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Participation for what? Organizational roles, quality conventions and purchasing behaviors in solidarity purchasing groups

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Abstract

Solidarity purchase groups are cases in point of the so-called "Alternative food networks", a wide-ranging body of practices dealing with food provisioning in a different way from the "main-stream" agro-food system. The paper challenges a clear-cut difference between alternative and conventional food chains and, on this background, it analyzes the case of Solidarity purchase groups as prosumers organized settings. We illustrate how different forms of participation of the SPG members convey dissimilar quality judgments, different purchasing behaviors and specific kinds of attitude about consumption. In this light, we are able to show how the internal variability of SPG roles plays a key place in the processes that guide prosumers behavior and their relationships with the producers, even within groups such as SPG that, prima facie, would appear to be internally homogeneous and strongly oriented by a shared vision of "alternativeness".

Keywords	Alternative food networks; Solidarity purchase groups; prosumers; free labor
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Cover Letter: "Prosumers participation and free labour in Solidarity Purchase Groups"

F. Barbera, J. Dagnes and R. Di Monaco

The paper contributes to the analysis of prosumers in Alternative Food Networks in general and Solidarity Purchase Groups in particular. The theoretical perspective mixes an economic sociology approach (quality conventions and markets as social construction), with the analysis of complex organizations. The main contribution of the paper is twofold. From the analytical side, we argue that while economic sociology recognizes the role of trust for consumers purchasing strategies in quality-based markets, it is less attentive to the organized settings where quality judgments take place. Secondly, Solidarity Purchase Groups are often assumed to be internally homogeneous and no individual-level variability within them is accounted for. Critical consumers univocally (and homogeneously) serve as the means to fulfill unmet needs and they become a functional reaction to the failure of the food system in the provision of "good, clean and fair" food. In this perspective, agents become nothing more than the vehicle for the homeostatic demands of the "system". But, as we argue, food systems changes call for a way out to "wicked problems" made of complex, multidimensional challenges on different scales, which do not have simple and straightforward solutions. This is why functionalist just-so-stories that frame Alternative Food Networks as a type of radical change that provides a more effective answer to the systemic unmet "needs" of the food system are flawed. All in all, the paper challenges a clear-cut difference between alternative and conventional food chains and, on this background, it analyzes the case of Solidarity purchase groups as prosumers organized settings. We illustrate how different forms of participation of the SPG members convey dissimilar quality judgments, different purchasing behaviors and specific kinds of attitude about consumption. In this light, we are able to show how the internal variability of SPG roles plays a key place in the processes that guide prosumers behavior and their relationships with the producers, even within groups such as SPG that, *prima facie*, would appear to be internally homogeneous and strongly oriented by a shared vision of "alternativeness".

Highlights

- 1) It is the quality of the *exchange relationship* and what is implied in the exchange that distinguishes the exchange taking place in the Solidarity Purchase Groups from the exchange in the conventional food chains. Exchanges in AFN bring their own rewards to individuals.
- 2) These exchanges take place in an organized setting and in connection to specific organizational roles that qualify Solidarity Purchase Groups member as *meaning-making* prosumers. Intrinsic motivation, shared values, and meaning-making mechanisms are empirically correlated with organizational roles, consumer attitudes and wishes.
- 3) These differences in the functional contribution of the members are related to their motives for joining the group, while the organizational Solidarity Purchase Groups context seems to allow to modulate the relationship with the producers by attaching importance to specific aspects of the relationship – either ideological or expressive – which are key for Solidarity Purchase Groups members and which would be more difficult – or impossible – to achieve individually.
- 4) Members of Solidarity Purchase Groups are not only different from the other prosumers, but very different from each other as well. Solidarity Purchase Groups are rich in internal heterogeneity and the radical nature of the change they strive for should not allow indulging in imaginative "adaptive stories" that seem plausible, even if it is not at all clear why that particular story, out of all the possible stories that could be told, should be the best one.

Prosumers participation and free labour in Solidarity Purchase Groups

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Abstract

Solidarity purchase groups are cases in point of the so-called "Alternative food networks", a wide-ranging body of practices dealing with food provisioning in a different way from the "mainstream" agro-food system. The paper challenges a clear-cut difference between alternative and conventional food chains and, on this background, it analyzes the case of Solidarity purchase groups as prosumers organized settings. We illustrate how different forms of participation of the SPG members convey dissimilar quality judgments, different purchasing behaviors and specific kinds of attitude about consumption. In this light, we are able to show how the internal variability of SPG roles plays a key place in the processes that guide prosumers behavior and their relationships with the producers, even within groups such as SPG that, *prima facie*, would appear to be internally homogeneous and strongly oriented by a shared vision of "alternativeness".

Introduction

Solidarity purchase groups (SPGs from now on) are cases in point of the so-called "Alternative food networks" (AFNs from now on), a wide-ranging body of practices dealing with food provisioning in a different way from the "mainstream" agro-food system (Murdoch et al., 2000). The term "alternative" seems to have been first used by geographers (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997) as "alternative geography of food", and Marsden et al (2000) more specifically cited "alternative food chains", and Renting et al. (2003) introduced the term "alternative food networks". AFNs usually take the form of grassroots experiments aimed at reorganizing the food system along ethical, political, moral and health lines (Micheletti et al., 2004; Honkanen et al., 2006; Onozaka et al., 2010; Sassatelli, 2015). While giving a clear analytical definition of AFNs is difficult, these phenomena tend to rely on different forms of proximity between supply and demand (Kebir and Torre, 2012). A growing body of food studies literature has underscored the need to overcome the "alternative-conventional" dichotomy, focusing instead on the multiple and overlapping "worlds of food" (for an overview, see Corsi et al, 2018). In this vein, as argued by Tregear (2011), clear-cut bifurcation between "alternative" and "mainstream" agro-food systems may often obscure the ambiguity of reality, where mixed situations and continuous, rather than binary choices, are ubiquitous (Ponte, 2016; Murdoch and Miele, 1999; Stræte and Marsden, 2006; Jarosz, 2008; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). As Amartya Sen (1992, 75) also reminds us: "if an underlying idea has an essential ambiguity, a precise

