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## Closing the Attitude-Behaviour Gap: The case of Solidarity Purchase Groups

Silvana Signori<sup>a\*</sup>, Francesca Forno<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Bergamo, Department of Management, Economics and Quantitative Studies, Via dei Caniana, 2, 24127 Bergamo, Italy

<sup>b</sup>University of Bergamo, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Piazza Rosate, 2, 24129 Bergamo, Italy

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### Abstract

Starting from the results of a research project on Solidarity Purchase Groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale - GAS) in Italy, the paper discusses how, within consumer groups, for the very reason of their horizontal organisation which encourages learning amongst peers, the conditions are created to overcome the so-called ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ in ethical consumption. The analysis shows how after joining a solidarity consumer group and experimenting this kind of shared economic practice, people not only change their consumption but they also feel more collaborative and trustful towards others, more interested in politics and have an increased sense of social effectiveness.

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### 1. Introduction

Citizens are becoming increasingly concerned about environmental, social and economic problems and more willing to overcome them by adopting more responsible lifestyles and new models of consumption. According to a recent survey by Eurobarometro, consumers’ awareness of environmental and social matters is entering the

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +390352052637 Fax: +390352052549.

E-mail address: [silvana.signori@unibg.it](mailto:silvana.signori@unibg.it)

mainstream. In 2011, for example, as many as 95% of Europeans believed that it was important to safeguard the environment (European Commission, 2011).

Policymakers, too, are calling for reduced levels of consumption as a step forward towards sustainability (Peattie and Peattie, 2009) and are becoming more and more involved in promoting activities that help to teach that the current model of development, based on a continuous consumption of “limited” resources, is no longer sustainable. Agenda 21 (the “action programme” that ensued following the U.N. conference on the environment and development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and which constitutes a sort of manual for the sustainable development of the planet “from now until the 21st century”) clarified, for example, that changing consumption and production models is at the center of a form of development directed towards sustainability (United Nation Sustainable Development, 1992).

In fact, methods of food provisioning are being highlighted as one of the main issues regarding climate change, as well as biodiversity and health hazards (Bellarby et al., 2008). Consequently, consumers are considered increasingly as both a cause and a possible solution to sustainability related problems. As a result of this line of reasoning, the growth of so-called “ethical consumerism” has generated considerable interest (and hope) in recent years from different perspectives and has sparked a lively academic debate involving several disciplines (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012).

As is often highlighted, an increase in the number of responsible consumers would play an important role in encouraging a change in production processes. In fact, this type of consumer chooses goods and services that respect the environment and human beings, paying attention to the impact made by the whole life cycle of the product (production, selection, transportation, purchase, use, maintenance, handling and finally disposal) in order to implement consumption models that aim to modify practices as well as economic and environmental patterns in the long term. Indeed, ethical consumerism might serve as a “form of social control of business” providing “incentives for companies to be socially and environmentally responsible” (Smith, 1990 and 2007: 4). Consumers could, therefore, become promoters of a more sustainable society both through their act of consuming (or not consuming) goods and by the pressure they can place on other actors (producers, peers, local governments, etc.).

Despite the significant changes in the levels of awareness, anxiety and general sensitivity towards environmental and social questions, many citizens have not altered their general behaviour, life style or purchasing decisions. This is the problem of the so-called “attitude - behaviour gap”, in other words the gap that can occur when a person’s values or intentions are not put into practice (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Bray et al., 2011; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Carrington et al., 2010; Cowe and Williams, 2000; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005) Narrowing this gap represents a challenge of great practical and theoretical importance in different fields of sustainability practices.

Research on this subject has pinpointed a series of factors and/or conditions influencing the actual transformation of intentions into consumer behaviour but most concentrate on the individual consumer. Although individual characteristics are certainly important, increasing emphasis is being placed on how the possibility to transform intentions into actions must also take into account the influence exerted by the socio-economic context in which these practices are shaped. Ethical consumerism appears to be highly contingent and this depends on various factors, linked to the product, the company and the consumer’s characteristics (Smith, 2007: 25), but also to the ‘environment’ in which the decisions are taken. In particular, it has often been underlined that it is through social and collective action that a certain awareness can actually lead to concrete changes in terms of market transformation (Gendron et al., 2009). This is the case of consumer groups (networks, communities, etc.) set up for food supplies and/or production, characterised by territorial closeness and by a social organisation oriented towards sharing (see for example Moraes et al., 2012).

