

Co-Producing Participatory Guarantee Systems – Limits and Potentials

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INTRODUCING GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES FOR LOCAL PROVISIONING

The last five years have seen the impact of global financial crises come to a peak in Europe. As the Euro zone trembles and the economies of Southern Europe grind to a virtual halt, scholarly interest in alternative provisioning methods and the solidarity economy movement is building. At the same time, policymakers wonder whether alternative food networks (such as Community Supported Agriculture schemes) might be scaled up to provide a viable model of food sovereignty, scholars of political activism debate whether such programs constitute a truly post-capitalist social movement, and philosophers consider whether such economic behaviour is morally grounded or is to be dismissed as the latest feel-good foodie fad. Diverse social and economic

actors converge on food re-localization, including a wide palette of provisioning activists, from Slow Food to seed-saving groups, from religiously motivated radicals to affluent and discriminating buyers. They creatively fill the space left void by global food systems, which are accused of justifying collective imaginaries of pending dooms by systematically withdrawing relevant information in exchange for marketable sound-bites.

Grassroots initiatives for local provisioning are proliferating, and have been identified as a social movement for a "new economy" (Alperovitz 2012). In their majority, they focus on alternative food networks (though increasingly also on non-food provisions such as clothes, shoes, detergents etc.; or on access to land, energy, insurance, and credit). Several groups and networks are growing, often without reciprocal knowledge or coordination. In particular, 'Alternative Food Networks' and 'Civic Food Networks' have been read as novel socio-economic grassroots circuits that experiment both reflectively and practically with the food system (Forno, Graziano 2014, Goodman, Dupuis 2002, Grasseni 2013, Renting et al. 2003, 2012). In particular, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the United States, the French *Associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne* (AMAP), and the GAKs (*Grupos Autogestionados de Consumo*) in Spain directly sell farming produce to their membership, sometimes employing agroecologic models and seed-saving, often – but not always – in the name of practicing alternative forms and models of the economy (such as Solidarity Economy, Economy of the Common Good, or Degrowth Economy).

In September 2012, the theme of "De-Growth" provided a provocatively counter-intuitive focus to the national assembly of Italy's Solidarity Purchase Groups, a network of critical consumers that pledge to purchase collectively as many goods as possible directly from producers and in *solidarity with them* (Grasseni 2014). In the run-up to the conference, the Italian Ethical Bank magazine, *Valori* (values), devoted a special issue to *The Forthcoming Middle Ages* (Baiocchi 2012). The controversial cover story upheld "forced de-growth" as a politically viable scenario and profiled alternative food networks as a new dark age, characterized by more Internet surfing and less gasoline-guzzling travel, greener technology and more localized economies. With fewer and more modest salaries available, female unwaged work (the publication suggested) could be productively returned to homesteading, traditional self-provisioning, and seasonal harvesting. This greener patriarchal society would be based on autarchy, a return to locality, and ultimately an extremely

conservative reinvention of both family and community. This journalistic stunt summarizes the ambivalent promise that alternative provisioning networks embody.

In Italy, faced by the environmental, financial, and social unsustainability of the global economy, provisioning activism is actually moving beyond consumers' ethical choices, which have been interpreted as a "political consumerism" informing a variety of lifestyle choices that may include vegetarianism, preference for organic food and ethically branded goods, or the Fair Trade circuit (Stolle et al. 2005). Critiques include the recognition that such role of "consumer-citizens" (Mol 2009) actually entails a great deal of consumer deskilling, and advocates more engagement through "civic agriculture" (Lyson 2004) or "food justice" (Alkon and Agyeman 2011).

A burgeoning interest for *urban food gardens* also falls within this framework, with various motivations: increasing the sustainability of urban food procurement, improving urban health with more fresh foods, and seeking religiously or culturally appropriate food-stuffs (Cangelosi 2013). This can facilitate or induce communities of practice exchanging experience, seeds, advice or help. In Europe and beyond, urban food gardens continue to be important forms of family sustenance.¹ Urban food gardening is increasingly looked at by municipal administrations as a way to encourage active citizenship and social cohesion as well as to make urban food procurement greener. In Italy, the municipality of Turin (a city of about 900,000 inhabitants in the middle of a wider urban area of more than 2 million inhabitants) is encouraging collective management of the city's allotments, by making it mandatory that only associations of citizens (rather than private individuals) can bid for access to city allotments.² Even in smaller cities, municipal administrations are increasingly interested in urban food gardens. For example in Bergamo (Lombardy) a new regulation has been issued in 2016 to lease 18 small parcels of publicly owned land to citizens or associations who wish to cultivate it – binding them to specific modes of cultivation.³ On the spur of Milan's 2015 Universal Exhibition devoted to the topic *Feeding the Plant* an "urban food policy pact" has been signed by one hundred world-cities.

