

# **Between resilience and resistance: SCMOs in Italy in times of crisis**

Francesca Forno, University of Bergamo

Paolo R. Graziano, University of Padova

## **Abstract**

Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (Forno and Graziano 2014) are social movement actors that work towards building dynamics within communities in which environmental protection and social justice issues are inextricably intertwined. Examples of such phenomena include solidarity-based exchanges and networks, new consumer-producer cooperatives, barter groups, urban gardening, time banks, local savings groups, urban squatting and others similar experiences. Although not new, over the last decade, such experiences have registered a rapid increase. Behind this diffusion, we may see various factors such as: (I) increasing attention towards sustainability among citizens; (II) changes in consumption practices due to the increase in unemployment and the reduction of credit access; (III) a general loss of meaningfulness in the wake of consumerism and the rise of social individualism.

Starting out from this analytical framework, the paper is aimed at understanding on how collective action was deployed, sustained and transformed by the 2008 economic crisis by looking at three different cases of SCMOs in the Italian case: the Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (solidarity-based consumer groups or solidarity purchasing groups, SPGs), Addiopizzo (a relatively new anti-racket organization which literally means ‘goodbye to protection money - pizzo’ solicited by organized crime) and an Italian factory ‘recovered’ by its workers in 2013, Rimaflow. In particular, the paper aims to discuss why, how and whether Sustainable Community Movement Organizations emerge and succeed in triggering sustained political engagement. Data for the analysis come from various sources, such as interviews with key actors from the three SCMOs, surveys among activists and participant observation.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (SCMOs), Alternative economic practices, Political Consumerism, Collective action, Italy.

## 1. Introduction

Social movements tend to follow a cyclical dynamic and protest cycles are often characterized by the emergence of new organizations and, in some cases, by shifts in the means (repertoire of actions) utilized by movement actors to exert pressure on their targets. If we look back to the history of social movements, we can observe how over the years they have changed with regard to their organization, priorities and forms of action. As they moved from class struggle to rights struggles, the societal changes they contributed to bring forth led to the establishment of new rights in the environment and welfare domain.

At the turn of the new century, with the advent of large anti/alter-globalization mobilizations, the action repertoire of social movements has expanded: in the late Nineties and the early years of the new millennium, for example, boycott campaigns have been increasingly utilized to foster changes in many different fields, along with a new focus on so-called "political consumerism" (Micheletti 2003). The term "political consumerism" refers to the purchasing of goods and services based not only on price and product quality, but also on the evaluation of producers' behaviour and production methods with respect to environmental sustainability, labour justice, and human rights. This mode of citizen participation stresses the importance of individual responsibility for the common good through acknowledgement that the act of consumption is a fundamental part of the production process (Micheletti 2009).

Given the centrality assumed by consumption in late capitalist societies, it does not come with surprise that many contemporary social movements organization have started to appeal to individuals in their role of consumers and have identified "political consumerism" as an important form of action through which achieve social change.

Traditionally more widespread in North America and Northern Europe, in the late 90s, the rise of political consumerism was strongly influenced by the events that followed the so-called Battle of Seattle (the demonstration against the WTO in 1999). The Global Justice Movement, as it is known, has identified in the market one of the main privileged arenas for political activism (della Porta 2007). This was the period during which political consumerism began to extend to an increasingly large number of people. Since the mid-90s political consumerism has experienced major growth also in contexts where it had long been a niche phenomenon, such as Italy (Forno and Ceccarini 2006; Ferrer-Fons, 2006; Koos 2012).

However, after a phase of expansion, during the anti-globalization cycle of protest in which especially boycotting become a widespread individual choice for opposing so-called neo-liberal economic policies, political consumerism started to be increasingly utilized by a variegated range of SMOs as a tool to reconnect local actors working in the same territory. Examples of such efforts include barter groups, urban gardening, new consumer-producer networks and cooperatives, recovered factories, time banks, local savings groups, urban squatting and others similar experiences which represent typical examples of continuous reactivation of people's desire to be agents of their own destiny.

As it will be discussed also below, in all such experiences alternative provisioning moves beyond the narrow understanding of political consumerism as it brings different collectives together and helps them to develop strategies of territorial and economic intervention, in the name of the common good, of sustainability, and as a critique of commonly held conceptions of "growth" as synonymous with "development."

Such solidarity-based practices of production, exchange and consumption can be seen directly connected with: (I) an increasing attention towards sustainability (II) the economic crisis (III) a growing "research of sense" (Castells et al. 2012) that appears as a new angst of the "consumer society" (Bauman, 2010). While providing the necessary resources to economically support collective action, such practices facilitates in fact that process of social learning and participative decision-making, which represent a way to foster alternative resilience processes (Keck and Sakdapolrak, 2013).

The paper is organised as follows: first, the characteristics and specifics of Sustainable Community Movements Organizations (Forno and Graziano, 2014) will be summarized. After this introductory part, the paper will reflect upon three different SCMOs, which have emerged in Italy over the last two decades in three different social movement sectors. The three SCMOs are: the Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (solidarity-based consumer groups), Addiopizzo (a relatively new anti-racket organization) and an Italian factory 'recovered' by its workers in 2013. In looking at these three cases, particular attention will be devoted on how collective action was enacted and has been sustained. Data for the analysis came from several sources of information, such as interviews with key actors belonging all three organizations, participant observation and surveys among activists.

