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Beyond Alternative Food Networks

*An Agenda for Comparative Analysis of Italy's
Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS) and Districts of Solidarity
Economy (DES) vis-à-vis US Community Economies*

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Beyond Alternative Food Networks: an agenda for comparative analysis of Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS) and Districts of Solidarity Economy (DES) vis-à-vis US Community Economies

Cristina Grasseni, Francesca Forno and Silvana Signori

The emergence of Solidarity Purchase Groups in Italy

Social and Solidarity Economies are experiencing unprecedented growth in several developed countries (Ash 2009, Hart et al. 2010). Recently, a national survey of the Farmers Union Coldiretti has claimed that 18% of Italians (about 7 million people) are allegedly involved in forms of collective provisioning. These include car-pooling, condominium shopping groups, and collective agreements with farmers (Rubino 2012).¹ About 150,000 people may be involved in *solidarity*-driven collectives such as Solidarity Purchase Groups or *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (henceforth GAS). GAS are grassroots networks that collectively organize direct provisioning, mostly of food and other items of everyday use (such as detergents and basic toiletry), but increasingly also of textiles and “alternative” services such as renewable energy, sustainable tourism, or even dental insurance. Retegas.org is the GAS national network, whose Charter explains that “solidarity” means cooperation and sympathy with producers, the environment, and other GAS members, or *gasistas* as they call themselves.²

Gasistas buy “in solidarity” with producers in the sense that they take into account difficulties and costs for often small and local farming enterprises. For instance, 80% of GASs interviewed in Milan stated that in at least one case, they paid for crops in advance of seeding them. With advance payments, the farmers has cash for crop preparation and also the guarantee that whatever the season, the crop will be placed at the negotiated price. This is a radically different working condition than those imposed by large distribution crop buyers.

In 2011-2013, the CORES project *Inside Relational Capital* gathered detailed data about GAS in Lombardy through a two-tiered questionnaire, combined with qualitative insights from participant observation. The online survey was administered to *gasistas* (one for each family in a group) and to GAS coordinators (one per group), focussing on socio-economic condition, educational and professional background, and

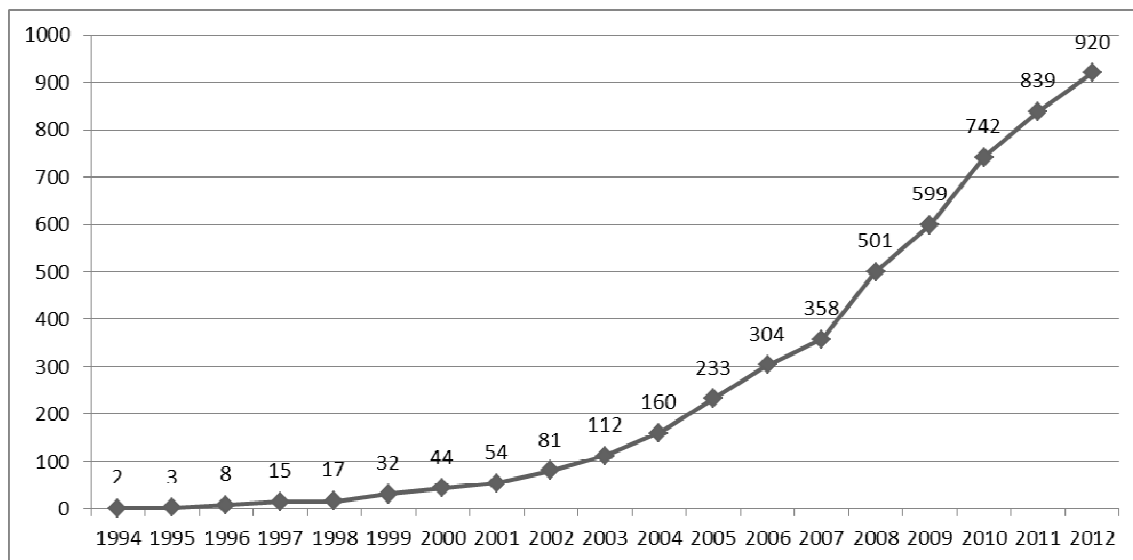
¹ Source: http://www.asca.it/news-Consumi_Coldiretti_spesa_di_gruppo_per_7_mln_Da_carpooling_a_Gas-1211852-ECO.html. Last accessed 31 October 2012.

