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*Transformative or market-driven?
The Impact of Social and Solidarity Economy in
the European Mediterranean City: An
exploration of the aporias of value in the context
of Bologna.*

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Gabriele Morelli

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Introduction

Despite the growing recognition of the transformative potential of the SSE and the amount of academic and policy-oriented research related to the SSE, it remains a relatively new concept to many. There is therefore a need for high-quality knowledge on this topic, and information to guide policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

(Encyclopedia of SSE, 2023: xviii)

In recent times, there has been an increasing interest in alternative forms of economic practices, particularly after the 2008 economic crisis.¹ This suggests a growing realization that continuing with 'Business as Usual' cannot be sustained (Scheyvens et al., 2016). Numerous initiatives have emerged globally, ranging from time banks and ethical finance to revived interest in cooperative and social enterprise. These initiatives are increasingly categorized as *Social and Solidarity Economy*. Simultaneously, we are experiencing crisis after crisis, the global pandemic being only the latest, and our development model seems to be only marginally reformed.²

The Social and Solidarity Economy (hereafter SSE) appears to be gaining momentum.

SSE is increasingly gaining attention internationally, attracting academic interest and facilitating local development. Several official documents have been recently published in support of SSE by

¹ Castells (2017: 205-212) writes in regard: 'Economic crises reveal the cultural and political foundations of practices of production, consumption, and exchange of goods and services. I understand crises as the condition in which the mechanisms that ensure the proper performance of these practices cease to function under the operating procedures embodied in markets and institutions. [...] Thus, the rise of alternative economic practices, largely in connection with social movements that emerged during the crisis (Castells 2015) appeared to be the harbinger of significant changes in the lives of people by transforming the culture, creating new imaginary, and implementing new policies on the basis of a change in power relations'.

² Stephen Healy (2018: 46-47) summarizes as follows: 'Some people point to the failure of three decades of post-cold war economic globalization to deliver generalized prosperity, producing instead a world where fewer than a dozen people control nearly half of planetary wealth. William [Wolfgang] Streeck describes the past half century as a time in which 'normality' is a fluctuation between economic instability and crisis, where each convulsion diminishes the social capacity to respond effectively to the next one - arguing in effect that the end of capitalism has already arrived, with nothing to take its place. Others argue that we are at the end of the long summer of the climatic stability of the Holocene, and that the last seventy-five years marked a 'great acceleration' that catapulted us into the Anthropocene: a period defined by a warmer and more volatile climate, acidified oceans, depleted resources, and a planet-wide sixth mass extinction'.

organizations including the OECD, UN, ILO, and EU.³ Amid the pandemic crisis,⁴ the United Nations Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy states that:

The complexity of the crisis that we are facing requires an enormous amount of resources, which furthermore calls for a cooperation between the private and the public sectors at different levels. SSE can play an important role due to its characteristics, as private enterprises often operate in areas of public utility. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are key to design relevant and innovative public policies to better overcome this crisis and to transform this crisis into an opportunity to make fundamental changes and allow the much-needed transformation of our society and economy. (UNTFSSSE, 2020: 7)

This tentative mainstreaming (which needs to be scrutinized in terms of its practical and political consequences) inherently entails risks and opportunities (Utting, 2016).

In fact, SSE is a complex phenomenon that still lacks a consensual conceptualization. It faces many challenges: “The scale of SSE is often underestimated in national statistics and policy, partly due to variability in the definition of SSE in different contexts and the difficulties of measuring the scale and impacts of smaller SSEOs, some of which form part of the informal economy. Mistakenly, SSE has been considered a fringe actor on the development stage and has not attained the place it deserves in public policy frameworks” (UNTFSSSE, 2022: ix-x).

In the existing literature, it is also possible to identify broadly two main approaches to SSE: one more *market-oriented*, in which SSE plays a marginal or complementary role to the capitalist economy (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010; 2014; Bassi & Fabbri, 2020), and the other more *transformative*, which sees SSE as a potential systemic alternative to it (Adam, 2018; Utting, 2018).

³ The ILO adopted the 'Resolution concerning decent work and the social and solidarity economy' in June 2022, available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_848633.pdf; the OECD promoted the 'Recommendation of the Council on the Social and Solidarity Economy and Social Innovation' in June 2022, available at: <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0472%20>; the United Nations approved the resolution 'Promoting the social and solidarity economy for sustainable development' in March 2023, available at: <https://unsse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/A-77-L60.pdf>; lastly, the European Union adopted the document 'Building an economy that works for people: an action plan for the social economy' in December 2021, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0778>.

⁴ This is a reference to the COVID-19 pandemic that was declared officially by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020 and ceased to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 5 May 2023.

In other words, SSE can be seen as a form of 'active welfare' that focuses exclusively on the supply side of the labor market (to be 'reformed' and made flexible), ignoring the demand side and its implications. In this sense, SSE seems to be considered as a tool to manage the negative externalities generated by contemporary capitalist practices, without questioning its premises (Adam, 2018).

However, certain authors have pointed out that the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has the potential to facilitate societal transformation (Papadaki & Kalogeraki, 2018; Bedridaki & Broumas, 2017; Adam, 2018). The SSE redefines the economy as a social sphere wherein economic activities aim to satisfy collective well-being (tied to social needs), rather than private profit, in a democratic and participatory manner. This perspective portrays SSE as an emancipatory process that leads to socio-economic transformation. In terms of sustainable development, Utting (2018: 14) defines the meaning of 'transformative' for SSE as follows:

Beyond addressing simultaneously the multiple dimensions of sustainable development –economic, social and environmental, as well as cultural and 'good governance' – it involves addressing not only the symptoms of contemporary development problems but also their root causes, namely the structural conditions that reproduce inequality, vulnerability and social and environmental injustice.

Hence, my research lies in the tension between these two poles, leaning towards a transformative understanding of SSE as a whole. However, I recognize the limitations of binary thinking.⁵ Although two opposing approaches have been identified, I acknowledge that there are many nuances between them. Rather than a dichotomy, it can be viewed as a continuum (see Figure 1).

⁵ As Greenwood & Levin (2007: 255) poignantly summarize, albeit in reference to other objects, 'We know from the work of many writers that radical dichotomies are almost always morally charged and substitute for thoughtful argument. The binary cultural logics always privilege one pole as the ideal and demonize the other as the source of all evil, oversimplifying the world in a morally coercive way. Mary Douglas (2002) so effectively pointed out long ago, believing unabashedly in such dichotomies condemns us to a lifetime of sweeping up the "dirt"-that is, the vast number of things in life that do not neatly fit into the dichotomous framework'.

The crisis of democratic institutions coupled with technological advancement and concentration of power lead historian Harari to ask: 'Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?' (Harari, 2015: 364).

The theoretical stance in this thesis is that it is not sufficient to support SSE only as an ex-post strategy or response to crises, without questioning the conditions of these crises and challenges. Rather, we must change the 'rules of the game' and support SSE for its transformative potential.

In this context, it is important to inquire: Does SSE subscribe to a particular social philosophy? Given that 'ontologies, discourses and definitions that develop from them are significant as they are performative' (Johanisova, 2019: 4), it is essential to recognize and invest in the political value of SSE as a transformative endeavor: 'how to regain control over the powers that we have long let dictate the lives of individuals and communities?' (Salvatori, 2020: 31).⁸

Providing a different reading of value, in the context of an accelerated globalized environment, will help us address the challenges of the future of work,⁹ amidst the technological disruption potentially brought about by automation. SSE has the potential to reopen a debate on the meaning, content and purpose of work, refocusing attention on the quality of work, its environment, its purpose and the relationship between human beings, nature and technology.

Globally, economic growth is becoming increasingly disconnected from employment, which results in job insecurity in terms of income, access to social security, and non-standard forms of employment (Borzaga et al., 2019: 38-39).

⁸ Translation is mine.

⁹ Though with different intentions than mine, Carlsson (2010: 928) effectively captures the point when he writes: 'Anticapitalist movements often fail to address the significance of "unproductive" labor (labor towards goals that exceed and contradict those of capital) and the problems with "productive" labor (labor that continues to reproduce the value form). Both organized labor and governing socialist or communist parties abdicated decades ago any say over the *content* and *goals* of work, and implicitly the content and goals of science and technology, to the initiative of Capital. By the dawn of the twenty-first century, this has led to the mind-numbing expansion of useless work, while social needs are neglected and most people's creative capacities are left dormant. People are richly rewarded to create advertising, to invent new "financial instruments", to design "anti-personnel" bombs, to analyze how to increase credit card debt, and so on. The same society will not spend meaningful resources on early childhood education and denies public schools of the most basic resources. Vast public subsidies pour into agribusiness and oil company coffers while urban gardens are bulldozed to make way for box stores and warehouses, and organic farmers have to sell their unsubsidized products at higher prices. Publicly funded highways continue to cover the land and most cities dedicate more than half their available acreage to parking or moving private automobiles, while public transit is starved of resources and the bicycle is treated as a childish toy instead of a legitimate transportation choice. This is all evidence of a society that in all instances strives to reproduce the dynamic of capital, the value form and waged labor, instead of attending to social need'.

The emergence of the fourth industrial revolution has made the situation more complex. It is already influencing every aspect of our social and economic life, but it is far from certain what its overall impact on employment and job quality will be.

Today, the phenomenon of the fourth industrial revolution is certainly the most powerful incentive to reconsider the paradigm of the civil economy. It is well-known that the rise of technological convergence –resulting from the synergistic combination of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive sciences (acronym nbic)– is radically changing not only the production methods, but also and especially the social relations and cultural matrix of our society. We do not yet know how digital technology and the culture that governs it will change the essence of capitalism in the coming years. However, we do know that a new Polanyian-type «great transformation» is having a far-reaching impact on the meaning of human work (and on the issue of job destruction), on the relationship between the market and democracy, and on the ethical dimension of human activity (Rocco & Bainbridge, 2002).

(Zamagni, 2018: 159-169)

Considering that, 'Out of the five groups of functions that define almost every work activity (physical capabilities, sensory perception, cognitive capabilities, natural language processing, social and emotional capabilities), computer-based systems can already perform effectively the first three and are making impressive progress on the fourth (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017)' (Borzaga et al, 2019: 41).

The jobs most unlikely to be replaced are those related to human abilities that artificial intelligence cannot replicate, 'the tasks related to social and emotional dimensions, where humans cannot be replaced, along with other non-routine cognitive tasks involved in coordination and problem-solving activities (Arntz et al., 2016; Autor, 2015; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014)' (Borzaga et al, 2019: 41).

Considering this, the sectors of the economy that are most likely to experience growth in the future are those that require the development and improvement of social, emotional, and relational skills and values. According to Borzaga et al. (2019), social and care services, particularly the 'silver economy', are the most likely sectors for SSE organizations to enhance working conditions, improve quality, and promote more gender-equitable relationships. Given that these sectors are vulnerable to non-standard labor practices, exploitation, and insecure conditions, the authors contend that

SSE organizations, which prioritize the needs of stakeholders, could have a beneficial impact on them.

From the perspective of a transformative SSE, this approach is very limited if not accompanied by a radical discussion and redefinition of what is considered value in our societies, recognizing that social value is paramount and that 'the more automation proceeds, the more obvious it should be that actual value emerges from the care element of work' (Graeber, 2019: 261). In other words, 'without proper checks and balances we believe our economic system could squeeze out those aspects of life that people value most. We urgently need to align incentives with the social and environmental values that are generated by the workforce' (Lawlor et al, 2009: 5).

A reading of SSE from the perspective of community economies can help in this respect, placing ethical questions about how to openly renegotiate our interdependencies (with humans and more than humans) at the center of the discussion. Beginning with the notion of 'economy as always plural' and 'community as always open',

These questions foreground both community and economy as dilemmatic spaces of problem posing and decision making in interdependence. Their relevance to the solidarity economy movement becomes apparent when one considers the persistent questions that preoccupy the movement: are the SSEs a movement that aims at social transformation, or does it aim to address the shortcomings of so-called free market societies? Is the movement experiencing 'mission creep' as it becomes more professional? What role does/should the state play in supporting the solidarity economy movement? What is the relationship between more formal solidarity economy institutions (for example, cooperatives) and everyday practices of mutuality? How does the solidarity economy connect to the concerns of other social movements? Each of these questions expresses genuine ethical dilemmas; the struggle to answer these questions is ongoing. In a sense, they re-pose the central questions raised by the theory of community economy – 'What is an economy?' and 'With whom are we in community (solidarity)?' – for which there can be no final answer.

(Healy et al., 2023: 14-15)

Several theoretical shifts seem necessary to move in this direction.

- The first shift entails *reframing* the economy, from a monolithic neoliberal capitalism to a diverse and heterogeneous space, as suggested by diverse and community economies scholarship.
- The second shift involves *reframing* SSE, not just as a sector or policy tool, but as an open conversation about ethical economic practices.
- The third shift requires a *reframing* of our understanding of value, moving beyond the narrow scope of marginal utility theory to a comprehensive definition of social value.

My dissertation explores the Social and Solidarity Economy as a potentially transformative practice for a post-capitalist society through the lens of the diverse and community economies approach. The focus of my research is to investigate the practical aspects of SSE initiatives that lead to transformative effects, namely creating positive social change in their operating context. Transformative SSE is not a predetermined theoretical category. Instead, it is explored through practical engagement with liminal theories of social innovation and social impact evaluation.

Recognizing with Flyvbjerg (2006: 223) that 'in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge', the theoretical elaboration is applied to a Southern European urban context: the city of Bologna.

Following the 2008 economic crisis, researchers have extensively examined Southern European countries and cities, both as sites of marginalization and welfare state retrenchment, and as sites of innovation and new forms of cooperation (Cano-Hila et al., 2022).

Bologna, a city with high social capital and developed SSE as presented by Murtagh (2019: 123-126), offers in this sense a fruitful context in which to delineate the possible contours of transformative SSE practices.

In doing so, this thesis is organized as follows.

In Chapter 1, through a literature review, I identify the main alternative conceptions of SSE and their political implications, discuss the most relevant concepts related to SSE (market, cooperation, social value) in order to produce preliminary hypotheses on the conditions of possibility for a transformative SSE, and explore the challenges and potentials of SSE as a transformative project.

In Chapter 2, I present the case studies on which my research is based, focusing on the rationale for their selection.

In Chapter 3, the methodology, methods, and analysis used in this study are explained.

The fourth chapter introduces the context in which my fieldwork took place: the urban space of Bologna, the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region in northern Italy.

Here I will briefly discuss Bologna as a Southern European city and its legacy of civic engagement and mutualism. This will set the context for my research.

In addition, I present a discourse analysis of SSE based on the narratives promoted by SSE support agencies. This will establish the framework through which a closer understanding of the SSE practices of the case studies can take place.

In the fifth chapter, I will present and discuss in depth the four case studies in order to test their validity in relation to the hypotheses developed and to make them resonate with the theory. I also reflect on the implications of the Theory of Change as an evaluation practice applied to a case study.

In chapter 6, the conclusion discusses how the thesis contributes to advancing knowledge about SSE by moving dialogically from theory to contextualized practices and back.¹⁰

First, I will address the limitations and challenges identified in the case studies. Next, I will provide a tentative understanding of transformative SSE. Finally, I will return to the diverse and community economies approach in order to create space for hopeful transformations.

¹⁰ As Benzecry emphasizes: 'the Pandora's box of qualitative sociology has been inexorably opened, calling attention to it, not anymore as just a 'method' (in order for it to be just that we would need very stable and shared definitions of the phenomena to begin with) but rather as a full-blown way to produce valid knowledge. As such, it is not there to generate early hypothesis, emulate quantitative research with a failed logic of inference – since it cannot emulate the statistical capabilities of random probabilistic samplings on a large N – or aim for confirmation. In inhabiting that difference, qualitative sociologists learn to sample for variation, and for theoretical gains; to think less in terms of generalization and more of how good is the constructed research object as a stand in for a larger sociological question; to think of unique cases not as a problem, but actually as an opportunity; and to think of the process as neither deductive nor inductive, rather as a constantly iterative project, in which the constant back-and-forth between the empirical material and the scholarly literature helps us to contrast, define, and refine, what is it that we are studying is indeed a case of. In this process, it is important to remind ourselves pace Jeff Alexander (1982), that theory and data are not pre-existing things in the world, but rather linguistic conventions, their difference anchored less in their ontology, and more within the logic of aggregation. Theory is the word we use to refer to cases in which what we produced as data serve us to illuminate similar phenomena in other contexts than the ones we investigated' (Benzecry, 2023: 7).

Chapter 1

Exploring the Social and Solidarity Economy as a post-capitalist practice

Section One: Reframing the Economy

Homo economicus is a sociopath—designed to cheat, lie, and exploit.

(Dash, 2014: 15)

Virtuous economists aspire to do God's work—to promote social betterment. Economists ranging from Karl Marx to John Maynard Keynes to the high priests of the Chicago School placed their science in the service of human salvation. Robert Nelson is right to identify economics as a secular religion led by those hoping to achieve heaven on earth. But economists' practice also contributes to harm. The harm can be severe, even devastating. Sometimes it destroys lives. Regrettably, the risk of harming is ineliminable from economic practice. This is the tragedy of economics. It is a statement of fact. *It is not an indictment of the profession.*

(DeMartino, 2022: 3)

Empirical analysis of how poor people engage the cash economy is entangled in social relations (remittances, love, sex, inheritance) in a way that challenges purely market dynamics. All markets are, to some extent, based on predation – even Time Banks are not purely altruistic – but cash is also vital in intergenerational transfers, gift giving and cultural obligations such that 'market exchange is not the negation of sociality; on the contrary, it forms a vital – indeed irreplaceable – part of the co-ordinated life of any modern society' (Ferguson, 2015, p. 126). In short, the confusion between market exchange and capitalism ignores broadly based, anthropological evidence on the dense, social relations of mutuality bound up in the cash nexus. Work is more than a cash exchange, and in the SSE, the dignity of labouring, especially among vulnerable people, tends to be devalued or dismissed in broader critiques of workfare.

(Murtagh, 2019: 80)

Reframing is a critical thinking strategy developed by diverse economies scholarship that 'involves first, the work of critique to disempower the framing that is standing in the way of change, and second, the work of building a new framing that can enable different kinds of action' (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020: 8).

This theoretical move is necessary to talk about community economic practices, of which SSE is an expression of. Otherwise, they would not be able to emerge as self-contained concepts that are worthy of exploration, analysis, and replication.

The term *capitalocentrism* captures the framing of capitalism 'as the ultimate real, as something we can't imagine the world without, as the inevitable container and constrainer of possibility that operates outside of society' (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020: 8).

The origins of this can be traced back to neoclassical economic thinking as a 'narrative of an ever-expanding economy, where firms compete on an abstract market, maximize financial profit, and, via this market, provide goods and services to individual consumers who, in turn, maximize their utility' (Johanisova, 2019: 2). The relevance of this ontology for our discussion, for its political implications and practical consequences, is clearly expressed by Johanisova (2019: 2):

One problem with this ontology, or view of the world as it is and should be, is that it is *performative*. [...] Another problem with such an ontology is that it *abstracts from some important caveats*. One caveat is that, to succeed on such a playing field, an enterprise must usually externalise its costs onto some other, weaker actors: This can be the world of Nature, via extraction of resources, pollution, waste, and global warming. Or, to be successful, effective and competitive, an enterprise needs to externalise its costs in terms of labour, outsourcing its manufacturing or other processes abroad, where wages are lower and labour rights are often curtailed. So - is it realistic for a SE [social enterprise] to compete in such an economy, if it is expected to produce positive rather than negative externalities, to have general interest aims rather than just aiming for profit?

These are not simply rhetorical questions. Scientists are warning that the ecological threat has been largely underestimated to date (Bradshaw et al, 2021). The impact of human activities on biodiversity is enormous, population and economic growth combined with inequalities and inefficient distribution of resources causes growing social problems and our ecological footprint

exceeds the Earth's regenerative capacity (Bradshaw et al, 2021: 2-4). Against this background, scientists conclude:

The gravity of the situation requires fundamental changes to global capitalism, education, and equality, which include inter alia the abolition of perpetual economic growth, properly pricing externalities, a rapid exit from fossil-fuel use, strict regulation of markets and property acquisition, reigning in corporate lobbying, and the empowerment of women. These choices will necessarily entail difficult conversations about population growth and the necessity of dwindling but more equitable standards of living.

(Bradshaw et al, 2021: 6)

Perhaps it is not surprising that this statement is consistent with the stance advocated by the transformative form of the SSE.

Although global income inequalities have increased since the 1980s, with variations between and within countries,¹¹ the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has paradoxically exposed the shortcomings of our socioeconomic model. Something that was previously thought impossible occurred during the pandemic: entire economic systems around the world were put on hold through lockdown measures, with enormous consequences for societies and economies.¹²

While the pandemic has posed significant challenges and the duration of its negative effects is uncertain,¹³ it has also highlighted the politics of the economy: it is *possible* to slow down the economy, it is *possible* to identify essential services and activities (however controversial), it is *possible*

¹¹ 'the extreme level of global inequality sustained throughout the entire period with a top 1% income group capturing two times the total income captured by the bottom 50% of the population—implying a factor 100 difference in average per-adult income levels. [...] When global inequality is decomposed into a between- and within-country inequality component, it is apparent that within-country inequality continued to rise since 2000 whereas between-country inequality rose up to 2000 and decreased afterwards. (Alvaredo et al, 2018: 54-55).

¹² Stephen Healy, *Diverse Economies, COVID realities, Touring Postcapitalist futures*, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHrNyn00gh0>.

¹³ According to the United Nations: 'The World Economic Situation and Prospects (WESP) 2021 warns that the COVID-19 pandemic, which has delivered a heavy blow to economic activities worldwide, may exert devastating long-run socio-economic effects, unless global policy responses can ensure a robust and sustainable recovery. [...] In 2020, world output shrank by 4.3 per cent, over three times more than during the global financial crisis of 2009. [...] The pandemic unleashed a severe employment crisis worldwide. By April 2020, full or partial lockdown measures had affected almost 2.7 billion workers, representing about 81 per cent of the global workforce. Despite some improvement later in the year, unemployment rates in most countries still remain well above pre-crisis levels (figure 2). Job and income losses have pushed an estimated 131 million additional people into poverty in 2020, many of them women, children and people from marginalized communities. (United Nations, 2021: 1)

to radically change our mobility. In other words, it presents a rare (and perhaps last) opportunity to imagine a society and economy that we have not yet had the chance to pursue. As the scientist Fritjof Capra (2020: 665) has noted:

With COVID-19, Gaia has presented us with valuable, life-saving lessons. The question is: will humanity heed these lessons? Will we shift from undifferentiated, extractive economic growth to regenerative, qualitative growth? Will we replace fossil fuels with renewable forms of energy for all our energy needs? Will we replace our centralized, energy-intensive system of industrial agriculture with organic, community-oriented and regenerative farming? We have the knowledge and the technologies to embark on all these initiatives. Will we have the political will?

(Capra, 2020: 665-666)

To begin our reframing strategy, we need to ask ourselves: What does 'market-driven' mean? What exactly does the term 'market' mean? The response is not as straightforward as one might anticipate. In fact, as Zamagni (2018: 152) notes, 'market' is currently the most frequently employed economic term in public discourse and private discussions, but it is also frequently misinterpreted and not without ambiguity.

The market is a ubiquitous concept, now evoked in every sphere of human activity (Sandel, 2013). Conventional economics views the market as a neutral resource allocation system where self-interested individuals and firms aim to maximize their interests through interactions between supply and demand, namely preference satisfaction and profit. According to Coraggio (2017: 16-17), the concept of equilibrium is seen as a presumed instrument of social mediation. Despite a long history of critical economic thinking, the idea of a perfect market remains dominant. Recalling these considerations is valuable to finally overcome this abstract yet dangerous concept, and hence, create a space for SSE to reach its potential.

This is a logically and empirically unattainable utopia. It is inconsistent, as Franz Hinkelammert and Henry Mora have shown (Hinkelammert, 2000; Hinkelammert and Mora, 2009), because it is not in fact a system of '[p]roduction of commodities by means of commodities' (Sraffa, 1960), that is, it is not an internally coherent system as is claimed, since it relies on the extraction of labour and nature that are not products of the system, because competition leads necessarily to monopoly; because if a condition of general equilibrium is reached, competition disappears; and because scarcity is not a natural condition, but produced by the market mechanism itself. All of these factors

render the possibility of an equilibrium or a global optimum illusory. From an empirical point of view, there does not exist, and has never existed, a single case that fits this model or closely represents it. Economic agents do not possess the knowledge or computing capacity assumed by the model, nor do they display the assumed utilitarian, selfish and asocial morality. Moreover, whenever the dominant forces in society have sought to bring about this utopia by freeing up the economy to real-world market forces (economic liberalism at the beginning, and neoliberalism at the end of the 20th century), intrinsic self-destructive tendencies have manifested themselves.

(Coraggio, 2017: 17)

From a transformative perspective, the market must be acknowledged as both an economic and social institution, as well as a mechanism of social regulation. In fact, it is 'a *necessary* institution of modern economies, no less than planning, community consensus or other modes of social coordination. Proposals for its elimination cannot be sustained. There is, however, a total confrontation with the dominant conception of the 'perfect' market, and with the treatment of human capabilities, nature, knowledge, money and the commons as fictitious commodities' (Coraggio, 2017: 20-21).

It is important to emphasize that orthodox economics has several limitations. The social system promoted after 1989 collapsed within approximately twenty years and remains in perpetual crisis.

We need to move beyond neoclassical and neoliberal economics.¹⁴ A radical critique of marginal utility as the main regulator of social and economic life is necessary. Otherwise, the SSE risks becoming, as many critics argue (Mäkelä, 2021: 4), an ex post remedy for the negative externalities of capitalist activities and, in a sense, a deepening of neoliberalism or a 'Trojan Horse' (McMurtry, 2013). As Dash (2014:2) argues, 'a better economy requires a better economics'.

To embrace pluralism both theoretically and practically, it is key to acknowledge the economy as a diverse social space and recognize the potential harmfulness of economics as a field of knowledge, as argued by DeMartino (2022). Adopting a Polanyian perspective, it is worth identifying some fundamental features of our economies in order to move in this direction.

¹⁴ As Salvatori (2020: 30) suggests: "This does not mean, of course, that the social economy is destined to become the new *mainstream*. It is only the totalizing conceit of the neoliberal approach that has believed that the economy could live according to a single dominant model. In the concrete reality of economic processes, the level of complexity is now so high that it cannot do without a plurality of approaches and models'.

First, *the economy is socially constructed*. The idea of an economic sphere separated from society and functioning as a 'machine' is a modern concept related to the spread of capitalist practices and positivist rational thought. The first attempt to reproduce such a machine dates back to the late nineteenth century, with Irving Fisher's hydraulic machine used to calculate equilibrium prices (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 2). The consequences of disembedding the economy, specifically the market economy, from society have been widely discussed since Polanyi's seminal work introduced the concept of double movements (Murtagh, 2019: 17).

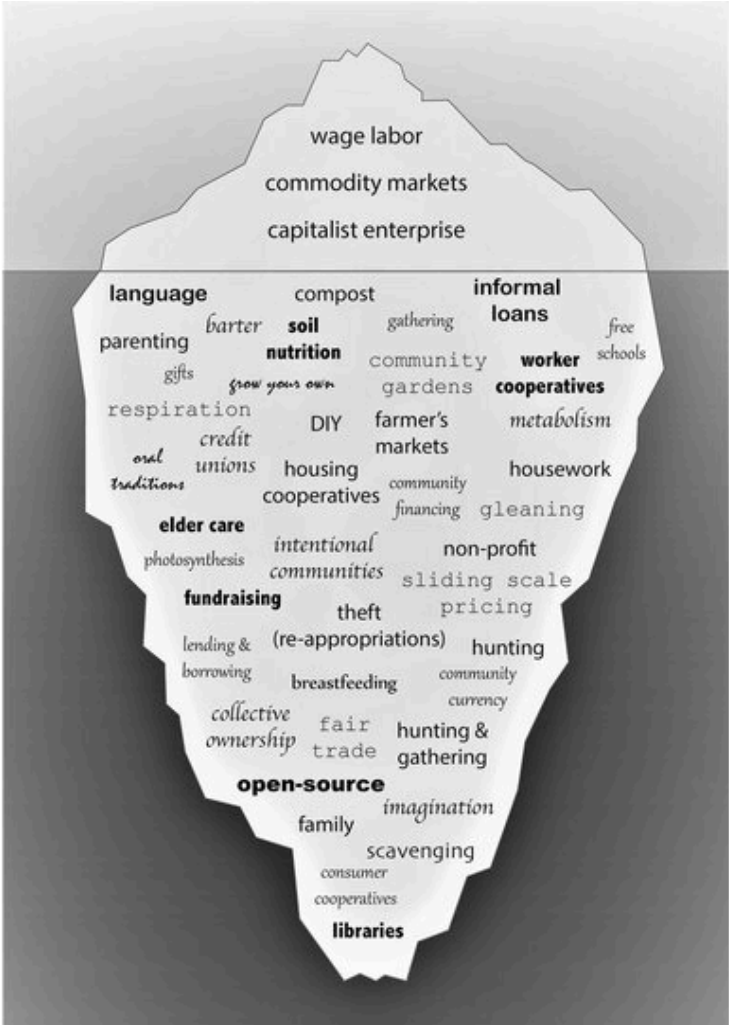
In simple terms, we could say that 'economics are basically the problem of *what* to produce (what goods and services the people who live in a society need or want to be produced); *how* to produce (what technology will be used, and how labor will be organized to carry out multiple production plans); and *for whom* to produce (which social groups should receive the goods produced, that is, how these goods should be distributed among all of the participants)' (Zamagni, 2018: 154). If that is the case, separating social reproduction from the economy is impossible.¹⁵

Second, *the economy is not identical to the market*. That is, the market economy is only one aspect of the diverse landscape of economic activity, and the economy is inherently pluralistic. Again, going back to Polanyi's work, we know that there are four basic mechanisms for regulating economic activity: householding, reciprocity, redistribution, and the market. Not only has the market played a limited role for most of human history, but the diversity of mechanisms is always present in any society, as they address different human needs while operating on different rationales (Johanisova, 2013: 8-9).

¹⁵ 'Granovetter's (1985) foundational work on modern markets emphasised their social formation and the importance of non-economic actors and networks required to hold them in place. Markets need to be sociologically embedded because interpersonal trust is ultimately vital to their stable reproduction and efficient operation. Uncertainty and risk characterise markets as they become faceless and placeless, and more complex socio-regulatory arrangements are needed to resolve co-ordination problems (Zukin and DiMaggio, 1990). Fligstein and Dauter (2007) show how networks, institutions and performativity interlink to explain the way in which markets function beyond rational economic exchange. Network theorists focus on the relational ties, how trust is accumulated and the importance of social capital as some of a range of assets in market dynamics. Institutionalists stress the importance of economic, organisational and regulatory context and how market rules, power and norms shape relationships and the scope for actor agency' (Murtagh, 2019: 16-17).

Again, the diverse and community economies framework provides a particularly powerful lens to acknowledge 'all the things we do to ensure the material functioning and well-being of our households, communities, and nations' (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 4).

Figure 2. The diverse economies iceberg



Source: Drawn by the Community Economies Collective. This image is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Third, *the market is not identical with capitalism*. This is an often overlooked aspect of economies, one that even critics of neoliberalism or market-based societies fail to acknowledge. The market is often referred to as this abstract all-encompassing totality 'that exists in the imagination of the actors' (Graeber, 2001: 86). In fact, it is possible to refer to the capitalist market as a project 'in which the most gigantic, totalizing, and all-encompassingly universal system of evaluation known

to human history came to be imposed on almost everything' (Graeber, 2001: 89). While we should also acknowledge that totalities in this sense 'do not really exist, at least not in any pristine form; any closed system is just a construct, and not necessarily a very useful one; nothing in real life is really so cut and dried. Social processes are complex and overlapping in an endless variety of ways' (Graeber, 2001: 86).

As economic anthropology has shown, the market existed before the emergence of capitalism and has taken various forms (Zamagni, 2018). The market continues to exist in different forms and serves various purposes. For instance, fair trade represents an ethical market. Additionally, non-capitalist organizations that prioritize goals other than profit also participate in the market. However, alternative economic practices have not yet received adequate recognition and analysis. Borzaga et al. (2011) argue that conventional economic paradigms are insufficient for explaining the emergence, evolution, and diffusion of cooperative enterprises and nonprofit organizations because they have a limited understanding of economic plurality. The neoclassical economic approach largely disregarded the presence of cooperative enterprises and nonprofit organizations. Meanwhile, the new institutionalist approach only recognized their existence as a result of market or state failure through transaction cost theory. Borzaga et al. (2011:26) propose developing an analytical perspective that recognizes the specificities of nonprofit and cooperative enterprises based on three crucial elements. This perspective is based on new theoretical approaches, such as behavioral and evolutionary economics:

- The definition of a wider concept of enterprises, which is not restricted to the narrow focus on profit maximisation and cost minimisation inherited from the most orthodox approaches. It needs to define firms broadly as coordinating devices of the economic activity, whose main or sole objective is the satisfaction of private and social needs. Different forms of property rights and governance systems are directed to manage the firm's resources, be they privately owned, contracted with external suppliers, or held in common by the organisation. [...]
- A reinterpretation of the problems linked to the relations between market and hierarchies (Williamson, 1975) since in this new approach market exchanges are by no means equivalent to the spread of only profit maximising firms. Indeed, a plurality of entrepreneurial forms – private-benefit, mutual-benefit, and social benefit – can be envisaged on the market. [...]

- The consideration of a wide variety of economic actors – investors, donors, managers, workers, volunteers, customers, users, beneficiaries, and the local community – who are driven by a plurality of motivational drives, intrinsic and extrinsic, monetary and non-monetary, and express different preferences, which can be self-regarding, but also other regarding or informed by criteria of reciprocity (Zamagni and Sacco, 2002).

In this process of reframing, there is another crucial element that is often insufficiently addressed: the radical redefinition of capitalist markets that has taken place in recent decades. Currently, the critique of *homo economicus* remains valid but insufficient in providing effective counter-hegemonic perspectives on capitalist practices. In what way? As per Zuboff (2019), the most advanced methods of capitalist value extraction utilize what she calls 'means of behavioral modification'. These methods adhere to an operational logic that is significantly different from earlier ones. In reality, contemporary capitalists (e.g. Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple) profoundly comprehend that cooperation, networks, and exchange are the fundamental drivers of human interaction. Moreover, they recognize that these elements are increasingly pertinent in an interconnected, globalized world and are also the fundamental basis of value creation, essential for producing profits. In other words, they acknowledge the significance of cooperation and have integrated it into their business model, although with the intention of exploiting and extracting value.

A significant figure in 'surveillance capitalism', described by Zuboff as a radical 'applied utopian', is MIT computer scientist Alex Pentland. In his book *Social Physics*, he acknowledges that:

one major flaw in this view of human nature is that people are not simply self-interested, self-commanded individuals. What we are interested in, and our command mechanism itself, is overwhelmingly determined by social norms created by interactions with other people. Modern science now understands that cooperation is just as important and just as prevalent in human society as competition.

(Pentland, 2015: 129)

Modern society is based on the idea that markets can distribute resources efficiently and on the assumption that humans are relentless competitors. But as we have seen, this is simply not a good description of how our society lives and functions. Was this ever a good description of human society? That is, was there a time in our human history when we were all fierce competitors in an open fight for resources? While much

of our mythology and romantic fiction suggests that this was true of early human societies, science tells us a different story. Anthropologists report that in the most remote and untouched societies they have found social traditions that are very egalitarian, with surprisingly equal sharing of food and often with distributed, expertise-dependent authority.

(Pentland, 2015: 132)

At first glance, it seems to align with the critique of radical thinkers towards orthodox economic rationality. This indicates that the same critique might not be completely effective in comprehending the intricacies of global capitalist practices or suggesting feasible alternatives to them. Platform capitalist practices operate in two-sided markets that simultaneously connect and 'produce' the supply side (firms) and the demand side (users) of the same market: 'As the number of users on one side of the market (using a search engine or joining a social network) rises, clicks on ads and information on consumers' behaviour also increases, boosting profitability in the other side of the market' (Mazzucato, 2018: 216).

Recent developments such as new behaviorism, nudging, big data, and artificial intelligence are constantly changing the way we understand and enact human interactions and economic relationships, with potentially dangerous consequences (Paulsen & Tække, 2020). Stein et al. (2021) maintain that behavioral economics builds on the limitations of neoclassical economics, recognizing that 'people are much more complex and have a wider set of motivations and emotions'. At the same time, behavioral economics aims to develop a more accurate model of human behavior and 'create homo economicus out of "imperfect people" through the construction of choice architectures' (Stein et al., 2021: 65). To put it with Millstone (2015: 96-97): 'while the 'sharing economy' could be seen to promote the values and aims of SSE organisations in the digital age, in its current form it is leading to the further corporate presence in what has traditionally been a space of opportunity for SSE organisations. Social media may simply provide traditional companies with the social knowledge and networks that were previously accessible only to SSE organisations, thus depriving the latter of one of their core competitive advantages. In those circumstances, the sharing economy is likely to become a mechanism for product-sharing dominated by a few corporate actors'. Today, it is more necessary than ever to explore and proliferate diverse economic principles and practices. Meanwhile, the monetization of any aspect of

social life through market mechanisms requires careful consideration of its implications: 'In deciding whether to commodify a good, we must consider more than efficiency and fairness. We must also ask whether market norms will crowd out nonmarket norms, and if so, whether this represents a loss worth caring about' (Sandel, 2013: 130).

To summarize, the market is not detached from society and is not purely a technical instrument. However, it can be used as a tool for transformative politics. It is crucial to consider the conditions that create and intersect with the market and how to interact with them.¹⁶ Indeed, 'there is nothing inherently neoliberal about market exchange any more than bartering or sharing is inherently ethical' (Murtagh, 2019: 7). Furthermore, one should not acquire other mechanisms of economic regulation uncritically:

if solidarity economy is to be considered a positive category from the point of view of emancipation and the democratization of the economy, it cannot be equated with all practices based on householding, reciprocity and redistribution as sources of protection. Concerned with the double movement of marketisation and protection of society, Polanyi (1944) probably idealized society as a source of protection. He neglected the fact that "historically, the meanings and norms that have served to embed markets have often been hierarchical and exclusionary" (Fraser, 2013: 50). Conversely, Polanyi generally ignored the possibility of emancipation through the market, for example when selling their own products on the market allows poor women to escape patriarchal domination or allows members of cooperatives to overcome dependency upon NGOs (e.g. market-driven cooperatives in South Brazil studied by Lemaître). Therefore, a neo-Polanyian framework for a realistic analysis of solidarity economy should carefully distinguish between different types of interdependence from the point of view of domination and emancipation.

(Hillenkamp 2014: 11)

Section Two: Reframing SSE

¹⁶ 'As recalled by Mazzucato (2018: 19): 'We can create a better economy by understanding that markets are outcomes of decisions that are made – in business, in public organizations and in civil society. The eight-hour working day has formed markets – and that was the result of a fight held in labour organizations. And perhaps the reason there is so much despair across the globe – despair now leading to populist politics – is that the economy is presented to us simply as 'made' by trade rules, technocrats and neoliberal forces. Indeed, as the book will show, 'value' theory itself is presented as a sort of objective force determined by supply and demand, rather than deeply embedded in particular ways of seeing the world. The economy can indeed be made and shaped – but it can be done either in fear or in hope'.

'Things can't go on as they have before' is a sentiment that was mainstreamed at the time of the Global Financial Crisis. Since 2008, it has been further reinforced by the spike in public and political awareness about climate change (IPCC 2013) and inequality. These and other concerns relating to market and state failures have opened up the space for rethinking 'development'. Beyond conventional crisis management responses, alternative pathways, once positioned on the radical fringe or considered not to have systemic or structural significance, are suddenly attracting more attention within mainstream knowledge and policy circles. Such has been the recent trajectory of 'social and solidarity economy' (SSE). This umbrella term is increasingly used to refer to forms of economic activity that prioritise social and often environmental objectives, and involve producers, workers, consumers and citizens acting collectively and in solidarity.

(Utting, 2015: 1)

rather than focusing on when we can first identify the social economy being conceptualized, I ask what happened around 1900 that created a need to conceptualize activity that had been occurring arguably for millennia? The answer, I believe lies in the increasingly robust, but uneven, emergence of capitalism as a world system.

(McMurtry, 2013: 2)

Could the confusion, vagueness, and tensions surrounding the labels, definitions, practices, and policies of the diverse SSE space be indicative of the highly political issues it touches upon? As Adam (2018: 227) points out with extreme clarity: 'In sum, there are differing conceptualizations of social economy practices in general and social enterprises in particular. These alternative visions raise in turn different expectations. In a nutshell, social enterprises can be seen as market-driven solutions to social problems (neo-liberal discourse), as remedies for the correction of both market and state failures (third way thinking), as part of the universe of SSE emancipatory projects for economic and social transformation (radical approach)'. In very general terms, then, the SSE can be seen as a response to pressing social problems such as unemployment and poverty or as an alternative way of practicing the economy. In this sense, both neo-liberal discourse and third way thinking can be seen as market-oriented. That is to say, SSE practices need to conform to or participate in an entity known as the 'market' (see previous discussion), even as they take social factors into account.

2.1: Histories and Contexts for a Pluralist Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE)

To broaden the discussion and framing of SSE, and to explore the possibilities of transformative processes here and now, it is helpful to examine the concept from a historical perspective.¹⁷ Like any social phenomenon, SSE does not develop in isolation. As Laville (2015: 41) explains, different historical contexts largely account for the emergence and decline of various forms of SSE.

The concept of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), is both old and new. It usually refers, on the one hand, to the social economy, which originated in Europe in the nineteenth century and is mainly rooted in the cooperative movement, and, on the other hand, to the solidarity economy, which originated in the last part of the twentieth century, mainly in Europe and Latin America, and is associated with social movements (Papadaki & Kalogeraki, 2018: 39). It is worth noting that social economy has a historical connection to philosophical and ideological elaboration, specifically to utopian socialism and anarchism (Marques, 2014: 1). Moreover, it is important to note that organized cooperation for economic ends has existed throughout the history of *Homo Sapiens* long before its formal sanction.¹⁸

Nevertheless, from a Western epistemological perspective, achieving modern solidarity is possible only after the establishment of society. This 'invention' enables individuals to perceive themselves as free and equal beings. Throughout the history of the last two centuries, tensions between the formal recognition of rights and the consequences of structural inequalities generated two versions of solidarity: 'democratic solidarity' and 'philanthropic solidarity' (Laville, 2015). The former being based on 'both economic and political empowerment through collective action', while the latter 'focused on poverty reduction through individual giving' (Utting, 2015: 12). These two forms of

¹⁷ This is an overview with a Euro-centric focus for the sake of discussion and is thus limited in its scope.

¹⁸ Marx identified this primitive form of cooperation in farming and hunting communities, with the aim of contrasting it with capitalist-type cooperation: 'Co-operation in the labour process, such as we find it at the beginning of human civilization, among hunting peoples or, say, as a predominant feature of the agriculture of Indian communities, is based on the one hand on the common ownership of the conditions of production, and on the other hand on the fact that in those cases the individual has as little torn himself free from the umbilical cord of his tribe or community as a bee from his hive. Both of these characteristics distinguish this form of cooperation from capitalist co-operation. The sporadic application of co-operation on a large scale in ancient times, in the Middle Ages, and in modern colonies, rests on direct relations of domination and servitude, in most cases on slavery. As against this, the capitalist form presupposes from the outset the free wage labourer who sells his labour-power to capital. Historically, however, this form is developed in opposition to peasant agriculture and independent handicrafts, whether in guilds or not. From the standpoint of the peasant and the artisan, capitalist co-operation does not appear as a particular historical form of co-operation; instead, co-operation itself appears as a historical form peculiar to, and specifically distinguishing, the capitalist process of production'. Marx (1990: 452-453). See also Moulaert & Ailenei (2005: 2038).

solidarity re-emerged in different forms to this day. The first includes 'early forms of associative democracy, the 'welfare state', social economy centred on non-profits and cooperatives; and, more recently, solidarity economy, focused on both economic and political empowerment' (Laville, 2015: 41). While philanthropic solidarity started with 'charities and patronising associations', there's been 'a return to a variant of philanthropic solidarity via microcredit, corporate social responsibility, social business and 'the Big Society'' (Utting, 2015: 12). In this connection, we should bear in mind that 'the way in which associational activity and the public sphere co-evolved is one of the great lessons to be learned from such a historical retrospective. It is not a question of replacing the state with civil society but rather one of combining redistributive solidarity with a more reciprocal version of the latter in order to rebuild society's capacity for self-organisation' (Laville, 2013: 9).

The Social and Solidarity Economy is a multifaceted and diverse social phenomenon. The diverse economies approach helps to recognize the heterogeneity of SSE as a strength and not something to be reduced. Yet, there is an urgent requirement to investigate further the consequences of SSE when it functions as both a political category and a policy tool.

It is crucial to recognize the importance of historical trajectories and local contexts in shaping SSE. Or, in other words, paraphrasing Moulaert & Nussbaumer (2005: 2072), to adopt a holistic approach to SSE.¹⁹ In this sense, North (2018: 77) provides a brief account worth reading: 'Kerlin (2009, p 172) identifies four drivers of the SSE sector: market, state, civil society and international aid. She argues that the rise of social entrepreneurship in the US came from the cuts in grants to non-profits from the late 1970s, while in the UK a similar growth in social entrepreneurship and social enterprise emerged from the retrenchment of the welfare state, and as a response to unemployment and inner-city decline. In Eastern and Central Europe, civil society arose from the fall of the Berlin Wall. In Argentina, structural adjustment and crisis saw the withdrawal of corporatist Peronist state provision associated with the crisis of clientelism after the 2001 crisis [...].

¹⁹ 'A holistic theory focuses on the dialectics of general mechanisms and factors of explanation on the one hand, and specific situations on the other. And as the holistic approach is indebted to the American pragmatist school, it recognises the intimate relationship between theory building and the views (including norms) and practice of agents (Ramstad, 1986). A holistic definition looks more like a dialectical argument between generality and specificity, taking into account history, institutions and territorial context, than an omni-valuable formula as is provided in an essentialist definition' (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005: 2072)

In Brazil, a Catholic commitment to social inclusion and the coming to power of the Worker's Party saw a massive increase in state welfare provision and support to the SSE sector. [...]. Kerlin sees state-funded civil society as the driver of the SSE sector in Western Europe through a commitment to socially inclusive and sustainable development, and Catholic Quebec talks about an inclusive social economy in a European vein. In contrast, Putin's Russia is suspicious of all autonomous forms of political organization. In Francophone Africa, the social and solidarity economy looks to give new life to traditional village economies'.

In Europe, retrenchment and privatization of the welfare state have had a significant influence on SSE in several ways. Firstly, it has led to the mushrooming of non-profit organizations to provide welfare services at lower costs (Adam, 2018). Secondly, it has prompted various initiatives in response to the same pressures (Calvário & Kallis, 2017). Social and Solidarity Economy, like many other key terms in the social sciences, are not fixed and unitary concepts, resulting in conflicting and competing definitions. According to Marques (2014: 2), 'it is worth noting that there is no consensual terminology for SSE and its acceptance varies according to national specificities. The boundaries are vague, which denotes a lack of theoretical foundations and empirical structuring'. Other categories have been developed and used around the concept of SSE. Some of these categories overlap, while others partially conflict, such as 'third sector', 'not-for-profit', 'social enterprises', 'social entrepreneurship', 'social entrepreneur', and 'social business'.

The literature offers different taxonomies of SSE scholarship, mainly distinguishing between more market-oriented approaches, variously defined as *mainstream* (Johansiova, 2013) *compensatory* (Newey, 2017), *reformist* (Smith & McKittrick, 2010; Hu et al. 2013), or *neoliberal* (North et al., 2020; Adam, 2018), and more *transformative* or *radical* approaches (Loh & Shear, 2022). This thesis does not focus on identifying a typology of SSE scholarships. Rather, the aim is to clarify some conceptual shortcomings through a discussion of the much-debated concept of social enterprise.

2.2: Social enterprise as contested terrain

What is a Social Enterprise? The term *social enterprise* can be defined as an organization that addresses a basic unmet need or solves a social or environmental

problem through a market-driven approach, according to the Social Enterprise Alliance.

(FINCA, [Social Enterprise](#))

The Social Solidarity Economy is an alternative to capitalism and other authoritarian, state-dominated economic systems. In SSE ordinary people play an active role in shaping all of the dimensions of human life: economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental. [...] SSE seeks systemic transformation that goes beyond superficial change in which the root oppressive structures and fundamental issues remain intact.

(RIPESS, 2015: 2)

Social enterprise is a highly controversial concept within SSE due to its difficult definition and uncertain relationship with the mainstream market economy.²⁰ Now, let us examine various conceptualizations of social enterprise.

The U.S. approach to social enterprise is market-oriented, considering it to be an actor that produces positive social outcomes through business activities. According to Defourny & Nyssens (2010), there are two slightly different schools of thought regarding social enterprise: the 'earned-income' school and the 'social innovation' school. The 'earned-income' school extends the notion of social enterprise to a wide range of organizations, for-profit or not-for-profit, provided they engage in commercial activity to achieve a social purpose (Defourny & Nyssens, 2014: 24). In contrast, the 'social innovation' school promotes social enterprises as a result of entrepreneurial creativity, leadership, and innovativeness in creating new responses to social needs. This has led to the widespread use of terms like 'social business', 'social entrepreneur', and 'social entrepreneurship', mainly in the Anglophone world.

SSE in Western Europe is related to the 'European social model', its achievements and challenges. For this reason, a large part of the SSE is linked to the provision of social/cultural/health services to marginalized groups (unemployed, migrants, low-income families and individuals, etc.) and to the diffusion of a new type of enterprise identified as 'social enterprise'. The concept first appeared in Italy, where the legal form of 'social cooperative' was introduced in 1991. Since then, it's spread to

²⁰ In particular, those following a more radical approach to SSE perceive social enterprises discourse as a possible neoliberal management tool of poverty and inequalities. For example RIPESS is cautious in this respect: 'We recognize that it is more likely that we'll find greater alliance with smaller and locally owned social enterprises. We also acknowledge the danger that social enterprises are sometimes used to undermine social welfare programs. [...] There are varying levels of comfort with concepts such as social enterprise and corporate social responsibility. This is complicated by the fact that different countries have different definitions of these terms' (RIPESS, 2015: 14-15).

other European countries and has been the subject of specific policies aimed mainly at integrating low-skilled unemployed into the labor market.²¹ According to the latest report there are approximately 398.609 social enterprises in the EU27.²²

It is recognized that the first theoretical elaboration was promoted since 1996 by EMES, the European research network for the study of social enterprises. Compared to the US approach, the European one is more focused on the collective dimension of the enterprise and on the limit to profit distribution.

The three salient features of social enterprises are:

- (1) the social goal pursued;
- (2) the non-profit distribution constraint; and
- (3) the assignment of ownership rights and control power to stakeholders other than investors coupled with an open and participatory governance model.

(Galera & Borzaga, 2009: 216-217)

While it is true that social enterprise and social entrepreneurship concepts are deeply rooted in the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts where these organizations appear (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010: 49), mainstream literature and discourse often neglect to consider the broader context within which these organizations function and their relationship to the dominant 'Business as Usual' model.

In essence, is social enterprise and social entrepreneurship a means to democratize the economy or to marketize civil society? Clearly, the answer is of significant importance.

Social enterprises, like other initiatives in the Social and Solidarity Economy, originated in civil society through social movements, associations, or other collective efforts. Since then, institutions have partially recognized, monitored, and influenced social enterprises. As Glerup, Hulgaard and Teasdale (2020: 46-47) point out: 'This recognition of SEs as organizations that had a positive

²¹ 'In many European countries, beside the creation of new legal forms or frameworks, the 1990s have seen the development of specific public programs targeting the field of work integration. Social enterprises may be active in a wide spectrum of activities, as the 'social purpose' they pursue may refer to many different fields. However, in the 1990s, one major type of social enterprise was clearly dominant across Europe, namely 'work integration social enterprises' (WISEs). The main objective of work integration social enterprises is to help low qualified unemployed people who are at risk of permanent exclusion from the labour market. WISEs integrate these people into work and society through a productive activity (Nyssens 2006)'. (Defourny, Nyssens, 2010: 38).

²² Based on own calculations from European Commission (2020).

economic, social and democratic impact laid the foreground for the emergence of SEs as a policy instrument across much of Europe over the subsequent 20 years. However, as an SE entered the mainstream, its critical potential was diminished. Within academia, scholars have tended to focus narrowly on the ways in which entrepreneurial forms and approaches might be extended to “solve” social problems (Dart, 2004). The neglect of the participatory dimension, combined with a focus on heroic individuals such as Muhammad Yunus, Bill Drayton and the institutions (such as Skoll and Ashoka) that support them, has produced a selective view of what is good for society (Dey and Steyaert, 2012)‘.

Institutions have demonstrated increasing interest in SSE, as previously noted. The European Union has recently approved the Social Economy Action Plan for 2021. The EU’s strategy has been market-oriented from the beginning and has continued in that direction. According to Bassi and Fabbri (2020), there appears to be a gradual shift towards a more progressive approach, but the underlying ontology has not changed.²³ To begin with, the concept of solidarity economy is neither mentioned nor recognized, and the SSE label is not fully acknowledged. According to Johanisova (2019), social enterprises and the social economy are considered useful when they fill gaps within the state or the market, without questioning mainstream economic practices. Therefore, it is doubtful that solutions would arise from heroic individuals who bring about social innovation, as claimed by the mainstream narrative on social enterprises. Nevertheless, the discourse on social economy as a third alternative is also flawed.

²³ The official European Union document ‘Building an Economy That Works for People: An Action Plan for the Social Economy’ (2021) mentions the word ‘market’ 32 times, but makes no mention of non-market, non-formal, or non-monetary practices. This comparison is noteworthy.

Most social economy initiatives investigated by academia are connected to the welfare sector (Hu et al. 2013), particularly during the period of austerity measures and privatization of services.²⁴ This connection is not coincidental. As Mäkelä (2021: 3) writes: 'One paradox reported by Hulgård (2010, 8) is that SEs can be seen as two sides of the same coin: 'not only as elements in a process of privatisation but also as a manifestation of the power of civil society – trend towards the emergence of new forms of solidarity and collectivism''.

There is nothing inherently wrong with cooperative organizations providing social services. They often have a better understanding of local needs, which allows them to provide better services. Additionally, the one-sided narrative of an intensified neoliberalization is not only unproductive but also inaccurate: 'In this formulation, social entrepreneurs are 'caring capitalists', working largely to import the practices and ideologies of the market into the third sector (Jessop et al., 2013, p. 111). However, this is a very limited understanding of social entrepreneurs, the multiple regimes they bring together and the ethics they enact in different institutional contexts and sectors. These relate to the way in which the social economy field is structured around a mix of organisational forms, legal entities, labour market interventions and non-monetised schemes that reveal a far more complex assemblage beyond a mere appendage to capitalism or replacement for welfare' (Murtagh, 2019: 76). Some critics attribute the creation of precariousness and the privatization of welfare, among other issues, to these enterprises. However, as Laville (2010: 34) suggests, rather than questioning the actors, it may be more useful to reflect on our own deficit and lack of public recognition. Being aware of the different trajectories and interpretations of the discourse on social enterprise is crucial to avoid diluting transformative agendas. As North (2018: 83) suggests, 'A more hopeful, non-paranoid reading might be to examine the extent to which social enterprises can help us rethink markets and what it means to be entrepreneurial or an entrepreneur, in democratic or inclusive ways'. Social enterprises in other economic sectors face limited prospects due to the

²⁴ As Utting (2018: 9) notes in respect to development, 'it is clear that while the concept of SSE is gaining currency in development discourse, the nature of policies supporting SSE is influenced by actually existing policy regimes and development strategies. It is also important to note that different development actors, with different interests and worldviews, pull terms and concepts in different directions. [...] This is very apparent in the case of SSE. The upshot is that more holistic interpretations of SSE are often diluted by emphasizing particular types of enterprises, sectors and roles, and by narrowing the remit of SSE. [...] It is crucial, then, to assess how SSE is being defined and interpreted by policy makers and within the institutions that design and implement policy. Instrumentalization can have the effect of narrowing the focus of attention towards particular types of SSE organizations and particular sectors of economic activity'.

predominant legal, social, and economic narrative that presents capitalist enterprise as the sole feasible option.

2.3: Re-defining the Social and Solidarity Economy

This narrow focus on social enterprise neglects the abundant and varied array of SSE enterprises that have flourished in nearly every sector of the economy. These include community-supported agriculture, food cooperatives, solidarity purchasing groups, and renewable energy cooperatives, to name a few.²⁵

Diversifying enterprise and social enterprise can also open the space for recognizing all the different practices outside of the strict provision of social services that the literature widely focuses on.²⁶ In this regard, the use of the wider term 'Social and Solidarity Economy' could help to overcome these limitations. Considering its growing public recognition and its ability to account for the pluralistic, heterogeneous, and distinctive nature of current ethical and sustainable economic practices,²⁷ I intentionally use the label of SSE among the various other labels to describe alternative economic practices,²⁸ as proposed by Utting (2023).

Critical academic research and grassroots social innovations are compelling the reframing of the mainstream understanding of social enterprises and SSE. As an example, dos Santos and Banerjee

²⁵ An exception to this trend in the Italian context is the Euricse report by Sforzi, Burini, De Benedictis, Bettani, and Gaudio (2022). The report can be accessed at: https://euricse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Rapporto-Comunita%CC%80-Intraprendenti-editato-11_10_22.pdf.

²⁶ In this vein, Lyne and Madden (2020: 74) writes: 'This privileging of innovation, albeit social innovation that elicits financial returns, as the pathway to change is accompanied by pressure to pursue organizational prosperity in tandem with replicable, lean approaches to solving social problems (see for instance Mair et al. 2012). From a diverse economies perspective social enterprise is itself a site of difference. When we take an anti-essentialist approach we open up the possibility that there might be many different drivers of social enterprise, not only the quests for social innovation and financial viability. Our interest is in how 'social enterprising' enacts the social and has the potential to enact the social in a change making way (Beyes and Steyaert 2011, p. 110; Cameron and Gibson 2005). Specifically, we are concerned to explore how social enterprising can be engaged in repairing a damaged world'.

²⁷ 'The umbrella term 'social and solidarity economy' provides ample space for connecting more conventional notions of enterprise, entrepreneurship and social protection with more transformative concepts of rights, equality, active citizenship, ethics, solidarity, emancipation and (social, environmental and distributive) justice. Similarly, under SSE, terms such as 'green economy' are reinterpreted to suggest patterns of economic transition that are not dominated by market logic; instead, they provide spaces for diverse actors and enterprises within the plural economy, restructure production and consumption patterns, and are both green and fair (Cook et al. 2012)' (Utting, 2015: 35).

²⁸ To name a few: popular economy, blue economy, civil economy, circular economy, community economy, peer-to-peer economy, participatory economy, etc.

(2019) identify five absences in the narrative and practice of social enterprises with the aim of decolonizing them: 1) Overemphasis on technical solutions and performance; 2) Underrepresentation of subaltern people in decision-making processes; 3) Overemphasis on organization and lack of recognition of informal economies as community economies; 4) Lack of attention to gender issues; 5) Deficit in problematizing economic and political dimensions.

Recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in research and theoretical developments in the field due to the growing interest of public administrators, academic institutions, and communities across the globe. As reported by Bouchard and Heiz (2022), the ILO (2022) has newly established the first 'multilateral definition' of SSE, which will be used as a reference point.

The SSE encompasses enterprises, and organizations and other entities that are engaged in economic, social, and environmental activities to serve the collective and/or general interest, which are based on the principles of voluntary cooperation and mutual aid, democratic and/or participatory governance, autonomy and independence, and the primacy of people and social purpose over capital in the distribution and use of surpluses and/or profits as well as assets. SSE entities aspire to long-term viability and sustainability, and to the transition from the informal to the formal economy and operate in all sectors of the economy. They put into practice a set of values which are intrinsic to their functioning and consistent with care for people and planet, equality and fairness, interdependence, self-governance, transparency and accountability, and the attainment of decent work and livelihoods. According to national circumstances, the SSE includes cooperatives, associations, mutual societies, foundations, social enterprises, self-help groups and other entities operating in accordance with the values and principles of the SSE.

The definition formulated by the ILO is broader and more precise than the definitions offered by other institutions such as EU and OECD, since it encompasses matters that are ignored by them, including sustainability, environmental concerns, indigenous and tribal communities, and informality (Bouchard & Hiez, 2022: 9). Some authors emphasize the significance of decolonizing SSE by acknowledging the distinctive legacies, experiences, and epistemologies of indigenous, black, and racialized peoples worldwide (Hosseini, 2023; dos Santos & Banerjee, 2019). The ILO

resolution partially addresses the five 'absences' mentioned above, mainly through formal recalls of the participatory aspects, gender issues, and reference to indigenous and tribal people. Furthermore, the matter of informality is solely tackled by conversion to formality. A hierarchical ontology of formal and informal economic practices underlies this notion, wherein the former are assumed to be favorable and the latter negative and deficient in terms of skills, capital, opportunities, etc. Although informal economies are highly problematic in several contexts, they also provide a livelihood for many people around the world,²⁹ and despite the narrative that they are 'particularly important for developing countries' (Bouchard & Hiez, 2022: 9), research shows that they are also largely present in minority world countries (Williams & White, 2020). Hossein (2019: 223) provides the example of rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) of black people in Canada and the Caribbean to emphasize that: 'Some aspects of the social economy are rejected as being "too informal." But it is precisely the informality of certain types of actors in the social economy that makes it not only accessible but also safe for excluded cultural groups: People can organize and politicize their work outside of the scrutiny of their oppressors. Through this informal nature, the social economy becomes a true civil society, because the people within it do not have to broker any deals with the mainstream'.

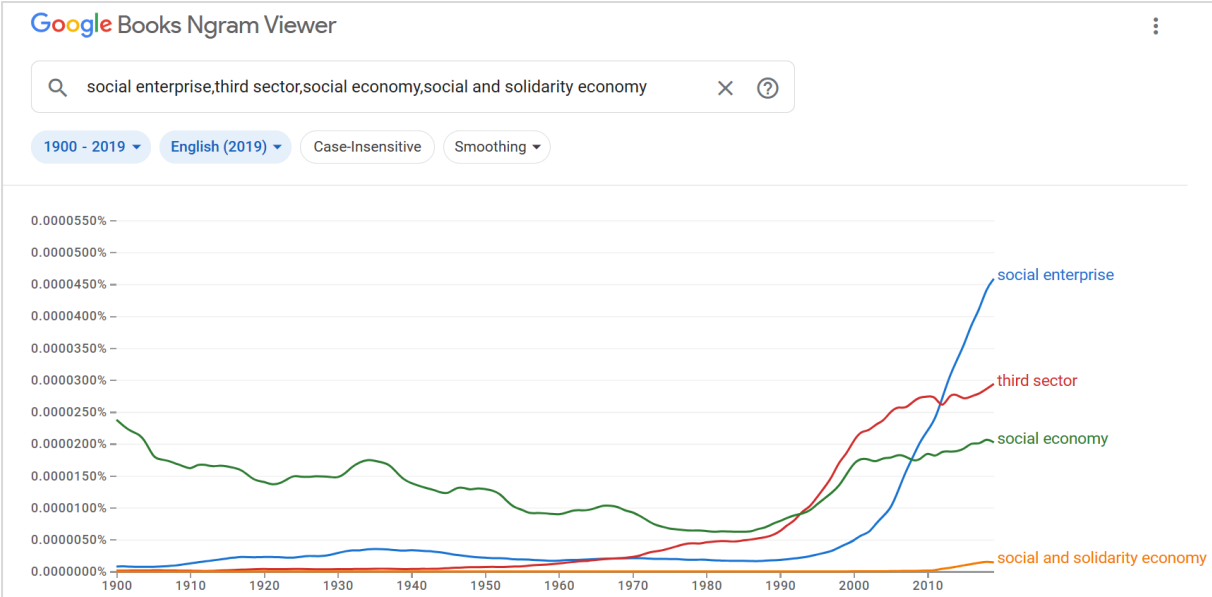
It is against this background that we can clarify some of the implications of the theorization of SSE.

First, it is worth noting that the literature on SSE is more limited than that on parent and competing concepts such as third sector or social enterprise. As an example, Figure 3 displays the frequency comparison of the terms social enterprise, third sector, social economy, and social and

²⁹ As explained by Gibson-Graham and Dombroski (2020:18): 'Inventorying diverse economies reveals **undesirable** and **unwanted** practices, where coercive power, inequality and environmental destruction are played out. To bring these economic practices to visibility is not to condone them, nor is it to neutralize them. Many such practices are conducted by capitalist enterprises, but they are clearly also part of the operations of non-capitalist enterprises and practices. It is as important to recognize, for example, the extent of the involvement of modern-day slavery in global capitalist supply chains, and actions to expose and eradicate it, as it is to identify the extent of cooperativism and practices of mutuality and actions to support them. Studying diverse economic practices is not only for finding possibilities, but also for ruling out possibilities, for laying out other projects of transformation. All economic practices and the subjects who perform them can be involved in change. For example, the meagre remuneration paid to indentured migrant domestic helpers may become an investment stream that funds community enterprise in their home countries (Gibson et al. 2001). And the appropriation of rotating credit associations by the state to control narratives of womanhood, as in Indonesia (Niehof 1998), is not to deny the empowerment these schemes offer women in other parts of the world (see Chapter 39 by Hossein in this volume). The diverse economy framework is thus a good tool for working *against* certain practices, although much scholarship has so far been dedicated to working *for* others'.

solidarity economy among English-language books published between 1900 and 2019, using Google Books Ngram. This is due to the fact that SSE is still a relatively new concept and has yet to garner widespread acceptance. In the meantime, SSE is not only more comprehensive but also more precise than all other parent and competing notions (Utting, 2023: 19; Bouchard & Hiez, 2022: 9). Therefore, utilizing SSE may facilitate overcoming conceptual narrowness and embracing a pluralistic understanding of our economies.

Figure 3. Comparison of the frequency of the terms social enterprise/third sector/social economy/social and solidarity economy among books published in English (1900-2019).



Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams/>)

Second, the distinction between analytical and normative is blurred, and this is another reason for the confusion in the literature. SSE can be considered as an analytical category utilized to explain social phenomena, even though practitioners might not even know they are part of it or would not define themselves in those terms. According to Jenkins & Poirier (2023: 6): 'The spread of the SSE through social movements is not the fruit of a fully fledged theory or blueprint imposed through a top-down approach. Rather, it reflects a bottom-up process representing very diverse experiences, where actors respond to challenges within their own context; some de facto, undertaking activities involving SSE principles without recognizing themselves as part of a collective identity called 'social and solidarity economy'. Simultaneously, SSE is by definition a concept that involves value judgments, and its theoretical development is accordingly influenced by normative considerations.

However, scholars seldom explicitly state the normative content, especially those favoring a more market-oriented perspective.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that SSE as a concept is inherently political (Utting, 2016). Its definition is necessarily loose due to the diverse underlying practices, which are constantly changing due to their distinct transformative elements, and also due to the significance of local contexts. It is still possible to identify the fundamental aspect of SSE: 'reasserting social control or 'social power' (Wright 2010) over the economy by giving primacy to social and often environmental objectives above profits, emphasizing the place of ethics in economic activity and rethinking economic practice in terms of democratic self-management and active citizenship' (Utting, 2015: 2). Thus, SSE is deemed an open process of emancipatory socioeconomic transformation. Social and Solidarity Economy refers to a range of organizations, including market and non-market, formal and non-formal entities as well as social movements, 'that have social and environmental aims, and are guided by objectives and practices of cooperation, solidarity, ethics and democratic self-management' (North & Cato 2017: 7).

This thesis considers the Social and Solidarity Economy not only as a sector of the economy or a policy tool - although it can be analyzed as such. The SSE is an ongoing project aimed at democratizing the economy, and a continuous conversation about possible ways to meet our needs in a sustainable, democratic and equitable way.

2.4: Measuring the Social and Solidarity Economy - A metrological project in development

It is crucial to remember that all types of accounting methods are evolving social conventions, defined not by physical laws and definite 'realities' but reflecting the ideas, theories and ideologies of the age in which they are devised. The way in which a spreadsheet is constructed in itself reflects values.

(Mazzucato, 2018: 76)

The SSE is of a multi-faceted nature, crossing economic, social, cultural, and political aspects of economic development. Therefore, the categories by which standard statistical instruments capture the reality may, in some cases, be ill-fitting. But what if, on the contrary, it was the SSE that influenced statistical standards? This could reverse

the burden of proof vis-à-vis the differentiated contribution of economic agents to more sustainable, equitable, and just economic development.

(Bouchard, 2023: 431-432)

Advancing and conceptualizing SSE is a challenging endeavor.

As we started our discussion on the performative effect of how we represent the economy, or to put it with Mitchell (2008: 1120), recognizing the economy 'as a project, or a series of competing projects, of rival attempts to establish metrological regimes, based upon new technologies of organization, measurement, calculation, and representation', we can now fully understand the significance of producing different accounts of economic 'facts' under the label of Social and Solidarity Economy.

As Gibson-Graham (2008: 621) notes, feminist economics and social economy scholarship and activism have made non-capitalist practices visible and constructed new economic realities worthy of consideration and measurement, such as unpaid and voluntary labor and the social welfare produced by cooperative enterprises. In this sense, SSE scholarship and activism is the continuation and advancement of this endeavor.

Neoliberalism, as a metrological project, has been a dominant paradigm in recent decades, and although it is in crisis, it has not yet been replaced. From this perspective, the context for a transformative SSE is not favorable. In other words, the 'rules of the game' favor the profit-oriented, shareholder-owned firm that extracts value from nature and society, producing negative social and environmental externalities (Johanisova, 2013: 7-8). A complex process of knowledge creation and dissemination through think tanks, academia, international institutions, and national governments made the success of this economic conceptualization possible.³⁰

In order to become 'facts', economic practices must be translated into accounting systems, narratives and knowledge systems. Alternative economic practices have long been neglected or transfigured because of the hegemony of neoliberalism (Laville, 2015: 55-56).

³⁰ In the words of Mitchell (2008: 1120): 'This is all part of what I would call the work of economics, and its narrow but effective history can be traced. In this case, one would trace the founding of the neoliberal movement by Hayek and others, its organization in the 1950s through the Mont Pelerin society, the Chicago school of economics, the building of think tanks like the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hudson Institute and many other neoliberal organizations established in North America and Europe from the 1950s onward'.

On the other hand, it is crucial not to forget that 'neoliberalism is a discourse linked to the essentialised subjects it constitutes performatively, and that even the critique of neoliberalism can serve to increase its effectiveness by granting it more power than it is due' (Bergeron & Healy, 2015: 85). This means recognizing that 'the relationship between the economy and neoliberalism as a somewhat vague collection of socio-cultural, political and institutional processes, is itself poorly articulated [...]. All of this highlights the conceptual and empirical limitations of an omnipresent neoliberalism meeting an omnipresent conservative social economy' (Murtagh, 2019:3).

To begin with, economic practices exhibit an inherent diversity that cannot be fully captured by statistical representations. As even the System of National Accounts (SNA), currently under revision, has acknowledged (2008: 471): 'No economy is completely regulated and captured perfectly by statistical enquiries'. Furthermore, the process of shaping the economy is never permanently fixed, as is evident in the ongoing changes in accounting systems and statistical measurements used to analyze economic trends.³¹

Against this background, measuring the relevance of SSE raises many questions. The definition of SSE has been a long-debated topic and the conversation is still open. Recognition varies across countries and regions, and laws, public policies, and state interventions obviously affect it. Legal forms clearly do not guarantee that an organization or enterprise actually produces positive social outcomes: 'This explains much of the ambiguity in the analysis of the social economy, which oscillates between the inclusion of all organisations with the cited legal forms (when the aim is to show their importance in the economy) and the exclusion of some organisations because of the gap between the observable reality and their affirmed principles' (Laville 2015: 49). Assessing the

³¹ Numerous jurisdiction and international organizations have, over the years, worked to develop alternative statistical measurement to go beyond GDP, focusing on social progress, the well-being of population, quality of life, inclusive growth, sustainable development and human development: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index (OECD n.d.), United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (UN n.d.-a), UN Human Development Index (UN n.d.-b) (Stiglitz et al. 2009). As such improvements are made to national accounts, the identification of the SSE organizations housed within them will enable measurement of the contribution of the SSE and comparison to that of other economic agents. Until then, additional information may be captured through specific surveys that will measure outcomes relevant to the SSE (see, for example, the proposal for measuring SSE contribution to sustainable development goals in UN 2018). Other impact measurement methodologies exist, namely experimental and quasi-experimental designs to evaluate policies or programs (Government of Canada 2019). These can be applied to the SSE, provided that they are adapted, and that the issues they raise are well understood by the stakeholders concerned (TIESS 2017)' (Bouchard, 2023: 430).

significance of SSE differs from evaluating its effects, even though they are closely connected because SSE entails a redefinition of the notion of 'economy'. Given that current national accounts and statistical tools tend to underestimate the economic contribution of SSE, alternative accounting strategies need to be formulated to account for the non-market and non-monetary value created by such organizations.³² Bouchard (2023: 431) captures the point when writing: 'The primary function of SSE statistics is to measure the contribution of the SSE within the overall economy. In seeming contradiction to this, another aim is to convey the aspects of this type of economy that are not economic in the strict sense of the term, as well as the role that the SSE plays in the different contexts where it takes root'.

The statistical emergence of the SSE phenomenon can be attributed to a series of international publications on various components of the SSE universe since 2003.³³ According to Bouchard (2021: 5-6), two major international standards compete for SSE measurement, each based on different conceptual frameworks. The first is based on the concept of non-profit organizations that limit or prohibit profit distribution. The other is based on the notion of Social Economy, which is characterized by democratic governance, collective ownership, and limited surplus distribution. Each conceptualization makes some activities and organizations visible while excluding others. The first views the SSE as a sector whose aim is to channel philanthropic, public, and market resources, as well as volunteerism, to alleviate poverty and address social issues. The other view of SSE sees it as a distinct form within a plural economy, a third way between the market and the state (Bouchard, 2021: 51). According to the United Nations:

³² 'Although standard economic indicators can accurately inform about some aspects of the SSE, such as sales figures or employment, they fail to shed light on aspects such as non-monetary production, the combination of market and non-market resources, the internalization of social costs, and the reduction of environmental externalities. Recommendations can be found in international SSE statistics frameworks regarding, for example, the measurement of non-market and non-monetary inputs and outputs, membership and types of members, and work created directly or in the scope of the SSE activity. Moreover, national accounts do not provide much information about other functions of economic units. As the main purpose of SSE enterprises is to improve the social, economic, cultural, or environmental conditions of the members of the organization, of a particular group or community, or of the whole of society, documenting it by referring only to economic variables may not be entirely sufficient, although nonetheless very important' (Bouchard, 2023: 429-430).

³³ United Nations Handbook on Non-profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts (2003); CIRIEC's Manual on the Satellite Accounts of Cooperatives and Mutual Societies (2006); ILO's Manual on the Measurement of Volunteer Work (2011); UN's Handbook for Satellite Accounts on Non-profit Institutions and Related Institutions and Volunteer Work (2018); ILO's Guidelines concerning statistics on cooperatives.

Worldwide, cooperatives provide 100 million jobs (20% more than multinational enterprises). Preliminary results from the Global Census on Cooperatives of UN DESA indicates that globally there are 761,221 cooperatives and mutual associations with 813.5 million members, 6.9 million employees, USD 18.8 trillion in assets and USD 2.4 trillion in annual gross revenue.

In the European Union, over 207,000 cooperatives were economically active in 2009. They provide employment to 4.7 million people and have 108 million members. In 2010 such organizations employed 8.6 million people. They account for over 4% of GDP and their membership comprises 50% of the citizens of the European Union. Overall SSE provides 6.53% of total paid employment in the European Union, or 14.5 million jobs. National data sources indicate that the social economy is growing significantly in several countries. For example the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) indicates a growth rate in Italy's nonprofit sector of 28% between 2001 and 2011.

In Brazil, more than 3 million people work associatively in SSE initiatives, according to the second national SSE census concluded in 2014. Cooperatives in Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia and Kenya employ between 250,000 and 300,000 people in each country.

(TFSSE, 2014: 3)

Undoubtedly, SSE is becoming more pivotal in various contexts and is getting more attention from institutions, policies, and international agencies. Of course, it is crucial to raise awareness, monitor, and attempt to measure its significance. Nonetheless, playing with numbers would not solve the problem. The heart of the matter is that the concept of SSE is fundamentally political (Utting, 2016) and requires constant examination of its content, practices, methods, goals, and limitations.

More importantly, it is the very nature of SSE activities that makes them difficult to estimate: what does it really mean to generate social value? Moreover, is it possible or even desirable to measure it?

Section Three: Reframing value

the more automation proceeds, the more it should be obvious that actual value emerges from the caring element of work. Yet this leads to another problem. The caring value of work would appear to be precisely that element that cannot be quantified.

(Graeber 2019: 261-262)

Across the globe, work as we know it is not achieving the goal of surviving well. We are working more but surviving poorly. We are overconsuming the earth's resources,

undermining our health, and not improving our levels of happiness. Can we rebalance the scales?

(Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 18)

Reframing the concept of value is the third critical step in this theoretical endeavor. In order to enhance the transformative potential of SSE, we need to look at value as a fundamental element of an economy. Indeed, what is considered value in a society shapes the nature of economic life, provides incentives, and favors some activities over others. Graeber (2001; 2019) merits praise for reopening the debate on how economic value distribution ('what is rewarded') contrasts with social value production ('positive contribution to the world') in our societies.³⁴ According to him, we are in a paradoxical situation: The more social value is produced by workers, the less it is valued in economic terms (Graeber, 2019: 180?). In recent years, a few scholars (Mazzucato, 2018; Patel, 2011), mainly heterodox economists, reintroduced the concept of value into the economic and public debate. They emphasize how its exclusion has obfuscated significant political decisions on income distribution, the differentiation between 'productive' and 'unproductive' activities, and the direction an economy should pursue (Mazzucato, 2018: 11-14). Their analysis helps position the concept within its historical evolution, tracing it from mercantilists to physiocrats, to classical and finally neoclassical theory of value. This enables one to observe the complex interactions of social and economic forces that give rise to a particular notion of value.

In economics, with the so-called 'marginal revolution' the concept of value has shifted from an object that can be measured (even though it was a highly debated one), to the 'subjective nature of the 'preferences' of different actors in the economy' (Mazzucato, 2018: 22). The concept of value is difficult to pinpoint, particularly due to the interplay among objective, subjective, and contextual

³⁴ His 'Theory of Bullshit Jobs' has faced criticism for its lack of empirical grounding and reliance on anecdotal accounts (Soffia, Wood, & Burchell, 2022). It is not my aim to explore Graeber's theory in this context. However, critics seem to be shifting the focus of the discussion. For instance, Soffia, Wood, and Burchell (2022: 833) propose that workers' perception of their jobs as pointless is not due to the work being 'bullshit', but is instead a sign of inadequate management and toxic workplace cultures resulting in alienation. While analyzing and critiquing the broader workplace relations in which labor occurs is undoubtedly important, this shifts the discussion's focus and fails to address the main point. That is, we need to rediscuss the content and purpose of work, or in other words, we need to collectively rethink value in the face of the multiple crises we're facing.

factors driving it (Heinich, 2020: 89-90).³⁵ However, we tend to take for granted in our societies that the marginal utility generated by market forces provides a dependable account of value when transfigured into monetary terms. Financial profit is, in fact, the most widely used proxy for economic value at a firm level, as well as for national wealth at a societal level, according to Nicholls 2006 and Young 2006, as cited in Ormiston & Seymour (2011: 127). For this reason, we need to 'bring back value theory as a hotly debated area, relevant to the turbulent economic times in which we find ourselves. Value is not a given thing, unmistakably either inside or outside the production boundary; it is shaped and created' (Mazzucato, 2018: 18).

3.1: What is social in the Social and Solidarity Economy? Value, social value and the future of work

We are back, then, to a “politics of value”; but one very different from Appadurai's neoliberal version. The ultimate stakes of politics, according to Turner, is not even the struggle to appropriate value; it is the struggle to establish what value is (Turner 1978; 1979c; see Myers and Brenneis 1991:4–5). Similarly, the ultimate freedom is not the freedom to create or accumulate value, but the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what it is that makes life worth living. In the end, then, politics is about the meaning of life. Any such project of constructing meanings necessarily involves imagining totalities (since this is the stuff of meaning), even if no such project can ever be completely translated into reality—reality being, by definition, that which is always more complicated than any construction we can put on it.

(Graeber, 2002: 88)

To rethink the economy, we must challenge this limited notion by highlighting the negative results it produces: 'All forms of work create and destroy social, environmental and economic value. But this often bears little relationship to the way in which wages are allocated. In economics the

³⁵ Heinich is examining classical and neoclassical economics from the perspective of objective value theories, which assert that an object's intrinsic value is reflected in its price. What changed in those theories was the form that value takes, whether it be labor, scarcity, or utility. She is then contrasting it with later subjective theories of value where 'an extrinsic conception of value, detached from the valuated object and attached to the relationships to the object' (Heinich, 2020: 80). This is precisely what the theory of preference satisfaction is all about. This confusion may stem from early neoclassical attempts to measure marginal utility using an interval scale, assuming utility to be consistent across all individuals. Subsequent neoclassical economists introduced the concept of preference satisfaction because measuring individual utility 'objectively' and making it comparable was impossible. Preference satisfaction replaces utility (even if the term is still used as a synonym), moving from an interval scale (with fixed units of measurement) to an ordinal scale (with objects ranked in order). (DeMartino, 2022: 111-113).

unintended consequences of market activity are known as 'externalities'. These may be remote and hard to see (sweated labour in Asia, for example), or they may not emerge until some time in the future (climate change). But someone is bearing the cost of them nonetheless. Private companies tend to bear a disproportionately small share of the burden, enabling them to inflate their profits and pay high wages. Conversely, those producing positive externalities may enjoy no economic benefit from this, which means their employers find it difficult to reflect societal value in the wages they are paid' (Lawlor et al, 2009: 7-8). The 2008 financial crisis, as well as the climate crisis, can both be viewed as examples of the outcomes stemming from valuation procedures that are rooted in profit-driven markets (Patel, 2011).