## **2. The Concept of Sustainable Community Movement Organization (SCMOs)**

In response to the multidimensional crises, the consolidation of grassroots mutualistic and cooperative experiences, within which new affiliations for collective action are experienced, is on the rise. The inability of state-run institutions to propose solutions and implement policies to address increasing environmental and economic problem has given rise to new SMOs that seems to take a different organizational form and use different way to exert pressure to their targets.

In the current economic crisis of industrialized society, social movements face in fact two types of challenges: firstly, they are confronting institutions that are less capable of and have no propensity for mediating new socio-economic demands; secondly, they are experiencing difficulties in building strong and lasting bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people. The latter are fundamental resources for the emergence of collective action; however, the highly individualized structure of contemporary society makes the creation of social ties ever the more difficult. As a consequence, contemporary waves of protest are often short-lived.

Indeed, it is a fact that even though conditions are not favourable, social movements have continued to expand and promote community-led initiatives for social and economic sustainability. In some cases, these initiatives play a decisive role in the fight against poverty and in guaranteeing human livelihood.

What has been called Sustainable Community Movement Organisations (SCMOs) are social movement organisations that have the peculiarity of mobilising citizens primarily via their purchasing power (Forno and Graziano 2014). Within these initiatives, however, political consumerism is not just utilized to build awareness to step up pressure on producers and corporations, but rather to facilitate the construction of new alliances among different actors starting from the local level – shopkeepers, farmers, entrepreneurs, consumer and environmental groups, local public administrations etc. – that often take on the role of alternative production and consumption networks (Cembalo et al., 2012; Grasseni, 2013; Migliore et al., 2014).

As the cases analysed below will show, while sharing several common traits with social movements of the past, SCMOs tend to bypass the traditional state-addressing repertoires of action, and to focus on a self-changing society as part of everyday politics, where the public and private spheres are blurred (Castells et al. 2012; Kousis and Paschou 2014).

The concept of SCMOs is therefore useful in that it allows explaining movement-building dynamics within communities, as well as how movements sustain themselves during periods when there is no

visible protest. In other words, it emphasizes the informal and cultural elements of movements, including amorphous social networks of individuals and the various rituals and events that support movement ideas, as well as explicitly political organizations and campaigns.

If political consumerism has been initially interpreted as a form of post-materialism and as a result of increasing wealth, within SCMOs this form of action needs to be re-considered (Guidi and Andretta, 2015). In fact, within such experiences, the act of shopping is not simply promoted individually, but socialized among different groups of people, organized either formally or informally. To put it more simply, rather than to be an end in itself, within SCMOs, political consumerism represents a tool through which these organizations build, construct and reinforce their ties in order to foster collective action. In other words, in such experiences consumption represent a key tool for recruiting and mobilising individuals (Dubuisson-Quellier et al. 2011).

Even if SCMOs mobilize and structure their claims not primarily thought contentious activities, such as for example protest action, to a certain extent, the contentious dimension of these actors can be seen as embedded in their social and economic networking activities. It is in fact through solidarity exchanges that these organizations support strategies of direct action (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015) such as information sharing, awareness raising, educating and lobbying.

Although SCMOs pay a huge debt (also in term of activists) to the previously developed Global Justice Movement (della Porta, 2007; Forno and Graziano, 2014), differently from earlier mobilizations, SCMOs are more oriented in building constructive and thoroughly organized alternatives inside contemporary capitalist societies by acting simultaneously at the cultural, economic and political level.

At the cultural level, SCMOs seek to oppose consumerism as an economic order that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever-greater amounts through the affirmation of "new imaginary" (Latouche 2010). Such "new imaginary" is supported by convivial activities, the organization of seminars and conferences, different types of social events organized with the goal to create space for civic learning.

At the economic level, these experiences encourage greater economic self-sufficiency as well as facilitate the construction and sustainability of economic circuits, which favour local production and consumption of seasonal, fresh, traditional, often organic products or support the provisioning of renewable energy sources to reduce reliance on fossil fuels (insulation, efficient appliances, carpooling and community transport).

At the political level, especially through the promotion of political consumerism, SCMOs have been often successful in proposing models of social and/or environmental regulatory governance based on voluntary actions and participation which instead of imposing coercively a certain behaviour has the objective of stimulating collective responsibility-taking.

### **3. The culture and organization of SCMOs**

Although with some differences depending on their contexts of origin, SCMOs share several common traits. All these SMOs move from the critique of the individualized consumerist lifestyle and support sustainable ways of production and consumption, based on simpler and sober way of life. Here it is often pointed out that the current standards of consumption damage the environment, contribute to climate change and to use up resources at a rate, which is unsustainable.

SCMOs share a common understanding that an excessive attention paid only to the price of products has undermined the guarantee of labour standards and accentuated exploitation of workers with the aim to reduce the overall unitary cost of labour.

Such movement organization also share the idea of the need to abandon ecologically destructive economic system and enact more sustainable form of production based on the valorisation and revitalization of the local economy. Although their focus is primarily on the local level, SCMOs are not “parochial” in the sense that not only do they support local producers (and/or community projects) but they also are concerned with the transnational distribution of wealth and life opportunities.