formulation of that idea must try to capture that ambiguity rather than lose it". On this background, we maintain that the overlapping between alternative and conventional food networks requires a finer-grained analytical perspective, capable of disentangling the multiplicity of rules, roles, and behaviors involved in these food chains. For instance, most members of SPGs also purchase food in the conventional chain, and many farmers who supply SPGs sell their products also on the conventional chain. Or, among consumers' motivations for buying directly from farmers, selfish concerns coexist with altruistic motivations. Furthermore, the very idea of quality (locality, freshness, typicality) is shared among different food chains, both alternative and conventional (Barbera et al, 2018a). Although recent works on AFNs address the interplay between the conventional and alternative aspects, as well as the intertwining between social and economic issues (Corsi et al, 2018), we argue that a closer inspection of AFNs as organizations in which: "basic economic features such as prices, margins, governance structure, etc. are defined and negotiated (...)" (Chiffoleau et al, 2019, 2), is key to understand how the plurality of rules, roles and behaviors work in these food chains. On this background, we will spell out the key concepts of our analytical framework at the crossroads of different but complementary bodies of literature (sections 1 and 2). Then, we illustrate in detail the cases of SPGs we analyze, the research design, methods and data (sections 3 and 4). In section 5, we discuss the empirical findings. Finally, in the conclusions, we go back to the research question and elaborate further on the key concept of prosumers in SPGs and AFNs.

1. Making Sense of Solidarity Purchasing Groups

Why do SPGs emerge? How do they work? In answering these two questions, given that SPGs were viewed as desirable on social and environmental grounds (Barbera et al, 2014), they were most often "explained" as bottom-up radical answers to unmet needs. It has been argued that, given the shorter distance food travels, they are both more environmental friendly for society and economically cheaper for consumers. Being based on direct connections between consumers and producers, they also arguably enhance social capital by creating a local network based on trust and common definitions of quality. Accordingly, SPGs have been described in terms of radical opposition against the conventional capitalistic food industry, considered as non-sustainable from the environmental perspective, socially unequal and economically hegemonic. These radical interpretations see SPGs as a kind of "structural change" that can potentially affect the social organization of the food system as a whole. The first wave of research on SPGs thus offered adaptive stories of a functionalist stamp, seasoned with a mechanistic image of organizational working. The general idea, as we just underscored, is that modern food systems are not sustainable since they have health and environmental impacts that call for radical change to fulfill unmet needs (De Schutter, 2017). But the

very existence of unmet needs, per se, does not generate the emergence of new and alternative food chains: "needs" have to be symbolically constructed, socially organized and economically coordinated to support the emergence of viable alternatives (Elster, 1982). As Mark Granovetter (2017) notes, functionalism tends to "explain" a given phenomenon as the "evolutionary" outcome of solving a specific problem of "adaptation" as a whole. This, Granovetter continues, results in the creation of imaginative "adaptive stories" that seem plausible even if it is not at all clear why that particular story, out of all the possible stories that could be told, should be the best explanation. This is a teleological mistake, namely: "the assumption that because we see a particular outcome to a process we conclude that the process must always have that specific result" (Santana 2013, 44). Accordingly, SPGs are often assumed to be internally homogeneous and no individual-level variability within the SPGs is accounted for. Critical consumers univocally (and homogeneously) serve as the means to fulfill unmet needs and SPGs become a functional reaction to the failure of the food system in the provision of "good, clean and fair" food. In this perspective, agents become nothing more than the vehicle for the homeostatic demands of the "system" (Goldthorpe, 2016). But, as we would rather argue, food systems changes call for a way out to "wicked problems" (Alford and Head, 2017) made of complex, multidimensional challenges on different scales, which do not have simple and straightforward solutions. This is why functionalist just-so-stories that frame SPGs as a type of radical change that provides a more effective answer to the systemic unmet "needs" of the food system are flawed.

A much more promising line of inquiry emerged in the last years (e.g. Chiffoleau et al, 2019; Maestriperieri, 2018; Maestriperieri et al, 2018; Corsi et al, 2018) where: "The general organization of alternative or short food systems has (...) been extensively described" (Deverre and Lamine, 2010), feeding a debate about their "alterity" (Holloway et al., 2007; Constance et al., 2014). Here SPGs show a great deal of variation in space and time and they are conceived – as any other kind of organization – as structured settings with (material and symbolic) resources to be distributed and roles to be fulfilled. Agents and their patterned interaction within and between organized settings are then the focus of the analysis. A very encouraging viewpoint in this line is the so-called "quality turn" in food production and consumption (Ponte, 2016). Accordingly, the "quality conventions" perspective has gained momentum in the sociological understanding of AFNs in general and SPGs in particular. This research stream has been summarized by Ponte (ibid.) in two main lines: the worlds of production framework (Salais and Storper, 1992; Storper and Salais, 1997) and the orders of worth approach (Boltanski and Thevenot, 1991, 2006). In this perspective, as Roberta Sassatelli (2015) has pointed out, AFNs draw attention to a different view of the idea of "consumer sovereignty", where it is necessary to: "combine immediate pleasure and long-lasting, sustainable well-being. In other terms,

this is not a reactionary call for abstaining from or deferring pleasure. It is the recognition that only some immediate pleasure is organized to be sustained and renewed in the long run through the enhancement of social relations, and that only sustainable pleasure is real – that is, truly beneficial across time" (2015, 8).

The consumption skills of AFNs/SPGs consumers differ from those typically involved by ordinary consumer goods, where new goods supplant "old" ones that have become technically and/or aesthetically obsolete: what is required here includes creativity, learning, and forms of relational satisfaction. As Russell Belk notes, "Commodity exchange is about the reproduction of rights to objects, not the reproduction of relationships between people" (Belk 2009, 718).