A fundamental problem with this way of accounting is again related to the way we think about the economy and work. Orthodox economics focused solely on capitalist market activities, silencing the other forms of economic production and exchange as well as reproductive activities. As emphasized by Patel (2011: 13?), the core issue is that: 'There is a discrepancy between the price of something and its value, one that economists cannot fix, because it's a problem inherent to the very idea of profit-driven prices'. Following a diverse economies perspective, we can say that:

Taking back work for people and the planet means looking at the mix of activities that people are engaging in to survive well. It means celebrating and supporting those forms of labor that are directly contributing to all aspects of individual and household well-being. There is a dominant conception that paid work is the best means of securing well-being because it provides an income for purchasing what we need. Certainly material well-being is critical, but that is not all there is. Overall wellbeing is achieved by the interactions among material, occupational, social, community, and physical well-being. Paid labor plays a role, but so do other forms of labor [...] alternatively paid work such as reciprocal labor or work that is paid in kind, as well as unpaid labor such as housework, family care, neighborhood work, volunteering, and self-provisioning.

(Gibson-Graham et al., 2013: 37-38)

Undoubtedly, unpaid non-market labor significantly impacts the well-being of society. Its value is not easy to estimate, and estimates differ depending on the valuation method. But the conceptual and methodological challenges should not obscure the fact that 'current national income

accounting procedures already assign a value to non-market work—a value of zero. It's hard to imagine a more misleading estimate' (Folbre, 2015: 7).³⁶ As stated by OECD economist Miranda (2011: 30), 'between one-third and half of all valuable economic activity in OECD countries is not accounted for in the traditional measures of well-being, such as GDP per capita. Unpaid work contributes not only to current household consumption (e.g. cooking) but also to future well-being (e.g. parental investments in raising children) and to community well-being (e.g. voluntary work)'.

However, the assumption that reproductive and care work is a given factor complicates the identification of gender relations power dynamics that favor men (Lawlor et al., 2009:11). Feminist economists have extensively evaluated 'neoclassical economics as androcentric' (Dash, 2014: 14), proving that gender-based division of labor structurally impedes women, often leading to an unpaid workload on top of their paid professional engagements (Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003).

In this regard, it is critical to recognize the consequences of social hierarchies, as they may undermine SSE, underscoring the necessity of embracing a transformative approach centered on 'emancipation', which transcends Polanyi's 'social protection' paradigm (Utting, 2015: 33). Labor market and social policies play a significant role in this context by promoting and supporting specific forms of labor valuation over others. The 'social provisioning' approach is relevant here as it considers all unpaid work forms, such as volunteering and subsistence farming, based on non-monetary exchange and relational ends, rather than solely focusing on care work (Dash, 2014: 13-14).

SSE practices are, by definition, not driven by profit. For this reason, they cannot be accurately evaluated by conventional economic measures such as return on investment (ROI) calculations, since such methods would consider their 'performance' to be suboptimal and obviously lower than that of capitalist firms. In other words, 'While profit-making firms are to be evaluated by their ability to carry out production in an efficient way, non-profit making firms are instead to be

³⁶ In the Italian case, the National Institute of Statistics estimated that the value of non-market household production in proportion to GDP accounted for 34.4% in 2014 (ISTAT, 2019: 32), with 64.4% of this contribution made by women (ISTAT, 2019: 35).

evaluated on the basis of their ability to increase the material and non-material welfare of their stakeholders, which are usually groups of individuals or constituencies embedded at the local level, and which, in the most extreme cases, can also coincide with society at large' (Borzaga et al, 2011: 20).

This leads to the question of what other values need to be measured besides the economic one.

Regarding this matter, Ormiston & Seymour (2011: 128) emphasize that:

Other 'forms' of value do, however, exist. These values include: (1) social value – the value related to personal relationships, which may be acquisitive values that have the expectation of reciprocation, or expressive value, which is not concerned with what can be gained from the other but with what can be conveyed to others (Emerson 1987, Miczo 2002); (2) natural value – considered typically by economists as the value of natural ecosystems that can yield a future flow of valuable ecosystem goods or services, but also considered to reflect business activity that repairs or protects ecosystem repairs; (3) cultural value – Bourdieu (1986, 1993) identified individuals as possessing cultural capital if they had acquired competencies in 'high' culture, and economists have included the term in economic analysis, although Throsby (1999) concludes that theoretical work is needed in the area of cultural value and measurement issues; and (4) creative value – based on Godelier's (1999) view of sacred objects, creative value is embodied in objects that: (i) have no practical use; (ii) abstract social relations and thought systems from everyday life; (iii) are beautiful, in the sense of valorising, enhancing and glorifying the objects' owner and/or in the beauty of the object; and (iv) are unique and have their value increase over time. Note, however, that we should not get distracted attempting to measure the unmeasurable (Shackle 1903/1992). The social entrepreneurship literature typically is not distracted by such differentiated measures, but rather concentrates rather on 'social value' as that which 'benefits people whose urgent and reasonable needs are not being met by other means' (Young 2006, p. 56).

Not all value can be quantified, and there is likely no point in attempting to do so. According to Sidorkin (2016: 324) 'The value of certain phenomena is derived through uniqueness, not through quantity. And that value is negated, in fact destroyed when we attempt to compare and measure. Even though theoretically everything *can* be measured, it does not mean that everything *should* be measured, lest we agree to destroy the measured'.

I would like to make three observations in this regard.

Firstly, measuring does not equate to quantifying. Indeed, measuring can be both quantitative and qualitative,³⁷ as demonstrated by the longstanding tradition of qualitative sociology. Qualitative processes of conceptualization are crucial in creating the conditions for making sense of the world we inhabit prior to quantification.³⁸

Secondly, quantifying is not synonymous with monetizing. Qualitative measures can be translated into numerical ones: deciding whether and when it is convenient cannot be decided *a priori*.

Thirdly, the way we monetize can be reframed to account for different valuation principles. In certain instances, it makes no sense to do so, since many valuable things in life can't be quantified (and even less monetized), while in others it can be productive to create semantic slippages that make visible the political implications of what we value in monetary terms. Indeed, as Murtagh (2019: 173) notes, finance 'is the main resource for the conversion of other forms of capital into social value but more importantly for community accumulation regimes that invariably implicates the SSE in the market'. However, the issue is that social value 'is being constantly reworked around private sector definitions and rationalities' (Murtagh 2019: 150).

As an example, Petrescu et al. (2020: 2) suggest using monetized calculations, in particular the Community Economy Return on Investment (CEROI), to uncover previously unrecognized and unaccounted for activities in an urban commoning project in Paris, France. These activities include volunteer work, environmental services, improvements to well-being, and ecological practices. Using this approach, Petrescu et al. argue that it could potentially shift the value away from profit-driven markets towards post-capitalist practices. Whilst they acknowledge the pitfalls of 'using the master's tools to challenge the dominant economization of lifeworlds', they propose not to 'cede all econo-metrics to the Capitalocene'. (Petrescu et al., 2020: 2).

³⁷ As Heinich (2020: 83-84) recalls: 'The measurement of value requires various instruments: codes (stars accompanying film reviews), awards (Palme d'Or, literary prizes, etc.), or numbers, in order to rate wines (the Robert Parker system), academic citations (the Eugene Garfield's Science Citation Index), or art works (the Willi Bongard's Kunst Kompass). In economic activity, the quantified measure is called 'price', which for most economists means value. But the reduction of valuation to quantified measurement and, more particularly, to price, often raises problems'.

³⁸ As Sartori (1970: 1038) emphasized: 'In this messy controversy about quantification and its bearing on standard logical rules we simply tend to forget that concept formation stands prior to quantification. The process of thinking inevitably begins with a qualitative (natural) language, no matter at which shore we shall subsequently land. Correlatively, there is no ultimate way of bypassing the fact that human understanding – the way in which our mind works – requires cut-off points which basically correspond (in spite of all subsequent refinements) to the slices into which a natural or qualitative language happens to be divided'.

As it should be clear by now, reducing the concept of value to merely the issue of price leads to underestimating or even dismissing its epistemic relevance (Heinich, 2020: 83). In fact, if 'the price of an object is a fact (quantified, variable, and 'refutable' in the Popperian sense), its value is a representation (qualitative, variable, and questionable) – in other words, a more or less shared conception of what this object is worth' (Heinich, 2020: 82).

Following Heinich's suggestion for a pragmatic redefinition of value,³⁹ it is important to note that the process of valuation involves a complex set of operations - measurement, attachment, and judgment - that assign a quality to an object. This contextual and representational approach to value helps to overcome reductionism.⁴⁰

Values are inevitably implicated in all the three moments of valuation: before, during, and after. Prior to valuation, they exist 'as part of a repertoire of representations shared by actors within the same culture, transmitted by education and incorporated into their habitus' (Heinich, 2020: 89). During valuation, they are applied concretely to a given object in a particular context. And finally, after the situation of valuation, where 'they can be modulated, refined, affirmed or, on the contrary, weakened or outdated, leading to a permanent re-elaboration of the repertoire available to actors' (Heinich, 2020: 89).

Value is always social, to some extent. For it to be realized there is a need for 'some sort of public recognition and comparison'. As Graeber (2001: 76) notes, economic models that view actions 'as aimed primarily at individual gratification, fall so obviously short: they fail to see that in any society—even within a market system—solitary pleasures are relatively few. The most important ends are ones that can only be realized in the eyes of some collective audience'. Even more importantly, 'ascribing value, or the lack of it', to delimit economic activities 'has always involved

³⁹ Although her epistemological positioning is different from mine, aiming at a purely descriptive sociology. In her own words: 'The purpose of the sociology of valuation that we advocate here should remain a purely epistemic one, aiming not at making valuations acceptable but at discovering and analyzing how actors decide whether a valuation is acceptable or not. Here lies a basic rupture between a normative (or even political) position and an analytico-descriptive (or scientific) one: the latter has nothing to do with critical social theory. Nonetheless, both share a common effort to escape the traditional subject/object dualism: hence our second redefinition of value' (Heinich, 2020: 79).

⁴⁰ In Heinich's (2020: 83) words: 'In a pragmatic perspective, a sociology of values should focus on the actual forms under which valuation occurs: that is, first, measure (including, of course, price); second, attachment; and third, judgment. Our purpose is not to plead for judgment rather than measurement, or for measurement rather than attachment, or for attachment rather than judgment, since these three modalities may be at stake depending on the subjects, the objects and the contexts of valuation. They only need to be identified, described and analyzed, in order to understand what they mean for the actors, what they require and what they bring'.

malleable socio-economic arguments which derive from a particular political perspective – which is sometimes explicit, sometimes not' (Mazzucato, 2018:14). As Mazzucato argues, the concept of value is always a matter of politics and how one envisions constructing society. Measurements are never neutral since they influence behavior and are in turn affected by it.

In fact, the emergence of the need to measure, or in some cases quantify, something other than efficiency in commodity production signals the existence of different sets of practices, different values, and the emergence of new valuation processes. This 'something other' is increasingly referred to as 'social (or environmental) impact'. This leads us to the concluding section where I will define my use of the term *transformative SSE* while discussing the contentious subject of social impact and its related concepts of scale and social innovation, all of which have become buzzwords in recent times (Krüger & Pellicer-Sifres, 2020).

Section Four: Towards the transformative SSE

While there is no surefire route to success, I believe a necessary component of success for every entrepreneur is having a Massively Transformative Purpose (MTP).

(Diamandis, 2017)

This reversal of priorities is one of the hallmarks of a system which can be characterized without hyperbole as 'market Stalinism'. What late capitalism repeats from Stalinism is just this valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement.

(Fisher, 2009: 42-43)

Innovation, impact, and scaling often intersect in a modernist narrative to expand socioeconomic capacities and address *global* environmental, social, and economic issues (Pfothenauer, Laurent, Papageorgiou, and Stilgoe, 2022).

In this context, the term 'transformative' is used to advocate for large-scale social change that promises to solve large-scale problems while generating large-scale revenues. As well as large-scale negative side effects, we might add. As Pfothenauer, Laurent, Papageorgiou, and Stilgoe (2022: 18-19) argue: 'the scalability zeitgeist resonates with the rise of shareholder value logics in

management theory that link social value and responsibility to profit maximization (Jensen, 2001; Lazonick and O'Sullivan, 2000). It further resonates with current trends toward assetization and technoscientific rentiership, which turn present and future control over things – land, skills, people, rights etc. – into durable revenue streams for investors (Birch, 2020; Birch and Cochrane, 2021; Birch and Muniesa, 2020), and promises of economic opportunity into tradable entities (Sunder Rajan 2006, 2017)'.

According to Pfothenhauer et al., innovation as scaling has become the dominant logic in platform technologies, experimental development economics, and 'living labs'.

To be sure, innovation is crucial for society. However, the extractive model of innovation, as described by Mazzucato (2018), is often associated with rent-seeking, exploitation, and the depletion of natural resources. It is important to note that this model is not a necessity, but rather a political choice.⁴¹

My use of the term *transformative* differs significantly from the aforementioned because I embrace an *open-ended, context-based, and self-reflective* approach. Before delving into it, let us examine how innovation, impact, and scale relate to SSE.

Although it can be difficult to determine the extent and direction of influence between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors,⁴² these three concepts appear frequently in various strands of SSE

⁴¹ 'Value extraction in the innovation economy occurs in various ways. First, in the way that the financial sector – in particular venture capital and the stock market – has interacted with the process of technology creation. Second, in the way that the system of intellectual property rights (IPR) has evolved: a system that now allows not just the products of research but also the tools for research to be patented and their use ring-fenced, thereby creating what the economist William J. Baumol termed 'unproductive entrepreneurship'. Third, in the way that prices of innovative products do not reflect the collective contribution to the products concerned, in fields as diverse as health, energy or broadband. And fourth, through the network dynamics characteristic of modern technologies, where first-mover advantages in a network allow large economies to reap monopolistic advantages through economies of scale and the fact that customers using the network get locked in (finding it too cumbersome or disadvantageous to switch service)' (Mazzucato, 2018: 190-191).

⁴² A narrative describing an ever-expanding neoliberal capitalism, variously referred to as 'caring capitalism' (Moulaert et al., 2017), 'conscience capitalism' (Farrell, 2015) or 'philanthrocapitalism' (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018), is again not very promising. One-sided and unidirectional influence and change is never a possibility. See Nicholls and Teasdale (2016) for a more nuanced analysis of neoliberalism and social enterprise policy in the UK with the use of nested paradigms. Alternative economic practices, such as SSE, can and, in fact, do influence mainstream practices as well. The risks of cooptation, isomorphisms, and even exploitation exist. For instance, Farrell (2015: 262) argues: 'At the heart of conscience capitalist agenda is the opening up of social and environmental concerns as areas for the market to colonise. This necessitates creating non-economic value or assigning economic value to what were previously considered social and environmental 'externalities' – put simply, a process of commodification'. Nonetheless, societal dynamics are complex, diverse, and ultimately unpredictable.

scholarship and narratives, most likely in the discourse of social entrepreneurship, as social innovation, social impact, and scaling.

The shared belief among them is that through acquiring sufficient knowledge, we can bring about the desired change (innovation) in the world via our actions (impact), and that this impact can be repeated, amplified, and multiplied without additional repercussions (scaling). As Pfothner et al. (2022: 5) indicates, 'the current entrepreneurial appetite for quantity, speed and scale seems to have a constitutive quality of its own'. It's worth exploring how these concepts are at play in the SSE.

4:1 Social innovation

The concept of social innovation is widely associated with the social economy, and the latter is even 'considered as part of social innovation' (Moulaert, 2005: 2071). Not surprisingly, the number of definitions of social innovation abounds and its boundaries, uses, and utility are far from clear.⁴³ Klein (2010: 11) adopts 'the definition given by Geoff Mulgan: 'Social innovation refers to innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social' (Mulgan 2006)'. In this approach, social innovation derives 'from public dissatisfaction with existing conditions and with concern about the gap between conditions of privilege and conditions of want' (Klein, 2010: 40). The term was adopted to emphasize the human and socio-political dimensions of development and innovation that were previously overlooked, with technology and business organization taking on primary roles as drivers of development for much of the 20th century up to the 1980s (Moulaert et al., 2017: 11).

Häikiö et al (2017: 282) trace the origins of the contemporary use of the concept to the social movements of the late 1970s and early 1980s that through community activism began to provide new welfare services (see Laville (2010: 16-20) on 'proximity services') by challenging the bureaucratic and paternalistic approach of the state. The conceptualization of social innovation 'has progressively emerged during the 2000s, first in the academic sphere (Moulaert et al., 2010) and

⁴³ For a historical overview of SI, refer to Moulaert et al. (2017: 11-23).

then on the political agenda'. According to Häikiö et al. (2017: 282-283) a major shift occurred during the last fifteen years: 'social innovation has also received political attention in the context of economic austerity. It has become a new EU-sponsored policy agenda for responding to the financial crisis. The idea has become subject to some forms of regulation and funding, not only at the EU level but also at national and local levels (Fraisie, 2013). At the EU level, one of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy is to promote economically efficient social innovations that facilitate smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and address the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society (see Gómez-Barroso et al., in this volume)'. As they note immediately, this innovative agenda 'coexists with strong recommendations for austerity measures and cuts in public spending in the Eurozone' (Häikiö et al, 2017: 283). Once social innovation has become institutionalized it appears to have lost its potential. In order to make sense of this, Häikiö et al. identifies differing and competing conceptualizations of the term: one technocratic, the other democratic. While the former 'reinforces the neo-liberal agenda by introducing business methods and resources in the management of social services, extending the rules of competition to the delivery of social services and prioritising cost-efficiency within restricted public budgets', the latter is conceived as 'grassroots initiatives that develop to satisfy unmet basic human needs, to empower excluded social groups and communities to access social and citizenship rights, to change power relations and to transform governance practices' (Häikiö et al, 2017: 283-284).

In this sense, social innovation is seen as Janus faced, since its practical application can produce very different results depending on the value assumptions and institutionalization processes involved, albeit with different degrees and nuances. Moulart et al. (2017: 37) suggests that a dualist reading of social innovation 'does not capture the range of different approaches, but serves as a point of departure, marking a continuum of approaches'. They also acknowledge (2017: 6) that within the EU, a shift in research funding towards the practical-organizational end of the SI continuum is evident, a development that is regrettable considering the high demand for research on social innovation in governance and the transformation of democratic practices.

Even though this framework is helpful in critically assessing the relevance and substance of social innovation policies, the term seems to have lost its relevance in both political and analytical terms.

Häikiö et al (2017: 298-299) themselves conclude their case studies analysis by acknowledging that: 'a closer examination gives reason to argue that the promise of local initiatives to develop into social innovations that challenge and reorganise the existing power relations among institutional actors, local communities and citizens (Moulaert et al., 2005) is, to date, unfulfilled'. In this vein, I agree with Krüger & Pellicer-Sifres (2020: 116) that the problem 'is not that 'nobody is quite sure of what it means'; the real issue is rather that it 'is a term that almost everybody likes,' but one that doesn't challenge anything or anyone'.

Krüger and Pellicer-Sifres (2020: 117-118) highlight several issues regarding the concept. Firstly, it 'overstretches the imperative of innovation' by neglecting other potentially transformative practices that can be found at other levels, while at the same time creating an obsession with short-term planning and simulacra of innovation (in order to obtain funding). Second, the concept 'has a 'harmonious' bias', which means that conflicts are mostly excluded from its narrative (also ignoring necessary processes of exnovation). Thirdly, social innovation 'favors incremental over transformative approaches', thus reducing its potential for significant change. Finally, it relies 'on the assumptions from modernization theory' without questioning the logic of growth and acceleration, and therefore completely ignores those lifestyles and traditional legacies that are often more compatible with a sustainable economy.

A more promising approach in this regard comes from what Avelino et al. (2019: 198) call *transformative social innovation* as 'social innovation that challenges, alters or replaces dominant institutions in the social context (Haxeltine et al., 2016)'. According to their theory, 'transformative change is an emergent outcome of co-evolutionary interactions between changing paradigms and mental models, political institutions, physical structures and innovative developments on the ground. Transformative change results from a specific interaction between game-changers, narratives of change, system innovation, and social innovation, as distinct but intertwined shades of

innovation and change, each of which has a specific potential to challenge, alter and/or replace dominant institutions'.⁴⁴

4:2 Social impact

You hear the word impact, it's everywhere, right? Impact this, impact that. Ok, it's the wrong word to use for evaluation. What does impact say to you? It's an artillery term. It's good for baseball, golf, you know, cruise missiles...But it suggests unidirectional movement, a single result, as soon as you reach impact change stops. Well, no. This is not a word that evaluators should use. [...] It's just a misleading term. It's a political term.

(Terry Smutlyo, The Impact Blues)⁴⁵

The OECD defines social impact as 'positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended' (Stern, Stame, Mayne, Forss, Davies, Befani, 2012: 6). The proliferation of social impact as a concept and social impact assessment as an evaluative practice is built on different historical circumstances. As stated by the OECD, 'Social and solidarity economy entities are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value added to society' (OECD Global Action, 2021: 11). This pressure is coming from different parts and for different reasons.

⁴⁴ As we can read on their *Manifesto for Transformative Social Innovation* (2017): 'As top-down policies, technologies and large-scale solutions are unable to bring about social change at the level of everyday life, we need the efforts of local communities to engage and experiment with social innovations. However, local engagement and experimentation are also not enough. Societal challenges are interlinked and systemic. Piecemeal and superficial solutions, no matter how innovative, can easily have unintended side effects, reinforcing persistent societal challenges, or even creating new problems. Activism towards a better world is toothless if it fails to address existing power structures in the global economy and engage with people outside their own like-minded communities. This means that social innovation alone is not enough: we need transformative change to make a difference: to challenge, alter and replace the dominant institutions that are ingrained in society (e.g. individualism, hierarchy, competition). Such processes of challenging, altering and replacing our dominant ways of doing, thinking and organising, is what we call transformative social innovation'. Available online at: <https://tsimanifesto.org/app/uploads/2017/12/Manifesto-for-Transformative-Social-Innovation-v0.1-Oct-2017-1.pdf> (accessed on 4 September 2023).

⁴⁵ Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f4rNEsyEYY&list=PL3vIwqKEsVA9-QCuqmj7Kv5OTSOCW0rYJ&index=12>

Since evaluation specialist Terry Smutlyo ironically suggests that 'impact' is a good term for sports and military contexts, it would be extremely interesting to reconstruct a genealogy of the term and its evolution into 'social impact'. For the purposes of this discussion, it is sufficient to recall that the etymology of impact suggests that it derives from the Latin *impactus*, meaning 'to press closely against something', as the past participle of *impingere*, meaning 'to push into, drive into, strike against'.⁴⁶

On the one hand, there is increasing pressure on SSE organizations, especially social enterprises, to measure their social impact (Mäkelä, 2021: 2). The pressure comes from different angles and for different reasons (institutions, donors and civil society), but it is definitely related to the increasing visibility and institutionalization of the sector. Some authors (Mendell, 2013: 16-17) even suggest that governments should also introduce the social return on investment rationale into policy design in order to highlight the benefits of investing in SSE. On the other hand, there is no agreement on how to properly measure social value, and the most common social accounting tools, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), have been criticized for not being suitable for this purpose.

The origins of the pressure to evaluate the impact of SSE are commonly attributed (Studer, 2022; Barraket 2013; Jany-Catrice, 2022) to changes in welfare state systems during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the widespread adoption of a doctrine known as New Public Management (NPM). NPM dictates that public administrations must be organized, monitored, and measured according to market principles. Given the close connection between SSE and the welfare state, the 'performance imperatives' dictated by market logic have gradually extended from social policies to philanthropy, social enterprises, and the social economy (Barraket, 2013: 447).

According to Jany-Catrice (2022: 269) three main transformations are at play in this process: 'the shift within productive systems towards an increase in service activities (Goffman, 1961; Mark; 1982; Levine, 1984; Gadrey, 1991; 1996); the increase and the changes—in volume, nature and objectives—in the evaluation of public policies (Lascoume, Le Galès, 2007); and an increase in quantification with the aim of technicization, depolitization and removing the human element

⁴⁶ D. Harper. "Etymology of impact." Online Etymology Dictionary. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/impact> (accessed August 28, 2023).

from the criteria on which judgements are made (Jasanoff, 2004; Porter, 1986, 1995; Scott, 1998; Beaud, Prévost, 2000; Ogien, 2010; Supiot, 2017)'.⁴⁷

Therefore, the need to move beyond productivity in the strict sense has led to the emergence of various indicators and measurement practices aimed at quantifying 'multidimensional services'.⁴⁷ It is worth noting that the widespread use of such measurements in public services reflects several changes, including the growing influence of economism, the proliferation of quantified data, and increased mistrust of public services (Jany-Catrice, 2022: 275). Against this backdrop, scientific tools, strictly managed by experts, for evaluating, comparing and allocating resources based on quantitative and monetized measures of social impact have been promoted (Urmanaviciene, 2020: 132). These tools originate from fields such as impact investing and development economics.

Cost-benefit analysis (CBA), Social Return on Investment (SROI),⁴⁸ and Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) are different facets of the same epistemology: one in which experts can identify specific causal relationships between inputs and outcomes and translate them into quantitatively comparable units. Social impact can be assessed through qualitative research, quantification, and monetization. Even though each of these approaches has pros and cons depending on the context, the assessment goal, and the resources available, 'the scientific literature on measuring social impact focuses on quantitative and monetization approaches' (Urmanaviciene, 2020: 132). The reason why we should be aware of the possible negative consequences of this quantitative epistemology is clearly stated by Donald Campbell (1976: 49), one of the proponents of the experimental approach in social science, in what is commonly referred to as Campbell's Law: 'The more any quantitative

⁴⁷ As Jany-Catrice (2022: 272-273) writes: 'Why are these interpretations inevitable? Because applying this industrialist concept of productivity unamended to service activities constitutes a veritable "epistemological obstacle" to analysis (Gadrey, 1991). Several reasons for this are generally advanced in the literature to explain such a difficulty and the importance of the interpretation. Among them, we can highlight the immediate elusiveness or impalpability of what is produced in services (sometimes too hastily described as its intangibility): what is really produced and what can be identified as "output", when we care, cure, accompany, advise? In addition, a certain degree of confusion in some service activities between the production processes (the fact of being in the midst of providing care, education, support etc.) and the outcome of the production process (being in good health at an individual and collective level, having gained self-confidence etc.), which various authors demonstrated as early as the 1990s (Gadrey, 1996; Agya Yalley & Singh Sekhon, 2014; Atkinson et al., 2005; Stiglitz et al., 2009)'.

⁴⁸ SROI evaluations are in reality based on a complex analysis of both quantitative and qualitative information. However, 'the multiplicity of data sources and the complexity of the framework within which the measurements are made and the resulting figures ordered are such that the only thing that counts is the result that comes out of the process (i.e. the "single figure", the SROI for example) on which an automatized judgement is based' (Jany-Catrice, 2022: 277).

social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor'. Additionally, it is acknowledged that these standardized methods are 'expensive, complicated, and time-consuming and require particular expertise' (Urmanaviciene, 2020: 134). Many SSE organizations are small to medium sized, and in many cases it would be at least questionable to divert limited resources from the actual production of social value to its representation. However, there has been minimal research into the performative effects of impact assessment discourse (Barraket, 2013).

Social impact measurement can be approached from various angles and perspectives. Barraket notes that little attention has been given to how and why SSE actors employ social impact measurement, whereas the focus has solely been on how to measure to gain social legitimacy, particularly with funders.⁴⁹ In her terms, too much attention has been paid to 'measurement as legitimacy' rather than to 'legitimacy of measurement' (Barraket, 2013).

How can a transformative SSE withstand what Barraket (2013: 447) calls the 'performance imperatives'? Deliberative and participatory methods of evaluation may guide us in this respect. In a context in which 'valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement' is a distinct characteristic of what Fisher (2009) calls capitalist realism, a collective reflection on what is value, how it is produced, appropriated and distributed in SSE practices can offer a possible solution.

⁴⁹ In this regard, Barraket (2013: 445) writes: 'Despite popular discourse that suggests the primary value of impact measurement to social enterprise is in its potential to open up markets and mobilise new resources in support of mission fulfilment (see Nicholls 2007; Social Ventures Australia 2012), our findings indicate that meeting compliance demands of existing grant funders was the main motivation for evaluation amongst our sample. While this may be necessary for social enterprises to ensure 'repeat business' and maintain accountability as new public governance actors (Schillemans 2010), it suggests that accountability imperatives override the wider potential for nongovernment actors to deliver service and resource innovations, which is an assumed value of network governance (Considine 2005)'.

These tensions must be addressed.⁵⁰ Previous research has indicated (Maas & Grieco, 2017; Ormiston & Seymour, 2011; Mäkelä, 2021) that social accounting practices have not been widely adopted by SSE actors and have not received sufficient investment. And this is due to several reasons: it is a relatively new field of analysis, there are personal biases towards positive outcomes (the so-called 'warm glow feeling'), it requires time, knowledge and skills, and of course due to the inherent complications in the process itself. SSE has the option of investing in the development of instruments that can capture social value, which is fundamental to its operations. Given the aforementioned challenges, the implementation of social impact assessment requires support from external environmental organizations, investors, experts, practitioners (Urmanaviciene, 2020: 142) and institutions. In any case, measuring social value is inherently challenging and requires a shift from a managerial to a deliberative convention.⁵¹ Studer (2022: 299) notes the contrast between these two logics, even though they can overlap and hybridize in practice. The former logic is characterized by methodological individualism and causality, and it is contrasted against collective and systemic evaluation in the deliberative convention. Objectivation through numbers is opposed to complementarity between quantitative and qualitative methods, and performance and results are contrasted with the identity dimension and a specific way of acting (practices). Lastly, the tools of the managerial convention are counter to a political approach.

As Mäkelä (2021: 5) reminds us in relation to social enterprises: 'Accounting for SEs requires a complex, dynamic, multi-directional and multi-stakeholder accounting system (Costa, Parker, and

⁵⁰ As explained by Murtagh (2019: 85-86): 'The issue of measurement is an important one. The lack of reliable data on the performance of social economy interventions, self-acclimation and the appeal to virtue, in part, reflect the sector's mix of ethics and objectives. It also makes it difficult to compete with discourses that can more readily identify, or at least construct, an overbearing efficiency narrative for the private market. The barriers to growing the social and solidarity economy run deeper than knowledge competition and relate to the scale and sophistication of often ill-defined subsectors, the nature of the enabling environment and the lack of dedicated resources tailored to the needs of social enterprises. It is a varied and multi-layered arena with a busy diversity, firms, schemes and informal local agreements that are not explained or sustained by utility seeking producers and consumers. How these are organised, if they want to be organised, co-ordinated and escalated as an economy, underlines the importance of markets and the institutional relationships that make them work'.

⁵¹ At the European level, the Visés project brought together 21 partners and 69 social economy enterprises from France and Belgium to jointly define a social impact assessment system suitable for the SSE, using an action research approach. Available at: <http://www.projetvisesproject.eu/>. The findings are presented in the document *Let's give sense to our economy. Advocacy position for a co-created assessment of the social impact of social entrepreneurship* (2017), available at: http://www.projetvisesproject.eu/IMG/pdf/vises_noteenjeux_en_relecture.pdf.

Andreas 2014)'. More specifically, accounting is never just a technical operation. It is a social and organizational practice with a powerful effect on what is made visible, relevant and valuable, and therefore on our knowledge structures (Mäkelä, 2021: 6).

In this sense, social impact measuring seems to rely on a narrow epistemology because it primarily focuses on the results (outputs and outcomes) of SSE actions or activities and overlooks the processes (decision-making, implementation, monitoring, etc.) that lead to those results. It prioritizes quantifiable outcomes (How much?), undervaluing the procedural aspect of organizations (How?). It solely concentrates on a single program or service of an organization, disregarding the intricate collaborations that are typically involved in the SSE field. The implementation of a service's quality often involves a significant number of actors, interrelations, networks, and partnerships. It is frequently challenging to determine the individual organization's contribution to the overall inter-organizational network of actors (Bassi, 2022: 9). For these reasons, Bassi recommends utilizing the more encompassing concept of social value instead of the troubling concept of social impact.

Maas & Grieco (2017: 112) claim that: 'Social value has little to do with profit but instead involves the fulfilment of basic and long-standing needs, such as providing food, water, shelter, education, and medical services to those members of society who are in need (Certo and Miller 2008)'. Graeber (2019 207) points out that 'for most people, "social value" isn't just about creating wealth or even leisure. It is equally about creating sociability'.

Defining social value is an open-ended process, intrinsically tied to the evolution of social needs. Given that social value has little to do with profit, 'the purposes motivating social entrepreneurs will affect the value created by social entrepreneurs' (Ormiston 2011: 126). And in this sense, McCulloch & Ridley-Duff (2019: 2) are right in pointing out that the very concept of non-profit must be criticized and rejected as 'it maintains the hegemony of financial capital and the 'for-profit' paradigm', rendering invisible the real contribution to social welfare by SSE and preventing 'the emergence of a counter hegemonic movement capable of repurposing markets to benefit society' (McCulloch & Ridley-Duff, 2019: 8).

At the same time, the fact that SSE organizations are legally recognized and required to operate as nonprofits is not *per se* a guarantee of positive social and environmental outcomes.⁵² Indeed, 'What matters is *how* surpluses (as opposed to profits) are raised, *to whom* they are distributed, *why* they are distributed (if they are), and *what impact* distribution has on the wealth of organisation members and their host communities (in both financial and non-financial terms)' (McCulloch & Ridley-Duff, 2019: 7).

Along these lines, McCulloch & Ridley-Duff (2019) propose to reverse the logic by adopting the label of 'for-purpose' organizations, not just as a matter of labeling but with the goal of providing a radically different approach to measuring value. In other words, 'wealth is the by-product of access that an enterprise (network) secures for its members, users, customers and beneficiaries to six forms of capital' (McCulloch & Ridley-Duff, 2019: 19), namely natural, human, social and relational, intellectual, manufactured, and financial wealth.⁵³

To summarize, accounting is a contested but crucial field: 'Accounting is needed to create visibility and credibility for SEs and to constitute SEs as legitimate institutional actors. Accounting thus has the ability to 'make the invisible visible', set values, construct our shared social realities and constitute organisations and performance as governable and measurable in terms of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and transparency (Burchell et al. 1980; Carmel and Harlock 2008; Miller and Power 2013)' (Mäkelä, 2021:16).

The point is not to oppose the role of experts or particular methods *per se*, but rather to recognize the epistemology underlying impact evaluation and its performativity. It is crucial to distinguish between approaches, methods, and techniques, clearly define objectives, take available resources into account, and be attentive and careful about the process itself. As Barraket (2013: 253) emphasizes, it is important to maintain this distinction. The acknowledgment of the need to demonstrate achievement and worth exists. However, prioritizing the identification and, where

⁵² Paradoxically, a nonprofit organization might have racist or authoritarian goals. In this case, it certainly could not be considered part of the SSE.

⁵³ They developed an interesting model 'for creating and sustaining networks of solidarity enterprises' called FairShares, available at: <https://www.fairshares.coop/>.

applicable, measurement of value through meaningful processes that encompass cognitive legitimacy should take precedence over merely valuing measures.

4:3 Scaling

The quest for social impact is closely linked to the drive to pinpoint solutions to social problems that can be replicated on a larger basis with a degree of certainty about the desired outcomes - in other words, the imperative to scale.

Tsing (2012) explains the rationale for scalability, which involves expanding a project without altering its fundamental components. A side-effect of this process is 'the exclusion of biological and cultural diversity from scalable designs. Scalability is possible only if project elements do not form transformative relationships that might change the project as elements are added. But transformative relationships are the medium for the emergence of diversity. Scalability projects banish meaningful diversity, which is to say, diversity that might change things' (Tsing, 2012: 507). As Tsing (2012: 510, 515, 524) admits, however, this design project can never be fully realized in practice.

Scalability as part of the modernist project originated in the business sector, particularly in the European colonial plantation economy (Tsing, 2012). The defining features of scalability, namely alienation, interchangeability, and expansion, were adopted from sugarcane plantations. While successfully implementing these features can generate remarkable profits, they often come at significant human and environmental costs (Pfothenauer, Laurent, Papageorgiou, and Stilgoe, 2022: 6).

The imperative of scale has been reproduced and transformed up to today whether in 'Big Tech', development economics or sustainability transitions. According to Pfothenauer, Laurent, Papageorgiou, and Stilgoe (2022: 6) 'scale' ceases to be an analytic category that refers to geographic reach, nested units of analysis or the marginal costs of production. Rather, as an actors' category, it signifies an imperative and framing device for businesses, governments and NGOs alike that prescribes what seems worth doing, what the rules of engagement are and how we define problems or solutions'.

In the literature on SSE, the issue of scale, defined as 'the ability to expand—and expand, and expand—without rethinking basic elements' (Tsing, 2012: 505), has been taken up, I argue, without sufficient reflection. As an illustration, in *Innovation and Scaling for Impact*, Seelos and Mair (2017: 5) advise: 'If you don't know how to scale, don't innovate'. Although the order of priorities is reversed, suggesting that social enterprises focus first on impact, then on scaling, and only then on innovation, the underlying assumptions remain the same.⁵⁴

Against this background, developing a 'literacy of scaling', as Schmid and Taylor Aiken (2023: 6) suggest for sustainability and transitions research, would be equally significant for SSE scholarship. 'Developing a literacy of scaling enables a more deliberate, explicitly political – and ultimately more tactical – recourse to the transformative sense and potential of amplifying sustainability-oriented practices, experiments, and initiatives'.

Indeed, the intensification of global social, economic, and environmental crises seems to many to require the proliferation of large-scale solutions, even as it is recognized that a rich variety of 'niche' sustainability-oriented community initiatives demonstrates the wide range of alternative pathways available (Schmid and Taylor Aiken, 2023: 1), and that scale itself may be part of the problem.

As stated by Fleming (2016), the notion that large scale is beneficial due to economies of scale is often unquestioned, while the associated high costs are neglected: large systems necessitate significant amounts of materials, energy, and infrastructure, produce vast amounts of waste, and disempower citizens (in the case of human systems).⁵⁵ In other words, 'The fundamental problem with large scale is that with each advance in size there is a necessary increase in *complication*' (Fleming, 2016).⁵⁶

Fleming acutely distinguishes between complexity and complication, maintaining that a globalized society operates as a complicated system in which there's a kind of paradoxical relationship between

⁵⁴ In their words: 'We refer to scaling as activities that act on and improve already existing knowledge, processes, products, services, or interventions to serve more people better. Scaling creates more immediate and more predictable positive impact than innovation' (Seelos and Mair, 2017: 7).

⁵⁵ I refer to the online version of *Lean Logic*: <https://leanlogic.online/introduction-david-fleming/>.

⁵⁶ <https://leanlogic.online/glossary/scale/>.

simplification and complexity.⁵⁷ A complicated system, in this sense, has a limited resilience in that it responds to challenges 'through greater complication—making additional provisions which involve more work, and lead to greater elaboration and more challenges—right up to the point of collapse'.⁵⁸

On the other hand, 'small scale has its own economies: shorter transport distances, less waste, less infrastructure (lower total costs), more attention to detail, more flexibility, and it opens the way to empowerment: *you* can make a difference' (Fleming, 2016).⁵⁹

In fact, scale could be problematic in another sense. The depiction of social problems on vast scales has significant psychological implications. The way we frame social problems can affect people's ability to deal with them, because the massive scale at which they are often located activates unmanageable (dysfunctional) levels of arousal that inhibit the ability to solve them.⁶⁰ Weick (1984: 47) proposes that shifting one's perspective and focusing on 'small wins' may help positively activate people's involvement: 'Changing the scale of a problem can change the quality of resources that are directed at it. Calling a situation a mere problem that necessitates a small win moderates arousal, improves diagnosis, preserves gains, and encourages innovation. Calling a situation a serious problem that necessitates a larger win may be when the problem starts'.

Schmid and Taylor Aiken (2023) identify potential pitfalls of using the scaling narrative too superficially. First, viewing scales as discrete levels of social reality, where community initiatives are

⁵⁷ In Fleming's words, 'the standardisation and specialisation of a complicated society comes with aspects of diminished complexity, relative to the decentralised self-reliant order prevailing pre- and post-civilisation. In some ways, civilisation explores the extremes of complexity; in some ways it is greatly simplified. Indeed, intensification—a society's accomplishment of a massive expansion of work by the division of labour—comes at the cost of extreme simplification not just for places, but for people, as observed by the division of labour's leading advocate, Adam Smith', <https://leanlogic.online/glossary/complexity/>.

⁵⁸ <https://leanlogic.online/glossary/systems-thinking/>.

⁵⁹ <https://leanlogic.online/introduction-david-fleming/>.

⁶⁰ The psychological phenomenon referred to as 'eco-anxiety' – an emotional reaction to the climate crisis – may serve as a concrete example. Although research findings on its impact on pro-environmental behavior remain unclear (Kurth and Pihkala, 2022), Mathers-Jones and Todd (2023: 7) argue that: 'Given that climate change is a genuine threat, and that normal and pathological anxiety can be distinguished by response magnitude (Beck & Clark, 1997; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), then a small amount of eco-anxiety might be necessary to motivate climate action. However, if an individual were to experience greater levels of eco-anxiety it may become a pathological form of anxiety and thus impair behavioural responses (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020), which may be more susceptible to moderation by other constructs such as attentional bias'.

niches against a mainstream regime obscures the fact that 'numerous cross-scalar practices and relations that actualize sustainability – including solidarity, trust, and care – are base and centre rather than peripheral to social co-existence (Gibson-Graham, 2006)' (Schmid and Taylor Aiken, 2023: 4).

Secondly, a focus on innovation primarily as novelty tends to overlook existing relations, technologies, and practices, requiring a balance 'with a humbler restoring and excavation of sustainability and justice-oriented practices already in place – present and past' (Schmid and Taylor Aiken, 2023: 4).

Third, the politics of urgency and speed often associated with the scaling narrative may also have negative consequences for relevant aspects of community initiatives. As Schmid and Taylor Aiken (2023: 4-5) note, several of the values pursued by community initiatives, including democracy, inclusion, respect, care, and joy, cannot be implemented immediately and require time.

Finally, an outward orientation that sees transformation primarily as an end-justified tool is more susceptible to instrumentalization and overlooks what they call 'inner transformation' as a crucial element for sustaining positive change: 'the development of relations of empathy, what geographer Paul Cloke (2002, p. 591) calls 'a sense for the other which is emotional, connected, and committed' (Schmid and Taylor Aiken, 2023: 5).

Obviously, large scales have their advantages, but it is important to question the assumption that they are always the most optimal choice. Scale is not about small being the best option either. It is rather about taking into account different principles other than efficiency, such as elegance, judgment, and presence (Fleming, 2016). However, Fleming contends that there are valid reasons for giving priority to smaller scales. And at the same time, acknowledging with Tsing that not everything can be scaled, and that non-scalability, while not necessarily positive *per se*, allows diversity, both biological and cultural, to flourish: it is 'where the logic of scalability fails, that the non-scalable emerge and are made visible. Non-scalable projects, Tsing emphasizes, deserve attention, not because they are necessarily better than the scalable ones, but because they embody the kinds of transformative and mutualistic relations that scalability erases' (Pfothenauer, Laurent, Papageorgiou, and Stilgoe, 2022: 7).

4:4 Transformative Social and Solidarity Economy

Now that I have critically assessed the implications of different conceptions of impact, innovation and scaling, I can finally turn to the concept of the *Transformative Social and Solidarity Economy* (TSSE).

The need to refer to the concept of transformative change was prompted by the impact of the multiple crises we're experiencing, the challenges of replacing 'Business as Usual' as well as 'the ambitious aspirational language of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)' (Utting, 2018: 1).

As Utting (2018: 4) reminds us, not everything that is transformative is necessarily positive, while significant gains can also be made through incrementalism. However, I want to build here on a specific conceptualization of 'transformative' in relation to the Social and Solidarity Economy precisely because 'as the SSE agenda enters the policy arena, it is not so much the scenario of deep structural change that tends to prevail. SSE policies tend to be accommodated within pre-existing policy frameworks and institutional cultures that are more conducive to incrementalism. As this occurs, the SSE agenda tends to be diluted or distorted, policy rhetoric is not matched in terms of resource allocation, and attention is diverted from the root causes of exclusionary and unsustainable development'.

With this in mind, the elements of transformative change as I understand them are as follows. Table 1 contrasts both transformative change and the mainstream conceptualizations of change. The rationale driving transformative change is nested in social needs based on the local context. The actors involved are those primarily affected by the identified problems, according to a bottom-up logic. The content of change revolves around the promotion of solidarity, reciprocity and care; the pace of change is not abused by the need for speed and urgency, but is negotiated according to the needs of the actors and the context. The direction of change, while certainly value-oriented, is not predetermined but always open-ended, as social needs, capabilities, technologies, and the environment are inherently changing. The modernist presumption of being able to 'know everything' is overcome. Finally, the justification of the process itself does not come from outside, from the realm of 'science' or experts, or dictated by pure necessity, but is based on self-reflection, awareness, and 'inner transformation'.

Table 1. Elements of Transformative Change (Transformative and Mainstream)

Elements of change	Transformative approach	Mainstream approach
<i>Rationale</i>	Social needs based on local context	Universal needs
<i>Actors</i>	Individuals, communities, collective organizations and institutions	Experts, companies, individuals, government
<i>Content</i>	Solidarity, mutualism, care	Preference satisfaction
<i>Pace</i>	Negotiated	Speed-based
<i>Direction</i>	Open-ended	Predefined
<i>Justification</i>	Self-reflective	Coming from experts (nudging)

In fact, a transformative process entails a 'politics of becoming', 'where subjects are made anew through engaging with others' Gibson-Graham (2003: 67). As perfectly captured by Gibson-Graham (2003: 67): 'This transformative process involves cultivating generosity in the place of hostility and suspicion. But such affective predispositions are not displaced easily, which means that the process involves waiting as well as cultivating'.

Inspired by the available literature (Utting, 2015; Utting, 2016; Utting, 2018; Hu et al. 2013; Newey, 2017; Darby and Chatterton, 2019; Hossein, 2019; Smith and McKittrick, 2010; Longhurst et al. 2016; Loh and Shear, 2022; North et al. 2020; RIPESS, 2015; Marques, 2014; Salustri, 2019) and by the principles outlined in the *Manifesto for Transformative Social Innovation* (2017),⁶¹ I propose non-binding assumptions about the transformative conditions and effects of SSE initiatives. In particular, SSE has the potential to be transformative when:

- It is supported by an enabling regulatory and policy environment.
- Fosters the development of proper competencies, assets, and skills.
- Is linked to other groups and social movements that share its interests and values.⁶²

⁶¹ <https://tsimanifesto.org/>.

⁶² Poignantly, Avelino (2019: 216) poses the question: 'How can social 'impact' entrepreneurs like the members of the Impact Hub, community initiatives such as ecovillages and participatory democracy initiatives such as participatory

- Allows for democratic governance and processes.
- Is not utilized as a justification for budget cuts and public service outsourcing (Avelino et al., 2019: 203).

Given the risks associated with mainstreaming SSE (Utting, 2016), it is crucial to scrutinize over time the precondition for TSSE: that no SSE initiative is directly linked to, justified, or promoted by budget cuts in social welfare spending, austerity measures, or any other equivalent regressive and conservative policies.

Likewise, I suggest the following assumptions about the effects of transformative SSE practices. SSE is transformative if:

- It specifically addresses social needs, fosters solidarity relationships that go beyond market mechanisms.
- Addresses roots and symptoms of inequalities.
- Uses 'tactical scaling'.
- And promotes counter-hegemonic narratives and practices.

These assumptions are suggestive rather than prescriptive and open-ended rather than definitive. Additionally, the boundaries between conditions and effects are not straightforward but rather porous.

A final note on scaling. In SSE literature, there is a reference to 'integrative scaling up' as 'the question of whether SSE can be scaled up and sustained while retaining its core values and objectives' (Utting, 2015: 3). 'Integrative scaling up' is considered to have several dimensions: *horizontal scaling*, 'i.e. the multiplication of numerous, often small-scale, activities at the grass-roots level or in specific sectors'; *vertical scaling*, 'as in the case of individual organisations and enterprises that grow significantly in terms of the scale of economic activity and membership, associate in

budgeting, cooperate to develop enough countervailing power to significantly challenge the existing power of unsustainable and harmful public-private partnerships in, for example, energy, agriculture, transport, housing and health care? To answer that question, we full-heartedly support the call to bring together what has long been separated, namely enterprises and social movement'.

networks or move up value chains'; *transversal scaling*, 'when SSE expands across sectors and becomes an engine for local economic and social development, and a countervailing power to business and political elites' (Utting, 2015: 4). For reasons explained in the previous session, I prefer to refer to 'tactical scaling', emphasizing the need to negotiate opposition and diversity, dominance and difference, and urgency and patience (Schmid and Taylor Aiken, 2023: 6). As Schmid and Taylor Aiken (2023: 6) argue: 'Tactical scaling' here, means community organizing engaging with amplificatory projects, on a tactical basis—not as an end in itself.

Chapter 2

On Collapsing the Distinction between Epistemology and Ontology: A Discussion on the Selection of Case Studies

By accepting that how we represent the world contributes to *enacting* that world we collapse the distinction between epistemology and ontology. Reading for economic difference is a thinking practice, a research method *and* an intervention in making worlds. It is a practice that needs careful cultivation within a scholarly environment in which strong theory is preferred. But the rewards of reading for economic difference are many. The nature of economic identity and dynamics of change become an open-ended empirical question, not a structural imperative. This allows for a different imaginary in which economic possibility proliferates and situates the researcher in a responsible position with respect to what stories she tells.

(Gibson-Graham, 2020: 483-484)

I'm just feeling more and more like the academic institution is this kind of, you know, is this very powerful way of accumulating knowledge but it feels like this sort of disembodied brain that's like just floating up there like acquiring knowledge for the sake of acquiring knowledge without, you know, without thinking through the impact on the real world and the impact on practical challenges, huge scale challenges that we're facing with increasing urgency.

(Ben Knight, *Self-Organizing Community Democracy for the Internet Age*)⁶³

For her, I am the one who 'crosses the bridge' to work with the community organisation, which, she argues, makes me different. This comment was the turning point for my fieldwork and my scholarship. It made me realise how the community perceives academics and, more importantly, reminded me of the urgent and pressing need to be more relevant for the actors who already do things within their own capacities to tackle challenges and change society through their day-to-day practices. I was urged to reconsider the limits of my participant observation (and my role as an academic) if I wanted to go beyond my comfort zone of 'reading and writing' and do more – literally and metaphorically 'crossing the bridge', getting out of echo chambers,

⁶³ Speech given by Ben Knight, co-founder of Loomio, at the 2015 Bioneers Annual Conference. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJnjTd9u4zg&t=623s>.

and ideally leaving behind the anxieties of being an academic that feed the neoliberal academy imposing rankings, assessments, careerism and individualism (Pullen and Rhodes, 2018; Ruth et al., 2018).

(Alakavuklar, 2023: 5-6)

In this chapter, I will present the empirical research carried out with four SSE entities in the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region in northern Italy between March 2022 and June 2023.

From August 2022 to March 2023, I served as a Visiting Fellow at Western Sydney University under the supervision of Professor Stephen Healy. This enabled me to work more closely with the Community Economies Research Network (CERN),⁶⁴ which I joined in June 2022.

In Italy, after the 2008 crisis, there has not been a reaction to austerity policies comparable to other peripheral EU countries such as Spain and Greece, which elsewhere have led to considerable social and economic experimentation (Vavarousis & Kallis, 2017). At the same time, SSE in Italy draws partly from the long tradition of the cooperative movement, partly from the experience of alternative economic practices such as fair trade, solidarity purchasing groups, to name a few, which we can consider as expressions of political consumerism.⁶⁵ Recently, a new form of enterprise called 'social enterprise' (Legislative Decree 155/06 replaced by Legislative Decree 112/17), whose practical application is still doubtful, has been introduced into the legal framework. For reasons explained above, it is not easy to estimate the value of SSE in Italy, although it is emerging as a paradigm and its relevance can no longer be ignored (Borzaga et al. 2022).

Thus far, the focus has been on various individual elements of its diverse universe, including social cooperatives, associations, and social enterprises. These entities were recently consolidated under

⁶⁴ <https://www.communityeconomies.org/>.

⁶⁵ Paltrinieri writes about it: 'Political consumerism goes hand in hand with the progressive politicization of the market, that is, with the attempt to make this institution a place where the existing balances between producers and consumers can be changed (Micheletti, Follesdal, Stolle, 2004). It is substantiated by individualized collective action and represents an alienated form of participation that identifies in the market, and not in society and in the traditional forms of politics, its locus and in the actors, first and foremost the companies, even if we cannot limit ourselves to them, the targets of its action'. Paltrinieri (2008: 71). [Translation is mine]

Legislative Decree 117/2017 in the Third Sector.⁶⁶ Mutual cooperatives are normally treated separately. Borzaga et al. (2022) were the first to unify the analysis of its components, making a valuable attempt to create a more comprehensive and realistic picture of its significance. Thus, they advocate for the need for a satellite account of the social economy.

Their study highlights the growth of the sector, especially after the 2008 economic crisis (14% growth in terms of organizations and 8,8% growth in terms of employment from 2011 to 2017) and concludes: 'The most important aspect that the data reveal is the pervasiveness of social economy organizations in practically all sectors of the Italian economic system, with a significant contribution along the agribusiness chain, in more labor-intensive activities and in services of general interest. Especially in the latter case, the weight of the social economy is evident, with a particularly important contribution in the provision of welfare services, not only by social cooperatives, but also by other social economy organizations (associations, foundations), which are usually treated separately, underestimating their overall contribution to the sector' (Borzaga et al., 2022: 34).⁶⁷

Section One: Specificities of the research context

In particular, the Emilia-Romagna region, traditionally endowed with a high level of social capital (Rettaroli & Zurla, 2013), has seen a multiplication of SSE experiences, not only in the welfare sector, but also in agriculture, food distribution and small-scale production. For this reason, it seems to be an interesting case to study. It is also worth noting that Emilia-Romagna is one of the regions with the highest number of cases of companies rescued in cooperative form, often referred to as worker buyouts.⁶⁸ The Region has recognized this heritage with the introduction of the Regional Law of 23 July 2014, n. 19, "Norme per la promozione e il sostegno dell'economia solidale" (i.e. "Norms for the promotion and support of the solidarity economy").

⁶⁶ The Third Sector Code, Legislative Decree 117/2017, is one of the pillars of the so-called Third Sector Reform that began in 2016 and represents the organic collection of regulations that affect it.

⁶⁷ Translation is mine.

⁶⁸ <https://www.cfi.it/workers-buyout.php>.

As we read in the report on the social economy in Emilia-Romagna: 'Social enterprises have developed a variety of recognitions in the different ecosystems in which they are embedded, understood as networks and links with entities, institutions and individuals, which influence performance and dynamics affecting them. Social enterprise ecosystems are mainly based on two pillars (European Commission, 2016): public policies that recognize, regulate and support these organizations, with the aim of reinforcing their development; the ability of citizens to self-organize, which allows the birth and development of social enterprises "from below" (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2018: 32).⁶⁹

Bologna is described as a city where different traditions and ideologies coexist and shape an urban landscape in ambivalent and often contradictory ways: from neoliberal tendencies to municipalist socialist traditions and social movements (Giovanardi & Silvagni, 2021; Marrone & Peterlongo, 2020). Bologna is also an example of the so-called *Emilian Model*, recognized for its solid tradition of civic and cooperative movements combined with market-oriented capitalist elements.

In recent years, local governments have introduced new attempts to reinvigorate citizen participation in local decision-making, with controversial effects (Bianchi 2018). It has done so by using the concept of commons as well as the social economy.

Section Two: Case studies selection from a practitioner perspective

After mapping SSE in the urban context of Bologna, I selected my case studies from specific entry points.

Since SSE is by definition a heterogeneous phenomenon, composed of formal and informal actors, with more or less defined legal forms, based on voluntary and paid work, monetary and non-monetary transactions, it is appropriate to limit the unit of analysis in order to make the research more effective. In particular, my attention will be focused on SSE initiatives that can be qualified as enterprises, i.e. as actors that *also* operate in the market and are able to generate some form of income.

⁶⁹ Translation is mine.

Without detracting from the many forms of SSE that enrich the social capital of territories, even if they cannot be monetized, and perhaps for this very reason, I will focus my attention on forms of enterprise in the strict sense. This is because it seems to me that the challenge of transformation is particularly relevant here. But again, the result is a diversification of the very concept of enterprise. In fact, all these experiences are hybrid organizations and combine different economic principles (reciprocity, redistribution, market exchange), thus contributing to diversify the practice of enterprising.

Another entry point for my choice is to study SSE organizations that do not provide welfare services⁷⁰ and operate in different sectors (food, agriculture, delivery, urban regeneration) to highlight the existence of a diverse SSE and its relevance to the overall economy, thus challenging the mainstream narrative.

In fact, there is an extensive literature that focuses mainly on SSE as service and welfare provision – a specific sector of the economy – and on social cooperatives – a specific organizational and legal form.⁷¹ This reinforces a narrow version of SSE as a tool for targeting specific population groups. Again, my focus is instead on multiple and diverse economic practices as ethical negotiations of our interdependence.

Against this background, I selected four case studies for my research.

- 1) *Arvaia*: first CSA (community-supported agriculture) in Bologna (2013)
- 2) *Camilla*: first food coop in Bologna and Italy (2018)
- 3) *Il Passo della Barca*: first urban community coop in Bologna (2021)
- 4) *Consegne Etiche*: first prototype of ethical delivery platform in Bologna and Italy (2020)

Camilla⁷² and Arvaia⁷³ are related to what have been sometimes called 'alternative food networks' (Calvário & Kallis, 2017), trying to provide access for people to healthy, organic, local and ethical food production and consumption.

⁷⁰ There is one partial exception. I will discuss its relevance later.

⁷¹ See, for example, Defourny & Nyssens, 2012; Galera & Borzaga, 2009; Osservatorio ISNET, 2022; Borzaga et al, 2017.

⁷² <https://camilla.coop/>.

⁷³ <https://www.arvaia.it/>.

Il Passo della Barca⁷⁴ is a community coop created in the Barca neighborhood to promote urban regeneration, services to local residents and families, and support community economy.

Consegne Etiche⁷⁵ is a project promoted by *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* and the Municipality of Bologna, involving two local cooperatives and a network of commercial activities and public libraries. Its goal is to create an ethical and cooperative alternative to delivery platforms. During the pandemic, it began its activity by delivering 1700 face masks to local residents in need. This particular case differs from the others in that it did not start as a new initiative, but rather as a prototype supported by the Urban Innovation Foundation in partnership with two local cooperatives (one of which ceased operations in 2021 for reasons unrelated to the project). In addition, the original goal of promoting an alternative to exploitative delivery platforms was not achieved, leading to a redefinition and reduction of the project. For these reasons, this case did not provide a suitable environment for the application of participatory approaches. However, it remains a 'limit' case study that is useful in highlighting the critical issues facing SSE, even in a context considered as favorable as that of Bologna.

I chose them for several reasons. Here the selection is obviously not based on random sampling, it is rather information-oriented.⁷⁶

First, they are pioneering SSE organizations in their field, addressing social needs with transformative goals, which is relevant in terms of social innovation.

Indeed, the selected organizations address social needs such as food production, consumption and distribution, urban renewal, and the provision of goods and services through cooperative, sustainable, and solidarity-based initiatives. In this sense, they seem to be different from

⁷⁴ <https://www.ilpassodellabarca.it/>.

⁷⁵ <https://consegnetiche.it/>.

⁷⁶ As Flyvbjerg (2006: 229) clearly emphasizes: 'When the objective is to achieve the greatest possible amount of information on a given problem or phenomenon, a representative case or a random sample may not be the most appropriate strategy. This is because the typical or average case is often not the richest in information. Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied. In addition, from both an understanding-oriented and an action-oriented perspective, it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur. Random samples emphasizing representativeness will seldom be able to produce this kind of insight; it is more appropriate to select some few cases chosen for their validity'.

mainstream, profit-oriented economic organizations, both in the way they operate and in the effects they produce.

Secondly, the legal status of these experiences is not clearly regulated as they are innovative and borderline. This reinforces the argument that we need to broaden the concept of the economy, particularly the social and solidarity economy, as *diverse*. Neither *Camilla* nor *Arvaia* are formally recognized as social enterprises or third sector organizations. They are definitely part of the SSE because they are non-profit, have social and environmental objectives, are self-managed organizations, and also use non-monetary transactions.

Food co-ops, CSAs, and community co-ops, as well as cooperative platforms, operate within and beyond the boundaries of existing legal frameworks in Italy, as there are no specific laws governing them.⁷⁷

Finally, but no less important, my personal knowledge and experience have guided my choice. I have been living in Bologna since 2007, first as a student at the University of Bologna, then as a social educator and finally as a researcher. In recent years, I have been personally active (both as a paid worker and as a volunteer) in several associations, collectives, and cooperatives in Bologna related to SSE, both as a paid worker and as a volunteer. I have first-hand experience of the challenges, contradictions, and tension points involved in such contexts. Additionally, I am familiar with the emotional and psychological implications of these experiences.

More relevant to this study, I've been a member of the food coop *Camilla* since 2019, and after a series of conversations with a founding member of *Arvaia* ('If you want to understand how the cooperative works, what better way than to become a member?'),⁷⁸ I decided to become a member of the CSA in March 2022. To be sure, I had thought about it in the past, so the decision was not a pretext for my research. This personal change is already a sign of how deeply practice and knowledge production are intertwined.

⁷⁷ This is not surprising given the social dynamics of bottom-up innovation. To take an example from the Italian context, the first social cooperative was founded in Trieste on December 16, 1972 ([Cooperativa Lavoratori Uniti Franco Basaglia Società Cooperativa Sociale](#)), while the law on social cooperatives came almost two decades later (Law 381/1991).

⁷⁸ The informal exchange took place on March 18, 2022 at *Arvaia*'s premises (Via Olmetola 16, Bologna).

Given the participatory nature of my research, being an active member allowed me to better understand the workings of these organizations and be more effective in actually conducting the research. I am also aware of the potential limitations of this condition.

In the next section, I will further explore my positionality in this research through an overview of methodological aspects.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology or How to Deal with Miscommunication, Contingency, and Particularity

Today [...] we have no lack of data, and moreover, FAT GAS BAM (simple mnemonics for Facebook Apple Twitter Google Amazon Samsung Baidu Alibaba Microsoft) manipulate more in a single hour than academia in ten years. What we lack is knowledge, insight, sense, things that are still inaccessible to the machines to which we have tried to reduce humans. When it comes to extracting and manipulating data, a computer can do it all by itself.⁷⁹

(Aberkane, 2017: 244)

No matter what reason or process has gathered people together in a solidarity enterprise, members must learn how to work together, sharing decisions and undergoing significant behavioural, cognitive, social and cultural change. Universities can play an important role in sharing this journey, which involves learning along the way.

(Alves et al, in North & Cato, 2017: 138)

Finally, there is the process of writing. In Foucault's lexicon, writing is an ethical practice, a way that the self relates to itself. It is an intellectual discipline that allows us to consider "the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think . . . seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (1997, xxxv). For us writing is a practice of forming the hopeful subject—a left subject on the horizon of social possibility.

(Gibson-Graham, 2003: 71)

Following Flyvbjerg (2006) and Yin (1981), case studies have been largely undervalued in the social sciences while they hold great potential for their advancement. Case studies provide context-dependent knowledge 'that seems more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories

⁷⁹ Translation is mine.

and universals' (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 224); are useful for generalizations and also for finding “black swans”; are useful for generating and testing hypotheses; can help to falsify preconceived ideas.

Section One: Research question and paradigm

Increasing complexity and uncertainty require an experimental and open approach (Roelvink, in Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). For this reason, I decided to experiment with methods and tools, combining action research with document analysis, digital and analog, trying to be adaptive and responsive to inputs from the field as well as stimuli from an ongoing literature review.

Considering the significant challenges that we face today, it is essential to examine SSE initiatives' contribution to social change not only theoretically but also through field research. This would enable the evaluation of when, how, and why SSE initiatives promote social change.

This research project aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship between SSE and transformative change in a specific context. It is inspired by the action research approach.

I refer to Greenwood & Levin's definition of action research as 'a way of working in the field, of utilizing multiple research techniques aimed at enhancing change and generating data for scientific knowledge production. AR rests on processes of collaborative knowledge development and action design involving local stakeholders as full partners in mutual learning processes' (2007: 1).

In this way, the whole process is configured as a social construction resulting from the dialectical interaction between different actors (researcher, social entrepreneurs, volunteers, etc.).⁸⁰ In this sense, the return of the research results is a fundamental moment of exchange between the participants.

Indeed, especially through a participatory approach, research can lead to a different understanding of the social value created by SSE, beyond economic maximization.

⁸⁰ As Minardi (2019: 36-37) writes: 'Social intervention is not configured as the explication of an enlightened-rational design of the social scientist in society (or on a segment of it), but rather as a social process, in which subjects, meanings attributed to actions, and actions themselves are progressively defined; this process, on the one hand, modifies a present social situation and, on the other, contributes to producing new social structures with corresponding systems of regulation and social communication. [...] first of all, the definition of the field of intervention changes, that is, the notion of the social environment on which the sociologist intervenes; it is a context that is not indifferent and neutral, but interactive, capable of influencing the same strategy of action of the operator, capable of adapting to the change induced by the intervention according to unforeseen paths and solutions'. [Translation is mine]

Given the nature of my object of study, its goals and *ethos*, I believe that a deliberate pursuit of a research practice that involves participation, action and reflexive inquiry is well suited to a deeper understanding of it.

Recognizing with Wadsworth (1998: 2) that "Participatory action research' is a description of social research per se (albeit social research which is more *conscious* of its underlying assumptions, and collectivist nature, its action consequences and its driving values). It faces numerous barriers to its practice which mean that, even when we think we might be doing 'it', we often have our doubts! I have come to conclude that pretty much all of the research we are involved in, is more or less an approximation in the direction of 'it'. That is, every piece of research is more or less participatory. It more or less enables action as part of the process. And it all involves more or less critical reflexive, skeptical and imaginative inquiry'.

In this context, my affiliation and commitment with two of the case studies can be seen as enriching the research process. As Wadsworth stresses, values not only guide action research, but are an essential component of its success.

What 'drives' participatory action research, like any research, is our 'need to know' in order to bring about desired change. We often shorthand term this our 'values' - which are our precious images of valued states or ways of being. Rather than seeing this holding-of-values as subjective and potentially a source of bias, the strength of the values we hold will determine the power and direction of our research efforts. Two key additional factors which will shape what we do is the strength of our imaginations (to theorise more creatively, deeply and imaginatively) and our scepticism (to keep our theory closely in relationship to the practices we are observing). Like any other research, the critical moment is that of 'discovery' or rather: 'invention' of a different and better way of seeing and understanding our realities. (Wadsworth, 1998: 10)

In this case, the knowledge-making process also provides a rationale for a participatory case study approach. The research aims to co-produce an understanding of the nature of social change in SSE practices and their social value, which necessitates participation in the projects (Greenwood & Levin, 2007: 116-119). Therefore, it is crucial to openly negotiate with practitioners the terms of their participation in the research process. The inevitable presence of bias is acknowledged. Addressing this requires honesty and transparency, both within and outside the field, about the

goals, limitations, demands, and potential benefits. In other words, it requires a clear understanding of the 'psychological contract' within which the research takes place.

The research process is not as linear and smooth as it is often portrayed. Systems biologist Uri Alon (2009: 2-3) outlines two research schemas in science that are applicable to social science research as well. 'A common schema is expressed in the way papers are written: one starts at point A, which is the question, and proceeds by the shortest path to point B, the answer. There is a danger, if one accepts this schema, to regard students as a means to an end (an arrow to B). Furthermore, for those that hold this schema, any deviation from the path (experiments that don't work, students that become depressed, etc.) is intolerable. Deviation causes stress because of the cognitive dissonance between reality and the mental schema. However, one can adopt a second schema, one that resembles more the course of most projects. As before, one starts at point A and moves toward the goal at point B. Soon enough, things move off course, and the path meanders and loops back. Experiments stop working, all assumptions seem wrong, and nothing makes sense. The researcher has entered a phase linked with negative emotions that may be called "the cloud." Then, in the midst of confusion, one senses a new problem in the materials at hand. Let's call this new problem C. If C is more interesting and feasible than B, one can choose to go toward it. After a few more detours, C is reached. The researchers can pause to celebrate before taking time to think about the next problem'.

Moreover, as Alon points out, the emotional and subjective elements implicit in the research process are, by definition, silenced. This is because the culture of science sees scientific knowledge as objective and rational, as opposed to the subjective and emotional (*"when you label something as objective and rational, automatically the other side is subjective and emotional"*). The myth of science, says Alon, is that *"the doing of science, what we do everyday to get to that knowledge, is also only objective and rational"*. For this reason, emotional and subjective elements are seen as *"threatening to science, and that's why we don't talk about it"*.⁸¹

⁸¹ Uri Alon, "We have to change the culture of science to do better research", 2013, TED video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVoz_pEeV8I.

The use of AI technology and narrative further complicates matters, and it's unclear how this will ultimately play out. On one hand, the hype about AI is just the latest manifestation of a recurring positivist utopia of Western epistemology,⁸² based on:

the assumption that given sufficient time and sufficiently accurate instruments, it should be possible to make models and reality correspond entirely. According to its most extreme avatars, one should not only be able to produce a complete description of any object in the physical world, but—given the predictable nature of physical “laws”—be able to predict precisely what would happen to it under equally precisely understood conditions. Since no one has ever been able to do anything of the sort, the position has a tendency to generate its opposite: a kind of aggressive nihilism (nowadays most often identified with various species of post-structuralism) which at its most extreme argues that since one cannot come up with such perfect descriptions, it is impossible to talk about “reality” at all.

(Graeber, 2001: 51)

On the other hand, advocates overlook what DeMartino dubs the epistemic 'paradox of knowledge expansion', which involves the expansion of knowledge alongside 'the domain of *salient ignorance*' (DeMartino, 2022: 61).⁸³ And this is, altogether, inherent to the process of knowledge creation.⁸⁴

In this respect, there are many obstacles along the way. Research moves in fits and starts, alternating stasis with sudden acceleration and unexpected opportunities.⁸⁵ It is therefore very important to

⁸² A specific example can be found in the field of social physics (see Pentland, 2015 for an illustration).

⁸³ Regarding AI DeMartino (2022: 61) writes: 'AI, for instance, raises deep uncertainties about the consequences of transferring human “reasoning” and functions to nonhuman entities. AI also necessarily introduces normative uncertainty. When and how should the new technology be used, and when should it not? Science fiction has long speculated about the nature of machines with AI, about how they can help but also threaten society. Today those questions have moved from science fiction to science proper. As science develops the capacity to devise machines with AI, it also necessarily raises new pressing questions for which it cannot provide definitive answers'.

⁸⁴ The MIT Technology Review lists the ten biggest technology failures of 2023, most of which include AI. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/12/22/1085829/the-worst-technology-failures-of-2023/>.

⁸⁵ As Law (2021: 1) reminds us, '*After Method* [...] explored something that all social researchers know perfectly well: that in practice methods are never clean and tidy and that research perfection cannot be achieved. So the book bridged a gap between a prevalent style of research method moralising on the one hand, and down-to-earth stories about research conduct, mostly drawn from science and technology studies (STS) on the other. For more than thirty years STS had been watching how scientists work in practice and arguing that this had little to do with abstract rules about 'the scientific method'. Instead, they work by crafting practical and intellectual tools for knowing and handling particular, specialist, parts of the world. Those tools were, are, heterogeneous. Embodied skills, educated forms of perception, instruments for sensing, techniques for turning observations into numbers, protocols for coding up, combining and moving findings from one location to others, plus conventions about appropriate literary forms. All of these are embedded in equally necessary social and institutional arrangements, assumptions about authority, and power'.

examine the options available, to abandon what was planned, and to remain open to the new possibilities that open up. To put it with Law (2021: 4):

There can be no formula. Instead, it is more like tinkering. And it is done collectively, in real time, by tinkering with shifting goods and bads (there are many kinds of actors involved, human and otherwise.) This, then, is a model for thinking about social research. Perfection is impossible, but care-ful research is sensitive to changing exigencies, concerns, tensions and forms of othering. It is, yes, uncomfortable. But it is slow, it is iterative, it is modest, and it tries to find ways of holding things together for a moment (Law & Lin, 2020).

Keeping these epistemological considerations in mind during empirical research proved important in staying on track with the research purpose and overcoming challenges. To provide a concrete example, during the selection of case studies for this research, *FairBnb* (the first cooperative platform for sustainable tourism), which was my initial choice but ultimately unavailable, was replaced by *Consegne Etiche*. Ultimately, this decision was more in line with the contextual approach of the research, as all other case studies operate at a local level, while FairBnb operates as a network of nodes in different European cities.

Here, I follow the diverse economies scholarship in abandoning 'control and mastery of the world in favour of a methodology centred on ethics (DeMartino 2013)' (Roelvink, in Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020: 456). For this reason, I would like to acknowledge that my research is necessarily framed from the perspective of a minority world researcher living in the minority world country of Italy, who is personally involved in the SSE movement and shares its values.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ 'Law argues that there is often an assumption that a methodology will provide the researcher with a process to discover the reality of an issue (note that this reality is typically singular). And following the right process serves to 'limit the risks' of getting this reality wrong (Law 2004, p. 9). This assumption relates to the epistemological position of the researcher, that is, how the researcher seeks to understand the world. Epistemological realism lies behind the understanding of methodology as a way to discover and reflect a reality that exists separate from our perception of it. Another common assumption associated with this approach is that we can adequately know and describe a 'singular' world and all the people within it through research (DeMartino 2013; Smith 1999). Critical left scholarship, while often debunking so called 'status quo' research (Harvey 1973), claims to get to the 'root' of social issues, and thus also draws on a kind of epistemological realism for its authority. There are a whole host of Western or minority world assumptions that are often not acknowledged but rather infused with this kind of approach to research; assumptions to do with the rules of doing research and standards of knowledge believed to serve 'mankind' (Law 2004, p. 5; Smith 1999, p. 2)' (Roelvink, in Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020: 453-454).

In a sense, research is always a representation of social worlds, so is ethnography, and as such 'is always an exercise in miscommunication, in which: (a) total control about what is being communicated is impossible and (b) understanding 'what is really going on there' is more a horizon of intelligibility than a potential to be fulfilled. Recognizing this should not stop us and force us to think of knowledge as a total impossibility but rather to push us into three directions: (i) to understand that we are aiming to objectify the words of the others, to borrow what they say and do, and systematize it; (ii) a reflection on the validity of how we construct these encounters as data; and (iii) an opening up of the menu of theoretical options available when doing ethnography. All this results in a reflexive account not of just who we are – as in the diverse versions of positional reflexivity – but rather on a deeper understanding how limited our knowledge is and how our practices can be validated, objectified, and studied. Our knowledge is productive precisely because it is limited, not despite of it!' (Benzecry, 2023: 17).

In this sense, the knowledge produced here is contextual, local, and small-scale. It is filtered through the perspective of a young, white, Western male. However, this does not prevent the exercise of theorizing 'as a constant back-and-forth [...] in which what we aim for is finding out what questions can I answer with the data I have been able to produce?' (Benzecry, 2023: 17). My research can therefore be situated within the post-paradigmatic social science that Flyvbjerg et al. (2012: 20) call *phronesis* as a form of 'knowledge that can challenge power not in theory but in ways that inform real efforts to produce change'.

Recognizing particularity and contingency with Gibson-Graham (2003) is a theoretical strategic move to resignify the local/global dichotomy and to address the always debated question of scale. Recognizing that 'global universals' also emerge from specific contexts and are subject to the movement of history opens up for different possibilities. If practices of care, solidarity, and cooperation are local and therefore considered subordinate to the global dimension (capitalist? neoliberal?), they are in fact happening everywhere, so they are global in that sense. In a way, 'It would be ridiculous to ask whether the powerful work of households and Earth Others could be 'scaled up' for greater effect' (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020: 18). In the concluding chapter, I will return in detail to the problem of generalizing from a context-dependent evaluation.

Finally, it is important to contextualize the research and analysis by discussing the conditions of knowledge production during the PhD. The Covid-19 pandemic inevitably affected the process, making it more difficult to interact with and receive support from the academic community. In addition, conducting research while dealing with precarious income and the need to work part-time to support myself has had a clear impact on my research and writing process. There is increasing concern regarding the mental health and research conditions of doctoral students. Based on existing evidence, we as doctoral students may be at risk of developing common psychiatric disorders (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). Additionally, chronic stress and anxiety can have detrimental effects on cognitive functioning, which can hinder the acquisition and production of knowledge (Schwabe and Wolf, 2010).

Section Two: Methods

I combined methods of participant observation with discourse analysis, participatory workshops, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

As anticipated, a participatory approach was not feasible with *Consegne Etiche*. The project was initiated as a pandemic-specific response, and although it aimed to have a long-term impact on the home delivery sector, it had to curtail its activities due to various challenges. For this reason, and because of the specific nature of the service provided, it was not possible to conduct participant observation or distribute a questionnaire. Therefore, the data collected are based on the Public Assembly on Ethical Delivery that launched the project, internal and official project documents, and a semi-structured interview with a member of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana responsible for the project.

Discourse analysis:

Before beginning fieldwork with the selected case studies, I identified the main organizations in the area that support SSE in terms of funding, research, and promotion. This was done to understand the narratives that circulate around the concept.

Between March and July 2022, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with members of 8 entities that support, research, or fund SSE initiatives in the city of Bologna:

- Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (Foundation for Urban Innovation)⁸⁷
- ISNET⁸⁸
- Forum Economia Solidale Emilia Romagna (Solidarity Economy Forum of Emilia-Romagna)⁸⁹
- Forum Terzo Settore Emilia Romagna (Third Sector Forum of Emilia-Romagna)⁹⁰
- MUG⁹¹
- Fondazione Yunus Italia (formerly Fondazione Grameen Italia)⁹²
- ART-ER (Attractiveness Research Territory Emilia-Romagna Joint Stock Consortium)⁹³
- Metropolitan City of Bologna.⁹⁴

The main questions in the semi-structured interviews were related to critical issues such as:

- Do you share the use of the category Social and Solidarity Economy? Or do you use other terms?
- What opportunities do you see for the SSE in general and in the city of Bologna in particular?
- How does the SSE relate to the mainstream economy? Is it an alternative economic model or a tool to fill the “gaps” left by the state and the market?
- What are the risks, if any, associated with the spread of this model?
- How can the social value produced by SSE be distinguished from marketing and branding?
- What role should/can the public play in relation to SSE?

Participant observation:

⁸⁷ <https://fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/en/>.

⁸⁸ <http://www.impresasociale.net/>.

⁸⁹ <https://economiasolidale.net/emilia-romagna>.

⁹⁰ <http://www.forum3er.it/>.

⁹¹ <https://www.mugbo.it/>.

⁹² <https://fondazioneyunus.it/>.

⁹³ <https://en.art-er.it/>.

⁹⁴ <https://www.cittametropolitana.bo.it/portale/>.

I conducted over 100 hours of participant observation from March 2022 to July 2022 and again from March 2023 to June 2023 in the three case studies Camilla, Arvaia, and Il Passo della Barca. In particular, I participated in their general assemblies, daily activities, and public events.

Semi-structured interviews:

I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with case study members. With founding members, the main issues discussed revolve around the above assumptions about transformative SSE practices.

In terms of conditions:

- How did the project come about?
- Was the regulatory and policy framework conducive to its creation?
- Did it receive external support?
- Has it developed the necessary expertise, assets, skills?
- Are there links with other entities in the field (associations, movements, etc.)?
- How important is the dimension of democratic participation?
- Is it in any way related to the reduction of public services?

In terms of effects:

- What social needs does it address?
- How does it build bonds of solidarity among people beyond the market mechanism?
- Does it address the issue of inequality?
- How does the project relate to the concept of scaling?
- What narratives and practices does it use? Can they be defined as counter-hegemonic?

The following are questions discussed with voluntary members:

- Why did you decide to become a member of the cooperative?
- Have you had similar experiences before?
- What are the goals of the co-op?

- How does the neighborhood/area benefit from the presence and activities of the cooperative?
- How has being a member of the cooperative changed you?

Lastly, questions for working members are:

- Why did you decide to become a Working Member?
- How do you rate your work/life balance?
- Is it different from other jobs you have held? If so, how is it different?
- How has being a member of the cooperative changed you?

Theory of Change participatory workshops:

Between May and June 2022, I conducted 6 participatory workshops of more than 2 hours each using the Theory of Change (ToC) with some members of the Camilla food cooperative. I will elaborate on the ToC in the last section of the chapter. For now, suffice it to say that I used it as a strategic evaluation tool to open a discussion about social change and social value with the members of the cooperative. Here I refer to evaluation as a pedagogical process in the Freirean sense (Patton, 2017). Although the Theory of Change is an evaluation tool that can be used in different ways, here I recall with James (2011: 2) that 'Freirean thinking underpins much of theory of change. He advocated for combining theory and action – 'theory in use' – to create social change: getting people to reflect on and name their reality was in itself an empowering process'.

Recruitment mode: Google form shared via the cooperative's newsletter and Telegram chat. Newsletter: Total membership 627; Telegram: 306 registered members; No. of respondents to the form: 13; Total number of participants: 10.