1 As for example in Nairobi, Kenya <https://nairobiplanninginnovations.com/2015/12/23/the-case-for-more-urban-farming-in-nairobi/> (last accessed 13.04.2016 but also and commonly in post socialist Poland: see Giedych, 2013).

2 See the regulation at <http://www.ortiurbanitorino.it>. This has stimulated some projects for collectively managed, open food gardens (*OrtiAperti*).

3 See the regulation at <http://www.comune.bergamo.it> > *Regolamenti*.

Fluid alliances of social, economic, and institutional actors are being read as instances of new economic sovereignty, social resilience, or inclusiveness – exercised through alternative provisioning. This follows a long anthropological tradition of understanding economic practice as embedded in relationships (Gudeman 2012, Polanyi 1968). In Italy, Solidarity Purchase Groups and Solidarity Economy Districts (Grasseni 2013) coexist with the cooperative model (Borzaga and Defourny 2004). The Ireland and UK-born Transition Network fosters reskilling and self-sufficiency since 2006, to tackle climate change and peak oil, showcasing Totnes and Bristol successes. In Germany, both a ‘Solidarity Agriculture’ (Solidarische Landwirtschaft) movement and the Transition Movement are present (the latter with 142 initiatives), sometimes synergizing with the Austrian “economy of common good” (Felber 2010). In France, where Europe’s first minister for social and solidarity economy was appointed in 2013, the grassroots agro-food networks AMAP are debating scaling-up (Dubuisson-Quellier 2014).

SOME EXAMPLES FROM FIELDWORK

Among documented cases of alternative provisioning moving beyond “ethical consumption” are Sicilian Solidarity Purchase Groups and anti-mafia activists joined to buy-cott (namely buying preferentially) “mafia-free” products (Forno, Gunnarson 2010). The UN Research Institute for Social Development petitions scholarship on such “social and solidarity economies” as models for socio-environmental resilience (UNRISD 2012). To gain a sense of how fast growing this type of provisioning activism is, Bergamo University ran a first census of active groups of solidarity purchase in the Bergamo area (a province of about 1 million inhabitants) in 2010, and mapped about 30 such groups. In 2011 we ran a second mapping effort and identified more than 60 active groups. About one thousand groups were censused nationally, but we mapped about 450 in Lombardy alone (a region of about 10 million inhabitants out of Italy’s 60 millions).⁴

However, there is currently no single master narrative for how alternative provisioning should work. The common understanding is that provisioning activism is particularly popular during economically

⁴ This was part of a collaboration among a developing network of solidarity purchase groups and CORES LAB, a research group on sustainable economies co-funded with sociologist Francesca Forno and economist Silvana Signori at Bergamo University.

troubled times. The media underline how it allows families to secure quality food at affordable prices, providing networks of mutual help amongst peers, while simultaneously supporting proximal producers. Such groups can be difficult to count because they tend to be informal, proliferating at the grassroots level but keeping very much “under the radar”. This poses a number of questions about how actually transformative they are in the context of regional economies and whether they can have an impact on policy-making in rethinking global food systems. Ethnographic evidence shows how laborious it is to coordinate amongst different groups and across diverging political sensibilities, both at local and at national level (Grasseni 2013).

Increasingly though, networks of provisioning activists understand themselves as a social movement. There are two international networks of solidarity economy and of community-supported agriculture - RIPESS and URGENCI - that overlap and converse on many topics. This is just one manifestation of how specific driving themes and shared repertoires cross-cut many different activist networks. For example, as explained in the incipit, in September 2012 the theme of “De-Growth” was the focus of the national assembly of Italy’s Solidarity Purchase Groups. These phenomena strive towards a new “eco-sociality” (Gibson-Graham, Roelvink 2010) that would seem to thrive on the re-localization of supply, on face-to-face relationships as a return to reciprocity and the gift as basic movers of economic transactions, and by relying on self-education and communication as important aspects of provisioning. While applauding such aspirations, ethnography unveils a variety of structural and social impediments to realizing such goals in practice. Mapping oneself is key not only to creating local economic circuits but to achieving a critical mass for political representation. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether GAS provisioning activism is actually building up into “consciously formed associations with the goal of bringing about change in social, economic, or political sectors through collective action” (Stevenson et al. 2009). An apt example comes from the uneasy relationship that GAS has with policy-makers and politics in general (Grasseni 2014b).