SCMOs try to go beyond the capitalist market setting by encouraging ongoing and direct relationships between different actors (workers, producers and consumers). For example, sustained community agriculture organizations, as we shall see also while discussing the SPG experience, create and consolidate local social relationships between producers and consumers, which is also characterized by the presence of a monetary exchange (i.e. buying specific products) but is primarily cantered on the social relationship created and not on the commercial one. Put differently, in the case of SCMOs the commercial or economic exchange is a by-product of a social exchange (relationship) and not viceversa.

Finally, another specific trait of SCMOs is the presence of diffused mutual solidarity. Such mutual solidarity is deeply rooted in the territory but is often facilitated but new technologies, such as internet, which make communication and connections faster and cheaper (Parigi and Gong 2014).

As we will see by presenting the three cases highlighted in this paper, through the use of political consumerism, SCMOs are contributing to aggregate around a common instance and projects a growing number of actors. The alternative economic networks they build offer the means to re-spatialize supply, re-embedding production, and reconnecting local actors with the physical territorial attributes and vernacular ecology of their region. Furthermore, these practices create scope for new market arrangements, where more horizontal links are established between a wide range of actors, often explicitly aiming at contributing to strengthen the local economy and creating new employment opportunities.

#### **4. How political consumerism enacts collective action: Three solidarity-based practices of production, exchange and consumption**

The 2008 economic crisis and the ensuing austerity policies seem to have fuelled the growth of a wide range of practices aimed at redressing the escalation of labour and life 'precarization'. Over the recent years, we have witnessed the rise and spread of numerous self-help and self-production initiatives inspired by mutualism and economic cooperation.

As seen, since the 90s political consumerism started to be increasingly widespread also in countries where there was not this tradition, such as in Italy. During the GJM cycle of protest the increase of the demand of "fair" products helped to strengthen and consolidate experiences such as fair trade organizations, responsible tourism and ethical finance. The consolidation of the fair trade sector allow a certain level of stability over time in debates and practices related to political consumerism and this even at the time when the no/new global mobilization lost intensity and newsworthiness.

As we shall see discussing the three cases below, the growing number of responsible consumers appear to have facilitated the spread of solidarity-based practices of production, exchange and consumption fostering the condition for socio-territorial (re)connection. SCMOs characterized in fact for 1) their social innovation potential; 2) their potential to produce spaces in which the relationships between economy and territory are redesigned. By so doing, they stimulate and reinforce the relations among people who reside and operate in the same territory, thus increasing what has also been called the "spatial capital" (Soja 2010).

While traditional SMOs have been studied mainly by looking at their relations with political institutions and actors (della Porta and Diani 2006, Tarrow 1995, Kriesi et al. 1995), in the case of

SCMOs it is necessary to move beyond political opportunities structures by focusing on the interplay between economic, political and cultural aspects (Guidi and Andreatta, 2015).

The following pages will summarize the dynamics pertaining to some grassroots organizations, which are trying to respond to the intensification of economic problems by emphasizing solidarity and the use of 'alternative' forms of consumption as a means to reconstruct social relations and to enact collective action. In particular, in what follows we will address the following questions: which role do political consumerism and alternative economic practices. played in the formation of SCMOs? And how are such experiences diffused and sustained?

### ***Whetting citizens' appetite for political responsibility: the case of SPGs***

SPGs are mutual systems of provisioning, usually set up by groups of people who cooperate to buy food and other commonly used goods directly from producers at prices that are equitable to both parties. Within such groups individual and families join together to collectively buy bread, pasta, flour, milk, dairy products, oil, fish, meat, detergents, wine, preserves, juices and jams, fruit and vegetables and other items of everyday use (such as detergents and basic toiletries). They also increasingly purchase textiles and "alternative" services such as renewable energy and sustainable tourism.

For SPGs, the term "solidarity" represents a sort of a guiding principle in the choice of products and producers. This means that unlike other collective purchasing groups, SPGs do not simply strive to get the cheapest price, but instead choose their products and producers with the explicit goal of building a viable alternative to the "consumer society" which they tend to regard as a societal model based on the exploitation of human and natural resources. In our individualized and fragmented societies, these groups represent an important way for people to bond together. Starting from the basic act of food provisioning, SPGs help citizens to start asking questions about not only quality, sustainability, and the costs of goods as consumers, but also about municipal services, schools and education, work, and so forth.

Research has often highlighted that SPGs are not simply a "new type of consumer organization," but rather an innovative form of political participation in an overall context of high levels of distrust in traditional channels of participation, such as that in political parties (Carrera, 2009; Graziano and Forno, 2012). Although their overall economic impact seems to be limited, they play in important societal, relational, and political roles as spaces of apprenticeship for a new type of consumer

citizenship (Grasseni 2013; Forno et. al. 2015). Through these groups, people not only satisfy “liberal guilt” needs by shopping ethically. They actually join to try to make a difference to environmental and social justice issues. In other words, within such organizations political consumerism does not represent a form of merely individual responsibility (Micheletti 2009) to develop collective, citizenship-driven alternative styles of provisioning. These groups facilitate both the circulation of resources (information, tasks, money, and goods) and common interpretations of reality, thus providing a framework for collective action that enables not only the deployment of alternative lifestyles but also to formation of new economic direct ties between citizens and between citizens and producers, usually small producers in marginal areas.