No. participants in the first meeting: 8

No. participants in second meeting: 5

No. participants in the third meeting: 8

No. participants in the fourth meeting: 7

No. participants in the fifth meeting: 3

No. participants in the sixth meeting: 3

The workshops were conducted experimenting with the use of Mentimeter,⁹⁵ a web application that provides an instant visual representation of ideas, positions, perceptions, etc., allowing you to engage and interact with people live through the use of smartphones. Mentimeter is increasingly used in educational contexts and its effects on the learning process are beginning to be evaluated (Mayhew et al., 2020; Gokbulut, 2020), especially in English-speaking countries, but to my knowledge it has not been used in social research contexts. The overall experience was positive in that it supported the process of facilitating the workshops. In particular, the visual representation of opinions seems to be effective, the app captures the attention and curiosity of participants, encourages participation while maintaining privacy. It also allows for reporting and storing data directly on the computer, making it much easier to retain and analyze. At the same time, experimentation with digital tools can only be useful if it is done consciously. Group work, writing on post-it notes and on the blackboard, physical proximity and the direct exchange of glances and opinions continue to play a central role. In fact, the separation of mind and body runs the risk of otherwise severely limiting the validity of the results.

Each workshop was audio-recorded. The results of the workshop were recorded in a detailed report. I have co-constructed with participants a Theory of Change for Camilla, the related results chain and possible impact indicators.

Questionnaires:

After the ToC workshops, I created a questionnaire to have a broader collection of data on social change and social value in combination with socio-demographic information on case study members. Questionnaires were administered to three case study organizations, namely Arvaia, Camilla and Il Passo della Barca. The questionnaires are as similar as possible, but also adapted to

⁹⁵ <https://www.mentimeter.com/>.

the specificities of each organization. In the case of the Camilla food coop, the questionnaire was developed based on the reflections of the workshops. In all cases, the questionnaires take directly into account the input and feedback of the participants with whom I was in contact.

The process of action research provided the insight to gather feedback and improve the questionnaire design, as well as increase participation to make it more relevant to organizations. Il Passo della Barca suggested that the questionnaire could be a useful addition to their reporting, as the cooperative was working on its social report. The contact members of each case study (excluding *Consegne Etiche*) were involved in co-constructing the questionnaires to incorporate the actors' perspective in the design, in accordance with the participatory nature of the research process.

Unfortunately, the response rates vary greatly between the case studies (refer to Table 2), so their significance is mostly indicative. A tentative explanation could be the degree of novelty of Il Passo della Barca, which probably affects the enthusiasm and active participation of the members, compared to Camilla and Arvaia.

Table 2. Case Study Questionnaires Information

	Arvaia	Camilla	Il Passo della Barca
<i>Members (N)</i>	300	655	112
<i>Dissemination</i>	Slack; Whatsapp chats of the distribution points	Newsletter, Telegram	Whatsapp, text message
<i>Respondents (N)</i>	27	59	69
<i>Response rate (%)</i>	9%	9%	61,6%
<i>Data authorization (%)</i>	96,3%	98,3%	94,2%

It is worth noting that those who completed the questionnaires were more likely to be people with stronger ties to the organization. On the one hand, it is obviously crucial to hear the views of those who are actively working on projects. On the other hand, this makes it more difficult to get the perspective of members who may be more critical, dissatisfied, or less involved in the project.

Return of questionnaire results:

I presented the results of the questionnaire at the general meeting of Camilla on April 4, 2023 and at the general meeting of Il Passo della Barca on April 16, 2023. In this context, I received feedback from the members of the cooperatives and this stimulated an exchange of ideas. In the case of Camilla, during the General Assembly many proposals were made to address the perceived challenges of the project, namely uneven participation of members and economic sustainability. Although it is not easy to determine which actions were directly stimulated by my presentation, a plausible link is the creation of a new working group within the food cooperative to investigate the reasons for the lack of member participation. In the case of Il Passo della Barca, given the discussion on how to effectively monitor so-called social impacts, I proposed to organize a workshop on impact evaluation with interested members. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to find a suitable date.

Figure 4. Presentation of questionnaire results at the general meetings of *Il Passo della Barca* on April 16, 2023 (top), and *Camilla - Emporio di Comunità* on April 4, 2023 (bottom)



Document analysis:

I collected various documents available online, directly from the case study participants, or on platforms such as Facebook: for example, organizational bylaws, financial statements, social accounts, event presentations, pictures, posts, and videos.

Analysis:

Initially, the interviews were transcribed using Sonix software and subsequently translated with the support of DeepL.

All the data, including interviews, notes, questionnaires, and documents, underwent qualitative analysis using Nvivo and Atlas.ti software. Following an in-depth reading of the data, the texts were coded. Initially, Nvivo software was used for manual coding, following my interpretation of the data and its relevance to my research objectives. Later, an exploratory analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software to gain insights from artificial intelligence and assess its effectiveness in the context of qualitative analysis.

I analyzed the questionnaire results and prepared concise presentations to share with the case study members. I revisited the material to verify the accuracy of the hypotheses.

During this period, I consulted the literature review to identify any agreement or disagreement with discussions found in the academic literature.

Section Three: Epistemological reflections on the Theory of Change in evaluation

Until social science develops the means to run history multiple times, however, we must accept the fact that the counterfactual yielded by even the most impeccable empirical methods is irreducibly fictitious since it depends on claims about alternative worlds in which the treatment and control groups are in fact identical.

(DeMartino, 2021: 262)

the Heraclitean position, which looks at things in terms of their dynamic potentials, is not a matter of abandoning science but is, rather, the only hope of giving science a solid ontological basis. But it also means that in order to do so, those who wish to make claims to science will have to abandon some of their most ambitious—one is tempted to say, totalitarian, paranoid—dreams of absolute or total knowledge, and accept a certain degree of humility about what it is possible to know. Reality is what one can never know completely. If an object is real, any description we make of it will necessarily be partial and incomplete. That is, indeed, how we can tell it is real. The only things we can hope to know perfectly are ones that exist entirely in our

imaginations. What is true of natural science is all the more true of social science. [...] Here, too, the ultimate message is one of humility: Critical Realists hold that it is possible to preserve the notion of a social reality and, therefore, of a science able to make true statements about it—but only if one abandons the sort of positivist number-crunching that passes for science among most current sociologists or economists, and gives up on the idea that social science will ever be able to establish predictive laws.

(Graeber, 2001: 53)

Simply put, and most unfortunately, current interpretations and applications of the Theory of Change concept have drifted so far from their origins as to render them useless. As inflammatory a statement as that may appear to be, it is also the single biggest and most annoying elephant in the development world's room. And as the development world continues to shift focus from solely philanthropic and development finance funding to self-funded social enterprises and the very trendy impact investing, this elephant has grown well beyond the confines of that room. What was originally a perfectly viable academic concept and school of thought debated and developed by respectable and intelligent academics, has become a trendy, over-used and illogical methodology that has as much value as a postage stamp: it may get a message from A to B, but by design it is not useful or valid beyond that short-term one-off use.

(Vun, 2021: 41)

The expression *theory of change* emerged in the field of program evaluation, but its origins cannot be traced back to a single organization or author, as it is deeply rooted in theories of social change as well: "theory of change' is nothing new – it is only the idea of using it as a specific approach or tool that is evolving currently' (James, 2011: 2). In a sense, ToC is indebted to Freirian thought (James, 2011) as a form of action research, that is, a constant interplay between theory and practice aimed not only at understanding social realities but also at producing change. Of course, this is not the

only interpretation, and like any concept, ToC is translated and used in different ways (Prinsen and Nijhof, 2015).⁹⁶

GECES⁹⁷ provides a narrow and 'technical' definition of ToC as: 'The means (or causal chain) by which activities achieve outcomes, and use resources (inputs) in doing that, taking into account variables in the service delivery and the freedom of service-users to choose. It forms both a plan as to how the outcome is to be achieved, and an explanation of how it has occurred (explained after the event)' (GECES, 2014: 13).

ActKnowledge, a New York-based independent research organization, one of the first to promote ToC in the field, offers a more precise definition: 'Theory of change is a rigorous yet participatory process whereby groups and stakeholders in a planning process articulate their long-term goals and identify the conditions they believe have to unfold for those goals to be met. These conditions are modeled as desired **outcomes**, arranged graphically in a **causal framework**' (Taplin and Clark, 2012: 1).

ToC is a tool and approach used to evaluate interventions with social or environmental objectives. Notably, it emerged in the Western Anglophone world, primarily in the United States, in the late 1990s to plan development programs (Prinsen and Nijhof, 2015: 236). It is linked to the shift in evaluation discussions marked 'by the abandonment of the primacy of method and the recognition of the role (or primacy) of theory' (Stame, 2016: 48),⁹⁸ and deeply impacted by Carol Weiss's theory-based evaluation. Over the past few decades, ToC has gained increasing attention and is now widely used not only in development aid but also in SSE-related contexts (particularly by NGOs, foundations, and social enterprises), though still predominantly in the Western world. As noted

⁹⁶ According to evaluation expert John Mayne (2017: 155): 'Theories of change (ToCs) are now widely used in evaluations. They are the basis of theory-based evaluations (Coryn, Noakes, Westine, & Schroter 2011; Donaldson, 2007; Funnell & Rogers 2011; Rogers, 2007). As many have noted, the specific models used vary greatly (James, 2011; Valters, 2014; Vogel, 2012) and there is no overall agreement on just what comprises a ToC. Funnell and Rogers (2011, pp. 15–34) discuss the range of terms used and their histories, as does Patton (2008, pp. 336–340). Further, what constitutes a good or solid ToC is not at all clear; the characteristics or criteria of a robust ToC have not been widely discussed'.

⁹⁷ European Commission Expert group on social economy and social enterprises, https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu/social-enterprises/expert-groups_en.

⁹⁸ Translation is mine.

above, there is a strong link between international aid development, welfare state reforms and SSE, particularly in terms of evaluation practices and narratives.

It's worth noting that the phrase itself is rather misleading, and its underlying epistemology has not been discussed in depth. First, if by *theory* we mean 'a plausible or scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena',⁹⁹ then ToC is not a theory at all, and for very good reasons. Indeed, the rationale behind ToC is precisely 'to describe a specific explanation of a specific example' (Mulgan, 2016).¹⁰⁰ And in this context, as Mulgan (2016) notes, the use of the singular is also quite striking: 'All successful models are collections of multiple elements and theories'. Finally, 'Even the word 'of' is misplaced. The purpose of theories of change is to guide action. They are in this sense theories *for* change, rather than *of* change. A theory of change is a backward looking theory in the classic social science sense' (Mulgan, 2016).

What Theory of Change provides is a toolkit for organizations to discuss, monitor, and potentially evaluate their particular outcomes within the context they operate. This can be accomplished in various ways, for different objectives and with varying effects.

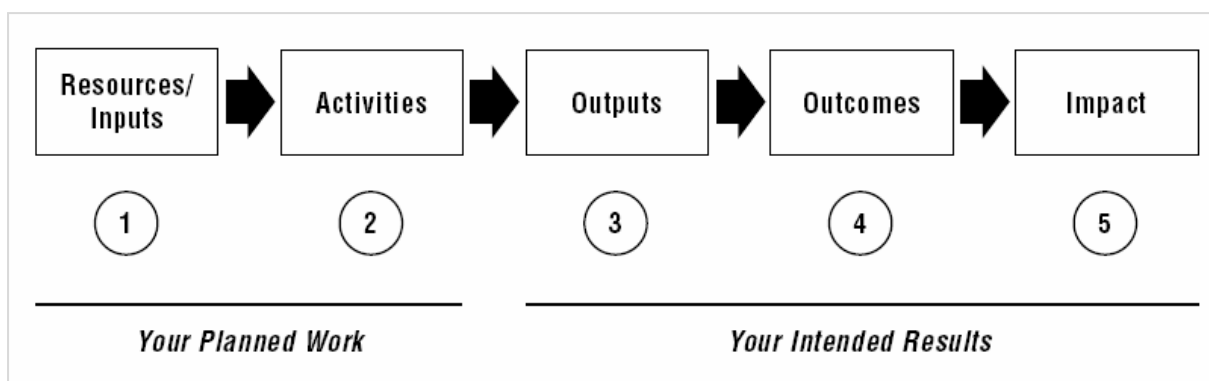
Social change is not linear. Starting from this premise should enable us to abandon mechanistic theories of change and social engineering of all kinds. This problem is now acknowledged by several Theory of Change theorists, most of whom recognize the inherent limitations of the logic model (or logical framework) and any evaluation tool that purports to offer overly simplistic models of change. However, positivist thinking in the (social) sciences, or what Graeber refers to as 'totalitarian, paranoid—dreams of absolute or total knowledge', resurfaces cyclically and manifests in various forms (refer to the AI discourse).

According to Prinsen and Nijhof (2015: 234), 'For more than two decades, the logical framework approach, or logframe, has been the dominant methodology in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of aid programmes' (see Figures 5-6).

⁹⁹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theory>.

¹⁰⁰ Available at: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/blog/whats-wrong-with-theories-of-change/>.

Figure 5. The Basic Logic Model



Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004: 1)¹⁰¹

Figure 6. Typical structure of a Logframe Matrix

Project Description	Indicators	Source of Verification	Assumptions
Overall Objective – The project's contribution to policy or programme objectives (impact)	How the OO is to be measured including Quantity, Quality, Time?	How will the information be collected, when and by whom?	
Purpose – Direct benefits to the target group(s)	How the Purpose is to be measured including Quantity, Quality, Time	As above	If the Purpose is achieved, what assumptions must hold true to achieve the OO?
Results – Tangible products or services delivered by the project	How the results are to be measured including Quantity, Quality, Time	As above	If Results are achieved, what assumptions must hold true to achieve the Purpose?
Activities – Tasks that have to be undertaken to deliver the desired results			If Activities are completed, what assumptions must hold true to deliver the results?

Source: European Commission (2004: 58)¹⁰²

The main criticisms of this model are twofold. Firstly, the 'linear cause-effect thinking' often assumes rationality and predictability, neglecting the intricate nature of change processes. Secondly, the use of the logframe is viewed as a tool for donor agencies to exert control over aid recipients. It is

¹⁰¹ Available at: https://www.betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Kellogg_Foundation_Logic_Model_Guide.pdf.

¹⁰² Available at: https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-09/methodology-aid-delivery-methods-project-cycle-management-200403_en.pdf. As noted by Centro Studi Lang's manual (2017: 20), the Theory of Change (ToC) logic was integrated into EuropeAid's (currently Directorate-General for International Partnerships) Logical Framework in 2015.

argued that this promotes a neoliberal development agenda that masks the root causes of poverty and inequality, while sidelining alternative and indigenous perspectives and analyses (Prinsen and Nijhof, 2015: 235).

Theory of Change emerged partially in response to critiques of the model and added new elements to provide a more holistic approach to change. In Ghate's (2018: 4) words: 'Ideally, in addition to the basic elements of *needs* (the initial problem being addressed), *inputs* (resources), *outputs* (intended activities) and *outcomes* (desired changes for service users), a Theory of Change should also include specification of *implementation outcomes* at practice, organisation or system levels (Ghate, 2015) as well as the *mechanisms of change*, (Weiss, 1997) both of which are required to produce the intended final outcomes for ultimate beneficiaries'.

However, the limitations identified for the Logical Framework are still relevant for the Theory of Change and need to be carefully considered. Many authors emphasize that linear thinking underlies much of the ToC elaboration (Mulgan, 2016). Ghate (2018: 5) observes: 'Theories of *behaviour* tend to be visualised in a linear form (Davis et al., 2015) [...]. Perhaps because of the influence of this paradigm, the alluring certainty of propositional logic (Mowles, 2014) and because many social interventions do aspire to influence behaviour for participants, numerous 'text book' examples of how to draw up a theory of change have adopted this form'.

At a deeper level, ToC is closely linked to the idea of impact evaluation, and for some authors, the gold standard for impact evaluation is RCTs. The World Bank, among others, strongly supports this approach. In fact, Gertler et al. (2016: 10), in their guidebook *Impact Evaluation in Practice*, suggest that 'impact evaluations take root in a program's theory of change'. And further specifies that: 'The focus on causality and attribution is the hallmark of impact evaluations. All impact evaluation methods address some form of *cause-and-effect* question. The approach to addressing causality determines the methodologies that can be used. To be able to estimate the causal effect or impact of a program on outcomes, any impact evaluation method chosen must estimate the so-called *counterfactual*: that is, what the outcome would have been for program participants if they had not participated in the program' (Gertler et al., 2016: 8).

RCTs have garnered extensive debates and criticisms. However, it is worth recalling some considerations when dealing with social change, transformation, and so-called social impact.

First, the politics behind RCTs applied to social contexts is well explained by Stame (2016: 118): 'It is the "clinical" (*clinical trial*) model dear to the positivist-experimental approach evaluators. Public policy is seen as a treatment administered to a target population to achieve a specific outcome (behavior change, harm reduction), just as one studies a remedy (drug, intervention) for a disease (Martini, Sisti, 2009, p. 25). And it is tested on an experimental group while simultaneously observing the behavior of a control group given a placebo'. In this scenario, social actors have no say in the whole process, they are passive recipients of supposedly sterile and objective procedures under expert control.

Three criticisms have been leveled at this approach (Stame, 2016: 63-66). First, the idea that there is a gold standard method for impact evaluation is questionable. Indeed, it depends on the context, the content of the intervention and the unit of analysis. RCTs are only statistically significant with large n samples, but they also seek to *attribute* a specific effect to a specific intervention in a specific context, while pretending to generalize using the *ceteris paribus* formula. Counterfactual analysis may be the best method in cases 'limited to simple interventions (linear causality) that take place in a fixed setting where implementation follows a precise protocol' (Stame, 2016: 65). Intuitively, very few, if any, social contexts fall into this category. *Theory-based*, *Case-based studies* and *Participatory* approaches are valid sources of knowledge, although they are mostly undervalued.

Second, comprehending causality is a complex issue that cannot be fully explored through counterfactual reasoning alone.¹⁰³ Counterfactuals present challenges in identifying the direction and nature of causality, as well as in dealing with multiple interacting causal factors (Tomei, 2016:

¹⁰³ Befani (2012) provides an overview of the different notions of causality in debates within the philosophy of science, identifying four main categories: 1) *regularity*, as 'the first modern account of causality revolved around the observation of regularities: if potential cause C and effect E are always found together, then either C causes E, or E causes C' (Befani, 2012: 2); 2) *counterfactuals*, 'in which the comparison is not done between highly different cases only sharing the cause and the effect but between identical cases differing only in cause and effect' (2012: 5); 3) *non-linear multiple causality* analyzes interactions between immediate and background or ground-preparing causes; 4) *generative causation* takes an approach that enquires about the "how" of the causal association. "[Within the generative causality framework] the causal explanation provides an account of why the regularity turns out as it does. The causal explanation, in other words, is not a matter of one element (X), or a combination of elements (X1.X2) asserting influence on another (Y), rather it is the association as a whole that is explained' (Befani, 2012: 19).

29-31). Indeed, the 'irreparable ignorance' in social science is always present, regardless of the approach, model, and theoretical framework embraced. This is due to the fact that we can never observe the simultaneous treatment and non-treatment of the same individual or community, as observed by DeMartino (2013: 266). Moreover, this ignorance equally impairs the generation of knowledge from the past and future.

Finally, generalizability (external validity) remains problematic and insufficiently addressed in RCTs, precisely because RCTs are inherently concerned with internal validity, isolating a single cause-effect relationship in a specific context.

The DFID report on impact evaluation (again in the context of international development policy)¹⁰⁴ offers a complex and sophisticated analysis of its methodological and theoretical challenges. Specifically, the authors identify four fundamental questions underlying impact evaluation (Stern et al., 2012: 37-47):

- 1) To what extent can a specific (net) impact be attributed to the intervention? [*Attribution*]
- 2) Did the intervention make a difference? [*Contribution*]
- 3) How has the intervention made a difference? [*Explanation*]
- 4) Will the intervention work elsewhere? [*Generalization*]

Answering the first question seems not only challenging, but for many even meaningless in complex social contexts. In what we might call the 'principle of indeterminacy' (Tomei, 2016: 10), we cannot know the outcomes in advance, precisely because social interventions of any kind are based on the actions of social actors.

Some authors take this conclusion to the extreme, embracing a complexity approach where the concept of emergence is firmly embraced: 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts but emergence implies more than simple holism: that we must understand things taken as a totality and only as a totality. And plainly a recognition of emergence means that we cannot understand things simply in terms of their components, the essence of the reductionist approach that underpins

¹⁰⁴ DFID is the former UK Department for International Development, now replaced by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

positivist science. Instead, we have to think about parts and wholes and we must recognize that causality does not run in any one direction. So parts have causal implications for the whole, interactions among parts have causal implications for the whole, parts have causal implications for each other, and the whole has causal implications for parts' (Byrne, 2013: 218).

Against this backdrop, a productive ToC requires grounding in post-positivist epistemology, openness to combining methods based on sense, necessity, and context (without presumptively opting for one single method), and the maintenance of participatory, democratic, and iterative qualities.¹⁰⁵ In this vein, Tomei (2016: 35) emphasizes a positive effect of ToC popularity: 'The diffusion of evaluation approaches inspired by the theory of change signals a recovery of the centrality of two fundamental dimensions of the sociological analysis of complexity: on the one hand, the imaginative competence and consequent planning capacity of actors (intentionality); on the other hand, the necessary constitutive relationality of institutional organizational structures (intersubjectivity)'.¹⁰⁶

Unfortunately, as noted above, this is not the only possible caveat to ToC applications. Indeed, the semantics of many theories of change are deeply enmeshed in governmental practices of welfare and development, in the Foucauldian sense.¹⁰⁷ There is a target population to be 'educated', 'empowered', 'made employable', and so on; a group of experts to set the standards to be achieved; and a charitable, nonprofit (or public) institution to deliver what is deemed necessary. The reason is that ToC is commonly used in the context of development aid and international cooperation.

¹⁰⁵ It is fruitful to recall Stame's (2016: 10-11) reflections on evaluation: 'recently, a movement for counterfactual impact assessment has taken hold and is presented as the only one capable of providing useful knowledge for policies. All this speaks of rigidity and methods imposed from above. That is why I always feel the need to make it clear that no method can be considered the only way of evaluating; that different methods can and must be used; that in every situation there is an authoritarian way of evaluating and a democratic way of evaluating'. Translation is mine.

¹⁰⁶ Translation is mine.

¹⁰⁷ As we read in *The Development Dictionary*: 'As Foucault said, 'the "Enlightenment", which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines.' One cannot look on the bright side of planning, its modern achievements (if one were to accept them), without looking at the same time on its dark side of domination. The management of the social has produced modern subjects who are not only dependent on professionals for their needs, but also ordered into realities (cities, health and educational systems, economies, etc.) that can be governed by the state through planning. Planning inevitably requires the normalization and standardization of reality, which in turn entails injustice and the erasure of difference and diversity' (Escobar, 2010: 147).

The proliferation of the Theory of Change can also be seen as a result of the hegemonic influence of funders and investors on organizations struggling to secure funding and conform to their standards and lexicon. According to Vun (2021:42): 'Given that funders now routinely require the projects theory of change and evaluation methodology, projects are having to comply with this requirement or miss out on funding altogether. What results is a situation where funders thereby become imperialists of the development project universe. Projects are expected to, and will in fact, align their theories of change and implementation thereof, for the purpose of securing funding. This in turn results in an adaptation of the original objective of the project, converting it to a colonial project of the funder'.

However, unilateral relations cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, another standpoint is possible, such as the one taken in this action research: there are no 'beneficiaries', but citizens who respond to their needs through self-management and solidarity; there are no funders to please but the will of cooperative members to learn and produce knowledge collectively.

On a more practical level, ToC is recognized as a challenging process because it requires a skilled facilitator, it can be time consuming and labor intensive, its reasoning is challenging because it requires backward thinking. It is difficult to present in a non-linear way, both visually and theoretically. In addition, it can be difficult to view the ToC as an iterative process and to test its validity. Like any evaluation process, it requires dedicated time, skills and resources (James, 2011: 30; Ghate, 2018: 6).

Having outlined the risks and limitations of uncritically adopting a ToC, the literature also identifies a number of benefits. These include promoting common narratives and understandings of an organization, challenging existing ideas and theories that are often tacit, learning opportunities, better communication and advocacy, a framework for monitoring and evaluation, and replicability (James, 2011: 18-19; Ghate, 2018: 5-6).

With these considerations in mind, I adopt James's (2011: 27) definition:

'Theory of change is an ongoing process of reflection to explore change and how it happens – and what that means for the part we play in a particular context, sector and/or group of people.

- **It locates a programme/ project within a wider analysis of how change comes about.**
- **It draws on external learning about development and how change happens at different levels.**
- **It articulates our understanding of change – but also challenges and opens it up.**
- **It acknowledges the complexity of change: the wider systems and actors that influence.**
- **It is often presented in diagrammatic form with an accompanying narrative summary'.**

A final note on the significant role of emotions in change is warranted. Although emotions are frequently excluded in academic discussions, they are crucial in decision-making, social functioning, and moral reasoning, as noted by Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007: 3). It is therefore worthwhile to consider emotions throughout the process of constructing a Theory of Change, as well as in its elaboration and implementation. In this sense, Billeter's (2021: ix) inquiries are not rhetorical: 'Is there a place at all for a theory of change based on rational decision-making given all the rational evidence showing that our decisions are steered by emotions to a large extent? However, do we really need to choose *between* a quantitative and a qualitative approach, *between* thinking and feeling, and *between* numbers and storytelling? Are not fundamental large-scale transitions supported by both mind and emotion?'. The provided answer is decisive: 'Good and sustainable change requires both reason and emotion, numbers and narratives, qualitative and quantitative. The more connected, the more sustainable the change is. After all, we work best when our parts of the brain work together, not against each other' (Billeter, 2021: x).

To conclude, the Theory of Change (ToC) is an ongoing process of learning and revision, similar to the practice of action research. It is not a static, once-and-for-all model. Independent consultant Cathy James highlights in her ToC review that 'One of the key learnings, though, was the

importance of ensuring that theory of change was not a one-off process and product' (2011: 21).
Regrettably, insufficient time was available to test and revise the co-constructed model for the food
coop, but hopefully, there will be an opportunity to do so in the future.

Chapter 4:

“The risk is aesthetics”: discourses and narratives on the Social and Solidarity Economy in 'Red Bologna'

Bologna has often been celebrated as a city capable of “enabl[ing] high-profile moments of resistance against ideologically aggrandising neo-liberal endeavours” (MacLeod et al., 2003 p. 1657). However, both this idealised representation and the argument that all of the structures and values underpinning the Emilian Model have been wiped away by neoliberalisation appear to be over-simplifications.

(Giovanardi and Silvagni, 2021: 21)

'I was a councilor for labor and tourism, for economic development in general, before I had the delegation for culture. And in 2011, when we started down the path of tourism... Before that, Bologna was not a tourist city. We had just entered the great crisis after Lehman Brothers, so 2008, 2011. And our city fell from 2008 to 2011 to almost 15 percent unemployment. Tourism, together with small neighborhood shops, was an important element in reducing unemployment and bringing it back to 4 percent. In the meantime, however, in this long journey of tourism and commerce, we realized that not everything was perfect, that there was also job insecurity in tourism, consumption of the city, and of course that commerce was growing, but not necessarily the working conditions of commerce were the best. For example, in the last few years we have not been able to break the rental bottleneck in the world of commerce'.¹⁰⁸

(Matteo Lepore, *Partito Democratico*)¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Translation is mine.

¹⁰⁹ Matteo Lepore, a former city councilor from 2011 to 2021 and current mayor of Bologna, and member of the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party), attended the public assembly on April 29, 2020, organized by the *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*. The gathering aimed to explore the possibility of integrating mutualism and ethical delivery platforms in the city of Bologna. The event, from which the quote is taken, was titled 'An Ethical Option for Home Delivery in Bologna: Can Mutualism and Platforms Be Combined?' (*Un'alternativa etica per le consegne a domicilio a Bologna: è possibile coniugare mutualismo e piattaforme?*). Available on the Facebook page of Fondazione Innovazione Urbana: <https://www.facebook.com/100064325934120/videos/779983492406837>. (Last accessed on 12 September 2023)

The chapter presents the contextual background for the fieldwork, focusing on the notable characteristics of the urban context, metropolitan area, and region. Subsequently, the prevailing SSE narratives in the city of Bologna are scrutinized through discourse analysis utilizing interviews taken from chosen support agencies.

Section One: Bologna: an urban context for experimenting with mutualism

A new municipalism is emerging as an ideal site for the invention and establishment of unprecedented economies, new forms of organization, and new ways of living. Cities are the frontiers of social conflicts and experiences of mutualistic cooperation. Cities are a hope for democracy.

(d'Alena, 2021: 65)¹¹⁰

In an era of permanent crisis, cities are facing increasingly problematic and persistent challenges that do not lend themselves to simple solutions. The increasing complexity of urban problems has led local governments, especially those in large and medium-sized cities, to open up to forms of shared governance in order to overcome the growing difficulties in securing goods and services traditionally provided by the public sector. Indeed, individuals and organized groups of citizens are transforming traditional ways of providing services, caring for vulnerable populations, and producing goods, culture, and knowledge. Citizen and community initiatives, which have emerged to address unmet social needs in a self-organized way, as an alternative to traditional urban policies and planning, have grown to experiment with new ways of interacting with urban institutions and to contribute to the construction of original *governance* mechanisms.

(Massari and Orioli, 2023: 73)¹¹¹

This research is carried out in Bologna, a city with a solid cooperative and civic tradition, where social experiments often take place and receive national and international attention. Despite this,

¹¹⁰ Translation is mine.

¹¹¹ Translation is mine.

there are significant social challenges such as environmental issues, inequalities, and housing that persist, and public policies often remain ambivalent.

For instance, in October 2019, the City Council adopted a Declaration of Climate and Ecological Emergency, pledging to achieve zero emissions by 2030 and organizing city assemblies to discover collective solutions to the climate emergency.¹¹² The declaration resulted from citizen activism and social movements like Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion Bologna (Massari and Orioli, 2023: 79). On December 27, 2021, the City Council approved a resolution to release the contentious infrastructure project, known as *Passante di mezzo*.¹¹³ The project aims to widen the bypass and highway section near the city center, increasing the number of lanes from 12 to 18. The project has undergone several modifications and has a lengthy planning history, yet it is now referred to as the 'Next Generation' or 'Green' Bypass. This is due to the large number of emissions offsets planned, although it remains a topic of debate among environmentalists and citizens alike (Di Mario, 2022).

Bologna, a medium-sized city located in Northern Italy, serves as the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region and its metropolitan area, which extends over 3,702.3 square kilometers and includes 55 municipalities.

Bologna's population on December 31, 2022, is 392,800, indicating a relatively stable growth compared to the previous year, with a net increase of only one hundred residents. Nevertheless, Istat reports that the daily influx of individuals into the city, excluding tourists and those traveling for business or health purposes, surpasses 507,000.¹¹⁴ This temporary population is made up of students, workers, and city users, who generate 'a high level of consumption of its space, which is constantly reorganized and regenerated as a result of the actions of those who pass through it as urban agents' (Massari and Orioli, 2023: 74). The high percentage of deeply rooted elderly citizens

¹¹² Available at: <https://www.comune.bologna.it/servizi-informazioni/bologna-dichiara-emergenza-climatica-ecologica>. (Last accessed on 16 September 2023)

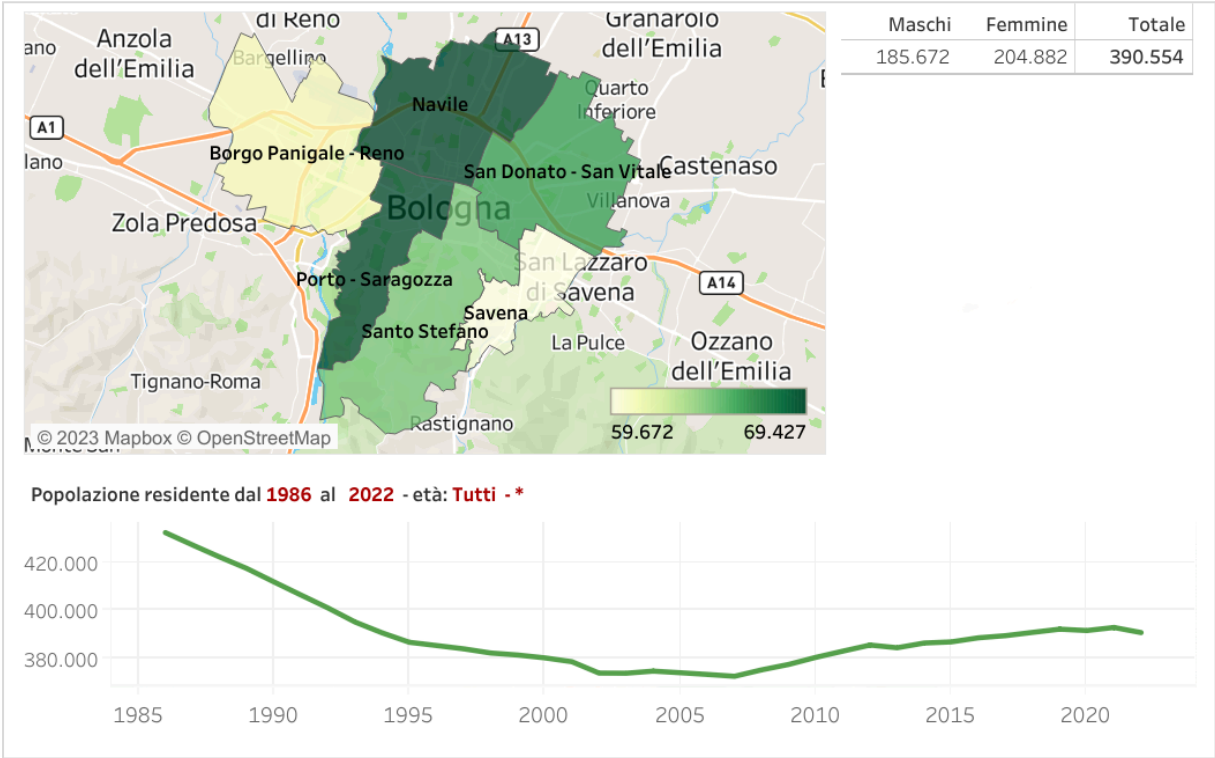
¹¹³ To be noted, the municipality's influence in this matter is limited since various national and regional actors are involved in the project. Nonetheless, the city council fully endorsed the most recent version of the project, which has become a point of pride for the local administration.

¹¹⁴ <https://www.comune.bologna.it/notizie/dati-demografici-2022>. (Last accessed on 15 September 2023)

(24.5% over the age of 65) in Bologna, coupled with its unique composition, results in a dynamic urban environment populated by both permanent and temporary inhabitants, who often interact and occasionally come into conflict.

The city of Bologna is divided into six administrative neighborhoods: Navile, Borgo Panigale-Reno, San Donato-San Vitale, Porto-Saragozza, and Santo Stefano (refer to Figure 7).

Figure 7. Bologna population by neighborhood; male, female, and total in 2022; time-series 1986-2022



Source: <http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/>

Bologna’s location has historically made it a crucial center of exchange and communication between northern Italy and the rest of the peninsula. This has been the case since ancient times, and continues to be significant today. Bologna remains a pivotal hub for overland transportation of goods and people. Its extensive infrastructure dates back to the late 19th century and has made it one of the most critical nodes for national road and rail circulation (Bazzoli, 2015).¹¹⁵ Over the course of the 20th century, Bologna became an important center of industrial production. The

¹¹⁵ An example of its contemporary relevance is the *Interporto*, a huge intermodal transport and logistics hub based on a public-private partnership, located about 20 km from the city center: <https://www.interporto.it/en/>. (Last accessed on 15 September 2023)

mechanical industry, especially packaging and automotive, together with electrical engineering and machine tools, contributed to its growth and prominence.¹¹⁶

In addition to trade and manufacturing, the city has also been historically important in terms of culture, creativity, and being the seat of the oldest university in Europe.

Since the 1980s, the socioeconomic landscape of the city has undergone significant changes due to the shift towards a service-based economy (Table 3), the decline of communist tradition and ideology, and subsequent shifts in local development policies. Scholars have frequently examined the decline of the 'Bologna city model', which epitomizes the Emilian model, in relation to the 'hegemony of entrepreneurial neoliberalism' (Giovanardi and Silvagni, 2021: 3). In this case too, however, a monolithic narrative of urban neoliberalization (Le Galés, 2018) overshadows the diversity of actors, practices, institutional arrangements, and even policies that take place in this complex environment, and the range of possibilities that remain open for making the city a place of reciprocity, care, and sustainability.

¹¹⁶ <https://www.storiaememoriadibologna.it/il-modello-industriale-bolognese-una-metamorfose-d-1312-evento>.

Table 3. Employment by economic activity (ATECO 2007) in the municipality of Bologna, 2014-2022

Addetti alle localizzazioni di impresa al 31 dicembre - Comune di Bologna dal 2014									
Sezione ATECO 2007	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014
A - Agricoltura, silvicoltura e pesca	628	597	551	795	799	799	820	807	776
B - Attività estrattiva	0	0	0	1	9	15	27	31	30
C - Manifattura	15.544	15.387	15.108	15.993	15.979	15.360	15.779	16.055	15.154
D - Energia	895	869	893	831	820	778	776	536	603
E - Acqua e trattamento rifiuti	1.760	1.715	1.639	1.663	1.570	1.603	2.064	1.621	1.627
F - Costruzioni	9.210	8.846	8.297	8.234	8.019	7.914	7.422	7.252	7.586
G - Commercio	27.582	27.003	28.872	29.635	28.801	28.361	27.303	25.577	27.663
H - Trasporto e magazzinaggio	15.787	15.075	14.410	15.643	15.231	14.416	14.920	14.919	14.743
I - Alloggio e ristorazione	16.797	14.623	15.422	17.210	16.520	15.079	13.556	12.953	12.916
J - Informazione e comunicazione	10.735	9.935	9.524	9.090	9.561	9.028	9.063	7.986	7.545
K - Credito e assicurazione	10.294	10.330	10.463	10.369	10.914	11.148	11.383	11.593	11.736
L - Attività immobiliari	3.467	2.554	2.670	2.706	2.684	2.571	2.529	3.531	3.453
M - Attività professionali	9.235	9.307	9.156	8.635	8.127	7.982	7.883	7.536	7.249
N - Servizi alle imprese	24.621	21.578	19.994	22.062	22.125	19.843	17.565	14.665	13.174
P - Istruzione	2.296	2.118	2.093	2.153	2.046	1.992	1.898	1.623	1.526
Q - Sanità e assistenza sociale	10.786	10.438	10.045	10.113	9.788	9.725	8.420	7.583	8.522
R - Arte, sport e intrattenimento	3.583	3.643	3.609	4.217	2.998	2.817	2.562	1.956	2.712
S - Altri servizi personali	3.900	3.936	5.063	5.095	4.211	4.242	4.030	3.792	3.883
Totale	167.209	158.024	157.886	164.550	160.276	153.717	148.254	140.300	141.210
X - Non classificate/Altro	67	61	77	105	74	44	254	284	312

Fonte: Elaborazioni dell'Ufficio di Statistica del Comune di Bologna su dati CCIAA

Source: <http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/>

Undoubtedly, there are observable trends consistent with neoliberalism, characterized by the commodification of social aspects, the promotion of global competitiveness and attractiveness, and an increased presence of market orientation, as demonstrated by the outsourcing of social services, the discourse of cost reduction and productivity, activation policies focused on individual responsibility, and city branding initiatives (Giovanardi and Silvagni, 2021: 21).

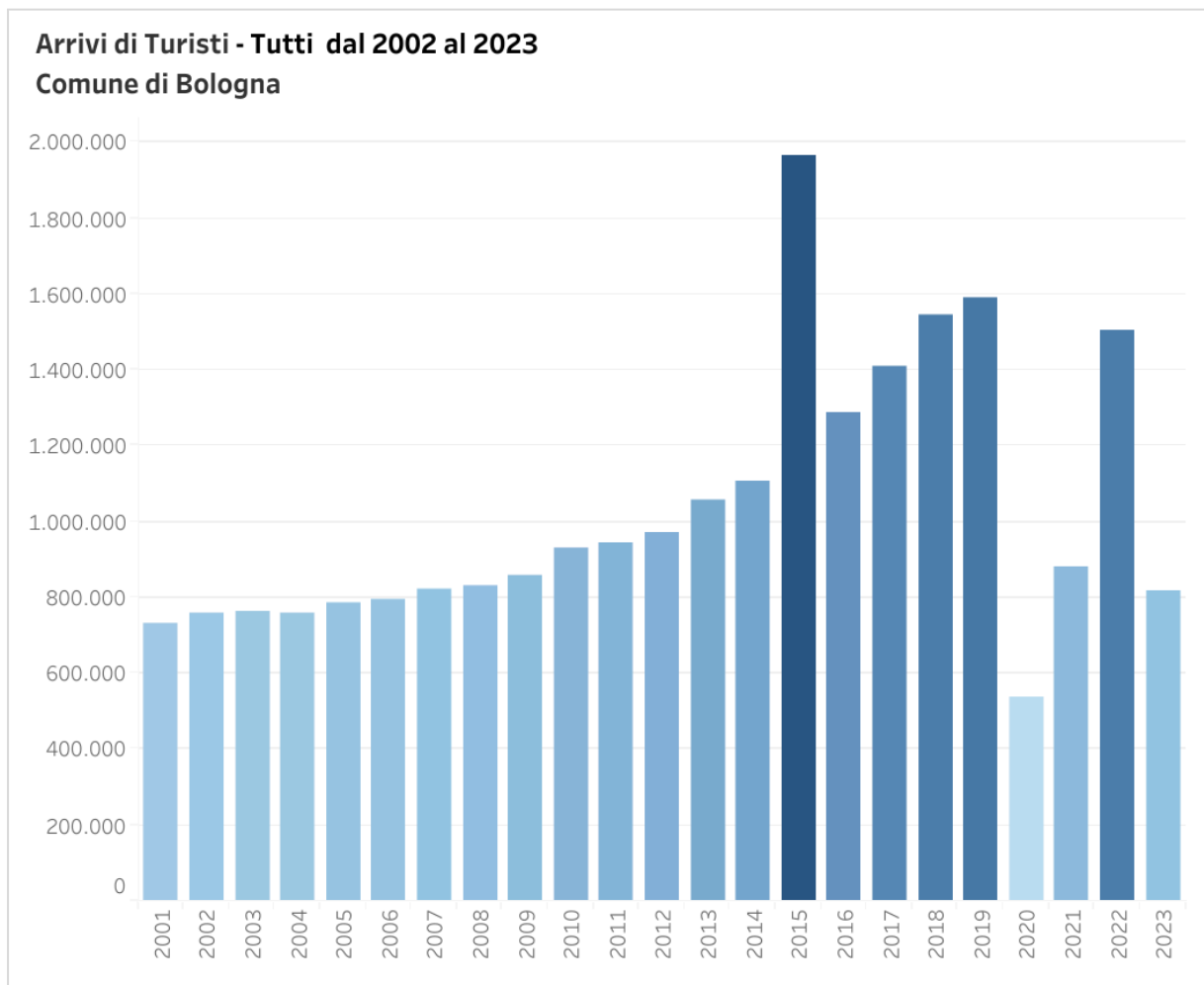
After the crisis of 2008, the local development strategy of the Municipality of Bologna was largely based on the promotion of tourism (Figure 8)¹¹⁷ and commerce, which since 2012 has included a process of city branding.¹¹⁸ As stated on *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* (Foundation for Urban Innovation) website: 'Bologna City Branding is a project promoted since 2012 by the Municipality of Bologna and implemented by the Foundation for Urban Innovation (then Urban Center Bologna), with the coordination of Prof. Roberto Grandi, the collaboration of Bologna Welcome and the partnership of UniCredit. The project aims to increase the effectiveness of Bologna's territorial marketing policy, both by defining the positioning that the city wants to achieve in the metropolitan dimension, and by identifying the most appropriate strategies for communicating this positioning to different target audiences locally, nationally and internationally'.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ The pandemic significantly impacted the sector, particularly in 2020 and 2021. However, the trend is showing signs of resumption from 2022 (data for 2023 are partial), with a noteworthy increase of +72% compared to 2021. *Le lancette dell'economia bolognese* - 2022, available at: http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/sites/inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/files/economia/lancette/le_lancette_delleconomia_bolognese_giugno2023.pdf.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.basiq.it/portfolio/bolognacitybranding/>.

¹¹⁹ Available at: <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/38-urbancenter/bologna-city-branding>. Translation is mine.

Figure 8. Tourist Arrivals in Bologna, 2001-2023

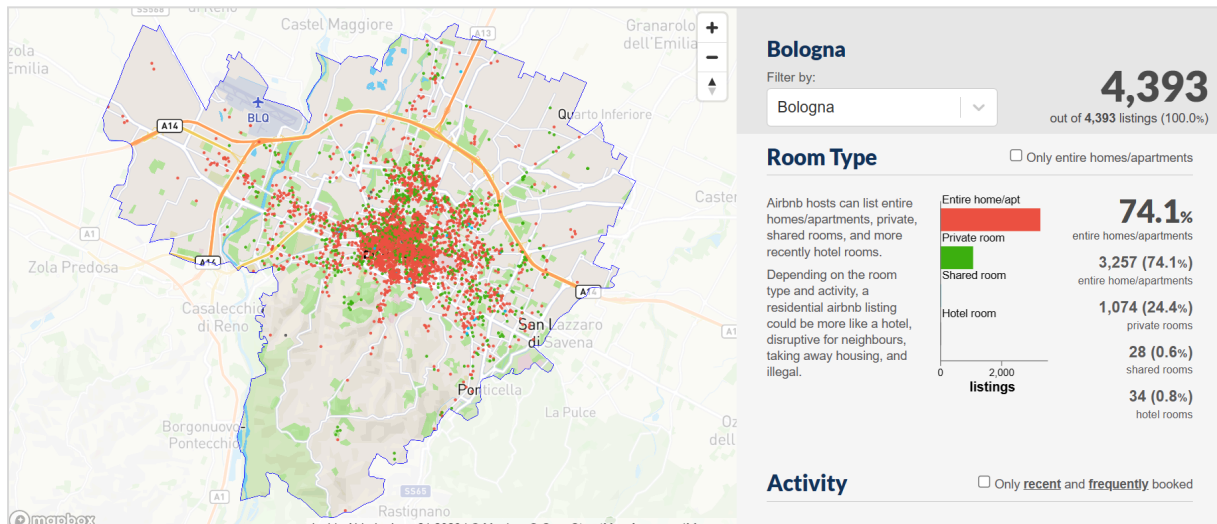


Source: <http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/>

Touristification processes have resulted in the emergence of numerous city narratives that capitalize on unique features of the urban landscape. For example, 'Bologna City of Food' is closely intertwined with current trends in food-related activities, food delivery, and short-term rentals (Marrone and Peterlongo, 2020). The significance of housing availability and accessibility in terms of spatial and economic inequalities is exemplified by the impacts of the expanding quantity of

AirBnb rentals (refer to Figure 9) and the luxury apartment market.¹²⁰ Marrone and Peterlongo (2020: 125) report that the proliferation of Airbnb hosts in the downtown area is eroding the rental market for students, families, and tenants.

Figure 9. AirBnb rentals in Bologna (June 21, 2023)



Source: <http://insideairbnb.com/>

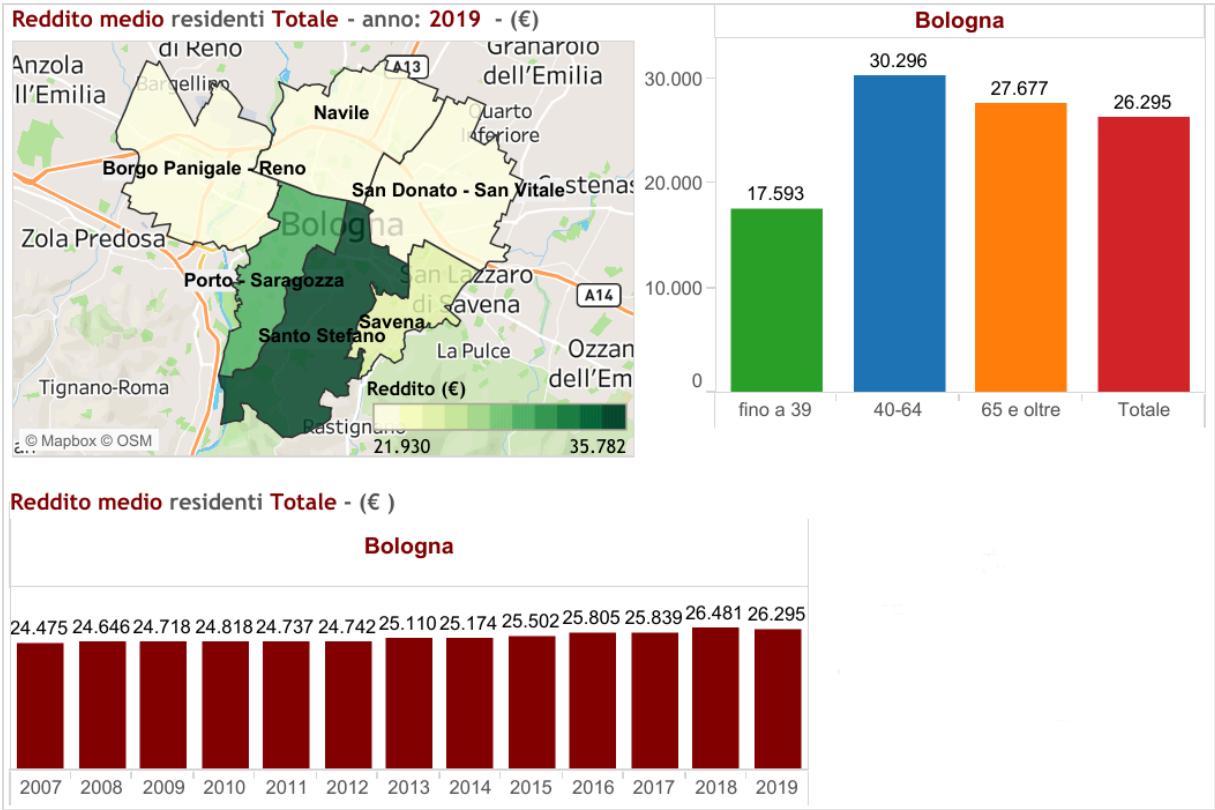
Although the city of Bologna, its metropolitan area, and the surrounding region enjoy high levels of economic prosperity within Italy, some challenges persist. On one hand, in 2022, the city of Bologna displays the largest employment rate amongst major municipalities, reaching 73%. The declining unemployment rate of 3.3% and the inactivity rate of 24.7% further confirm its strong employment performance in the country. On the other hand, there continues to be a considerable

¹²⁰ In May 2023 a new branch of Engel & Völkers, a leading global real estate brokerage company, opened in Bologna https://www.engelvoelkers.com/it/propertysearch?businessAreas=residential®ion=Emilia-Romagna&countryAlpha2=IT&customPlace=true&place_name=Bologna%2C%20Emilia-Romagna%2C%20Italia&marketingType=sale&city=Bologna&kind=group&country=Italy&sortBy=objects_prod_price_eur_desc&boundingBox=44.640501%2C11.673186%2C44.321014%2C11.108108&placeID=ChIJC8RR6ZjUf0cRQZSkWwF84aI. *Il Resto del Carlino Bologna*, a local newspaper writes: 'Bologna, May 5, 2023 - Finding a home in Bologna is an odyssey, but premium real estate giant Engel & Völkers has a new office just below the Two Towers, in Piazza Minghetti, in Palazzo de' Toschi. Because "Bologna is confirmed as a city with high potential", says Tomaso Aguzzi, CEO of the company, which expects to recruit a hundred real estate agents within two years, "with several areas of interest still to be presided over and a market with characteristics of strong attractiveness also for foreign clients". The top listing for houses in Bologna reaches 8 thousand euros per square meter in the Quadrilatero area, with the historic center area just below (up to 7 thousand euros per square meter)'. Translation is mine. Available at: <https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/bologna/economia/engel-and-volkers-immobiliare-bologna-e230180c>. (Last accessed 17 September 2023)

gender gap, with a 10% difference in employment rates between men and women (*I Numeri di Bologna Metropolitana*, 2023). Sectors such as logistics and segments of outsourced social services, together with the so-called gig economy, are particularly vulnerable to precarious employment, low quality jobs and even exploitative conditions.

The inflation rate in Bologna has surged to +9.0% in 2022, significantly exceeding the national average of +8,1%. The Italian Consumer Price Index (NIC) reveals that it is the highest increase Bologna has witnessed since 1985, when the inflation rate was +9,2%. The upswing is chiefly attributed to the escalation in energy goods' prices and the impact of the war in Ukraine. Noteworthy shifts in the inflation by product show that the annual changes in housing, water, electricity, and fuel are the highest (+39%) while transport follows next with a rate of +9,2%.¹²¹

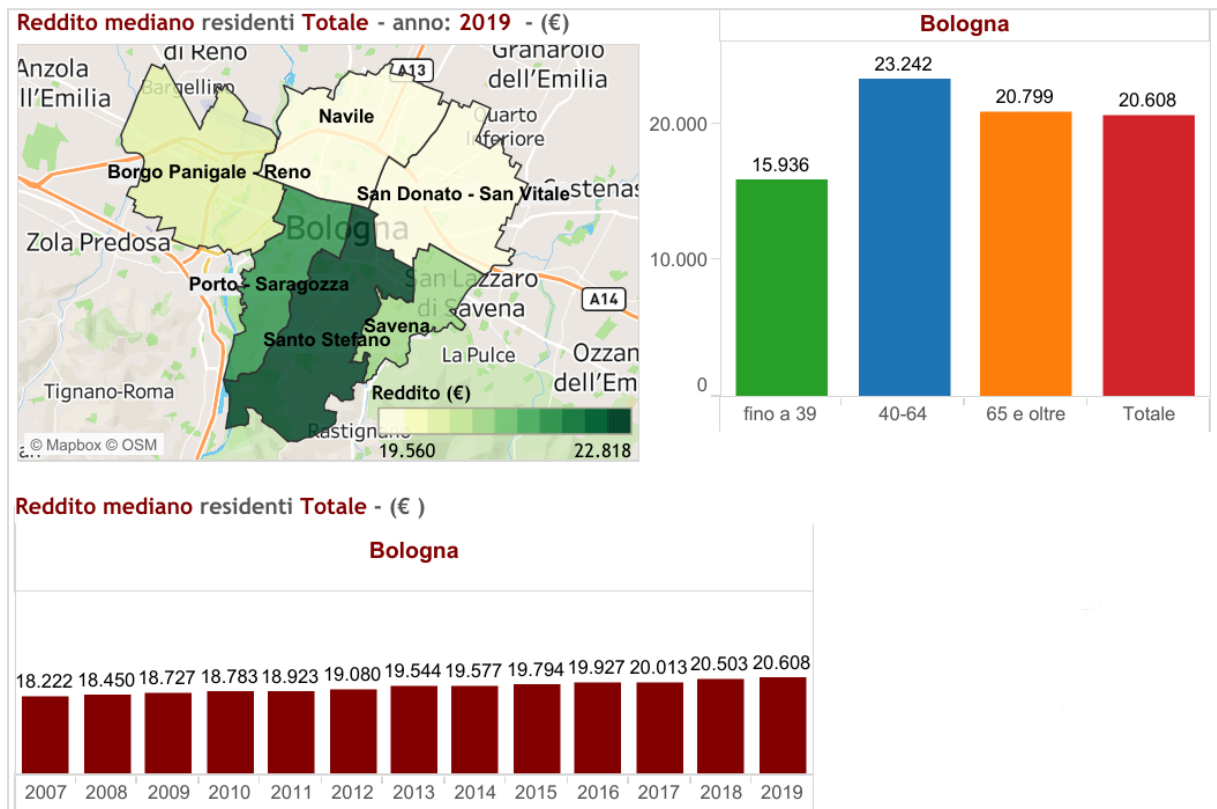
Figure 10. Mean income of Bologna residents by neighborhoods; total and by age groups in 2019; time-series 2007-2019



Source: <http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/>

¹²¹ Le lancette dell'economia bolognese - 2022, available at: [http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/sites/inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/files/economia/lancette/le_lancette_delleconomia_bolognese_giugno2023 .pdf](http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/sites/inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/files/economia/lancette/le_lancette_delleconomia_bolognese_giugno2023.pdf).

Figure 11. Median income of Bologna residents by neighborhoods; total and by age groups in 2019; time-series 2007-2019



Source: <http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/>

As a result of these trends, the city experiences tensions concerning spatial and economic disparities, leading to heightened difficulties for lower-middle income individuals to obtain satisfactory housing, secure employment, and quality food. Social cohesion appears to be under pressure. The province of Bologna ranks fourth in the country according to the crime index (*IlSole24Ore*, 2022), with 4977.7 charges per 100,000 inhabitants.¹²²

This is confirmed by public authorities. The municipality has been classified as having a medium-high level of potential fragility, as indicated by the metropolitan city of Bologna in its recent study on social, demographic, and economic vulnerability in the region (Città Metropolitana di Bologna, 2022).¹²³

¹²² Available at: <https://lab24.ilssole24ore.com/indice-della-criminalita/indexT.php>. (Last accessed 17 September 2023)

¹²³ Available at: http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/sites/inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/files/altri_temi/altri_temimcm/fragilita_cm2022ed.pdf.

As previously noted, Bologna is a multifaceted and dynamic urban context that cannot be easily dismissed under the rubric of 'neoliberal'. Indeed, the city is confronting current issues through a complex interplay between bottom-up initiatives and institutional responses. Elements of co-optation, institutionalization, conflict as well as collaboration are present, depending on the contextual drivers. In this context, the framework of Social and Solidarity Economy emerges as an effective way to understand the dynamics and possibilities of place-based mutualism to address contemporary challenges. The municipality has diversified its portfolio of public investments with the new mandate (2021-2026). The city now employs multiple strategies to incentivize investment in cultural development, such as the 'City of knowledge' initiative.¹²⁴ This ambitious project will channel European resources from the recovery plan to bolster the municipality's cultural ecosystem. As explained by Chiara Farini of Fondazione Innovazione Urbana: *'It's a project, it's a macro vision, let's say, a macro vision that wants to make the relationship between knowledge, culture, science, data, the use of data, the vector of development for the city, therefore of attractiveness, of development, of attractiveness for people, of attractiveness for investment, of economic development, of social development and inclusion'. 'There will be the new Technopole with the new computer, with the new supercomputer, there will be a bicycle path that will connect everyone, there will be a new cultural center that is the Democratic Memory Center. So there are different declinations of this city of knowledge. This new district of Ravone is one of them, but it fits into a broader vision of the physical city and basically the development of the city. And we as a foundation are accompanying the definition of this project, of this macro vision of the City of Knowledge, both because in all the projects, in all these projects of the Way of Knowledge that use PNRR funds, we are always involved in the design of citizen participation processes.'*

The Emilia-Romagna region is renowned for its tradition of civic engagement and cooperation, with Bologna at the epicenter. The cooperative economy in the region has experienced noteworthy transformations, with some cooperatives emulating the practices of private for-profit companies to enhance their competitiveness. This shift has led to an identity crisis among cooperatives (Giovanardi & Silvagni, 2021: 21). In the municipality of Bologna, the number of cooperatives has

¹²⁴ <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/cittadellaconoscenza>.

decreased over time, particularly in the last decade (as shown in Table 4). In contrast, the number of traditional businesses, especially limited liability companies, has increased by 3,4% in 2022.¹²⁵

Table 4. Number of Cooperatives (Registrations, Cancellations and Balance) in Bologna, 2000-2022

Imprese Cooperative attive al 31 dicembre nel Comune di Bologna dal 2000						
Anno	Iscrizioni	Cancellazioni	Saldo	Imprese attive	Imprese registrate	
2022	15	29	-14	446	717	
2021	23	53	-30	454	729	
2020	20	31	-11	473	756	
2019	21	41	-20	476	764	
2018	29	40	-11	505	786	
2017	39	59	-20	519	796	
2016	43	44	-1	517	814	
2015	58	33	25	517	815	
2014	57	70	-13	513	787	
2013	40	41	-1	517	798	
2012	41	49	-8	565	801	
2011	50	73	-23	565	807	
2010	55	64	-9	580	837	
2009	43	51	-8	582	848	
2008	71	53	18	588	859	
2007	65	32	33	585	841	
2006	48	57	-9	561	810	
2005	54	60	-6	556	823	
2004	53	74	-21	565	829	
2003	43	63	-20	549	841	
2002				571	862	
2001				578	907	
2000				550	881	

Fonte: Elaborazioni dell'Ufficio di Statistica del Comune di Bologna su dati CCIAA

Source: <http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/>

Meanwhile, SSE extends beyond the cooperative sector. There has been continuous development of innovative practices in community and solidarity economies, which are exemplified in the case studies chosen for this study. This indicates that the region's experience and heritage is by no means exhausted. Additionally, the normative and institutional response has also been evolving over time.

¹²⁵

Available at: http://inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/sites/inumeridibolognametropolitana.it/files/economia/lancette/le_lancette_delleconomia_bolognese_giugno2023_.pdf. (Last accessed 17 September 2023)

In 2014, Regional Law No. 19 of July 23 officially recognized the solidarity economy (*economia solidale*) in the Emilia Romagna region. However, the solidarity economy is still a relatively unexplored, little-known, and unsupported part of the economy.

In the same year, the City Council approved 'The Regulation on Collaboration between Citizens and the City for the Regeneration and Care of Urban Commons' to promote innovative forms of collaborative local governance (Iaione, 2016). Bologna was once again the pioneering city and promptly became a prototype to motivate other municipalities.

In 2022, the Metropolitan City of Bologna initiated the development of a Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy, with the objective of completing it by June 2024. At the same time, the Municipality of Bologna began to reconfigure local governance to incorporate co-production and co-planning of policies with Third Sector organizations during the 2021-2026 term. This process has been named *Un Patto con il Terzo Settore. Laboratorio delle reti civiche a Bologna* (A Pact with the Third Sector. Workshop of civic networks in Bologna)¹²⁶, a lengthy participatory process that engaged approximately 500 citizens from February to July 2022 and culminated in the creation of a document titled *Un Nuovo Patto per l'Amministrazione condivisa* (A New Pact for Shared Administration).¹²⁷

Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (FIU), which facilitated the process, explains: 'The goal is to co-program priorities and to identify **how to innovate the different and multiple tools, such as calls, conventions, pacts**, even in terms of management of spaces or projects, between the administration and the many civic realities of the city, which, even in the most acute phases of emergency, have shown a strong sense of responsibility and great activism'.¹²⁸

This initiative is rooted in a lengthy tradition of innovative local governance originating in the 1960s (Massari and Orioli, 2023).

The effects of these policies are not without criticism, as some authors have seen them as forms of cooptation, institutionalization of social movements, privatization of social services, or as tools to

¹²⁶ A report by *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* is available here: https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/images/2022_TerzoSettore/2022_Patto_Terzo_Settore_allegati.pdf.

¹²⁷ Document available at: https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/images/2022_TerzoSettore/2022_10_06_PATTO_TERZO_SETTOR E.pdf.

¹²⁸ <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/terzosettore>. Emphasis in the original.

promote a depoliticized (or post-political) approach to the urban commons, excluding more radical demands (Bianchi, 2018).¹²⁹

It is challenging to evaluate the process since it has contradictory effects on the urban socioscape. Massari and Orioli (2023: 74) pointed out that the local government, which has been led by the reformist left since the 1990s, has gradually reduced the direct and informal participation channels and instead broadened the institutional participation utilizing a widespread technical framework. Nevertheless, civil society in Bologna has retained its capacity to demand direct participation in decision-making processes, ranging from the actions of the most antagonistic groups, collectives, and social centers to more moderate activists or organized groups.

The historical interaction between more antagonistic and radical social movements and the local administration has been marked by shifts in strategies, including repression, containment, and institutionalization attempts (Giannini and Pirone, 2019). It is a fact that in recent years, all existing occupations, both housing squatting and social centers, have been evicted;¹³⁰ while only some of them have been successfully involved in processes of institutionalization. The administration has implemented various strategies to address the decline in political participation and consent and local conflicts. Since 2016, these measures have included 'District Labs' and 'Participatory Budget'. In 2021, the aforementioned 'Citizen Assembly' was also established to deal specifically with climate change.

To date, 894 cooperation agreements (*Patti di Collaborazione*) have been signed between the Municipality of Bologna and groups of citizens to regenerate public spaces for the local community.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Bianchi (2018: 298) claims that the Bologna Regulation on Urban Commons 'also has various negative effects: (i) it is selective and includes only the more moderate participatory claims, excluding the more antagonistic ones; (ii) it seems to select and include some social groups - those with sufficient economic and social capital and with sufficient free time - while excluding the most disadvantaged groups; (iii) it does not seem to guarantee an equal redistribution of resources within the city, instead facilitating saving on services through outsourcing, since it does not value the cost of labour; (iv) it does not aim to effectively redistribute decision-making power, since this is retained within the public administration'.

¹³⁰ <https://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/occupazioni-abusive-bologna-sgomberi-collettivi-casa.html>.

¹³¹

https://opendata.comune.bologna.it/explore/dataset/patti-di-collaborazione/table/?disjunctive.area_tematica&disjunctive.quartiere_mod&disjunctive.stato&disjunctive.area_statistica&sort=data_inizio&dataChart=eyJxdWVyaWVzIjpbeyJjaGFydHMtOlt7InR5cGUiOiJjb2x1bW4iLCJmdW5jIjoiQ09VTlQjLCJzY2llbnRpZmljRGlzcGxheSI6dHJlZSwiY29sb3IiOiJyYW5nZS1jdXN0b20ifV0sInhBeGlzIjoiZGF0YV9pbml6aW8iLCJrYXhwb2ludHMtOm51bGwsInRpbWVzY2FsZSI6InllYXliLCJzb3I0IjoiIiwic2VyaWVzQnJlYWtkb3duIjoiic3RhdG8iLCJjb25maWciOnsiZGF0YXNldCI

As Giannini and Pirone (2019: 951) argue 'these processes could mark the cooptation of conflicts into local administration strategies as well as open new forms of politicization around urban commons'.

Looking at the local welfare, although municipal expenditure on social services has remained stable in Italy for the past decade despite increasing social demands (CNEL, 2022: 4),¹³² Bologna provides a superior level of investment in both quality and quantity of social services when compared to the Emilia-Romagna region and other Italian provinces.

In this regard, the political facets of the social economy, framed as the Third Sector, are acknowledged at the institutional level. According to the document 'A New Pact for Shared Administration': 'In order to mobilize the full potential of the social economy, it is imperative to start from a new consideration of the actors of the third sector, with the awareness that, over the years, they have been used instrumentally as a mediating force to ensure that the economic crisis does not flare up into a democratic and social crisis, and that, instead, we must recognize their relational value and proximity work for and with the territory, as well as their ability to interact with public institutions and the market for the maximization of the general interest of the community, including the economic one' (*Un Nuovo Patto per l'Amministrazione condivisa*, 2023 :8).

The Bologna municipality's regional database records the following third sector organizations:

- 580 Social promotion Associations (APS),¹³³
- 242 Volunteering associations,¹³⁴
- 85 Social cooperatives,¹³⁵

[6InBhdHRpLWRpLWNvbGxhYm9yYXppb25lIiwib3B0aW9ucyI6eyJkaXNqdW5jdG12ZS5hcmVhX3RlbWF0aW](https://www.bologna.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf)
[NhIjp0cnVILCJkaXNqdW5jdG12ZS5xdWFydGllcmVfbW9kIjp0cnVILCJkaXNqdW5jdG12ZS5zdGF0byI6dHJ1ZS](https://www.bologna.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf)
[wiZGlzanVuY3RpdmUuYXJlYV9zdGF0aXN0aWNhIjp0cnVILCJzb3J0IjoiZGF0YV9pbml6aW8ifX19XSwiZGlzc](https://www.bologna.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf)
[GxheUxlZ2VuZCI6dHJ1ZSwiYWxpZ25Nb250aCI6dHJ1ZX0%3D&location=11.44.48793,11.36089&basemap=ja](https://www.bologna.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf)
[wg.streets.](https://www.bologna.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf) (Last accessed on 19 September 2023)

¹³²

[https://www.cnel.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf.](https://www.cnel.it/Portals/0/CNEL/ComposizioneConsiglio/ONSST/CNEL_Rapporto_SERVIZI_SOCIALI_2022_vers_9_settembre_2022.pdf?ver=2022-09-20-084212-407.pdf)

¹³³ [https://teseo.regione.emilia-romagna.it/teseofe/associazioni-promozione-sociale.asp.](https://teseo.regione.emilia-romagna.it/teseofe/associazioni-promozione-sociale.asp)

¹³⁴ [https://teseo.regione.emilia-romagna.it/teseofe/organizzazioni-volontariato.asp.](https://teseo.regione.emilia-romagna.it/teseofe/organizzazioni-volontariato.asp)

¹³⁵ [https://teseo.regione.emilia-romagna.it/teseofe/cooperative-sociali.asp.](https://teseo.regione.emilia-romagna.it/teseofe/cooperative-sociali.asp)

- 96 Foundations.¹³⁶

This is where the crucial importance of how to label and classify such diverse phenomena, ranging from small, informal groups to large foundations, and which elements to include, comes into play. The cooperative movement is not included here, nor is the solidarity economy.¹³⁷ The boundaries of these phenomena are obviously blurred and this makes it difficult. Nevertheless, to fully realize the transformative capability of SSE, it is crucial to consistently address and openly discuss this matter.

The local administration appears to start acknowledging this as well. Again, *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* explains: 'The new regulations broaden the scope of collaboration methods and support forms for various subjects by eliminating the registration requirement under the list of free forms of association. They facilitate collaboration at all levels based on the territorial needs and provide more options to benefit from. With this innovation, the city acknowledges the importance of local entities that may be smaller and less organized in contributing to the future development of the area. The goal is to ensure that they receive appropriate recognition and support'.¹³⁸

Section Two: A discourse analysis of Social and Solidarity Economy agencies

*“Actually, **the risk is aesthetics**. That is, everything we do, including what I do, let's be clear, let's say it's tolerated in a way, but limited. So the ability to make structural changes, maybe **that's the problem: structural changes**. That is not there. There is not this ability to translate the non-structural changes, that is, the everyday changes, the changes that one tries to introduce in everyday life to deal properly with solidarity... Then, at the end of the day, they run the risk of being behaviors that are a bit of an end in themselves. In the sense that, at the end of day, the decisions that matter, the places, the models that are proposed in society, as concretely lived in everyday life, tolerate because*

¹³⁶ <https://www.servizi.regione.emilia-romagna.it/registropersonegiuridiche/Default.aspx>.

¹³⁷ As a representative member of the Camilla food coop, I have actively taken part in the 'A Pact with the Third Sector' initiative. The cooperative under analysis cannot be formally classified as a Third Sector organization based on existing definitions. This is despite its large mobilization of volunteers and creation of social value, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹³⁸

<https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/45-uncategorised/3046-patto-per-l-amministrazione-condivisa-e-nuovo-regolamento#cosa-sono-la-progettazione-e-la-programmazione-condivisa>. See the cited document *Un Nuovo Patto per l'Amministrazione condivisa* section 7 and section 8 (43-45).

you have to have a space for tolerance. But there is no change. There is no change. This is a big problem. But it is true. That is, you risk aesthetics”.

(Fausto Viviani, *Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna*)¹³⁹

*“Of course, the focus here is on trying to help those who want to **create impact**. But it also has to be said that for certain things, a certain kind of impact is almost a **commodity** now. That is, you don't meet people anymore who tell you that they want to do business whatever the cost, that they don't care about the environment, that they don't respect people, that they harass their employees. Because, assuming you can prove it, of course nobody tells you that anymore. Because it's so far out of the vocabulary, a certain kind of thing, that this kind of **framework** is almost **taken for granted**. And almost taken for granted because, unfortunately, but also fortunately on the other hand, you push so much on what is **greenwashing, pinkwashing**”.*

(Vittoria San Pietro, *MUG*)¹⁴⁰

So it's definitely a **struggle**. It's not that I'm acting in a vacuum, no. Because anyway, we have found now that **in most of the sectors that are covered by the economy, you can have a social solidarity economy that has a formalized legal framework**. We do it, there are cooperatives of all kinds and all types. We are now seeing the emergence of more and more social enterprises. There are, I mean, paradoxically, even B Corps, benefit corporations. So we have different forms that make us realize that **the dimensions of daily life and also of economic production can indeed be safely covered** from a certain point of view, that is, with the tools that we have at our disposal, although no one prohibits us from imagining others.

(Luca Tarantini, *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*)¹⁴¹

So it seems to me that the knot by which you have to measure yourself today, if you want to do something like this, is no longer, in my opinion, that there is an innovative part and there is a traditional part. But there is a part, but there is a **transformative dimension** that **challenges everybody**. Is it a **problem** or an **opportunity**? It depends, as always, doesn't it?

(Fausto Viviani, *Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna*)

¹³⁹ Interview with Fausto Viviani, spokesperson of *Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna* (Third Sector Forum of Emilia-Romagna) conducted in Bologna on 4 April 2022.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Vittoria San Pietro, the Head of MUG (Magazzini Generativi) Bologna, conducted in Bologna on 7 March 2022.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Luca Tarantini, project manager of *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* conducted in Bologna on 13 May 2022.

In this section I will discuss what kind of narratives circulate in the urban context of Bologna regarding the concepts of SSE and liminal. Considering that this label is still not so widespread even in an area like Bologna, where both public administration and organizations seem to be more familiar with expressions such as third sector, social economy or, to a lesser extent, solidarity economy. As argued in the first chapter, the label of Social and Solidarity Economy would make it possible to emphasize the diversity of practices (from less to more formal, from monetized to non-monetized, from voluntary to remunerated) that make up the plurality of mutualism and cooperation in a local context, while at the same time creating a greater convergence of often 'separated sectors', offering a more robust political orientation towards transformative change.

The eight SSE support agencies identified have different characteristics, relationships with public administration and roles in relation to SSE (see Table 5). *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* is a private foundation that is entirely publicly funded (by the Municipality and the University of Bologna), *Art-ER* is a regional body that supports investment and innovation in the territory, while *MUG*, *ISNET*, *Fondazione Yunus Italia* are private organizations. *Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna* and *Forum Economia Solidale Emilia-Romagna* are the representative bodies of the Third Sector and the Solidarity Economy respectively. Finally, there's the Metropolitan City of Bologna, represented in this analysis by the head of the Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy, Daniela Freddi.

Table 5. SSE support agencies interviewed

	<i>Year of establishment</i>	<i>Type of organization</i>	<i>Type of Activities</i>	<i>Relationship with the SSE</i>
Fondazione Innovazione Urbana	2018	Foundation	Urban regeneration research, development, co-production and communication	Research and promotion of urban collaborative economy, citizens activation
Art-ER	2019	Emilia-Romagna Joint Stock Consortium	Innovation, knowledge, attractiveness and internationalization of the territory	Technical support for implementing the regional law on solidarity economy
MUG	2021	Innovation hub	Smart working area, start-up accelerator, workshops, meetings	Acceleration dedicated to startups with a focus on social, environmental, and cultural impact
ISNET	2007	Association	Research	Research on social enterprises, Impact analysis
Fondazione Yunus Italia	2010	Foundation	Support, consultancy, research	Training and consultancy for micro-entrepreneurs
Forum Terzo Settore ER	1998	Association of Third Sector Organizations	Coordination, consultation	Representation of third sector organizations at the regional level
Forum Economia Solidale ER	2017	Assembly of Solidarity Economy Organizations	Coordination, consultation	Representation of affiliated solidarity economy organizations at the regional level

The interviews were analyzed using NVivo software (refer to Table 6) according to the questions outlined in the semi-structured interview described in Section Two of the methodology chapter, as well as insights from the texts themselves. Discussions with representatives from these agencies centered on the primary concerns regarding SSE as identified in the literature. These include the utilization of various labels and conceptualizations, potential risks and benefits, methods for measuring social value, and the role of public actors.

The Manifesto *L'economia al servizio delle persone. Verso il Piano Metropolitan per l'Economia Sociale* (The Economy at the Service of the People. Towards the Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy)¹⁴² will provide the contextual background, i.e. the official local government narrative, within which to read the discourses on SSE in the Bologna context.

Table 6. Topics emerged from the content analysis

Themes and sub-themes description	No. of Files	No. of References
Type of Organization	7	11
Challenges:	3	14
Accessibility	1	2
Digitization	1	1
Environment	2	2
Mutual aid	2	3

¹⁴² The Manifesto is available on the dedicated portal of the Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy: https://www.cittametropolitana.bo.it/portale/piano_metropolitano_economia_sociale. (Last accessed on 30 September 2023).

Proximity	2	4
Covid-19	7	17
Definitions of SSE:	8	32
Narratives	7	21
Limits	8	35
Research and Training	4	16
Risks	5	8
Role of the org. in relation to the SSE	10	49
Role of the public actor	8	61
Social value vs Marketing:	6	31
Method of analysis	2	6
Social impact	6	21
Transforming behaviors and habits	3	6
SSE vs mainstream economy	8	78

Source: NVivo software

Luca Tarantini, project manager at *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* (FIU), explains:

The general interest that guides the Foundation, and thus the two founding partners in its creation, is clearly to try to narrate and influence what urban transformations are in the different dimensions and connotations that it has. One of the main connotations I would like to emphasize is clearly that of the civic imagination, which aims to narrate, but more generally to operate, the transformation of the city in a coordinated way through the participation of citizens. It is clear, however, that we are a bit far from the perspective of the social and solidarity economy, in the sense that we are nevertheless moving on a thread that is that of public funding, and with public funding we carry out our activities.

We try, wherever possible, to pursue activities, projects, even with services of an economic matrix that can go to hit, to affect those goals on which we do not reach. But clearly we have a somewhat, shall we say, limited vision in terms of establishing new economic principles as we understand them, that is, what we can do. In other words, we are basically a research center. But we also do other things. And we try, in short. I mean, I would be inclined to say that the capacitation of civic forces is definitely a step toward a new way of thinking about economics.

Mario Ottolenghi explains the role of *Art-ER* as follows:

I am in charge of the environmental unit of Art-ER, which is the development agency of the region. And I've been following the solidarity economy from the beginning, from the embryonic stage of the law. Because from the very beginning the region identified Art-ER as a technical structure to support the birth of the bodies under the law, as well as a technical secretariat, let's say, of the various meetings and the management of them. So I have a little historical memory. I am part of the Regional Observatory provided for by the law itself, together with two colleagues, Marco Deriu, from the University of Parma, and Dario Tuorto, from the University of Reggio or Bologna.

MUG, in the words of its manager Vittoria San Pietro, “is EmilBanca's project to give back to the territory through urban regeneration”. EmilBanca is a local cooperative bank with a 125-year history:

The idea of this place is to be the responsible market player that encourages the birth of new enterprises. New enterprise, whether start-up or traditional enterprise.

Both trying to increase the territorial attractiveness to retain the talent that you have, and basically becoming attractive to those from outside so that they can find a little more fertile ecosystem to start a new entrepreneurial activity. There's obviously a focus on the third sector or the nonprofit world and impact. But there is also a great openness to those who want to do the classic startup.

Laura Bongiovanni, President of *ISNET*, clearly defines her association's positioning by utilizing the language of social entrepreneurship.

ISNET is a second-level network that brings together, to date, 1,300 social impact enterprises distributed throughout Italy, and these are therefore social cooperatives according to law 381, but also entities that have entered less recently, let's say fully, in the field of social economy. I'm referring, for example, to limited liability social enterprises, which have thus acquired the status of social enterprise, and I'm referring to benefit societies, which have been created, as you probably already know, with the 2016 Financial Stability Law in Italy. So it's a landscape that has gradually diversified from social cooperation, the heart of social entrepreneurship in Italy, and has these new opportunities that the same law has offered to companies. We are in the business of accompanying, of studying the phenomenon of the social economy. That is, of that entrepreneurship that through its activities has a simultaneous social and economic impact. So we do not follow the activity of associations, for example, because there is no entrepreneurial aspect, because it's not in our core, let's say.

Fondazione Yunus Italia (formerly *Fondazione Grameen Italia*), as its name suggests, is inspired by 'the world's banker to the poor' and its main goal is to spread the idea of microcredit and micro-entrepreneurship in the Italian context. As Pio del Lorenzis, former head of the advisory and microcredit department, points out:

The Foundation was established in 2010, the result of a collaboration between the University of Bologna, the Unicredit Foundation, which in fact then allocated what are the assets of the Grameen

Foundation Italy, and the Grameen Trust, then an entity closely related to the Grameen Bank founded by Yunus.

When the Foundation was set up, its main objective was research. That is, the idea was to conduct research to understand how microcredit, according to the model introduced by Professor Muhammad Yunus, could be replicated in a Western context such as Italy.

Then in 2016 there was a change, and the foundation went from research, which we still do anyway because we do projects with the University of Bologna, to being operational on the topic of microcredit. And so we introduced training, but also workshops for aspiring entrepreneurs.

So basically you identify people who may have vulnerabilities and may not have access to credit, but they have a business idea, and then these people take a path and then access the financial instrument of microcredit, so that with the financing they start their business and become economically independent. We were able to do this because at a certain point microcredit was included in the Consolidated Banking Act.

The spokesperson of *Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna*, Fausto Viviani, outlines the extensive history of the Third Sector, placing special emphasis on mutualism as its foundation.

Two centuries. It was born with mutual aid. It comes from mutual aid societies, just to give you an idea of when it started. Even in the Middle Ages, some people say with the Misericordie Confraternities. So it was born, of course, in emergencies or great conflicts. So it has an ancient history, the third sector. Now they call it the third sector because... first sector, second sector, let's say logics of modern times, but actually it has a very ancient history. I say what I'm interested in, it was born with mutualism, that is, it was born with peasant struggles, workers struggles, the birth of mutual aid societies that were both secular and Catholic. And that in mutual aid, from mutual aid came political parties, from mutual aid came the trade union... In fact, first the trade union is formed, then the political parties are formed.