² *Gasista* in the singular. We propose a gender-neutral plural, *gasistas*. The GAS Charter is available on line (in Italian) at <http://www.retecosol.org/docs/CartaRes0703.pdf> (last accessed 9 September 2012).

political and associative experience - as well as group logistics, organization, and communication. The survey gathered previously unavailable financial data to measure GAS impact on local and regional economies. A pilot project was completed on 62 GAS in and around the town of Bergamo in 2012. According to data about Bergamo, 35 GAS spent collectively almost 80,000 Euro per year – about 2,200 Euro per group.³ The project also contributed to charting GAS nationwide. By March 2013, 451 GAS were mapped in Lombardy. 193 group coordinators and 1,612 *gasistas* completed the CORES questionnaire on line.⁴

Since the first GAS was established in 1994, about one thousand GAS have spontaneously registered with *retegas.org* (Fig. 1), but this is only a partial census. The Bergamo pilot project mapped about double the number of previously known GAS. A parallel initiative in Rome came to similar results (Fonte et al. 2011). According to *Retegas*, it is safe to presume that at least 50% more GAS exist than the 1,000 currently registered. If each group enrolls 25 families of 4 people on average, each GAS would cater for about 100 consumers. Projecting the CORES financial data for Bergamo, 1,500 groups nationwide would account for at least 30 million Euro.

Figure 1: GAS registered with retegas.org per year.



Source: *retegas.org*

³ The data about the Bergamo pilot study are available online as Osservatorio CORES (2013), *Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni: Provincia di Bergamo. Indagine Osservatorio CORES e Tavolo Nazionale RES*, Bergamo: CORES Working Papers, No. 1. <http://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/27485>.

⁴ The data presented here are part of a wider research project, *Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni*, carried out by the CORES Research Group under the scientific direction of Francesca Forno, Cristina Grasseni and Silvana Signori at Bergamo University (www.unibg.it/core). The study was endorsed by the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (Tavolo RES www.retecosol.org) and carried out in collaboration with Davide Biolghini and Giuseppe Vergani of Tavolo RES.

CORES appointed a number of “facilitators”, *gasistas* themselves, who would scout and chart existing GAS and liaise with each GAS coordinator, to request permission to interview the group. The survey was designed in tight collaboration with representatives of *Tavolo RES*, the nationwide Working Group for a Network of Solidarity Economy in Italy. The questionnaires were tested on about twenty representatives of as many GAS networks, at a training workshop sponsored by Tavolo RES. Bergamo was chosen as a pilot project because of CORES good knowledge of the context, and because all three of CORES co-directors were *gasistas* themselves. The mapping effort happened in close collaboration with a nascent network of local GAS, *ReteGasBergamo*, established in October 2009.

Thanks to this preparatory work, by December 2011, 62 GAS were charted in the Bergamo area alone, 42 of which agreed to participate in the survey, namely 71%. These included large and long-established groups serving up to one hundred and fifty families, as well as small groups with no more than eight families. The online survey closed in March 2012. This procedure established a protocol, which CORES replicated in Lombardy and is currently being extended to Sicily and Friuli, in collaboration with local “facilitators” with comparable knowledge of the local contexts.

Our survey of 1,612 *gasista* families in Lombardy further established that 44,8% of the groups engaged between 21 and 40 families each, whilst 34,4% involved between 1 and 20 families. Larger groups do exist but the majority are small- to medium-sized networks of families, which get together to establish strategies for collective and solidarity-driven purchase.