Where does exactly the difference between "reproduction of rights to objects" and "reproductions of relationships between people" lie? As a first intuitive answer, consider this vignette: you are driving home after a dinner at a friend's house, while a wheel pierces and you need to stop. It is a late night and there are no cars around, it is going to rain and you need to act quickly. In the distance, you see a car approaching: is the good Samaritan who stops to help you to change the wheel. He is very confident with this kind of things, far more than what you are, and in a few minutes the problem is fixed. To thank him, you get your wallet and you hand him 50 Euros. He looks at you with disappointment, turns back and drives away without even waving at you. What is exchanged in "social life" is a particular category of goods (Bianchi, 2018): symbolic goods that are exchanged between two or more actors under conditions of incompletely specified obligation (Blau, 1964). Both group identity and emotional enforcement display a positive effect on commitment and support the exchange of such goods (Lawler and Yoon, 1998; Lawler, Thye, and Yoon, 2000, 2008; Lawler, 2001). The theory is rooted in classic sociological works (Homans, 1974; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976), and has tried to explain important facets of social interaction and the relational structures it generates (see f.i. Molm and Cook, 1995; Fehr and Gintis, 2007). Relying on previous experimental evidence, Lawler (2001) proposed a causal model to account for the mechanisms that cause the emergence of: "a recurrent pattern of interaction among a set of actors, from which they come to perceive themselves as a unit (i.e., a group) and to develop feelings about that unit" (Lawler, 2001, 4-5). In this line, as Pizzorno argued (2007), group identity and emotions have the task of supporting the system of meanings in which social actors are immersed and the expectations express their self-representation as persons. As in the good Samaritan vignette, social goods such as social approval, status, respect, recognition, and trust often rewards behaviors whose value depend on the intrinsic meaning with which the actor has taken the action, rather than on their extrinsic result.

In this connection, we argue, the blurring of the boundaries between production and consumption in SPGs is key to understand not the "co-creation" of the product/service as in the standard prosumer

perspective (Ritzer and Jungerson, 2010) but the "co-creation" of the meaning associated with the product/service. In SPGs, prosumers need first and foremost to be understood both as meaning-makers and meaning-consumers. Given the interplay between the social and the economic dimension (Granovetter 2017), this meaning element goes hand-in-hand with the unpaid labor that prosumers lend to support the costs associated with SPGs, especially those connected to logistics, organization, and distribution of food. Hence, as we will illustrate, meaning making mechanisms and unpaid labor are not equally distributed within SPG and their combinations in different organizational roles need to be empirically assessed. All in all, the overlapping between meaning and unpaid labour shift prosumption in SPG away from the "McDonaldization of society" where: "among other things, diners are expected to serve as their own waiters carrying their meals to their tables or back to their cars, sandwich makers (by adding fixings such as tomatoes, lettuce, and onions in some chains), salad makers (by creating their own salads at the salad bar), and bus persons (by disposing of their own debris after the meal is finished) (Ritzer and Jungerson, 2010, 18). In SPGs, prosumers are intrinsically motivated in what they are doing and are willing to devote their effort for no pay. Intrinsic motivation and unpaid labor need to be assessed as micro-level mechanisms key to understanding how the meso-level organization of SPG is actually (and effectively) working. For instance, a relevant issue is how distribution costs are borne by the different operators along the chain, since each stage of the chain (storage, processing, transport, retail) entails costs that are passed on to the following stage. That distribution costs do not vanish with shorter or even direct chains, but this is frequently overlooked in the literature focussing on the social aspects of AFNs in general and SPGs in particular. The bearing of distribution costs has to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, since there seems to be many variations in this respect, as shown, for instance, by the empirical case studies comparing the structures and the performances of local and mainstream food chains in the USA reported in King et al. (2010).

1.2. SPGs as organized settings

As we showed elsewhere (Barbera et al 2018a, 2018b), quality in conventional food networks refer mainly to hard quality, namely to detectable characteristics such as prices and standardized rules of production, as well as the attribution of premiums, brands and other recognition. AFNs instead point to soft quality, namely to less directly perceivable qualities, which emphasize the role of stakeholders in a local context, respect for tradition, the existence of trust relations, attention for the environment, the value given to shared community spirit and passion for farming (Barbera and Dagnes, 2016). But: "in reality, clear distinctions cannot be made between definitions of quality and (...) boundaries between categories are often blurred" (Sage, 2003, 7). Even if soft quality is more relevant in AFNs,

conventional food chains conjure up certain "alternative" ideas in the products they propose to consumers. The complexity of exchange and the overlap among different quality worlds open a window of opportunity for camouflage strategies by hybrid organizations whereby conventional food chains conquer specific zones of AFNs' quality space in order to fulfill consumers' desire for "alternative" quality conventions (see Barbera et al, 2018b).

These findings, therefore, open up some questions about the role that relations and mutual influences between consumer and producer play in the purchasing decision processes in this market segment. In fact, given the importance of relationships, different hypotheses can be formulated about the social mechanisms at work. In particular, consumers associated with SPG seem to base their own judgment devices that drive purchasing behavior markedly on personal relationships (Ibid.). However, as we argued, these relational patterns must adapt to the ways in which roles are structured and modulated at the organizational level.

We argue that the concept of participation could be used to specify the relationship between the prosumers and the organization, in order to investigate the way in which the membership of the SPG interacts within the purchasing processes and in the relationship with the producers. The first hypothesis concerns the presence, in the same SPG, of different forms of participation of the members, characterized on the basis of the relationship they develop with SPG members and the meaning they attribute to it. The second hypothesis would lead to assess how these differences, if statistically significant, conveys dissimilar quality judgments, different purchasing behaviors and kinds of attitude about consumption. In this light, as we underlined, the internal variability of roles would play a key place in the processes that guide prosumers behaviour and their relationships with the producers, even within groups such as SPG that, *prima facie*, would appear to be internally homogeneous and strongly oriented by a shared vision of "alternativeness".