Stefano Carati, President of the *Forum Economia Solidale Emilia-Romagna*, tells the story that led to the creation of the Forum as a bottom-up participatory process:

The Solidarity Economy Forum was established by virtue of a regional law, Regional Law No. 19 of 2014. It is entitled 'Norms for the promotion and support of the solidarity economy'. Here I think it's interesting, if I understand a little bit the approach of your research, that this law was built in a participatory way between subjects of the solidarity economy, so solidarity purchasing groups, producers, in short realities that refer to the solidarity economy, and some councilors of this legislature of the Emilia Romagna region. So it was a journey that lasted about three years in which this law was built together, practically. So I think this is already a significant element.

The Forum, that is, this law basically, [...] this law basically aims to recognize and promote the solidarity economy in the region, and it basically provides for three basic institutions, which are the Forum, which you can identify, in a simple form, as the assembly of grassroots realities of the solidarity economy that enroll and want to enroll. Currently there are about sixty realities that are registered in the Forum. Then the Solidarity Economy Permanent Table and the Solidarity Economy Observatory.

Finally, Daniela Freddi, in charge of the Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy, illustrates the rationale behind this new initiative, emphasizing its political dimension:

It was precisely the mayor's intuition to build a plan in Bologna, to have a plan in Bologna for the social and solidarity economy. This is something, if you like, original enough. In the sense that at the moment Italy does not have a plan for the social and solidarity economy and neither does the region of Emilia Romagna. And so, in fact, we're going directly, at least from, let's say, a symbolic, political, evocative level, from the European level to the local level.

Examining these organizations' self-definition and role in relation to SSE reveals distinct but often intertwined perspectives. Figure 12 presents an AI-generated graphical summary of the primary ideas derived from the ten interviews with members.

Figure 12. Key Concepts Extrapolated with AI from Interviews with SSE Support Agencies



Source: realized with Atlas.ti software

The manifesto *L'economia al servizio delle persone* acknowledges the challenges confronting the Bologna metropolitan area, viewing them as long-term digital, ecological, and demographic transitions, compounded by singularities with disruptive consequences, such as the pandemic or the war in Ukraine. In line with the European Union Action Plan, the manifesto (*L'economia al servizio delle persone*, 2022: 9) adopts the term social economy and presents a comprehensive definition while adopting a bold position in its respect.

‘The residual nature to which the social economy has long been confined is not justified by objective elements which, on the contrary, outline a reality with strong development potential. Precisely because the social economy is based on the need to respond to social needs and aspirations, it has a strong capacity for adaptation and innovation, as the pandemic period has demonstrated. Due to its great heterogeneity, held together by a framework of common purpose and vision, the social economy is at the same time an instrument of democracy, of people's participation in social and economic processes, of welfare and industrial policy’.

In fact, the social economy is regarded as 'one of the most resilient realities', an essential element of industrial policy, and a means of promoting local development. Furthermore, it is recognized as a key policy instrument for achieving the objectives set forth in the 2021-2026 mandate.¹⁴³

The person responsible for the plan recognizes the significance of acknowledging the political and policy implications of categorization for successful implementation:

It's good, it's useful to clarify the concepts because they then have a whole series of consequences in terms of policy actions. We will work on that in part. It is indeed one of the main problems. Both in Italy and in Europe. Yesterday they told me, the delegation from Emilia Romagna, they said that one of the main tasks that the Commission is doing is precisely to understand who these subjects are, who is inside, also to homogenize, so to speak, the European picture a little bit more. So there's no doubt that this

¹⁴³ The document *La Grande Bologna. Per non lasciare indietro nessuno* (The Great Bologna. To leave no one behind) contains the official mandate lines 2021-2026 and is available at: https://www.comune.bologna.it/myportal/C_A944/api/content/download?id=61f9071e2b5f5be009a5eba5d.

problem exists and it's very clear to me, just as it's clear to me the important repercussions it has when you want to go and carry out interventions, that's all.

Examining the definitions of the phenomena described as SSE in my thesis, I have identified four primary categories utilized by the support agencies under review: third sector, social economy, solidarity economy, and social entrepreneurship. Generally, it is recognized that language labels hold substantial significance, *'because - in the words of ISNET's president - behind the language, let's say consciously, sometimes even unconsciously, there are hidden positions and visions'*.

At first glance, it appears that in the discourses analyzed, the interviewees tend to distinguish between the social economy and the solidarity economy, while the third sector and social entrepreneurship are frequently utilized interchangeably or as components of the social economy. In the first place, it appears that the term solidarity economy is not always recognized, as illustrated by the words of one of the FIU members interviewed: *'maybe you can enlighten me on the issue of solidarity, because I have never studied/interpreted this version. In the sense that I studied social economy. But the connotation of solidarity, maybe you can give me some clues. Because I don't know if it's just a matter of, I don't know, if it's just a matter of toponymy, so to speak'*.

To quote the president of the Emilia-Romagna Solidarity Economy Forum: *'Yes, it's a little different from the social economy. In short, a slightly different approach that is very much based on the relationship between... It was born with a different, relational approach, between consumer and producer, let's say. So it presupposes a direct relationship'*.

It is unclear whether the 'isolation' of the solidarity economy is a result of identity choice or institutional exclusion. Most likely, a combination of both. In any case, this division bears some crucial questions. Art-ER member interviewed explains that in relation to the solidarity economy forum:

The [Emilia-Romagna] Region has always struggled a bit to understand, so the institutional side has always struggled to understand why an additional channel of dialogue should be created when, especially in a Region like ours, the channels of interaction with the third sector world are already

established and well defined. These include everything from Legacoop¹⁴⁴ to all forms of cooperation that are structured in some way. This is a strength, if you will, in the sense of a very strong point of identity, but from my point of view it is also a very critical point. In the sense that in the dogged pursuit of that uniqueness, we very often end up missing opportunities.

With respect to elaborating on who is included within the universe of SSE, Daniela Freddi identifies two important distinctions to be made: one between '*for-profit companies that also have a social or philanthropic commitment*' and SSE entities; the other between '*realities that have employment and realities that don't*'. The reason is that '*there is a piece of this world that has a lot of employment, especially in our region, has a lot of employees. I'm referring mainly to the cooperative world, and therefore has a whole set of needs, issues, etc., that are still different from a small cooperative or association*'.

According to other respondents, the boundaries between for-profit and nonprofit will become increasingly blurred as organizations experiment and innovate. Third sector representative at Emil Banca (MUG) states:

It is clear that today, in the hybrid management of entities that seek to start from nonprofit, to move toward profit for sustainability, but at the same time also take somewhat circuitous paths to get to values. It is not a shock because, for example, legal forms of governance can be stressed to achieve certain goals. Even to do something social.

This leads us to the contentious relationship between SSE and the 'mainstream economy'. The various narratives at play can be synthesized through hybridization, cooptation, complementarity, and transformation.

The FIU interviewee defines co-optation as the chameleon-like ability of 'capitalism' to adapt to criticism by incorporating different practices without producing substantial change.

¹⁴⁴ Legacoop is the oldest (1886) and most representative Cooperative Federation in Italy: <https://www.legacoop.coop/>.

And then another issue is clearly monitoring, because in a second this stuff becomes social washing, green washing, and then... Because this is basically what capitalism is. It is able to take, to find out what its shortcomings are, and at the marketing level, as you wrote, to turn them around. But without materializing anything. I mean, and in fact we still have it in our way because of this chameleon-like ability to adapt, yes, to make [others'] instances its own. Which is the whole story that is rooted in the no-global movements.

Awareness of this problematic dynamic of change is evident in all the interviews, albeit with different nuances, with the exception of the interview with the representative of *Fondazione Yunus Italia*. In this case, the focus of the conversation is on producing effective entrepreneurs, that is to say, *'aligning all the skills of entrepreneurs a little bit, giving them a background that allows them to be full-fledged entrepreneurs'*. There is a vague reference to *'individuals who may have vulnerabilities'* but with a business idea, who are then trained: *'A first module is a module of empowerment of the person: even before we understand the person as an entrepreneur, we try for a moment to re-motivate them, to help them focus on what their goals and aspirations are from a professional point of view and whatnot'*.

The idea that there are constraints to putting SSE into practice underlies the narratives that emerge from the interviews, because *'it's a very utopian question at the moment'* (FIU) or *'it's a bit of a fairy tale world'* (MUG).

At the same time, the urgency of a different socio-economic paradigm is recognized. In this light, SSE can also be understood as complementary to capitalist practices. And this complementarity can be seen to operate in different ways.

But I personally think that it could, indeed should, be understood as a mechanism to counteract the degeneration of the capitalist economy. And so, in my opinion, it's not an economic system that has to, that goes to fill gaps, but it should become comparable to the mainstream. (Luca Tarantini, FIU)

Elements of potential conflict are recognized in this evolving relationship. This appears to be true when cooperative practices are attacked for being corrupt or when alternative practices are confronted with the power of extractive platforms such as in the case of *Consegne Etiche*.

And when I studied the market for a cooperative system, it was just the boom years of the fake cooperatives and the whole mud machine that was going on with respect to an industry that is just that. In fact, there were the famous, you'd say, "ah, but you're cooperatives..." So let's say that it's also often the mainstream system that carries out a real form of, I don't know how to say, harassment, right? Because at the time when a market that is capitalist, extractive market, that leads us to have situations of both economic and social imbalance. So from the point of view of rights, where career advancement, let's call it, is now a mirage, job enhancement ditto, it seems clear to me that the moment there are virtuous phenomena and everything revolves around these, these virtuous systems, it scares the gains, as to say, yes, only the gain of the market tout court, the traditional market.

Going back to the question of Consegne Etiche, the social economy is often and often fused precisely with the concept of conflict, even labor conflict, on the basis of rights. And it's inevitable, I think, to think that for the affirmation of certain rights, whether it's labor rights... Let's take, let's take the formalization of labor and then labor law... It's inevitable, I think, to support the affirmation of labor rights from a redistributive perspective. Not only in terms of redistribution, but also in terms of quality of work in general.

Indeed, as Matthaei and Slaats (2023: 26) remind us: 'No society, past or present, is purely one or the other [inequality vs solidarity paradigm], and present day societies all contain elements of each. In fact, it is helpful to place various systems on a from-inequality-to-solidarity spectrum'. Coexistence with capitalist practices, therefore, is obviously not the same as filling the gaps or the void. Luca Tarantini applies his reasoning to the context of Emilia-Romagna:

Emilia Romagna is one of the cases, and I think you have chosen it not for nothing, both from the point of view of knowledge and just the adherence of the region to a concept, to an economic vision that then clearly goes hand in hand... That is, we are also one of those big regions where now construction sites are going to start everywhere, and so on. So the two kinds of economic visions go in parallel,

sometimes they overlap, but rarely. And yet here they are, so to speak, in contexts like this, I have a hard time seeing them as the over... that is, as the social economy that fits into a gap left by the market, because basically the market hardly leaves gaps, especially today, even in 2022. So it's really a question of vision. And it is a vision of those who implement it concretely.

This tension between 'Business as Usual' and alternative forms of mutualism, defined here as SSE, is effectively depicted through a cinematic analogy by Fausto Viviani.

*So Dances With Wolves is like this. What does he do? He comes from the white world, meets the Native Americans, sees their potential. He comes back to say, "Look, they are not what you think. You can do a lot of things with them. But that doesn't happen in Dances With Wolves because there's confrontation. And Dances With Wolves is Kevin Costner. You can choose to be Kevin Costner. Finished badly in the movie. But it's an extraordinary experience, it's a beautiful movie. It was a great success and the message is beautiful. When he dances with the wolves, it is an extraordinary moment. It means you can do it. And then, **between this world and the more traditional world, you can do a work that is not about 'I exist insofar as they oppose me', which is the conclusion of Dances with Wolves. No, 'I exist insofar as I am a legacy'. But I realize that this legacy has to be put into something else, which is the transformative capacity, which is not only about me, but also about other interlocutors with whom I can do this common transformation.***

In fact, alongside the notion of a continuously constrained space of action for cooperative economic practices, another powerful idea, that of transformation, emerges from some of the interviews. Again, the spokesperson of the Emilia-Romagna Third Sector Forum begins the discussion with a resolute assertion regarding the necessity of a transformative dimension for SSE and beyond.

You happened to be at a time when somehow... Basically, the key word that I would make a conceptual investment in is, "What is transformation today?" Because it has changed the paradigm. There's a phrase, rightly so, that says "we don't have to go back to normality because normality is the problem". But if that is the case, then what you described is still true... But it no longer has those characteristics. Why is that? Because of so many reasons, of course. Then you can make the list of why we are all in a

transformative dimension, right? You can then go and identify what are the factors that affect the whole social solidarity economy today as a function of the need for transformation, change, innovation.

In his view, current challenges, including migration, digitalization, the environment, the pandemic, proximity, domiciliary care, and home care, require change. Their relevance has been observed during a series of crises and traumatic events, necessitating societal and collective action and reflection in order to tackle them.

I think today we need to rethink mutual aid as I described it to you. Mutual aid, of course, of the 21st century. And so it changes completely because the society is not what it was then, but basically we practiced an extraordinary mutual aid.

There are different positions at play here: *'we can imagine an overcoming, a paradigm shift that is clearly realized in the long term and in a gradual way'* (FIU). This language suggests a gradual transition without necessarily implying a less profound transformation. In other cases, the transformative potential of SSE is emphasized, as in the narrative of the president of ISNET.

*So through an impact analysis we understood, and from our point of view, that this **detonating capacity** of the social impact enterprise **to transform also the behaviors and attitudes of an economic system and the actors** that populate it, is a very interesting and very current capacity. And so if you ask me what is the language that we are most familiar with today, I would say that this one that refers to the transformative economy, meaning by this term an economy that is capable of generating precisely in a more technical language a social impact that contaminates, that is, that in turn produces and triggers transformations.*

The President of the Solidarity Economy Forum of Emilia-Romagna advocates for the strategy of *contamination* to drive change in the 'mainstream' economy as well as *'to make sure that in the political administrative planning of the Region, in the context of all its activities, the principles of the solidarity economy in some way were assumed'*.

The world of the solidarity economy is a bottom-up world that is slowly trying to promote and develop practices that can contaminate even the economy, say the mainstream economy. We have no illusions. It is a long road that requires... But as I said, another key point is to raise awareness of these issues.

At the level of knowledge production and dissemination, it is clear that SSE is not widely integrated into academic curricula or public discourse, and there is low public awareness among citizens.

So there is also the whole question of knowledge. That is, even at the academic level there is a mainstream, and it is not possible that there are only two or three faculties...(FIU)

So clearly there is a lot of ignorance today, because we don't know what some realities do, what kind of services they do. I mean, a lot of people who don't know that their children's after-school program is run by that cooperative. They don't know that the elderly person is taken care of by that cooperative. I mean, they don't have an idea of what the approach is somehow, which sometimes is not necessarily always, qualitatively speaking, special. (MUG)

Several interviewees have indicated that public institutions play a critical role in strengthening SSE. This can be accomplished by increasing its visibility, promoting SSE-related education and training, and monitoring its progress over time.

I know for a fact that it can never be the administration that shows the way. But there are cases where certain realities, and I go back to the virtuous cases I mentioned earlier [Consegne Etiche, Il Passo della Barca, Camilla], if they are promoted in a structured way, if they are reinforced and communicated in an effective and structured way, they can definitely create the conditions for there to be scalability of certain phenomena. (FIU)

But this is only part of the story.

*There is another issue: **resources**. That is, the administration, in addition to trying to change the paradigm by improving, promoting and publicizing what is being done, can also clearly provide for the implementation of resources, **because without them we do nothing**. And therefore provide for*

rewards at the resource level, ad hoc calls... But in general also, how to say, the promotion of public-private partnerships in all forms. (FIU)

The significance of political decisions in this context is evident, acknowledging the constraints imposed on both local and national governments regarding public intervention. These limitations stem from several factors, such as market competition principles and EU regulations (*'you can never make laws that are damaging, that affect entrepreneurs and so on'*), as well as political legitimacy (*'there are also a lot of people who say: "Yes, that's fine, however I may think I can do it, but the market is like that"'*).

Although things are changing at different institutional levels. The director of the Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy underscores that we are currently experiencing an uncommon phase for the SSE, which presents a 'window of opportunity' that should be seized. Recalling a conversation with Gianluca Salvatori, a distinguished authority in the field and general secretary of Euricse, she tells me:

He said precisely that "we are living in an exceptional moment". In the sense that, in addition to the European Action Plan, he recalled precisely the positions of the ILO and the OECD on these very issues. So, in my opinion, he is saying, precisely to reinforce what you have said, that we are really living in an exceptional moment. A window, because I think he sees it as a window that will close at some point. And that is why it is necessary to concentrate maximum efforts. So, precisely, to reinforce what you have said, that there has been, at this stage, a strong, so to speak, evolution of elaboration and institutional attention also on this issue.

My question about the potential risks associated with SSE integration prompted my interviewee to reflect on a previously overlooked issue: *'That's a good question. I have to say that I only saw, let's say, opportunities there. But it's a fair question. I would have to think about it. Maybe so coldly, and I will think about it, I see two risks'*.

The first risk pertains to the reallocation of resources and accurately identifying those who are genuinely aligned with policy objectives.

Then, in my opinion, when a large window of thematic attention of discussion but also of resources opens up anyway, that is, the risk is that, as is physiological to happen, there is a strong reorientation of subjects and policies towards this area. It is quite physiological. In the sense that if the discourse is that we're now paying attention to this issue, and we're not just paying attention to it on the level of, let's say, academic definitional debate, but we're defining it in terms of policy and the resources are going there, this spontaneously causes a strong reorientation. Now, it is precisely when things become so massive that the risk can be that, to use a Bolognese expression, "tiri su un po' il lusco e il brusco". That is, in the sense that you lose the ability, perhaps, to select what are really the lines and initiatives that really reflect, so to speak, those directions. I think that could be a risk.

Daniela Freddi reflects on the potential impact of ambiguous objectives on policy effectiveness. Unclear objectives may lead to inappropriate actions or the employment of particular methods to achieve the wrong goals.

If you don't clarify yourself, you run the risk of jumping into a line without clarifying the objectives and therefore implementing them, without really verifying that you are implementing actions that respond to your objectives, to the objectives that you had somehow set for yourself with these initiatives.

In this respect, Italy lacks the necessary culture of evaluation of public policies, says Freddi.

But what I want to say is that it would be correct, and in fact in my opinion this is also a starting point for the work of Bologna, it would be correct, this is a point, a flaw in political action... Certainly at the Italian national level, where it is difficult to make an evaluation of public policies. I mean, it's very rare, I don't know, I've seen very few, if any. But because in Italy we don't have the culture of evaluating public policies. That is, things are done, but then no one really goes to see...

These are not the only risks linked to institutional attention. Converting bottom-up practices into institutional processes could compromise the alternative dimension, potentially diluting radicalism as solidarity practices are translated into policies. As Art-ER's member, who has followed the process of the regional law on the solidarity economy, acknowledges:

*I told you, the **biggest misunderstanding** is that **they represent a form of alternative economy that can no longer be so alternative when you activate paths of this kind here.** Because these paths here...you place yourself within a law, you place yourself within the mechanisms of, within processes in which **part of the alternative there is denied by the very principle of regional law.** (Art-ER)*

There is indeed a dimension of SSE that Dinerstein (2013: 11) calls *excess*: 'SSE movements venture beyond, with little certainty about their praxis, which is facilitated by ongoing collective self-reflection and self-learning (*aprendizaje*). The fact that the law or policy demarcate the terrain of 'what exists' and 'what does not exist' (legibility) does not mean that SSE practices that are moving beyond those parameters do not exist at all. Following Vázquez (2011: 36) the possibility of translation 'begs the question of untranslatability: so what is that which remains untranslatable, outside the scope of translation?' SSE practice is about shaping absences and as we have seen, it produces excesses (e.g. food sovereignty) that have no representation in the grammar of the state policy and therefore remains untranslatable'.

Again, there seems to be a difference between the solidarity economy as represented by the regional forum and the more traditional third sector or social economy. They have somewhat different approaches and there is lack of communication and cooperation between them. And the solidarity economy is blamed for being too identitarian. The metaphor of the *Indian reserve* is mentioned by both Fausto Viviani ('*The point is if you want to carve out a space where you can do whatever you want and that's it. Okay, the reserve. Then the reserve is small, it's big, whatever, no problem, it's a reserve.*') and Marco Ottolenghi ('*For me, this stuff about creating and defending the Indian reservation... I don't know. I don't know how much, how much this can pay*'). According to him, this tension is still unresolved within the same Solidarity Economy Forum: '*And that's a big element of weakness, because when your interlocutor institution understands this weakness here, this lack of convergence and oneness of vision, between, we are completely alternative and not...*'.

With particular reference to the solidarity economy, there is also the recognition that dialogue between institutions and grassroots initiatives is problematic in terms of divergences in timing, decision-making methods, and language communication which often seem insurmountable.

From the point of view of the regional administration, *'you also have to make some compromises that perhaps distort this uniqueness, this peculiarity a little bit'; 'there is a need for some literacy, literacy in the rules of the game'; and the timing of the consensus method 'is not the right timing if you want to confront institutions'*. Although Ottolneghi also admits some limitations that form part of the regional government as well, in terms of lack of sensitivity of some public administrations or sectors, lack of funding especially for the dissemination of SSE principles (*'the budget allocation was much more to support the realities of the field than to disseminate principles'*), not clear governance on the Solidarity Economy Law (*'there is a bit of a mess about the governance of this system'*).

On part of the Solidarity Economy Forum, other difficulties are encountered: *'I must say that the path is long and arduous, not easy. It's not as if we've achieved particularly impressive results. Also because, I mean, the legislature ended, when the law was passed, it was at the end of one legislature, then there was another one, now there is another one. **So each time I don't say we had to start over, but in short, almost.** Then, of course, **there are the difficulties and complexities of dealing with the regional administration, which has become very complex and articulated.** So we, somewhat as newcomers, often struggle to understand what are the roads, the ways, the paths to follow in order for a certain project line to be accepted. **There is also a diversity of languages, so in the beginning the approach and even the terms we use are often not fully perceived and understood by the regional administration'**.*

The problem with translation may be linked to what Fausto Vivian calls 'the risk of aesthetics': marketing strategies tend to overshadow the necessity for more profound changes, both in terms of alliances with actors outside the SSE and in terms of the need to develop new practices.

*It must be determined whether these alliances are based on **aesthetics** or **ethics**. That is, do they have substance that somehow structures the model and offers a model that is practiced with a sense of dignity? Or is it just a marketing operation? Such operations are now quite common in environmental*

issues, given the current sensitivity around the issue. But they certainly promote more virtuous behavior. Are these virtuous behaviors enough to address the anxious questions about sustainability, compatibility, and the fate of the world? Frankly, I see no alternatives.

One of the major constraints of the SSE appears in the discourse on the power dimension.

*Using the word paint is perfect. And that is the theme. **Moving from “paint” to structure.** That's another subject. So you don't approach it from here. There is not. You can do two things. On the one hand **you can promote sensitivity.** That's right. That is, the **demand for structural change.** You can promote that. **You can also do some practice,** which has limits, because it helps with awareness and so on. But the proposal for structural change... I don't know if that comes from here. Honestly. Here you can prepare the ground. Preparing the ground, the experiences... The structural change that puts solidarity, the social economy, sustainability etc. etc. at the center, which for your age and your generation is a legitimate, a legitimate expectation, I don't know if it comes from here. Because to get from here to there, **you have to measure yourself against the power...** with those who make the decisions. With whom... Or **rather, with the powers,** not with the power. I wish there was power. **Because when there is power, you put yourself in its place. In our society, in our world, that is not the case.** But it is true that you can make alliances, even with the powers.*

Various interviewees stress the importance of raising awareness regarding the issues brought up by SSE movements. They highlight the significant hindrance of not being able to effectively communicate their actions and processes.

Because even they don't map the value of what they're doing. But because it costs money to do that kind of work. I mean, it's not like everybody has the skills to do that. (FIU)

Because until now, all these realities have never considered it important to tell their stories. They took it for granted that people knew them, but in fact people don't know them. So it is not surprising that they are now thriving on social impact budgets, which have become more of a requirement. (MUG)

But we took the initiative precisely because we were animated by this visible consciousness: “You are not telling yourselves, tell yourselves”! Because others are doing it. Maybe they are not doing anything. But they tell their stories. And these are doing instead. (ISNET)

As discussed in the first chapter, mapping and communicating social and environmental value can be complex, resource-intensive, and require specific skills. This is recognized by my interlocutors. For instance, Luca Tarantini observes my selection of case studies, stating, '*admittedly, even there they are all realities, all projects that are difficult to evaluate at the level of impact monitoring*' (FIU).

This is particularly true in the solidarity economy, where more informal and non-monetized practices are often at play:

*We are not there yet. I mean, we are at the beginning. So even if you evaluate the turnover that the solidarity economy is doing, there is no specific data here. Just because it's an evolving world, it's a world, let's say, of families and then people who do this kind of activity as volunteers. There is no structure, except for a few situations. There is no structure of employees, of people who work full time in the field. There are social cooperatives that are registered, there are solidarity emporiums, there are employees there, but let's say **all the work that is done, even the relationship with the region, is volunteer work**. So we don't have a specific number. We know that there are many GAS in Italy, many formal, that is, set up as associations, many also informal, so they have no legal status, but they are simply grassroots groups. And **we don't have an in-depth study that quantifies, let's say, the turnover of these economies**. (Forum Economia Solidale Emilia-Romagna)*

The measurement and communication of social value are crucial for various reasons. One, it addresses the lack of awareness surrounding SSE organizations and their activities, thereby reducing the number of uninformed citizens who are unaware of their existence. The public sector plays a critical role in accomplishing this objective by measuring, assessing, and monitoring outcomes and simultaneously offering incentives for the value created to foster change. The importance of volunteering is acknowledged, but as stated by Alberto Montanari, '*we know very well that the spirit of volunteering is not always the best, especially when it comes to doing things in a concrete and serious way*' (MUG).

On the other hand, it may help address the marketing tactics used by interested parties, commonly referred to as greenwashing, pinkwashing, and social washing, and resist the capitalist cooptation of SSE practices.

Laura Bongiovanni, from ISNET, firmly believes that discerning genuine social value from marketing can rely on objective indicators: *'I think the question is already answered. That is, **the company has to demonstrate, I think, with objective indicators, for example those that can be derived from a social impact analysis, what is the extent of the changes achieved by the initiative***'. While Luca Tarantini problematizes: *'you know better than I do that impact assessment is not something that they don't do because they don't want to do it. First of all, **it is very expensive. Very few people really know how to do it, and more importantly, not even all the criteria are aligned with what the concept of assessment is. So we don't have... We have different models, different evaluation systems that don't always give the same answers. And I'm not saying that we should sanctify one method. I am saying that we should invest more in the research that is inherent to it, in order to have plans that are more or less homogeneous, or that have criteria that remain the same regardless of the method.***

Despite its limitations and potential risks, there is widespread recognition that SSE is resilient, diffuse, and beneficial to societal well-being. Although these considerations may appear contradictory, they emphasize the challenge of understanding dynamic social environments and the contentious political issues at stake, which are inherently unresolved. SSE could potentially play a significant role in addressing the various challenges that we must confront. Ottolenghi noted that in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, *'where everything fell apart, the solidarity economy was consolidated'*.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ The Fondazione Innovazione Urbana has conducted a series of studies on mutualism in Bologna during the pandemic. The dossiers are accessible at <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/rinnovarelacitta-osservatorio>. The initial dossier states: "After the outbreak of the pandemic, there was a strong activation from below by more or less organized citizens, which led to the reinvention of methods and approaches, formal and informal networks and realities, with the aim of providing services related to the satisfaction of basic needs - food, medicine, etc. -. Such approaches have gradually been consolidated and used to meet other needs in the area, more related to the needs for sociability, listening, emotional and psychological closeness" (FIU, R-innovare la città - Osservatorio sull'emergenza Coronavirus, 2020: 6, available at: https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/images/Osservatorio_Emergenza/DOSSIER_MUTUALISMO_1_PARRTE.pdf).

As is typical during times of crisis, the pandemic has sped up and, to some extent, worsened societal changes in a non-linear fashion, similar to any complex phenomenon.

Covid-19 emerged in only two interviews, the broadest from the perspective of the topics discussed, with Fausto Viviani and Luca Tarantini. The first emphasized its impact on our ways of living and the capacity of SSE organizations to promptly adapt and answer to emergencies as well as emerging social needs.

And of sure, as part of the transformative processes, contexts emerge that were not relevant yesterday, but are now. For example, domiciliary care, the home where you live. Has the role of the home where you live changed within these two experiences [the war in Ukraine and Covid-19]? Hell, yes, it has changed. Secondly, but then will you go back as before? But no, you can't go back as before. And so, how does this change, which has served to cope with the pandemic, affect me on the social and solidarity economy of tomorrow?

*Also because what was done with the pandemic and what we are doing now with refugees, with welcoming, etc., etc., are in some ways already transformative practices. Examples? During the pandemic, people could not leave their homes. A lot of people could not leave their homes. So what happened? That **the third sector world came together**, that is already..., in the area. And there are **those who brought food, there are those who accompanied to services, those who made phone calls, those who brought medicine to the homes of people who could not go out.***

The way people experience the connection with space has changed, with proximity becoming more crucial for social wellbeing. Fausto Viviani, once again, offers a poignant consideration of what this could imply:

My generation has lived with the idea of globalization, of more and more integration, of a smaller and smaller, more and more integrated, more and more uniform, increasingly globalized world. It is the end, it is finished. It no longer has, it no longer holds. It does not hold. So the theme of proximity comes back, but it can be read in two ways: the 'small homeland', and that is why people vote for Orban or Putin; or the ability to put one's own territory, where

one operates, into a larger context. So also a rethinking of democracy itself, of how to revive or not revive this practice today.

In this dual role of proximity and necessity for greater communal relations, SSE could play a vital role in shifting towards a rethinking of democracy, as Viviani suggests, rather than a resurgence of nationalism and closure.

Digitalization also has a disruptive impact on social interaction, as evidenced by the prevalence of social media and online communication. This shift in communication methods has both positive and negative effects, but overall it is changing the way humans interact with each other in profound ways.

*Then you have digitization and the arrival of digital technologies. Look this is, this alone is a revolution and it **has elements of great concern because you act a separation between mind and body**. The social and the solidarity is such when the body and the mind are there, they are simultaneous, let's say. That is, if I were talking to you using the computer I would not be talking to you as I am talking to you now that it is you and me here. Why? But because it is normal to be like that. We are not - **the human being is not only mind, it is not only body. It is both**. (Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna)*

Finally, the environmental challenge is urgent, so that, according to Viviani, *'it seems clear that environmental issues are becoming more and more important, more and more central, whatever you want to call it. But again, there are other issues, there are elements that emerge that our reality, this transformation, is constantly confronting us with. For example, there is the question of, how do you say, there is a concept... That is, from the particular to the general. That is, it is clear that with the environment you have to do a double operation. On the one hand, of course, **you have to invest in the sustainability of production systems**, but on the other hand, **you have to act on the consciousness of people in terms of their lives, their behaviors, their logics...** Which, in a way, **many of these realities are already practicing**'.*

Competing narratives surround SSE in the Bologna context, occasionally overlapping or conflicting. Despite this, the need for transformative change and the significance of upcoming challenges are commonly acknowledged. Two of the case studies included in this thesis were established during the pandemic, specifically *Il Passo della Barca* and *Consegne Etiche*, while the other two, *Camilla* and *Arvaia*, continued their activities as they were considered essential during lockdown measures.¹⁴⁶ With these points in consideration, the next chapter will thoroughly examine the capacity of SSE organizations to effectively meet community needs at the local level.

¹⁴⁶ The March 22, 2020 decree by the Prime Minister identified the essential economic activities permitted to operate amid the lockdown period. Available at: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2020/03/22/76/sg/pdf>.

Chapter 5

Analyzing the Transformative Social and Solidarity Economy in the Urban Context: Researching an Italian Case Study

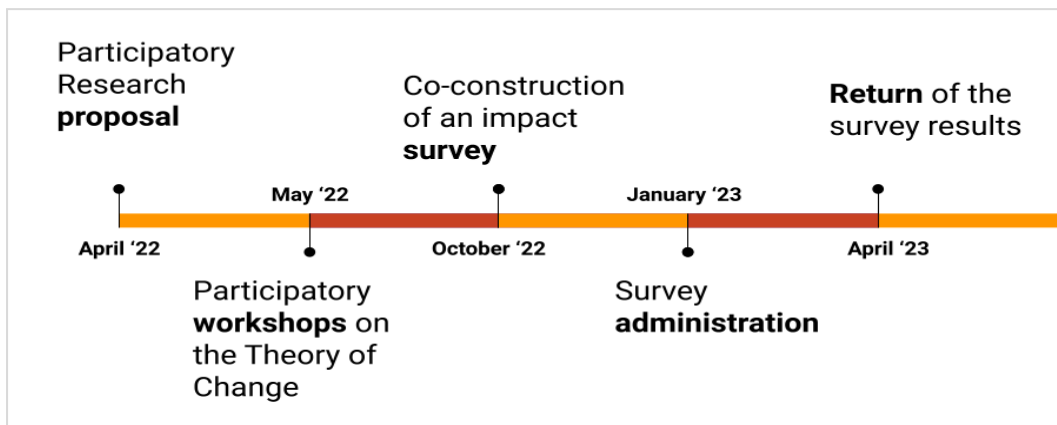
The research projects I will describe are focused on transforming ourselves as local economic *subjects*, who are acted upon and subsumed by the global economy, into subjects with economic *capacities*, who enact and create a diverse economy through daily practices both habitual (and thus unconscious) and consciously intentional.

(Gibson-Graham, 2003: 55)

The chapter analyzes the fieldwork carried out on four selected case studies: Camilla - Emporio di Comunità, Arvaia, Il Passo della Barca and Consegne Etiche. Each case study is presented in depth before drawing some lines of thought on hypotheses about transformative SSE through comparison.

In each case study, unique variations were observed in the interactions, feedback loops, and opportunities. Among all the case studies, the most successful action research was conducted with Camilla (as depicted in Figure 13). A participatory process was employed, utilizing the Theory of Change, with the volunteer members of Camilla's food cooperative to examine its social value and contribution to social change. A Theory of Change, specifically tailored to the food cooperative, was co-constructed with participants through exercises, discussions, and brainstorming about the organization's values, goals, stakeholders, and critical issues. This is explored in detail in section two (2.1) due to its significance in the action research aspect of this thesis. The data collected from each case study is then analyzed and compared with existing literature in the subsequent sections.

Figure 13. Timeline of PAR with Camilla food coop



Section One: Camilla: Redistributing value through fair supply chains and cooperation

The situation is urgent. One-third of all food goes to waste, and yet governments and other players in the food system are unable to prevent 820 million people from regularly going hungry. The food industry, especially, bears responsibility for the fact that 680 million people are obese, but it is largely governments and their citizens who have to pick up the costs of treatment. When industrial-scale farms draw copious quantities of water to irrigate crops, again it is taxpayers who foot the bill for the water scarcity that can follow. It's the same for agrochemicals and their effects on the health of people and ecosystems. Governments find themselves shouldering the costs of biodiversity loss, and mopping up agriculture's contribution to greenhouse-gas emissions. These hidden costs — or externalities — must be met, and last month a landmark report estimated them to be somewhere in the region of US\$12 trillion a year, rising to \$16 trillion by 2050. That is a staggering figure — equivalent to the gross domestic product of China. What is equally alarming is that these costs are not being regularly counted, and the food and agriculture industries seem to assume that the bill will be paid. That isn't right and has to change.

(Nature, 2019: 296)¹⁴⁷

“One thing that upsets me is that people are critical about the cost of food, right, that if they eat it, they become made of that.... People are willing to spend on an item of clothing, on other things, on a smartphone. I mean, on those other things they don't raise objections. They are not willing to pay for the trouble of producing it [food].”

(Camilla's member, participatory workshop - 5 May 2022)

¹⁴⁷ Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03117-y>.

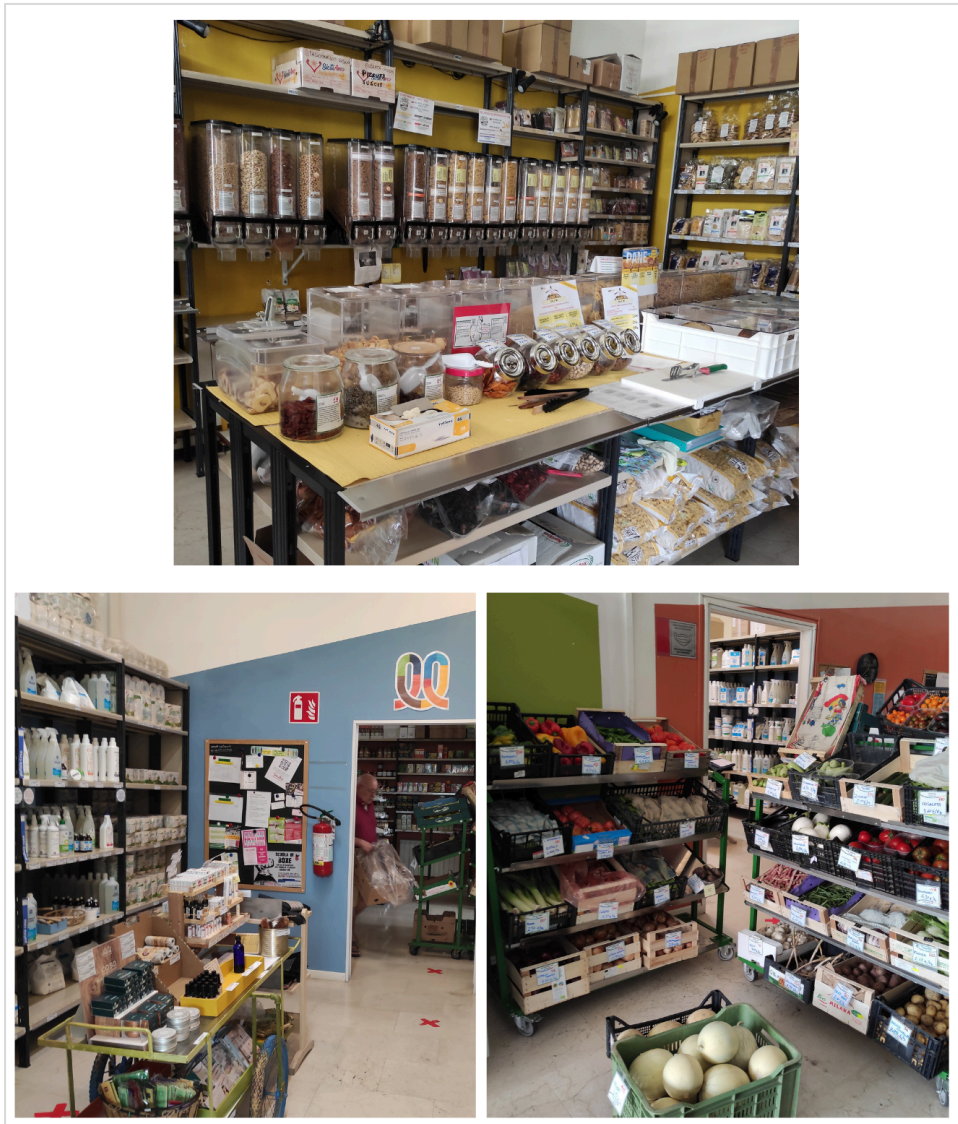
Camilla is a food cooperative (or community emporium, as it calls itself) operating within the solidarity economy framework. It is a part of the alternative food networks aiming to shorten the supply chain and promote solidarity among consumers, producers, the environment, and the Global South.¹⁴⁸ Although to the casual observer it may appear to be a small grocery store, compared to a supermarket, where members can purchase products (Figure 14), the food cooperative offers much more than a careful selection based on its ethical guidelines. In fact, Camilla's members are involved in a range of social, cultural and economic initiatives, both within and outside the cooperative, such as suspended shopping, public events, debates and visits to local producers, to name a few. Thanks to its cooperative structure, this project has become a thriving community that is constantly evolving. The innovative organizational model implies that the members of the food cooperative are at the same time customers (the only ones entitled to purchase), managers (since each member devotes two hours and forty-five minutes per month to run the cooperative) and owners (through their contribution to the cooperative's share capital).

The Emporium is open for a total of 41 hours per week, six days a week. Members are expected to contribute 2.45 hours every four weeks to Camilla's operations.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, members may choose to participate in working groups, which vary in number, activities, and commitment based on emerging needs, available resources, and member availability and energy. The organization comprises various working groups, such as the Membership Office, Administration, Team Referents, Communication, Computer Scientists, Production, Inventory Management, and TRAM (Responsible, Self-Managed, and Mutualist Tourism). The working groups are crucial and tangible examples of self-management and participation in the food cooperative, in addition to the required elements of the cooperative model, such as the General Assembly, the Board of Directors, and the Board of Auditors.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ As we read in Barbera et al. (2016), cited in Mostaccio (2020: 208), alternative food networks (AFNs) include: 'direct sales on-farm and door-to-door, for example through the introduction of food box schemes; the direct sale off-farm, at local markets and farmers' markets; and forms of farming and/or collective distribution, as in the case of community gardens or 'Solidarity Purchasing Groups' (SPGs)'.
¹⁴⁹ Members may be excused from the monthly voluntary shift under certain circumstances such as health or personal reasons.

¹⁵⁰ Personally, I've been active in the Communications Working Group for about a year (2022) and have had the opportunity to reflect collectively on how to communicate the meaning and value of what Camilla is doing and to contribute to the renewal of the website's content.

Figure 14. Camilla food coop's premises



Source: own pictures

Camilla, the cooperative, was founded on June 21, 2018 and became operational on February 9, 2019. Camilla stands as Italy's first venture into the food cooperative model. It drew inspiration not only from the Park Slope Food Coop,¹⁵¹ founded in Brooklyn in 1973, but also from European precedents such as Bees (Brussels)¹⁵² and La Louve (Paris).¹⁵³ Bologna proved to be a fertile urban setting for this experiment, building on two grassroots movements actively working towards the local solidarity economy. Alchemilla and Campi Aperti, from which Camilla originated, are two organizations dedicated to sustainable agriculture. Alchemilla is a solidarity purchasing group, also

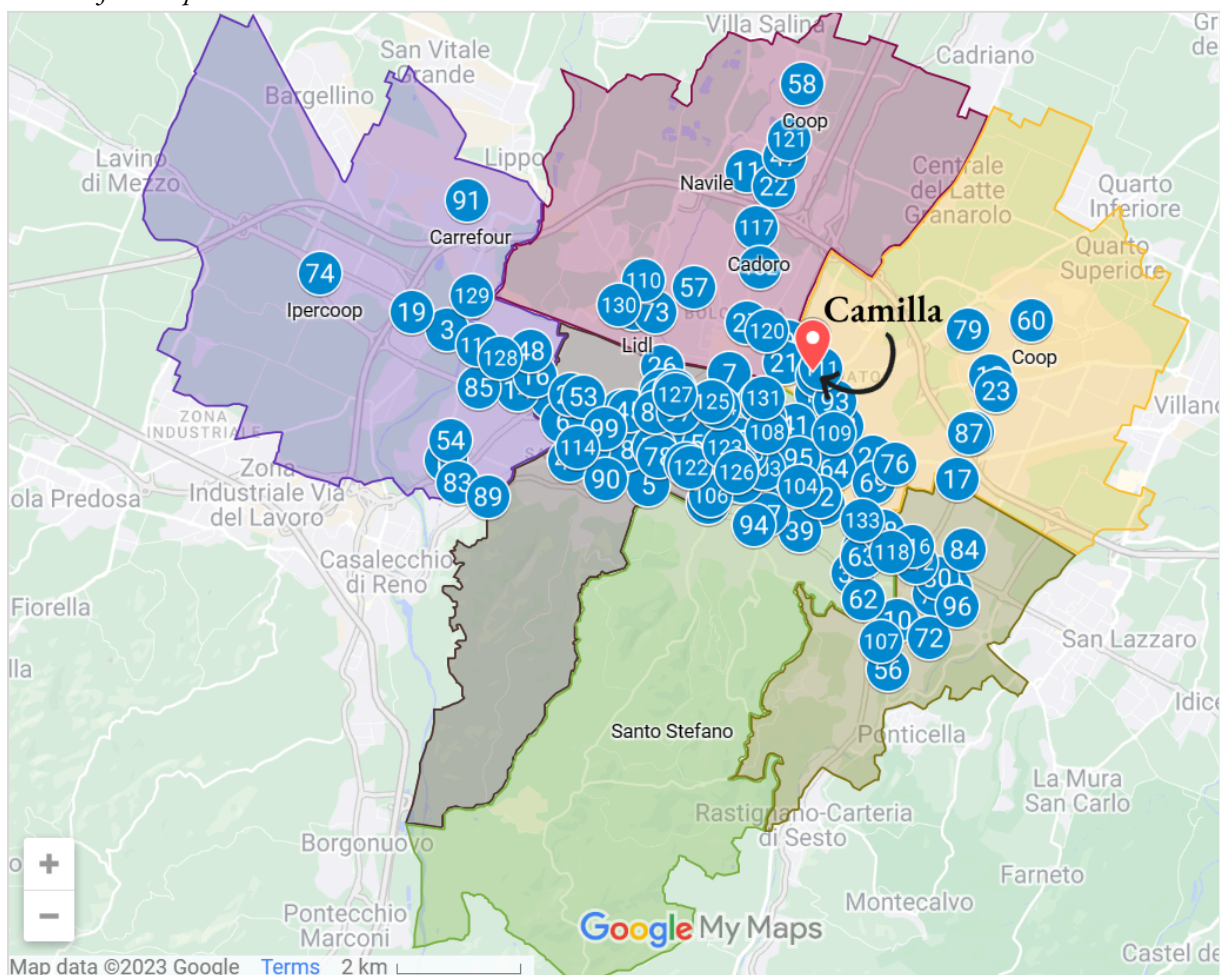
¹⁵¹ <https://www.foodcoop.com/>.

¹⁵² <http://bees-coop.be/en/>.

¹⁵³ <https://cooplalouve.fr/>.

known as GAS in Italian, established in 2013.¹⁵⁴ Meanwhile, Campi Aperti is a farmers' and producers' association that has been promoting a participatory guarantee system (PGS) and organizing farmers' markets since the late 1990s.¹⁵⁵ Camilla gathered 450 members who signed up before the emporium opened based on trust. As of November 2023, the number of members has increased to 680. Camilla is situated in the first suburb of Bologna, specifically in the district of San Donato. The surrounding area, as depicted in Figure 15, is densely populated with hypermarkets, supermarkets, and discount stores, which presents a challenging environment for an initiative with a counter-hegemonic focus on rethinking production and consumption models.

Figure 15. Map of existing and planned large-scale retail outlets in the Municipality of Bologna in 2023 and Camilla food coop



Source: adapted from Planimetrie Culturali, <https://planimetrieculturali-aps.org/2022/02/20/maps/> (last accessed on 30 October 2023)

¹⁵⁴ <https://alchemillagas.noblogs.org/>.

¹⁵⁵ Its website is available at: <https://www.campiaperto.org/>. A documentary on the origins of the Campi Aperti Association is available in Italian at: <https://archive.org/details/GustoCritico>.

Indeed, Camilla represents an evolution of solidarity purchasing groups, serving as another facet in the development of ‘new forms of political participation’ (Mostaccio, 2020: 214).¹⁵⁶ The potential for transformation lies in converting passive consumers, who are disconnected from production processes and subjected to associated inequalities and negative impacts on their health, the environment, and human labor, into proactive citizens or co-producers (Sacchi et al., 2022). The primary challenge is to navigate and mediate between members’ interest for high-quality, affordable food and goods, the rights of producers to fair compensation for their labor, and the collective interest of both present and future communities in safeguarding the natural environment.

In the following section, I will show how this can be translated into practice through a discussion of the participatory workshops on the Theory of Change.

1.1: Discussing the Theory of Change as a discursive practice of evaluation

“In Camilla, I want the sale of the product to be secondary, to be taken for granted. Rather, Camilla is an entity that accompanies a transition. Changing habits is complex”.
(Camilla’s member, participatory workshop - 19 May 2022)

“Now this is interesting: working on awareness, which I think is the heart”.
(Camilla’s member, participatory workshop - 23 June 2022)

The participatory workshops conducted with members of Camilla’s organization aimed to foster a collective and open discussion about the social, economic, and cultural value of the initiative. In order to have a practical guide for the discussion, I chose the Theory of Change, given its increasing popularity, to test its strengths and weaknesses in the bottom-up and participatory practice of evaluation, despite all the limitations and criticisms discussed above. For similar reasons, I use the lexicon of impact evaluation, although its performative effects may be a limitation.

¹⁵⁶ Mostaccio (2020: 213-214) notes: ‘Actually, AMAP, CSA, Teikei, SPGs and other similar groups can be considered as new collective forms of political participation. As they are traditional social movements organizations, their activities are based on lobbying, primarily local public authorities. Interestingly, they appear to be a new type of a hybrid organization that may help to bring back a focus on citizenship issues (Graziano and Forno, 2012; Miglione et al, 2013; Sacchi, 2018). The transformative potential of this new practice enables SPGs to challenge local institutions to develop new forms of local food governance and institutionalization (Fonte, 2013)’.

The practical objective was to collectively formulate a hypothesis for the ToC regarding Camilla that could be tested for feasibility and testability in the future. The process was also intended to provide a basis for designing a questionnaire to assess both quantitative and qualitative aspects of the initiative. More broadly, the goal was to create a common knowledge base upon which the food coop could build. To conduct the workshops, I used the well-established Aspen Institute guide, *The Community Builder's Approach to Theory of Change* (Anderson, 2006),¹⁵⁷ ActKnowledge's guides,¹⁵⁸ and additional resources.¹⁵⁹

The ToC model consists of five primary elements: a *pathway of change*, depicting the causal links between actions and outcomes; *enablers* (and *obstacles*), comprising elements and subjects that may either facilitate (or hinder) the organization in meeting its objectives; *assumptions*, which are the hypotheses on which the ToC is based; *indicators*, which provide measurable evidence of goal attainment; and *narrative*, a discursive text that outlines the overall vision and logic of the ToC.

The process is generally overseen by external experts and organized into multiple sessions. Key decisions must be made, including identifying the primary goal, its implementation, the stakeholders involved, and the number and duration of meetings.

In this case, I was simultaneously the facilitator and an active member of the cooperative. Although this particular situation may be a source of potential bias, it is consistent with the participatory ethos of the research. In addition, it allowed me to more easily access and manage information and knowledge about the food coop. One of the most pertinent criticisms of utilizing Theory of Change is that it can frequently be viewed as yet another tool imposed by influential external actors, such as funders. Though, as the researcher, my objectives may not entirely align with those of the cooperative's members. However, in this instance, there are no outside stakeholders to satisfy. My

¹⁵⁷ Available at: <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/files/content/docs/rcc/rcccommbuildersapproach.pdf>.

¹⁵⁸ Available at: https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/ToCFacilitatorSourcebook.pdf; https://www.theoryofchange.org/wp-content/uploads/toco_library/pdf/ToCBasics.pdf;

¹⁵⁹ Centro Studi Lang (2017), 'Manuale operativo per la Theory of Change. Linee guida per gestire un workshop partecipativo di Teoria del Cambiamento e porre le basi per la valutazione dell'impatto sociale' available at: https://www.fondazionechangitalia.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Philanthropy-Insights-n_5.pdf; van Es, Guijt, Vogel (2015), 'Theory of Change Thinking in Practice: A Stepwise Approach'. Available at: <https://hivos.org/document/hivos-theory-of-change/>.

ultimate objective is to gain a deeper comprehension and knowledge of the food coop's operations, which could ultimately be of practical use to the organization.

ToC can be conducted *ex ante*, *in itinere*, or *ex post*, making it a versatile tool. The ToC for Camilla was based on past experience, though it was projected for the future. Generally, ToC analyzes single projects or initiatives, but in this case, I opted to apply it to the entire organization to broaden the perspective on value.¹⁶⁰ I chose to involve only members of the food co-op as it was the initial endeavor of this nature. Involving suppliers or other external stakeholders would have added unnecessary complexity to the project. Despite not completing all the necessary steps for a full ToC, the process generated ample material for sociological analysis as well as collective discussion. Each meeting lasted two hours, and while I initially planned for four meetings, I extended it to six due to the required complexity. The workshops were held in the premises of an association, Circolo Arci Guernelli,¹⁶¹ which is part of the network of the Camilla food coop. In fact, Camilla has an informal agreement with this association to have free access once a week to one of their spacious rooms to use for cultural activities.

Throughout the process, I aimed to create a safe environment where participants could freely express themselves, share knowledge and experiences, and receive attention to emotions. Balancing the multi-faceted role of a facilitator was notably complex. To achieve this, I employed methods that prioritized personal perspectives, integrated engaging and privacy-protecting technologies such as Mentimeter, and provided clear communication about expectations, obstacles, and affective states.¹⁶² Each workshop commences with a Mentimeter visual presentation to elucidate key concepts and tools utilized, as well as to provide summaries of prior sessions and materials.

¹⁶⁰ In this regard, James (2011: 28) writes, among the key principles for a good ToC: '**Consider the overall organisational theory of change:** Where possible, exploring an organisation's theory before getting down to project level can help ensure that learning feeds into wider organisational processes and structures'.

¹⁶¹ <https://www.facebook.com/circoloarci.guernelli/>.

¹⁶² In this sense, it's worth recalling Patton's (2017: 64) reflections on the role of emotion in evaluation: 'When we engage with each other as whole human beings, both thinking and feeling come into play. We think about things and we care about things. Ideally, we think about the things we care about and care about the things we think about. Research in brain science, decision sciences, and behavioral economics (Patton, 2014), to name but a few examples, has revealed the deep interconnections between thought and feeling, cognition and emotion. Understanding and appreciating these interconnections are manifest in approaches to evaluation that incorporate visualizations, videos, art, and photography. Artistic and evocative approaches to evaluation want to bring forth our emotional selves and do so by integrating art and science. Science makes us think. Great art makes us feel. Great evaluations should evoke both understandings (cognition) and feelings (emotions)'.

Afterward, the group is guided through a series of exercises, brainstorming, and group activities to reflect on the organization and build the Theory of Change through a step-by-step guide. After each workshop, I revise all the materials, clarify definitions, and organize them to improve clarity.

Figure 16. Workshop delivery and facilitation (29 June 2022)



As is often the case, the process proved more significant than the results, allowing members to discuss critical issues from their own perspectives. James (2011:7) noted emerging categories that represent diverse perspectives on the ToC. Theories of change encompass approaches that are evaluative or formative, explanatory or exploratory, as well as linear or complex. In my efforts, I aim to create a Theory of Change that is more formative rather than evaluative, focuses on exploration rather than providing definitive explanations, and is ultimately more intricate than straightforward. Now, let us examine how this was implemented in practical terms.

1.1.1: Camilla food coop's co-constructed Theory of Change

The main finding of the ToC pathway is the collective identification and naming of the positive changes and effects that the food coop contributes to trigger. In this sense, the main areas of impact and transformation identified are: consumption habits and awareness, increased knowledge

exchange on sustainable lifestyles, consumption and production, and the formation of new social relationships based on solidarity. Table 7 presents Camilla's theory of change, outlining the output-outcome-impact chain, underlying assumptions, and potential barriers. The long-term impact goal most felt by participants is to change consumption habits while building community: 'The number of citizens in Bologna who buy from short, trustworthy, fair, and sustainable supply chains has increased' would serve as evidence. Because it is difficult to track and evaluate broad outcomes, I helped them redefine their goal so that it was under the control of Camilla's actions. It is now focused on Camilla's efforts to get its active membership to increase by a certain percentage within a certain timeframe. In this sense, the meaning of 'active membership' becomes crucial. In fact, becoming an active member of the food cooperative requires a deep awareness of ethical consumption, a change in many habits, and an effort to participate in the activities of the emporium. The participants agree to find a minimum definition of what is meant by an active member, that is, a member who purchases at least once a month at a minimum of 50€, attends the membership meetings, and covers the monthly shift. Active members do much more than this, volunteering many hours a week and promoting the food co-op at various levels, although given the high variability of commitment in such a project, it is reasonable to identify a basic level of commitment that is still necessary for the food co-op to survive.

Table 7. Camilla Food Coop's Co-Constructed Theory of Change (June 2022)

Impact Goal	Camilla's active membership* has increased by 30% in 5 years (*Members who make monthly purchases of at least 50€ , attend membership meetings, and fulfill their monthly duty shift)				
Final Outcomes	Increased supply of sustainable products in emporium	Increased member awareness of products' value	Reduced prices for fair trade products in the emporium	Improved logistical accessibility to Camilla's products	Increased number of projects supported by Camilla
Intermediate Outcomes	An increasing number of	The sense of sharing, trust,	Increased Camilla's membership		Expanded network of

	producers have agreed to supply the emporium	and community among the members is enhanced		relationships with realities that share similar values
Initial Outcomes	Increased trust between producers and Camilla members	Increased member awareness of the work behind the emporium	Increased visibility of Camilla's activities in the city of Bologna	

Output	Fulfillment rate of member product requests vs. number of product requests	Experiential activities	Internal training for each member	Architectural barriers removed	'Suspended grocery shopping'
	Sale of bulk products	Mutual aid activities	Mail exchanged on the mailing list	Home deliveries to members	Activities and projects in cooperation with other organizations
	Type of products available in the emporium	Volunteer work carried out by members	Members on shift vs. members in training	Emporium operating hours	Communications content (newspaper articles, television reports, social media posts/content, website)

	Self-managed supply chain projects	Active working groups	Available tutors	People who become members after Camilla (day the coop opens to non-members)	Information stalls held
				Non-member access to the Emporium	
				Dissemination events	

Assumptions	The selection of products made by members is a pivotal aspect of the model as it strengthens a sense of community and promotes control over food production and consumption (food sovereignty).
	The increasing availability of bulk products encourages people to buy more of them.
	Bulk reduces packaging, production costs, and consumer prices.
	It is not so much the total number of products that is important, but the ability to meet different consumption needs.
	Volunteer hours are in addition to the emporium shift. The two hours and forty-five minutes are not considered as volunteer hours, but are part of the social agreement.
	Members' participation in working groups facilitates a better understanding of all the work that goes into making the Emporium work.
	Mentoring serves to convey the quality and value of products to new members.
	Information booths are an important opportunity for members to socialize.

	'Suspended grocery shopping' is more successful outside of the cooperative, as it remains a sensitive matter within.
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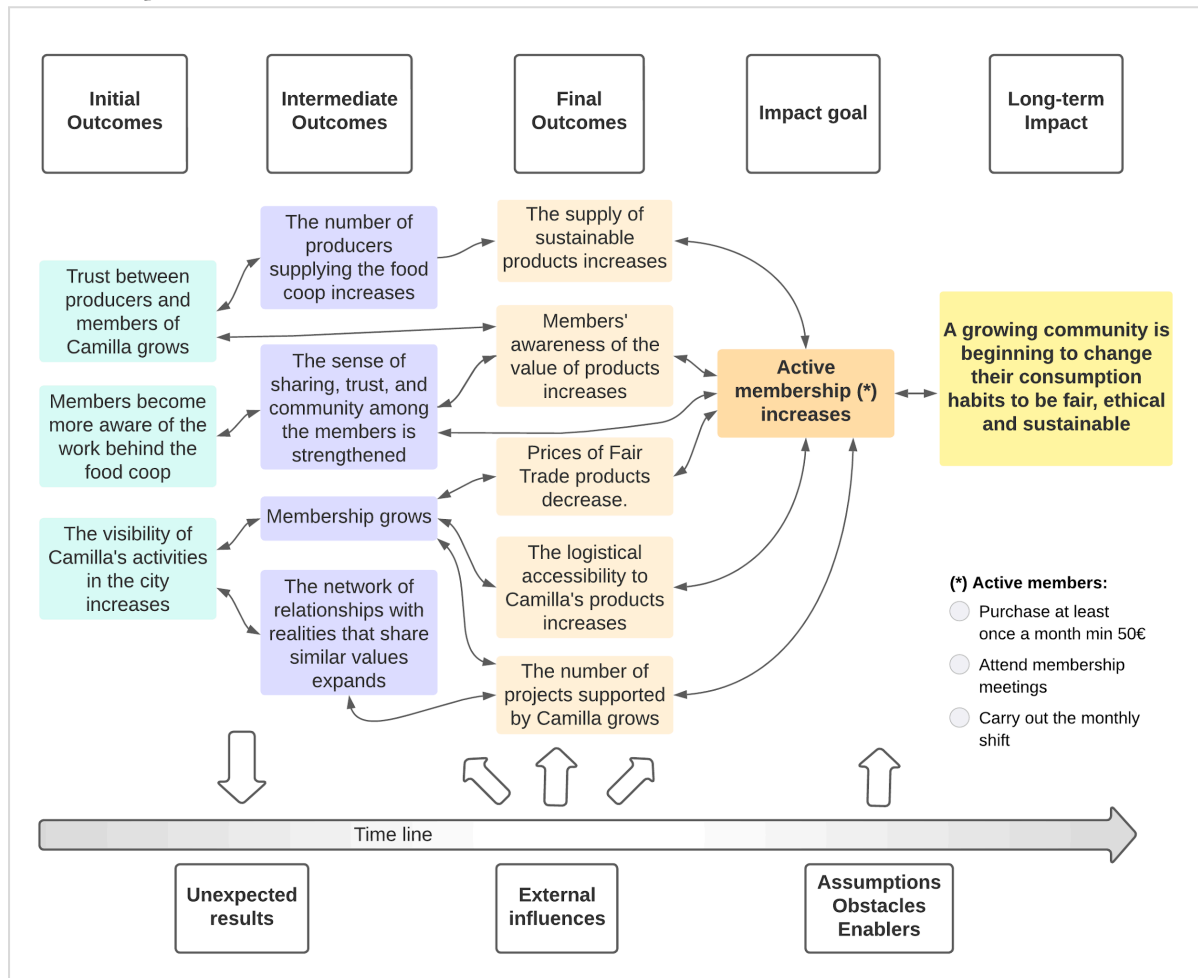
Internal obstacles	Changing habits takes time and effort to achieve, as acknowledged by a participant in the workshop who stated that “ <i>Changing habits is a terrible thing</i> ”.
	Creating self-managed supply chain projects presents numerous challenges, such as the need for particular skills, restricted opportunities, and high energy demands.
	Not all products are suitable for bulk sales; there is a limit determined by their inherent quality.
	Limited youth participation is likely due to affordability, among other reasons. There are few members under the age of 30.
	Cultural limitations seem to be an intrinsic selection barrier for the project. In order to decide to become a member, people must already have access to certain information and awareness about the sustainability of consumption models.
	Affordability and social inclusion must be taken into account as there are various cheaper options available for individuals to purchase the goods they need, albeit less sustainable and ethical. It is unlikely that individuals with specific disadvantages would join the food cooperative.
	The commitment and time demanded from members are both limiting factors to Camilla’s advancement and a crucial component of the project.
	Is there anything newsworthy happening in Camilla? Does Camilla lack newsworthiness? (open question)
External obstacles	Inflation, which is related to the war in Ukraine, has caused a simultaneous decrease in consumer purchasing power.
	Covid-19 has significantly affected the local economy and all modes of social interaction.

Due to the recognized necessity of integrating complexity and non-linearity into theories of change,¹⁶³ Figure 17 endeavors to offer a more non-linear depiction of Camilla's Theory of Change. This acknowledges that results may not always happen in a set sequence, that various feedback loops exist, that interactions are always multidirectional, and that unforeseen results are common. Furthermore, Mayne argues that labeling outputs, outcomes, and impacts may result in never-ending and pointless discussions due to the ambiguity of the terms.¹⁶⁴ For simplicity's sake, I have utilized the most widely recognized labels for the ToC, acknowledging that these labels do not precisely correspond to their nuanced meanings.

¹⁶³ 'As we increasingly recognise, theories of change more broadly construed need to reflect the real world, and must accommodate for the concept of 'emergence': something 'that arises from but is not reducible to the sum of all activity that comprises interactive agents acting locally' (Mowles, 2014, p 166)—in other words, the unpredictable results of human beings interacting with one another and with the structures and systems that surround them' (Ghate, 2018: 5).

¹⁶⁴ Mayne (2015: 139) writes: 'The models deliberately avoid explicit labelling of results along the impact pathway as different levels of outputs and especially outcomes, such as immediate, intermediate, and final outcomes. These output and outcome labels have no inherent meaning and are not helpful in developing a theory of change—indeed they often lead to wasted debate. Rather, it is the sequence that is important. The goods and services, reach, capacity change, behavioural change, and other labels in Figures 1 and 3 have intuitive meaning and provide a good analytical structure for developing a theory of change'. He has developed an alternative ToC model called COM-B Theory of Change model in which the main categories are capabilities, opportunities and motivation and behavior.

Figure 17. Non-linear Visual representation of Camilla Food Coop's Co-constructed Theory of Change (outcomes-impact)



Source: realized with Lucidchart

The underlying theme of all the discussions revolved around the issue of value. The primary challenge is to meaningfully identify and communicate the social, environmental and economic value created by the food cooperative. This includes supporting fair and local trade, reducing environmental impact, fostering solidarity, encouraging volunteerism, building networks, and sharing knowledge as a common good.

Many obstacles have been identified on the path to achieving the impact goal, some originating externally, while others are inherent to the project. Consequently, varying levels of influence and control are accessible to the food cooperative. However, it is not possible to draw a clear line, as many constraints are obviously related to the social context in which the project operates. For

example, income inequalities contribute to making it difficult for low-income individuals to access the food cooperative, but in this respect the food cooperative itself has very limited influence.

In any case, the food coop is managing existing obstacles through different strategies.

Regarding the need for members to work on their habits through conscious effort, the food coop is conceived to be a supportive environment for personal growth and to foster a learning community. Within this community, members are encouraged to seek new perspectives and inspiration to make positive changes in their daily lives.

Aware that the project would require energy and time commitment, the founding members envisioned a flexible organization that would allow for different levels of involvement and participation, but would also be fun and not, as one workshop's participant frankly put it, just another "*pain in the ass*".

Additionally, there are 'tension points' that arise during the process of action research, closely linked to the previously discussed obstacles. Tension points are described by Flyvbjerg et al. (2012: 288) as 'power relations that are particularly susceptible to problematization and thus to change, because they are fraught with dubious practices, contestable knowledge and potential conflict. Thus, even a small challenge – like problematization from scholars – may tip the scales and trigger change in a tension point'.

Tension points are mediated through ongoing negotiations. These include:

1. Social and environmental sustainability vs affordability
2. Economic sustainability vs. environmental sustainability
3. Increase in available products vs. sober and sustainable consumption
4. Unequal distribution of responsibilities vs. sustainable sharing of responsibilities among members

These issues can be thought of as tension points, in that what appears to be inherent limitations to Camilla's project are in fact related to the allocation of value within the society in which it operates. In fact, Camilla can be viewed as a countercultural practice of consumption. Therefore, what is more sustainable for humans and the environment may not seem financially feasible. Additionally,

volunteering and activism, which enhance cooperation and produce meaningful work, and are significant for people's life experience, are not given economic value. Furthermore, self-managed education and knowledge production, limited by time constraints and societal infrastructures dominated by the 'banking' concept of education (Freire, 2000), are not adequately acknowledged.

1. *“Actually, the reason why sustainable products are more expensive than others is because those others are doped prices”.*

The food cooperative faces a common criticism, even from its own members, that while it is a promising project in theory, it is challenging to implement. This is due to the higher prices of goods compared to those found at supermarkets, which poses difficulties for low to medium-income individuals shopping at the emporium on a regular basis. The mechanism on which the food cooperative is based is precisely to avoid low prices for everyday products, recognizing that behind them there's human labor and ultimately nature, while reducing costs through self-management and shortening the supply chain. Because Camilla internalizes what economists would call negative externalities, while the majority of actors do not, it does not operate on a level playing field. To enhance affordability while upholding ethical standards, Camilla is exploring different strategies. For instance, new members can request to pay the membership share - an essential component of a cooperative - in installments. Nonetheless, it is clear that external actors, including the public sector, may need to intervene.¹⁶⁵

A critical aspect emphasized by members is the difference between 'internal' and 'external' economic solidarity. It is deemed easier to implement solidarity with external initiatives, while solidarity among members is recognized as controversial. Camilla, in fact, supports numerous grassroots initiatives through crowdfunding, donations, and other means of assistance. The issue of internal solidarity (redistribution) mechanisms regarding purchasing capacity is deemed too complex to

¹⁶⁵ Even IMF advisor Thomas Hellbeing (2010: 49), from a narrow market-oriented perspective, acknowledges: 'Externalities pose fundamental economic policy problems when individuals, households, and firms do not internalize the indirect costs of or the benefits from their economic transactions. The resulting wedges between social and private costs or returns lead to inefficient market outcomes. In some circumstances, they may prevent markets from emerging. Although there is room for market-based corrective solutions, government intervention is often required to ensure that benefits and costs are fully internalized'.

address at the moment. *“The idea was also that internally some members would allow members with less financial capacity to buy. However, this is a process that is not there and it is at sea as a discussion”*. *“It is very delicate internally, not externally”*.

2. *“You have to put it on the scale. You don't have the right answer, you always have to mediate a little bit. But I think it is good to ask the question”*.

Once again, the tension between economic and environmental sustainability is not unique to Camilla, but rather one of the overarching challenges of our time. The difficulties of maintaining sound economic sustainability are closely linked to the higher costs associated with recognizing the greater value of ethical and organic producers (Pieper et al. 2020). In fact, Camilla makes a conscious decision to work with producers who adhere to ethical and organic production standards. The food cooperative tries to manage this tension by implementing minimal mark-ups on its products, while differentiating between categories.

3. *“It depends on how you want to increase supply. You have to negotiate between different needs: the demands of the members, meeting the needs of the members as much as possible without reproducing the consumerist model of the supermarkets”*. *“Very often it's the small producers who don't want to sell to Camilla because it messes up their whole organization, but otherwise no. We are the ones who decide”*.

Responding to members' needs is the fundamental reason for the cooperative's existence. How to put this into practice is the challenge that the food co-op would have to face for the duration of the initiative itself. Camilla has developed a system, which is still evolving and provisional, to collect members' requests on what products to have in the store. Having too many products could reproduce a consumerist model that she is trying to overcome. At the same time, the goal would be to satisfy as many of its members' consumption needs as possible. Deciding which needs are "legitimate" according to the ethos of the project is an open question. At the same time, it is not always easy to find local producers to supply the emporium. In the case of fruits and vegetables, for example, many local small farmers prefer to sell their produce directly to consumers rather than have the food cooperative act as an intermediary.

4. “Either we coordinate, we set rules and figure out who's in charge of what and how to expand this stuff, or it doesn't work. I mean, we have one person on all the fields. That's a lot of people. This is a very big problem”. “It's inside the model. That dysfunctionality is called self-management”.

An organizational problem that is quite common, such as the uneven distribution of responsibilities, also seems to occur in Camilla's self-management. Responsibility is concentrated in the hands of a few members, and there are no identified processes for managing potential conflicts. The causes of these inequities may be many. One source is the amount of free time they have, such as retirees or certain types of freelancers who have both more free time and more control over how they spend it. Another source is related to the status acquired by long-time activists/members, especially founding members, who invest significant effort in the project, increase their visibility, and consequently have greater influence on decision-making processes. Finally, personal resources such as cultural capital in the Bourdieuan sense may play a role.

Workshop 1: Introduction -Theory of Change basics - Values discussion

During the first workshop, held on May 5, 2022, I present the personal motivations that led me to undertake this research on the Social and Solidarity Economy in Bologna. On the one hand, there is the frustration associated with the awareness of the need to change our socio-economic model, parallel to the fact that any real change often seems marginal or even counterproductive. On the other hand, there is the realization that there is much more than what the hegemonic discourse presents to us. Camilla is not the solution, but a concrete attempt to practice a sustainable economy. I employ Gibson-Graham's iceberg metaphor of the economy, adapted to the Italian context,¹⁶⁶ to elucidate this concept.

Before I dive in, I take some time to set the stage for the process. Specifically, participants are asked to answer two questions: 1) What am I passionate about? 2) What does Camilla mean to me? Participants answer the first question verbally and the second on the Mentimeter. This gives me the opportunity to introduce the new, unfamiliar tool that will be used throughout the process.

¹⁶⁶ Diverse Economies Iceberg in Italian by Brave New Alps association, available at: <https://www.communityeconomies.org/resources/diverse-economies-iceberg-italy>.

These are the responses to the second question recorded on Mentimeter:

- *Opportunity for change;*
- *An alternative practice;*
- *Wellness, knowledge, outreach tool, relationships;*
- *Discovering that I share essential values with people who seem very different from me;*
- *A place to find good, ethically produced things. Clean in every way. Good for me;*
- *Putting the values I believe in into practice;*
- *Imagining an alternative model of value creation and distribution;*
- *A space for sharing change;*
- *A community that allows everyone to experiment both in the private aspects of their consumption and in the collective aspects (organization, management, etc.);*
- *An anchor;*
- *A project to be proud of*

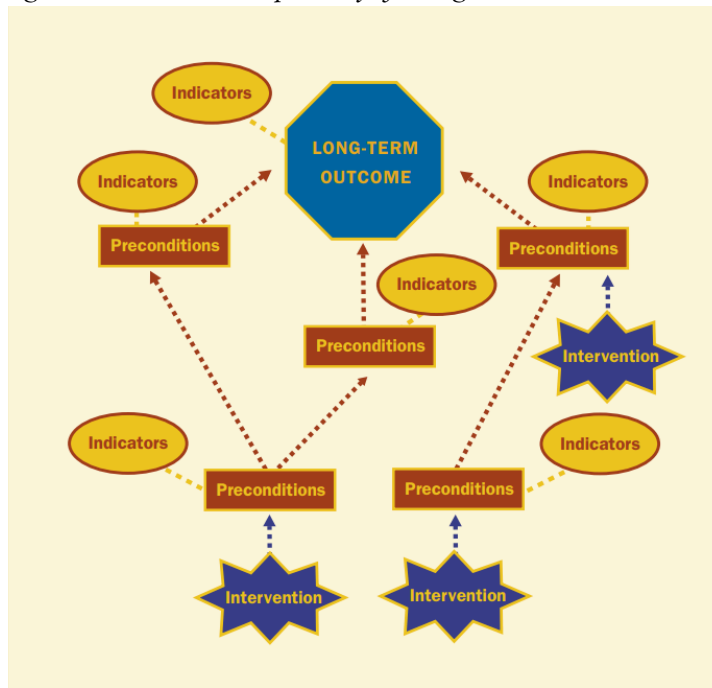
The socialization of the answers stimulates a debate. One participant emphasizes the importance of such an experience, which is not only a private matter but also has a social and political value:

“This thing between private and collective interests me. We’ve all been kicked out of the piazze [squares]¹⁶⁷ to be pushed back into our houses, and it seems to me that with Camilla you’re bringing something of the piazza back into the house. Maybe it’s not a piazza, it’s a field, but it’s really a public space and a private space”.

Expectations and goals of this participatory process are socialized and discussed. I provide a comprehensive explanation of the Theory of Change's rationale, referring to the following Pathway of Change model (Figure 18).

¹⁶⁷ The participant refers to the 'piazza' as a public space that has historically been the stage for political and collective action in Italy. For a historical perspective, see Bianchi (2003). Available at: http://storieninmovimento.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Zap01_4-Zoom2.pdf.

Figure 18. Elements in a pathway of change



Source: Anderson (2006: 6)

To ground the ToC, I share an example of how Camilla has influenced me through a product I buy at the emporium: yogurt from the Lama Grande farm. I explain how buying the product has influenced my behavior: I have acquired a new habit of buying, consuming, and reusing (empty jars are returned to the emporium), and I have been able to appreciate the short, organic, and sustainable supply chain because I was also able to visit the farm through a trek organized by Camilla members.

My example prompts a discussion about the importance of habits and the challenges of changing them. In this sense, it is recognized that being part of a community like Camilla's cannot be all about obligations, but must also be fun and rewarding:

“It also starts to be a little bit of a game, because if it's just the duty, another pain in the ass that you have to do by putting in more time and spending more, you just don't do the shifts at some point, there has to be the fact that it's also nice to go there and do the shopping”.

I propose that participants engage in an exercise to reflect on the particular influence that their membership in the Camilla food coop has had on them, and then share their insights through Mentimeter:

- *I have transferred many of my purchases to Camilla;*
- *I no longer throw away egg cartons that have become spaceships for Gormiti [toys], pirate ships, and occasionally egg cups;*
- *I can really exert my “purchasing power”;*
- *I have increased my knowledge of the sustainable production chain;*
- *I have activated relationships with people I probably would never have met if the cooperative had not been created;*
- *Paying more attention to the food I buy and drastically reducing my purchases from large scale retailers;*
- *I also try to buy in bulk;*
- *I know how to read product labels and make informed choices;*
- *I do almost all my shopping at the Emporium;*
- *I have learned to make semi-finished products in the kitchen. I don't eat puff pastry anymore, only “mad dough” light pastries.*

We collectively analyze the responses and identify three primary areas of influence on Camilla's members, based on the given examples: 1) changes in consumption habits 2) heightening of knowledge and 3) formation of new social relationships. The discussion also helps clarify the meaning of “exerting my purchasing power”. One participant references the nonglobal movement, highlighting that: *“In the Genoa, Seattle period, the idea was that you had the power to boycott someone, that is, to abstain. Whereas in this case, instead, it's the power to say yes to someone, not to say no to the bad guys, but to say yes to the good guys, to simplify a lot”*.¹⁶⁸

Before implementing the Theory of Change for Camilla, it is essential to conduct preliminary and preparatory activities. The objective of this step is to examine the organization's objectives and principles through individual and group exercises, as seen from the attendees' viewpoints. The scheme would be as follows: First, the participants are asked to rate using Mentimeter (refer to

¹⁶⁸ This idea seems consistent with Zan's (2014) proposal of the cooperative enterprise as a form of collective action that can be defined as 'entry', complementing the Hirschmannian taxonomy of exit, voice, loyalty. *Entry* brings back to the market those who chose the exit option, while preserving the typical character of the voice option: the strength of protest against capitalist relations. Because of this dual characteristic of its members' behavior, the cooperative is both a political and an economic option.

Figure 19 for a visual representation) how well Camilla is fulfilling the identified principles/goals so far (on a scale of 1 to 10). Second, the participants will be divided into two groups to collectively rate how well they think Camilla is achieving the principles/goals (using the same scale) and to identify a concrete action that represents them. Finally, the individual and group results are discussed together.

I suggest thinking about values from the keywords I extrapolated from Camilla's Charter of Intent and Principles:¹⁶⁹ food sovereignty, cooperation, solidarity, self-management, social cohesion, fair trade, mutual exchange, peasant, organic and biodynamic farming, biodiversity, fair labor compensation, social and environmental sustainability, and ethical finance.

Figure 19. Participants rated the extent to which the designated goals were achieved on a scale of 1 to 10 in practice



Source: Mentimeter

The relevance of the process of collective self-reflection is acknowledged by participants, considering the project's heterogeneity resulting from the ongoing addition of new members. According to one member, “When I asked you and five other people what Camilla was, I got very different definitions from each other, not a little bit ... very different”.

¹⁶⁹ Available at: <https://camilla.coop/carta-principi/>.

Workshop 2: Discussion on goals - Stakeholders map and matrix - Debriefing

The second workshop, on May 12, 2022, begins with a conversation about the previous exercise. Here Camilla clearly emerges as a complex ecosystem, that is, the awareness of being part of a network of initiatives in which the combination of multiple actors and actions produces changes that are greater than the sum of their parts and cannot be easily attributed to individual components (Davies, 2004).

“There are some principles that may not be well calibrated because Camilla is just a little piece”.

*“But we also evaluated that Camilla is sitting at this table [food sovereignty] and therefore it is a value, an asset for us and for others. And so with this action we are working for food sovereignty”.*¹⁷⁰

Social cohesion is recognized as a challenging principle to pursue in practice:

“It’s one of the most difficult goals to achieve”.

External conditions influence the extent to which individuals are able to participate in such a project: *“There is also an issue of people’s purchasing power there. So, there is also the fact that in Camilla, not everyone can and does get groceries”.* *“On the one hand, there are the economic difficulties of the individuals, and on the other hand, there is Camilla’s not particularly economic strength. So it’s difficult to come together”.* Camilla’s members are well aware of the potential contradictions and limitations of the project. Various efforts have been made to address the need for greater inclusion of low-income individuals. *“There is a specific working group called “Ingresso Libero” [free entry], which exists, but has somehow stalled”.* A number of proposals have been suggested over time, such as offering a basket of goods at reduced prices and establishing internal solidarity among members with different spending options. However, none of the proposals have been implemented.

¹⁷⁰ The participant refers to the project for food sovereignty in Emilia-Romagna, which aims to change the agri-food system and is promoted by a network of organizations to which Camilla belongs. The founding document is available at: https://www.grandeesodo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/progettoSA_v4e.pdf.