Promising qualitative research has gone as far as transnationally comparing “civic food networks” (Renting et al. 2012) as catalysts for novel governance. Among these are community-supported agriculture schemes that use participatory certification, a self-certification device ideated by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM 2011). The solidarity economy movement in Italy is complex and multi-faceted (Grasseni 2013), but we can consider the participatory certification as one of the most advanced attempts of the

solidarity economy movement in contemporary Italy to build ‘networks of networks’ and to coalesce the myriad of Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS) that organize networks of family for responsible consumption into a higher-order project, which would articulate and mobilize discourse and practice through collaboration with local farmers to effect a real impact on local economies. The participatory guarantee project *Per una pedagogia della terra* (For a pedagogy of the land) unites organic farmers and members of Solidarity Purchase Groups in the Lombard provinces of Como, Varese and Monza Brianza. The goal of the project is to establish a partnership between producers and consumers whereby the consumers recognize the quality of the produce through a *Participatory Guarantee System* (PGS).⁵ In other words, crop quality is collegially certified following the same standards and criteria as organic agriculture, as regulated by national and European law, but without the intervention of a third-party certifier.

PARTICIPATORY GUARANTEE SYSTEMS
AS GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES FOR LOCAL PROVISIONING:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Silvia Contessi has focussed in particular on *soil* as a key element of these experimentations, which can be analysed from the point of view of a professional vision (Goodwin 2003). Soil has come to the fore in recent news about global land grabbing, but it has always been a key factor for the politics of *agro-business* – in particular, soil quality or environmental degradation should, but not always is, normatively defined. For example in Italy the law does not regulate soil quality for agricultural use (Contessi 2014). Soil is a complex system (Hausmann 1964, 1986, 1992) whose knowledge is necessary for multiple disciplines and practices: forestry, agronomy, viticulture, urban planning, and archaeology, building engineering and environmental management. Nevertheless, in common sense language soil is associated with dirt (the common word for soil in American English is in fact *dirt*), while in fact all food depends on soil and its interaction with water and seeds. Do alternative food practices change this disconnect?

A preliminary answer can come from ethnographic analysis of the Lombard PGS project (Contessi 2015) from both a technical and

5 Following the model and protocols provided by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements: see <http://www.ifoam.bio>.

anthropological point of view. Contessi argues that *both* 'traditional' organic certification systems *and* participatory guarantee systems are lacking knowledge measures and intervention capacity with regard to soil pollution, which in northern Italy, as elsewhere, is a very real condition. For example, organic certification stresses all the practices through which soil fertility can be maintained and focuses on reducing chemical substances such as synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, synthetic plant protection products and biocides, while a chemical inspection of the soil is left to self-control. Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) adopt the organic production protocol from the law, and thus reproduce this veritable blind spot. PGS articulate relationships of trust and knowledge exchange between producers and consumers, which can facilitate both social and environmental resilience (where by resilience we take its most common interpretation as capacity to withstand the shock of change). However, both in traditional and in alternative organic certification systems, soil contamination consistently eludes the field of vision of both third-party and participatory certifiers.

In particular, in the PGS case studies by Contessi the preference for organic and local food is not founded upon environmental or agronomic expertise. This is unfortunately in no way an exception. Short-chain organic food can also be produced in contaminated land, or with polluted water (Contessi 2015: 107-112). Even social agriculture (namely working in the fields with disadvantaged workers) has been observed to be carried out in contaminated areas (Contessi 2015: 113-115).

However, it is precisely from a social point of view that the Lombard PGS is significantly innovative. It connected three existing DES – Districts of Solidarity Economy – in Como, Varese and Monza-Brianza, bringing their engagement to a further level of maturity. Together they elaborate an independent model of certification that critiques agricultural standardization. Taking example from the Brazilian network Ecovida, they nevertheless differed from it, since the Brazilian project was devised by a network of producers while the Lombard project was initiated, entirely organized and carried out by a network of consumers. At its outset in 2011, the project involved 16 farmers (namely 11 vegetable and fruit growers and 5 animal breeders) and the members of the Solidarity Purchase Groups involved in the three DES. The organization involved a members' assembly, three local committees, as well as *Gruppi di visita* (inspection groups) and a guarantee committee (*Commissione di Garanzia*), both including volunteers from the producers and consumers stakeholders as well as an agronomist. While inspection groups carried out on-field visits, the guarantee committee evaluated the reports from the visits and authorized the certification.