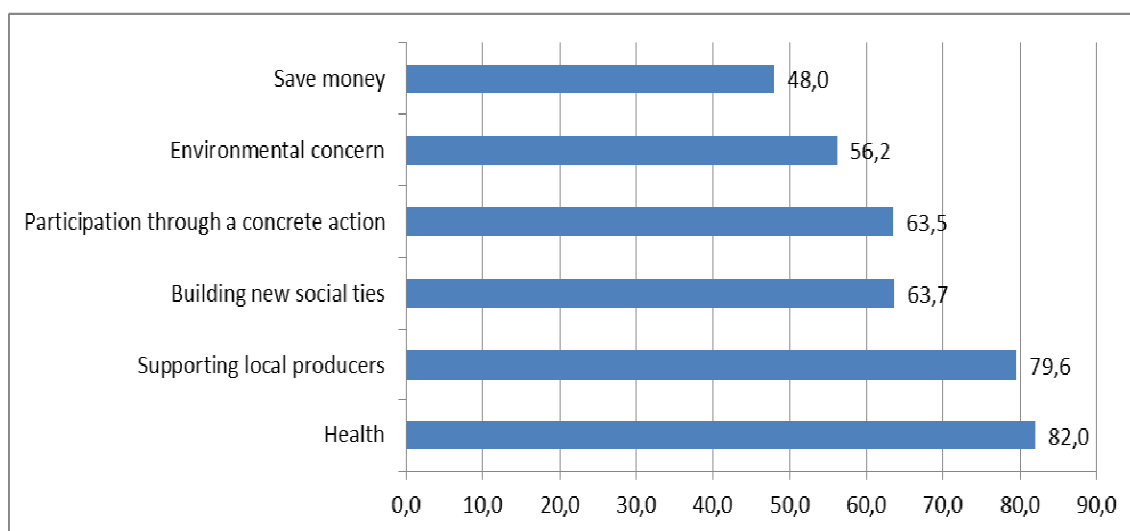
In the next section, we outline in detail *gasistas*’ statistical portrait. Our claim is that participating in a GAS socializes one in alternative socio-economic circuits, which empower consumers seeking direct and collective relationships with providers. In the following two sections, we argue that GAS not only increase families opportunities for affordable and quality food in times of crisis, but also re-embed provisioning in a relational fabric. GAS have a political impact on context-specific regional economies, increasing social engagement and active citizenship, for instance vis-à-vis the role of the mafia in Italian economy. In sum, GAS function as de Tocqueville’s “schools of democracy”, building social capital beyond mere consumption. Finally, we highlight some elements of similarity and difference between Italian Districts of Solidarity Economy and Massachusetts Community Economies, as promising parallel developments of Solidarity Economy in comparable contexts.

Solidarity Purchase Groups as family-driven collectives

Who are *gasistas*? 60% of them work as clerks, teachers, professors. We should think of them as mostly office workers. 47,2% are couples with children over 5 years old, whilst another 24,6% are couples with children under 5 years old. On the whole, *gasistas* are unmistakably *families*: only 6,9% are single. 37,8% of the interviewees has a degree or a higher degree, another 37,7% has high school diplomas.

The following chart records the types of motivation for joining a GAS. As one can see, despite the crisis, the main drive is not to get a better quality/cost bargain, but to protect one's own health, implying that *gasistas* seek better quality food (in most cases, organic) through support to smallholders (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Motivations for joining a GAS (% very much agree/agree)



Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

We asked only one person per family - the one that does most of GAS-related work - to fill in the questionnaire. 62% of them were women, 49,6% aged between 30 and 44 and 42,9% aged between 45 and 60. This hardly fits the stereotypical portrait of the political activist. *Gasistas* are *provisioning activists*, in that they are the same people that would typically bear the burden of providing for their families (namely mostly working middle-aged women). They re-fashion that burden, by socializing it in a Solidarity Purchase Group. GAS buy collectively bread, pasta, flour, milk, dairies, oil, fish, meat, detergents, wine, preserves, juices and jams, fruit and vegetables. About half of them also buy clothes through a GAS. Most of them organize this form of collective

purchase through monthly meetings, where *gasistas* meet face to face and discuss what to buy, from whom, in which quantities, and product referents report on their activity of liaising with each producer involved, regarding prices, logistics, product quality etc.