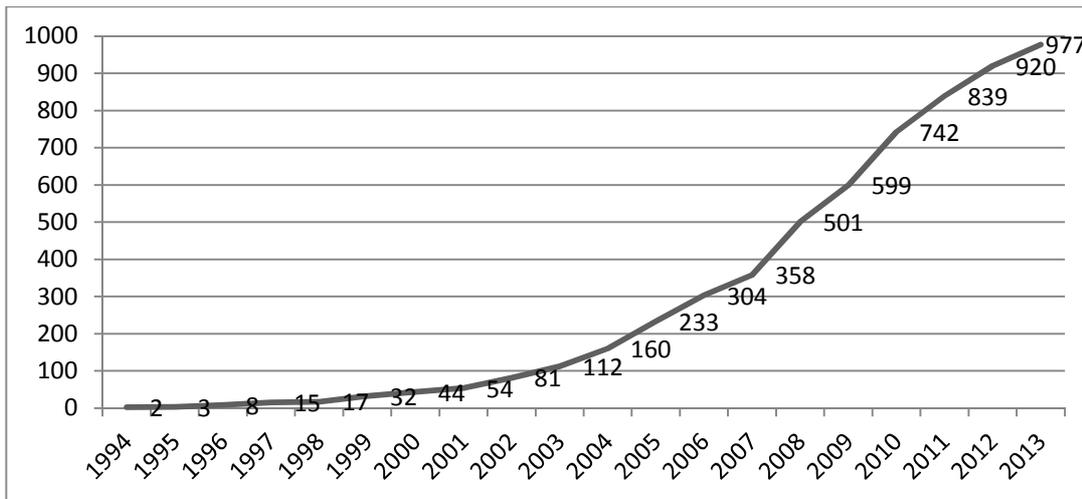
Activities within a SPG entail for example collecting orders from other group members, establishing direct relationship with producers by checking availability, travelling to pick up the order, paying in advance for everyone else, and arranging a time and place for other members to come by, pay up, and collect their share<sup>1</sup>. However seemingly inefficient, this time-consuming method forces every member to be proactive and to participate in the group with equal responsibilities, fact that favours intensive processes of socialization. Through telephone calls and sending of emails, the partaking in visits that inevitably lead to follow-up invitations to cultural and political events of common interest, the circulation of relevant readings and news on the group mailing list, these groups through their action contribute to opening up new space for discussion and exchange of mutual information that actually make possible to provision “alternatively”.

Although the first SPG in Italy was established during the mid-1990s, this particular type of groups became increasingly common during the following decade when it spread to all of the Italian regions. According to data provided by the website of the national SPG network, the number of self-registered SPGs has risen from 153 in 2004, to 394 in 2008, to 518 in 2009, and to 977 in 2014. However, these figures, as is argued below, are likely significant underestimates of the real number of existing groups (Fig. 1).

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, each member of the group usually buys one item (let’s say pasta) in great numbers on behalf of everyone else and then distributes it to other members of the SPG.

Figure 1 - Growth trend of Solidarity Purchase Groups in Italy, 1994-2013



Source: SPG registered on [www.retegas.org](http://www.retegas.org)

Compared to other “alternative food networks” that have emerged in affluent countries over the last decade—such as the French AMAP (Associations pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne) or the American CSA (Community-Supported Agriculture)—being part of a SPG requires a higher level of commitment and involvement. Members are in fact usually asked to participate actively in the organization of their group by taking part in the creation of norms, the management of financial and logistical activities, and the planning of convivial and informational activities. This is because SPGs, unlike CSAs, are largely consumer- rather than producer-driven. Moreover, at the local level, once these groups achieve a critical mass, they sometimes assemble themselves into *Distretti di Economia Solidale* (Districts of Solidarity Economy) that are roughly similarly to the Anglo-Saxon transition town movement and have explicit governance objectives (Grasseni 2013; Grasseni 2014). Thus, within a SPG, political consumerism becomes much more than a way to compensate for the inability of institutions to pursue pro-environmental policies and human-rights protection through a so-called “politics of the self” or “life politics” (Giddens 1990; de Moor 2015). SPGs are collective experiences, designed to co-produce the common good by (re)building reciprocity and trust among diverse subjects operating in the same territory, directly intervening in local food provisioning chains, and reintroducing social and environmental sustainability issues in regional economies, sometimes with the explicit aim of participating in the governance of the territory. In this regard, research shows that these groups represent important examples of grassroots innovation. However, constrained in scope, they demonstrate the will to develop local and regional solutions to

sustainability problems (Brunori et al. 2011; Migliore et al. 2014) a will that seems to have increased after the 2008 crisis.

### ***Political consumerism as a tool for self-organizing anti-mafia communities***

Thanks to the actions of a relatively small SMOs called Addiopizzo, political consumerism has also entered recently in the repertoire of the anti-mafia movement, proving to be a particularly effective strategy, as it has also enlisted the participation of certain social actors traditionally reluctant to take collective action against the mafia, thus allowing for the achievement of goals never previously attained (Forno and Gunnarson 2010). The incorporation of political consumerism in the anti-mafia repertoire of action represents another example of important transformations taking place in the organizational form and strategy of several contemporary social movements.