2. Solidarity-based Purchasing Groups (SPGs) in Italy and in Piedmont

SPGs (from GAS, Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale) widespread in Italy since the mid-90s as networks of individuals and families committed to the collective provision of food – to which in some cases other products are added – according to some shared criteria (Graziano and Forno, 2012). The generic principle of solidarity mirrored in the name refers to a wide range of practices having as a fixed point the direct purchase from farmers for both social and environmental reasons, aiming to protect the environment and to ensure fair compensation for their work (Hankins and Grasseni, 2014). This orientation can be combined with specific slants of SPGs – or of some sub-groups within a SPG – focused for example on the provision of local and/or organic products (Graziano and Forno, 2012; Brunori et al, 2012).

As already stated, while in literature a central role is given to the value-driven nature of the groups, less attention has been paid so far to the concrete management of SPGs and, above all, to the different ways of participating that the members of the same group put in place, starting from their wishes, beliefs and opportunities (cf. Grasseni, 2013). In order to clarify these overlooked dimensions, we first need to know how SPGs work and, if any, what are the variations that can be accounted for in their functioning. Although it is quite well-known that management and logistic tasks are carried out on a voluntary basis and according to the principle of self-organization, it is obviously not very useful to stop the analysis here, implicitly assuming a single model at work across SPGs and within them. SPGs and their internal organization vary according to different levels of formalization in the division of labor and in the managing procedures, ranging from complete informality to rigidly defined positions and tasks (Pettenati and Dansero, 2018). Nevertheless, an SPG is usually composed of a few general managers, who deal with the overall coordination of the group, and of the various product managers, who handle a single product in all its phases, from the initial selection of the farmer to the collection of periodic orders by the participants up to the delivery setting (cf. Fonte, 2013). The delivery and distribution phase needs some logistic facilities – as a minimum, a sheltered place that is easily accessible for transporters and group members – and can be managed in a more or less organized way. In small SPGs the distribution can take place in a private house. In this case, the group member responsible for a food product personally goes to the farmer to pick it up or receives the shipment home; later, the other participants – all together or staggered over time – can personally collect the ordered products and pay for them. Conversely, in larger groups there are formal distribution meetings: participants meet periodically at an agreed location – often a municipal room granted to the SPG for free or for a small fee – where several products are distributed simultaneously. Here, some volunteers who previously collected the goods divide the products into crates, each one containing everything that was ordered by an individual or family. The crate can be withdrawn after being passed to a sort of cash desk to pay the bill. Of course, distribution meetings are also an opportunity for socializing among group members, as well as for discussing organizational issues. If the organization of smaller groups can be very basic, the complex groups tend to have consolidated practices and to equip themselves with proper tools, such as a bank account, software for order management and accounting, an annual balance sheet (cf. Grasseni, 2013).

SPGs appeared in the mid-90s, as already mentioned, and then widespread, first at a mild pace and then with an explosive growth rate, especially after the economic crisis. In fact, in a few years the number of voluntarily registered groups in the Network of Solidarity Economy (Rete di Economia Solidale) has more than tripled, going from about 300 in 2006 to about one thousand in 2011 (Ibid.), and then has remained stable in recent years (Novelli and Corsi, 2018). Since registration on the

network is completely voluntary, the data is certainly underestimated. On the basis of some researches carried out locally, Retegas estimates that there are about twice as many registered purchasing groups (Grasseni, 2013).

Nevertheless, the SPGs presence is not homogeneous on the national territory, creating rather a fragmented patchwork of differing areas, with a prevalence of groups in northern and central regions, i.e. in Lombardy, Tuscany, Piedmont, Lazio, Emilia Romagna, and Veneto (cf. Maestriperi, 2016). In this paper, we specifically focus on the Piedmontese context, which is recognized for its leading role in the development of AFNs (Barbera and Dagnes, 2016; Corsi et al, 2018). Like other types of AFNs located in Piedmont, the SPGs are mainly urban practices, i.e. they are concentrated in the Turin metropolitan area. Dansero and Pettenati (2018) mapped 175 SPGs in Piedmont in 2016: about 70 out of these, equal to about 40%, are located in the city of Turin and almost 50 (equal to about 28%) are in the city nearby surroundings. Adopting a producer-based perspective, the prevailing role of the peri-urban context emerges: most of the about 650 farmers who traded with the Piedmontese SPGs for the last 5 years are located within 50 km of Turin (Ibid.). This strong urban and peri-urban connotation can be explained, on the one hand, because of the importance generally given to the local origin of the products by the participants in SPGs; on the other hand, because of the close relationship existing between metropolitan areas and movements aiming to critically reshape the conventional producer-consumer nexus (Jarosz, 2008).

As already mentioned, SPGs can vary greatly in terms of their scope, formalization, and extension. This is confirmed in the Piedmontese case, where some informal groups involve few people, while others have over a hundred adherent families and a strictly defined organizational structure (Pettenati and Dansero, 2018). Regarding their origin, as already observed local SPGs usually come from already existing groups, benefiting from the prior acquaintance and experience of the participants (cf. Forno et al, 2013). Specifically, SPGs in Turin and city surroundings can be formed by neighbors, students, co-workers, families whose children are classmates, as well as they can derive from sports associations, Catholic groups, radical political movements, and social cooperatives (Pettenati and Dansero, 2018). Of course, the SPGs orientation, as defined by the founders, vary greatly depending on the origin of the group: a simple preference for healthy food, a civic sensitivity to the economic and/or social sustainability of the supply chain, a radical political opposition to conventional food networks (Ibid.).

In accordance with the theoretical framework previously illustrated, in this paper we will investigate how individual participants in SPGs actively perform their role as prosumers, understood above all as co-creators of meanings through practices, and how this dimension is connected with the organizational level. In other words, focusing on the micro-level mechanisms we aim to deepen "the

activist notion of co-production as a transformative practice, through which gasistas come to think of themselves as more than mere consumers" Emphasis added. Gasista is the common term used to identify the participants in the group (also by the participants themselves).

(Grasseni, 2013, 5).