In this paper we try to discuss how the attitude-behaviour gap is reduced within a particular grassroots experience that have recently spread in Italy, namely the Italian Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS from the acronym of Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale). Our thesis is that these groups may work as spaces of creative cross-fertilization and innovation as they can work as socio-pedagogic laboratories: identifying and experimenting critical issues regarding delegation and representation, participation and labour division, as well as skill and value construction.

## 2. The GAS-Study

As the self-presentation on the national ReteGas website states, Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS - Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale) are formed by “people who decide to join together to buy food products and other commonly used products which are then distributed amongst them”. These groups call themselves “solidarity based” as they adopt the concept of solidarity as the guiding criterion when choosing products. This solidarity “begins with the members of the group and spreads to include the small producers who supply the products, respect for the environment, the peoples in the southern hemisphere and those who, because of the unjust division of wealth, suffer the unfair consequences of this model of development” (taken from [retegas.org](http://retegas.org), last accessed 20/07/2014).

Consequently, it is not just the purchasing element in the intentions of those promoting and encouraging these groups that unites the families belonging to a GAS, but rather the common search for a feasible alternative to the “consumer society” which is considered to be a model of society based on the exploitation of man and environmental resources (Cembalo et al., 2013; Grasseni, 2013, 2014a and 2014b; Grasseni et al., forthcoming; Graziano and Forno, 2012; Migliore et al., 2014; Schifani and Migliore, 2011;).

With a growth rate that remained quite limited for the whole of the nineteen nineties, in the last decade this experience has become widespread throughout Italy, although there is a greater concentration in the Northern regions of the country. According to the data provided by [retegas.org](http://retegas.org), the number of the GAS has risen from 153 in 2004, to 394 in 2008, 518 in 2009, to the current number of 980 ([www.retegas.org](http://www.retegas.org), last accessed 13/7/2014). This figure underestimates the actual number of groups in existence, as clearly shown by the results of our analysis.

## 3. Research Design and Data Collection

In 2011–2013, detailed data concerning GAS groups were gathered in the northern Italian region of Lombardy through two level questionnaires, combined with qualitative insights from participant observation. The aim of the research was to achieve a better understanding of the mechanisms and processes behind the diffusion of GAS groups in Italy, exploring individual decisions to join these groups as well as their internal organisation and action strategies.

Lombardy, with about ten million inhabitants, is the most densely populated Italian region and the region of Italy estimated to have the highest concentration of GAS groups in the country (<http://www.retegas.org>, last accessed 20/03/2014). The informality that characterises these groups, as well as their rapid spread over the last decade, required us to first generate an accurate map of these organisations as a prerequisite to the implementation of a survey.

Data collection took place via two online questionnaires. A first survey was designed for completion by the representatives of each individual GAS and was aimed at gathering information about the operational characteristics of the group such as its internal organization, logistics, and means of communication. Another questionnaire was intended for individual members of each group. The main objective of this part of the survey was to collect information about the features and motivations of gasistas (i.e. the members of the GAS), such as their socio-economic profile, educational and professional background, reasons for joining, and perceived achievements.

The questionnaires were launched on October 2011 and was concluded on March 2013; several reminders having been sent out over the months.

## 4. Findings

The first significant finding of the research was that the number of GAS groups turned out to be much higher than the number of self-registered groups. Through our mapping, we identified a total of 429 GAS in Lombardy, while at the time of the research the number of self-registered GAS on the [retegas.org](http://retegas.org) website was 227. The number of families belonging to these groups was 7,122. Of this number, 204 group coordinators and 1,658 group members completed the questionnaire online, totalling 47.55% of coordinators and 23.28% of individual members throughout Lombardy. A notable outcome considering that web-based surveys usually have a much lower response rate than other survey modes (see for example, Manfreda et al., 2008).

Apart from describing the groups, how they are organized and how they manage purchasing activities and the characteristics of the members of these groups, the study aimed at investigating motivations for joining a GAS and the purposes and the main results obtained through the collective purchasing. Furthermore, the study examines changes in consuming and other sustainability related habits after joining the consumer' group.

#### *4.1. Socio-economic profile and motivations*

Those who participate in Solidarity Purchase Groups tend to demonstrate certain characteristics. GAS tend to involve more females than male (62% of those replying to the questionnaire were in fact female) and more people belong to the middle age range of the population: of those who replied to the questionnaire 49.6% are aged between 30 and 44 years old and 42.9% between 45 and 60 years old.