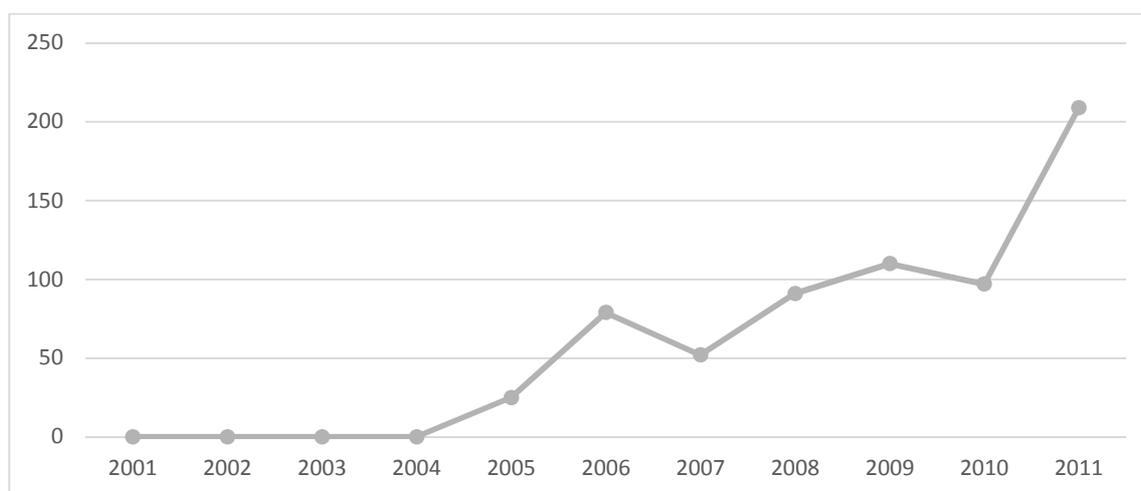
When Addiopizzo started to mobilize, market-based actions were already well-known among an increasing proportion the Italian population, mainly the middle classes, the young and the better educated. As in other Western European Countries, Italian consumers were showing an increasing willingness to take part in political consumerism (Forno and Ceccarini, 2006, Ferrer-Fons 2006). The success of political consumerism in spurring civic mobilization and social change seems to have encouraged anti-mafia activists to emulate groups and organizations that used the market as a political arena. Addiopizzo thus incorporated market-based actions among its tactics for fighting organized crime.

Addiopizzo's first public appearance occurred during the night between June 28th–29th 2004, when thousands of stickers edged with a black border – like traditional Italian death announcements – were plastered all around the city centre of Palermo. The stickers, which read: “*Un intero popolo che paga il pizzo è un popolo senza dignità*” (‘A whole community of people who pay the pizzo is a community without dignity’), were not addressing anyone in particular, but deliberately aimed to rally all Palermo citizens to the cause. Just a couple of days later, on July 1st 2004, the ‘*attachini*’ (bill-stickers) explained that sentence in an interview in the regional newspaper *Il Giornale di Sicilia* and in an open letter published on the same day in the Palermo edition of *la Repubblica*. It was in this moment that, by echoing the discourses and campaigns of the Fairtrade and anti-sweatshop movements, political consumerism was for the first time explicitly introduced among the practices utilized by a grassroots anti-racket organization. From that point on, Addiopizzo activists

started working to create the conditions for the emergence of new alliances between conscious consumers and local economic actors resisting the *pizzo*.

Thus, also within the context of anti-mafia mobilization, the contemporary increase of political consumerism among broader sectors of the population seems to have re-vitalized citizens' involvement and participation. Contrary to those who have described the rise of lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998) as a shift away from traditional political participation, also this case seems to show that the personalization of politics – which implies a deep embodiment of commitment and belief – can constitute a base for more sustained and public political engagement (Lichterman 1995). Here again we can observe how critical consumption plays an important role as key tool for both recruiting and mobilising individuals as well as for building an alternative economic network based on revitalized form of solidarity and flows of mutuality between different actors. In its specific, also the Addiopizzo's initiative recalls those alternative economic networks which are (re)emerging in local communities where various groups and movement actors work towards localized development and are driven by the hope of improving human conditions (Gibson-Graham 2006; Conill et al., 2012). As in the case of SPG also in this case critical consumption was utilized to (re)build reciprocity and trust among diverse subjects operating in the same territory. Moreover, as it is possible to note in Fig. 2, similarly to the growth of SPGs, also the number of shopkeepers and entrepreneurs who joined the Addiopizzo initiative increased after 2008, i.e. in connection with the worsen of the economic crisis.

Figure 2 - Growth trend of shopkeepers and entrepreneurs that joined the Addiopizzo initiative



Source [www.addiopizzo.org](http://www.addiopizzo.org)

As in the case of other SCMOs, also Addiopizzo thus played simultaneously on the three distinct levels (cultural, economic and political). At the cultural level, such organization was able to affirm new discourses based on individualized-collective practices. At the economic level, it encouraged greater economic collaboration among local economic actors striving to survive in a particularly adverse economic context exacerbated by the crisis. Finally, at the political level, especially through the promotion of political consumerism, Addiopizzo has been successful in proposing an innovative regulatory governance tool based on voluntary actions and participation which if clearly did not solve the mafia problem, put the racket issue on the public agenda and political (Forno 2015).