Gasistas are not rich and they should not be confused with gourmet food lovers. Conviviality may play a part in GAS practice, with farm site visits and occasional dinners or fairs. But GAS are first and foremost solidarity-driven provisioning collectives. In Lombardy, where the cost of living is more expensive than elsewhere in Italy, their family income ranges between 2,500 Euro and 3,600 Euro (monthly, gross) in 34% of cases and between 2,000 Euro and 2,500 Euro in 22% of cases. This is why any changes in their consumption and provisioning styles are significant, as one assumes that they are not dictated by a radical chic fad or by a question of taste only, but by learning new lifestyles though operating within the constraints of fairly tight family budgets.

The CORES survey shows how their shopping basket, consumption styles, and even styles of civic participation changed, sometimes dramatically, after joining a GAS (Tabs 1, 2 & 3).

Table 1: Changes in consumption habits

	Increased	decreased	Introduced	No change	n.a.	Total
Vegetable	50,4	0,4	0,7	47,4	1,2	100
Organic	79,4	0,2	7,7	11,6	1,1	100
Wholemeal	52,9	0,6	10	35,2	1,4	100
Legumes	38,5	0,5	3,7	56,3	1,1	100
Local	80,6	0,2	5,4	12,6	1,1	100
Seasonal	68,1	0,1	2,8	27,8	1,2	100
Cereals	45,1	0,3	12,8	40,5	1,3	100
Meat	3,1	42,5	0,2	52	2,2	100
FairTrade	39,6	1,4	5,6	51,8	1,5	100
mafia- free	44,6	0,6	14,7	38,5	1,5	100
Ecological	41,4	0,6	25	31,9	1,1	100

Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

Table 2: Changes in lifestyles

	Yes	No	Already did	n.a.	Total
Decreased purchasing pre-cooked food	24,8	5,1	69,4	0,7	100
Decreased shopping in supermarket	41,4	47,9	9,7	0,9	100
Increased purchases in local shops	27,5	33	37,9	1,6	100
Started producing food at home	38,3	31,9	29	0,9	100
Started growing vegetable	16,2	54,8	27,6	1,4	100

Started to use less the car	17,6	46,9	34,5	1	100
Increased recycling	32,5	6,7	60	0,9	100
More attention to energy consumption	29,3	22,9	46,3	1,4	100
More attention to water consumption	28,6	6,1	64,3	1	100

Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

Table 3: Changes in styles of participation

	Yes	No	Already did	n.a.	Total
More interested in problems concerning my town of residence	26	30,3	42,5	1,2	100
More interested in politics in general	7,9	35,8	55	1,3	100
More able to cooperate with people in general	39,7	16,1	42,9	1,4	100
Feeling more able to influence public policy	23,9	60,8	13,8	1,6	100

Unpublished data, CORES Project “Dentro il Capitale delle Relazioni”.

Nevertheless, *gasistas* do not present a rosy picture about themselves. Critical points highlighted are the effective involvement of *all* members in the running of the group (57%), and the difficulty of finding volunteers for new tasks (13,5%). Managing a GAS is time consuming: most of them are organised on a system of volunteered task-sharing, to ensure the smooth running of finance, logistics and operations at no additional operational cost. The vast majority of groups are organized around a simple mailing list (no Facebook pages!) and meet in person once a month to make consensual decisions about orders, deliveries, and all other activities. 62,7% of *gasista* reported that “we try to rotate roles and tasks, but they tend to remain allocated to the same people”. Logistics plays an important role. The main reason for abandoning a producer is

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