3. Data and sample

Data collection was based on a semi-structured questionnaire administered to a random sample of participants in four SPGs in the province of Turin (i.e. Avigliana, La Cavagnetta, Roccafranca, Salvagas) within a broader research project (for a total of 1090 interviews) about the relationship between producers and consumers in AFNs (cf. Barbera et al 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

Specifically, SPGs were selected according to their location (in the city or in the neighboring municipalities), their number of members (small to medium groups, up to 50 adherents, and large groups, with more than 100 participants), and their status (informal groups or recognized associations). After obtaining the commitment of the managers in each group, the questionnaire to SPG members was administered during a distribution meeting. Thus, a total of 151 questionnaires investigating methods of participation in the group, purchasing habits, quality conceptions, and socio-economic features, were collected. Further information on the groups' governance framework and organizational aspects was also obtained from the consultation of their websites and, in two of the four groups, through individual in-depth analysis with their representatives (cf. Novelli and Corsi 2018).

The final sample is mainly composed of long-term residents (over 80% lives in the local context for more than 10 years, 77% was born in Piedmont) who are part of a family of at least two people; 73% of respondents have children living together, and in most cases (44%) these children are under 14 years old. Two-thirds of the respondents are females, and the high mean age of the sample is rather high: in fact, the distribution in age classes highlights the prevalence of adults (40–60 years old), representing 70% of the sample, while 20% belongs to the elderly class (over 60 years old) and only 10% is under 40 years old.

With respect to socio-professional and educational status, data show that in 65% of the cases, the highest educational qualification within the family of respondents is the degree, in 34% of the cases is a diploma, while the presence of families with lower school levels is residual. These are almost all non-manual workers, belonging to the employed middle class (70%), to the self-employed middle class (7%), and to liberal professions (13%). By contrast, the working class is only marginally involved (4%), as are the housewives (3%). Finally, pensioners constitute 12% of respondents. Consistent with this socio-economic profile, a large share of families declares to have a monthly net

income of over €3,000 (31%) or between €2,000 and €3,000 (35%). Among the others, 28% claims to have at its disposal between €1,200 and €2,000, while 6% earn less than €1,200 per month.

4. Empirical findings

Our first hypothesis concerns the existence and features of different forms of participation in SPGs based on the relationship the members develop – or do not develop – with farmers and with other participants in the groups. To test this hypothesis, we select within the questionnaire a set of questions dedicated to exploring the individual contribution to the functioning of the SPG. Some of these questions measure the commitment to the phases of selection, purchase, and distribution of products, asking the frequency with which each of these actions is carried out on an annual basis. Other questions point to the relationship with other members, with respect to the roles and actions that structure the organization's functioning (coordination, communication, the decision on the farmers and the products, etc.), as well as the sharing of values and common meanings.

Performing a principal component analysis to these items, three different forms of participation emerge, each one characterized by different ways of closeness and action in connection to products and producers (tab. 1). As for the first factor, there is an above-average presence of ties with producers and other SPG members, but also a high level of participation in meetings and other socialization settings; we label this factor "Networking and social management". It is remarkable to note that these SPGs members do not deal with the direct withdrawal of orders for their family, but are mainly dedicated to managing social relations for the group, with which they feel the sharing a common set of ideals and values. The second factor refers to the activities of internal logistics management, in order to organize orders and distribute the products. It includes, therefore, the material activity that allows the transfer of products from farmers to SPG participants; we label this factor "Collection, sorting and delivery". Finally, the third factor is labelled "Governance and communication", and indicates the contribution to the institutional and formal functioning of the group, which consists in the participation in the governance bodies, with directorship roles, and in the management of institutional communications, especially those related to the mission of the group and its marketable image.

From this viewpoint, therefore, the forms of participation do not substantially discern between members according to their ties with different nodes: e.g. members handling relations with producers and members handling relations with other members. Rather, it is the nature of the organizational roles that makes up the distinction: some participants relate to the producers as institutional representatives of the group (factor 3), some as negotiators in the purchase of products (factor 1), and others as managers for transport and product delivery (factor 2). Similarly, the prevailing contents of

the relationship with other members are different. In this line, three levels of relationship between SPG participants emerge: the institutional level, connected to the reproduction of the group from a formal and positioning perspective (factor 3); the exchange level, managed by those who also foster social relations between members (factor 1); and the logistic level, which involves the collection of products to ensure delivery to members (factor 2).

Table 1. Latent dimensions of participation in SPGs.

Item loadings for principal component analysis. Rotated component matrix.	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
	Networking and social management	Collection, sorting and delivery	Governance and communication
I collect orders for my family	-0.561	0.051	0.225
I deal with communication (mailing list, website, promotion)	0.042	-0.109	0.847
I keep in touch and manage relations with a producer	0.604	0.323	0.218
I keep in touch and manage relations with other members	0.514	0.005	0.358
I'm a member of the SPG management board	0.226	0.250	0.769
I attend members meetings	0.688	0.039	0.164
I participate to the SPG social initiatives	0.641	0.011	0.115
Frequency with which I collect orders for my family (weeks per year)	-0.055	0.573	-0.037
Frequency with which I collect orders for a group of families (weeks per year)	0.188	0.820	0.146
Frequency with which I collaborate with farmers for deliveries (weeks per year)	0.031	0.823	0.019

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization; rotation converged in four iterations.

The dimensions we have identified are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there may be SPG members above the average in two or three different "modes of participation". To clarify which the prevailing activities are, the relative scores of the three factors might provide some insights. The SPG members are divided into three similar shares: for 35% the main activity is the formal one, consisting in board meetings and communication, for 34% the management of contractual relations and socialization prevails, and for the remaining 29% the focus is on the logistic delivery of products. Only 8% of participants show above-average scores in all three activities, being hyperactive in participation, while 21.3% of respondents are below average in all activities. These members are probably among those for whom, according to one of the representatives we interviewed, the SPGs constitute a "fungible" purchase method: "In some cases, people approach SPG convinced that this is an online store. But SPGs should also be cooperation. With these people, it is difficult to have even minimal cooperation, for example in the delivery or in taking charge of a product. Often these people go away voluntarily because in this kind of group they don't find what they were looking for" (Representative SPG n.2).

The single above-average activity that appears most frequently in the experience of the SPG participants is the networking and social management (23%), then the collection, sorting, and delivery (14.7%) and governance and communication activities (11.3%) follow.

