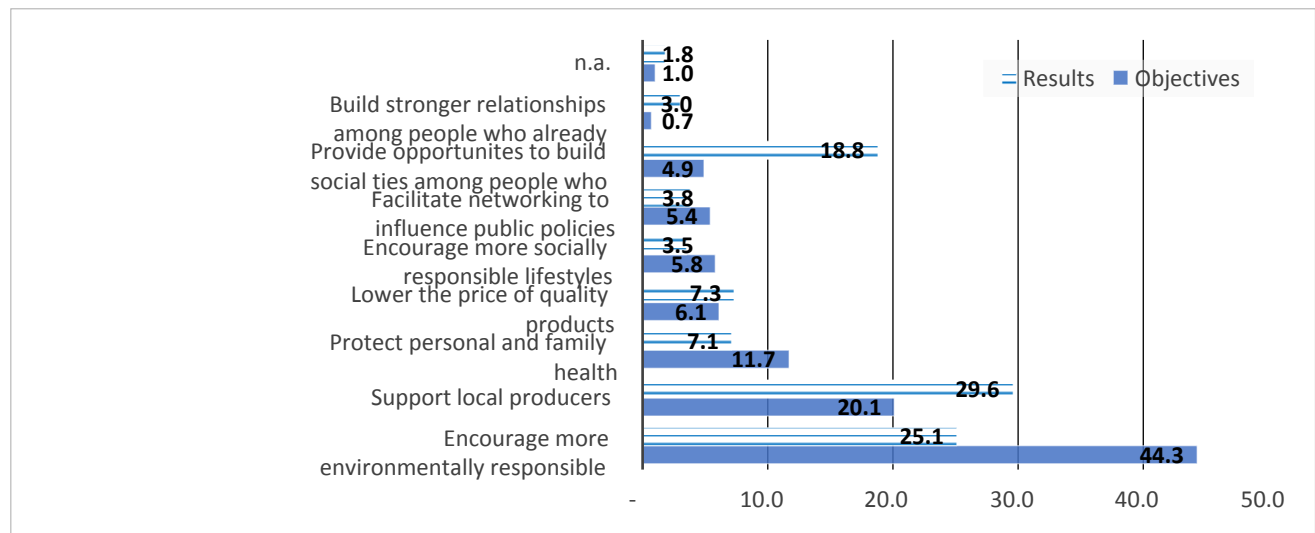
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FIGURE 1 - Main objectives and results of GAS groups (single choice question, %) (N = 1,658) .

	Objectives	Results
Encourage more environmentally responsible lifestyles	44.3	25.1
Support local producers	20.1	29.6
Protect personal and family health	11.7	7.1
Lower the price of quality products	6.1	7.3
Encourage more socially responsible lifestyles	5.8	3.5
Facilitate networking to influence public policies	5.4	3.8
Provide opportunities to build social ties among people w/	4.9	18.8
Build stronger relationships among people who already k	0.7	3.0
n.a.	1.0	1.8
	100.00	100



Questions: [Objectives] Which of the following ones do you think is the main objective of your GAS? [Results] Since your GAS started its activity, what do you think was the main result achieved?

Table 1. Changes in consumption habits after joining a GAS (%) (N = 1,658)

	Introduced	Increased	Decreased	No change	Na.	Tot
Vegetable	0.7	50.4	0.4	47.4	1.1	100
Organic	7.7	79.4	0.2	11.6	1.1	100
Wholemeal	10	52.9	0.6	35.2	1.3	100
Legumes	3.7	38.4	0.5	56.3	1.1	100
Local	5.4	80.6	0.2	12.6	1.2	100
Seasonal	2.8	68.1	0.1	27.8	1.2	100
Cereals	12.8	45.1	0.3	40.5	1.3	100
Meat	0.2	3.1	42.5	52	2.2	100
Fair Trade	5.6	39.6	1.4	51.8	1.6	100
Mafia-Free	14.7	44.6	0.6	38.5	1.6	100
Ecological	25	41.4	0.6	31.9	1.1	100

Question: Since you started to be part in a GAS, did you change your consumption of the following products?

Table 2. Changes in lifestyles and civic participation after joining a GAS (%) (N = 1,658)

	Yes	Already did	No change	Na.	Tot
Reduced purchases of pre-cooked food	24.8	69.4	5.1	0.7	100
Reduction in supermarket shopping	41.4	9.8	47.9	0.9	100
Increased purchases in local shops	27.5	37.9	33	1.6	100
Started producing food at home	38.3	29	31.9	0.8	100
Started growing vegetables	16.2	27.6	54.8	1.4	100
Started to use the car less	17.6	34.5	46.9	1.0	100
Increased recycling	32.5	60	6.7	0.8	100
More attention to energy consumption	29.3	46.3	22.9	1.5	100
More attention to water consumption	28.6	64.3	6.1	1.0	100
More interested in problems concerning my town of residence	26	42.5	30.3	1.2	100

More interested in politics in general	7.9	55	35.8	1.3	100
More able to cooperate with people in general	39.7	42.9	16.1	1.3	100
Feeling more able to influence public policy	23.9	13.8	60.8	1.5	100

Question: ...and since you started to be part in your GAS, have you also started to...