### ***Bringing together workers and citizens through “alternatively produced goods”: The case of Rimaflow***

Political consumerism utilized as a tool to both recruiting and mobilizing individual was also found central in the experience of an Italian ‘recovered’ factory that was (re)born in 2013 in the hinterland of Milan called RiMaflow.

As a contemporary phenomenon, recovered factories emerged in the wake of Argentina’s debt crisis of 2001. *Fábricas* or *empresas recuperadas* is the name used to describe instances in which the workers of failed businesses restarted their activity without the former owners. Such instances were part of a much larger movement of social protest, sometimes called the *Argentinazo*. As Kabat (2011) has argued: “The factory takeover movement served as a catalyst for the popular mobilization that accompanied the *Argentinazo* but at the same time was one of its major beneficiaries”.

In Italy, the vast majority of ‘recovered factories’ has emerged after the 2008 crisis<sup>2</sup>. However, the Italian phenomenon seems to have very little in common with the Argentinian one. In Italy, in fact, the majority of recovered factories have not partaken of the wide social unrest that took place in Argentina and are better described as one particular way of creating new cooperatives, sometimes described as workers’ buyouts (Orlando 2015).

However, within the experiences of Italian ‘recovered factories’ Rimaflow appears to be different. Here, in fact, the occupation has led to a number of new income-generating activities aiming at

---

<sup>2</sup> A total of 64 cases were found, spanning from 1982 to the present day. The vast majority has emerged after the 2008 crisis. Six of these cases, however, are no longer active, while two are struggling to survive. Emilia Romagna and Tuscany host the greatest number of cases, respectively 17 and 15 (Veneto has 7, Lombardy 6, Lazio 5, Marche Umbria Campania and Sicily 3 each, Friuli and Puglia 1 each) (Orlando 2015).

building a system of relations through the factory's occupation based on self-help, mutualism and cooperation: all strategies that appeared to activists to respond better to the general impoverishment caused by the crisis.

Facing the prospect of being left alone and at the mercy of the labour market, which gave them little hope of being employed again (partly because of the perceived weakness of trade unions), Rimaflow workers decided in fact to work on building a series of new activities with the aim to establishing alliances with other social movements based on mutualism and cooperation. In such decision, declining solidarity among workers determined by the failure of the union struggle counted a lot. Some activists even saw in the need to rely mutualism, rather than self-management, a recapitulation of the history of the labour movement in Europe and Italy during the 19th and early 20th century. Mutual organisations, in fact, had historically preceded the unions, often contributing to their formation. Their decision was therefore a consequence of the involution of the labour movement, and of wider society, towards the conditions of the 1800s.

Until this day, they have established several diverse activities. The main warehouse has been turned into a poly-functional space that is used by local groups for concerts, meetings, movie screenings, plays, etc. There is also a kitchen and a bar. In the second warehouse, an artisans' market with permanent stallholders takes place on weekends. Another warehouse has been turned into a parking space for campervans, and another one into a storage area for people who cannot afford garages. All these activities are meant to generate an income for the workers, but also to raise funds to set up two productive activities. One would be the repairing and recycling of electronic goods, which already happens on the site but at a very small scale. The other is the repairing of pallets (the wooden frames used to move cargo). As the vast majority of those who repair pallets use unregulated, poorly paid labor, the Rimaflow workers aim to sell theirs to retailers as 'ethically produced' pallets. Finally, the workers have taken to distributing food from organic growers in the south of Italy (mostly oranges) to groups of critical consumers in and around Milan, using the site to stock the crates. Workers do also produce some products as the *Ripassata* (tomato juice) or the *Rimoncello* (lemon liqueur) which main function is performing as bridges between workers and the outside world of citizens-consumers.

Thus, as in the other two cases discussed above, also in such experience the value of solidarity is at play so it is the idea to reconnect citizens in their role of consumers to certain issues concerning production such as, in this case, the condition of workers. As in the case of SPGs, also among Rimaflow activists the idea of co-production is therefore central. This term describes in fact the

relations of alliance that enable alternative forms of production to take place (Grasseni 2013). As seen in the description of the previous cases, especially from the consumers' point of view, this notion permits the overcoming of views of purchasing as simple shopping. But the notion also moves beyond strategies of individual boycott and 'buycott', as it refers to collective strategies deployed by groups rather than individuals. Seeking to establish direct relations with farmers and distributors, as seen in the case of SPGs, critical consumers not only express, but also practice, solidarity. The same can be said of Rimaflow workers.

## **5. Conclusion**

Western societies have transformed into a network society driven by a model of economic growth known as global informational capitalism. As argued at the beginning, during the current crisis, social movements are confronting two interrelated difficulties. On the one hand, institutions are less willing to accommodate demands for social justice and equity, due to the neoliberal policies largely prevalent in Europe. On the other, the highly individualized nature of contemporary society makes it difficult to create bonds of solidarity and cooperation among people. Nevertheless, in some cases people's discontent has been the basis for collective actions that try to increase both the resistance to neoliberalism and the resilience to its impacts. As it was defined (D'Alisa et al. 2015) social resilience is "a dynamic process which describes the ability of embedded social actors to foster collective transformation through a process of social learning and participative decision-making" (2015:334). SCMOs seek to found a fairer society than the current neoliberal one. As seen, such experiences are giving rise to new and rapidly growing spaces of 'alternative economy' in which it is claimed that the production and consumption should be more closely tied together socially, economically and in some cases also spatially.