Thus, the hypothesis regarding the presence of different forms of participation finds support in the available empirical evidence. It may prove useful to highlight that the differences in the functional contribution of the members are related to their motives for joining the group. Indeed, by exploring the relationships between the three dimensions of the activity and the motivations that led the members to participate in the SPG, our analysis highlights two significant points (cf. tab. 2). First, the priorities for the participation refer to two related dimensions: local products and quality. The willingness to support local producers and consume local and seasonal products, on the one hand, and to buy good quality products – and with a favorable value/price ratio –, on the other hand, is widespread among members. Conversely, the low price as such does not attract any interest. The data confirms the perception of the SPG representatives we interviewed: "Let's say that the issue of price is not the priority criterion for us. A good quality-price ratio is an interest of almost all participants, but none of them joins our group because they want to spend less. In some cases, this then happens, but that's not the trigger" (Representative SPG n.1).

Second, further analysis reveals a connection between the reasons for joining an SPG and the organizational role played in it. Specifically, an empirical relationship emerges between two of the organizational roles and two of the motivations leading the members' participation. On the one hand, those who mainly dedicate themselves to the institutional activity – the governance and communication dimension (factor 3) – underscore significantly higher than the average to have joined the SPG to "fight against big food corporations and large-scale distribution". On the other hand, those who are engaged in networking and social management (factor 1) indicate significantly higher than the average willingness to participate in a group of people with shared ideals. These two views are quite consistent with the role assumed in the organization: organizers and "mundane" members. Therefore, the organizational SPG context seems to allow people to modulate the relationship with the producers by attaching importance to specific meanings – either ideological or expressive – which are key for them and which would be more difficult – or impossible – to achieve individually. By contrast, those dedicated to collection, sorting, and delivery of the products (factor 2) do not emphasize specific reasons for their participation comparing with others: in fact, they show a pragmatic attitude for the supply of local, seasonal, and quality products, however, shared with the majority of SPG members.

Table 2. Motivations for joining the SPG (% , max 3 preferences).

Reasons for joining the SPG (max 3 preferences)	%
To support local farms and the income of local farmers	71.8
To consume local products	40.9
To have quality assurance	38.9
To consume seasonal products	32.9
Value for money	30.9
To do not support big food corporations and large-scale distribution	26.2
To respect the environment	25.5
To consume from known farmers	16.1
To participate in activities with people sharing the same ideals	15.4
Price	1.3

According to our second hypothesis, the observed differences in the forms of participation – networking and social management, collection and delivery, governance and communication – affect consumer attitudes and behaviors, even within a seemingly homogeneous group such as an SPG. To test this hypothesis we focus on two types of variables. These two variables specify the consumption behaviors of SPG members according to two central dimensions: (i) the quantity and persistence of purchases through the SPG; (ii) the evaluation of the price paid for, and the related demand elasticity.

Table 3. Consumption attitudes and behaviours (%).

	Total	Network and social management	Collection, sorting and delivery	Governance and communication
How much fruit and vegetables do you buy through SPG?				
Less than half of the total purchase	31.4		22.8	
About half of the total purchase	33.6		26.3	
More than half of the total purchase	35.0		50.9	
Total	100.0		100.0	
<i>Chi square sign.</i>			<i>0.003</i>	
Buying habits of fruit and vegetables through SPG				
Most of F&V purchased through SPG	35.4	33.8	50.9	50.0
Only some specific F&V purchased through SPG	32.0	26.5	33.3	27.1
F&V purchased through SPG only in certain periods of the year	24.5	35.3	15.8	20.8
F&V not purchased through SPG	8.2	4.4	0	2.1
Total	100.0	100	100	100
<i>Chi square sign.</i>		<i>0.015</i>	<i>0.001</i>	<i>0.04</i>
Buying through SPG, do you spend more or less than you would spend in a conventional supermarket?				
Less	57.7		68.5	
More	42.3		31.5	
Total	100.0		100.0	
<i>Chi square sign.</i>			<i>0.035</i>	
Which price increase for a purchase through SPG would you tolerate before going to a supermarket?				
0%	16.1	10.3		
20%	22.1	20.6		
30%	20.8	22.1		
40%	19.5	11.8		
50%	21.5	35.3		
Total	100.0	100		
<i>Chi square sign.</i>		<i>0.001</i>		

Tab. 3 shows that participation centered on logistics leads to an increase in quantity and persistence of purchases, and at the same time fosters to believe that the purchase costs are lower than those that would have been paid relying on other chains. Conversely, those who participate through networking

and socialization activities, and who are moved by shared values of common ideals, exhibit a low price elasticity of demand. In other words, the purchases would remain the same in the case of strong price increases: in fact, 35% of these participants would not change their consumption even in the event of a 50% price increase.

To deepen the structure of buying behavior patterns, we proceeded with two further investigations. First, we examined significant information through principal component analysis. The result shows two important latent dimensions. The first refers to the quantity, continuity, and frequency of purchases through the SPG, detected using the case specification of "fruit and vegetables". The second refers to the evaluation of the price: the conviction of accessing quality products paying a lower price than large-scale distribution emerges, while at the same time declaring a very low price elasticity of demand. Briefly, you are prepared to pay much more than you do, but you are convinced to pay less than you would (tab. 4).

Table 4. Latent dimensions of consumption attitudes and behaviours in SPGs.

Item loadings for principal component analysis. Rotated component matrix.	Factor 1	Factor 2
	Quantity and persistence in the purchase of F&V through SPG	Belief of spending less through SPG but low price elasticity
High purchase frequency of F&V through SPG	0.717	-0.112
High persistence in F&V purchase through SPG	0.837	0.175
High quantity of fruit and vegetables purchased through SPG	0.881	0.100
S/he affirms that buying through SPG s/he spends less than in a conventional supermarket	-0.008	0.797
Price increase for purchase through SPG tolerated before going to a supermarket (0, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%)	0.074	0.641

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization; rotation converged in three iterations.