The project's documentation included a Charter of values, a Declaration of intents which the producer signs to become member of the system, a Protocol of organic vegetable cultivation and a Visit's guidebook to structure the field inspections. At the time of fieldwork, a protocol for animal husbandry and its Visit's guidebook had also been drafted. Drafting and discussing these documents was an important element of the working group's activity: the rules they codified served the purpose of making explicit in which direction this project wanted to go with self-certification, and their deliberation aided the group's internal cohesion. The field visits were then a concrete opportunity for the consumers involved to get to know the reality of farming first-hand and to acquire a more technical awareness of agronomic language and practices. It should be noted how the characteristics of this project were the informality and accessibility of both the language and the procedures involved: the meetings, the field visit reports and the committee's evaluations were made available to all members of the project (and to the anthropologists following it). Similarly, the field inspections were structured in such a way that it was the farmer who leads the visiting group showing the rationale of his/her work, instead of being questioned by the visitors to check punctual normative requirements.

The philosophy underlying the field visit is thus that of a knowledge exchange: the visiting group *learns* from the farmer what he/she does, so that *together* they can deliberate what might need changes or adjustments. This control mechanism is founded on the assumption of reciprocal trust and in particular on the sincerity of the producer. Contessi's 3-year long observation of the PGS circuit thus confirms Grasseni's fieldwork with Solidarity Economy networks, namely that knowledge-socialization, face-to-face meetings and personal trust are the building blocks of this organization. However, reciprocity and trust are both the potential and the limits of the PGS system. Trust can be an ambivalent mode of knowledge-sharing. For example, field inspections do not have the objective of detecting specific problems in a punitive logic. Personal knowledge of the actors involved in the system can and does determine how the field visits are conducted and how favourable the determinations of the guarantors are. While this can be commendable in the sense of supporting local farmers or appreciating the good will of social enterprises, it can also deter from the objectivity of the evaluation. In one case for example it appeared that the farmer being inspected had used bean seeds that had been pre-treated with Thyram (this is a standard plant protection product used in seed treatment) instead of organic seeds as per the cultivation protocol. The

inspection committee appreciated the honesty of the farmer and accepted this as a mistake that would not be repeated; so did the certifying committee (Contessi 2015: 192-194).

Thus trust brings producer and consumer closer, but this reciprocal support does leave some leeway for tampering with the standards of the food which is ultimately consumed by the network's members. On the other hand, the very flexibility of the protocol allowed making room for liminal producers who would not otherwise have benefited of any quality certification. Similarly, when a lack of volunteers brought to a standstill in the field visits, these could be rescheduled in such a way as to continue with the project instead of discontinuing it. All these adjustments were communicated and shared within the group, so that the organizational hurdles and the need to expand resources were also socialized – which ultimately led to the PGS system being expanded to other provinces in Lombardy, applying for additional third-party funding.

Similarly to PGS, urban food gardens represent a promising field of future research attention. Their micro scale includes important dimensions of sociability both in urban and peri-urban areas. However, in these heavily urbanised contexts, public and private land is exposed to illegal waste disposal practices, the deliberate interment of dangerous waste, pollution from sewage and leaks, adjacency to ex petrol stations or dismantled industries, heavy traffic, carbon emissions, cement and tarmac covering, or use of herbicides in parks and roadsides. Each of these impacts the environment with specific contaminants including heavy metals, hydrocarbons, particulate and fine dust, solvents, volatile organic compounds and chlorinated compounds. To this we should add industrial emission, which easily moves across space. Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) are a group of toxic chlorinated compounds that resist chemical, biological and biochemical degradation and thus accumulate in the food chain (they *bio-accumulate*), including pesticides such as Lindane, Aldrin, Dieldrin, DDT, Mirex and other industrial products such as PCB, Hexabromobiphenyle, with their undesirable sub-products Polycyclic Hydrocarbons, Dioxins and Furans. The Unintentional Persistent Organic Pollutants (U-POPs), which originate from metal works combustions, and waste combustion are being studied for their effects on health as they (together with POPs) are fat-soluble and accumulate in both vegetable and animal fats, thus bio-magnifying their presence in the animal and human food chains (Spezzano 2004). These challenges are currently overlooked both by professional operators working in conventional agriculture and in neo-rural food activism.

We suggest that this awareness is currently lacking from many alternative economic models that currently invest on community-supported agriculture movements and on local food in particular (whether through urban gardens or alternative food networks and participatory guarantee systems). However, the multiplicity and variety of experimentations currently undertaken offer many opportunities for enhancing socio-environmental resilience (Adger 2000, Folke 2006). Even though they do not do better than conventional agriculture in facing up to the environmental challenges of urban agriculture, these models at least posit food quality as a condition for rethinking the food system and would thus benefit from increased awareness of its technical aspects. If food sovereignty and health go hand in hand with citizens' participation in solidarity economies, more space can be devoted both in research and in dissemination to a social understanding of the technology of food production, which is increasingly dependent on our understanding of our inhabited environment as a complex and delicately balanced system.

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