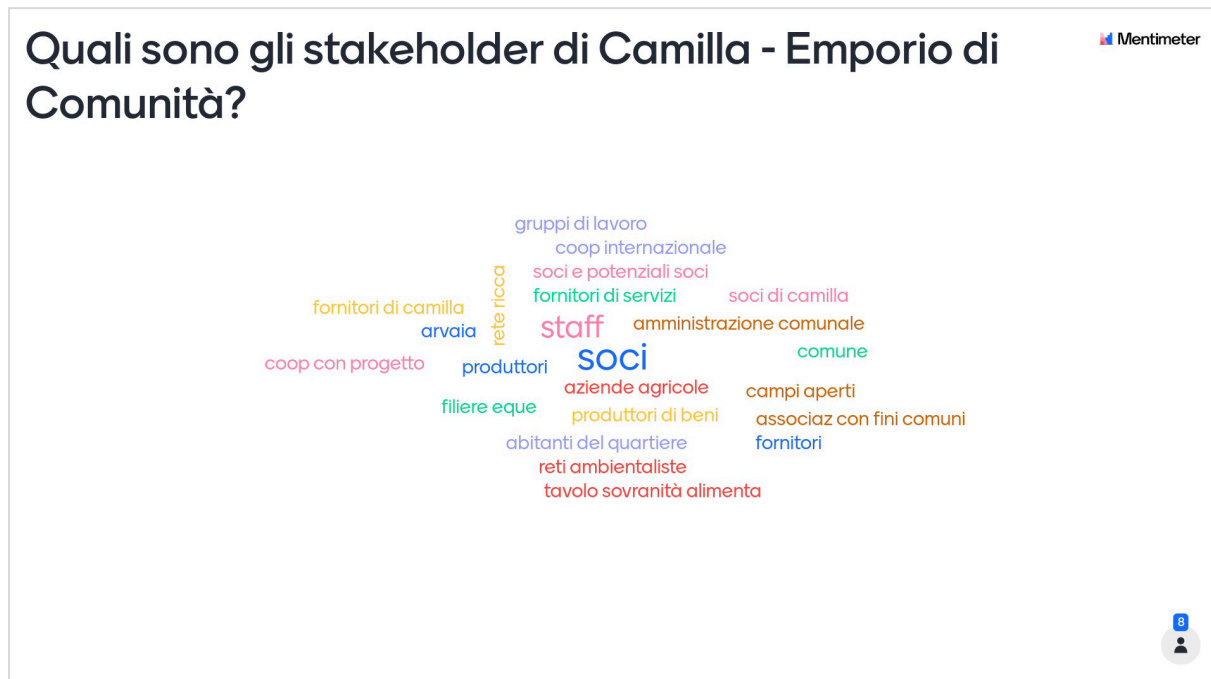
Extreme events such as the Covid-19 pandemic inevitably affect social reproduction: *“It was also difficult in this last period when everyone was talking to us about social distancing”*. *“Before Covid, we used to do workshops”*.

Elements of the project's inner strength are also recognized: *“Mutualistic exchange could be understood not only as an exchange of concrete goods, but also as an exchange of information”*. *“Now information is valuable. Not surprisingly, it costs the wrath of God”*. *“Knowledge circulates in a way, this could also be understood as an exchange. Maybe it's worth more now than anything else”*. Knowledge as a commons is produced and shared within the cooperative but also to some extent externally. Some concrete examples: *“S. showed us how to make the yogurt maker. P. showed us how to use percarbonate”*.

After our discussion, we continue our preliminary work by examining Camilla's goals as outlined in the bylaws. Again, the issue of social inclusion emerges as problematic. One of the two groups identifies *'spesa sospesa'* (suspended shopping) as the action that carries it out. One participant highlights a crucial distinction between external solidarity and inclusion in the project: *“I'm not sure it's inclusion in the sense that you're giving help on the outside. Instead, it's much more difficult to get people inside”*. The inherent limitations of Camilla as a single organization in achieving such a complex outcome are thus acknowledged: *“It's not even necessarily within our reach as a goal”*.

I introduce the concept of stakeholders and ask participants to make up their minds and individually write down all of Camilla's stakeholders through Mentimeter.

Figure 20. Camilla's identified stakeholders



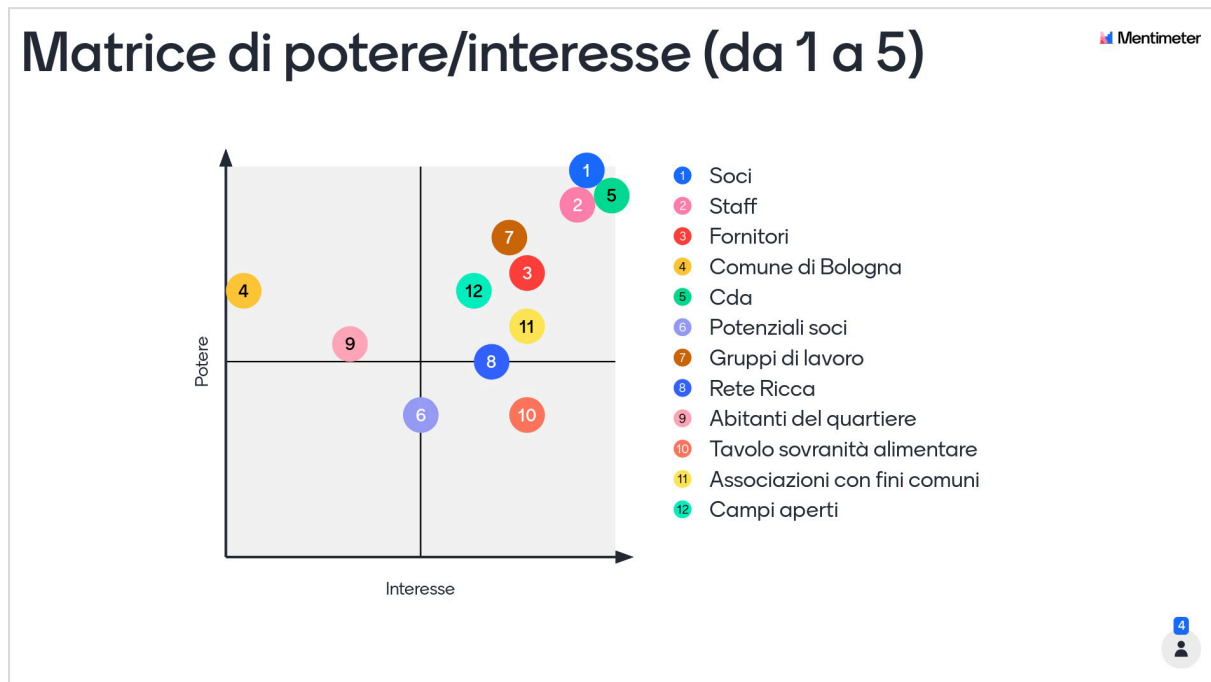
Source: Mentimeter

The main stakeholders identified can be categorized into two groups: internal stakeholders, including members, staff, board members, and working groups; and external stakeholders, comprising suppliers, neighbors, the Municipality of Bologna, the R.i.c.c.a. network,¹⁷¹ the Campi Aperti association, the Food Sovereignty Network, potential members, and associations with common goals.

I introduce the power/influence matrix as a tool to apply to Camilla's case. I request participants to split into two groups and rate all identified stakeholders based on their level of power and interest using a scale of 1 to 5. Subsequently, they will individually cast their votes on Mentimeter (Figure 21).

¹⁷¹ R.i.c.c.a. is the informal network of Italian food coops. At time of writing, there are seven food coops located across various Italian cities. The first national meeting took place in Bologna (May 6-7, 2023) and was organized by Camilla. The discussion can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRyNOo4szMw>.

Figure 21. Camilla's Power/Interest Matrix on a scale of 1 to 5



Source: Mentimeter

The municipality of Bologna is perceived as absolutely distant from Camilla in terms of interest: “*Off-map the municipality*” (number 4 in Figure 21).

The workshop ends with a debrief session during which I collect feedback from the participants. Mentimeter is utilized as a visual representation of participants' emotional and cognitive aspects in my workshops. Attendees are asked to assess how they feel about their role during the workshop on a 1-5 scale of comfortability, feeling listened to, being stimulated, innovativeness, and adequacy (Figure 22). Additionally, participants will rate the degree to which they agree with the following statements on a 1-5 scale: the final product of the workshop, I feel it is mine and I feel it is ours (Figure 23).

Figure 22. Evaluation of participants' role during the workshops



Source: Mentimeter

Figure 23. Personal evaluation of the group's product



Source: Mentimeter

Workshop 3: Discussion of stakeholder matrix - Identification of the impact challenge - Outcome mapping

The third workshop, on May 19, 2022, begins with comments on Camilla's stakeholder matrix. In particular, we discuss the place of the neighbors in the power/interest matrix in relation to Camilla's ability to communicate her goals and identity both internally and externally. It is acknowledged that it is not so easy to communicate the value of what the food coop does, *“Few members, let alone those outside the cooperative, are aware of what Camilla is”*.

It seems to be a challenge to convey the sense of the initiative to new members, and there is a sense of operating in a niche: *“get out of this inner circle that we are now, these 5-600, we are just that, make a leap to the rest of the citizens”*.

During the discussion, an additional consideration related to Camilla's participatory model emerges: it is not just about shopping, but about taking the time to run the emporium. This can be seen as a barrier to entry, but at the same time it is seen as an indispensable element of the project. It is a central issue for the cooperative project on which there are different positions.

“There's an entry level, not just of money, but of time, and that may be why there aren't a lot of neighborhood [members], but also why there aren't a lot of people our age”.

“But this is not a stumbling block: this is Camilla. That is, one thing cannot disregard the other, that is, you can't think that you're going to take everybody in and they won't want to engage, because then it becomes a store, it's no longer a community emporium”.

Throughout this process, the crucial issue of the role played by conscious and unconscious actions and habits emerges. The pivotal role of awareness in guiding individuals and collectives through change in the messy entanglements of the social world they inhabit will be elaborated further in the concluding chapter.

In the context of the workshop, the participants highlighted the demands that changing habits places on individuals, in addition to the previously mentioned constraints. The process requires a considerable amount of time and commitment, and not everyone is expected to be an 'activist'.

“It's 2 hours and 45 minutes, it's not a huge amount anyway, and it's about changing your habits ... because you don't have to come to Camilla just because you vote and you're absolutely convinced about

the stuff there. It's because you want different things in your daily life, so you have to go through a change in your daily life. Which is very long and very slow, so I think people need a lot of support. It took me more than a year to do my first balanced shopping at GAS".

A nurturing environment is also crucial. In this sense, Camilla can be seen as a supportive container that can give substance to people's will to change and become practice.

"I mean, if we just see Camilla as a moment of activism, then you feel all this fatigue and all this stuff here, this weight in short. But if you say instead that Camilla is a tool that helps you make a transition, it's a support. I mean, you turn the question around".

Camilla's members agree that the initiative serves as a pedagogical community, in a Freireian sense:¹⁷² *"That's why I say that Camilla's shelf is not the priority: sure, there is the sustainability of the emporium, but the priority is for people to understand that their actions carry weight".*

The workshop continues with the identification of the long-term impact goals of the cooperative. In fact, the ToC requires a counterintuitive approach to defining the pathway of change: through a process called 'backward mapping', members of the organization are asked to project forward into the future, thinking about the long-term outcomes they want to contribute to, and then to work

¹⁷² Freire (2000: 79) famously distinguished between the 'banking' and 'problem-posing' conceptions of education in arguing for a pedagogy of liberation: "Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. "Problem-posing" education, responding to the essence of consciousness—*intentionality*—rejects communiques and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of*, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian "split"—consciousness as consciousness *of* consciousness. Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferral of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors—teacher on the one hand and students on the other'.

backward to identify what they see as the necessary and sufficient conditions for moving in that direction.¹⁷³

Identifying relevant and realistic long-term goals immediately seems more difficult than expected. We conduct various exercises and make several attempts to define them together. The general idea of Camilla's broad social impact is captured by this member's phrase: "*We should say that the impact is to transform society, to involve the majority of people in the consumption of solidarity economy goods*". Clearly, the main challenge is to identify objectives that are not too broad and general to be meaningfully captured and 'measured', while at the same time maintaining a holistic view of the intended transformation.

The first long-term goal the group agrees on is to change consumption habits. The creation of a self-managed business model is the second long-term goal identified by the group.

There is a recognition that Camilla's influence is limited in terms of numerical impact. For instance, if Camilla were to expand to 1000 members, they would constitute merely 0.3% of the city's populace. Again, a quantitative approach risks completely shifting the discourse on issues of scale and thus silencing all the different forms of value that these kinds of community economies produce. The members also realize that Camilla is immersed in a network of initiatives that overlap, cooperate, possibly conflict, and so on, so that a linear-quantitative cause-and-effect thinking is not helpful.¹⁷⁴

Two key themes arise from the discussion. Firstly, there is a clear connection between consumption and production, with changes in one inevitably affecting the other. As one participant noted, "*You create the possibility that there is a relationship between consumer and producer, and at that point you*

¹⁷³ As we read in the Hivos ToC guide: 'Pathways of change are a projection of the envisaged change process into the future, based on what we know of the current situation and our views and beliefs about how change happens. Mapping 'pathways of change' is done by working backwards from the long-term desired change, asking ourselves what needs to change for the desired change to occur. At the same time, we are also unpacking and testing our thinking about how the change process may evolve from the current situation to the future' (van Es, Guijt, Vogel, 2015: 55).

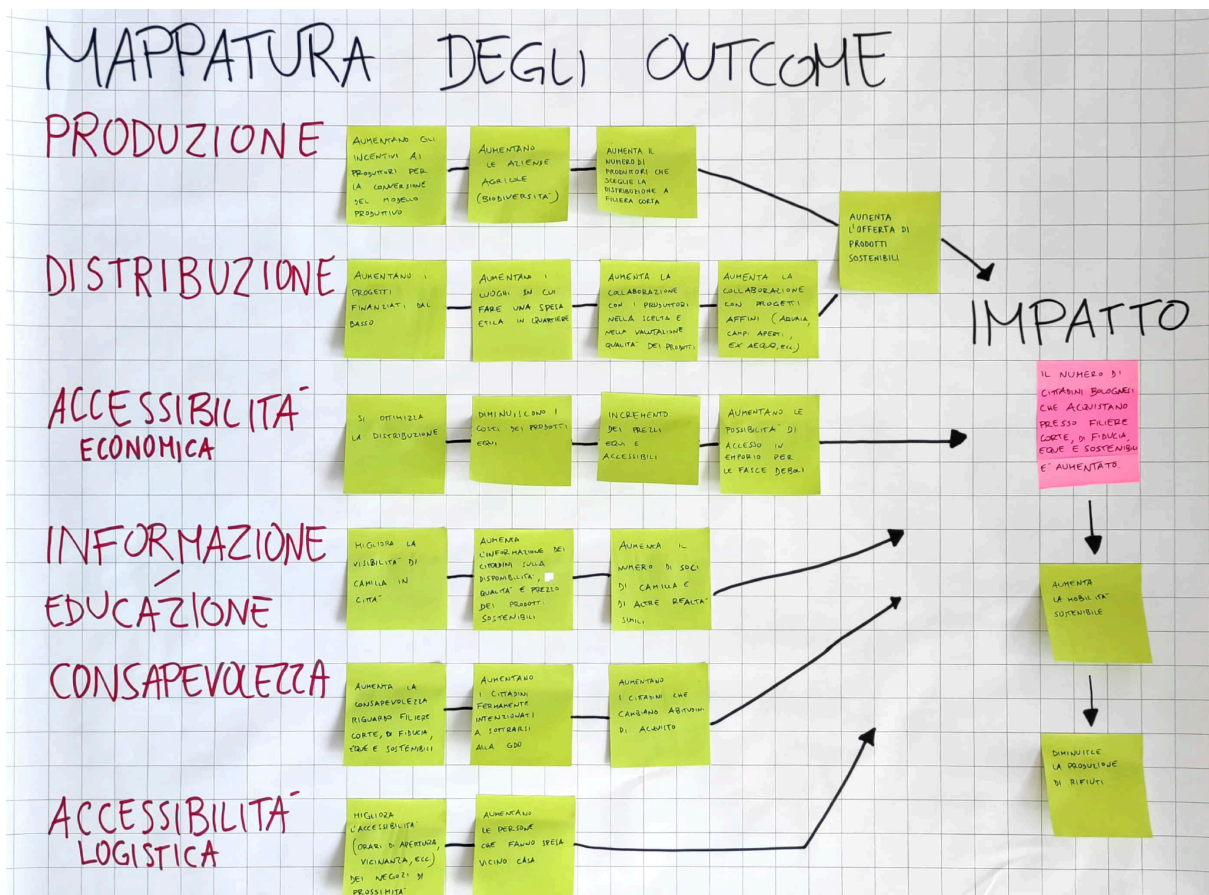
¹⁷⁴ As an example, one member discusses the importance of a healthy diet, which Camilla could contribute to, in relation to the overall health of individuals and thus reducing costs for the national health system: "*I would like to do such a population study: record what they eat, how they move. I am convinced that the more I increase a healthy diet, regardless of Camilla, I am convinced that in 10 years my blood tests will be different. So, to put it simply, it could be that the national health system will be relieved*".

change both production and consumption”. Second, mutual trust plays a fundamental role in this relationship. “In my opinion, the thing is that the relationship is based on trust, so it's not based on certification, it's not based on convenience, it's not based on the worker being underpaid”.

The group comes up with the first impact challenge as follows: *The number of citizens in Bologna who buy from short, trustworthy, fair and sustainable supply chains has increased.*

The next step is to work backwards to identify what is needed to achieve long-term impact. I ask each participant to write on post-it notes the outcomes they think are necessary for the identified impact challenge (Figure 24). This is the most challenging part of the process, requiring constant refinement of terms and connections, as well as weeding out what isn't relevant.

Figure 24. Camilla's outcomes mapping



Source: own picture

Workshop 4: Refining the impact challenge - Construction of the pathway of change - Reality check

On 26 May 2022 we discuss the results of the previous workshop. I see two issues to be addressed in relation to the given definition, which is too broad. Firstly, the desired behavior regarding the impact goal should be specified: will the purchase be regular, monthly, occasional, etc.? Additionally, to estimate the impact, it is necessary to determine the current status and establish a threshold for achieving the goal. For the Camilla organization, monitoring membership is a straightforward way to assess the current state. Evaluating what exists beyond Camilla poses a considerably more intricate challenge.

The group agrees that regular purchasing is a desirable objective, and aims to specify its frequency (how often) and quantity (minimum desirable purchase). The challenge lies in determining which expenses to consider as needs are multifaceted and intricate. Therefore, Camilla cannot reasonably cover everything. One member points out, *“What is this expense? That is, if my expense is also what I spend on my cell phone, for example, it comes out of this, and I have already completely canceled any kind of percentage. Of course, that’s not what we meant. But actually, you also have to understand how short, trustworthy, fair, sustainable supply chains satisfy in absolute terms”*.

Short, trusted, fair, and sustainable supply chains are too expansive and outside of Camilla's sphere of control. While Camilla may have an influence, the ability to monitor and demonstrate such impact is particularly challenging. The group agrees to narrow the scope of the discussion. The group opts to determine the effect on Camilla based on available data, which must be verified. The Food Sovereignty Network, of which Camilla is a member, presents a possible area of broader impact, but the scope may be overly intricate.

Participants reiterate that the impact of Camilla's membership extends beyond the food coop and encompasses positive changes in their routine lives: *“We have 300 members who buy, but we have probably activated at least fifty who may go to farmers' markets in their neighborhoods”*.

The group agrees on labeling those as 'active members'.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the revised impact challenge is stated as follows: *The number of citizens in the metropolitan city of Bologna who regularly purchase groceries from Camilla, totaling no less than 50€ (to be confirmed), at least once a month, has risen by 30% within a period of 5 years.*

At this point, I lead the group through a reality check, a review of the outcome map. Upon a participant's proposal, the group assigns a number between 1 and 3 to each outcome based on the extent of Camilla's influence (from greatest to least). Outcomes scoring 2 or 3 are eliminated from the map.

Workshop 5: Identification of outputs

In the fifth workshop, 23 June 2022, I present the results mapping that I revised to continue the construction of the results chain by identifying outputs and activities. I also reworded the definition of the impact goal as follows: *Camilla's active membership has increased by 30% in 5 years*, defining active members, based on the previous discussion, as *those who purchase at least once a month with a minimum of 50€, attend membership meetings, and cover the monthly shift.*

We start with the activity of completing the results chain, following some guiding questions:

- What kind of intervention is needed to produce the outcome?
- What activities we already do can produce the outcome?
- What actions are needed to initiate the memberships we need to produce specific outcomes?

A relevant discussion immediately arises about the need to find a compromise between potentially conflicting needs: economic sustainability and environmental sustainability. For example, there may be a discrepancy between cost and value: *"Sustainability may be an issue: that is, it is not economically sustainable because it costs me too much, but maybe its cycle is impeccable from an [environmental] sustainability point of view, that is, this product has a production line that is impeccable from a sustainability point of view"*. Another example is transportation costs: *"The thing about shipping costs: they may be economically viable for Camilla because it increases the price of the product, but at the same time you're making a choice to have your product perfectly on time in the emporium when you want it, which increases the shipping costs because at that point the shipping is*

dedicated to you. So you have a truck that travels empty with your pallet. I'm solving a need that I have because we have a problem, but how do I solve that problem?"

The group concludes that there's no final answer. This complexity requires ongoing negotiations on how to survive well (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013): *"You have to put it on the scale. You don't have the right answer, you always have to mediate a little bit. But I think it is good to ask the question"*.

During workshops, confusion often arises regarding the varying levels of the activity-output-outcome chain. We reflect together on this confusion. The group returns to the long-term impact of changing consumption habits and the importance of actively raising members' awareness. Awareness operates at multiple levels, including production processes, sustainable practices, creating and being part of a community, and the functioning of the food cooperative.

"Shift your consumption from the outside to the inside, Camilla"; "Now this is interesting: working on awareness, which I think is the heart"; "A lot of work needs to be done on the information and communication aspect; "Awareness comes with knowledge. And so to increase knowledge, you have to have means of dissemination".

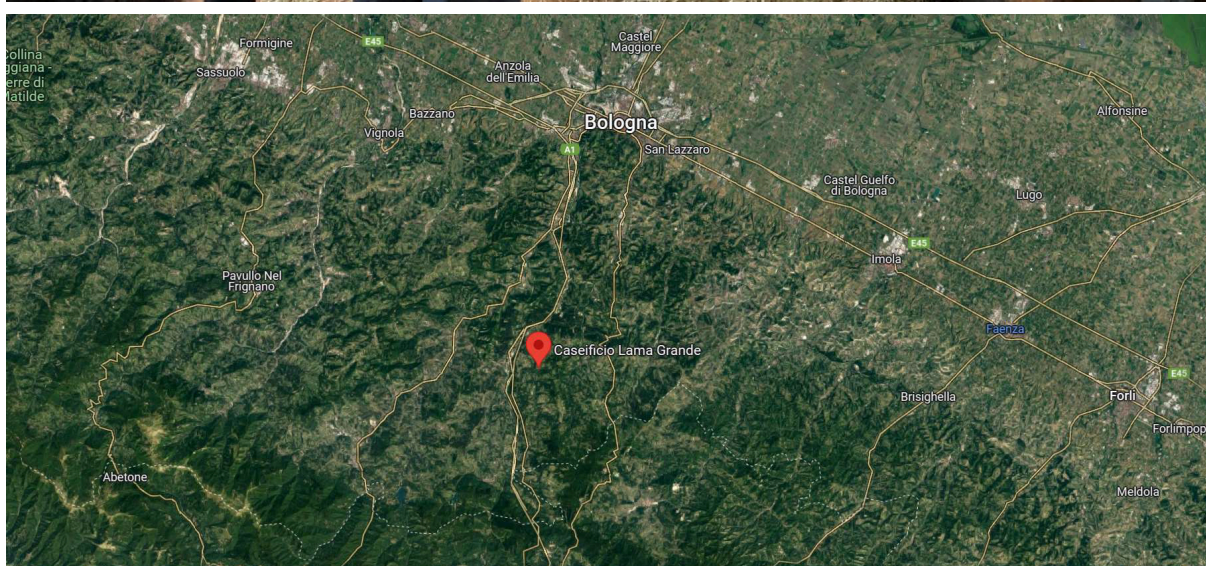
"In abbraccia_camilla (mailing list) you can really see the diversity, the many faces of Camilla."¹⁷⁵ The sense of belonging instead? I don't know if it's right, I don't want to become identitarian, but a sense of belonging, yes. I mean, so many things I do because it's a little part of who I am. But I see some members who are a little bit distant in that".

In this respect, the participants identify an informative and an experiential part, which is considered particularly important. *"The workshops and the trekking: for me, what you learn by visiting the farm has an enormous potential"*. Camilla arranges treks and tours to some of its suppliers located in the Bologna region. These excursions afford members the opportunity to observe firsthand the production process and supply chain of the goods they consume. Additionally,

¹⁷⁵ Camilla has an internal mailing list that any member can subscribe to if they wish. This mailing list is dedicated to communication among members and represents the diversity of people, needs, and forms of exchange within the community. The mailing list is used for exchanging recipes, gifts, job offers, and mutual help, among other things.

participants may interact with producers and farmers, listen to their stories, pose inquiries and gain insight into sustainable practices (see Figure 25).

Figure 25. Members of Camilla during a visit to the Lama Grande cheese factory in Monzuno (BO) (October 24, 2021)



Source: Facebook and Google maps

Another potential contradiction that must be constantly mediated is between economic growth, which refers to an increase in available products, and responsible, sustainable consumption. *“Increasing the number of products, no matter how sustainable, can actually be viewed negatively in terms of awareness. You don't need 25,000 items from a sustainability perspective”*. One member summarizes poignantly: *“It depends on how you want to increase supply. You have to negotiate between different needs: the demands of the members, meeting the needs of the members as much as possible without reproducing the consumerist model of the supermarkets”*.

During the discussion, critical issues arise regarding the need to establish trust among team members and respect differences in needs, perspectives, and skills. Additionally, the group must address the unbalanced distribution of responsibilities within Camilla's management, which is concentrated among a few members, as well as how to mediate potential conflicts.

One participant, who is also part of Camilla's staff, points out: *“I think there are some members who can't even imagine, they can't understand what's there, not only on the part of the staff, but also what's behind all those members who give Camilla a lot of activity”*.

In many self-managed and volunteer-based organizations, member commitment often lacks balance. This may be due to physiological factors, which vary depending on individuals' circumstances. However, if not openly managed and discussed, this imbalance can ultimately jeopardize the success of the project in the long term.

This project, which has no precedent in Italy, explores a new model combining paid and unpaid work in an experimental way. It will therefore require adaptation and a trial-and-error approach to find a balance between working and volunteer members.

“What I want to make clear to the members is that I think it worked out well for Camilla, because A. and I somehow found a very balanced way of working together. We could have been two people who couldn't stand each other, and that would have been a problem, because nobody knows how to coordinate Camilla's two employees. Because Camilla's staff did it themselves, nobody told them what to do”.

Camilla is conceived as a flexible organization that responds to the needs of its members at different levels, offering space for participation and action according to personal availability, interest and inclination: *“The idea behind our cooperative model is that you can participate in Camilla on many different levels. And each person chooses the one that best suits his or her life”*.

Participants discuss a specific example of a member, a retired engineer, who gives a lot of time to the food coop and has become crucial in warehousing and logistics: *“A very small example: every time D. goes on vacation, we have to make complete arrangements for a missing person”*. *“That is a bit of a special case, maybe even a bit of a dysfunction”*. In a way, it seems to some members that this is all part of self-management. *“It’s in the model. This dysfunctionality is called self-management”*. On the other hand, it is recognized that this is also an exercise of consciousness on the part of members who are extremely committed to limiting themselves and not becoming *“unique entities”*.

In any case, volunteer hours provided by members are therefore of unique value to the food coop and to the Camilla community at large. *“It’s also a way to provide value, to recognize what’s behind the activities”*.

“It is an index of sharing. That is, the more you are willing to give hours to Camilla, the more it means that the cooperative is meaningful to you”.

“It is the relationship of trust with the members, because then the cooperative is the members”.

“To ask for this kind of commitment from the members for a long time, I mean it’s an evolution ... We have to hope that in the future things will be a little bit more automatic”.

“Yes, it means that the extra hours that the member gives are easy and passionate”.

Self-management requires developing specific skills, attitudes and cultivating an open mind on part of members. Facilitation training has been done by some Camilla's members although it is recognized the challenges of putting it into practice. *“No one is an all-rounder. It works when everyone calmly finds their own place. Then you give your best. And then the other one helps you with his”*.

Participation is an important concern and theme throughout the workshops. Seasoned members reminisce with a hint of nostalgia about Camilla's enthusiasm during the initial phases, which is typical of a new project, and acknowledge the current state as critical on this front.

“The phase of freshness and participation that we had when we found the space...so painting together, I think was extraordinary”.

“Not only the physical phase of the emporium but also the construction phase. The construction phase was something that really set in motion a tremendous will to participate”.

“Now people find the emporium already done. It lacks that novelty that you can even present to a press review”.

“In my opinion, you have the forces at your disposal if you can regain that freshness... Right now, in my opinion, we are in a bit of a critical phase”.

According to one member, it was difficult to communicate the ethos of the project to newer members: *“But we didn't have the ability to focus on certain points. Now we don't know how to pass it on”.* Despite this challenge, members remain confident in the model's ability to spark a positive shift in urban consumption habits. *“But it is really exciting. You have to be able to get a really solid foundation, because I think Camilla is a pilot project that can hold up. And we know that because it's held up for 40 years in the United States. You just have to do a good job of identifying what your needs are”.*

In fact, Camilla is a space of diversity and a container for different forms of exchange to proliferate: *“What opportunities does Camilla offer you? Where else can you find this kind of exchange?”.* *“It's beautiful that Camilla is the stage for doing things, but there has to be a common thread”.*

Workshop 6: Discussion on assumptions, enablers, and indicators - Debriefing

The workshop on June 29, 2022 begins with my presentation of the reorganized and reframed material to continue the ToC creation. We discuss each output in detail and together establish plausible cause-and-effect relationships with the outcomes, starting with my hypotheses written on post-it notes. Unfortunately, due to time and energy constraints, we did not complete the ToC with activities and resources and build a common narrative, although it is possible to derive them from the model already defined. I therefore decide to focus the remaining work on assumptions, enablers and indicators. Together, we review the entire pathway of change (from outputs to outcomes to impact) by conducting a verification of assumptions and enablers. That is, a test of plausible

hypotheses about why taking certain actions will produce certain results, and an analysis of the elements that facilitate (or hinder) their achievement. I highlight certain critical elements that have emerged from previous sessions that need to be considered in order to achieve the impact goal.

During the conversation, the group draws attention to the crucial process by which members select the products to be sold in the emporium. *“That’s so much of what we say: ‘We choose the products’. The process has to be there, because if it’s not there, it’s not really there”*. *“And I think if we can have a really clear, streamlined, linear process, I think that becomes a newsworthy thing in the sense that it’s also very newsworthy and innovative”*.

Having a transparent participatory process for selecting products based on the ethical standards established by the food coop could result in several positive outcomes, including: "Heightened confidence between producers and members", "Enhanced availability of sustainable products", "Greater member awareness of product value", and "Strengthening of a sense of sharing, trust, and community among members".

Attention is drawn to the multifaceted benefits of buying items in bulk. Bulk purchases reduce packaging waste, production costs, and consumer prices, thus promoting sustainability. Additionally, the cooperative's upward trend in its bulk products indicates support for this hypothesis. *“We started with a few bulk products. Now, from the beginning to now, the number has increased tenfold. And also, in my opinion, this availability has affected sales in the sense that those who were not buying bulk because of the lack of availability are now buying it and have realized the usefulness and also the quality”*. *“There is a shift. If even large productions like Girolomoni have shifted to bulk ... because there is convenience”*. *“Because there wasn’t much demand before”*. One limitation is that not all products are suitable for bulk sales due to the quality of the products themselves.

Camilla's food cooperative aims to expand the availability of local and organic goods by purchasing directly from small producers, as well as supporting independent, community-led supply chains. However, activating additional projects has proven challenging. One standout example is Pomilla, a

tomato sauce that Camilla's cooperative has transformed and branded by collaborating with nearby producers. The creation of several self-managed supply chain projects presents significant challenges: *“one obstacle is commitment, the energy it takes to activate one”*, others include the skills required, and limited opportunities.

Regarding members' required volunteer effort, we make it clear that we are seeking additional hours beyond those of Emporium shifts. *“Either you're a Camilla member and you're doing two and three-quarter hours, or you're not doing two and three-quarter hours and you're not a Camilla member unless you're not relieved or you're exempt. That is the sine qua non. The rest is something extra you add on”*. *“To clarify this conceptually, in my opinion, those three hours are not volunteering, they are part of the social pact”*.

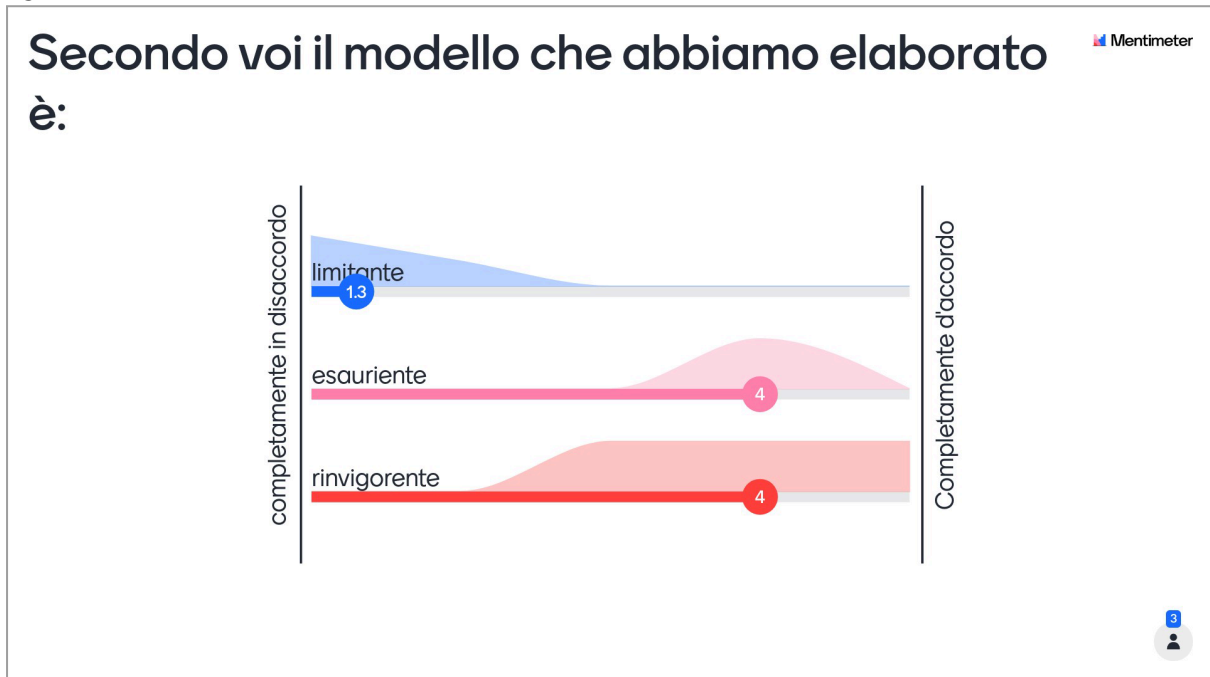
Finally, we turn to the discussion of identifying possible indicators. I clarify that indicators can be identified in terms of outputs, outcomes, impacts, and assumptions. They can be quantitative and qualitative, and they can measure breadth and depth of change. Many indicators can be derived directly from outputs and are all quantitative, while for outcomes they are more complex as they almost all have a qualitative dimension. Indicators as such do not indicate impact, but provide a measure of results achieved over time.

The workshop concludes with a final debriefing session regarding the meeting and journey. I assert that the Theory of Change tool has widespread applications and should not be restricted to a positivist view of linear change. Instead, it should be viewed as a versatile and adaptable guiding mechanism over time. Addressing complex needs in a sustainable and democratic manner necessitates persistent negotiations without an ultimate solution. I quote from the Community Economies Research Network, which effectively represents the concept: 'The community economy names the ongoing process of negotiating our interdependence. It is the explicit and democratic co-creation of the different ways in which we collectively earn a living, receive our livelihood from others, and provide for others'.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ <https://www.communityeconomies.org/about/community-economies-research-and-practice>.

Finally, we use Mentimeter (Figures 26 and 27) again to evaluate both the path and the edited model. Unfortunately, there were only 3 participants, so it was not possible to record the other points of view.

Figure 26. Model evaluation



Source: Mentimeter

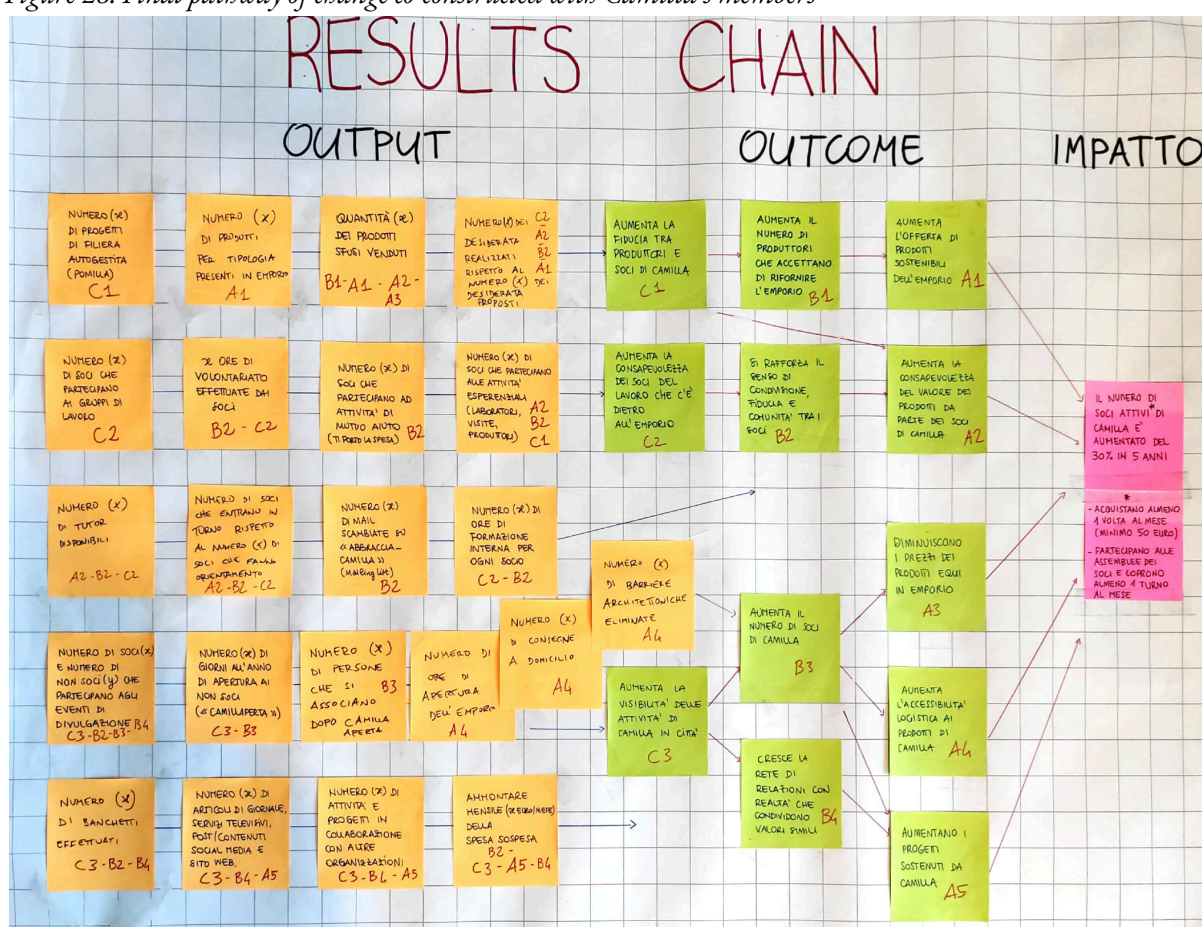
Figure 27. Relevant missing elements from the co-created ToC



Source: Mentimeter

Participants find the co-constructed Theory of Change quite thorough and invigorating, and don't find it particularly limiting. When asked what relevant elements are missing from the elaborated model, important points emerge that we do not have time to discuss, but that certainly deserve further study: namely, what political role Camilla's experience can play, the fact that its existence is taken for granted, how to rethink the project, and how Camilla relates to the society in which it operates. These elements may indicate limitations inherent in the Theory of Change model, although a more elaborate and sophisticated model could be explored.¹⁷⁷

Figure 28. Final pathway of change co-constructed with Camilla's members



Source: own picture

1.1.2: Preliminary notes on the ToC action research process

¹⁷⁷ A ToC textbook that goes in this direction is the aforementioned Hivos guide by van Es, Guijt, Vogel (2015).

Developing a theory of change can be a time-consuming task, and due to several factors, it was not possible to finalize and refine a ToC for the Camilla food cooperative. Participation in the workshops posed challenges in terms of both continuity and the total number of members enrolled. During the workshops, participants identified a low participation rate as indicative of a broader issue with involvement within Camilla. *“Why couldn't he involve so many people? That's Camilla's problem in general...but specifically, I have to say that I understood the importance”*. There may have also been a communication issue at play, as two participants chose not to sign up initially to avoid taking up space from others. The issue prompts self-reflection: *“In my opinion, it is crucial in a work like this to involve a lot of people, especially people who are younger within Camilla”*. *“Camilla needs to ask itself why they are not participating”*.

Nevertheless, the process of co-construction proved to be an enriching experience for both the participants and my research project. Primarily, it acted as a self-reflective practice that enhanced awareness and fostered mutual understanding among the members. *“This is another problem that members have in building relationships with each other: knowing that we are different. And that's why I think this work is very good instead. Because it would help people. First of all, because they would orient themselves a little bit differently each time, and I think that's also very interesting, and then because it's personal.”* Through reflection, we examined the benefits of this approach and whether it could be implemented with other members, perhaps in a scaled-down form. *“I believe that many other members would be interested in undertaking this pathway”*. *“We can think of ways to replicate and develop it”*. *“It helps so much; it helps so much”*.

As an inherently open tool, ToC is subject to future assessment and refinement. I extracted several indicators from the co-constructed model and consulted with the board members of Camilla to determine if they had the necessary data to complete the matrix. Predictably, the food cooperative is missing relevant information, some of which is undocumented (such as suspended shopping), while other pieces are challenging to obtain (such as trust between consumers and producers). In any case, according to research on social impact evaluation, it may place an extra burden, primarily for organizations with limited resources (Barraket, 2013a, 2013b). Additionally, it is crucial to establish the evaluation's significance to the involved actors.

In conclusion, it is clear that different theories of change are possible for the Camilla Food coop, and different impact goals could be identified and discussed. Participants acknowledged this notion not only when exploring the possibility of conducting future workshops with a wider range of cooperative members, but also when visualizing repeating the process. As one participant suggested, “*Then I imagine that if we did it again, we would definitely shift the focus to other details, so it would change the perspective*”.

1.2: Discussing the social value of the Camilla food coop

*“And instead, in Camilla, you understand how **people change a little bit when they come here**, because they are in the cooperative and they have to do things. Because if you want it to work, it has to be like this. And so **you give up a little bit of yourself**. And I think that is really important for a community. Then [Camilla] also has the ability, I think, to deal with sometimes complex issues like Covid... Not solve them. Because then it's not like a solution will ever come. But in short, you do it, you try. That's it. Then everybody makes mistakes, but at the end of the day, I mean, nobody is born a genius, nor is there an entrepreneur who comes from above...”*

(L.S., Camilla's member)¹⁷⁸

The evaluation of the Camilla food cooperative continued through four semi-structured interviews with several types of members, as well as the distribution of a questionnaire to members. Drawing inspiration from the ToC pathway, I obtained feedback from select participants to enhance the questionnaire's relevance to Camilla's members and to explore the possibilities of participatory evaluation processes. The survey comprises three sections: 1) analyzing the dynamic between the member and the cooperative; 2) examining Camilla's significance to the community and surrounding area; and 3) gathering socio-demographic information.

1.2.1: Reading the co-constructed survey data

¹⁷⁸ Interview with L.S., former working member of Camilla food coop, conducted in Bologna on 13 July 2022.

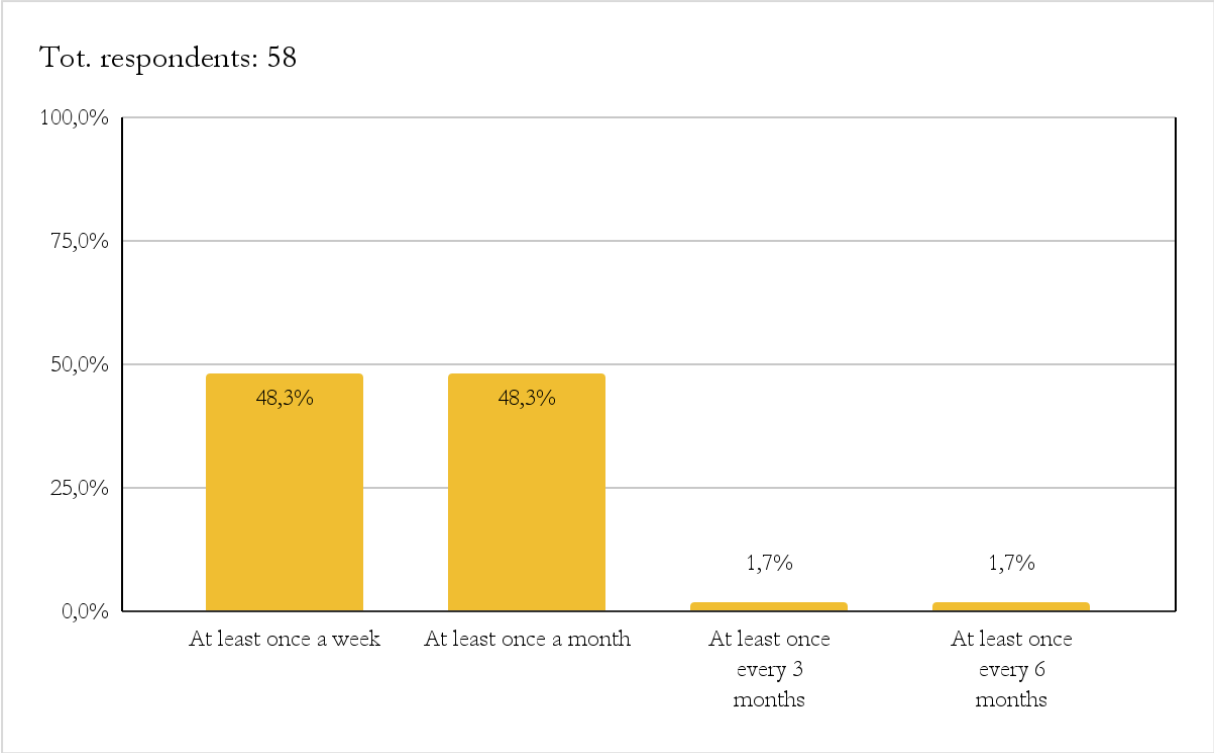
Fifty-eight members completed the survey *and* gave permission for the results to be used for the purposes of this research (only one refused; she is not included in the analysis), representing 9% of the membership at the time of the survey. However, it is worth noting that not all members actively participate in the Camilla food cooperative. For various reasons, about half of them do not shop, do the monthly shift, or volunteer. Looking at 2022, for example, 305 members are those who have actually done their shift to run the store. As a result, the gathered data holds greater importance since it accounts for 19% of the effective membership in 2022.

The first section describes the reciprocal interaction between the cooperative and its members, in terms of their level of involvement and the benefits they receive. Participation in the food cooperative requires a conscious effort, while being part of the community emporium offers a variety of benefits, including access to products, knowledge and care. It also builds trust and personal commitment to the project, initiating or reinforcing changes in habits and awareness of sustainability.

The vast majority of participants learned about Camilla through word of mouth (34.5%) or at public events and information stands (25.9%). Thus, aside from founding members (12.1% of respondents), other means of communication hold little relevance here, including digital ones that are increasingly hyped as the essence of contemporary social interaction (12.1% internet, 3.4% press, 1.7% radio). Not surprisingly, real-life social networks are crucial for a project like Camilla, and direct contact remains essential and far more effective.

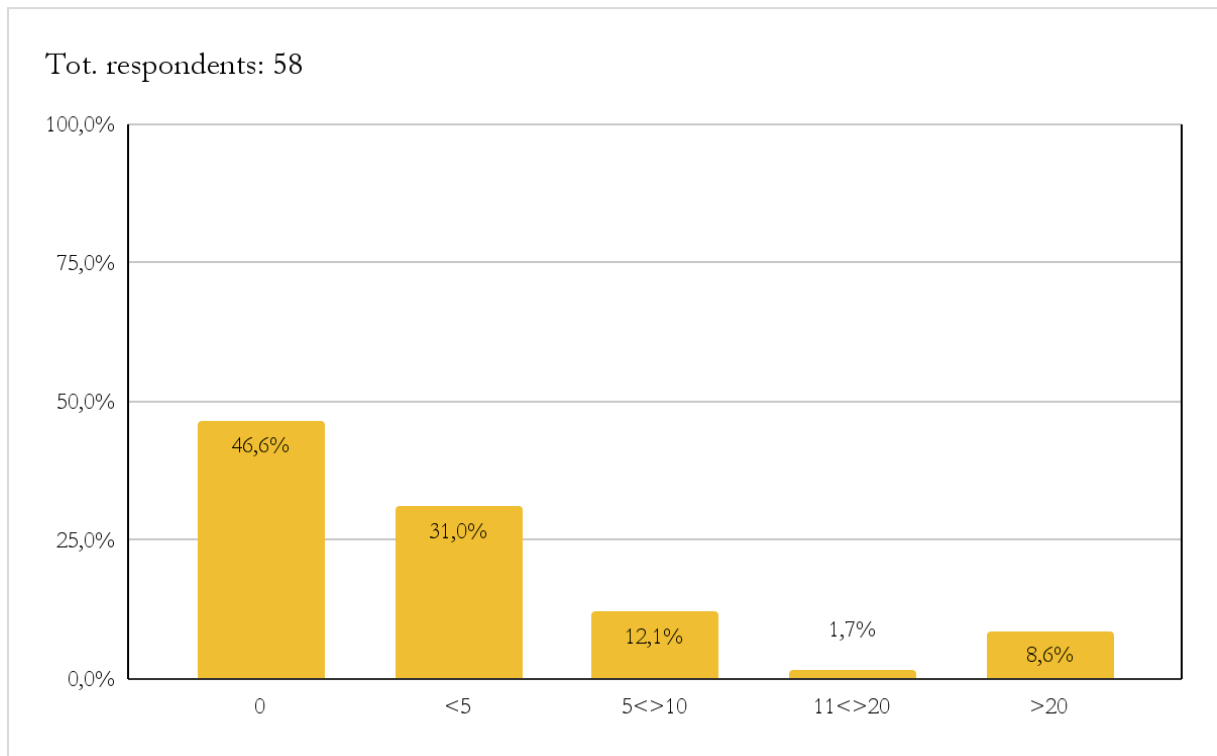
As anticipated, the survey respondents consist of individuals who are highly engaged in the project. Most of the participants have been members since or almost since the beginning (67,2% since 2018, 13,8% since 2019), and frequently shop at the Food Co-op (see Graph 1). They also take part in at least one working group (55,2% of respondents).

Graph 1. Percentage of purchases at Camilla food coop by frequency.



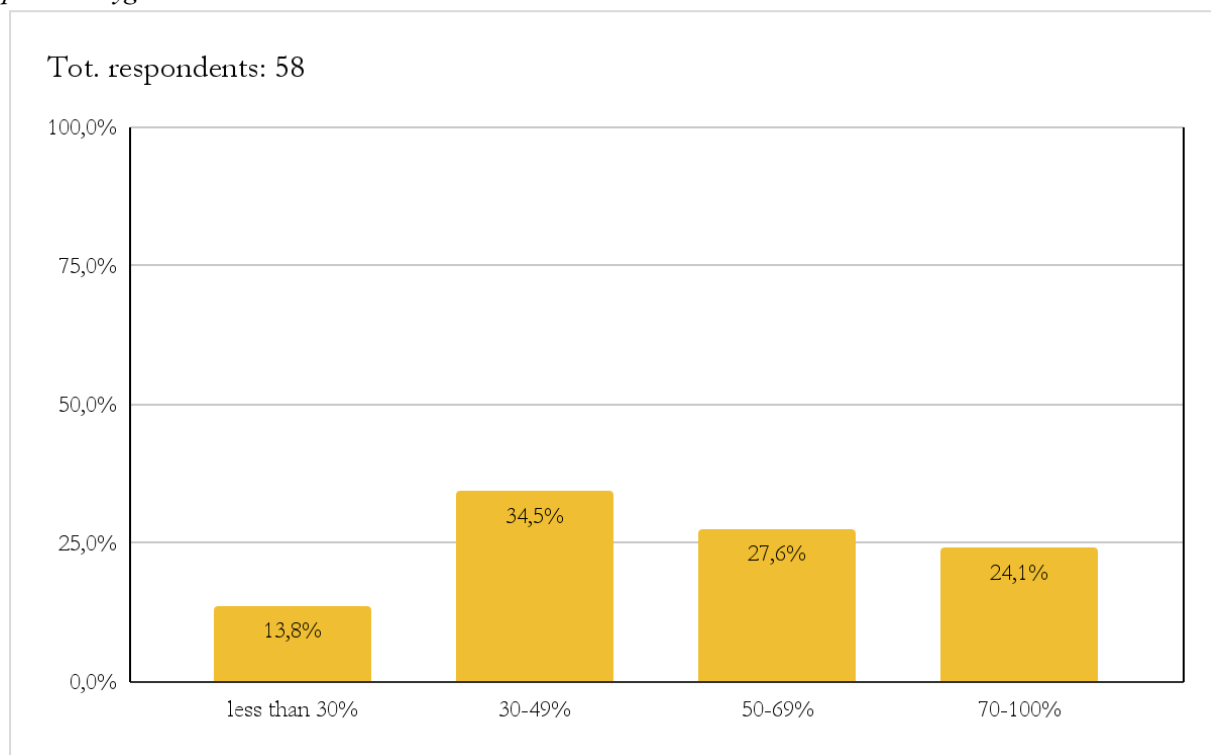
In terms of participation in the cooperative, about 50% of volunteers do not work any extra hours outside their shift, while a third contribute a few hours per month. A small proportion of volunteers contribute more than 20 hours per month (see Graph 2). This uneven distribution seems to support the conclusions reached during the ToC workshops and probably reflects the current state of the cooperative.

Graph 2. Average volunteer hours per month (excluding shifts) as a percentage



Examining Camilla Food Coop's capacity to meet their members' needs, slightly more than half of survey respondents obtain a significant amount of their daily groceries from Camilla (see Graph 3). When respondents were asked to evaluate the percentage of their total monthly expenditure on items currently provided by the food cooperative (including food, cosmetics, household cleaning, and personal hygiene products), only 24.1% reported buying everything or almost everything from the coop. In contrast, 13.8% indicated buying less than 30%, 34.5% bought something between 30 to 49%, and 27.6% purchased about 50 to 69% of their items from the food cooperative. Considering that the participants in this study are more inclined to be engaged with the organization, these findings reveal a potential accessibility issue with the food cooperative. Further investigation is necessary to identify and address any barriers that prevent members from fully integrating the cooperative into their daily lives.

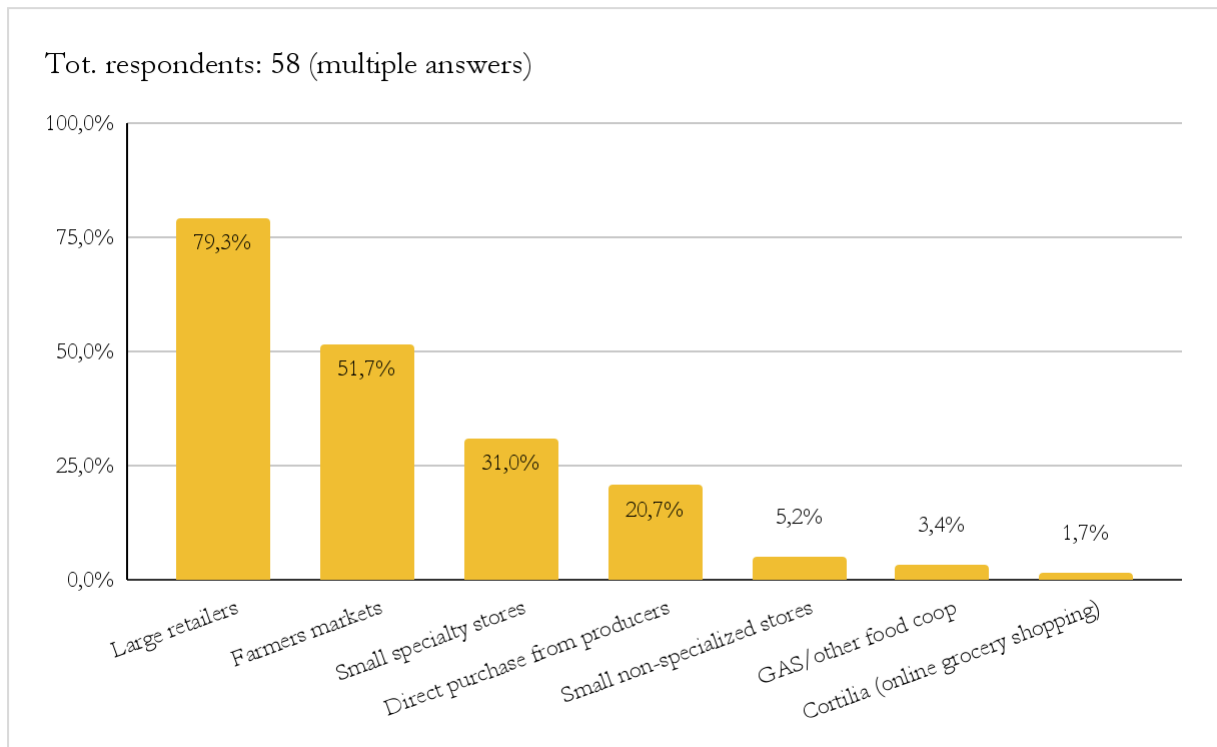
Graph 3. Percentage of total monthly expenditure spent in Camilla on food, cosmetics, household cleaning, personal hygiene



Conversely, the channels through which members supplement their spending are quite diverse (see Graph 4). While the majority of respondents (79.3%) still shop at large retail stores, they seek out different types of options, including buying directly from producers (20.7%) and small local stores (36.2%). Most importantly, 51.7% of respondents say they habitually shop at farmers' markets, a sign of continuity with behavior outside of Camilla in support of what Campi Aperti and the Regional Law on the solidarity economy call 'proximity peasant agriculture' (Sacchi, 2016).¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ The cited Regional Law 19/2014 defines 'proximity peasant agriculture' as follows: 'Activities carried out by small farmers with diversified production, obtained with respect for nature, the environment and health, with a prevalence of employment of labor per unit of agricultural land used'. Translation is mine.

Graph 4. Channels through which members integrate their shopping by percentage

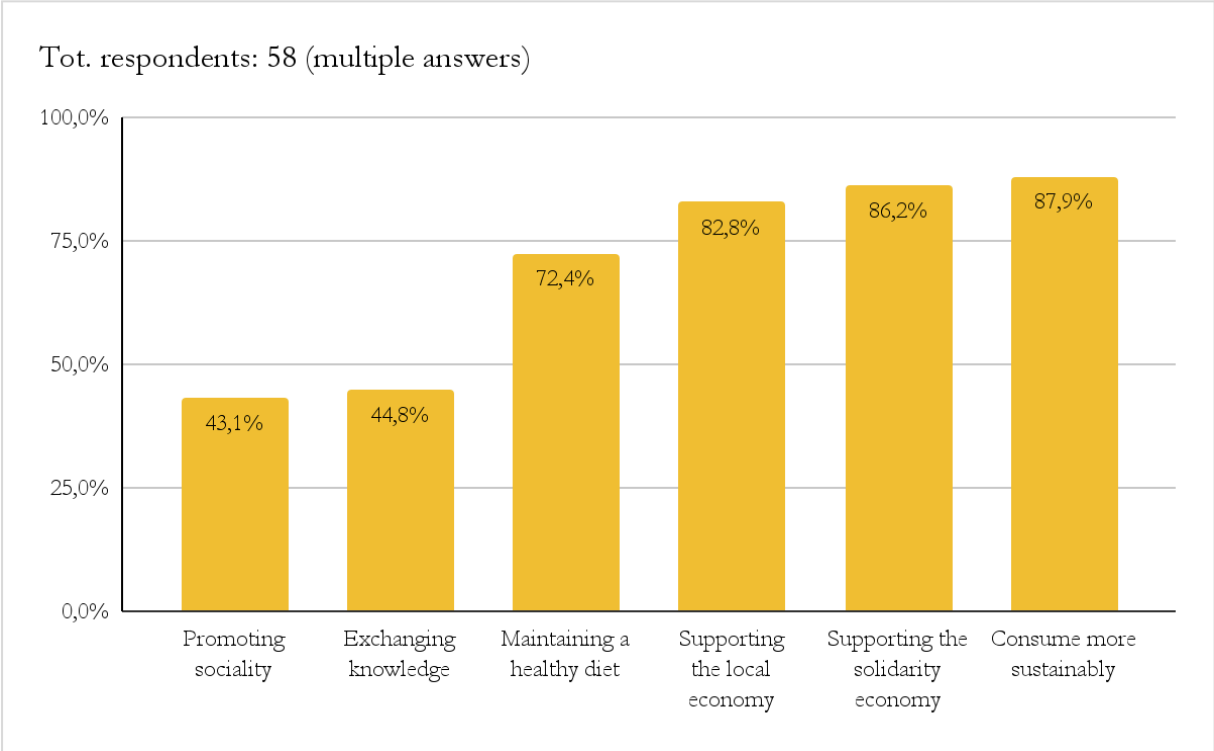


On a rating scale of 1 to 5, 81% of food cooperative members rated their trust in products as a 5, while 19% rated it as a 4. This illustrates the effective mechanism of trust that underlies the governance model. As Sacchi (2022: 321) notes, ‘Trust represents the precondition and the lubricant strengthening the social bonds amongst Camilla’s members and reducing the transaction costs of Camilla’s procedures’. Indeed, consumption is just one among many aspects envisioned by the model, which is inevitably embedded in a network of relationships, actions, and knowledge that mutually reinforce each other.

When queried about whether they believed that product prices reflected their social, environmental, and economic value, 89.6% of respondents answered affirmatively, with only 3.4% adding that the prices were too high and 8.6% being unsure. Notably, very few mentioned high prices as a concern, despite this issue often being cited as a significant barrier to purchasing the products. This is significant, as one of the main aims of the food cooperative is to encourage individuals to reconsider the value they allocate to their purchasing decisions. Low prices often come at the expense of labor, the environment, or human health.

Moving on to the advantages and outcomes that members reap from participating in the food cooperative, 71% of respondents indicate that their involvement in Camilla has allowed them to forge new meaningful connections (while 1.7% were able to sustain existing ones), with negative feedback coming from only 15.5% of participants and 12.1% expressing doubt. Such results suggest that this endeavor carries a potential for generating or revitalizing social capital at the local level. When queried about the benefits they perceived, the top answer was the ability to consume more sustainably (87.9%), followed by supporting the local economy (82.8%) and the solidarity economy (86.2%). The primary components of the collective experience appear to be connected with practicing an alternative form of economy, followed closely by the importance of maintaining a healthy diet (72,4%) (Graph 5).

Graph 5. Benefits of membership in Camilla food coop as perceived by members (percentage)

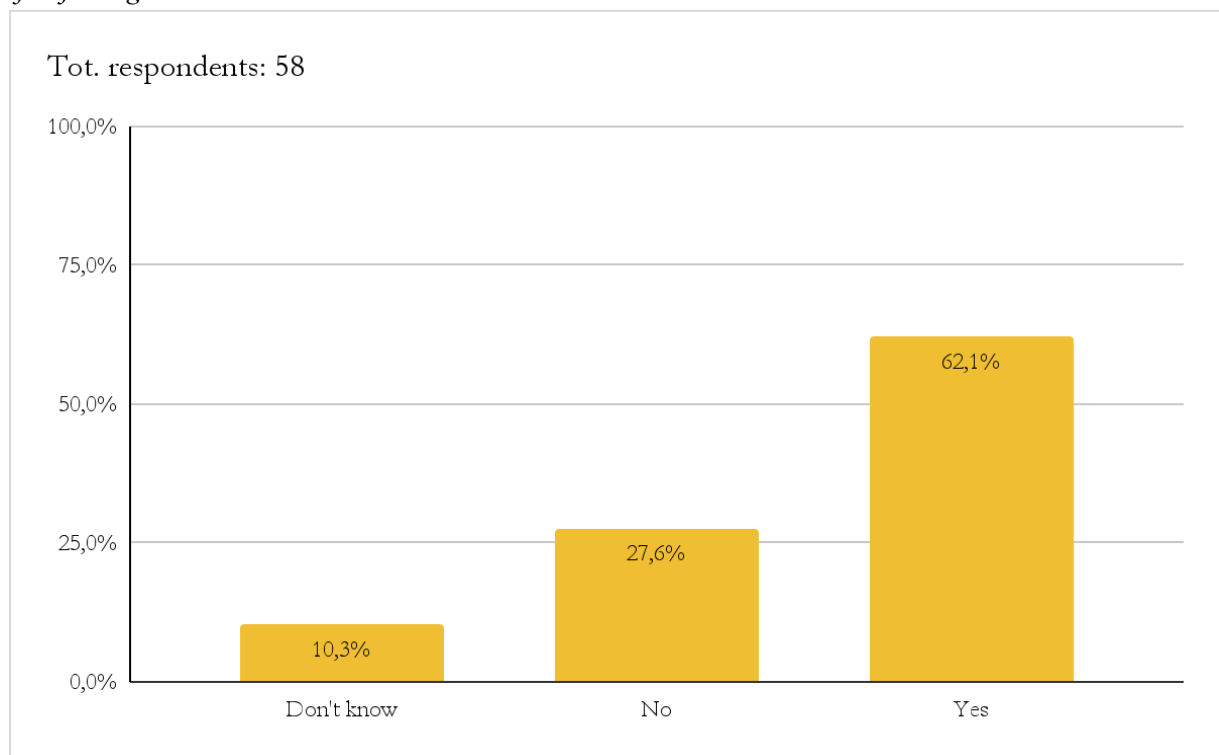


The open-ended question on the same topic (35 answers), the benefits members receive from their involvement with Camilla, mentions both physical and psychological well-being (“*It alleviates some of my frustration at being part of an unfair system that is on the verge of collapse*”), as well as a sense of belonging to an ethical community (“*Being part of a community that is experiencing a slow but*

steady revolution”) and a sense of doing something concrete to practice change (“*Having the solution to a problem that plagues the world: large-scale retail capitalism*”).

In terms of the individual transformation that Camilla's membership has triggered, there are promising and intriguing elements that the survey helps to bring to the surface. More than 62% of the participants reported altering their lifestyle, habits, and thought process upon enlisting in the cooperative (Graph 6); nearly half of the respondents (48.3%) attributed their discovery of novel resources (in terms of associations, local producers, sustainability, etc.) to Camilla (Graph 7), while 60.3% indicated that their membership provided them with the opportunity to acquire new abilities and knowledge (Graph 8). Camilla appears to facilitate conscious transformation in its members.

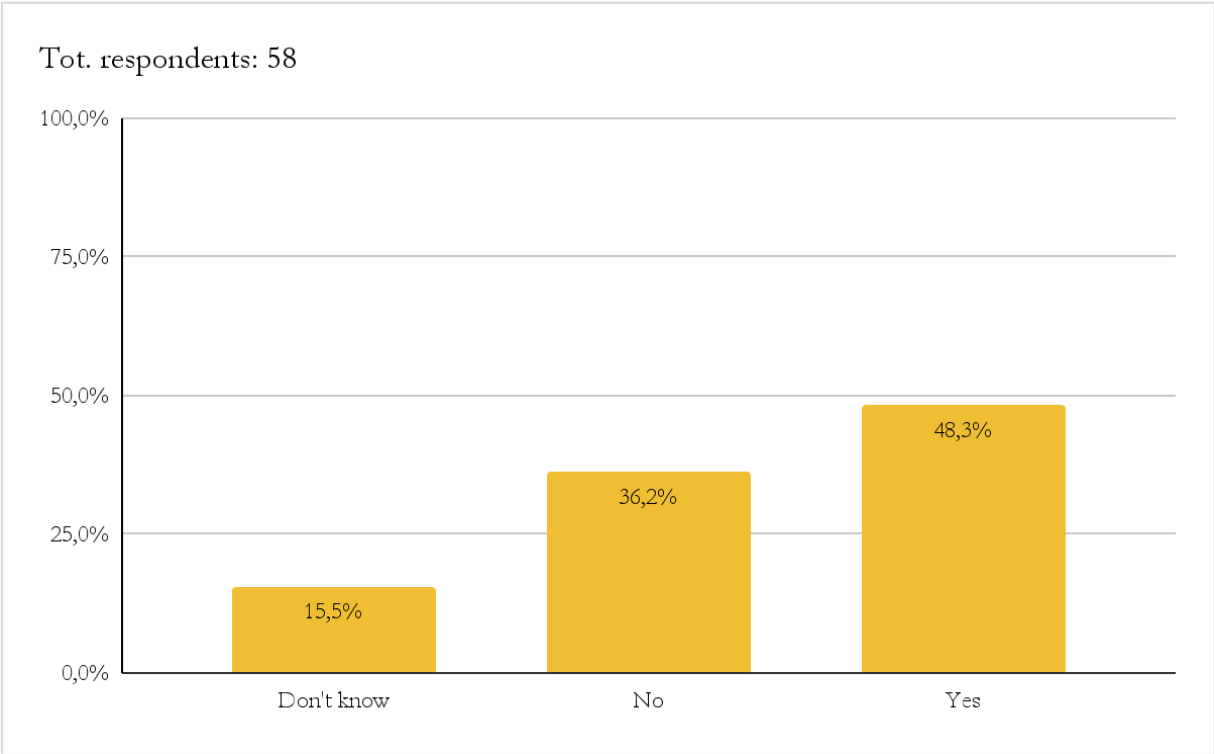
Graph 6. Percentage of members' self-perception of changes in personal habits, ways of thinking, and lifestyles after joining Camilla



To delve further, answers to the open-ended question on personal habits and mindsets uncovered instances of self-awareness surrounding various aspects of consumption habits (33 responses): product quality, promoting healthy dietary practices, minimizing waste production through bulk purchases, being aware of supply chains and value production, reducing overall consumption,

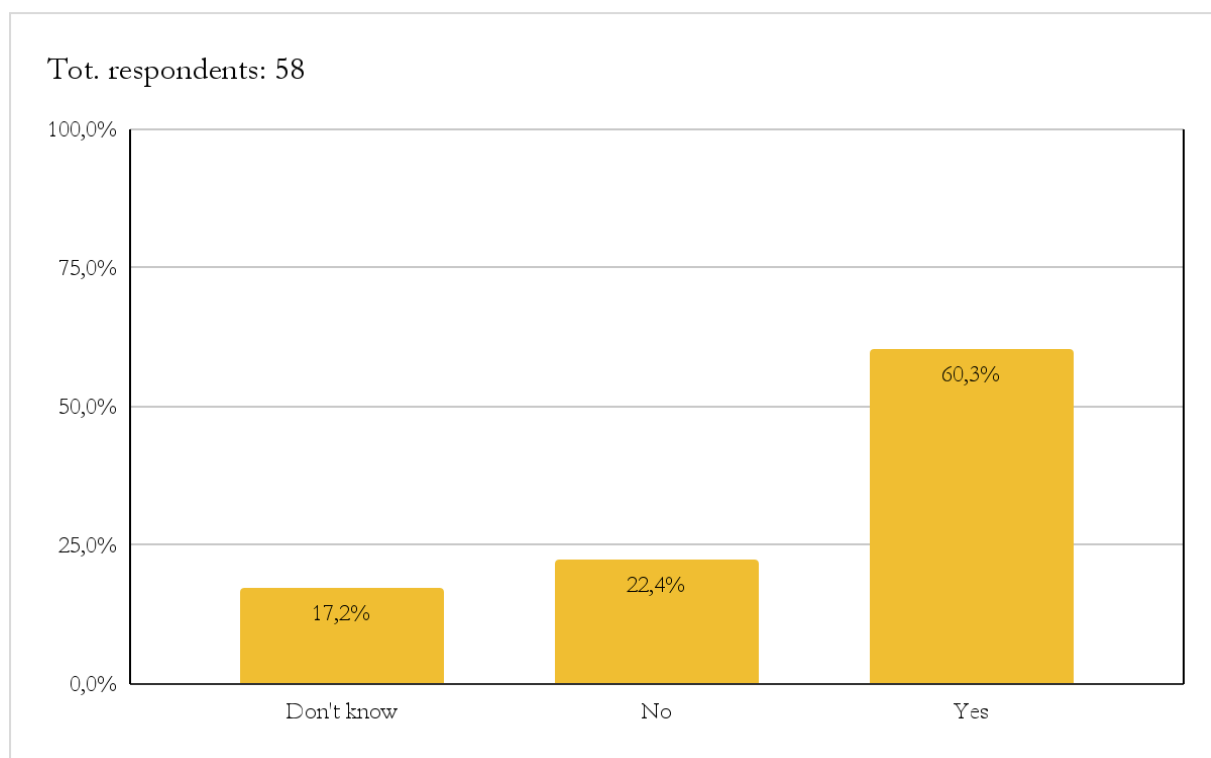
creating connections and exchanges with people who share similar values, and reducing supermarket consumption. *‘I cook more, I use more raw ingredients and seasonal produce, and I no longer view grocery shopping as a time of anxiety but as an opportunity to socialize’.*

Graph 7. Percentage of members who have discovered previously unknown resources after joining Camilla



Discussing knowledge circulation through the Camilla food cooperative, 20 respondents in an open question primarily mentioned discovering not only new projects or associations (e.g., *‘I was unaware of energy cooperative or social housing partners’*), but also becoming familiar with local producers, social movements, and concepts such as food sovereignty (*‘I didn't know Arvaia [the CSA involved in this research] and I didn't know the concept of food sovereignty in concrete terms’*).

Graph 8. Members who gained new skills and knowledge after joining Camilla (percentage)



Finally, 28 members responded to an open question, detailing the new skills and knowledge they acquired as part of the food cooperative. There is a diverse range of practical aspects to consider, including social, communication, and organizational skills (facilitation, project management, active listening, working in teams), practical knowledge associated with sustainable consumption (self-production, recipes), and the everyday operations required to run a food cooperative, such as logistics, warehousing, and the cash register.

“I have greatly improved my ability to work in groups and to listen to others”.

“I am experimenting with making my own food and home and personal care products, as well as exploring new ways of cooking; thanks to the training opportunities I have experienced with groups of members, I have improved my communication skills: in fact, I have learned to recognize my limits without necessarily knowing how to overcome them. But this still helps me to improve both my communication and my relationship with groups”.

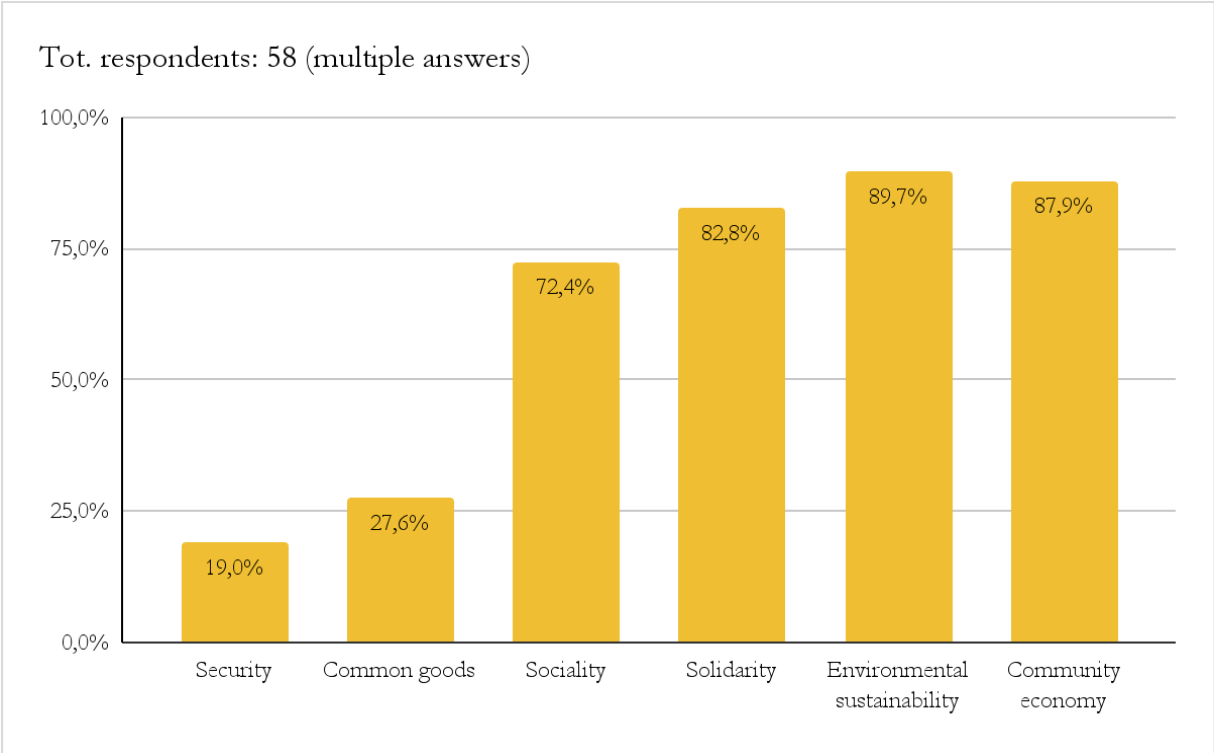
In the case of one particularly active member, the process went so far that he became one of the promoters of another food cooperative in another Italian city, following Camilla’s example:

“Organizing a cooperative and founding one”.

The data support the hypothesis established during the ToC process that Camilla functions as a learning community. This aligns with the views of Forno, Grasseni, and Signori (2013), who portray Solidarity Purchasing Groups as ‘self-educating’ spaces. Indeed, their reflections seem to apply to food cooperatives as well: ‘The research found that Solidarity Purchasing Groups are characterized as "self-educating" spaces where rethinking individual consumption is often the first step in establishing a new kind of active and "sustainable" citizenship’ (Forno, Grasseni, Signori, 2013: 72).

The second section of the survey encourages participants to consider the potential positive impacts that Camilla has on both the local and wider communities. In relation to the food cooperative's effect on the local area, respondents predominantly highlighted the importance of promoting community-based economies (87,9%), environmental sustainability (89,7%) and solidarity (82,8%), as well as social engagement (72,4%). Interestingly, only a small minority identified the promotion of common goods and security as a key benefit (Graph 9).

Graph 9. Members' perceived positive impacts of Camilla on the territory (percentage)

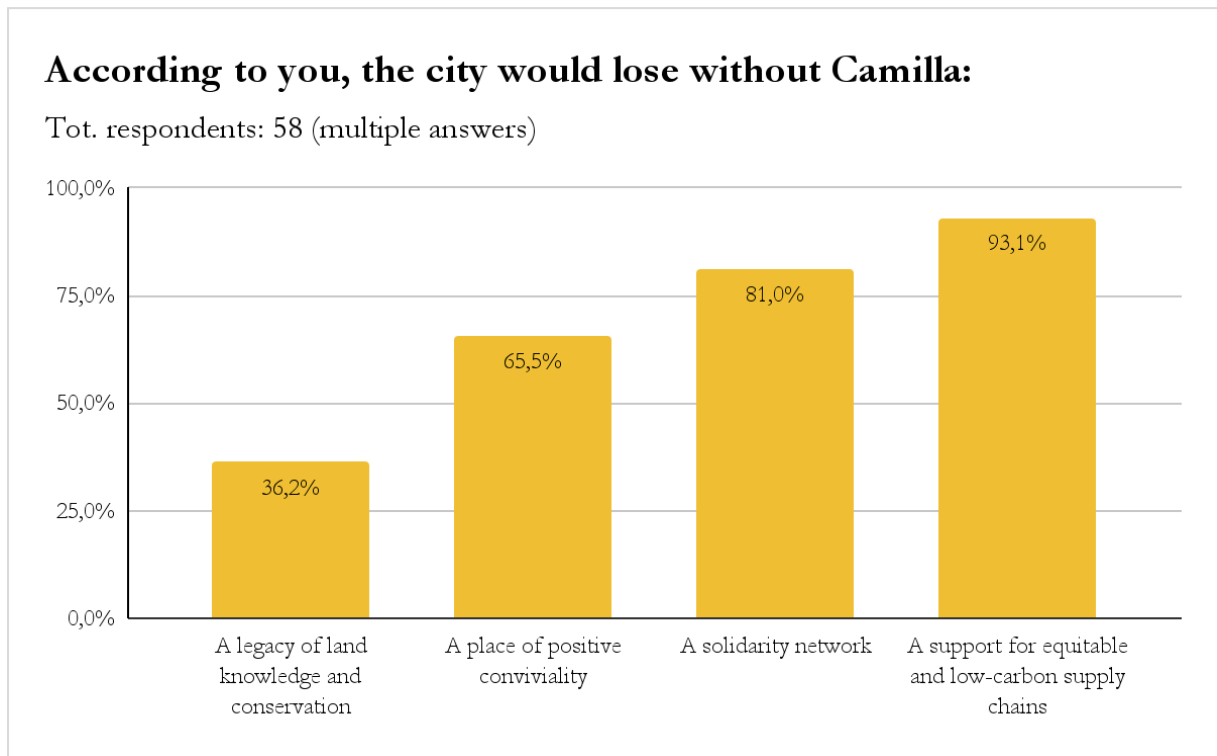


The open-ended responses (35 in total) suggest that Camilla serves as a model and an inspiration for those seeking to adopt more sustainable consumption habits. Members identify various areas of positive influence, including support for small local producers, provision of a genuine alternative to supermarkets and large retailers, dissemination of relevant knowledge to consumers, promotion of sound information, promotion of healthy diets, and sustainable production. According to a survey respondent, Camilla can be considered as a unifying and amplifying force. In her own words, *“A glue: because it brings together different actors and experiences that support and enrich each other, learning to live together in diversity. An amplifier: because it gives voice and shape to the sensitivities of individuals and associations (or even companies and farms) in choosing environmentally and socially responsible practices”*.