The second empirical analysis was carried out using two regression models, aimed at verifying whether the participation practices actually affect the consumption behaviors just described. In order to do this, we focused on "persistence", a practice of consumption of fruit and vegetables that captures the attention to local and seasonal products, which leads to consuming local products in accordance with the seasons. With regard to the economic dimension, we focused on the price elasticity, because it shows the willingness to pay a high price in order to keep the purchasing together with the other members of the SPG, regardless of the beliefs on the prices of local products, which can change precisely with the seasons and phases of the market. The multiple regression models include control variables such as gender, age, family education level and family income variables. As shown below

(Tab. 5) the models with these independent variables show a scarce relevance in differentiating the consumption behaviors within the SPG members. This happens despite all these variables, as specified above, show a remarkable range of variation (Tab. 5, models a1 and b1). On the other hand, by introducing into the model the variables previously illustrated in connection to the different forms of participation, the estimation of the parameters is statistically significant. In particular, the greater adherence to ideals and the exercise of networking and social management around shared values (factor 1) lowers the price elasticity and makes the decision to purchase through SPG more rigid. Participants are willing to make economic sacrifices in order to keep consistency with their own orientation and with the people sharing common ideals (model a2). The participation through the collection, sorting, and delivery of products (factor 2) seems instead to lead to intensely focus on the seasonality of fruit and vegetables, staying connected with local farmers (model 2b).

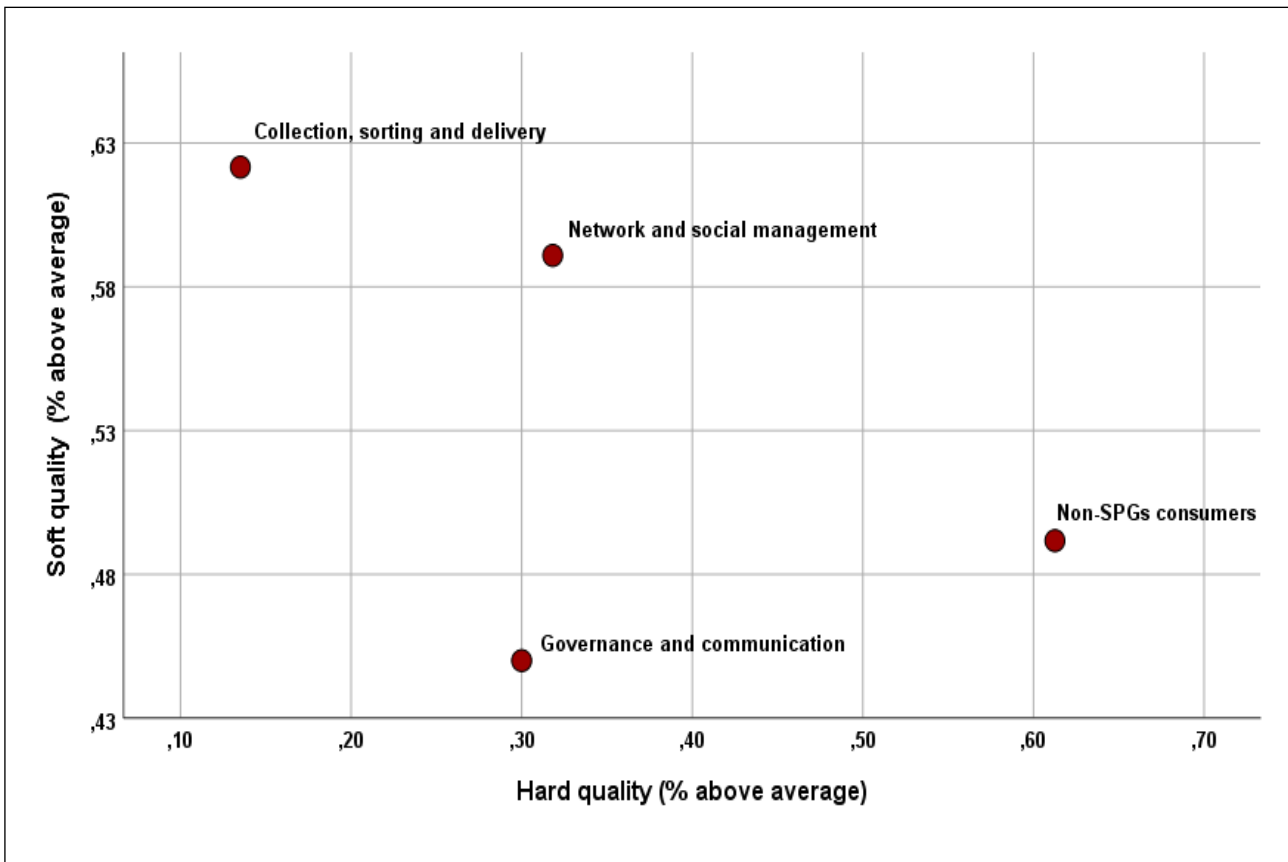
Table 5. Latent dimensions of consumption attitudes and behaviours in SPGs.

	Model 1a			Model 2a			Model 1b		
	Dependent variable:			Dependent variable:			Dependent variable:		
	Which price increase for a purchase through SPG would you tolerate before going to a supermarket? (20%, 30%, 40%, 50%)			Which price increase for a purchase through SPG would you tolerate before going to a supermarket? (20%, 30%, 40%, 50%)			Persistence in F&V purchase through SPG		
	<i>N: 141</i>			<i>N: 141</i>			<i>N: 141</i>		
	<i>Model sig.: 0.16</i>			<i>Model sig.: 0.009</i>			<i>Model sig.: 0.820</i>		
	Beta	t	Sig.	Beta	T	Sig.	Beta	t	S
(Constant)		-0.3	.765		.479	.633		2.828	
Female	.199	2.375	.019	.198	2.398	.018	-.055	-.634	
Age	-.016	-0.183	.856	-.026	-.297	.767	.025	.276	
Family educational level	.191	2.140	.034	.175	1.983	.049	-.012	-.127	
Class income	.038	0.442	.659	.038	.449	.654	-.089	-.998	
Network and social management				.203	2.492	.014			
Collection, sorting and delivery				.048	.592	.555			
Governance and communication				-.033	-.407	.685			

Finally, as already mentioned in sections 1 and 2, we adopted a quality conventions perspective (cf. Ponte, 2016) to identify the main dimensions of quality. Hard quality, related to measurable characteristics such as prices, standardized rules of production, brands and other formal recognition; soft quality, related to less detectable features such as the role of stakeholders in a local context, the respect for tradition, the existence of trust relations, the attention for the environment, the value given to shared community spirit and passion for farming (Barbera and Dagnes, 2016; Barbera et al, 2018a, 2018b).