In the previous pages, three different types of SCMOs have been discussed. As argued, while sharing several common traits with social movement organizations of the past they do not usually rely on protest politics but rather they focus on a self-changing society as part of everyday politics, and this although being quite radical in their attitude and discourses.

As several studies have shown, alternative economic networks can indeed mitigate some of the negative impacts of the industrial system by reconnecting like-minded consumers and producers (Kneafsey et al. 2008; Brunori et al. 2011). Although the politics and practices of alternative economic networks have come often under critical scrutiny, being sometimes described as a narrow

and weakly politicized expression of middle- and upper-class angst, the idea that emerges from the discussion of the three cases presented in this paper is that SCMOs move beyond political consumerism as a form of merely individual responsibility (Micheletti 2009) to develop collective, citizenship-driven alternative styles of provisioning.

If from one side these experiences can replicate existing social privileges due to their small-scale nature (Alkon and Agyeman 2011), on the other, the networks they form do facilitate both the circulation of resources (information, tasks, money, and goods) and common interpretations of reality between different actors operating in the same territory, thus simultaneously providing a framework for collective action and enabling the actual deployment of alternative lifestyles.

Within SCMOs, the use of “mutualism” which encourages every member to be proactive and to participate actively in the organization with equal responsibilities activates an intensive process of mutual learning and socialization among different actors which help to develop a common understanding of society and how should society work.

As seen, for example, within SPGs, political consumerism becomes a mean to co-produce the common good by (re)building reciprocity and trust among diverse subjects operating in the same territory, directly – for example - intervening in local food provisioning chains, and reintroducing social and environmental sustainability issues in regional economies, sometimes with the explicit aim of participating in the governance of the territory.

The current economic crisis seems, moreover, to have given a further impetus to the spread of these experiences, confirming Castells et. al (2012) who have identified the alternative economic sector as one of the four emerging layers of EU and USA economy after 2008. In fact, beyond promoting and practicing solidarity market exchanges, alternative economic networks are often incubators and accelerators of further local initiatives. As seen at the core of these initiatives is a shared vision about environmental, social and economic sustainability. Another central issue is the emphasis on the territory and reterritorialization of production and exchange, through the valorisation of local resources at an integrated level.

Among the main issues emerged in the wake of the crisis, there is a new emphasis on production. While the emphasis on consumption is a product of consumer society and welfare, production is now becoming more central to the current debate and movements’ action. The new emphasis on creating partnerships between producers and consumers within a local context also seems to bring

these experiences to forms of commoning, already present in urban areas, as described by Bresnihan and Byrne (Bresnihan and Byrne, 2014).

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that such self-organized collective actions have been heavily criticized for being niche practices, which will just survive at the fringe of the capitalist market (Goodman et al., 2012). The distrust towards political parties and more in general towards the political arena, which is common among these experiences, seem in fact to limit the possibility for SCMOs to pursue greater political and social change. However, it is also possible that the ideas and practices developed within solidarity-based practices of production, exchange and consumption will act as a driving force for social innovation, and possibly create the foundations for a more structured political discourse and action. After all, the call for a sustainable eco-economy requires not only a radically different system of production and distribution, but also different collective styles of consumption, which need to be based on new civic values as well as novel forms of participation.

## References

- Alkon, A and Agyeman, J (eds) (2011) *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Bauman Z (2007) *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bennett, L. W. (1998) The uncivic culture: Communication, identity, and the rise of lifestyle politics. *Political Science & Politics* 31(4), 740–61.
- Bresnihan P. and Byrne M., 2014 *Escape into the City: Everyday Practices of Commoning and the Production of Urban Space in Dublin*, Volume 47(1), 36–54.
- Bosi L. e Zamponi L. (2015) Direct Social Actions and Economic Crises: The Relationship between Forms of Action and Socio-Economic Context in Italy. *Partecipazione & Conflitto* 8(2), pp. 367-391.
- Brunori, G., A. Rossi, and V. Malandrini (2011), 'Co-producing transition: innovation processes in farms adhering to solidarity-based purchase groups (SPG) in Tuscany, Italy', *International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food*, 18(1), 28–53.
- Carrera, L. (2009), 'I gruppi di acquisto solidale: una proposta solida nella società liquida', *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 3, 89–117.