There are also less positive reflections, indicating that members are aware that they are part of a niche with a somewhat limited impact (*“In the city of Bologna we are a micro reality, but still we can influence together with the farmers markets on consumer awareness”*), that there are external constraints (*“It could be positive if this type of responsible consumption and relationship with producers increased. I think that today this model cannot spread because the majority of the population can feed themselves by paying much less for their food (of lower quality, of course)”*) or lack of support (*“With a favorable city government, Camilla’s experience could be expanded”*). While these are valid points, they run the risk of having a paralyzing effect. It is crucial to acknowledge all the positive things that are already happening, without shying away from the critical issues. In any case, all the responses suggest that the food cooperative has great potential (*“The cooperative, with a significant number of members, could be an important “battering ram” for the diffusion, through the members themselves, of a different and fairer culture of consumption and participation; if everyone “propagated” some of their choices within a horizon of proximity to at least one or two friends/colleagues/neighbors, there would be a great impact in cultural terms”*).

When survey participants were questioned about the potential outcomes if Camilla had never existed, the primary loss identified was the support for fair and environmentally friendly supply chains, with 93.1% of respondents citing this factor, followed by a network of solidarity at 81%, and a space for positive social interaction at 65.5% (refer to Graph 10 for details).

Graph 10. Members perception of what the city of Bologna would lose if Camilla did not exist (percentage)



Through this imaginative exercise, members can reflect on actual forms of Camilla's value that already exist. The 32 open-ended responses on this topic highlight Camilla's role as a representation of the future society for its members, both by showing the way (as an innovative model) and by making it possible (by mitigating our negative impact on the planet). In this sense, the city of Bologna would lose: *'A lot. Camilla is a model for all urban communities of the future because it helps individuals make informed purchases, involves them without stress and anxiety, while supporting local businesses'*. Members also emphasize the value of places like Camilla as spaces for the production of critical and divergent thought (*'The possibility of thinking and expressing oneself outside the mainstream'*), spaces for real democratic practices and self-governance (*'[The city] would lose an experience based on self-determination and self-management, fundamental for the future of environmentally friendly production, the rights of producers and their workers.'*).

The final section of the survey identifies significant social and demographic factors that necessitate further inquiry. Primarily, the respondents comprise women (66.7%, see Table 8) aged 45 to 68 (68.9%, see Table 9) who predominantly dwell in Bologna (80%, see Table 10) and its San

Donato-San Vitale and Navile neighbourhoods (27.3% and 47.7%, respectively, see Table 11). In this respect, the participants' sample aligns with the Camilla Food Cooperative's social base.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, it should be noted that the President of Camilla is also a woman.

Table 8. Gender of respondents

	N.	%
Other	1	1,8
Prefer not to say	1	1,8
Male	17	29,8
Female	38	66,7
Total responses	57	100
Missing	1	
Total	58	

Table 9. Age of respondents

	N.	%
18-29	4	6,9
30-44	11	19,0
45-55	22	37,9
56-68	18	31,0
>68	3	5,2
Total	58	100

¹⁸⁰ As a member, I have access to the Food Coop's internal documents. According to the notes to the 2022 financial statements: 'The cooperative has grown over the years, but it has maintained more or less the same characteristics as regards the distribution of its members between men and women, with a prevalence of women (64%); as regards the distribution of members by age groups, with a prevalence of the age group between 45 and 65 years and an average age of 51 years. The geographical distribution of the members has also been confirmed over the years: 80% of the members live in Bologna and in particular in the district of San Donato - San Vitale, where the Emporium is located, and in the surrounding areas (44%)'. Translation is mine.

Table 10. Place of residence of respondents

	N.	%
Municipality of Bologna	44	80,0
Province of Bologna	10	18,2
Other region	1	1,8
Total responses	55	100
Missing	3	
Total	58	

Table 11. Neighbourhood of residence in Bologna

	N.	%
Borgo Panigale-Reno	1	2,3
Porto-Saragozza	2	4,5
Savena	3	6,8
Santo Stefano	5	11,4
San Donato-San Vitale	12	27,3
Navile	21	47,7
Total	44	100

These data are consistent with Forno et al.'s (2013) analysis of GAS (Solidarity Purchasing Groups) in northern Italy, where women predominate and older people over 68 and young people under 29 are underrepresented.¹⁸¹ All of the respondents are of Italian nationality.

¹⁸¹ They comment: 'These data confirm how women tend to be at the center of consumerist movements, a fact that is partly due to the central role women play in making decisions about family consumption' (Forno et al., 2013: 35). Translation is mine.

Not surprisingly, the survey respondents show a high level of education, as 79.3% hold a degree higher than a high school diploma (Table 12). The findings are significant when compared to national averages¹⁸² and indicate the importance of cultural education in encouraging active citizenship, self-management, and sustainable lifestyles. At the same time, it highlights the challenge of engaging people with less cultural capital in such projects.

Table 12. Educational level of respondents

	N.	%
High school	12	20,7
University degree	28	48,3
Postgraduate	18	31,0
Total	58	100

The household composition within the food cooperative exhibits a noteworthy diversity with single family members (31.6%) and couples (38.6%) forming the majority. Additionally, families with three (10.5%), four (15.8%), and more than four members (3.5%) are also present but less significant (Table 13). These data are consistent with the trends observed at the national level, which show a decreasing average number of household members.¹⁸³

¹⁸² As the ISTAT (2021: 1) report for 2020 states: ‘In Italy, only 20.1% of the population (aged 25-64) has a university degree, compared to 32.8% in the EU’. Available at: <https://www.istat.it/it/files/2021/10/REPORT-LIVELLI-DI-ISTRUZIONE-2020.pdf>.

¹⁸³ The Italian National Institute of Statistics reports a decrease in the average number of household members from 3.35 in 1971 to 2.29 in 2019 (ISTAT, 2022: 1). The report is available at <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2022/03/Censimento-permanente-della-popolazione-le-famiglie-in-Italia.pdf>.

Table 13. Household composition

	N.	%
1 person	18	31,6
2 people	22	38,6
3 people	6	10,5
4 people	9	15,8
More than 4 people	2	3,5
Total responses	57	100
Missing	1	
Total	58	

The survey data regarding monthly disposable income of households is noteworthy, albeit self-reported and should be taken with caution. The statistics indicate that 56.3% of respondents earn a low income, 30.7% earn a medium income, and only 12.7% earn a high income (refer to Table 14). The preponderance of low and lower-middle income groups is intriguing, particularly since such initiatives are often accused of being elitist (Sacchi et al., 2022: 325). This is partly different from what Forno et al. (2013: 39) conclude in their cited study on Italian GAS: ‘The income of the households surveyed is middle income. In fact, the majority of them (60 percent) have a net monthly income between 2,067 and 3,615 euros. From a socio-economic point of view, therefore, gasistas do not belong to an “elite” group. Rather, they are individuals with high cultural rather than economic capital. They are middle-aged families with an average of two children, often with both spouses working, in most cases as civil servants. These characteristics seem to suggest that gasistas belong to what has been called the “reflective middle class”, that is, the social component that has the ability to “reflect on the effects of its actions”’. Obviously, there is a tension between the accessibility of the food coop and its economic sustainability (see previous section), which requires ongoing consideration and cannot be permanently resolved. In any case, this data demonstrates

that individuals who comprehend the significance of particular value-based actions and are provided with the opportunity to participate in such projects, do so without requiring an ‘elite’ status.

Table 14. Monthly household disposable income bracket

	N.	%
Up to €1,291	8	14,5
1,292 to 2.066 €	23	41,8
2,067 to 2.582 €	7	12,7
2,583 to 3.615 €	10	18,2
3,616 to 5.165 €	6	10,9
Over €5,166	1	1,8
Total responses	55	100
Missing	3	
Total	58	

Food cooperative members are primarily employed as clerks in both the public and private sectors (49%), with 16.3% identifying as freelancers, 22.4% as not employed, 8.2% as retired, and 4.1% as entrepreneurs (Table 15). This composition reflects the evolving workforce in the context of Bologna, where the majority of workers are employed in the service sector.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ As noted in the previously cited Metropolitan Plan for the Social Economy (2023: 2-3), ‘Jobless growth is not generated by technological development alone, but is the result of a structural change that the Bologna Metropolitan Area has also undergone over the last 30 years, gradually moving from a diffuse, predominantly manufacturing business fabric, specialized in mature sectors, to a largely tertiarized system with advanced, knowledge-intensive production that is well integrated into global value chains. However, it is the large and diverse service sector that plays a decisive role on the employment front: as many as 70% of those who work in the Bologna metropolitan area do so in a tertiary sector, with a growing dynamic over the long term, period, net of the recent pandemic phase’.

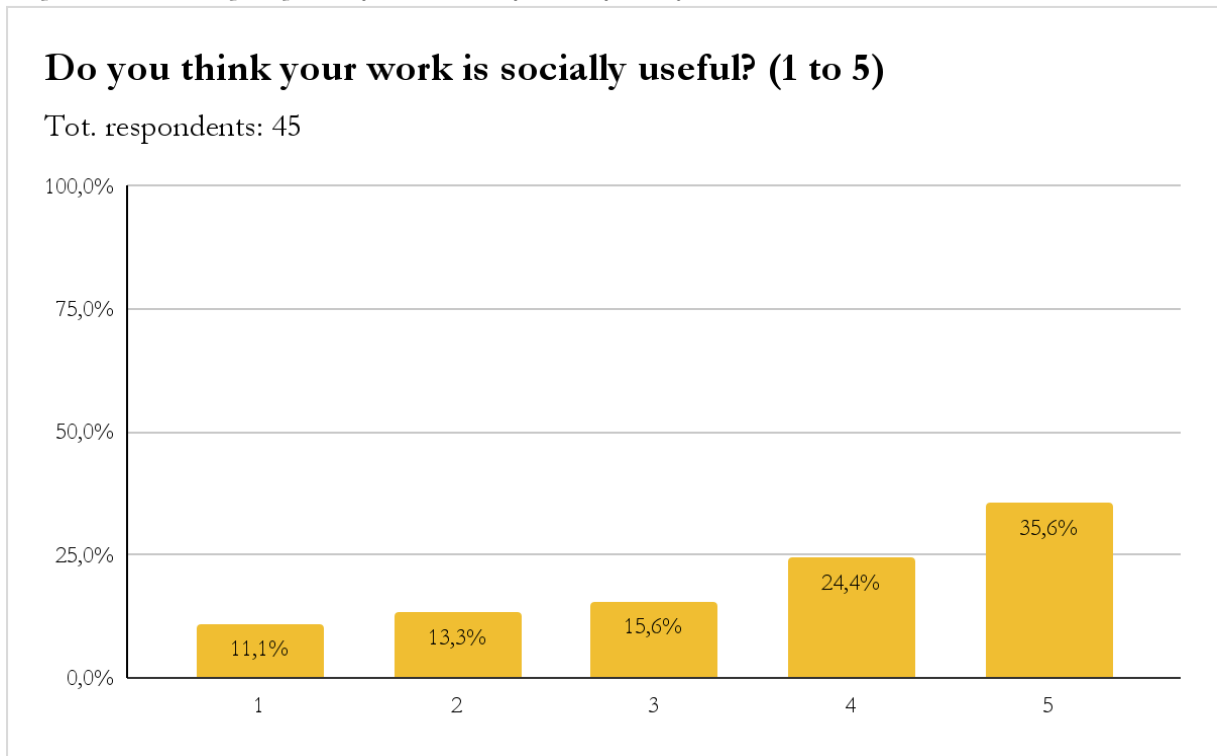
Table 15. *Employment status*

	N.	%
Clerk	24	49
Freelancer	8	16,3
Entrepreneur	2	4,1
Retired	4	8,2
Not employed	11	22,4
Total responses	49	100
Missing	9	
Total	58	

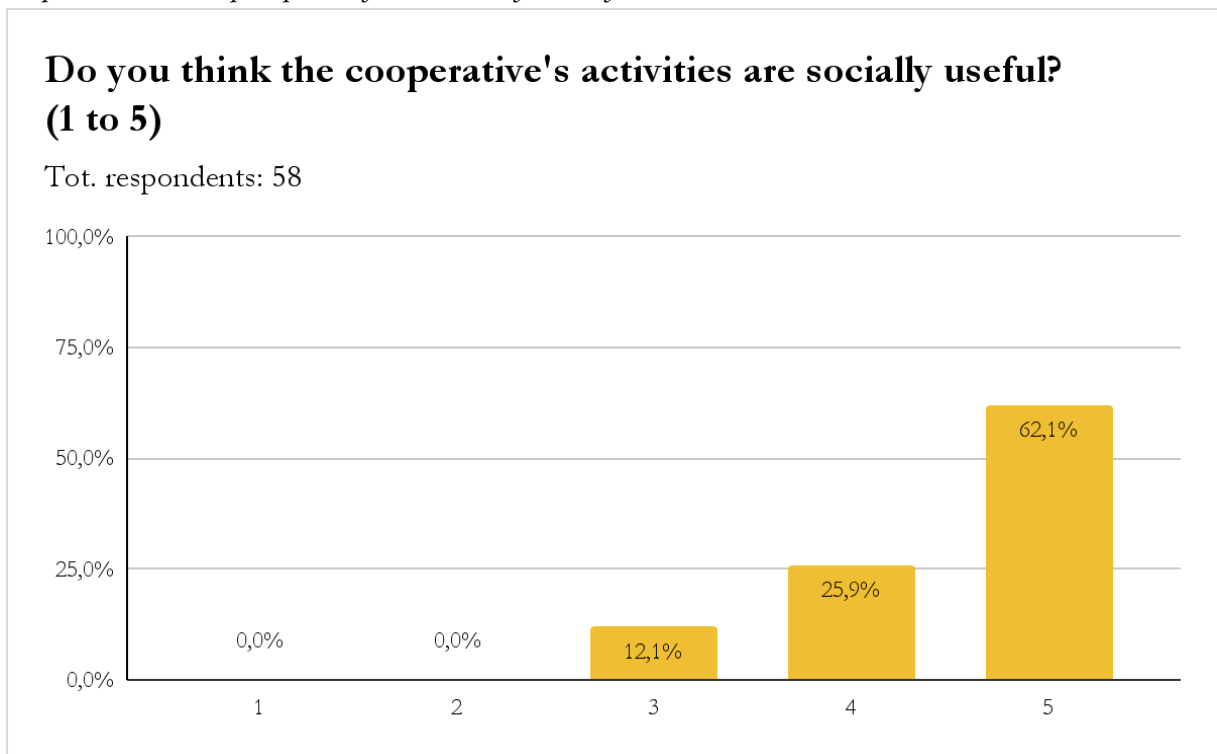
When asked to rate the perceived social usefulness of their job and the Camilla food cooperative on a scale of 1 to 5, the results merit attention. It is noteworthy that 24.4% of employees perceive their job as having little to no social utility. Additionally, 15.6% regarded their job as somewhat useful, 24.4% as quite useful, and 35.6% as very useful, as shown in Graph 11. When comparing the results with members' opinions on Camilla's social worth, it is evident that there is a distinct variation: no one believes that it lacks any social value, whereas 12.1% acknowledge her contributions as somewhat valuable, and 88% of members recognize it as highly useful (refer to Graph 12).¹⁸⁵ For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that these data are proxies for social values, highlighting the importance of debating the allocation of value in our economic activities.

¹⁸⁵ The total for each distribution differs because 45 respondents reported having a job and answered the question about their job, while all 58 respondents answered the question about Camilla.

Graph 11. Members' perceptions of the social usefulness of their job



Graph 12. Members' perceptions of the social usefulness of Camilla's activities



As anticipated, members of Camilla demonstrate a noteworthy degree of civic involvement and commitment. 72.4% of participants possess prior volunteering experience, while 60.3% are presently active in other civic groups (see Table 16). In each case, there is a marked range of backgrounds, encompassing trade unions, political parties, environmental associations, social cooperatives, social movement organizations, and cultural organizations.¹⁸⁶ In this respect, Camilla mainly brings together people who already have associative experience and at the same time it is a meeting place between people with different experiences and sensitivities. This is similar to what Forno et al. (2013: 43) conclude on members of Solidarity Purchasing Groups.

Table 16. Civic participation

	N.	%
Volunteer experience prior to joining Camilla	42	72,4
No volunteer experience prior to joining Camilla	16	27,6
Total	58	100
Currently part of other civic organizations	35	60,3
Not currently affiliated with any other civic organization	23	39,7
Total	58	100

In conclusion, the survey enabled the Camilla food cooperative, with the aid of its members, to present comprehensive data on its social value for the first time in its history. Restitution during the general meeting further facilitated the demonstration and dissemination of this information. The questionnaire provides an incomplete yet revealing representation of the cooperative's expansive

¹⁸⁶ As an example, some organizations of which respondents are members include: SOMS Insorgiamo, Amo Bologna, Campi Aperti, Piazza Grande, Lesbiche Bologna, Associazione Jaya, Arci, A.N.P.I. Pianoro, Maggio Filosofico Pianoro, Arvaia, Armonie, ARMONIE Associazione di donne per le donne APS, Salvaiciclisti, Colonna Solidale Autogestita, Ex Aequo.

social network. Finally, it facilitated further data collection on the identity of these members, or more specifically, how they choose to present themselves.

Several notable observations can be made in this regard, all of which require further investigation. The "no" and "don't know" responses to changes in habits brought about by membership are noteworthy (as are the positive responses), but are difficult to interpret from the questionnaire alone. The social composition of the food cooperative shows that the project is mainly supported by citizens, especially women, who have a high level of cultural and intellectual capital. The social base supporting this project has a background of civic participation, but also shows a wealth of diverse interests, cultural backgrounds, and skills that can be beneficial to the project. The survey shows complete national homogeneity, with Camilla being non-multiethnic. Engaging migrants or people with a migrant background in these projects can be challenging for a number of reasons. Although there are some within the food co-op, unfortunately none participated in the survey. There is also a lack of members aged under 29 and over 68. While it is possible to speculate on the reasons for their limited engagement in such organizations, further discussion is needed. Additionally, member participation varies, with different levels of awareness and involvement. Newer members appear to be less engaged in the organization. It is unclear why some project members are not actively participating, particularly those who did not respond to the survey. Further research is needed to determine the root cause of inactive participation. Contributing factors may include time constraints, access costs, and level of commitment.

Despite its limitations, the survey provides insight into intangible social value indicators, such as trust, awareness, and community involvement at the Camilla food coop. The findings reveal a vast range of social actions that benefit members and communities, exceeding expectations for a seemingly 'ordinary' grocery store.

1.2.2: Emerging qualitative elements of transformative change through semi-structured interviews

“So if everyone counts in the community, then the fact that Camilla actually allowed people to find their space will also count. And then, in my opinion, the beautiful thing

about Camilla is that you can find your space. If you are willing to share it, to accept diversity...”

(L.S., Camilla’s founding member)

This section provides an analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with four members of Camilla. The interviewees include two founding members, including the president, one (former) working member, and one newer member. The discussion will focus on the elements of transformative SSE as outlined in the theoretical framework (Chapter 1, Section 4:4).

As noted above, Camilla did not come out of nowhere, but rather builds on the legacy of the local solidarity economy movement, particularly solidarity purchasing groups and farmers' markets. Founding member R. helps to recall the needs that prompted a small but determined group of citizens to respond differently from the existing options: *“There is a part, albeit a small part, of this city that has been wondering how to manage its relationship with shopping in the world, in everyday life, so food, detergents, etc., giving a signal of breaking in some way with what is the traditional commercial offer, that is, the large-scale distribution and yet everything that goes with a product you know nothing about. Of which you don't know what was the level of fair compensation of who produced it, who transported it, and so on and so forth. And so something that is a hole. It was a big hole that in the beginning they tried to fill in some way with solidarity purchasing groups, where the desire was, yes, to have quality food, but also to look for producers, so a system that was different. That is, to **create a relationship between those who consume and those who produce, and also, in this sense, to make micro changes starting from one's daily life**”*.¹⁸⁷

This search for another way of being in common, or to use Gibson-Graham's phrase, of surviving well with others, both humans and more-than-humans, led to an experiment with the model that seemed more appropriate for the purpose: the food coop. *“To further emphasize the need to **withdraw from a purchase in which we are solely and exclusively passive**”*. Indeed, the GAS model was at some point perceived as somehow limiting in its scope and depth.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with R., founding member of Camilla food coop, conducted in Bologna on 14 July 2022.

L.S., another founding member and also a former working member explains: *“Let’s say that the project was born out of the needs of a very large group of families that had formed a GAS [Solidarity Purchasing Group] called Alchemilla. We were more than 120 families, and somehow we had seen that the way we were buying was still very limited in terms of a sustainable and expanded economy. That is, if you want to make a difference, start making a difference, this could no longer be the way to give a sign to another form of economy”*.¹⁸⁸

Surprisingly, only a small percentage of Alchemilla GAS families decided to join the food cooperative. L.S., pointing to Park Slope as a model, recalls: *“There are now 18,000 of them, and so we took, let’s say, the structure from them, basically, obviously adapting it to the Italian context and the path of our families. It took us, I think, almost two years to focus. In fact, the last year, the second year, was the one that allowed Camilla to open up. That is, it was the concrete year of ... We followed a course with MAG6 to build our business plan.”*¹⁸⁹ *We started to focus on what the needs were. There were very few of us in the beginning, because the thing that surprised us a little bit was that the GAS families didn’t really follow us”. Conversely, new members were recruited through advertising campaigns and open meetings: “There was a lot of interest, so much so that we started to make a kind of expression of interest, that is, you filled out a form saying “Yes, if this thing starts, I’ll become a member” and there we realized that the families that belonged to the GAS more than 80% actually did not participate in the birth of the project”.*

In fact, the whole process was grassroots, open and democratic from the beginning: *“At a certain point we held a meeting open to the city, with more than 150 citizens attending. We were divided into working groups because we had already started to focus on what the cooperative needed, so the administrative side, the part linked to the producers, the logistical part”*.

E. joined Camilla only three months after she moved to Bologna in 2021 because of her family's background in sustainable consumption: *‘I actually found out about it through my mom. Because yeah, in my family it’s my mom who always had a little bit of this focus on the environment and so...*

¹⁸⁸ L.S. was employed part-time by the Camilla food coop from its opening until March 2023 and remains a regular member.

¹⁸⁹ MAG6 is a social enterprise located in Reggio Emilia that specializes in mutual and solidarity finance, financial advice, and education. More information is available at <https://www.mag6.it/>.

And so she found Camilla'. 'At home, we still prefer not to go to the large-scale supermarket'. When asked about her reasons for joining, E. mentioned the convenience of having a trusted local source for her purchases: "***I like being able to buy locally. Yes, also because being off-site, I don't know any local or surrounding companies, so I'm happy to know that I can trust, I would say, quite completely in Camilla and therefore also participate, be part of Camilla without having to deal too much with research or things that... Instead, when I go to the market, maybe I care a little more about finding out who's behind it***".¹⁹⁰

When asked how the Community Emporium builds relationships based on solidarity to go beyond and reshape the market mechanism, R. firmly answers that self-management is at the heart of the project, both as a value and as a practice: "***I think the attempt is really to use self-management for what we can concretely do. In the sense that the difference between being passive and being active is a significant difference. And it is a difference that actually carries a heavy load. That is to say, beyond words, a practice of self-management is an extremely strenuous, though in some ways more rewarding, practice, both subjectively and communally. Because then, in short, we live to be better***".

She also acknowledges the challenges inherent in such a countercultural practice, embracing the aporia that is part of the journey: "***Because there is so much contingency in it. Each of us is who we are, with all our limitations, our excesses, between dreams and moments of despair. So it is not easy to put it into practice. Camilla is also a way. But here at least the fact of being on a path, of being on a journey, and not feeling in a static, established situation where I know I have to go there and this is how it is, there is no alternative, because it is never true that there is no alternative. But it depends on how much effort we want to put into it***".

R. suggests that contemporary society may also be experiencing a decline in critical thinking and elaboration, which could limit social transformation: "***It's not that the intellectual world doesn't think about it today. It's just that it seems to have lost any kind of relationship to everyday practice***".

¹⁹⁰ Interview with E., a recent member of the Camilla food coop, conducted in Bologna on July 15, 2022. At the time of the interview, E. had only been a member of the cooperative for about eight months.

Speaking of inequalities and how the food cooperative relates to them, the discussion with R. brings to the fore a dual aspect of inequality: one that could be defined as ‘cultural’ and the other as ‘material’. In her own words: ***“If by inequality you mean the difficulty of access to this kind of path, it is of two kinds. One, let's call it more conceptual, in the sense that maybe you don't pose the problem, if you pose the problem you solve it quite easily by saying I'll take the organic product from the GDO [supermarket] and I'll buy, I don't know, the newspaper... and that's it. So that's an inequality that objectively exists. Assuming that you raise the problem, because that is the fact. The inequalities, on the other hand, that are more material, physical, in who has access to Camilla, this is a mirror, in a way, of what our society is”***.

The members are aware of the material and immaterial asymmetries that may be present in the project (*“The practice of self-criticism is always a healthy, right, and worthwhile thing to do”*, says R.). They acknowledge that Camilla's members, particularly those who initiated the project, belong to a specific group. *“In the sense that it is clear that Camilla is an experience that comes from a segment of people who can afford to think and have thought hot and cold over the years about what it means, what it really means to consume. And so that in itself is already a selective element, which is not to say that we all have the same pocket. Because it's not just about pockets, about economic capacity. But it is clear that this is already a first obstacle that is certainly perceived”*.

In this regard, R. wittily argues how *“to try to do something in its potential reproducibility is still to set in motion an energy that certainly has a limit. A limit determined by people and their actions. And so, yes, inequality is something to be reckoned with, but I don't think it should be a justification for inaction for anyone in any field, social or political, in the broadest sense”*.

In discussing the issue of scale, R. acknowledges the challenges Camilla faces in expanding beyond its current circle; challenges that are inherent to any conscious social change. *“Objectively, we see that the path, even this path, is more uphill. Obviously this need that this core of people have been working on for a long time has been so strong, it has been so strong precisely because they have been working on it for a long time, thinking about it, doing practices in so many*

*areas. These are not things, **these are not focalizations that you do with a simple lens.** And yet you never say never, absolutely. So you have to keep going”.*

Connecting with others and building networks then becomes the critical element to amplify change and overcome one's self-limiting beliefs: *“I still think that the question of networks is a very important question, that **if we don't learn to get out of our identitarianism, especially in a certain field, so that the favorite sport is “but let's separate”... Identitarianism is a beautiful, very strong thing because it can do so many things, but it is also a form of self-centeredness”.***

L.S. reflects on the external support the project received and concludes that the members provided most of the skills, resources, and assets needed to start the food coop and were willing to share them. It is also evident that the Municipality of Bologna did not provide any interest or support, and unfortunately, this situation remains unchanged.

*“The search for space took much longer, but mainly because **we had no support from the institutions.** So we tried to work with the city government, which was never interested, or at least only pretended to be interested, in listening to this segment of the population. So much so that when the need for space became very strong, because there were many of us and they began to have the desire to be able to buy the products and see the car start, we decided to choose the space privately. And when we found this space that was chosen between two, and we asked the municipality for support because we had to make the change of use. It was an office, but now it has become a commercial business. We had to do some small internal work and again it didn't help. So **Camilla paid everything that had to be paid to be able to open.** The work inside was done by an architect who, of course, directed, based on the regulations that a commercial activity must have. And then **most of the work, like painting and building the shelves, was done internally by the members.** This is a bit like how we were born, how we came to this reality. **From the outside, I would say that there is no support, in the sense that everything really came from within, that is, from the will of the people who make up the cooperative, each with their own skills, giving a little bit”.***

The project was self-funded from the beginning. *“We never had a mortgage. In fact, we did it last year. Because there is this possibility of having an interest-free loan for enterprises in the solidarity*

economy”,¹⁹¹ explains the president S.. On the other hand, the project has been network-oriented, which means that support in terms of knowledge exchange, expertise and promotion has been sought by Camilla with realities sharing similar values: *“The networks we participated in. In the sense that at the beginning, exactly, we discussed all the problems with Campi Aperti, with Arvaia... We had many meetings with the different associations, the club here... That is to say, **from the very beginning, we have always had relations with other realities, but not with the aim of gaining any advantage**”*.

In particular, the aforementioned Campi Aperti association and its affiliated farmers have been closely involved in Camilla's project, not only providing advice but also directly supplying products. At the same time, this collaboration has highlighted some of the difficulties of the local solidarity economy in supporting projects of a larger scale, such as a food cooperative. L.S. offers insightful reflections on this, *“some of the vegetables come from the El Tamiso cooperative.”¹⁹² There are reasons for this. First of all, **Campi Aperti cannot meet the needs of the cooperative because their primary concern is the balance of their agricultural companies. These companies are typically structured for direct sales. So the farmer sells his products directly to the market and they don't have a structure for logistics and distribution. What I have learned over the years is that it changes a lot depending on how you manage your business, how you decide to structure your business. So there are activities that we do together, we support each other, we participated in their celebration in the square**”*.

Through constant consultation and collaboration, Camilla and its members, particularly those involved in logistics and supply chains, have gained valuable insights into the limitations and potential future directions for the years ahead. L.S. describes the challenges:

¹⁹¹ S. refers to the regional fund that supports FEMS (Ethical Mutual and Solidarity Finance) initiatives by subsidizing the interest on loans granted to solidarity economy experiences, in accordance with the regional Law on Solidarity Economy. For further information: <https://www.scoiattolo.org/pages/fondo-regionale-economia-solidale/>.

¹⁹² El Tamiso is an agricultural cooperative that unites 59 organic farmers, primarily from the Veneto region. It consistently supplies the food cooperative with fruits and vegetables that are not readily available locally. Visit <https://www.eltamiso.it/it> for more information.

“So from the beginning I was involved with producers. So with the Campi, with some of the Campi Aperti, **it was tiring work, but very interesting, from which I then understood the different forms that agricultural companies can take and that it is obviously a personal choice of the farmer.... But even if you look at our guidelines, which are mainly related to fruit and vegetables, they are the result of a very long discussion with Campi, with some of the farmers of Campi Aperti, which is mainly related to seasonality.** So we decided that El Tamiso would support us in the possibility of having a discrete range of fruits and vegetables. It is obvious that there is a problem of seasonality, in the sense that El Tamiso is a Venetian cooperative, but its members are scattered all over Italy... Therefore, it finds itself with a series of products that have not yet arrived in Emilia-Romagna. The tomato is the most classic example: El Tamiso offers you tomatoes as early as April because they have some partners between Sicily and Calabria who, if the season allows it, have the first tomatoes in April. **So at Camilla we try to respect the seasonality of the Emilian farmers in the form of Campi Aperti.** Because even there things change a lot. In other words, there are agricultural companies that have decided to create, let's say, a balance with the external environment, so the level of mechanization, the level of tunnels, in short, is different from many other types of companies. That is why you can still see cabbage in Campi Aperti until March. So this is what we try to do. If possible, we take from Campi Aperti. Possible means both for the season and for the abundance they have”.

Therefore, it is necessary to constantly balance and compromise between various needs, necessities, and aspirations. Negotiating interdependencies is a continuous process: “*The relationship is one of deep trust. But we built this whole part with them. That is, **they helped us a lot to understand what it means to pay attention to the environment, to externalities. We are not zero miles, we call them fair miles. Because obviously there's a whole range of products that Emilia Romagna doesn't offer, that it doesn't have, we go out and get them. But we try to do it with organizations or cooperatives, Rosarno***¹⁹³... in short, agricultural companies that perhaps pay particular attention to social projects or the environment. And there are

¹⁹³ She refers to SOS Rosarno, a mutual association of day laborers, farmers, and activists that has been active in the Calabria region since 2010 to combat the extreme exploitation of migrant workers in Piana di Gioia Tauro (see Perrotta, 2017: 35-136).

many types of companies that participate. **Another very ambitious thing, I think, that Camilla had, in addition to putting its members on the cash register, was to start immediately with very small companies. Because our goal was to be able to build a network of small companies that do not have access to large distribution.** Some of them by choice, and rightly so, because then the quality of your work disappears, which brings with it various organizational and cost problems. The smaller you are, the more a product costs. And then, little by little, we arrived at more or less what we have now, which is that for each product you find two groups: the one that is produced in a slightly more industrialized structure, but still very careful, and the small farmer”.

The process of establishing the cooperative in all its complex functioning and requirements came out of self-management and seems to have been quite smooth. Each member, according to their abilities and willingness to put their efforts in common, coordinated with each other and in a reasonable short time the organization could run and improve over time.

“Yes, in the end **we found them among the members. I would say all of them.** Because apart from the architect, who was paid and who indicated the current legislation in Emilia Romagna... And then, of course, we have safety as an external professional. It is a study that supports us. But, for example, we did hygiene courses and this was done by a person who can do it, who has the license to do it, who was a member at the time and therefore we managed, with a controlled price, to teach people who then found themselves managing a fresh shop, they found themselves managing cleaning. Over time, in three years, Camilla has changed a lot from that point of view. In my opinion, it is not yet a well-oiled machine, but **in three years there has been a noticeable change in the self-management of the actions to be carried out within the emporium.** Then there are procedures. **The procedures have all been written by the members, because we have members who have expertise in this area”.**

As mentioned in the ToC analysis, there may be imbalances in the distribution of responsibilities and efforts that could jeopardize the long-term sustainability of the project. “I have to say that, in short, in the end, **in my opinion, Camilla works. It works... There is an engine. By now there must be about sixty people doing the important work that allows the cooperative to stay**

open. The more we can increase that number of people, the more the workload is spread out a little bit. There are members who really do a lot of work, starting with C., P. and our president”.

However, Camilla has certainly channeled positive energy from various individuals to benefit the local community. *“The warehouse was basically designed by a retired engineer who spends a lot of hours here out of passion. And this allows us, for example, to control expiration dates, something we didn't have a year ago, and maybe a year ago we didn't need it as much. Considering that the products have gone from 400-500 products to over 2500 references, it is quite complex to have control over what you have inside and the expiration dates in a self-managing system. I would say that I think we have achieved a good level of control that can always be improved. And now we are informing the members. So in the beginning, everybody took their turn and it wasn't clear what everybody had to do. I think it was very ambitious to decide that even the cash register, which is the most delicate part of a commercial business, because Camilla is a commercial business after all, should be left to the members. That is, it was decided from the beginning to have two employees. We started within eight months of each other. First it was my colleague and then he came in... We said. We talked about internal skills. The skills that a commercial activity must have... So we have a number of external professionals. We have an accountant who is also a member. In fact, there is also a group set up there, an administrative working group, so the management is completely self-managed”.*

The success of managing such a complex organization from the bottom up was even recognized *“by the Ministry. The inspector who came congratulated us. We managed to do a good job”*.¹⁹⁴ Camilla chose not to join any cooperative federation in order to maintain its complete independence.

Choosing the appropriate legal structure for this innovative venture proved to be a challenging task. In Italy, there are no specific regulations for food coops, and the voluntary nature of a consumer

¹⁹⁴ S. refers to the bi-annual inspection by the Ministry of Economic Development that cooperatives not registered with a legally recognized cooperative representative organization must undergo, as required by Legislative Decree 2 August 2002, n. 220. More information available at: <https://www.mimit.gov.it/index.php/it/impresa/cooperativo/vigilanza>.

cooperative run by its members is not assumed under the current legal framework. In the words of Camilla's president: *“Well, we worked on it a lot. First of all, we analyzed the difference between a business structure and an association. So the advice that everyone gave us was: “Be light, be light”. So the association first. Then we rejected it for an ideal and ideological reason, which was that we want to run a business, we don't want to hide behind an association. The second reason was that the management of an association, it's true that it's less complex, but it's also true that if you have an association that has a VAT number, in the end you have to do more or less everything that you should do [with a company]... So the advantage was limited... And what's more, you also have less protection, because in any case the corporate structure distributes the responsibilities a little bit more... That is, there is a board of directors that is responsible for potential problems. Instead, in an association, it's the president [who's responsible] and that's it. And then, instead, we started with the idea that among the different forms of companies, the cooperative was the one that was most in line with the philosophy of the project”*.

After selecting the cooperative form for its democratic nature, it was necessary to reflect on which type of cooperative would be most suitable for the purpose. According to S., the hypothesis of the community cooperative was evaluated but ultimately discarded: *“Within the cooperatives, there was one hypothesis that we had evaluated that would have been interesting, and that was the community cooperative, which is a new form, but unfortunately it has no national regulation, it has a regional regulation. And the region of Emilia Romagna has limited it only to the hypotheses of social cooperatives. So we should have given Camilla a different social purpose, the inclusion of disadvantaged people, etc. Which seemed to us a little too laborious... That is to say, there were two important burdens to carry together, and that's why we said: consumer cooperatives, it's the easiest thing”*.

Finally, the self-managed nature of the food coop is giving Camilla a pioneering role in the Italian context: *“There the only obstacle that could remain was the fact that there were no self-managed consumer cooperatives and therefore the role of the voluntary members could be contested. In fact, this hasn't happened yet. In fact, all the controls that have been*

carried out, in short, have given value to the commitments that we have made with our statute, and therefore we are happy”.

As more food cooperatives follow Camilla's example in other Italian cities, it will be intriguing to observe the legal and political spheres, including the historic cooperative federations, react and adapt to these new practices of cooperation in the years to come. Indeed, ***“the cooperatives that came after us and relied on Legacoop to draw up their statutes have had disputes on this point. They object to the fact that a consumer cooperative cannot have voluntary members. And now there will be a moment of awakening also for Legacoop, because in the meantime there is another trade association, Confcooperative, which supports instead, for example, the Cagliari cooperative Mesa Noa. So sooner or later there will be a discussion, but at the moment we are the only one that is not affiliated”.***

Camilla is a concrete example of diversifying enterprising in practice, as described in the diverse economies literature (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020: 11-12).

Regarding the personal and individual aspects of change and transformation experienced by members, R. emphasizes the more playful elements along with the existential meaning that such a collective constitutive experience provides: ***“For me... I think we all do things to improve ourselves. Then we say we do it for the wonderful and progressive destiny of society, etc., which is partly true, but partly it is also to give meaning, a direction to our, our need for identity. Identity as we have constructed it for ourselves ideologically, morally. So for me in that respect it was and is an important affirming element, even though I had a lot of disconfirmation about it inside. So both from the point of view of relationships and... It's always a play with others, and so that's the thing for me right now that I'm enjoying, then I'm also having fun, so...”.***

Instead, L.S. provides essential insights into working in a self-managed food coop, a unique workplace where ***“I end up with 600 owners. A. and I are among the few who have that many employers”.*** Even in this respect, everything was unprecedented and required effort, innovativeness and a lot of patience: ***“And so, let's say, even as employees, we had to invent ourselves. In fact,***

Camilla hired two employees through a selection process. There were eight applications. In the end, **Camilla chose a person who was not involved in the creation of the project, who was not even part of the friendly networks in any way. And a person who, like me, had been part of, let's say, the founding group, but had also been part of the group for at least a dozen years.** Which I think was very reasonable because he immediately brought a little bit of his contribution in terms of what he knew as a commercial activity. While I already had the whole relationship with the suppliers that we started with, Camilla started with the suppliers that we had met with GAS”.

L.S., who comes from a completely different background, that of academic research in chemistry at the University of Bologna, admits that “**over the course of three years I had to, let's say, partly reinvent myself,** but also begin to understand the difficulties of some companies”.

Reflecting on why she chose to take on such a challenge, she explains that it was a combination of coincidence, personal disposition, and opportunity. “*Why did I choose it? It was almost natural, in the sense that I stopped working at the university almost parallel to the birth of the Camilla Food Cooperative. [...] I was at university, my ambition was to be a researcher. So I come to work here and let's make a change. It started as a joke. In reality the researcher didn't come and it was a bit natural in the sense that when Camilla made the call for employees, I was still working at the university, I said but in the meantime I'll send a CV, then we'll see. In short, what happens, happens. [...] From there I discovered a world. One, the world of the worker. Because I've always been on a research grant, for quite a few years... and you're channeled into a form of non-work, because it's considered like a scholarship, basically*”. A member who works as a trade unionist took care of the legal and contractual aspects of the working relationship: “*And so I understood why we started with 24-hour contracts. Because S., who is our first member, works in the CGIL [trade union], he was asked what kind of contract would best protect the worker. So that's what A. and I have*”.

On a personal level, L.S. finds her work particularly satisfying (“*Then personally I am very happy to work in the cooperative because it is a project that I have participated in, that I have helped to bring to life*”) because it allows her to constantly learn new things, to make connections, but also to develop

meaningful relationships with other members. ***“The relationships with the members are really extraordinary. And you get to meet a slice of the world that you would never have met otherwise. Because no matter how many interests you have, you spend most of your time in your workplace, in your family. Your family then becomes part of your interests, and after a while, I mean, that’s your world. You can be a virtuous person, 25,000 ideas, actually volunteering in 25,000 places. But then there is a little bit of time in each one. At the end of the day, I’ve been here a long time and I’ve seen a part of the city that I never would have seen. I really enjoy it. Very exhausting, I freak out every now and then. And with some of the members, I think there has been an excellent relationship of respect but also of recognition of things. I’m very happy”***.

The less positive aspects are financial, since the food cooperative cannot guarantee full-time employment: ***“It’s satisfying. At the moment, of course, it’s part-time, so the part that suffers the most is the economic part. That can only be solved with the possibility of increasing the hours. But at the moment it’s a good balance, because with my partner’s situation we can manage anyway”***.

The ethical dimension of this kind of work also emerges when L.S. critically reflects on the economic sustainability of the food cooperative in relation to the cost of its employees. ***“During one of the first meetings where the data was shown, it was obvious that the cost of the two employees was the greatest economic weight for the cooperative. So you always feel guilty for not succeeding... that is, for not being enough compared to the weight you represent for the cooperative”***. The rewarding aspects of the job are related to the human connection she experienced, which was strikingly different from other working environments she had encountered, such as the university where she had worked for about 20 years. During the same meeting, a member approached her and asked, ***“That is the gross income, but can you live with it? And to hear that someone from the outside cares that you are satisfied was really very powerful for me”***.

Finally, a few words on a topic that has obviously come up in my conversations with members: the global pandemic. Covid-19 seems to have affected the operations of the food cooperative in a contradictory way. On the one hand, the emporium was allowed to operate as an essential activity,

and members increased their purchases because they felt more comfortable and secure during the lockdown than when they went to supermarkets or other regular stores. L.S. explains, “*During the Covid period, Camilla had to disinfect three times a day. For example, there are members who were grateful that Camilla was open during the covid period. They felt comfortable coming here to do their shopping. They felt protected*”. As a result, the food cooperative had a surplus at the end of the year, indicating an improvement in its economic balance.¹⁹⁵ On the contrary, social isolation and social distancing measures seemed to have a negative impact on both social relations and commitment to the project.

For her part, R. laments that the opportunity to critically examine our socio-economic model in relation to the pandemic was largely missed: “*I had hoped that it would be much more of a challenge, honestly, to face the fact that there is something in this system, in the macro-system that we live in, that is obviously the source of all this imbalance, which is also physical, which is also turning into disease. I'm afraid it was much less of an opportunity for reflection and stimulation*”.

In any case, Camilla showed a good degree of resilience and flexibility in dealing with such a complex issue. In fact, it adapted its internal rules to the needs and sensitivities of the members, while at the same time maintaining solidarity: “*So this message was sent out saying that **those who didn't feel up to it were no longer obliged to do shifts**, they wouldn't be counted for those days, and in reality a beautiful thing was created... That's also true, **in those two months they created awareness among a core group of members, which is not bad. Because those members volunteered and kept the cooperative open. We never had to give up an opening hour, ever. A. and I worked a little more overtime during that period, but then we started doing deliveries, for example. And in terms of the working relationship, we started to make regular deliveries. S. took care of... That is, if our employee has to get a car and has to do this activity, he has to be covered for this activity. So, in a moment that I want to say was delirious, within a week we started to set up this, let's say, possibility for the most needy...***”.

¹⁹⁵ According to the financial statement of 2020, the food coop recorded a surplus of 4,027.62€, in contrast to a passive of 8,646.32€ in 2019.

Section Two: Arvaia: Commoning land and food

we describe four “great transformations”, which have been characterizing Italian agriculture since the 1980s, – in the context of the transition towards a new, neoliberalizing regional food regime (Corrado 2016): 1) the “supermarket revolution”, i.e. the growth of retailers’ power in determining food production; 2) the growth of a limited number of larger farms and, on the other hand, the progressive marginalisation and deactivation of a large number of medium- and small-scale farmers; 3) the growth in the number of migrant agricultural labourers, often in harsh living and working conditions; 4) a new wave of emigration from the entire territory of Southern Italy. [...] Arguably, these four great social transformations were linked to a marked neoliberal turn in the governance of agriculture promoted by Italian governments and the EU through a process of deregulation of the sector that was followed by a private-driven re-regulation implemented through reforms of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy and unbalanced trade liberalization (Corrado et al. 2016b). As in other countries (Burch and Lawrence 2007), in the process of supermarketization of the agri-food system, supply chains became markedly “retailer-driven”. As a result, a handful of powerful actors – transnational corporations in the food processing and, most of all, Italian and foreign retail chains – through their “buyer power” became increasingly able to influence where, how, by whom, and at which price food is produced.

(Iocco, Lo Cascio, Perrotta, 2018: 5)

“The institution understands the commons [bene comune] as an asset of the municipality [bene del Comune], which is the community as an institution [Comune]. And so this is something that we have said many times, even publicly, even ... even in presentations that I have made to aldermen and councilmen, I have said: “I mean, we look at our commons [bene comune] differently than you do. Because you are asking us to pay a price for something that we share with everyone who is willing to participate”.

(S., Arvaia’s founding member)

While Camilla focuses on ethical consumption and reducing the negative externalities of large-scale distribution, Arvaia focuses on food production. However, it is important to note that production, consumption, and distribution are deeply intertwined and both experiences influence all of these elements, albeit from different angles.

Arvaia is a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), founded in 2013, that promotes peasant agriculture and agroecology as a radical alternative to industrial agriculture. Arvaia can be seen as a peasant organization that seeks to ‘practice the alternative’, or an example of mutualism as defined by Perrotta (2017: 130).¹⁹⁶

CSA emerged from various traditions, experiences, and needs in different parts of the world. The model is conventionally associated with the Japanese *Teikei* of the 1970s, which was a grassroots response to the health risks associated with the spread of industrial, conventional agricultural production.¹⁹⁷ In the late 1970s, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives emerged in America and Europe, with the first European example being identified in Switzerland in 1978 as ‘Les Jardins de Cocagne’. These initiatives were influenced by the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, who advocated a reciprocal approach to business relationships.¹⁹⁸ Since then, CSAs have expanded to Germany, Switzerland, the United States, and other parts of Europe. They are often known by different names, such as AMAPs (*Association pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne*) in France, *Solidarische Landwirtschaft* in Germany (Medici et al., 2021: 3), *Reciprosos* in Portugal, and CSAs in America and Canada (Genova & Piccoli, 2019: 50). Similarly, though largely unrecognized, another source of inspiration dates back to the 1960s and '70s, when Dr. Booker T. Whatley, a black horticulturist and agricultural professor at Tuskegee University in Alabama, advocated for pick-your-own farms and what he called Clientele Membership Clubs to help marginalized black farmers.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ In his own words, ‘In order to describe this diverse peasant movement, trying to use the categories of Pino Ferraris, I propose a distinction between organizations that are primarily concerned with political demands at different levels (local, national, European), thus representing a “resistance”, and others that try to “practice the alternative”, from a perspective of mutualism’ (Perrotta, 2017: 130). Translation is mine.

¹⁹⁷ Kondoh (2015: 144) writes: “‘*Teikei*’ means “partnership” in Japanese, and the *teikei* movement is literally a grassroots movement based on a partnership between organic farmers and consumers. Its goal is to build a partnership between these two parties based on mutual understanding and trust through repeated interactions. It is an alternative to the conventional food system, which is characterized by instrumental relationships created to trade agricultural commodities. Instead, *teikei* tries to overcome the boundary between these two actors to create a sustainable and equitable society’.

¹⁹⁸ See ‘The History of Community Supported Agriculture’ by Steve McFadden, published by Rodale Institute on January 1, 2004. It can be accessed at <https://rodaleinstitute.org/blog/the-history-of-community-supported-agriculture/>. Last accessed in December 2023.

¹⁹⁹ In Whatley’s own words, from an interview originally published by Mother Earth News in 1982, “It should be a pick-your-own operation, with a clientele membership club. You see, running the farm on a pick-your-own basis eliminates the two major complaints of small growers, no labor and no market. It lets the farmer avoid the cost of

CSAs are typically loosely defined due to variations in legal form, size, types of consumer-producer partnerships, and so on.²⁰⁰ This presents a challenge for research, but is also an intrinsic characteristic of this type of grassroots organization, which is rooted in a specific local context. For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to the definition adopted at the 3rd European Meeting of CSAs on September 17, 2016 in Ostrava, Czech Republic: ‘Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a direct partnership based on the human relationship between people and one or several producer(s), whereby the risks, responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared, through a long-term, binding agreement’.²⁰¹

Arvaia is the largest Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in Italy and one of the first established experiences. While Medici, Canavari, and Castellini (2021: 3) claim that it is the first Italian CSA, the CSA network reports that the first experience dates back to 2010 in Tuscany (CAPS, Pisa).²⁰² Regardless, Arvaia's expertise is often sought after by other CSAs. Collecting

harvesting, washing, grading, packing, packaging, refrigerating, and transporting the produce. And it brings in buyers. [...] The clientele membership club is the lifeblood of the whole setup. It enables the farmer to plan production, anticipate demand, and, of course, have a guaranteed market. However, that means the grower had better work just as diligently at establishing and maintaining the club as at producing the crops. Put it this way: If you fail to promote your club, something terrible happens — nothing!”. Available at: <https://www.motherearthnews.com/homesteading-and-livestock/small-farm-plan-zmaz82mjzkin/>.

For more information on the roots of CSAs in black history in the US, refer to the following articles: ‘You Can Thank Black Horticulturist Booker T. Whatley for Your CSA’ by Shelby Vittek, published in *Modern Farmer* on May 20, 2021, available at: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/you-can-thank-black-horticulturist-booker-t-whatley-your-csa-180977771/> and ‘CSA Is Rooted in Black History’ by Natasha Bowens, published in Mother Earth News on February 13, 2015, available at: <https://www.motherearthnews.com/organic-gardening/csas-rooted-in-black-history-zbcz1502/>. Last accessed in December 2023.

²⁰⁰ The vademecum for CSA, produced by Arvaia in cooperation with the University of Pisa, Bolzano, and Urbino, states: ‘Each of these realities has specific characteristics in terms of legal form (association, agricultural, social or consumer cooperative, informal pacts between consumer groups and one or more independent farms); number of members (from 15 to more than 200); size of fields (from a few hectares to more than 30); type and seasonality of production (only fruit or also vegetables, with annual or only seasonal production); location with respect to cities (urban, peri-urban, rural); number of workers (from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 8). These characteristics, which are specified in detail in the research and constitute an initial compass for orientation among the various possible alternatives and forms, are an expression of the variety of paths taken in different contexts’ (Rossi, Genova, & Rosso, Spagone, Maria, Zappaterra, Piccoli, 2022: 7). Translation is mine.

²⁰¹ Available at: https://urgenci.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016_CSA_Dichiarazione_Europea-IT.pdf. Last accessed in December 2023.

²⁰² In the aforementioned document we can read, ‘The CSA movement in Italy has developed over the last decade, leading to the creation of about 20 CSAs, mostly located in northern and central Italy. Although limited in size, the number of experiences has increased steadily and progressively in recent years. The first CSA was founded in Tuscany in 2010, followed by a number of other experiences, some of which are still running today, while others have stopped their projects’ (Rossi et al., 2022: 5). Translation is mine.

precise data can be challenging due to the informal nature of some initiatives, which can be difficult to identify and lack visibility. Euricse (European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises) recently conducted the first comprehensive report on CSAs in Italy, based on 16 entities. The report highlights that CSAs are a relatively recent phenomenon, with the first organizations founded between 2010 and 2013. The majority of CSAs have been in operation for 5-8 years, while about a quarter were founded more recently (Sforzi, De Benedictis, Piccoli, Rossi, 2023: 4).²⁰³ Rossi et al. (2022) found that 17 out of the approximately 20 active CSAs in Italy participated in their research. The website of the Italian network of CSAs lists 15 organizations.²⁰⁴ Although the model is dynamic and each CSA has its own characteristics, the European network has identified basic principles shared by the Italian entities (3rd European Meeting of CSA, 2016):

- Responsible care for the soil, water, seeds and the other commons through the agroecological principles and practices as found in this declaration and the Nyeleni Declaration 2015.
- Food as a common good not a commodity.
- Human scale production rooted in local realities and knowledges.
- Fair working conditions and decent income for all involved.
- Respect for the environment and animal welfare.
- Fresh, local, seasonal, healthy and diverse food accessible to all.
- Community building through direct and long term relationships with shared responsibility, risks and rewards.
- Active participation based on trust, understanding, respect, transparency and cooperation.
- Mutual support and solidarity beyond borders.

In the Italian context, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives are frequently linked to solidarity purchasing groups and can be seen as a development of them, similar to the food cooperative model (Genova & Piccoli, 2019: 52; Rossi et al., 2022: 4). Arvaia has benefited from the context of an already active alternative food network. It also builds on the tradition of urban

²⁰³ The report *L'agricoltura supportata dalla comunità in Italia* is available at: <https://euricse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Rapporto-CSA-editato.pdf>. Last accessed in December 2023.

²⁰⁴ <https://www.reteitalianacsa.it/le-csa-italiane/>. Last accessed in December 2023.

gardens, which have recently experienced a revival according to Coldiretti Association,²⁰⁵ and combines it with cooperative culture. This emphasizes the collective dimension and related values for urban contexts, communities, and the environment (Menzani, 2020).²⁰⁶

CSA Arvaia, which means ‘peas’ in the local dialect, began in 2013 with about 35 members who collectively decided to farm 3 hectares of land on the western outskirts of Bologna in Borgo Panigale. The group was inspired by similar experiences abroad. In 2015, after winning a public tender for 25 years, the farm expanded to 47 hectares of land in the Villa Bernaroli park, located in the Olmetola area between the Borgo Panigale district and the neighboring municipalities of Casalecchio di Reno and Zola Predosa. The farm now produces legumes, cereals and fruit. In the following years, the distribution of processed food products was expanded to include tomato paste, bread, flour, pasta, rusks, honey and seeds.

Its members include working members (farmers), user members, and financing members. Arvaia is an agricultural cooperative that collectively self-manages 47 hectares of public land. The municipality owns the area, which comprises 8 hectares cultivated by the CSA and a much larger green area shared with other entities, such as the Steiner school, neighborhood social center Villa Bernaroli,²⁰⁷ 340 urban gardens, and Baobab social cooperative. According to Lambertini (2023), they manage 12 hectares of public green spaces using agroecological principles.²⁰⁸ In addition, there are 4.75km of public pedestrian and cycle paths (Iafrate, 2018: 41).²⁰⁹

²⁰⁵ <https://www.coldiretti.it/economia/67599>. Last accessed in December 2023.

²⁰⁶ In the words of Arvaia's president, "We are a collective garden that produces sociality and enhances the beauty of the landscape as a common good", interview published in the online magazine *Cantiere Bologna*, available at: <https://cantierebologna.com/2021/04/16/arvaia-quando-le-parole-corrispondono-ai-fatti/>. Last accessed in December 2023.

²⁰⁷ The website for Villa Bernaroli can be found at <https://www.villabernaroli.it/>. For additional information regarding the network of neighborhood social centers and their recent transformation, refer to <https://casediquartierebologna.it/>.

²⁰⁸ Lambertini (2023: 4), contrasting agroecology with the industrial agriculture of the "Green Revolution", writes: "On the contrary, cultures based on the principles of agroecology seek to recover an approach to agricultural production that is more respectful of the surrounding environment, which is no longer seen as an enemy or an obstacle to be destroyed, but as a potential ally for ecological agriculture free of excessive chemical products: trees and hedges (which have disappeared from large areas of monoculture) provide important "ecosystem services", the combination of different crops helps to regenerate the soil and maintain a good level of fertility, the diversity and variety of production reduces the risk of losing the entire harvest in the event of adversity (bad weather, diseases, parasite attacks, etc.)".

²⁰⁹ This section refers to Iafrate's (2018) bachelor's thesis in gastronomic sciences at the University of Parma, which provides the only in-depth analysis of the Arvia CSA to date. The thesis is available on the Arvia website: <https://www.arvaia.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Sistemi-alimentari-alternativi-e-sostenibili-in-aree-urbane-il-caso-Arvaia.pdf>.

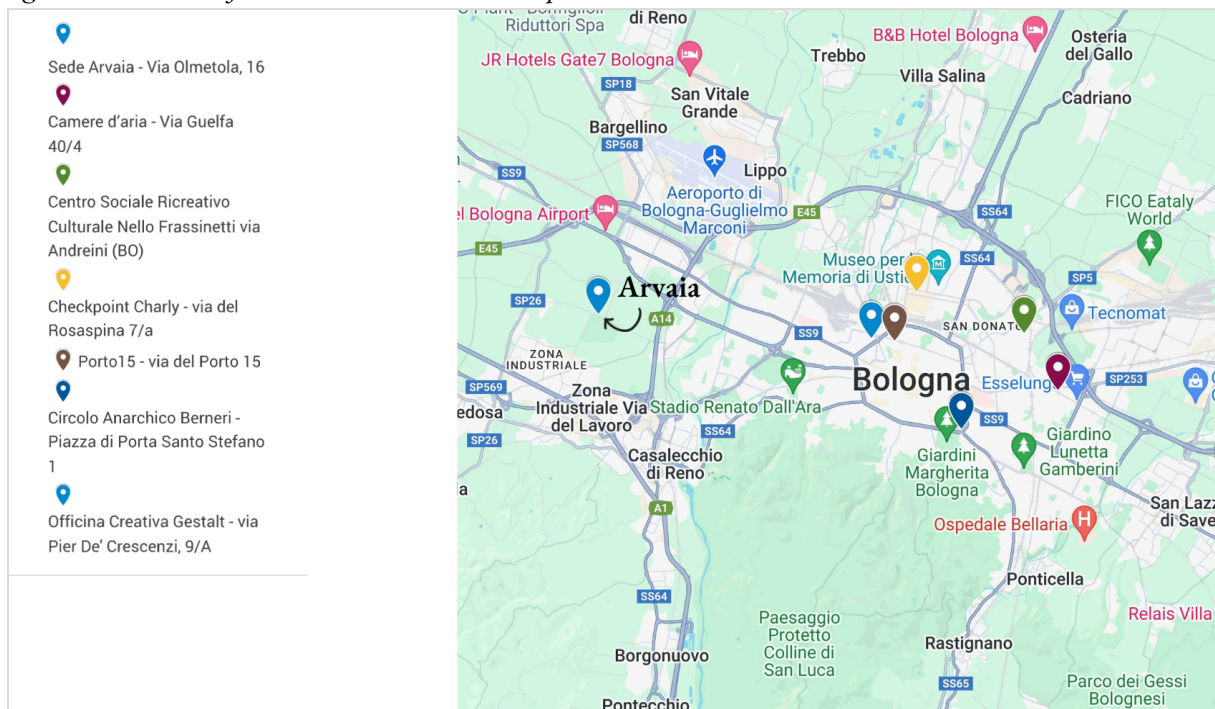
Arvaia manages the space as a public space open to the citizens and is responsible for its maintenance. The CSA has made significant investments in the land, including ecological improvements such as investing 30,000 euros (in 2021) in a well that allows the use of groundwater instead of drinking water, thus reducing waste. The land is also used for beekeeping, planting trees to promote biodiversity, creating a wetland, and practicing organic farming.

The idea behind the project is “*to do business jointly, an economic venture, in this case an agricultural venture, between producers and consumers*”, to use the words of Cecilia, a farmer in the CSA.²¹⁰

At the start of each year, cooperative members plan the cultivation of specific agricultural land, estimate production costs, and divide the year’s production into equal parts. This approach frees them from market mechanisms and the need to purchase products at established prices, while also collectivizing business risks. As I’ll discuss, this is not easy to put into practice and there are serious obstacles, although they are sometimes translated into newer opportunities.

The products are distributed to members for 50 weeks per year at seven collection points, including Arvaia’s premises (see Figure 29).

Figure 29. Location of Arvaia and its distribution points



²¹⁰ Excerpt from a documentary available on Arvaia's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-FDrIQaU7g&t=133s>. Last accessed in December 2023.

Source: adapted from Arvaia's website (<https://www.arvaia.it/contatti/#distribuzione>)

The 2022 Social Report states that Arvaia has 365 members, including 213 users, 62 financing members, 14 cooperatives, and 9 workers (in addition to one non-member worker). It produced 51 varieties of vegetables, totaling 61,051 kg, and 7 varieties of cereals, totaling 10,533 kg. The weekly portion size is approximately 6.2 kg. In terms of processed products, members purchased 1,135 kg of flour/seeds (6 types), 2,182 kg of bread (2 types), 1,295 kg of pasta (29 types), and 605 kg of tomato puree. In 2022, *Confcooperative* conducted the biennial review for Arvaia, the cooperative federation to which it adheres. Arvaia is a predominantly mutual consumer and labor cooperative with 9 employees, 8 of whom are members. Labor services are predominantly performed by associates, accounting for 88% of labor costs, while consumption is carried out by members 76% of the time. Therefore, the overall prevalence is 82%.²¹¹

Arvaia has an innovative internal solidarity and mutual aid mechanism that allows for the redistribution of resources (Lambertini, 2023: 3). Members are invited to make an offer for the upcoming agricultural year during a meeting called an “auction”, taking into account the recommended average quota. Each member anonymously decides the amount to offer, which may be equal, lower, or higher than the recommended quota, according to individual possibilities. If everyone offers the recommended amount, the budget is met. If some offer more, in order to allow the participation of those who cannot cover the entire quota, members actively participate in the construction of a diverse economy based on mutual solidarity.²¹² The auction ends when the budget is covered by the total bids of all participating members. Members become direct financiers of the cooperative and entrepreneurs, along with those who cultivate the fields. In 2021, 166 members participated in the auction. Of those, 100 members offered more than the suggested quota, 51 offered the suggested amount, and 15 offered less.²¹³

²¹¹ The data presented is sourced from the financial statements of 2022 and attendance records of the Annual General Meeting held on May 26, 2023.

²¹² I have experience with this mechanism, having participated and benefited directly. Specifically, I participated remotely in the “auction” for the 2023 agricultural year held in February, subscribing to half a box of products. The proposed quota was 460 euros, while I offered 400 euros due to my limited financial capacity at the moment. I also had the option of paying in installments.

²¹³ Data taken from the 2021 Social Report.

In terms of its internal governance, Arvaia has a flexible, concentric structure in which, between the work of the Board of Directors and the decision-making and consultation of the General Assembly, there is a series of Working Groups and the Coordination Group, which carry out the day-to-day management of the cooperative and translate into practice the orientations and needs expressed by the social base. Arvaia works through 4 main working groups: Agriculture (farmers, field activities) and Public Greenery (orchard and public greenery); Communication, Events and Training (in fact they work as two different groups); Economy and Organization (accounting); and Distribution (logistics).²¹⁴

One of the most impactful experiences a member can have is working in the fields with farmers to see firsthand how the CSA operates. This provides an opportunity to learn about agroecology and spend time in contact with the land (Figure 30).

²¹⁴ The website reports on these working groups. During an informal exchange that took place on April 11, 2022, E., a member of the Members' Office, reported that a new group has been formed called 'Care and Well-being of the Community' (initially named 'Conflict Management' due to the need to mediate between worker and volunteer members) to take care of internal relations and participation. Another emerging group is the Sustainability Group, which is currently unnamed, and focuses on medium-term perspectives.

Figure 30: Assisting Arvaia's farmers with strawberry picking in June 2022



Source: own pictures

Arvaia participates in local farmers' markets, organizes promotional events such as festivals and seasonal walks, participates in university research projects, operates as an educational farm, and participates in various national and international networks.²¹⁵

Arvaia is a concrete example of periurban agriculture that reconnects city dwellers to the land, its labor, seasonality, timing, and values through a process of land commoning and decommodification of its produce.

²¹⁵ Arvaia's website has a dedicated page for all activities carried out by the CSA, which can be found at <https://www.arvaia.it/cosa-facciamo/>. Last accessed December 2023.

2.1: Discussing the social value of the Arvaia CSA

“Arvaia is great diversity: diversity of nature and human diversity”.
(C., Arvaia’s farmer)²¹⁶

As anticipated, the Theory of Change analysis with Arvaia could not be completed despite a number of attempts for a variety of reasons, including time and energy. This case study proved to be challenging to engage in an action research process, likely because it is an established project that has been studied by several academics over the past 10 years and is currently undergoing internal reorganization to address various challenges.

Therefore, the evaluation of the Arvaia CSA proceeded with four semi-structured interviews with various members and the distribution of a questionnaire to members. The questionnaire was prepared based on Camilla’s action research and feedback was obtained from selected participants to increase its relevance for Arvaia’s members and explore other possibilities for participatory evaluation processes. The survey similarly comprises three sections: 1) analyzing the dynamic between the member and the cooperative; 2) examining Arvaia’s significance to the community and surrounding area; and 3) gathering socio-demographic information.

2.1.1: Reading the co-constructed survey data

Twentysix members completed the survey *and* gave permission for the results to be used for the purposes of this research (only one refused; she is not included in the analysis), representing 8.7% of the membership at the time of the survey. Similarly to Camilla’s case study, it is not easy to estimate the exact number of active members, being a minority of the formally registered members. Some members cannot participate nor subscribe to the weekly box for several reasons, some others only purchase and consume the products, while others show different levels of commitment and involvement in the daily activities of the CSA and relative community.

²¹⁶ Interview from the aforementioned documentary on Arvaia.

The Board of Directors has identified this as a problem for both the sustainability of the CSA and legal compliance. Therefore, in 2022, they decided to address the issue by starting the process of expiring inactive members.²¹⁷ At the time of the survey, Arvaia had 300 members.

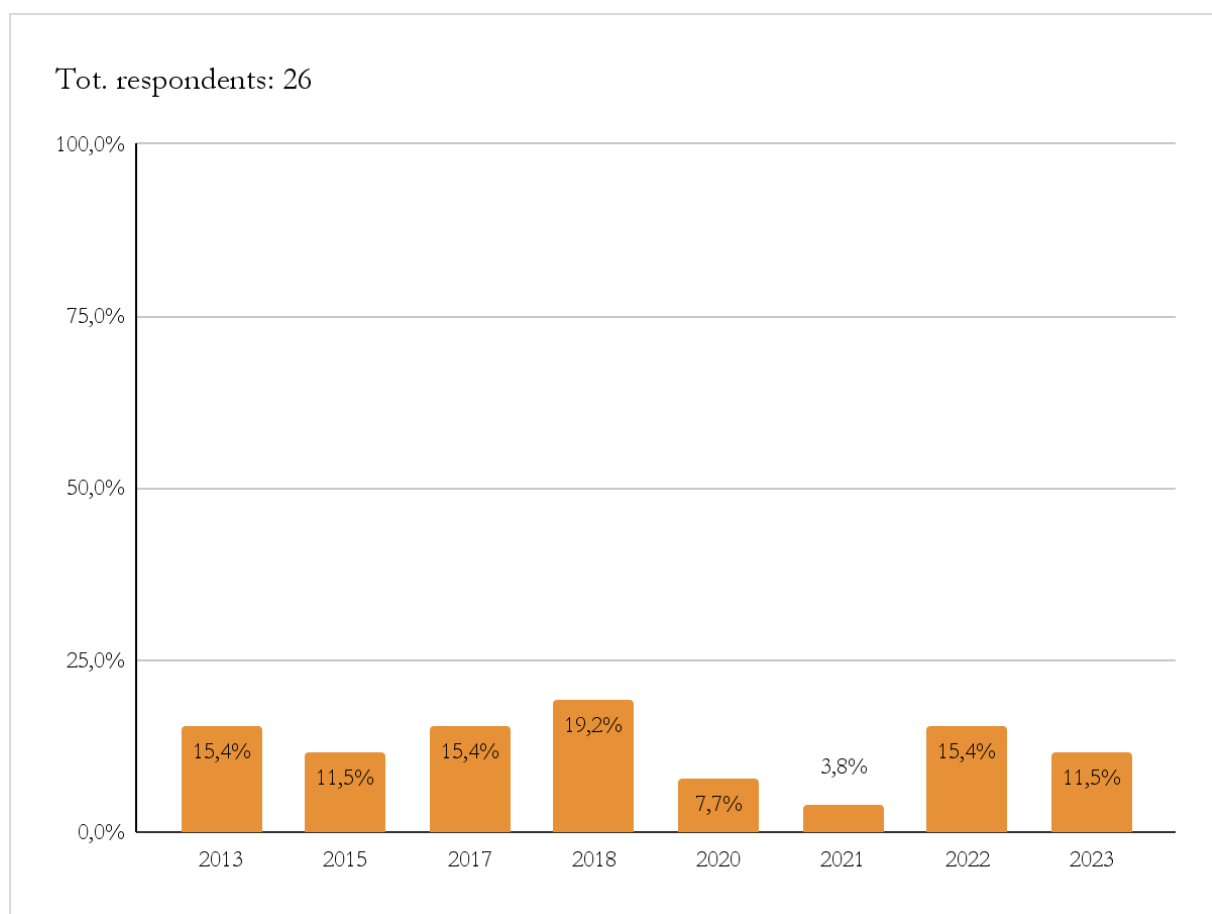
This section explains the reciprocal interaction between the cooperative and its members in terms of their level of involvement and the benefits they receive. Participation in the CSA requires a conscious effort, while being part of the community offers a variety of benefits. These benefits include access to high-quality seasonal, organic, locally sourced, and fresh products, as well as a connection to the land and knowledge of sustainable farming practices and ecology in general.

Over 60% of the participants learned about Arvaia through word of mouth, while 19.2% discovered it at public events. Other means of communication, such as the internet, were of little relevance (3.8%). Only 7.7% learned about the CSA while taking a gardening class, and 3.8% were involved in research or are founding members. As in Camilla's case study, real social networks are crucial for a project like Arvaia, and direct contact remains essential and much more effective. On the other hand, this may also indicate a lack of resources and investment in alternative forms of communication and dissemination.

Respondents are fairly evenly distributed in terms of length of membership (see Graph 13).

²¹⁷ During the General Assembly on May 26, 2023, the issue of inactive members was discussed. It was noted that some members have not resigned or reactivated their membership to continue supporting the cooperative, which poses a problem for its sustainability. The board has undertaken extensive efforts to address this issue by requesting that all inactive members either reactivate or resign. As of 2022, 187 members have lapsed. To address this issue, the Board of Directors has introduced an article that allows for the lapse of membership after a certain period of inactivity, as determined by the Board of Directors. Currently, only 4-5 members have requested a refund, and many have not responded. The Assembly has unanimously approved the new article, which will be included in the User Membership Rules. These are personal notes from the general meeting held on May 26, 2023 at Arvaia's premises.

Graph 13. Percentage of CSA members by year of joining

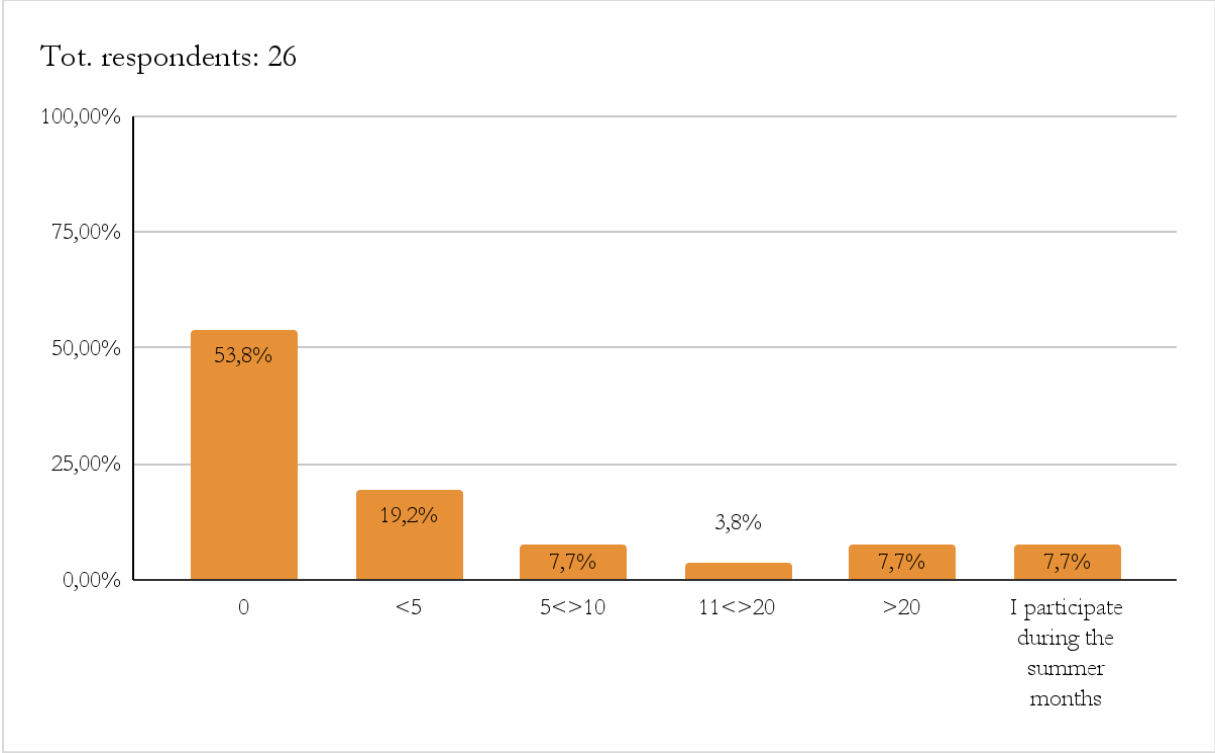


Compared to Camilla's case, the respondents are people who are at least ideally involved in the project, but somewhat less so in terms of practical commitment. In fact, half of them say that they would like to participate in a working group but lack the time to do so; 7.7% were not aware of this possibility, suggesting that dissemination of information to newer members may be a problem. Finally, 42.3% of respondents are active in at least one working group.

Regarding the number of members who participate (see Graph 14), 58.3% do not volunteer in the CSA. Among those who do volunteer, their level of commitment varies greatly. Specifically, 19.2% contribute only a small number of hours per month, 7.7% contribute between five and ten hours, and only 7.7% contribute more than 20 hours per month. The distribution of effort seems to be more unbalanced than in Camilla. It is also worth noting that the model is certainly different. In Arvaia, there is no minimum number of hours required to run the daily operations of the CSA,

which distinguishes it from the food coop. Additionally, participation in activities depends on the needs of the farm, which are determined by factors such as seasonality.²¹⁸

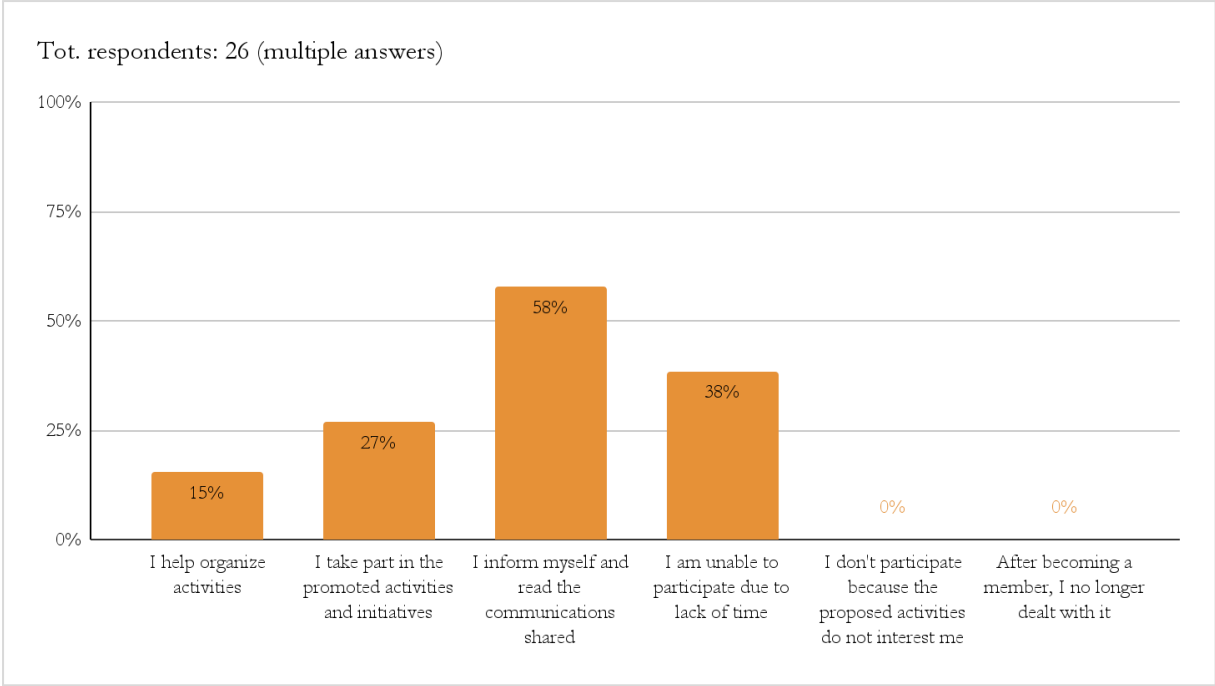
Graph 14. Average volunteer hours per month as a percentage



In terms of how members participate in the CSA, the majority (58%) stay informed about what is going on in the community, while 27% say they participate in activities offered by the co-op and only 15% actively contribute to their organization. 38% are unable to participate due to lack of time. Notably, no one indicated a lack of interest (Graph 15).

²¹⁸ These findings are consistent with Iafrate’s study (2018: 33-34), which led him to conclude: ‘Arvaia’s workforce is designed to remain within certain limits. At present, seven farmers are employed daily in the fields, on a total area of almost 47 hectares. Approximately 200 families have to be fed each week. The CSAs also rely heavily on the volunteer work of the members, reasonable hours and tasks depending on the needs of the moment, in order to enable the proper sustainability of the community, the primary interest of each member. We are talking about an average of 4 half days per year for each member. If the member, from being an active member, becomes a mere user, it is well understood that this paradigm will increasingly fade until the number of passive members (i.e. the demand for products) overwhelms the cooperative’s means (labor and equipment), which can no longer meet the demand. The participation of each member is therefore crucial. Arvaia’s difficulties with this mechanism are well illustrated in Figure 16, where we see that almost 50 percent of members say they hardly ever participate in community-organized activities. Only 20 percent of the members are active every week, while about ten respondents (15 percent) are active every month. Nevertheless, there are difficulties in managing and harmonizing the different tasks. For this reason, Arvaia will have to reinvent a new participation dynamic or a new production and distribution scheme in the near future’.

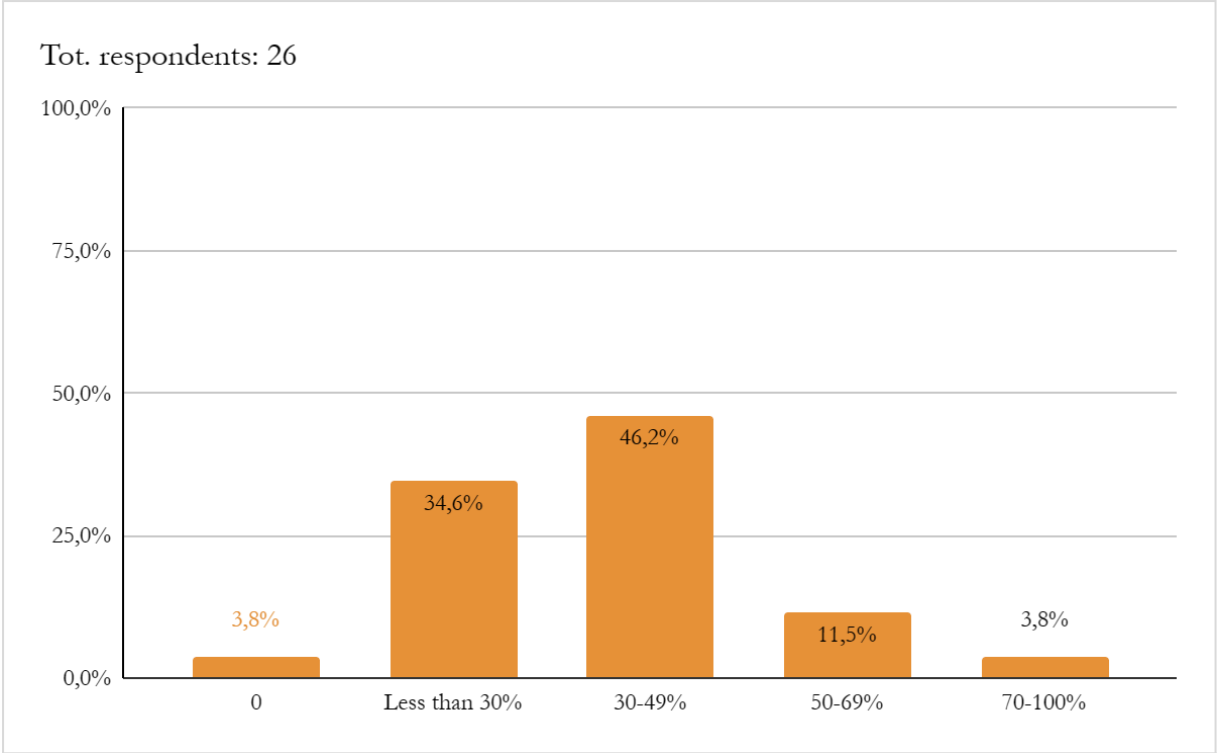
Graph 15. Type of participation of members in Arvaia (percentage)



When examining Arvaia's ability to fulfill its members' food consumption needs (see Graph 16), only 15.3% of respondents reported relying primarily on Arvaia's products. The majority of respondents (46.2%) reported covering 30 to 49% of their monthly food needs with Arvaia's boxes, while 34.6% reported covering less than 30%. The evaluation of these data is not straightforward and requires a more specific study. The CSA mainly provides vegetables, legumes, and some fruits, and members must supplement their diet with food from other distribution channels. In addition to the weekly box subscription, the CSA offers processed products such as bread, canned tomatoes, honeydew, and pasta produced by the social pasta factory IRIS (Cremona) with grains grown in Arvaia. The ratio of subscriptions to CSA members appears to be decreasing.²¹⁹ However, it is important to note that the number of formally registered members in recent years may not accurately reflect the current membership due to the ongoing process of membership expiration.