Gas members tend to have a high level of education (of the people belonging to the GAS, the percentage of graduates is decidedly higher than the national average: as high as 49.5% compared with 13.5% shown by the ISTAT census in 2011), although those participating in the GAS do not seem to enjoy particularly high incomes: 22.3% declare a net monthly income of less than 2,000 euros, 56% an income of between 2,000 and 3,500 euros. Only 20% state that they have an income of over 3,500 euros (1.7% did not reply). Moreover, the research highlighted the fact that the GAS consist mostly of families with children (71.8%), of which in 25.6% of the cases there is at least one child under 5 years of age. 60.1% of the members of the GAS have a clerical job or are teachers, while workers (4.4%), the unemployed (2.7%), pensioners (4.1%), free-lance workers (13.2%) and businessmen/managers (5.6%) are under-represented.

Amongst the interviewees, the possibility to consume healthier food and the desire to support small, local producers obtain very similar percentages in the replies concerning the motivations for joining a Solidarity Purchasing Group (82% and 79.6% respectively). In the same way, percentages of over 50% were recorded for GAS members who stated the desire to participate and take concrete action (63.5%), the opportunity to create new relations (63.7%) or fears concerning environmental problems (56.2%) as the reason that gave rise to their decision to join a GAS. From these figures, it is evident, on the contrary, that "the price" did not represent the main reason for half of the interviewees (mentioned by 48.05% of the interviewees).

#### *4.2. How the GAS work*

Most of the GAS analysed provide for an equal division of the tasks. 72% of the 204 GAS analysed subdivide the 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 19.7% of the cases, within the GAS there is a group of people who organise the purchases, while only in 4.7% are the orders managed by a cooperative. The members of the GAS are also directly involved with the distribution of the purchases. In fact, it is the families themselves who belong to the GAS who provide spaces for the storage and distribution of the goods.

The decisions regarding the purchases, the producers and, more in general, the principles behind the GAS are discussed jointly during plenary meetings. In most groups (68.4%) this type of meeting is held monthly, in other cases they are held every 2-3 months (13.5%), or every 3-6 months (7.8%). Only in a few cases are the plenary meetings held annually and in 1.6% of the cases no plenary meetings are arranged.

Attention also appears to be high with regard to the rotation of the coordination roles. 85.9% of the cases in fact try to encourage a rota, even if in only 18.7% does this alternation actually take place, while more often (62.7%), despite their efforts, "it always tends to be the same people who do everything". Only 15% of the replies shows a stability in the assumption of the roles of coordination.

#### *4.3. Closing the Gap*

If the purchase is the central activity of every GAS and the choice of products and producers occupies a large part of the time and the discussions of the members of the GAS, according to the interviewees, the activity and results achieved by these groups go far beyond just the purchase. The data highlight how amongst the participants for example, not only there is, an increase in the consumption of organic food (79.4%), seasonal food (68.1%) and local produce (80.6%), with a drop in the consumption of meat (42.5%). Participation in these groups also facilitates the adoption of a more sustainable lifestyle (greater attention spreads through the group to recycling practices, 32.5%, towards actions that reduce the use of electricity, 29.3% and water 28.6%) and more collaborative behaviour is

encouraged amongst the people (38.7%), leading both to an increased interest in politics amongst the participants (especially local politics, 26%) as well as the sense of social effectiveness (23.9%).

## 5. Discussion of the main results

Despite previous studies which underlined that demographic characteristics are poor predictors of ethical views (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005), we have discovered that our data are similar to the results shown by other research on the socio-economic profile of responsible consumers (Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti et al., 2003). Those who participate in Solidarity Purchase Groups are mostly women with families and children, aged between 30 and 60 years old, with a high level of education and an average income. With regard to these data, the GAS seem to be a phenomenon that involves the middle and well-educated classes more than other more individual actions of responsible consumption (as for example the ethical consumers analysed by Dickson, 2005 or described by Barnett et al., 2005).

The results collected confirm that membership of a Solidarity Purchase Group is motivated by a series of reasons both of an individual (self-interested) type such as safeguarding one's own health, and of a social type, such as the wish to support local producers or the desire to participate with concrete action and create new relations. For almost half of them there is a fear concerning environmental problems, while, contrary to most of the previous studies on ethical consumers or on traditional consumer groups (see for example, Bray et al., 2011; Carrigan and Attala, 2001; Shaw and Clarke, 1999), price did not represent the main reason for joining a GAS. More than a way of saving money, the GAS seem to represent new spaces in which individuals can participate and experiment new practices, improve their commitment towards the issue of sustainability and devise and test concrete alternatives to an economic system that is not considered to be sustainable.