- Castells M, Caraca J E and Cardoso G (ed) (2012), *Aftermath. The Cultures of the Economic Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cembalo, L., Migliore, G., and Schifani, G. (2012) Consumers in postmodern society and alternative food networks: The organic food fairs case in Sicily. *New Medit*, 11(3), 41-49.
- Conill J., Castells M., Cardenas A. & Servon L. (2012). *Beyond the Crisis: The Emergence of Alternative Economic Practices*. In *Aftermath. The Cultures of the Economic Crisis* (ed. by Conill J., Castells M., Cardenas A. & Servon L.) pp. 2010- 2050. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- D'Alisa, G., Forno F e Maurano S. (2015) Grassroots (economic) activism in times of crisis: Mapping the redundancy of collective actions. *Partecipazione & Conflitto* 8(2), pp. 328-342.
- Dubuisson-Quellier, S., Lamine C., LeVelly, R. 2011: *Citizenship and Consumption: Mobilisation in Alternative Food Systems in France*. In: *Sociologia Ruralis* 51(3), 304–323.
- de Moor, J. (2016). *Lifestyle Politics and the Concept of Political Participation*. *Acta Politica della Porta D* (ed) (2007) *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-national and Transnational Perspectives*. Boulder, Co: Paradigm Publishers.
- della Porta, D. & Diani, M. (2006) *Social Movement: An Introduction* (2nd Ed.). Blackwell, Malden.
- Ferrer-Fons M (2006) *Il consumerismo politico in Europa. Le differenze nazionali tra dimensione politica e livello micro* In: Tosi S (ed) *Consumi e partecipazione politica. Tra azione individuale e mobilitazione collettiva*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Forno F and Ceccarini L (2006) *From the Street to the Shops: The Rise of New Forms of Political Action in Italy*. *South European Society and Politics* Vol. II, No.2, 197-222.
- Forno, F. and Graziano, P.R.. (2014) Sustainable community movement organisations. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(2), 139-157.
- Forno F. (2015) Bringing together scattered and localized actors: Political consumerism as a tool for self-organizing anti-mafia communities in *International Consumer Studies* Volume 39, Issue 5, pages 535–543.

- Forno, F, Grasseni C. and Signori S. (2015) "Italy's solidarity purchase groups as 'citizenship labs'", in E. Huddart Kennedy, M. J. Cohen, N. Krogman (eds.) *Putting Sustainability into Practice: Advances and Applications of Social Practice Theories*, Edward Elgar.
- Forno F and Gunnarson C (2010) "Everyday shopping to fight the mafia in Italy". In Micheletti M and McFarland AS (eds) *Creative participation: responsibility-taking in the political world*. London, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, pp. 103-126.
- Giddens A. (1999) *Runaway World: How Globalisation Is Reshaping Our Lives*. London, Profile Books.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006), *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Goodman D., Dupuis M. E., and Goodman M. K. (2012) *Alternative Food Networks: Knowledge, Practice, and Politics*, London: Routledge
- Grasseni C (2013) *Beyond Alternative Food Networks: Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups*. London: Berg/Bloomsbury Academic.
- Grasseni, C. (2014), "Seeds of trust: alternative food networks in Italy", *Journal of Political Ecology*, 21 (1), 178–192.
- Graziano P R and Forno F (2012) Political Consumerism and New Forms of Political Participation: The Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale in Italy. *Annals AAPSS*, 644: 121-133.
- Guidi R. and Andretta, M. (2015) Resilience and Positive Protest. How Italian Solidarity-Based Purchase Groups Change in Times of Crisis and Austerity? *Partecipazione and Conflitto* 8(2):443--477.
- Kabat, M. (2011). 'Argentinean Worker Taken Factories: Trajectories of Worker's Control under the Economic Crisis'. In Azzellini I. and Ness, I. *Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 365-381.
- Keck M. and Sakdapolrak P. (2013), "What is Social Resilience? Lessons Learned and Ways Forward", *Erdkunde* 67(1): 5-19.
- Kneafsey, M., Holloway, L., Cox, R., Dowler, L., Venn, L. and Tuomainen, L. (2008) *Reconnecting Consumers, Producers and Food: Exploring Alternatives*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.

- Koos S (2012) What drives political consumption in Europe? A multi-level analysis on individual characteristics, opportunity structures and globalization. *Acta Sociologica*, March 2012 vol. 55 no. 1, 37-57
- Kousis M. and Paschou M. (2014) Theoretical and methodological considerations about alternative forms of resilience in times of crises, in WP1: Defining, identifying, and measuring crises Workpackage Leading Institution: UNIGE [http://www.livewhat.unige.ch/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/LIVEWHAT\\_D1.2.pdf](http://www.livewhat.unige.ch/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/LIVEWHAT_D1.2.pdf)
- Kriesi H., Koopmans, J.W. & Giugni, M. (1995) *New Social Movements in Western Europe*, UCL Press, London.
- Latouche S (2010) *Farewell to Growth*. Polity Press, London.
- Lichterman, P. (1995) Beyond the Seesaw Model: Public Commitment in a Culture of Self-Fulfillment. *Sociological Theory*, 13(3), 275–300.
- Micheletti M (2003) *Political Virtue and Shopping. Individuals, Consumerism and Collective Action*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Micheletti M (2009) La svolta dei consumatori nella responsabilità e nella cittadinanza. *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, N3, 17-41.
- Migliore, G., G. Schifani, G. Dara Guccione, and L. Cembalo (2014), ‘Food community networks as leverage for social embeddedness’, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 27 (4) 1–19.
- Orlando G. (2015). The recovered factories case in Italy: between resistance and resilience, CORES Working papers n. 4 [https://aisberg.unibg.it/retrieve/handle/10446/51012/63510/Working\\_paper\\_CORES\\_4-2015.pdf](https://aisberg.unibg.it/retrieve/handle/10446/51012/63510/Working_paper_CORES_4-2015.pdf)
- Parigi P. and Rachel G (2014) ‘From grassroots to digital ties: A case study of a political consumerism movement’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 14(2), 236-253-
- Soja E.W. (2010), *Seeking spatial justice*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tarrow S. (1998) *Power in Movement*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.