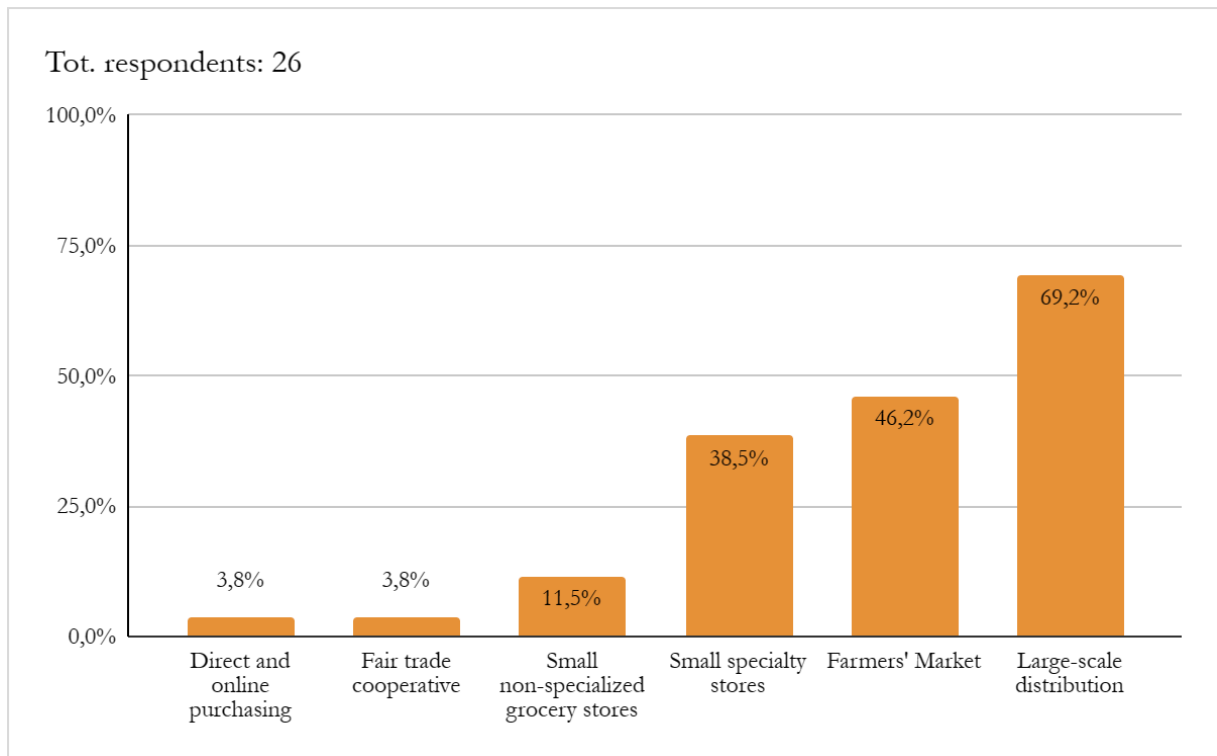
²¹⁹ According to the 2022 social report, the ratio was 0.49 in 2014, 0.46 in 2018, and 0.38 in 2021.

Graph 16. Percentage of total monthly food expenditure covered by the CSA



The distribution channels by which members supplement their grocery needs are comparable to Camilla's, with less emphasis on purchasing directly from producers (only 3.8%). Similar to Camilla's situation, large retailers such as supermarkets, hypermarkets, and discount stores are the primary option with 69.2%, and farmers' markets are the secondary option with 46.2%.

Graph 17. Channels through which members integrate their grocery by percentage



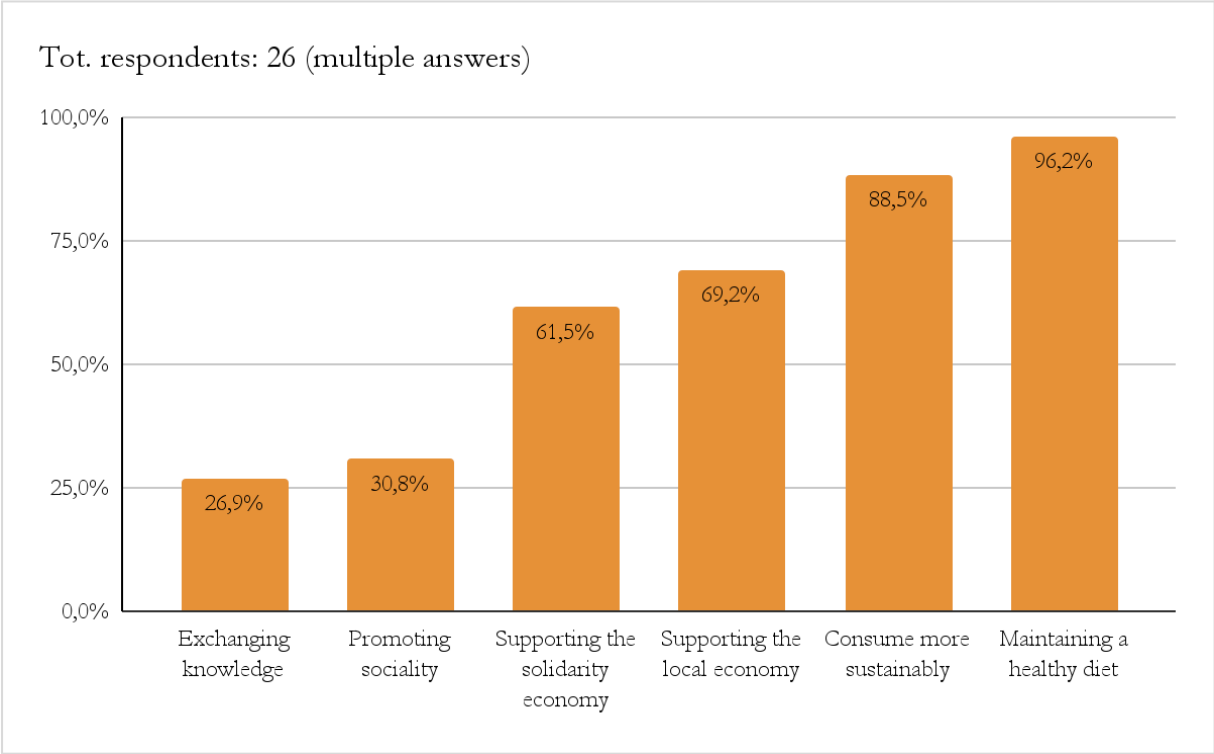
All respondents rated their trust in Arvaia products as 5 on a scale of 1 to 5, which is higher than Camilla's members. This is not surprising given that the model allows for the most direct and transparent relationship between producer and consumer that can be imagined. As a member, you can stay informed about everything that happens in the fields and be directly involved in the process. This includes watching the products grow and change over the seasons, and even helping the farmers in the field.

When asked whether they believed that product prices reflected their social, environmental, and economic value, 96.2% responded affirmatively, while only 3% were unsure. These data demonstrate a greater alignment of the members with the project's philosophy than with Camilla's. Indeed, the mechanism underlying the CSA aims to reverse the market logic so that members contribute to the cost of environmentally friendly production rather than paying a price for the product (Lambertini, 2023: 3).

In terms of the benefits and outcomes of participating in the CSA, 65.4% of respondents reported making new meaningful connections through their participation in Arvaia. Negative feedback was provided by 19.2% of participants, while 15.4% expressed doubt. The results are slightly less favorable than Camilla's. One explanation for this difference could be that the food cooperative's management actively promotes collaboration and interaction among its members, while in Arvaia, community engagement relies more on individual initiative. However, the CSA can also aid in the development of social capital at the local level.

When asked about the perceived benefits (as shown in Graph 18), the most common response was to maintain a healthy diet (96.2%), followed by consuming more sustainably (88.5%) and supporting the local economy (69.2%). In contrast to Camilla's case, and in line with the considerations just made, the collective dimension of the experience seems to be somewhat less relevant here than the more 'individualistic' components of healthy eating and sustainable consumption. The benefit of knowledge sharing and promoting social interaction is less apparent as it was for Camilla's members.

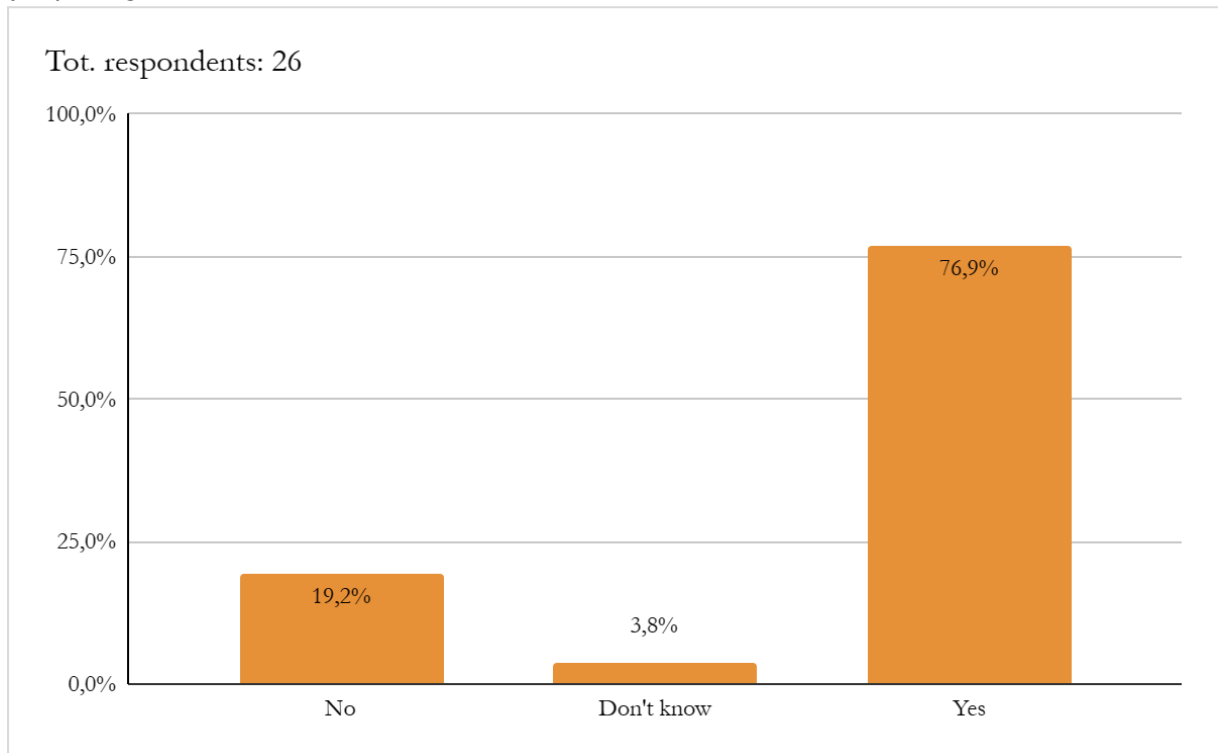
Graph 18. Benefits of membership in Arvaia CSA as perceived by members (percentage)



The open-ended question on the same topic (14 answers), the benefits that members receive from their involvement with Arvaia, mostly refers to more ethical and sustainable consumption (*“It’s a concrete way to reduce the impact of my consumption, even if it’s only a part of it”*), as well as awareness of what food production concretely entails and how relevant differences in supply chains can be (*“Being able to experience with my son about nature, the meaning of food and work, ecological balance and respect. I know what it means to farm in terms of work and organization”*), but also to promote social change (*“To feel part of a social change: Arvaia gave me the chance to try to get out of the world of food consumption in a concrete, comfortable and practical way”*).

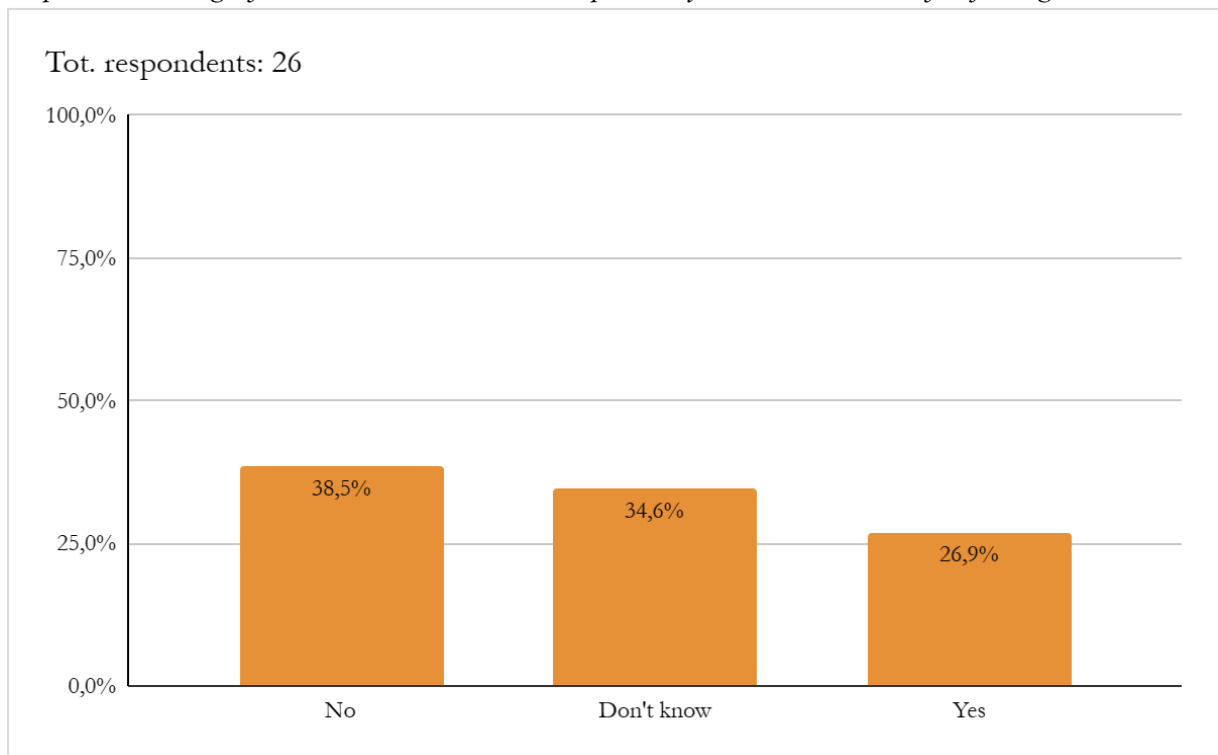
In terms of the individual transformation triggered by membership in Arvaia, there are notable differences in relation to Camilla’s case. Specifically, 76.9% of participants reported changes in their lifestyles, habits and thought processes after joining the cooperative (Graph 19). Only 26.9% of members attributed their discovery of new resources, such as associations, local producers, and sustainability practices, to their membership in Arvaia and the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge. Arvaia seems to promote a conscious change in the behavior of its members, but seems to find more obstacles in the circulation of knowledge. Again, this could be read in the light of possibly fewer opportunities for interaction between members in Arvaia compared to Camilla.

Graph 19. Percentage of members' self-perception of changes in personal habits, ways of thinking, and lifestyles after joining Arvaia

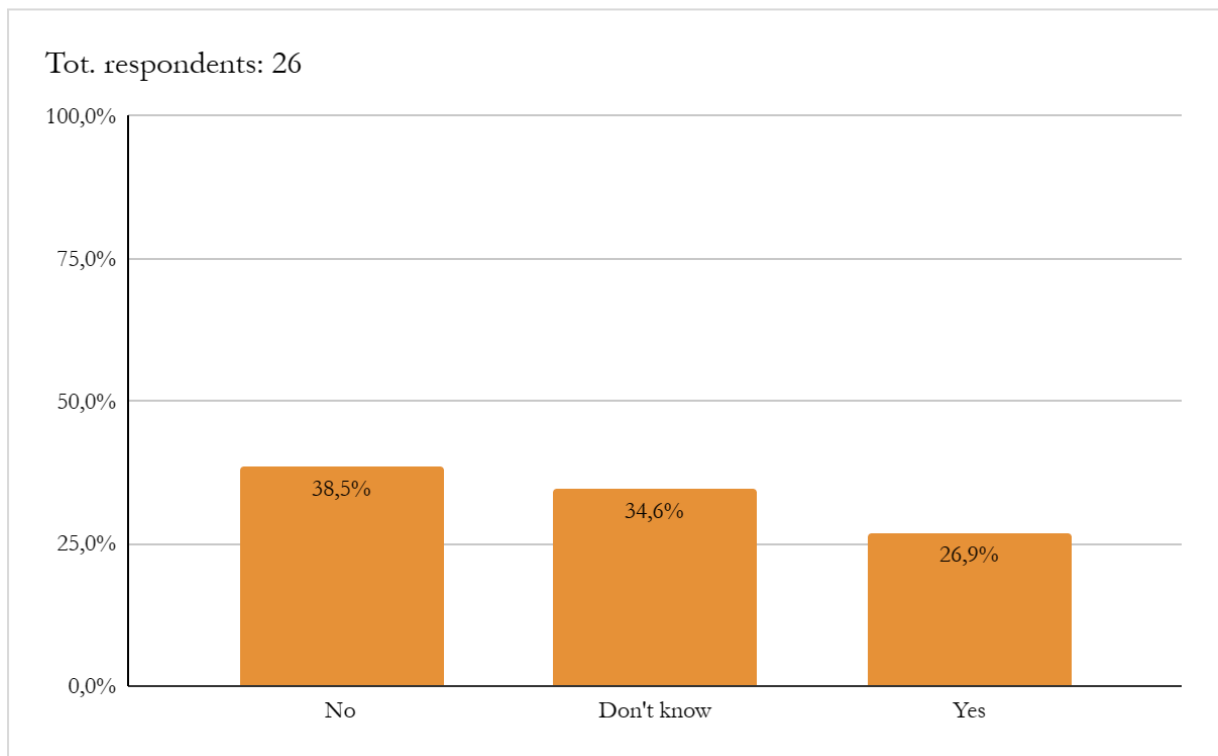


To delve further, answers to the open-ended question on personal habits and mindsets uncovered instances of self-awareness surrounding various aspects of consumption habits, mostly related to nutrition (16 responses): respecting and enjoying the seasonality of the products of the earth (“*I have rediscovered the pleasure of “doing with what is there”, that is, what time and nature offer, which is so much more than we usually believe*”, “*I no longer eat with my eyes. I only eat what the field offers me*”), increasing the amount of vegetables in the diet, less supermarket consumption (“*I realized that you can consume consciously, look for products that do not come from big retailers. I try to buy bulk products (no packaging), local products (less emissions to the environment), products that help local realities*”).

Graph 20. Percentage of members who have discovered previously unknown resources after joining Arvaia



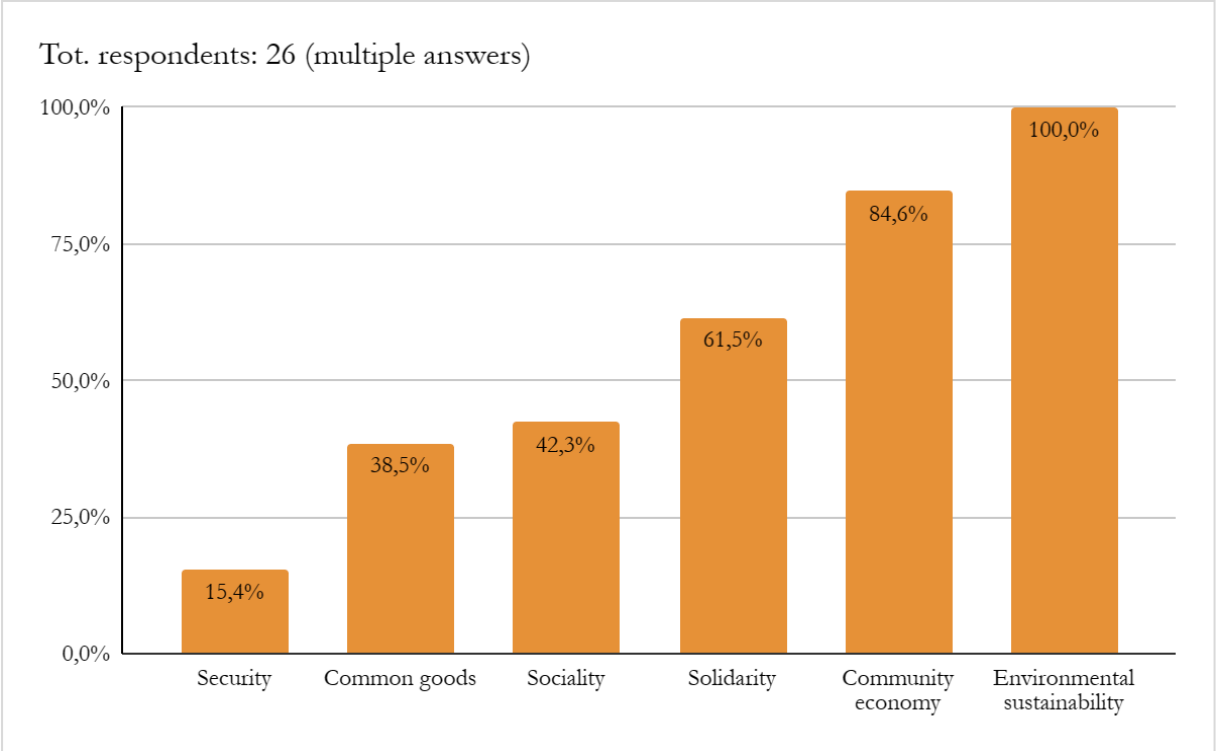
Graph 21. Members who gained new skills and knowledge after joining Arvaia (percentage)



Five members responded to the open-ended question, describing the new skills and knowledge they acquired as part of the CSA. These skills primarily relate to manual work in the field, even for those who are inexperienced (e.g. *“I am a new member and have learned how to pick strawberries”*). Additionally, logistical skills and an understanding of the complexities involved in both production and distribution were mentioned (e.g. *“Awareness of the organization of agricultural production work”*; *“I recognize vegetables better than before and have an idea of how complex distribution is”*).

The survey’s second section prompts participants to consider the potential positive effects of Arvaia on the local and wider community. Respondents unanimously agree on the relevance of CSA for environmental sustainability, followed by its promotion of the community economy (84.6%) and solidarity (61.5%). However, the perception of the impact on sociality is significantly lower than in the case of Camilla (42.3%). The perceived impact on public goods is higher at 38.5%, while the impact on security remains low at 15.4% (Graph 22).

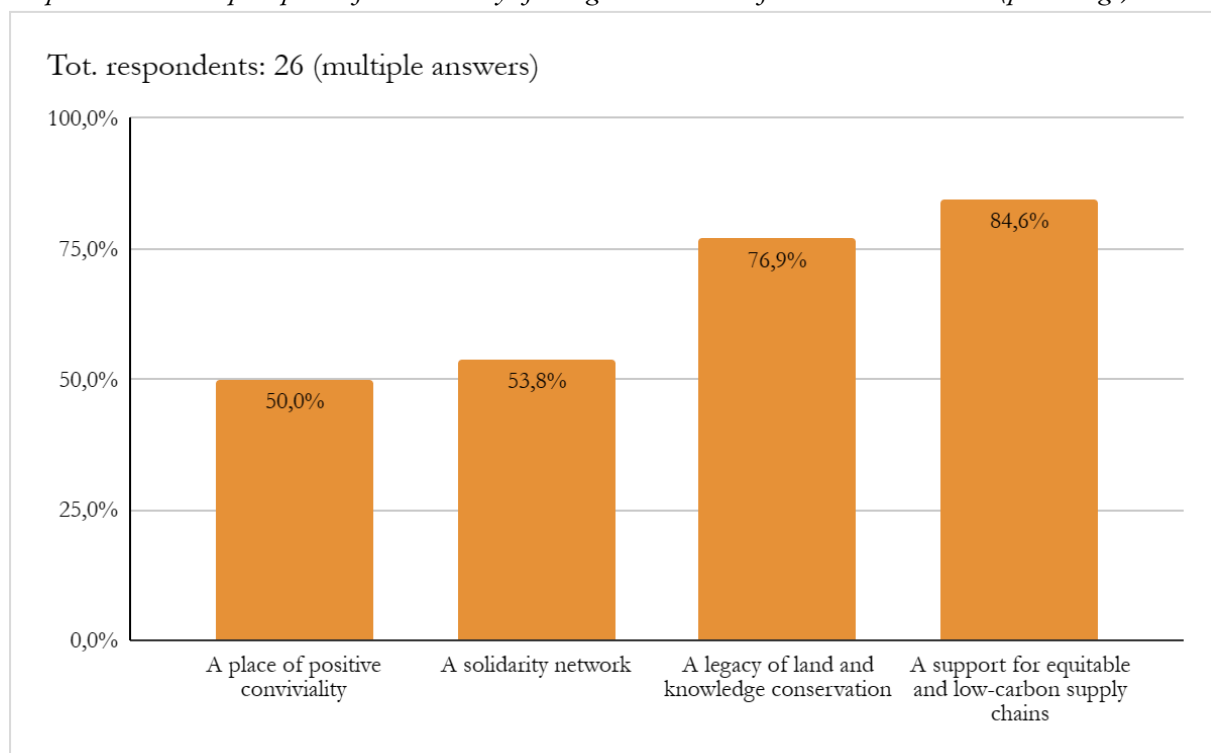
Graph 22. Members' perceived positive impacts of Camilla on the territory (percentage)



The 11 open-ended responses on the same topic suggest that Arvaia fosters citizen and consumer awareness of the relevance of what and how we eat in its multifaceted aspects, (“*Promoting healthy and conscious lifestyles, health and land conservation*”), as well as short supply chains (“*Promote the consumption of organic, zero-mile food and a less self-centered position of the consumer of agricultural products*”). According to another member, the positive environmental impact is evident, while the social benefits could be increased: “*It is definitely ecological, as it restores biodiversity, and could be more social if it had more members and diverse forms of sociability*”. Once again, promoting the social aspects of a CSA appears to be challenging.

When survey participants were asked about the potential outcomes if Arvaia had never existed (Graph 23), they identified the primary loss as the support for equitable and low-carbon supply chains (84.6%), followed by a legacy of land and knowledge conservation (76.9%), and a solidarity network (53.8%).

Graph 23. Members perception of what the city of Bologna would lose if Arvaia did not exist (percentage)



This question prompts members to reflect on the existing forms of Arvaia's value. The 15 open-ended responses on this topic highlight Arvaia's role as a source of inspiration and a concrete

example for others (*“A pilot experience that has been an inspiration to many others in Italy and an improvement to the quality of life in the city”*). However, some respondents noted that Arvaia is still an unrecognized model: (*“I don't think many people are aware of this”*).

The final section of the survey, despite the relatively small sample size, provides insights into the social and demographic factors of CSA. The respondents were predominantly women (88.5%, as shown in Table 17), which is even more pronounced than in the case of Camilla.²²⁰ It is worth noting that the president of Arvaia is also a woman. All but one of the respondents live in the municipality of Bologna. They are evenly distributed among its districts, except for Navile, which has a lower presence (4%).

Table 17. Gender of respondents

	N.	%
Male	3	11,5
Female	23	88,5
Total	26	100

Table 18. Age of respondents

	N.	%
18-29	4	17,4
30-44	3	13
45-55	8	34,8
56-68	5	21,7
>68	3	13

²²⁰ Although women make up the majority of members, it is very likely that they are overrepresented in this survey. The Arvaia 2021 Social Report states that 57% of members are women and 43% are men. Unfortunately, more recent data is not available.

	N.	%
Total responses	23	100
Missing	3	
Total	26	

Table 19. Place of residence of respondents

	N.	%
Municipality of Bologna	25	96,2
Province of Modena	1	3,8
Total	26	100

Table 20. Neighbourhood of residence in Bologna

	N.	%
Navile	1	4
Borgo Panigale-Reno	4	16
Savena	4	16
San Donato-San Vitale	4	16
Santo Stefano	5	20
Porto-Saragozza	7	28
Total responses	25	100
Missing	1	
Total	26	

The data are comparable to those of Camilla's survey, indicating a majority of women and underrepresentation of individuals aged over 68 and under 29. Furthermore, all respondents are of

Italian nationality. The analogy remains valid for the level of education too, with 76.9% of individuals holding a degree higher than a high school diploma (refer to Table 21).

Table 21. Educational level of respondents

	N.	%
High school	6	23,1
University degree	15	57,7
Postgraduate	5	19,2
Total	26	100

According to the survey, the majority of households consist of two members (42.3%). Additionally, families with one member (15.8%) and those with three or four members (19.2%) are equally represented.²²¹

Table 22. Household composition

	N.	%
1 person	5	19,2
2 people	11	42,3
3 people	5	19,2
4 people	5	19,2
Total	26	100

The survey data shows that the monthly disposable income of households is similar to that of Camilla, with a high-income percentage of 11.5%. However, the distribution of low and middle-income households is more in favor of the latter (50%) than the former (38.5%).

²²¹ Iafate's survey, based on a sample of 88 out of 200 members in 2018, showed similar results: 'Households with 2 and 3 people are the most common (30 percent and 26 percent, respectively), followed by slightly fewer households with 4 people (19 percent of the total)' (2018: 25-26). Translation is mine.

Table 23. Monthly household disposable income bracket

	N.	%
Up to €1,291	2	7,7
1,292 to 2.066 €	8	30,8
2,067 to 2.582 €	3	11,5
2,583 to 3.615 €	10	38,5
3,616 to 5.165 €	2	7,7
Over €5,166	1	3,8
Total	26	100

Table 24 shows that 52% of CSA members work as employees in the public and private sectors. 24% identify as professionals, while 4% are retired and 4% are workers. The remaining 16% are not employed.²²²

²²² Referring again to Iafrate's study, he observes: 'Arvaia is also participated in and shared by university teachers, from the humanities and social sciences to the sciences. Also noteworthy is the participation of freelancers, who, thanks to their more open and independent nature and a freer management of their daily time, make up 22 percent of the members. The largest slice of the pie is shared by office workers, who account for 40 percent. Retirees are also well represented, probably due to their large amount of "free time" and the pursuit of a social integration project, as well as their great experience and critical spirit developed over the years' (2018: 27).

Table 24. Employment status

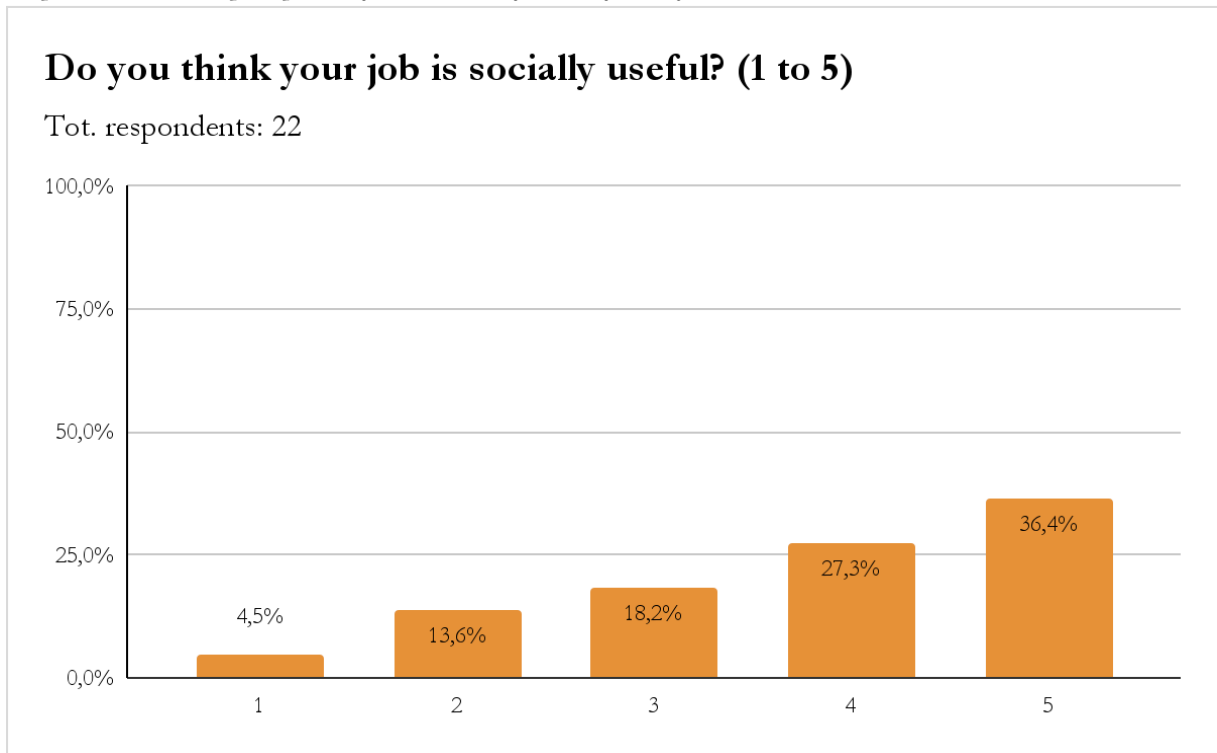
	N.	%
Clerk	13	52
Freelancer	6	24
Workman	1	4
Retired	1	4
Not employed	3	16
Total responses	24	100
Missing	2	
Total	26	

When asked to rate the social usefulness of their job and the Arvaia CSA on a scale of 1 to 5, the results were similar to those of the Camilla survey. 18.1% of employees perceived their job as having little to no social utility. Additionally, 18.2% regarded their job as somewhat useful, 27.3% as useful, and 36.4% as very useful, as shown in Graph 24. When comparing the results with members' opinions on Arvaia's social worth, there is a clear variation: while no one believes that it lacks any social value,²²³ 96.2% of members recognize it as highly useful (refer to Graph 25).²²⁴

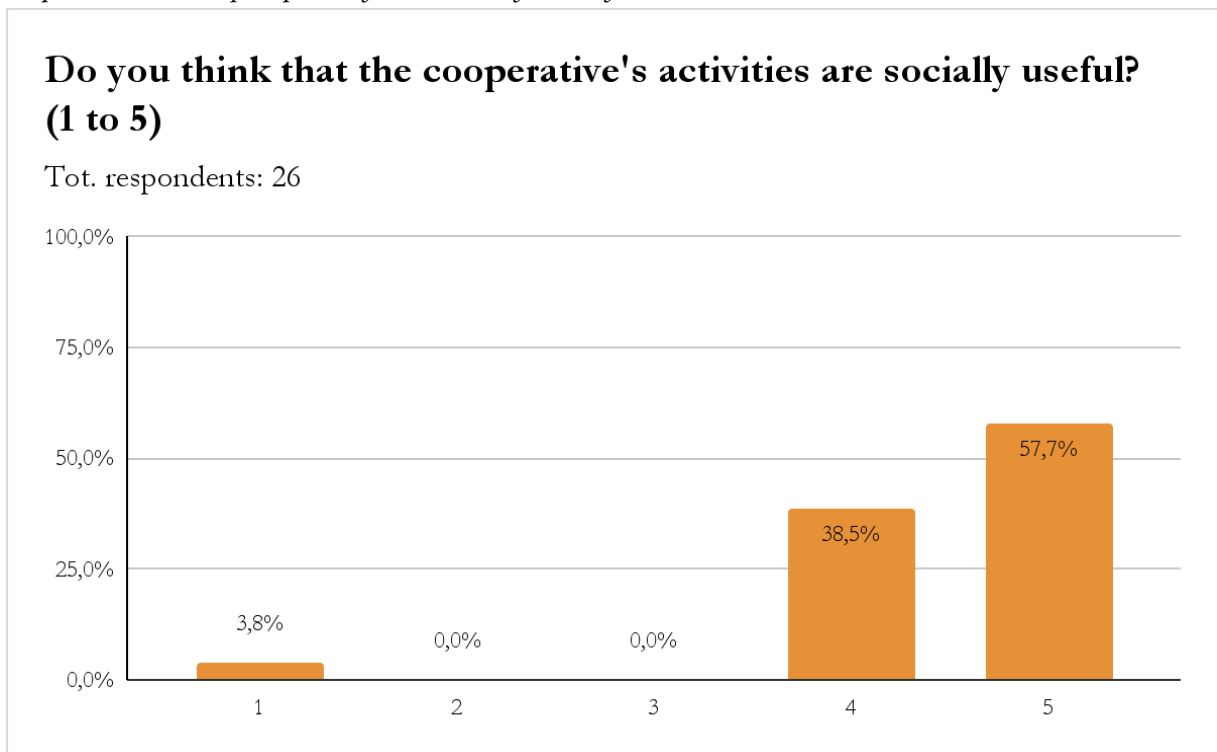
²²³ The single negative vote may be an error on the part of the respondent, as she's been a member since 2018 and all of the other responses she gave are extremely positive.

²²⁴ The total for each distribution differs because only 22 respondents reported having a job and answered the relevant question, while all 26 respondents answered the question about Arvaia.

Graph 24. Members' perceptions of the social usefulness of their job



Graph 25. Members' perceptions of the social usefulness of Arvaia's activities



Another similarity with the Camilla case study is the high level of civic involvement and commitment among its members. According to Table 25, 65.4% of participants have prior volunteering experience, while 53.8% are currently active in other civic groups. The members come from diverse backgrounds, including housing cooperatives, environmental associations, NGOs, social movement organizations, and cultural organizations.²²⁵ Arvaia primarily connects individuals with prior associative experience while also serving as a gathering place for individuals with diverse experiences and sensitivities.

Table 25. Civic participation

	N.	%
Volunteer experience prior to joining Arvaia	17	65,4
No volunteer experience prior to joining Arvaia	9	34,6
Total	26	100
Currently part of other civic organizations	14	53,8
Not currently affiliated with any other civic organization	12	46,2
Total	26	100

In conclusion, the survey collected data on the identity of the members, specifically on how they choose to present themselves. However, the results have not been shared with Arvaia's members yet, only with the Board of Directors.

²²⁵ As an example, the organizations of which respondents are members include ExAequo, Risanamento, Co-housing Porto 15, Nuova Acropoli, Infermieri di strada, MSF, Campi Aperti, Ancescao, ANT, and Rigenerazione NO Speculazione.

Provisional observations have been made on the results, which require further investigation. Notably, there were 'no' and 'don't know' responses to changes in habits resulting from membership, as well as positive responses. It is worth noting that there is a difference between the Camilla and Arvaia case studies. In the first case, the percentage of negative and unsure answers to the questions regarding new resources discovered (51.7%) and new skills acquired (39.6%) is higher than in Arvaia's case (73.1% in both cases). Conversely, the percentage of negative answers to the question regarding changes in habits is lower in Arvaia's case (23%) than in Camilla's (37.9%). Interpreting these questionnaire responses alone is difficult. However, it is possible that Arvaia's members are more aware of the implications of the project, given their 10-year history and greater consolidation, compared to the relatively young project of Camilla. On the other hand, the food coop appears to have a more effective capacity for connection, exchange, and inclusion, possibly due to its different organizational model, as mentioned above.

The social composition of the CSA suggests that the project is mainly supported by citizens, particularly women, who possess a high level of cultural and intellectual capital. Therefore, it is unsurprisingly similar to the food cooperative. The social composition that emerged aligns with Iafrate's (2018: 26) reflections that: 'The Arvaia member is a thinking, active and, above all, educated consumer, aware of the motivations and needs that make him an important part of a community attentive to social, economic and environmental issues'.

The same considerations made for Camilla about ethnic homogeneity and the challenge of engaging migrants or people with migrant backgrounds in such projects apply here. This is a recognized issue in the AFNs literature. As White (2020: 219, in Gibson-Graham & Domboski, 2020) notes, 'The populations that make up a typical CSA or CSE membership often lack diversity. The socio-economic factors of class, race and ethnicity that have impacted a wider range of sustainable food projects, policies and perspectives are also often reproduced in CSA where farmers and members are more often white, upper middle class and college-educated (Schnell 2007; Slocum 2007)'. While the author is referring to the US context, this issue should be considered for future improvements to the CSA model in Italy.

With these limitations in mind, the survey provides insight into intangible social value indicators such as care, awareness, and community involvement in the Arvaia CSA. The results indicate a wide range of social actions that benefit members and communities. As interviews with members will reveal, a CSA is about making connections, cultivating transactions, and educating consumers (White, 2020: 215-218).

2.1.2: Emerging qualitative elements of transformative change through semi-structured interviews

*“I mean, there is a discourse of efficiency, of ability. But there's also **a whole series of factors that you don't always get right with your skills, your predictions, and so on.** So what I'm telling you is that **a manager who is used to making predictions and calculating probabilities is not necessarily going to be a farmer.** Maybe he can be a manager in a big agribusiness company. Why? Because he is working on things that are already predetermined and in large quantities anyway. He exploits so much of what the land has that the numbers, good or bad, always prove him right. Until he has to give up those lands and take others. But he has the financial power behind him and he can do that. The small farmer cannot”.*

*“It is very difficult to create an equal, extremely democratic working environment. I mean, **the beauty of Arvaia is also the fact that the workers, that is, those who work, get together and they can decide their own rules, their own things together.** This is something that does not exist in any other area of activity, except in a cooperative built like this. And look, **this thing is not trivial. And it's not that easy to do”.***

(S., Arvaia's founding member)

*“And so, yeah, from a personal point of view, **it was good for me from a nutritional point of view, right?** Because in the last few years I have really managed to buy very little... The garlic, which we can't grow because we don't really know why, the carrot. Few, very few things. And then **it's really a challenge to use the things that we take here.** Also from a physical point of view, **I feel that being outdoors, being with them, with the guys, but also being alone, it's almost a form of meditation, right?** I also like, I don't know, transplanting alone. I don't have any problems. I feel like **it calms my mind, calms my mind and I go home in a better mood, less nervous.** So yeah, in my opinion it was good for me and it still is good for me. So it*

*almost became an addiction. I run here whenever I can, even half a day. I don't feel tired except in the evening when I stop. And it makes me think a little of my grandparents, my uncles, of the life that was once lived with the most natural rhythms. Now that the good weather is coming, I can't wait to come here around 6:00 in the morning, because those are the most beautiful hours. **Here I feel more in harmony with, yes, with the natural rhythms, in short**".*

(L., Arvaia's member)

This section presents an analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with four members of Arvaia. The interviewees include a founding member, the current president, a working member, and a user member. The discussion focuses on the elements of transformative SSE as outlined in the theoretical framework (Chapter 1, Section 4:4).

Like Camilla, Arvaia's project is linked to the farmers' market movement and solidarity buying groups.²²⁶ S., a founding member, recalls the origins of the CSA: "*Basically, we were born out of an idea that actually came more from the French AMAPs than from the CSAs*". "*Something along the lines of a couple of CSAs that have been around in Europe. They are GartenCoop in Freiburg and Cocagne in Geneva. One Swiss and one German. We had relationships with them. There were exchanges. They came to us, we went to them*". He's a former IT specialist who took early retirement and, thanks to a friend who started farming, became interested in food production beyond what he calls "the gourmand side of it".²²⁷ After learning about the public land in the Villa Bernaroli park, S. and a small group of friends, seven in all, decided to lease the land and create Arvaia. Although the relationship with the Bologna City Council was somewhat problematic from the beginning, he

²²⁶ Arvaia's president says, "*We were born, in a way, from the experience of Campi Aperti, because one of the founders, in particular, was a small farmer who was a member of Campi Aperti, he did some Campi Aperti markets. So that experience was crucial to create an awareness of what small-scale agriculture means, in many ways, food sovereignty. I prefer security to sovereignty, but that's my personal opinion. And also from solidarity purchasing groups. Because among the founders of Arvaia, our former president was a member of a GAS, which is still our member today, and from which a substantial part of the very first members who started the initiative came*".

²²⁷ In his own words, "*I was part of that category called the "exited" people. Many wrote then, but long after we had done the CSA, that many of those who came from IT had gone into the land. We had done it before they wrote it. R. had this scarce acre of land. "Come on, come over sometime." So I had never, let's say, looked at the question of land as cultivation. I was one of those who followed the food supply chain a lot, the discussions that at that moment were mostly about the more gourmand part of the question*".

admits that “*the most important thing was that a PD councilor, Francesco Errani, was very interested in such a project. So we had, shall we say, a certain openness on the part of the municipality. At least to the point of subleasing part of the land, the first three hectares or so, which we subleased from the cooperative that is right next to us, the one that manages the Green [Baobab]*”.

The project attracted interest very quickly: “*Let's say the first party after we were founded, I think it was March 10, 2013, so not even a month after the official founding, we immediately had the first 50 members*”. Although the three farmers struggled at first to generate even a minimal income, they persevered. S. learned to work the land and put in a lot of effort, facing ups and downs, but still keeping faith in the project: “*I said that to myself a lot, even to the point of saying, “Enough, I'm leaving”. And I didn't. I didn't because I think there's still a lot of positive things in that kind of experience. So if you take stock, there's a lot of positive things and there's enough negative things*”.

The case study speaks of opening up and imagining economic possibilities (Cameron, 2020: 30, in Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020). The president of the CSA, P., explains the search and motivations behind the project that led a small group of people to build the largest CSA in the country over the course of ten years. In her own words, “*the idea that attracted me at the time, and I think attracted a lot of people, was really **the idea of self-production of food. That is, to show that it was possible, obviously with some organization and within certain limits, to produce part of what you ate yourself or to produce it very close to you. So that there was a way to show that we're not totally dependent on agribusiness, on large-scale distribution, and that it's possible to do that. And that it was not just an experience of, I mean, an aesthetic and folkloric experience, a little bit niche, but that it really became a way to at least partially reorient one's consumption***”.

L. has been a volunteer and member of Arvaia for 9 years. She first learned about it through a radio advertisement and it quickly became a habit for her to come by bike on a regular basis to help with farming. She feels a strong sense of community and connection to the other members, stating, “*Let's say I'm very affectionate. I love everybody*”. Her motivations for joining the CSA are clear: “*The desire to feed myself in a correct, healthy way, also having the responsibility of*

raising two children, and the possibility of coming to work [in the fields]. It's not just the food itself, but the whole range of opportunities that such a project can offer: *"The opportunity to know all the work processes and then, above all, to be in the middle of nature, because that is something that makes me feel good"*. Her origins may have influenced her choice. She worked at the University of Bologna for many years, but she's originally from Puglia. During her childhood, her father, an employee with a piece of land, *"needed help from his children in the countryside"*, she tells me, *"I thank him because I never did it with sacrifice. But in a nutshell, I saw that it helped me a lot, and I'm happy to keep it going, to keep a little bit of what he taught me, right? But just like that, don't be afraid to get your hands dirty"*. She's also been active with associations in her region and politically in the *Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana* (Italian Communist Youth Federation).

Arvaia is about exploring different relationships with food, avoiding simplistic ideas and rejecting the romanticized view of agriculture (*"the desire to return to the beautiful ancient world, which is often only beautiful and harmonious in fantasy"*). Coming from a peasant background and trained as a historian (*"I find all this rhetoric very disturbing, precisely because I find it anti-historical, silly, superficial"*), P. makes a clear statement against any idealized view of the past: *"The condition of day laborers, peasants, even sharecroppers, in almost all of Italy until the 1960s, was a condition of poverty, pain, exploitation, but a brutal one. Even within the families themselves there were relationships of violence...The patriarchy of that time...There were relationships of absolute violence"*. This is extremely important in a context where, in contemporary narratives about agriculture, the rhetoric of "returning to the land" and "Made in Italy" food runs parallel to unresolved situations of severe exploitation of workers, especially migrants (Iocco et al., 2018).

Instead, what the CSA meant to its founders was creating an alternative to industrial agriculture while preserving public land as a common good. As P. summarizes, the goal was to say, *"It is possible to grow food, to do it in the most fair and sustainable way possible, which means paying the people who do it for a living fairly, letting them work properly, and not.... All those things here. Of course, there was also the desire to do it collectively, to create a community in some way. To do organic farming, or at least experiment with a different way of farming. To preserve this*

piece of land and remove it from any idea of possible future speculation. There were all these reasons”.

In this sense, Arvaia's experience can be interpreted as a defense and collective management of green spaces as commons, which are often scarce in urban areas.²²⁸

Moreover, Arvaia's example is relevant in a context where agriculture faces challenges related to climate change and structural changes, including the concentration of the sector and the disappearance of small farms.

According to the latest census, the number of farms in Italy has decreased by 30% over the last decade to 1.13 million in 2020. Despite this decline, the average farm size has increased by 17.7% for farms over 100 hectares (Openpolis, 2023: 6).²²⁹ The average farm size in Italy is smaller than in other EU member states. However, the composition of farms has been changing dramatically. In 2020, 21.3 percent of farms had less than 1 hectare of land, 57 percent had at least 1 hectare but less than 10, 20.2 percent had at least 10 but less than 100 hectares, and 1.6 percent had over 100 hectares (Istat, 2022: 5).²³⁰

S., a founding member, emphasizes that Arvaia is not a small farm, but it faces challenges competing with industrial farms that profit from exploiting land, people, and subsidies: *“we do it because we have a budget of 300,000 euros, because there are quotas, so we have the quotas and the economic value of all the people that contribute to the fact that we can do this kind of agriculture”.*

As S., states: *“We take it for granted at this very moment, that is, in these very months that we are realizing it, that **food is a commodity and it is taken for granted to have it. It is not”.***

²²⁸ According to the Coldiretti Association, in Italy there are only 32.5 square meters per person of urban green spaces, ‘It is important to address the problem of reduced availability of green spaces in cities - says Coldiretti - by focusing on a major urban redevelopment plan of parks and gardens that will improve the quality of air and life of the population by giving a boost to the economy and employment, considering that - Coldiretti points out - the situation is worse in the metropolis, where values range from 16, 9 square meters of green per capita in Rome to 18. 5 in Milan, 25.4 in Florence, 13.5 in Naples, 9.4 in Bari, 12 square meters in Palermo, 22.1 in Bologna and 23.7 in Turin’. Available at: <https://www.coldiretti.it/ambiente-e-sviluppo-sostenibile/clima-solo-325-mq-a-testa-sos-verde-urbano>. Translation is mine.

²²⁹ Report available at: https://www.openpolis.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/report_aic5.pdf.

²³⁰ Available at: https://www.istat.it/it/files//2022/06/REPORT-CENSIAGRI_2021-def.pdf.

Drought and water scarcity are going to affect food production all over the world, and in Europe the mediterranean area is the most exposed (Openpolis, 2023: 28).²³¹ Instability of global markets due to the war in Ukraine, energy costs, and logistical bottlenecks have made the last couple of years challenging for both farmers and consumers.²³²

S. suggests that Arvaia can help citizens become more aware of the implications of food production. “*The question is, we give you a tool to recognize it, and then it's up to you to actually try to figure it out. Every time you go to a farmer's market, it's not a given that you're going to find what you're looking for, because **when you go to a supermarket, they almost always have everything. Now they are starting to not always have everything.** And that's a bad sign. Bad, let's say, **is an important signal**”.*

L., who has a historical memory of the CSA, observes: “***Now the soil is rich, it's beautiful, there are earthworms...** And it has really changed. But in the first years, when we started to rotate, to take those lands where there was alfalfa, in short, you could see the difference, you know? So we certainly improved the terrain”.*

In terms of solidarity mechanisms to transform the market, the core element of the CSA is the aforementioned “auction” that covers agricultural expenses for the coming year. The following quote from the president speaks for itself: “*I think the main mechanism, and it's also one of the things, if you will, that I think has worked best in recent years, is the famous auction of quotas. Which*

²³¹ In the Istat report (2023: 3) we can read: ‘The year 2022 has been counted as one of the hottest years ever, not only in Italy but on the entire European continent. A first part of the year with five consecutive months (from January to May) that were completely dry was followed by a summer characterized by very high temperatures that began as early as May and June, with repeated heat waves in July and August, while for the remaining months (between September and November) the absence of precipitation was interspersed with sporadic extreme episodes of a flooding nature that mainly affected some areas in the Center and South. Italian agriculture has long been engaged in coping with and countering the effects resulting from adverse climatic events, but in recent years the constant rise in temperatures, droughts and consequent water shortages are becoming, due to their persistence and diffusion, alarming phenomena, giving rise to a tropicalization of the climate that now impacts not only on agriculture, but on all productive sectors, with implications that, in the long term, could also affect public health and social behavior’. Available at: https://www.istat.it/it/files/2023/06/REPORT_ANDAMENTO_ECONOMIA_AGRICOLA_2023.pdf.

Translation is mine.

²³² In Italy, according to ISTAT (2023: 1): ‘In contrast to the rest of the economy, the value added of the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector fell by 1.8% in real terms in 2022; the volume of production (-1.5%) and employment (-2.1%) also declined’. Translation is mine.

is not an auction, but we call it that. And this is the mechanism by which the expenses that are necessary to produce the vegetables, or in any case to keep the cooperative in business, and therefore all the functions that are necessary to keep it alive, from administration to communication, are shared. It is calculated what is the per capita quota, so to speak, even if this quota can be shared or divided by associations, families, relatives, friends, roommates, whatever. So it is calculated together with the information from and the dialogue with the members. And given this number, which is the result of this work of calculation and division, which is what we call the average recommended quota, everyone can offer what they think they can support. More, if possible, or less, if the quota is not for him or her, it is not sustainable”.

This mechanism requires a delicate balance between economic sustainability, redistribution of resources and commitment to the project that has worked quite well so far: **“Of course, *this mechanism only works if there are at least a certain number of people willing to contribute more. Historically, this has often been the case, with many members offering more, though perhaps only a little more. However, there are more members who offer a higher amount than those who offer a lower amount”.***

However, there may be other elements that prevent more members with lower economic capacity from participating in the process and therefore from having access to Arvaia's products. In fact, according to the president, *“let's say that in my opinion this is sometimes the case, but we have never done a very thorough investigation, I think it would be very interesting to do that... **There are forms of self-censorship in relation to the relationship that we have all internalized with money. Even those who are critical of the market mechanism. That is, the fact that, in my opinion, some people, if not all, but in short, many, would rather give up participating in the mechanism than offer much less. If they don't think they can afford the fee. However, I repeat, this is something that should be verified by doing serious research on the reasons that make people give up. But there is a bit of that feeling. In some cases we have verified this directly, because we have talked to the interested parties. I don't know how extensive it is, but it's there”.***

It is definitely an issue that would deserve special attention, given its relevance to the expansion of Arvaia's countercultural practices, although it would require a careful approach, as it is a very sensitive issue. In fact, ***“it is difficult to socialize. Because then everyone has the right to privacy. That is, in the sense that we do not ask for a public declaration of what is offered, nor the reasons why one decides not to participate anymore or not at all. But I think it would be interesting to study that, because the mechanism works. It has worked well in the sense that, for better or worse, we have always managed to cover the budgets and no one has ever complained. In other words, it is a principle that the members are happy to accept”***.

Above all, it is a very innovative process of decommodification of food and land, which has never been done before in the Italian context: ***“You don't buy a product, you don't pay a price, and therefore whoever puts in his share, whatever it is, gets his share of vegetables. It has worked well, it is a solidarity mechanism”***.

Other forms of solidarity also exist, depending on the specific needs of members and the CSA as they arise: ***“At certain times we have activated solidarity mechanisms, for example, during Covid, when we continued to distribute by making door-to-door deliveries when it was not possible to leave the house, many members made contributions in the form of extra purchases to support the effort of working extra hours to make these deliveries, so to speak. Many members signed up as financial members or increased their share of the capital stock or made solidarity purchases. Last year, we suffered damages from the animalist attack that destroyed the tarpaulins, etc. Many members bought the solidarity tomato paste, which was a paste that we sold at a higher price, explaining that the surcharge went to cover the expenses we would have had to pay to restore the equipment. So from that point of view, the answer was always a good answer”***.

When the conversation shifts to exploring issues related to inequalities, the challenges faced by the CSA are quite similar to those faced by the Camilla Food Coop, where the complex intertwining of cultural and material aspects are at play. P. recognizes that ***“when we think, I mean, how to include and reach people who are in real poverty, economically, educationally, culturally, not much. In the***

sense that **there is a cultural barrier**. That is, **those who are really, let us say, on the margins, are unlikely to come to an initiative like this**". It would not be impossible, but as P. explains, it would require external support and a strong network: "*Unless there is mediation. That is, maybe we should or could, if we had more resources, or someone who works with other kinds of realities: social cooperatives, associations that work with people in difficulty and know how to involve them. So, yes, you could think about it*".

P. offers an insightful perspective on the issue of scalability that challenges the modernist imperative to scale, in line with the ethos of community economies: "*If you mean our scalability, no. Because we would actually like to reduce ourselves. If you mean the ability to... **how replicable is it, it's definitely replicable in any context**. It's easy in quotes. In the sense that **one of the big limitations is certainly access to land**. But if you have the useful land and you build a community of reference, **you can easily do it anywhere and adapt it to your needs**. So I don't think we are a model to be followed to the letter. We are one of the many possible experiences of supporting agriculture, of a community that eats. So there is no problem with that. As part of the Numes project, financed by Banca Etica, we have produced a kind of manual that is freely available to anyone who wants it*".

In this perspective, it appears that establishing connections is more relevant than scaling.²³³ When asked about the relationships Arvaia has, P. responds, "*there is Borgo Mondo, many others... In short, the Steiner School is our member, other associations are our members. Porto15 is our member. Then we have Brisa, a traditional for-profit company, but our member, with whom we have a special exchange on bread. The organic pasta cooperative Iris is our member. We are their partner, we gave them the grains [to make pasta]. In short, we have several relationships. I have to say more as a city reality than as a neighborhood reality*".

Examining the external support received by the project, there appears to be a troubled relationship with the local institution, specifically the Municipality of Bologna, and their understanding of value and commons. Although there has been some support due to the land being public property,

²³³ As Gibson-Graham & Dombroski put it, 'Diverse economies scholarship focuses on both the heterogeneity of economic practices and the unfixed nature of the alignments and connections between them' (2020: 9).

“The municipality, from this point of view, helped us in a certain way. It also basically wrote, deliberated for a tender that, let’s say, we could win”, says S.. But he immediately adds: “Although there has never been an initiative from the municipality where it was decided that this land would be given on loan for use or free or symbolic use. And that has always been one of the challenges that we have presented to the city government. Because basically, the very idea, even in our charter, is that we have created this thing so that the land is a common good of the community of the citizens of Bologna”.

As reported by S., another founding member, the cost of rent has been compensated in the last two years through an agreement with the cultural sector of the Municipality of Bologna. The compensation amounted to approximately 18,000 euros, which were used to propose open events as part of BolognaEstate. Arvia members have criticized the decision to involve the cultural sector instead of agriculture or the economy to find a solution. Instead, they are calling for a review of the land concession conditions that are considered unfair for the project’s purposes.

The relationship with the cooperative movement also seems to be complex. Arvaia, unlike Camilla, chose to become a member of one of the main cooperative associations, *Confcooperative*, mainly to reduce the administrative burden on the cooperative. *“Confcooperative was actually chosen because we, especially A., knew some people from Confcooperative, so it was easier. When you start a cooperative, you have to join an association for a number of administrative things anyway”,* explains S.. But it doesn’t seem to be a particularly fruitful relationship, according to S.: *“So it’s basically an ugly term, but it conveys the idea of a little bit of mafia, almost a mafia-like attitude. In the sense that they say: “We give you this, you are protected, you pay us this amount every year”. Which basically becomes a tax, because the more members you have, the more you have to pay. You pay according to the number of members. In the end, it didn’t give us any services”.*

As there is no legal framework for CSA in Italy, and as the model, similar to Camilla’s, combines paid and unpaid work, it is not fully recognized and even seems to be treated with some suspicion by cooperative associations.

Arvaia is a self-financed project that has collected capital through the subscriptions of its members. The members can be either natural persons, as working or user members, or legal entities, as financing members. This is in contrast to the Camilla cooperative, where only natural persons are eligible for membership. Arvaia has received public funding through the 2014-2022 Rural Development Program of the Emilia-Romagna Region and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).²³⁴

In any case, the challenges the CSA faces in maintaining its economic sustainability while providing all of these public, social, and environmental benefits are reflected in the fact that its operating costs are not fully covered internally. As the president explains with a hint of bitterness, “*We certainly haven't achieved the goal of having a community that supports agriculture in the full and complete sense. In other words, it's not true that the members' contributions cover all the cooperative's expenses. It's not true because, well, we have a particular situation in the sense that this concession that we have from the Municipality of Bologna, which was signed after we won a tender, is for a very large extension of land, greater than our needs. So we had to imagine... In short, part of the work we do on the land is not consumed directly by the members... We have to pay an expensive rent...*”.

This challenge has transformed into an opportunity, multiplying the connections of the CSAs and diversifying their economic transactions. In particular, “*So we have to keep the market alive. In other words, we have to continue with the Villa Bernaroli farmers' market. This is also a positive thing because it allows us to have a relationship with many people who are attracted to this area. It also allows you to keep the relationship alive with members who, for various reasons, can no longer or do not want to stay in this thing [the CSA], but they prefer to come and buy our vegetables there rather than from others. In other words, in the end, **the market turned out to be a kind of imposed limitation that we experienced at a certain stage as a kind of failure in an activity that is actually worthwhile for various reasons***”.

The sale of processed products is an interesting form of negotiating interdependencies for the benefit of all involved parties. Arvaia has a unique non-monetary exchange with the

²³⁴ Information on public funding received is available on Arvaia's website: <https://www.arvaia.it/contributi-pubblici-allagricoltura/>.

aforementioned Brisa bakery. According to S., *“this exchange that we have with vegetables, in my opinion, is ultimately convenient for us. We, a good part of their work for the bread, because we give them the flour, we exchange it for the work to make the vegetables. It's work for work”*.

In any case, the members cover more than half of the costs, says P.. *“It is absolutely prevalent. In the sense that it certainly covers at least 60% of the budget. Then there are some processed products, which are flour, things like that. Yes, but the percentage is certainly higher, higher than 50% on average. Which is a lot”*.

Arvaia has a self-governance and internal democracy structure similar to Camilla's. The organization has different levels of involvement, including a core group of highly committed members, occasional participants, and those who are not involved at all. Reflecting on the decision-making processes, S. shares his radical ideas about democracy and points out its challenges: *“The most important thing, in my opinion, is that we have built a board that in reality expands in the coordination group. But the people who want to participate have to participate continuously. Where many decisions are actually discussed, certain things are put on the table and then operationally sent back to the working groups. But strategic issues are discussed there. It's not perfect, it's not even that well structured and transparent, it could be improved a lot”*.

Similar to Camilla's case, there appears to be an unbalanced burden of responsibility on a few individuals. *“Again, the real problem is that those who have been involved in coordination for some time are always the same people. Not many others come in. And this is really a problem of democratic participation. Because in the end, if the group is always a little bit the same, it tends to be a little bit self-referential”*.²³⁵

²³⁵ At the Annual General Meeting on June 25, 2022, the Board of Directors proposed to abolish the limit on individual mandates. Previously, the term was set at three years with a maximum of two consecutive terms. Today, it appears that this choice no longer holds significant meaning. According to members, the issue of power does not arise because the Assembly remains the sovereign body and there is no accumulation of power, only responsibility. The Assembly unanimously approved the change in the Regulation after a short debate in which the thoughts converged (personal notes).

At the same time, S. emphasizes the social value of creating a horizontal work environment where members have full control of their duties and responsibilities. This is quite exceptional. Arvaia's beauty lies in the fact that workers come together and decide their rules and responsibilities collectively.

In this context, W. offers his perspective on the multifaceted elements that make up the concept of work, sharing his decisions, motivations, emotional aspects, and challenges. After about two years as a user member of the CSA, W. makes a radical decision based on a combination of two main reasons, as he explains. *“Well, there were basically two reasons. The first was an interest in how the cooperative was formed and how the work was organized. In the sense that I first got to know the cooperative as a user member. So I had time to get to know it, to know how it worked. I was doing a completely different job, **I was working in a big retail store, and I wasn't at all happy with what I was doing.** In fact, that job lasted ten years and maybe nine and a half years too long. So when I heard that they were looking for someone for the summer, **I actually applied because I was convinced that it would be a positive change in my life,** even if it was risky because I didn't really know if I could stay there. I had a permanent contract, so...”*

He took the risk because he was fascinated by the organization of work in the CSA and dissatisfied with his previous job. After more than two years, his analysis is positive: *“I thought I might like it, and I absolutely do. I'm happy”*.

However, challenges and friction are inevitable. The main issue here appears to be achieving a balance between work and personal life, coupled with economic concerns. This is similar to the situation faced by the food coop. *“**It is precisely the workload that exists independently as the basis for being able to produce these quantities of food. And unfortunately there is no financial sustainability to be able to be paid for all the hours you work.** Which is actually another aspect. It doesn't depend on the balance between free time and working time, that's another thing. But there's that too, just like that”*, W. explains.

Unfortunately, the CSA is not able to pay all the hours provided by the workers: *“**Unpaid hours are about 40% of what we do.** So we don't work, let's say, half the hours for free, but a little less.*

About 60% of it is paid. In terms of working days, which is easier, we get paid 15 days a month, okay? The days should be 7 hours, so 15 7-hour days. We work, certainly in the winter twenty, so from Monday to Friday. We do not work Saturday and Sunday in the winter. But that is from the beginning of November to March, okay? From March to the end of October we also start working on Saturdays and Sundays, and then later on we open and close the tunnels because it's still cold at night and we have to keep them covered. We have to open them during the day because it's too hot, and then there's the watering. Because you still have to go personally to open the emanation, we don't have a timer, nothing. So just from these twenty days that we do, which is already five more than the paid days, it's practically that you either don't work on Saturdays or you don't work on Sundays during the week. So you always work six days a week, so you work at least 24 to 25 days a month. So it's ten days more, not counting the hours, because we really don't count the hours, so we never work 7 hours. We work more”.

Regarding personal economic sustainability, W. does not face any issues as he leads a simple life with minimal expenses. He does not own a car or pay rent. He states, “*it's not like I'm making a lot of sacrifices because I don't earn enough and the expenses are too high. But it depends on your expenses. Personally, I don't have many, so the money I get is not a problem, it's not too little*”. The main problem from his point of view is this: “*I have too little free time*”.

The issue of self-exploitation and overwork in CSAs has been identified in the literature as a potential threat to their sustainability (Galt, 2013). We reflect together on the possible reasons for this excessive workload. According to W., “*it doesn't really depend on the organization. In the sense that, unfortunately, we cannot afford to be more than we are from the point of view of paid workers. And the work that we're doing is what's needed, it's not that we're doing more work than we have to*”.

As a worker in Arvaia, W. has indeed seen improvements, at least in organizational terms: “*Apart from the fact that I obviously participate more actively, we have improved a lot in this area in the last two years. This means that there is much less downtime or wasted time where you might forget*

something. Of course that happens. The fact that we are in such a big space, that we have all the equipment in one place, also means that you have to move around to get something”.

Working in this context seems quite challenging and tiring. So the question is: what makes it worthwhile to work in a context where so many needs, commitments, expectations have to be constantly met, negotiated and rearranged?

W.’s thoughts are clear: *“So I have done many jobs. In many different fields. I can tell you that this job, that is, the only similarity it had with other jobs I have done, that is, the only similar experience I have had, was when I worked as a gardener with the father of a friend of mine, so anyway a person I knew, who was alone. It was just him and me. Then I worked almost always in commerce, so **it was a completely different world.** So in the sense that **I never saw meritocracy. I never saw the possibility of expressing your ideas. I never saw the possibility of being listened to, not even to express my own ideas, not even to disagree with somebody, because those are the hierarchies”.***

W. observes that finding a context similar to Arvaia’s is very difficult. Based on his experience, particularly in the context of large retailers, he acknowledges, *“I cannot deny the fact that this kind of pyramid and hierarchy can be functional in this context. But **where the context is just to make profit, nothing else. So that’s a big difference”.** In Arvaia, *“it’s very different because we all do everything. We all get the same money. We all have the same responsibility. That is also very important. It wasn’t like that before, but a lot of times you were expected to do things...”**

Of course, every organization presents difficulties that are inherent to dealing with other human beings in complex societies: *“I don’t think it’s the problem of the pyramidal organization, horizontal or otherwise. It is a problem that when a person is not doing things alone and is forced to relate to others, he can disagree, he can pretend not to hear certain things, he can forget certain things, he can be wrong and so on. So the more yes, the more people there are, the easier it is for this to happen”.*

But in a nutshell, what makes Arvaia different, says W.: *“It could be summed up in this: that in such an environment, **the needs of the individual worker still have some weight.** In a different kind*

of environment, or at least in the ones I have been in, it is zero". This means taking into account the emotional and psychological elements that are essential to human well-being and are often overlooked. In a for-profit environment, W. says, "It's the classic argument that you're the number that has to produce, or manufacture, or sell, or clean, or whatever it is, and that's it, that's what you have to do, that's the end of it. Then you have to do it better, as soon as possible, without creating too many problems. But you have to do it right there. It's not that your personal condition is so important or... Yes, the person becomes less important, that's it. It's clear that it's not in the foreground here either, because we certainly come here to work, it's not like we come here to have meetings to understand each other, to understand our psyche, but it's important, it's important. But that is definitely a point in favor of this place".

Regarding the personal and individual aspects of change and transformation experienced by members, W. reflects on small but significant changes in daily habits, as well as the possibility of finding a common space with people who share similar values and ideas. *"So when we talk about lifestyle, let's say that my lifestyle was more or less the same before. It is clear that I got closer to realities similar to the one where I work. I met people, **I discovered that fortunately I wasn't the only one who had certain thoughts.** And the discussion with people certainly led me to make some **decisions in my daily life.** About what I do on a daily basis. The fact that I still travel by train is the first one. **The comfort of the car would be greater, but it doesn't make sense.** It's not that they convinced me here not to pollute with my car, but **it's something that came naturally, seeing also the others who work here as an example.** As for the food we produce, of course I have eaten vegetables here. I still don't shop at the supermarket at all".*

Being part of this project, not only as a member but also as a worker, has influenced W.'s priorities and mindset, while giving him the opportunity to learn many things along the way: *"The fundamental thing, if we talk about Arvaia from a personal point of view, is precisely the fact of **interacting every day with people who have a certain mentality and also a certain intelligence,** I must say. And **that made me learn a lot of things,** also from a practical point of view. You could say to me, "Okay, what does that have to do with lifestyle?" Actually, just the fact of being able to do something at home alone, because S. my colleague, showed me how to assemble this,*

*how to assemble that, how to use this tool, how to use the hose, how to do this, how to change a tube, and so on. In fact, they are very useful in everyday life. Really, really. **The practical things I learned outside of farming have helped me almost more than the things I learned on the farm***".

The experience was significant both in terms of personal relationships and political views. In fact, W. has explored a variety of economic practices previously unknown to him: "***In two years I have been enriched in many ways. A lot of political things I didn't know, a lot of things about alternatives that exist, not only for the production of food, but, to name one, MAG6, which is a company, a social cooperative like us, but it deals with finance, or, I don't know, the insurance company that does social work and therefore guarantees a certain type of service [Lo Scoiattolo]. So many different, alternative realities that have given me awareness and also a little more self-esteem to know that, that is, if I don't see the world as it sucks and goes, because everyone thinks that way, it's not true. Well, it's not true. That might be the most important thing. That I'm not so abnormal to have certain thoughts in the dissimilarity I thought I'd landed in. Both about relationships and about work. I mean, for me, work is absolutely not fundamental in a person's life. That is, I am convinced that if there was a possibility, if the system were different, people could easily do what they really want***".

L. provides a unique perspective as a user and volunteer of CSAs. She reports that her involvement has improved her quality of life and nutrition, and has also allowed her to share these values with her family.²³⁶ "*So, in short, the origins certainly had an influence, and I hope that the daughters and also the husband, in short, little by little, they also understood the importance of certain things. Definitely for nutrition. I'm happy because now they understand the value of these vegetables that they eat*". Diversity here emerges in another sense: "*there's such a variety of produce. I discovered things that I didn't know about. I discovered Jerusalem artichoke, I discovered kale, I discovered chicory, rainbow chard*", L. recounts.

²³⁶ Interestingly, L. makes a suggestion about studying the effects of Arvaia on members' health, similar to L.S.'s proposal for Camilla: "*Actually, I always thought it would be nice to follow the children of members who have grown up with these things, even from a health standpoint, to see how it might affect them. That's always been something that has intrigued me*".

On the part of Arvaia's president, the CSA has allowed her to shift her perspective on social change in a way that she describes as somewhat “paradoxical”:

*“Well, apart from the fact that I completely changed my life, work, house, etc., but that's okay. But here, the biggest change, if I have to put it that way, and what really challenged me, made me learn... It really **made me see first hand how complicated it is to do certain things**. Things that we **really have no idea how much effort, creativity, inventiveness they require**. And it really changed me from that point of view, in the sense that maybe, if you want, **it's a bit of a paradoxical result**, I don't know. But **I'm much less ideological than I was ten years ago**, much less attached to... That is, not to say that I have abandoned values and things, but having measured a whole series of very material things, I see that today I am much less fond of my declarations of principle, I see myself much less with them. In short, I see them as, yes, important things, but then... **I am much more sensitive to small concrete changes that can occur in people's lives and much less sensitive to declarations of principle**, I must say”.*

S. recalls that Arvaia allowed him to leave the world of multinationals and do what was in line with his principles: *“It gave me a lot, because while I was working for multinationals, my ideas remained the same. This can be an advantage or a disadvantage. Often a disadvantage. That's something I finally said to myself when I left my last job. I said: “I mean, why look for another job in the same field instead of trying to do what I always wanted to do?” Which is to be involved in the food supply chain discussions. And so **it makes a lot of sense to me personally**”.* So he concludes, *“All in all, this is something that I still enjoy. **It even rewards me in a way. In the sense that I understand that I am doing things that are important anyway. And that makes me feel good**”.*

The subject of Covid-19 came up only superficially during the interviews. Arvaia continued to operate during the pandemic, although it was difficult. Solidarity actions were carried out. An important aspect that S. recalls is the fact that the pandemic forced an increased use of digital technologies, which in a way had some advantages. *“Then this online thing here, yes it took some things away from us, but in other ways I think **it ended up being an advantage**. Because **before we weren't very used to doing things online**. But always seeing each other in person can be*

difficult sometimes. Seeing each other online, I mean, sometimes we were great. Online we had two 1.5 hour meetings where we made some amazing decisions”.

Section Three: Il Passo della Barca: urban regeneration through care

Community enterprises build wealth by centering work as "endeavor," in the sense that work is a transformative activity of the person (who finds meaning in it) and of the society (the places) in which he or she lives. In an era when wealth is created through the accumulation of goods and the acceleration of exchange, community enterprises represent a model in which value is instead created through *the intensity of slowness*.

(Farina, Teneggi, Venturi, Zandonai, 2017: 30)

“We were not simply talking to ourselves. Our goal was to trigger an economic and legal mechanism”.

(M., founding member of Il Passo della Barca)

Il Passo della Barca is an urban community cooperative founded in Bologna on March 20, 2021, in the midst of the global pandemic, by a group of neighbors living in the Barca district. This grassroots organization aims to “*transform a dormitory neighborhood into a social space*” (as one founding member simply puts it),²³⁷ building on the social capital and cooperative tradition of the local context. Before delving deeper, it is important to note that this type of community initiative may seem to emerge suddenly, but in reality it has deeper roots than one might initially assume.

The community cooperative is a unique type of cooperative that has recently emerged in Italy. It represents a diverse form of enterprising that transforms the relationship between the community and the economy (Venturi & Baldazzini, 2023: 2-3). It does so by resignifying ‘the value of place, where “place” specifically means the set of physical and virtual spaces in which social, economic, and technological relations produce shared meanings’ (Venturi & Baldazzini, 2023: 3).

According to *Confcooperative* researcher and community planner Teneggi (2021: 41), ‘community cooperatives emerge mainly in contexts of social or economic deprivation. These are, in the most

²³⁷ Phone conversation with founding member M. on April 30, 2022.

typical cases, rural or mountain areas where the inhabitants have less access to services and employment opportunities, or urban or peri-urban areas where there are higher rates of social and institutional impoverishment. In order to understand the factors that contribute to the emergence of these experiences, we need to look at the original contexts of some cases considered illustrative: the village of Succiso, on the ridge of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, and the Sanità district in Naples.’

While community cooperatives have existed for over thirty years,²³⁸ there were few examples in the territory prior to 2010. However, in the last decade, the phenomenon has consolidated and recently gained significant momentum. According to the largest mapping on the subject (Venturi & Miccolis, 2021: 4), out of the 188 cooperatives documented in 2021, 57% were founded between 2018 and 2020.

As with any emerging social phenomenon, it is difficult to determine the exact origin and scope of community cooperatives due to unclear boundaries with other types of social economy organizations, such as social cooperatives. Furthermore, the lack of national legislation and consistent literature further complicates the matter. However, community cooperatives have great potential as strategies for local development and reactivation of citizen participation, according to many authors (Venturi & Baldazzini, 2023; Bianchi, 2021). Additionally, Bianchi (2022: 60) notes that this phenomenon is not so new anymore. Community cooperatives are receiving attention from institutions, as demonstrated by a growing number of regions adopting specific laws to

²³⁸ As far as I know, the oldest example that can be traced back to a community cooperative is the *Teatro Povero* (literally Poor Theatre) in Monticchiello (Tuscany), founded in 1980. On its website we can read: ‘The Teatro Povero di Monticchiello is a social and cultural project born in the 1960s. At the beginning of that decade, the Tuscan village was going through a deep crisis due to the rapid disappearance of the economic and social system that had characterized its existence for centuries: sharecropping. Work, culture and traditions quickly disappeared and the population was halved. Those who remained, by choice or necessity, began to reflect on the meaning of the rapid changes that were overwhelming their world and their identity. In a village without a theater, they decided to unite around the idea of a theater in the square: a form of performance that would soon become an attempt at a collective and ideal reconstruction of the meaning of their lives. A form of resistance to the crisis. [...] The form of organization chosen by the Teatro Povero, once it had reached a relative maturity, was that of a cooperative: in 1980 the Cooperativa del Teatro Povero di Monticchiello was founded, which would gradually and increasingly take over the management of social and welfare activities for the community of Monticchiello’. Available at: <https://teatropovero.it/storia/>. Translation is mine.

recognize them.²³⁹ This is evidenced by the recent report financed by the Ministry of Economic Development, ‘Feasibility study for the development of community cooperatives’ (Irecoop ER, 2016).

The report provides an inductive definition of the phenomenon as follows: ‘We are faced with a community cooperative when there is an area in a vulnerable state and a specific need that can also generate an entrepreneurial opportunity, expressed by a real community (not a virtual community); an economic activity is developed aimed at the pursuit of community development and the maximization of collective welfare (not only that of the members) and not that of profit maximization’ (Irecoop ER, 2016: 8).

The emphasis was first placed on the realities developed in the so-called inner areas, where most of the experiences effectively began to operate, as a possible way to contrast depopulation, reduction of services and employment. It was found that 63% of these experiences operate in inner areas (Venturi & Miccolis, 2021: 6). More recently, community cooperatives have also emerged in urban or peri-urban contexts.

Since there's no single model, there are a variety of legal forms (from work cooperatives to social cooperatives to agricultural cooperatives). According to Teneggi (2021: 43-44), there are five types of community cooperatives: *village community cooperatives*, *cultural community cooperatives*, *work community cooperatives*, *urban community cooperatives*, and *municipal community cooperatives*. Il Passo della Barca is one of the few examples of urban community cooperatives.²⁴⁰

The project was initiated by a group of families who reside on the same side of the Barca neighborhood and know each other through their children's schooling in Cesana. In 2020, they began discussing how to transform their inclination towards active citizenship into a new initiative that could create value within the neighborhood. The conversation is ongoing and has gained

²³⁹ The Emilia-Romagna region has recognized community cooperatives with Regional Law 12/2022. Available at: <https://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblealegislativa:legge:2022:12>. Currently, 14 regions have regulated this cooperative type, while two others have presented a law proposal.

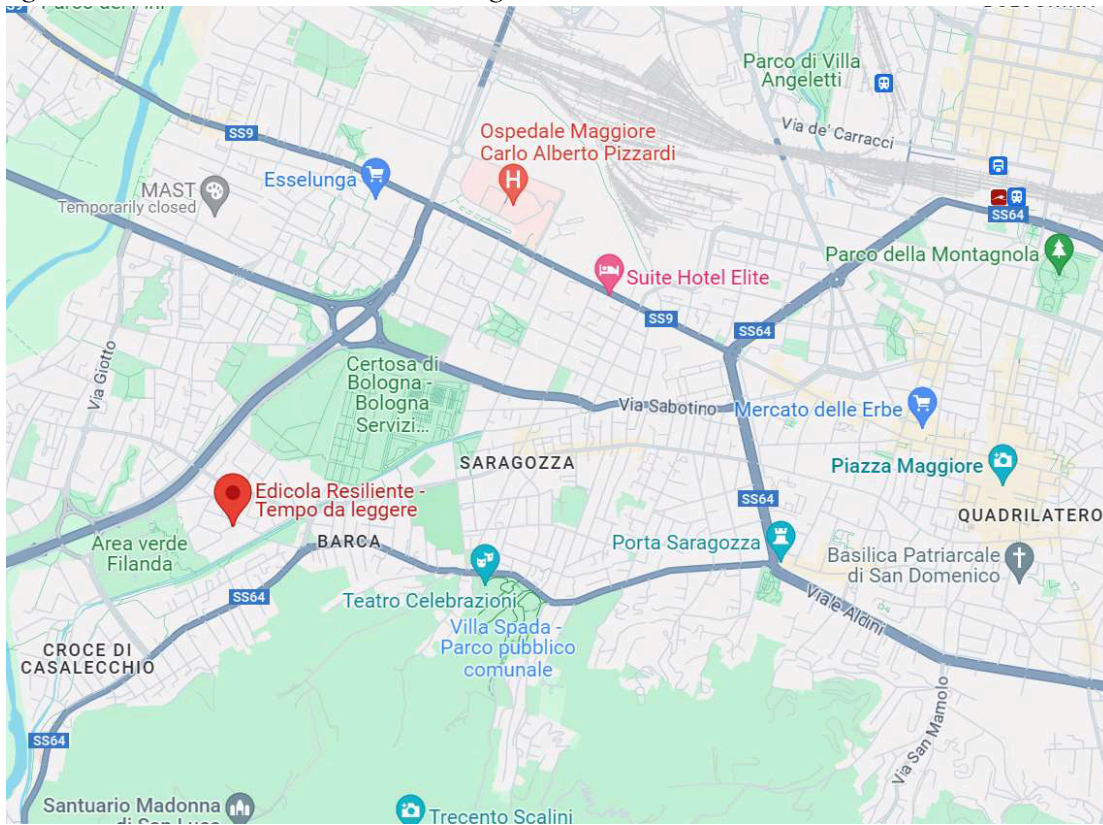
²⁴⁰ Teneggi (2021: 43) reports that ‘in Parma, [...] in 2004, we have the first case of an urban community cooperative that emerged from the activities of the Gruppo Scuola association’.

resonance. The initial informal group comprised 10 individuals. As of March 2021, the cooperative was officially established with 79 members, and by April 2023, the membership had increased to 112.