Our findings confirm Papaoikonomou et al. (2012) regarding utility (i.e. the possibility to have access to particular goods), social interaction and political ideology as the main initial motives for joining a group. Unlike the Responsible Consumption Cooperatives analysed by Papaoikonomou et al. (2012), these groups are characterised by their informality. In many ways, it can be argued that the main resource of the GAS consists of the capital in terms of relations among the individual members, a resource which, amongst other things, those promoting the GAS make a constant effort to reproduce by means of a horizontal organisation and a division of tasks that discourages delegation and at the same time avoids the risks of "professionalisation" (Grasseni, 2013).

It is the very convergence within the GAS of people who have had different experiences that contributes towards making these groups true and proper spaces for the processing of ideas and comparison, in which relations are formed and common practices and ideas take shape. The organisation itself of the group, based on reciprocity and the desire to maintain relations amongst the members on an equal level, seems to be part of the plan of action of these groups. As experiences in the past have also demonstrated, strong interpersonal bonds are, in fact, generally created in groups of consumers (Mayer, 1989).

Unlike other initiatives that have been growing over the last few years and which also aim to encourage the marketing and distribution of products with the same environmentally sustainable qualities (by way of an example mention can be made of the bio markets or factory outlets and e-commerce), within the Solidarity Purchase Groups, the purchase assumes a role of socialisation and exposure to forms of collective work for the common good. In other words, the collective purchase becomes a vehicle which daily weaves a relational nature into the web of exchanges. It is, in fact, within the GAS themselves that everyday lifestyles, expressed by means of critical consumerism, extend to other spheres of life and action.

The "self-educating" role that characterises these groups is of particular interest. As the data collected have shown, within the GAS the collective purchase plays an important co-education role in favour of responsible consumption, encouraging the awareness that choosing a certain type of consumption means taking into account the ways in which the territory is managed, safeguarding the countryside, supporting small producers and, in general, paying attention to the production process, and so on. Even when people who do not know each other join together over matters concerning their daily lives, they soon begin to ask other questions regarding issues such as the services offered by the local councils, schools, pollution and safeguarding the territory. In fact, discussions within the GAS lead to considerable changes in the style of consumption, in lifestyle and in the participation of the individual members of the groups.

These data suggest that, more than persuasive communication (convincing people with positive arguments), to change their habits and lifestyles it is important to appeal to the notion of commitment, in other words in order to increase the possibility of taking action, it is fundamental to enable people to participate in discussions amongst peers, in a free choice and in the very creation of alternatives to unsustainable mass consumption.

Therefore, participating in a GAS increases the awareness of the sustainability issue and this is a starting point for improving ethical behaviour as well. As Bray et al (2011) suggest, the personal experience of being part of a group boosts confidence and beliefs, two important factors (they consider them as to be exogenous variables) influencing ethical behaviour. The participation fosters cooperation and co-education, more informed decisions are taken and this could help to overcome (at least partially) many of the factors that usually impede ethical consumption (like laziness, lack or too much information, skepticism, cynicism, etc.).

## 6. Conclusions

Starting from the results of a research project on Solidarity Purchase Groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale - GAS) in Italy, the paper has discussed how, within consumer groups, for the very reason of their horizontal organisation which encourages learning amongst peers, the conditions are created to overcome the so-called “value-action gap”. The analysis shows how these groups can be considered “communities of practices” (Dunham et al., 2006) in which sustainable consumption progressively becomes a habitual practice and a source of grassroots social innovation towards sustainability.

Although some research has quantified the economic potential of the GAS as a factor with impacting regional agricultural economies (Brunori et al., 2011; Cembalo et al., 2013; Schifani and Migliore, 2011), our data show a low economic effect on the overall economy. On the other hand, what is valuable in these groups is their strong cultural impact on changing attitudes and general behaviour regarding sustainability related issues. After joining a solidarity consumer group and experimenting this kind of shared economic practice, people not only change their consumption but they also feel more collaborative and trustful towards others, more interested in politics and have an increased sense of social effectiveness. This kind of participation could be considered, therefore, as an innovative way to make people more aware of and more engaged in sustainability issues.

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