Fig. 1 compares the positioning on the two dimensions of the SPG members by their prevalent form of participation and with respect to other consumers. This analysis brings out further elements, which empirically support our hypotheses. The scatter plot shows that the relative distances between the groups we focus on are significant on both dimensions while keeping the SPG members as a whole a clear-cut connotation with respect to the average of others consumers, as the most right point in the graph shows. In fact, all SPG participants share the low importance attributed to prices, brands, formal certifications and standardized procedures (i.e. hard quality); for this reason, they are very much on the left in the graph compared to other consumers. However, even the SPG members, in connection to their concrete forms of participation, would appear to be very differentiated from each other, which is consistent with our theoretical framework and hypotheses (see Tab. 6, showing that differences between groups are statistically significant). Those who are part of a SPG above all for a matter of shared ideals, and who mainly deal with the institutional and formal functioning of the group (factor 3, Governance and communication) seem not to be involved in informal trust relationships and in the co-creation of meanings, either with the other members or with the farmers. Thus, in their quality positioning, they attribute little importance to the elements that we have defined as soft quality. Conversely, members who are directly involved in relationships and management (factor 1, Networking and social management) and logistics (factor 2, Collection, sorting and delivery), and who have reported more frequent personal contacts with the farmers, give greater importance to soft quality features, such as trust and the sharing of territorial identity. It seems, therefore, that the prevalent quality conventions are correlated with the type of relational practices with local producers and other SPG members, which are in turn connected to the forms of participation in the SPG.

Figure 1. The quality space: hard and soft quality.



Notes: the axis value is the percentage of consumers over the average value of the dimension. N = 1,090.

Table 6. Quality dimensions and supply chains (ANOVA analysis).

		Sum of squares	<i>gl</i>	Mean squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Soft quality * Participation forms	Between groups	9.225	3	3.075	3.222	.022
	Within groups	917.008	961	.954		
	Total	926.233	964			
Hard quality * Participation forms	Between groups	62.701	3	20.900	23.349	.000
	Within groups	860.237	961	.895		
	Total	922.938	964			

5. Conclusions

In the AFNs/SPGs literature, the production and consumption of food are closely tied together spatially, economically and socially. However, both the first and second criterion is much too close to the mundane definitions of AFNs as used by lay people and practitioners. Moreover, they do not combine with each other coherently. One of the things they are lacking, for instance, "and Walmart's local food initiative is a perfect example of this, is a recognition that reduced spatial distance need not automatically result in the reduction of social distance" (Carolan 2017, p. 219). These shortcomings have been addressed by the further criterion, popular in the academic literature, of embeddedness, i.e., the product's connection with information on the way it is produced. In the words of Marsden and co-authors (2000), "It is this which enables the consumer to confidently make connections and associations with the place/space of production, and, potentially, the values of the people involved and the production methods employed". The embeddedness criterion has the clear merit of encompassing the different motivations for giving value to specific food and/or to specific chains under a single concept, that of information concerning the value of food. Nevertheless, by definition, it may include types of the food chain that are integrated into the conventional food system. This is the case for certain "Spatially extended" food products. It is certainly true that products like Parmigiano Reggiano, or Champagne, derive their appeal for consumers from their regional origin. And it is certainly true, too, that the quality of these products stems from long-lasting historical practices that were originally linked to shared knowledge and skills transmitted over the centuries. Nevertheless, the relevant skills and techniques could now be easily imitated, and the economic value of reputation is legally protected by labels and appellations. More importantly, these products are often fully integrated into the conventional food chain. They are distributed by supermarkets or specialized shops, they are advertised, and from this point of view, the differences with branded food are slight.

Given this background, the analysis we carried out is coherent with a criterion where SPGs "alternativeness" stems from the fact that the exchange is not purely between an anonymous and fungible commodity and money; that the benefit for consumers does not only stem from the intrinsic (physical, chemical, or organoleptic) quality of food but from the modalities themselves of the exchange; and, possibly, the utility for producers derives not only from the monetary reward but, again, from the exchange itself. In our view, it is the quality of the exchange relationship and what is implied in the exchange that distinguishes the exchange taking place in the AFN from the exchange in the conventional chain. Exchanges in AFN bring their own rewards to individuals (De Schutter 2017). As we argued, these exchanges take place in an organized setting and in connection to specific organizational roles that qualify SPG member as meaning-making prosumers. The empirical evidence

shows that intrinsic motivation, shared values, and meaning-making mechanisms are empirically correlated with organizational roles, consumer attitudes and wishes. The organizational roles identify three levels of relationship between SPG participants: the institutional level, connected to the reproduction of the group from a formal and positioning perspective; the exchange level, managed by those who also foster social relations between members; and the logistic level, which involves the collection of products to ensure delivery to members. These differences in the functional contribution of the members are related to their motives for joining the group, while the organizational SPG context seems to allow to modulate the relationship with the producers by attaching importance to specific aspects of the relationship – either ideological or expressive – which are key for SPG members and which would be more difficult – or impossible – to achieve individually. Finally, we showed that all SPG participants share the low importance attributed to prices, brands, formal certifications, and standardized procedures; for this reason, they are very much on the left in the graph compared to other consumers. However, SPGs members are not only different from the other prosumers, but very different from each other as well. SPGs are rich in internal heterogeneity and the radical nature of the change they strive for should not allow indulging in imaginative "adaptive stories" that seem plausible, even if it is not at all clear why that particular story, out of all the possible stories that could be told, should be the best one.

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