The project was triggered by a specific physical location, namely the historic newsstand located in Piazza Bernardi (see Figure 31). Or, more specifically, an event related to it: the imminent closure of the neighborhood's newsstand due to the retirement of the long-time and well-known newsagent, Pina. “*We wanted to start with an ambitious project*”, says M., one of the promoting members, who informed me that the neighborhood's closing newsstand was seen as a sort of hub for the local community. “*We decided to seek funding to take over the business and determine the appropriate legal structure*”. In December 2021, the cooperative purchased the kiosk thanks to a crowdfunding campaign and reopened it in February 2022 under the name *Edicola Resiliente* (‘Resilient Newsstand’).²⁴¹ The newsstand is a cooperative asset that has been managed independently by a resident which is also a member for 6 months.

²⁴¹ The crowdfunding campaign for ‘Finalmente l’Edicola Resiliente’ reached €13,100 with the support of 113 backers. More information is available at <https://www.produzionidalbasso.com/project/finalmente-l-edicola-resiliente/>.

Figure 31. Edicola Resiliente in the Barca neighborhood



Source: Google maps, Il Passo della Barca Facebook page

The reopening of the newsstand, although not without challenges, is just the starting point. It represents a physical space, but more importantly, a symbolic one that aims to reconnect people living in the neighborhood. The cooperative's primary objective is to provide services to

individuals, families, and children in the area based on their emerging needs. This will help foster a sense of community and promote local engagement.

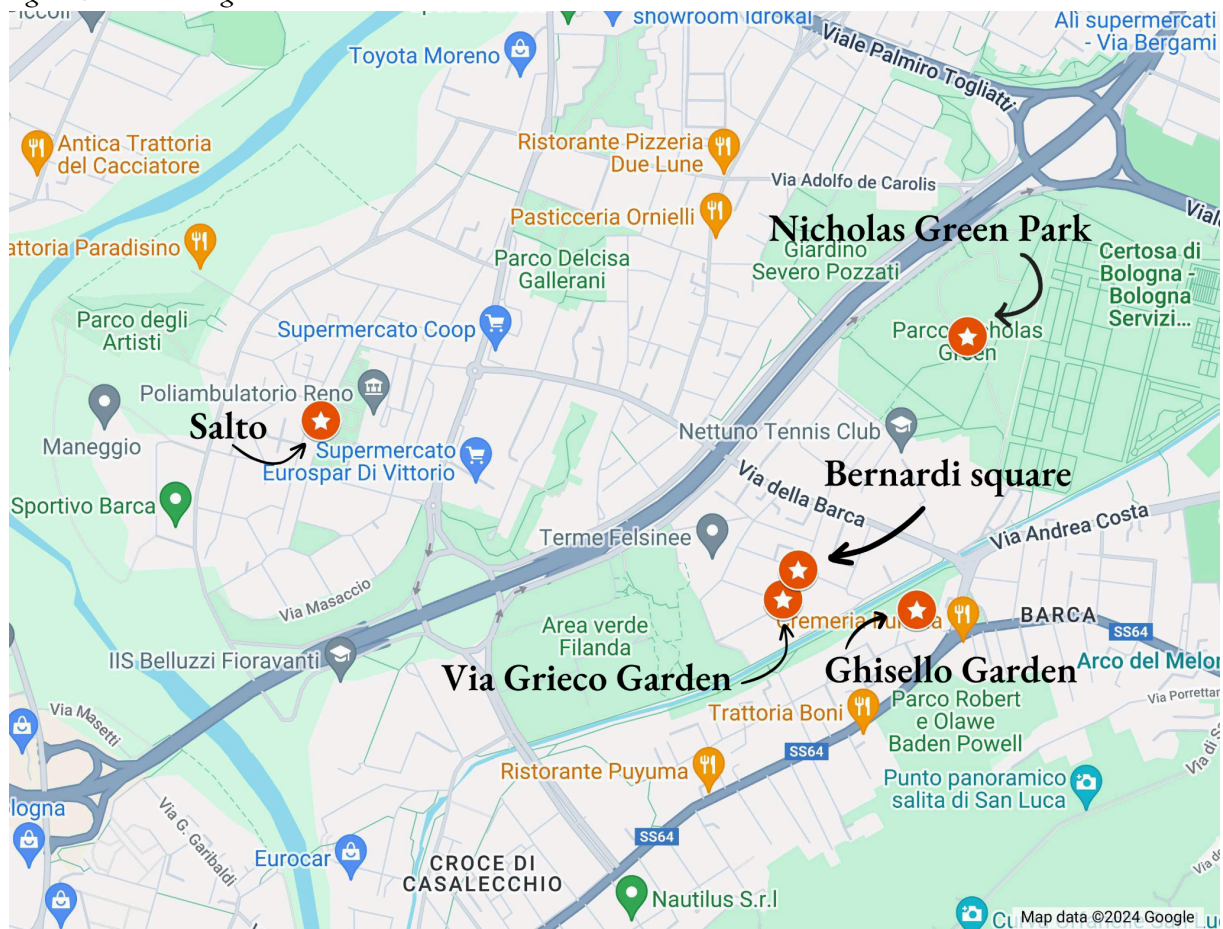
Il Passo della Barca is a type A social cooperative and is affiliated with *Legacoop*, the largest and oldest cooperative federation in Italy.²⁴² During its first two years of operation, the cooperative focused on developing and consolidating three assets: acquiring and relaunching the newsstand as a hub of services, promoting the regeneration of public spaces such as parks and squares in the neighborhood, and offering services that aim to improve the quality of life and general well-being of the local community. These services include workshops with cultural, artistic, and environmental themes, as well as leisure activities.²⁴³ So far, the places that the cooperative has invested in, both as physical spaces and as a set of relationships, are Piazza Bernardi (where the kiosk is located), the Ghisello Garden, the Nicholas Green Park, the garden in Via Greco, and finally the "Salto" space at *Treno della Barca* (Figure 32).

²⁴² According to Italian Law 381/1991, social cooperatives are classified into two main categories: type A and type B. 'Social cooperatives have the aim of pursuing the general interest of the community in the human promotion and social integration of citizens through: a) the management of social, health and educational services; b) the carrying out of various activities - agricultural, industrial, commercial or service - aimed at the employment of disadvantaged people'. Available at:

https://www.lavoro.gov.it/documenti-e-norme/normative/Documents/anniPrecedenti/19911108_L_381.pdf

²⁴³ Social report 2021 and 2022.

Figure 32: Urban regeneration sites in the Barca Area



Source: Google maps

During the summer, the cooperative participates in BolognaEstate, a summer festival promoted annually by the Municipality of Bologna. For three consecutive years, Il Passo della Barca and its members have transformed the Ghisello Garden, a green area in the Barca district, into an ‘urban beach’ (see Figure 33). The goal is to make the hot summer more bearable for the neighborhood’s residents. The organizers aim to create a beach atmosphere to attract people and foster connections while providing opportunities for quality time. The event will span two to three weeks and include cultural events, concerts, debates, and workshops for adults and children. Food, drinks, and beach chairs will also be available.

Figure 33. Lido del Ghisello during the summer event 'Cultura da Spiaggia' in June 2022



Source: own pictures

Currently, the cooperative does not employ any staff, but instead hires out some of its members as professionals for its events. However, the ultimate objective is to establish a community economy that generates employment opportunities and benefits the local area. President Antonio Cardelli explains, *“The choice to set up as a business and not as an association lies in the fact that we also want to be able to produce work, to generate value within the neighborhood, to reinvest everything in the neighborhood itself, taking advantage of the different skills of the members. We think that this is a very interesting part of the city because it is central to certain landmarks and services (hills, parks, hospitals, stadium, etc.), so it is also perfect for tourism that needs proximity. These are all ideas that*

we have presented to Legacoop, Banca Etica, the District and the City Council, with which we hope to revitalize the economic fabric of our neighborhood”.²⁴⁴

The cooperative relies heavily on volunteer members to carry out its activities. As a relatively new organization, it is still developing and seems to be flexible. Like the other case studies, the cooperative has different levels of member participation, but it also has its own unique characteristics. Members are encouraged to participate through what the organization refers to as responsible self-management. The Cooperative's Board of Directors has issued a directive to establish a Planning and Implementation Team (TPA) responsible for implementing the cooperative community's participation process. Through a series of thematic forums, the cooperative has identified its main areas of interest as: neighborhood and community services; cultural offerings and workshop animation; tourism, hospitality, and leisure; and public space and urban renewal. In 2022, a call was made for individuals interested in collaborating on planning and implementing initiatives and events to join an ‘operational group’. Participation is encouraged based on availability, affinity, interest, and competence. The group consists of members of the Board of Directors and approximately 25 other members who wish to take on a more active role in the cooperative. The Board of Directors provides an overall and strategic vision and framework for the operational group to freely imagine and implement individual activities. As of February 2023, there are 10 subgroups responsible for carrying out specific projects or activities.

3.1: Discussing the social value of the Il Passo della Barca community cooperative

“It makes me feel like a citizen of my city in an active and positive way, to the point of feeling like a protagonist of a much-needed social change. I believe that acting in a group to make the city a better place to live and to strengthen relationships is fundamental to being an actor in one's own social life”.

(member of Il Passo della Barca)

“You don't wait for the mayor and the administration, you roll up your sleeves and create a community”.

²⁴⁴ Interview published in the online magazine Zero on April 15, 2021. Available at <https://zero.eu/it/persona/alla-barca-nasce-unedicola-di-comunita/>.

(M., founding member of Il Passo della Barca)

As previously mentioned, the Theory of Change analysis with *Il Passo della Barca* could not be completed due to time and energy constraints. Members already dedicate their free time to the cooperative, many of whom have families and children to care for. Additionally, the cooperative has already invested in other forms of training during the previous months.

The *Il Passo della Barca* cooperative was evaluated through four semi-structured interviews with different members and a questionnaire distributed to members. The questionnaire was based on Camilla's action research and feedback was obtained from selected participants to increase its relevance for Il Passo della Barca members and explore other possibilities for participatory evaluation processes. The survey consists of three sections. The first section analyzes the dynamics between members and the cooperative; the second section examines the importance of Il Passo della Barca to the community and the surrounding area; and the third section collects socio-demographic information.

3.1.1: Reading the co-constructed survey data

Sixty-five members completed the survey *and* gave permission for the results to be used for the purposes of this research (four members refused to participate and are not included in this analysis), representing 58% of the membership at the time of the survey.²⁴⁵ In contrast to other case studies, and due to the organization's young age and expansion phase, it is possible to estimate the number of active members in approximately one quarter of the social base. However, the other members demonstrate a significant interest in the cooperative's activities. This is evident from their high participation in this survey, but also in the General Assemblies and events organized by the cooperative. At the time of the survey, *Il Passo della Barca* had 112 members.

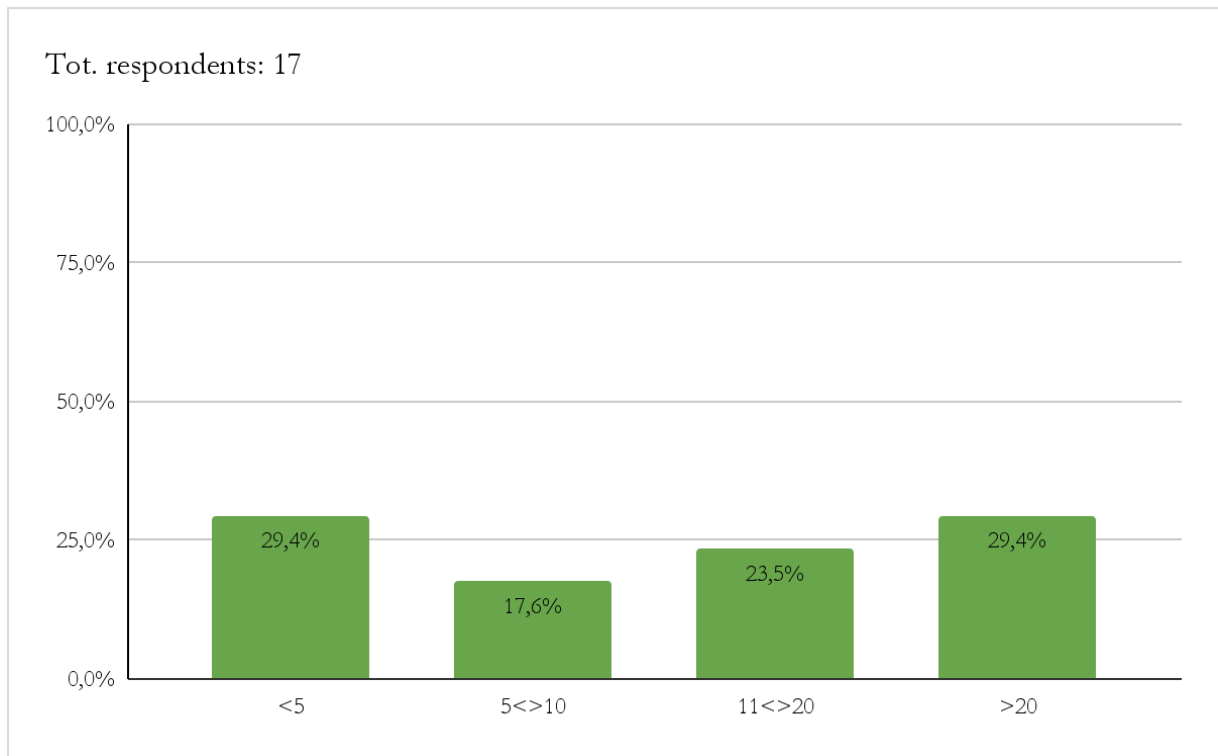
²⁴⁵ Regrettably, the first section of the survey was only completed by 28 respondents due to an unidentified issue with the Google form. However, all 65 respondents completed the second and third sections. Consequently, there is a discrepancy in the totals and relative answer percentages.

This section describes the interaction between the Cooperative and its members in terms of involvement and benefits. Participation in the Community Cooperative requires a reconsideration of the relationship with the surrounding environment. This involves paying attention to what the neighborhood already has to offer, recognizing its value, and sharing it with other people who may gradually become less alien. Members identify needs related to the quality of life and the quality of the area in which they live. They self-organize to identify possible responses and develop corresponding services.

More than 71% of the participants learned about *Il Passo della Barca* through word of mouth, while 14.3% are founding members. According to the data, other means of communication, such as the Internet and public events, were not significant (7.1%). Possibly even more than in the previous case studies, real social networks are crucial for a project like this, which is by definition place-based. The cooperative aims to involve and promote the well-being of Barca's neighbors. Direct contact remains essential and more effective. Public events or online promotion may have played a minor role due to the newness of the project.

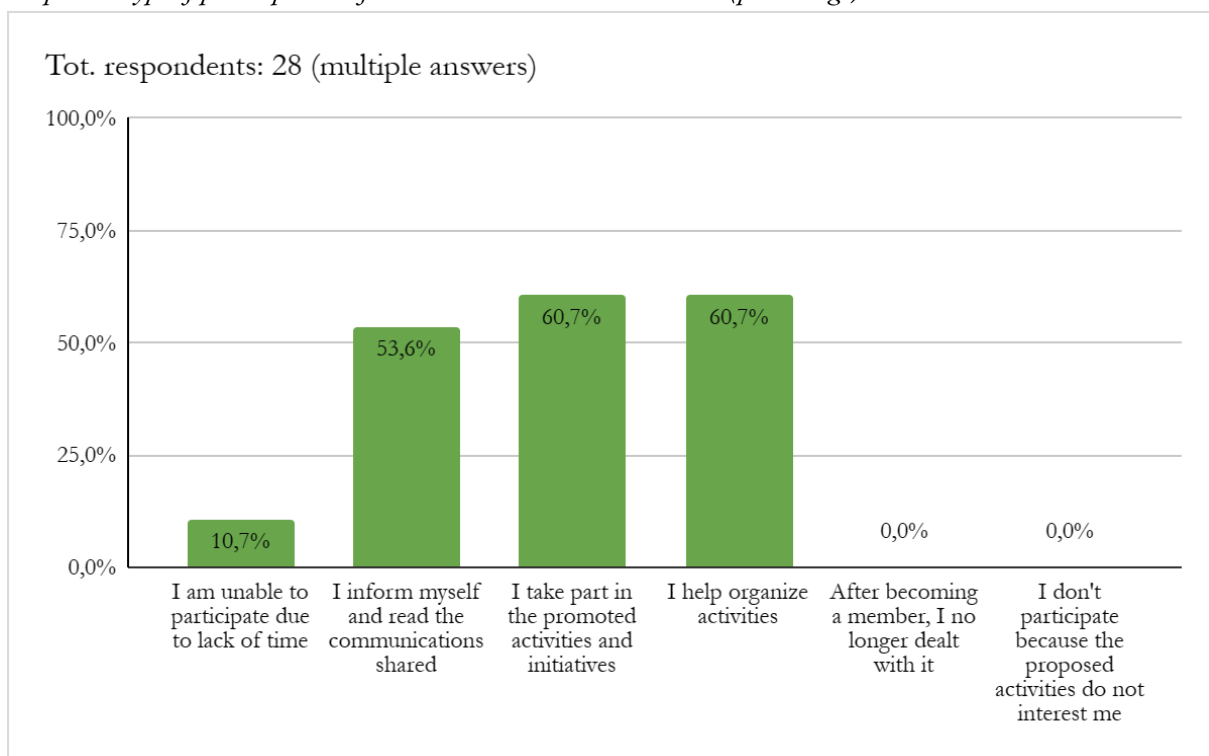
Survey respondents are engaged members, with 71.4% active in at least one workgroup (including 57.1% in more than one), only 3.6% not active, and 25% wanting to participate in a workgroup but lacking the time to do so. In contrast to the other case study, although unfortunately, the sample is extremely small due to the mentioned error in the survey administration, it seems that the level of commitment comprehensively varies but is more evenly distributed. Indeed, 29.4% of respondents declare to volunteer less than 5 hours a month and more than 20 hours per month. 17.6% between 5 and 10 hours and 23.5% between 11 and 20.

Graph 26. Average volunteer hours per month as a percentage



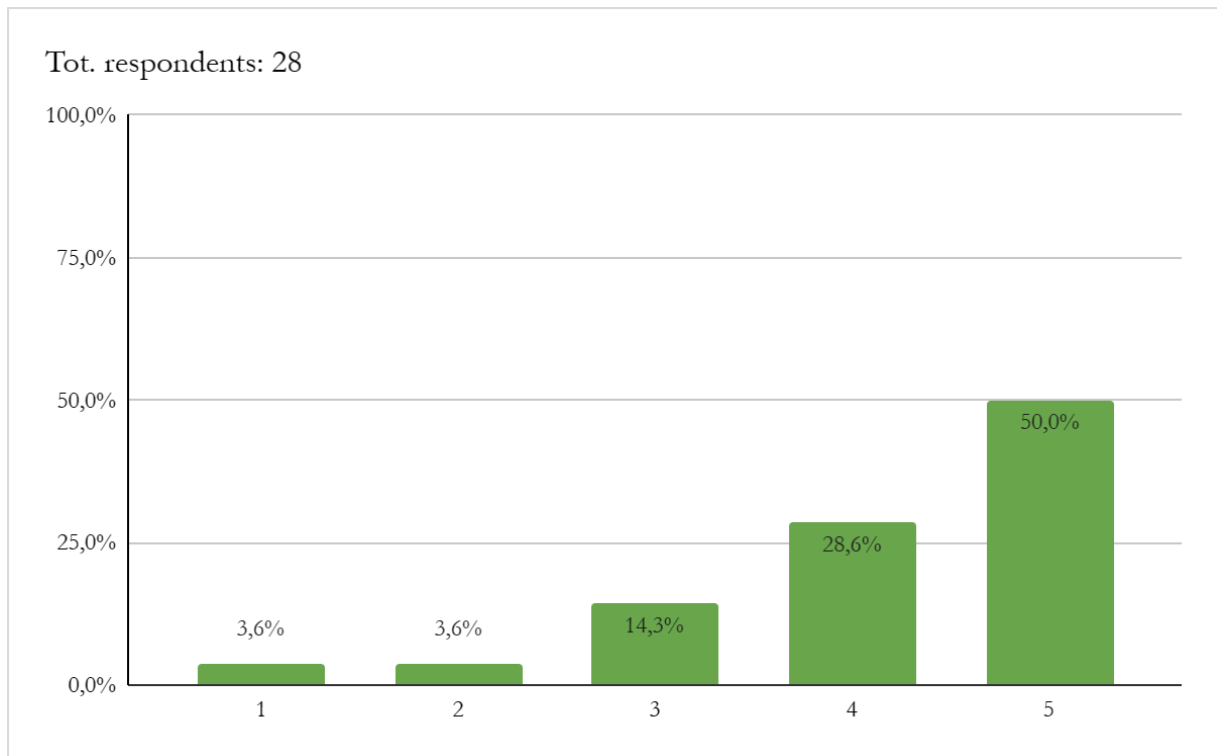
This is confirmed by the way in which members participate in the community cooperative: the majority say that they both participate in the activities offered by the cooperative and actively contribute to their organization (60.7%), while 53.6% stay informed about what is going on in the community and 10.7% are unable to participate due to lack of time. Notably, no one reported a lack of interest (Graph 27).

Graph 27. Type of participation of members in Il Passo della Barca (percentage)



In terms of the organization's ability to meet the needs of its members, 78.6% of respondents rated the proposed cooperative activities as very high, 14.3% as fairly high, and only 3.6% as low (Graph 28) on a scale of 1 to 5. Additionally, 71.4% of respondents consider the level of internal communication to be sufficient, while 25% do not and 3.6% are dissatisfied.

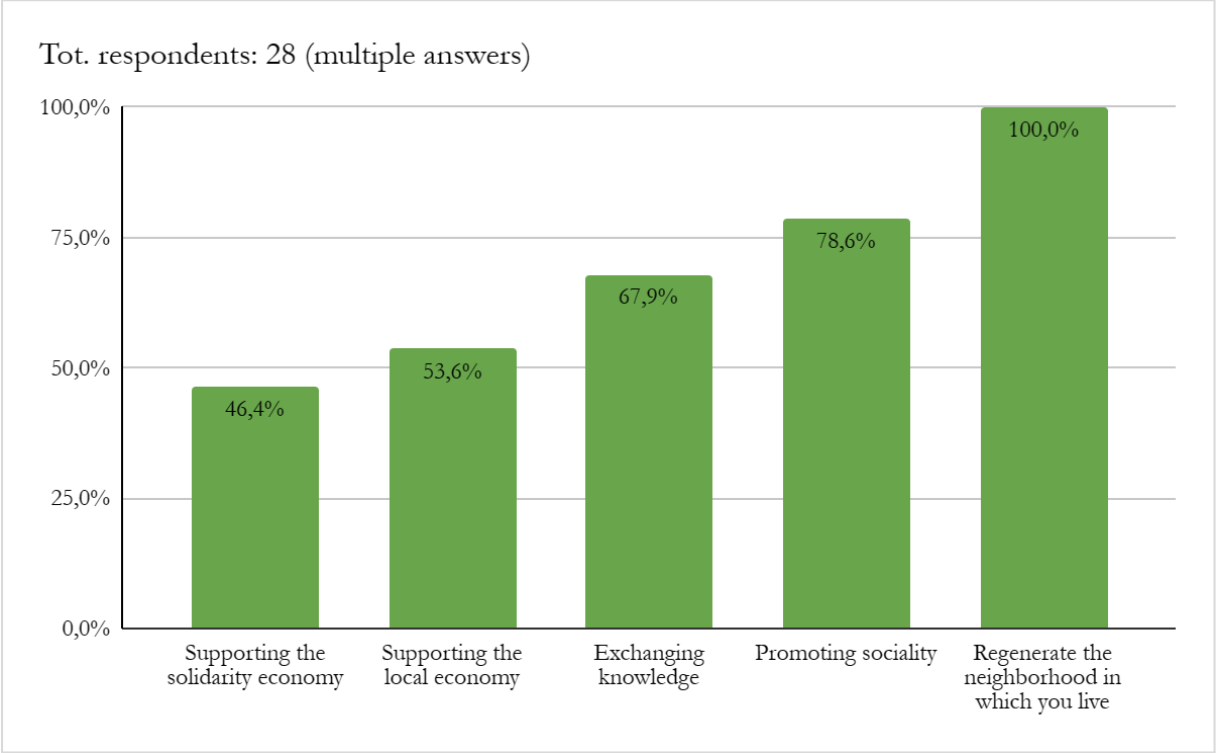
Graph 28. Members' perception of how their needs/interests are met by the cooperative (1 to 5)



Regarding the benefits and outcomes that members derive from participating in the cooperative, 78.6% of respondents indicated that their participation in Il Passo della Barca has allowed them to create new meaningful relationships. Only 14.3% of participants expressed negative feedback, and 7.1% expressed doubts. These results indicate that the initiative, despite its limited experience, can already mobilize social capital at the local level.

When asked about the benefits (as shown in Graph 29), all respondents agreed that the neighborhood would be regenerated (100%). Additionally, 78.6% of respondents indicated that social interaction would be promoted, followed by the exchange of knowledge (67.9%). The members' perceptions align with the characteristics of the case study, emphasizing communitarian dimensions more strongly than political aspects.

Graph 29. Benefits of membership in Il Passo della Barca community cooperative as perceived by members (percentage)

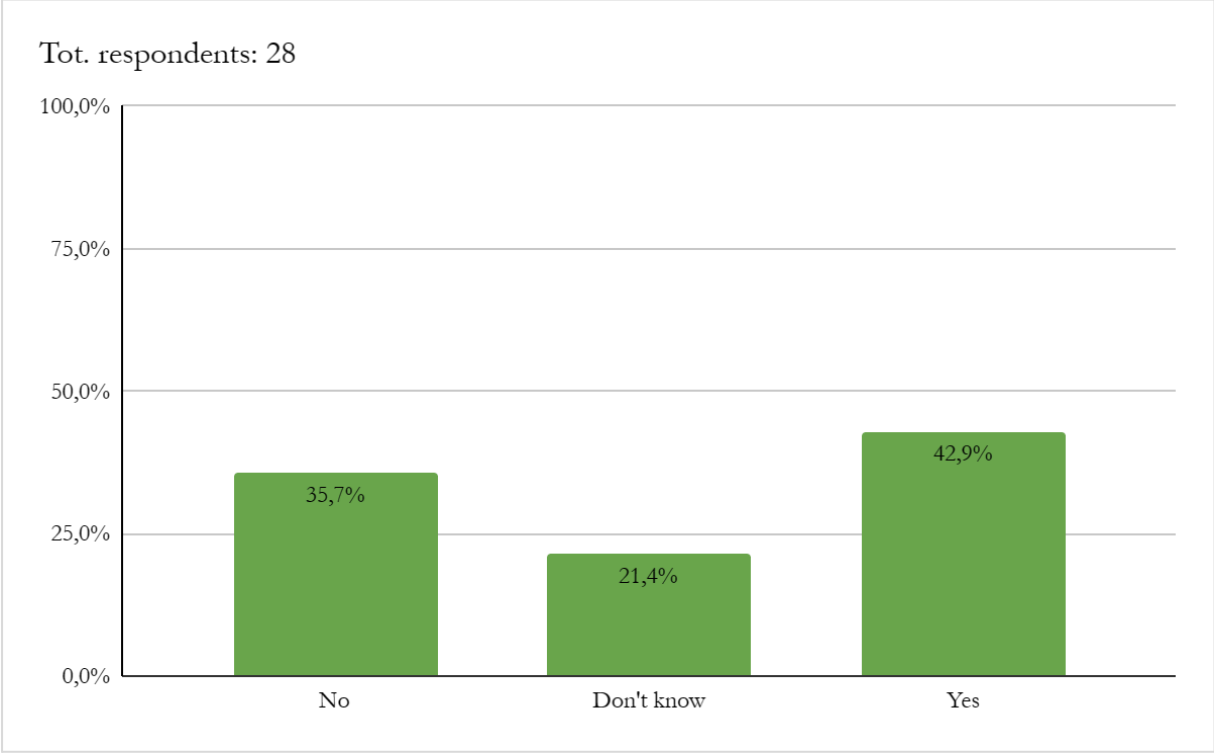


The open question on the same topic (19 answers), namely the benefits that members receive from their involvement with Il Passo della Barca, refers to being active participants in improving the place where they live (*“The joy of being an active part of change from the bottom up, the opportunity to make the neighborhood better for everyone”*), creating and nurturing a community (*“Participating in the creation of a community of close people who were only neighbors before”*). A member has expressed dissatisfaction with the cooperative activities, stating that they seem to focus mainly on families with children and not on single people. This feedback should prompt the project to reflect on how to include different categories of neighbors in its scope of action.

Compared to previous cases, there are differences in the individual transformation triggered by membership in the community cooperative. Specifically, 42.9% of participants reported changes in their lifestyle, habits, and thought processes after joining the cooperative, which is understandable given the shorter average duration of membership (Graph 30). However, 75% of the members credited their discovery of new resources, such as associations, places, and sustainability practices, to

their membership in Il Passo della Barca (Graph 31). This indicates that the organization effectively promotes knowledge of the resources available in the local context. Additionally, 42.9% reported that their membership provided them with the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge (Graph 32).

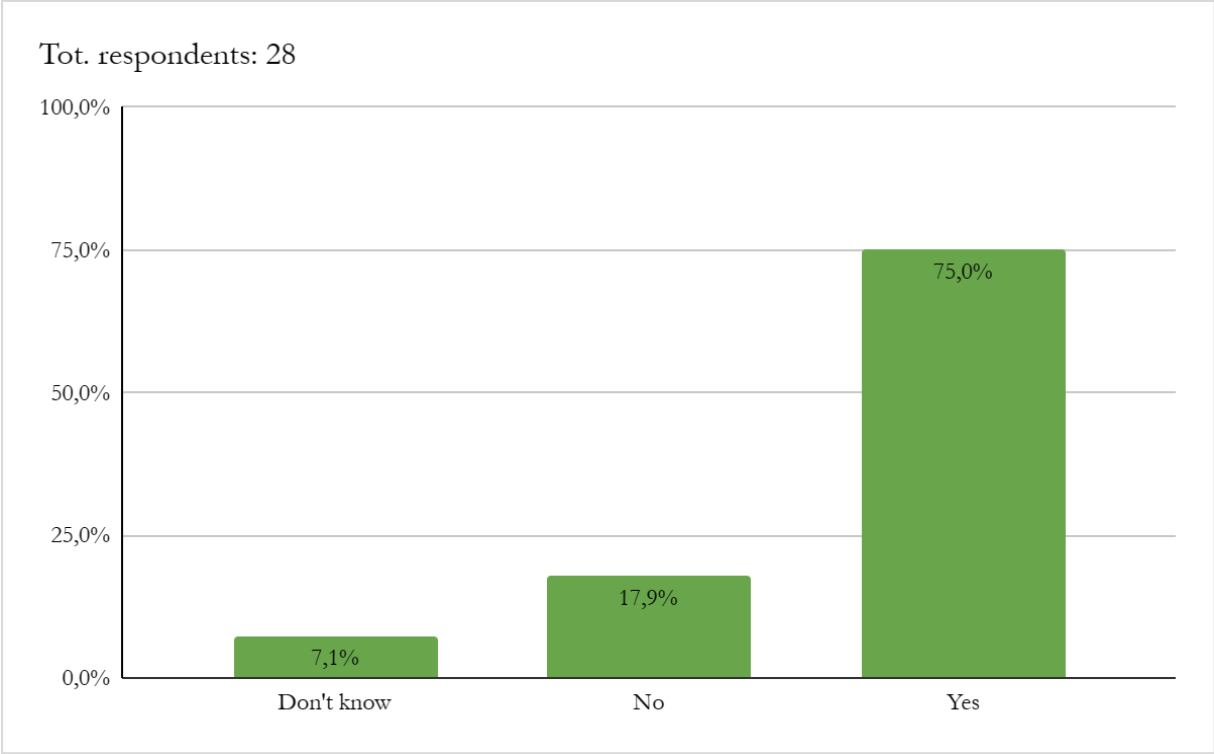
Graph 30. Percentage of members' self-perception of changes in personal habits, ways of thinking, and lifestyles after joining Il Passo della Barca



To go further, responses to the open-ended question about personal habits and attitudes revealed examples of self-awareness regarding various aspects of being more connected to the neighborhood. Eleven respondents mentioned: sharing with other neighbors (“*When I come across something I like, it is now second nature for me to share it with people who were previously just acquaintances*”), new opportunities for social relationships and diverse perspectives (“*I get to meet more people, discover different points of view, and have coffee with a variety of people! And it's nice!*”), a sense of belonging and attention to place (“*I pay more attention to the whole territory, including its people and places*”). There are also promising elements to promote active citizenship: “*I consider participating more in local, neighborhood political and administrative decisions*”; “*I am more aware of the community in which I live and, as a citizen, I am more interested in promoting my rights*”). Furthermore, as noted

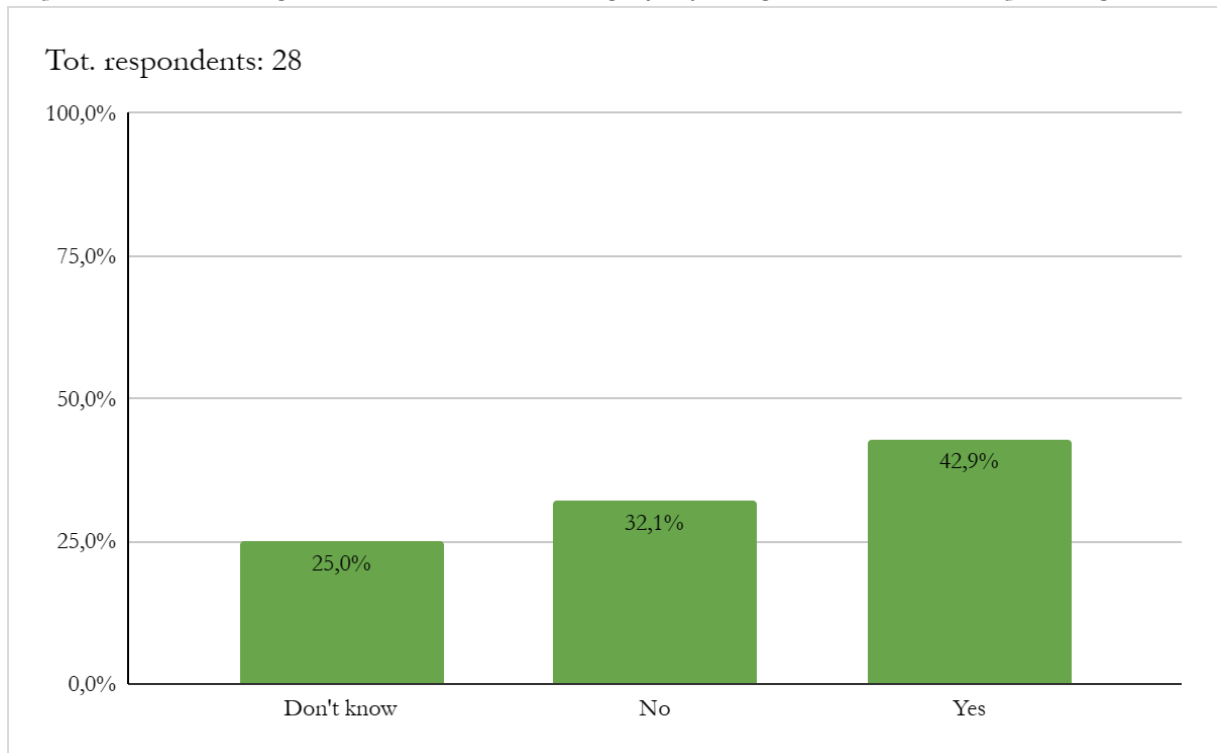
by another member, Il Passo della Barca could potentially serve as a model for the city of Bologna. The member expressed: *“I believe that I am creating a community model that can be replicated in other neighborhoods”*.

Graph 31. Percentage of members who have discovered previously unknown resources after joining Il Passo della Barca



When discussing the circulation of knowledge through the cooperative, 15 respondents mentioned the discovery of new projects or associations active in the neighborhood, as well as a variety of resources such as stories, small businesses, and hidden places (*“During walks, little glimpses that I didn't know and whose history I didn't know; thanks to encounters with people who lived here long ago, anecdotes and characters I didn't know”*).

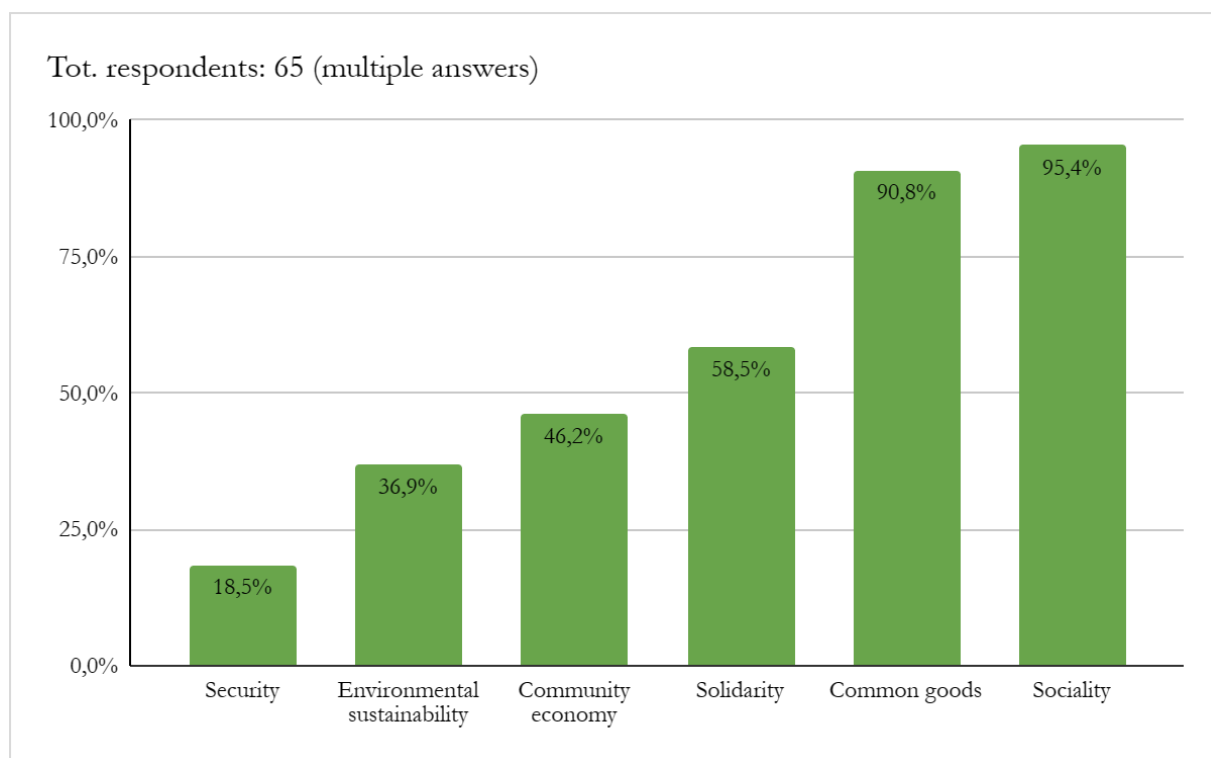
Graph 32. Members who gained new skills and knowledge after joining Il Passo della Barca (percentage)



Finally, 12 members responded to an open question, describing the new skills and knowledge they gained as part of the community cooperative. Participation in the cooperative required the development of various skills. Most members indicated the need for relational, communication, and organizational skills (*“Participating in BolognaEstate made me realize that I have communication skills”*). Additionally, practical knowledge associated with the organization, such as administrative competencies (preparation of documents, requests for proposals), was also necessary.

The second section of the survey invites participants to reflect on the potential positive impacts of Il Passo della Barca on both the local and wider communities. Respondents emphasized the importance of promoting spaces and opportunities for positive social interaction (95.4%), followed by the promotion of common goods (90.8%) and solidarity (58.5%) as the cooperative's effects on the local area. The impacts on community economy (46.2%) and environmental sustainability (36.9%) are considered less relevant when compared to the other case studies. As with the other cases, only a small minority identified the promotion of security as a key benefit (Graph 33).

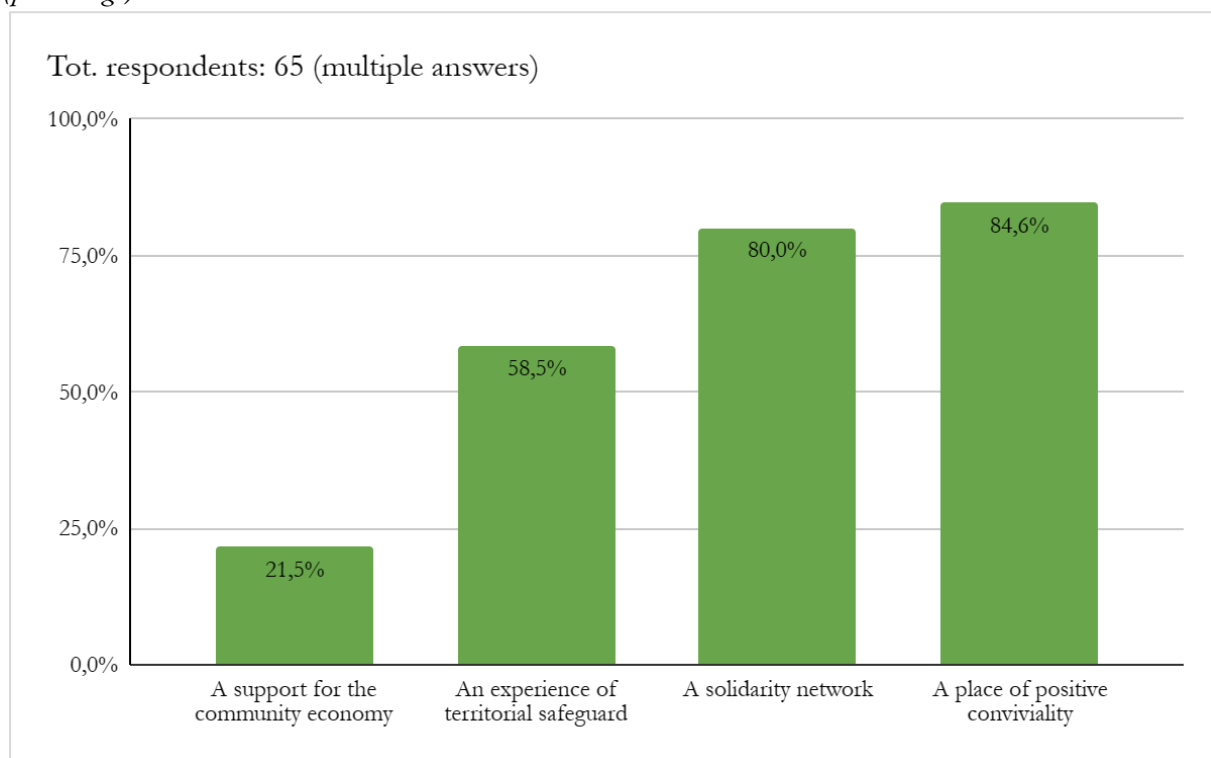
Graph 33. Members' perceived positive impacts of Il Passo della Barca on the territory (percentage)



The open responses (40 in total) suggest that Il Passo della Barca is a model and an inspiration for those who want to create a different everyday life based on proximity, mutual exchange and solidarity. Building a (real) social network and support for neighbors (*“Create a network of skills to draw from and where you can apply your own knowledge”*), supporting the local economy and common goods, promoting cultural change that reactivates citizens (*“Contribute to cultural change in terms of awareness of what it means to be part of active citizenship”*, *“Create the awareness that we can do it TOGETHER, don't wait for the institutions to create something we might like. Just stop and think, discuss, share skills and knowledge among members and you can imagine and make concrete any idea”*). The idea of setting an example for other neighborhoods or other cities to follow emerges again. A member expresses the countercultural elements inherent in the project as follows: *“The creation of a network of concrete human relationships that go against the trend of the aseptic and distant way of understanding relationships that is typical of our times in our latitudes. A constant invitation to go out into the streets, to meet, to discuss, to plan and to build together ways of participation”*.

When asked about the potential consequences if Il Passo della Barca had never existed, respondents identified the loss of a positive social space (84.6%), a network of solidarity (80%), and a sense of territorial protection (58.5%) (Graph 34).

Graph 34. Members perception of what the city of Bologna would lose if Il Passo della Barca did not exist (percentage)



Through this imaginative exercise, members were able to reflect on real forms of the value of Il Passo della Barca that already exist. The 31 open-ended responses on this topic highlight the cooperative's role as a model of active citizenship and grassroots participation (*"A serious and valuable proposal that really starts from the bottom, strongly tied to the territory"*), as an opportunity to improve the quality of life in the neighborhood by offering social support (*"A chance to take someone out of isolation, out of loneliness"*), and as an opportunity to take care of otherwise unused physical and material spaces and resources (*"The possibility of discussion between citizens who live in the same place would be lost, the possibility of bringing together citizens who do not have a meeting place, the possibility of new uses for spaces in the Barca neighborhood that have been abandoned in recent years"*). Effectively summed up by one respondent who said: *"A pioneering and hopefully repeatable experience. It is not fundamental what you want to achieve, but the awareness that if*

everyone puts a little energy into something, anything becomes possible. The community improves. It is a political experience outside of political logic, simply an aggregator of ideas and resources that knows critical issues well and seeks answers within”.

The last section of the survey identifies relevant social and demographic factors. The survey respondents are primarily women (55.4%, see Table 26) between the ages of 30 and 55 (86.2%, see Table 27) residing in Bologna, with the exception of one respondent living overseas (see Table 28). The majority of respondents live in the Borgo Panigale-Reno neighborhood (82.5%), where the Barca area is located. However, some respondents reside in other adjacent neighborhoods (see Table 29). This data is noteworthy as it indicates that the cooperative is capable of generating interest beyond its specific area of focus. The cooperative's president is male.

Table 26. Gender of respondents

	N.	%
Male	28	43,1
Female	36	55,4
Prefer not to say	1	1,5
Total	65	100

Table 27. Age of respondents

	N.	%
18-29	2	3,1
30-44	23	35,4
45-55	33	50,8
56-68	6	9,2
>68	1	1,5
Total	65	100

Table 28. Place of residence of respondents

	N.	%
Municipality of Bologna	63	98,5
Overseas (China)	1	1,5
Total responses	64	100
Missing	1	
Total	65	

Table 29. Neighbourhood of residence in Bologna

	N.	%
Navile	0	0
Borgo Panigale-Reno	52	82,5
Savena	1	1,6
San Donato-San Vitale	0	0
Santo Stefano	1	1,6
Porto-Saragozza	9	14,3
Total responses	63	100
Missing	1	
Total	64	

Compared to previous cases, there is a more balanced participation between men and women, and the average age is lower. However, there is still an underrepresentation of people over 68 and under 29. Additionally, all respondents are of Italian nationality. The analogy holds true for educational attainment, with 80% of individuals holding a degree higher than a high school diploma (see Table 30).

Table 30. Educational level of respondents

	N.	%
High school	13	20
University degree	30	46,2
Postgraduate	22	33,8
Total	65	100

The household composition of members in the community cooperative differs from that of the other case studies. There is a prevalence of families with three or four members (83.1%), while only 6.2% are single or have more than four members (Table 31).

Table 31. Household composition

	N.	%
1 person	4	6,2
2 people	3	4,6
3 people	23	35,4
4 people	31	47,7
More than 4 people	4	6,2
Total	65	100

The survey data shows that households' monthly disposable income is predominantly medium to high. Specifically, 25.9% of respondents reported having a low income, 37.9% reported having a medium income, and 36.2% reported having a high income (Table 32).

Table 32. Monthly household disposable income bracket

	N.	%
Up to €1,291	3	5,2
1,292 to 2.066 €	12	20,7
2,067 to 2.582 €	6	10,3
2,583 to 3.615 €	16	27,6
3,616 to 5.165 €	15	25,9
Over €5,166	6	10,3
Total responses	58	100
Missing	7	
Total	65	

The members of Il Passo della Barca are mainly employed as clerks in both the public and private sectors, comprising 63.5% of the total. Freelancers make up 17.3%, while 9.6% are not employed, 1.9% are retired, and 5.8% are entrepreneurs (refer to Table 33).

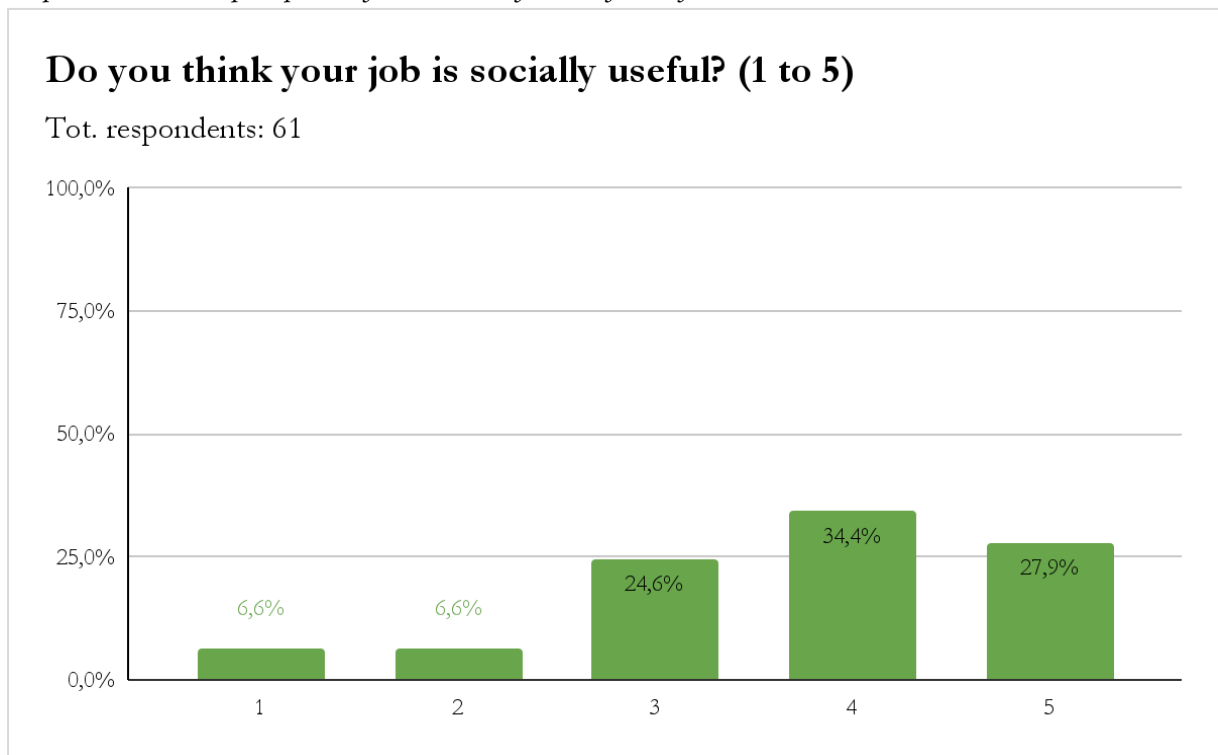
Table 33. Employment status

	N.	%
Clerk	33	63,5
Freelancer	9	17,3
Entrepreneur	3	5,8
Workman	1	1,9
Retired	1	1,9
Not employed	5	9,6
Total responses	52	100
Missing	13	
Total	65	

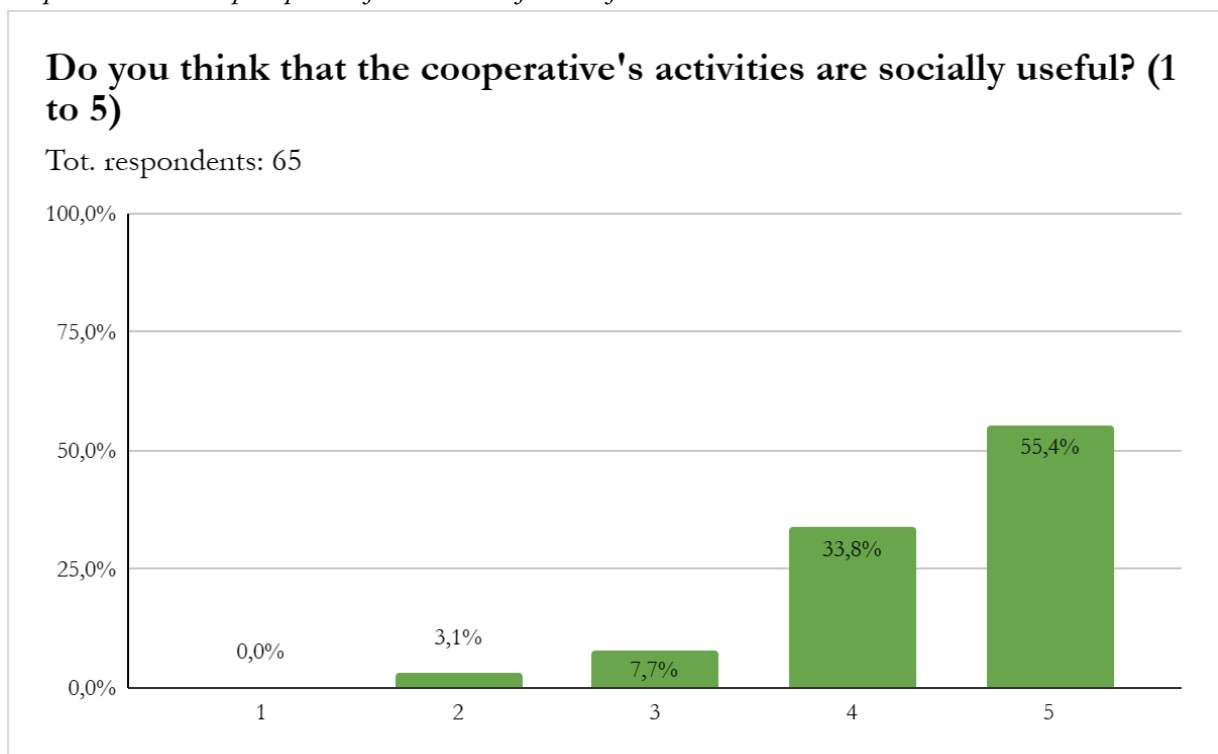
When respondents were asked to rate the social usefulness of their job and the community cooperative on a scale of 1 to 5, the results were similar to those of previous case studies. Some 13.2% of employees perceive their job as having little or no social usefulness. Additionally, 24.6% considered their job somewhat useful, 34.4% useful, and 27.9% very useful, as shown in Graph 35. Il Passo della Barca is widely recognized for its social value. Based on Graph 36, 89.2% of members find it very useful, while 7.7% find its contributions somewhat useful.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ The total for each distribution differs because 61 respondents reported having a job and answered the question about their job, while all 65 respondents answered the question about Il Passo della Barca. In Table 33, I consider 60 respondents as employed based on their self-declaration, excluding one respondent who reported babysitting while studying.

Graph 35. Members' perceptions of the social usefulness of their job



Graph 36. Members' perceptions of the social usefulness of Il Passo della Barca's activities



A notable distinction between the case studies previously discussed and Il Passo della Barca is the civic involvement and associative experience of its members. As shown in Table 34, the majority of members have no prior experience (53.8%) and are not currently active in other organizations (63.1%). This is significant because it suggests that the community cooperative can not only build upon the existing level of social capital but also can multiply it. The project relies on the existing high social capital of the territory, but also has the potential to engage those without prior experience, thereby increasing the overall ‘stock’ of social capital. It is important to recognize this point because active citizenship projects often struggle to expand beyond their current circles and involve new participants.

Table 34. Civic participation

	N.	%
Volunteer experience prior to joining Il Passo della Barca	30	46,2
No volunteer experience prior to joining Il Passo della Barca	35	53,8
Total	65	100
Currently part of other civic organizations	24	36,9
Not currently affiliated with any other civic organization	41	63,1
Total	65	100

In conclusion, the survey allowed the Il Passo della Barca cooperative, with the assistance of its members, to share and comment on comprehensive data regarding its social value. Presenting this information during the general assembly facilitated its socialization and reflection. The questionnaire provides an incomplete but revealing representation of the cooperative's extensive

social network. Finally, it facilitated additional data collection on the identity of these members, specifically, how they choose to present themselves.

Il Passo della Barca is a relatively new organization that is still growing and evolving. Its potential is yet to be fully realized, making it difficult to grasp. However, there is already promising material from both sociological and practical/political perspectives.

Similar to previous case studies, the cooperative's social composition indicates that the project is primarily backed by citizens, particularly women, who possess a high level of cultural and intellectual capital. The project's social basis consists of individuals with a history of civic engagement, but also demonstrates an increase in participation from new citizens. The survey reveals complete national homogeneity, with Il Passo della Barca being non-multiethnic. Additionally, young people under 30 and the elderly are underrepresented. Presently, the organization appears to focus on providing services to families residing in the neighborhood, which aligns with the characteristics and needs of its founding members. The social composition of the group exhibits distinct features. The majority of its members consist of families with at least three members, while couples and single individuals are scarce. However, since cooperatives aim to serve the entire community, it is important to consider how to better include single individuals, the elderly, young people, and those with lower incomes.

Il Passo della Barca is currently experiencing a growth phase, and its members are reflecting on the direction in which the project should develop. Despite its limitations, the survey provides insight into intangible social value indicators such as care, commitment, and community involvement in the Barca neighborhood. The results reveal a wide range of social actions that benefit members and communities, inviting us to rethink how local economies might look. The semi-structured interviews discussed next will provide further depth.

3.1.2: Emerging qualitative elements of transformative change through semi-structured interviews

“I don't know if there's a contradiction there. Because obviously you cannot put an economic value on improving relationships, but those are the things we are trying to do

instead. Because the newsstand is where the newspaper is sold, it's where you find the course, but it's also where I find someone to talk to, to help me find something. It's a reference point. Economically it may not have an immediate or quantifiable value, but for us it does, and perhaps one of our greatest challenges is to turn it into a value. That is, also an economic value in the sense that it's worth investing in this thing because, I don't know, exaggerating, by saying I'm fine and I'm spending this money in a certain way rather than on antidepressants. And therefore the improvement of life, of everyday life, in short, I think it has a very strong value, maybe not quantifiable in euros, but certainly in the well-being of everyone”.

(A., member of Il Passo della Barca)

We made a journey of memory that took place here, around the kiosk, where the elderly, the historical neighbors, let's call them that because they were really historical, brought their history, which is the history of the neighborhood. They participated in these activities by bringing photos, videos, and material. And above all, we also go back to the oral tradition, talking about what were the stories of the neighborhood, what happened before. And all this material was then displayed around a garden. Here, near the kiosk, everything was hung on a net, which symbolizes exactly what we are saying: the connection. That is, who are we? Where are we? Where are we going? And so this network really manifested itself physically, let's say.

(G., member of Il Passo della Barca)

This section presents an analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with four members of Il Passo della Barca. The interviewees consist of two founding members, one member who was a former news vendor of *Edicola Resiliente*, and one recent member. The discussion centers on the elements of transformative SSE as outlined in the theoretical framework (Chapter 1, Section 4:4).

One of the founding and most active members, M., explains: “*Ours is not the degraded neighborhood. The objective was to bring people together to overcome the dormitory neighborhood*”.

While the Barca area is not particularly problematic compared to other neighborhoods such as Pilastro or Bolognina, its residents believe that it is undervalued and not recognized for its

potential. This element is noteworthy because the legislation primarily envisions the development of community cooperatives in disadvantaged areas.²⁴⁷

One of the founding members, A., explains the motivation behind the decision to create this particular type of organization: “*Our goal is clearly not to respond to specific needs, such as children with problems. Or let’s say we are not like the social cooperative CADIAI, which does activities with disabled children. Our overall goal would be to improve the well-being of everyone, everyone in our neighborhood*”.

This statement is in line with the distinction made in the literature (Bianchi, 2022) between community cooperatives and the more established concept of social cooperatives. According to Bianchi, it may not always be easy to identify the boundaries between the two models. Both models evolved similarly, originating as a spontaneous movement from autonomous groups and providing services of general interest. On the other hand, social cooperatives are distinguished from community cooperatives by their well-defined and precise services that identify their nature. In contrast, community cooperatives carry out a wide range of activities. Secondly, social cooperatives provide services to individuals in need, regardless of their place of residence. In contrast, community cooperatives aim to benefit citizens residing in a specific geographic area. This distinction is based on the target population of each type of cooperative (Bianchi, 2022: 63).

A. acknowledges that several member families of Il Passo della Barca are not native to Bologna and, therefore, lack the familial support of grandparents, uncles, and cousins. Consequently, they have sought mutual support through common friendships to restore a sense of community and humanity within the neighborhood. This means “*walking down the street and meeting people you know, with whom you have relationships on different levels, but whom you recognize with a smile. In short, this makes life here psychologically safer*”. Bianchi (2021: 79) advanced the hypothesis ‘that community cooperatives satisfy not only an economic need, but also the psychosocial need of their members and supporters to have a greater “sense of community” (Ferri et al., 2017)’.

²⁴⁷ Regional Law 12/2022 establishes that community cooperatives are formed ‘to counteract the phenomena of depopulation, economic decline, social or urban degradation, environmental criticality, they have their headquarters in the regional territory and operate in mountainous areas, internal areas or areas at risk of depopulation, or areas characterized by conditions of socio-economic and environmental criticality’ (art. 1).

The global pandemic seems to have highlighted the importance of close relationships and proximity, as mentioned in the interviews. According to M., “*Covid helped because **it raised awareness that networking with those close to you is not a given, but it can be built and it is positive***”. During the lockdowns, individuals frequently encountered one another without establishing a meaningful connection. The ten founding members were acquainted because their children were in the same class. When initiating the project discussion, M. and their group asked themselves: “*How many people are there like us, who have a lot in common but don't know each other?*”.

The pandemic has had some positive effects, A. notes, such as allowing people to work from home and freeing up time: “*The pandemic helped us in some ways in the sense that it allowed us to do a lot of things by working 90 percent smart, so maybe we got things done that are in some ways harder to do now. Because maybe you're back in the office*”.²⁴⁸

However, promoting participation has not been without difficulties. As G. points out, the cooperative has managed to encourage involvement, “*even in a period that I think is difficult because people are coming out with wounds. Wounds that may not be visible, but are felt. Psychological wounds caused by the situation we have lived through. So there is participation, but there is also, in my opinion, from what I have perceived, a difficulty in opening fully to a new reality*”.

G. is a member who took up the challenge of becoming the newsagent of the restored kiosk in Piazza Bernardi. He recalls how he came to know about the cooperative and its projects. The pandemic had a paradoxical influence on his decision. “*The meeting with the cooperative was, if you will, accidental. In the sense that a friend of mine told me about this cooperative, its projects and its presence in the area. And let's say the singular thing, **it happened at a time when the whole society was at a standstill and we were in the middle of a pandemic**, so we had to stay close to home. And that was my luck: to have such a reality in my neighborhood. So **I was able, by force of circumstances, to stop and see what was right under my house***”.

²⁴⁸ This is a controversial issue that cannot be discussed here, as it may only apply to certain groups of people while exacerbating inequalities for others. Moreover, there is a crucial distinction between remote work and smart work that is often confused. This debate has undoubtedly pushed for change and opened up a discussion on smart work in a country that was previously lagging behind in this area.

G. explains the reasons why this kiosk is so important to the local community and why it is called 'resilient': *"First of all, because they are all families that live here, around Piazza Bernardi. And for them the loss of a heritage like the one that this kiosk created, that was here for 45 years, with Pina running it for 45 years, would have been a clean sweep of everything. And in my opinion, the cooperative was resilient in this case. In fact, the kiosk, even though I have my own company with my name, they call it the resilient kiosk. **It meets a social need, a need of the population, of the people of this place, which is to continue the exchange**".*

The idea behind this, as A. says, is that the kiosk acts as a kind of neighborhood service provider: *"For us, the added value is to find a person who can tell you what to do when you need something. Or if you just arrived in the neighborhood. If you need to pick up a package from Amazon or someone else, they can hold it for you. If you can't take your child to school, you can drop them off and wait for the other kids so they can take the walking bus and all go to school together. I need an electrician and I want to get a safe person in my house, you have a number of people you can suggest to me. Here, all these things to improve, to make life more comfortable, easier for the people who live here".*

G. comes from a very different background, but this experience has helped him to reconnect with unknown parts of himself: *"I worked for many years in a completely different field, and this is all new to me, all new. **I'm rediscovering characteristics of myself that I didn't know I had, and I'm putting them at the service of this place, of communication, of sociality, if you will**".*

G. had a positive experience with the activity as it provided new opportunities for relationships and was a novelty. He tells me: *"I feel part of something, something active, something beautiful, something constructive", "doing this work in such a context, in such a social situation, gives me a lot of satisfaction".* However, the challenges must have been too much for him, because after six months he ceased his activity for personal reasons. The cooperative suffered a setback because it had invested in the kiosk, both financially and symbolically, as A. admits. *"Yes, the kiosk is the raw nerve. This is the saddest thing but we are trying. We're putting a lot of effort into it. Unfortunately he decided to cancel the contract because of his own problems. A project that was supposed to last three years was finished in six months. And so it's clearly left us struggling".*

The newsstand's symbolic and emotional value must contend with the fact that the industry has been in crisis for years. *“These days, we who are more involved in this part of the business plan have noticed, for example, that the amount of newspapers sold is really very low”*, says A. However, the members of the cooperative are resolute and have taken this event as an opportunity for self-reflection and reevaluation of their project. They are currently renegotiating their current needs and opportunities.

A. immediately adds: *“**Maybe we can look on the bright side: maybe we were wrong in some things, in the evaluation.** Trivially, I can already tell you that, for example, it is not a good idea to think that there is only one person all day, every day”*. This underlines the relevance of first-hand experience, but also the pedagogical value of such a grassroots context, where experimenting, failing, learning and negotiating are an integral part of the process. This is also where the transformative potential of such initiatives lies.

*“There are also some things that seem banal, but **until you try them on your skin, so to speak, you can't understand what you need and how to structure them better.** So we appreciate everything we have done, even where we have made mistakes. Because it must also be said that probably, even certainly, something on our part was not managed or understood correctly”*. *“So now we are trying to restart the newsstand, but we are putting together this business plan and other forces to try to figure out how to restart the newsstand, but not just the newsstand”*.

Following the closure of the newsstand, Il Passo della Barca is maintaining the space's vitality through a series of public events and discussions with members and neighbors. The organization is currently considering how to restart the activity in an economically sustainable way while maintaining its function as a hub for the community.

During our discussions on how the project promotes mechanisms of solidarity and mutualism, the question of social, economic and monetary values comes to the fore. More specifically, their possible contradictions and how to reconcile them in a different understanding of the local economy.

From the former newsagent's perspective, Il Passo della Barca is an inclusive space for diversity: “Especially from what I've seen, they try to involve people regardless of age, income level or social position”. It promotes participation, “they try to involve people in their activities, and I think that is an advantage” and care for public spaces: “The different activities that take place in the parks include cleaning them”. And he adds: “These are situations that, in my opinion, **cannot be evaluated on an economic level, but we must necessarily talk about human capital, about what you receive, which cannot be quantified in money, but, in my opinion, in personal enrichment**”.

Similarly, A. expresses her views on the non-monetary values of the initiative and how to deal with possible contradictions with monetary calculations. “I don't know if there is a contradiction. Because **obviously you cannot put an economic value on improving relationships**, but those are the things we are trying to do instead. Because the newsstand is where the newspaper is sold, it's where you find the course, but it's also where I find someone to talk to, to help me find something, it's a point of reference. **Economically it may not have an immediate or quantifiable value**, but for us it has, perhaps **one of our greatest challenges is to turn it into a value**. That is, also an economic value in the sense that it's worth investing in this thing because, I don't know, exaggerating, by saying I'm fine and I'm spending this money in a certain way rather than on antidepressants. And therefore **the improvement of life, of everyday life, in short, I think it has a very strong value, maybe not quantifiable in euros, but certainly in the well-being of everyone**”.

G., on the other hand, believes that it is possible to reconcile them: “In my opinion, **you can do both**. That is, you can do the economy... Social enterprise, I don't think I'm wrong, can be both. Either subsidized or earning through activities that are in the social field, and at the same time **being not only an entrepreneurial activity, but also a company that creates a network in the territory**”.

Of course, there is no definitive answer to the question of value. However, by giving voice to these experiences and their different valuation practices through what Gibson-Graham (2014) refers to as *thick description*, we may move in the right direction of rethinking the economy.²⁴⁹

A. gives a concrete example of what social value means in practice: “*One of our members, one of the most active, I noticed it in one of the different meetings that we had, he said, “I come here because I know I have friends here”. I mean, they may not be long-time friends, but **there is such a strong common ground of sharing in many aspects, in principles, in ideas.** So you already start with a strong sharing, so it really seems to be, I don't say friends forever, but friends with a certain maturity. And also **with a high level of attention to the needs or times of others, also to the availability that we can have for others, because in short, we are the ones who need it first**”.*

The community cooperative does not directly address the issue of inequalities, as its primary focus is on providing services to the neighborhood and creating solidarity networks. However, it is still present and must be considered. The survey revealed that the cooperative's social composition is relatively homogeneous, which is somewhat expected given its early stage and appeal to individuals with similar values and attitudes. This is acknowledged by members I interviewed.

Interestingly, the issue of diversity and inclusion was evident in one of their projects, SaliInBarca. “*This fact was quite surprising when this SaliInBarca thing came out*”, comments A.. SaliInBarca is a platform that allows neighbors to register and offer specific services that can be used by others, similar to a time bank, but without the need to account for volunteer hours. A. explains the idea behind the project, stating: “*So the SaliInBarca project, which also started and then stopped, we are now implementing. So the idea was on three levels. In the sense of an initial availability of the members for good neighborly services, we called them that. Like, I'm going to the sea, I'm going to the mountains, you water my plants, you feed the cat. Or more immediate needs, especially in the*

²⁴⁹ In their own words, ‘It is ethnographic thick description and weak theory that have helped us to imagine the becoming of community economies motivated by concerns for surviving together well and equitably; distributing surplus to enrich social and environmental health; encountering others in ways that support their well-being as well as ours; maintaining, replenishing, and growing our natural and cultural commons; investing our wealth so that future generations can live well; and consuming sustainably. For ethnographers today, no task is more important than to make small facts speak to these large concerns, to make the ethical acts ethnography describes into a performative ontology of economy and the threads of hope that emerge into stories of everyday revolution’ (Gibson-Graham, 2014: 152).

pandemic: I need food, medicine and things like that, help with the children's homework and things like that. To a second level, which could be that of the worker member, where it could be used to provide services at controlled prices for the members". The concept is to utilize the skills of those willing to serve the community and, potentially in the future, establish a source of income within the community.

The members quickly discovered that this intriguing idea was more difficult to implement than they had anticipated. *"And even there, over time, we realized that a more careful analysis needed to be done. In the sense that, for example, with SaliInBarca, the first thing we discovered, in quotation marks, was that **needs and availability did not match**".* In reality, the participating members had comparable working conditions and time availability, making it very difficult to match them: *"We discovered that there were, say, 25 of us who were available to go and water the plants for all the houses in our neighborhood, and no one was willing to go and do the cleaning, so to speak, but 50% of the members needed a person to clean the house. Because maybe **the average type of our members are either freelancers or people who work anyway. I don't think we have a single housewife among our members, except maybe someone who is already retired.** So what could have been initially thought of as an exchange, i.e. I'll water your plants and I need someone to clean my house, didn't work because in reality **we were all giving the same availability and we were all looking for something that none of us were available to give**".*

Again, this is a matter of reflection that has led to a better awareness of the complexities of negotiating our interdependence and the possible obstacles along the way. A. honestly states, showing a deep level of self-awareness: *"This has taught us that we have to, in short, that it is **not so easy to recognize the needs and demands, both of ourselves as members, but also of the neighborhood and of the people who live here. Because of many things, especially in the last few weeks, I've had **the impression that we live a little bit in our own bubble** of people of a certain type. Here my husband would say that I'm a "racist" on a social level... **If we are all people of a certain cultural level, of a certain type of interests and things, maybe we lack sensitivity to other needs or other things that we don't see or experience first hand**".***

One of the more recent projects, called *Salto*, seems to be moving in the direction of connecting more people from different backgrounds. It is part of an urban renewal project promoted by the Municipality of Bologna in the Barca district, specifically in an area called *Treno della Barca*.²⁵⁰ Il Passo della Barca, along with other local associations, won the tender for the allocation of open spaces for cultural and recreational purposes. This area is geographically close to the main area where the cooperative already operates. However, it has a different social composition, having been a working-class area in the 1970s and now with a significant immigrant population. As F. notes, “*it is still a peripheral area, with all its problems, and therefore the fact that Il Passo della Barca has now had the opportunity to manage spaces together with other entities, I think is already a good thing, a great help in the direction we have been talking about. But I think there is still some work to be done*”.

It is important to remember that the community cooperative offers its services and benefits to everyone in the neighborhood, regardless of their affiliation with the cooperative itself. Therefore, the composition of the cooperative does not necessarily reflect the full range of those who benefit from or participate in its activities and network. It is expected that individuals with greater skills, time, and resources will be able to devote their energies directly to the cooperative. What is less obvious, and therefore more relevant, is whether they actually do so.

In this context, and in view of the good support that the cooperative has received in a relatively short period of time, the question of scale in a broad sense was discussed. A. believes that growth is ongoing (“*our goal is certainly not to stop at the number of members we have. I am sure of that*”), and the goal is not limited to membership numbers. The focus is on promoting participation habits, which have been declining in all Western countries in recent decades (Bianchi, 2021). “*Increasing the membership, it's clear, not so much to increase the capital itself, but also to increase the possibility of people who can also contribute, to replace those who may have initially given their share because they believed in the issue of the kiosk and stopped there. Because there are the president and others who are desperate or angry because we can't get them back*”.

²⁵⁰ More information is available at the following website: <https://www.culturabologna.it/documents/iltrenodellabarca>.

Passive participation appears to be an issue, as seen in previous case studies. However, the numbers and personal observations indicate a significant level of commitment. F.'s perspective supports this, stating: *“I think there is a great involvement of the members. Unfortunately we are many members and not all of us are able to give full availability, I think for a thousand reasons. But **the involvement of the members seems to me intense**, I could define it as intense. With the tools that we have, with WhatsApp, but also with face-to-face meetings, we clearly have the tool of assembly, which is also in the statute. But I mean, I could give an opinion in these two months that I have approached it, it seems to me that the involvement of the members is very significant”*. The challenge is to maintain this level of engagement over time and ensure its sustainability.

Recently, the statute was modified to introduce a regulation on financing members to increase the share capital.²⁵¹ However, the main challenge, as A. sees it, is the cooperative's ability to expand its economic capacity by creating employment opportunities for its members. *“And I think scalability lies in the idea that you can have members who are really working members. Even if it's difficult, maybe it's taking longer than you'd expect, maybe they're not living 100% off of it. So maybe one of the first challenges could be, this is something we are evaluating, that the news vendor could be an employee of the cooperative”*.

In any case, it is remarkable that the cooperative has managed to generate a surplus in its first two years of operation.²⁵² A. feels that things are moving fast: *“we had a very strong acceleration”*. Certainly, Il Passo della Barca has managed to create a growing network of different realities, ranging from local institutions to associations, cooperatives and local businesses. M. explains: *“We have relationships above all with local entities: Barca59, Associazione Le Ortiche, Il ramo d'oro, etc. We have a relationship with the Civic Center. One of our members ran for the board of directors of the Civic Center near us: Rosa Marchi. With the participatory budgeting tool, we try to fit in. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. In general, we network with everyone: from small retailers to profit and*

²⁵¹ The amendment to the Statutes was discussed and approved by the Assembly during the General Meeting held on May 8, 2022, at the Civic Center Rosa Marchi.

²⁵² Specifically, Il Passo della Barca recorded a surplus of €1,488.00 in 2021, increasing to €6,521.00 in 2022 (2021 and 2022 Social Report).

non-profit associations. The office in the Borgo Panigale Reno district works very well. The more we can work together, the better”.

In this case, it seems that there's a positive relationship with the local administration, both in terms of municipal and neighborhood management. As the first urban community cooperative in Bologna, it has attracted the attention of the local administration. As G. tells me, the municipality can only benefit from such an organization: *“We are watched by the neighborhood authorities, and in any case we help to have a vision of the neighborhood itself. Yes, because I think that the management of a city, of a neighborhood, needs **such a situation to really understand what the population of the neighborhood needs.** And I think this can be extended to the city. That is, those who govern, those who administer, can only know what is needed by interacting with these realities. Certainly, such a reality can only be good for the management of the neighborhood, in my opinion”.*

The cooperative also sought support in terms of training and skills, following a training program offered by the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana and advice from Legacoop, the cooperative association. Thus, a fruitful combination of interests seems to have facilitated the process. As A. says: *“At the end of the day, we have ourselves behind us and, well, we have partners who help us. Because we can't say that the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana or the Coop in its different structures doesn't do anything. So they support us. And when we manage to understand what we need, they are there. They're probably also interested, because **if we become a marketable model,** let's say, I think **it could be useful for them as well,** but I think for a lot of things we're still at a pretty pioneering level”.*

External support and advice were crucial in understanding the appropriate legal form, given the absence of national legislation for municipal cooperatives and the fact that Il Passo della Barca was founded before the introduction of regional law. Founding member M. recalls, *“The question was: how do we establish ourselves?”* Through a process with the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana and Legacoop, they found the right legal form and chose the social enterprise.²⁵³

²⁵³ The founding members of Il Passo della Barca participated in the training and funding program called Scuola di Azioni Collettive (School of Collective Actions) promoted during the pandemic. On the FIU website we can read: ‘In view of the strong activism that has been mobilized in these months of emergency, the School of Collective Actions was launched in Bologna at the end of 2020: training and resources for projects with social and civic impact, a training and

In this sense, Il Passo della Barca and its members are "stretching" the current legal framework to experiment with different ways of responding to social needs, indicating a transformative potential in this respect. As M. explains, "*We are in the process of consulting on the prevalent mutuality. **Our goal is to provide services to the community and not just to members**, so we have difficulties with the prevalent mutuality.*²⁵⁴ *If I do something for the neighborhood, I don't do it just for the members, otherwise I create the neighborhood club. Involving the community means overcoming the prevalent mutuality. There is no regional law on community cooperatives, **the various legal provisions are conceptually tight, they will adapt over time.** At the moment we have only user members, we are working to have worker and volunteer members*".

It is worth noting that Legacoop strongly suggested from the beginning that the legal form should be an association, as the cooperative form has more requirements, is more complicated to manage, and has more responsibilities. However, the members deliberately chose the cooperative form because it was in line with their values and intentions. In the words of M.: "*For now, we can start paying members through VAT numbers, because it is too expensive to have employees, and we can internalize consulting for some services, such as security, website, etc., instead of paying external parties to support mutualism. **The creation of jobs is one of the main reasons why we chose the cooperative form and not the association form**, in order to have solidity and stability. To overcome the problem of not being able to create jobs, **we used the mechanism of self-management: participation in promotional activities.** The workshops that have been held have all been paid for, and the goal is not to pay externally, but to pay internally*".

This conversation goes beyond labeling. It involves identifying the appropriate legal forms to recognize paid and voluntary work, ensuring that rights and safety conditions are respected, and preventing illegal work or social dumping. It is not solely an academic conversation or a matter for

development path for projects with social and economic impact, environmental and cultural event dedicated to the Third Sector, communities, networks and active citizens of the area promoted by the Foundation for Urban Innovation, in collaboration with the Municipality of Bologna'. Available at: <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/progetto/collettive>. Translation is mine.

²⁵⁴ The Italian law on cooperatives distinguishes between prevalent and non-prevalent mutuality and treats them differently for tax purposes. Prevalent mutuality is recognized when mutual exchanges with members exceed 50% of the total exchanges the cooperative makes with both members and non-members.

legal experts, but rather it is connected to how we value human activities. It is crucial to monitor the model's development over time and its ability to address regulatory shortcomings.²⁵⁵

In any case, self-management, which in practice means voluntary work, is at the heart of the cooperative experience. M. explains: “*The formal tools are in place, the general assembly elects the board of directors. The board tries to involve the members as much as possible. In general, there are so many activities that many members cannot attend due to personal commitments. We have almost one event a week. We try to be involved, but not everything, simply because it takes time and the majority of the members are working parents with children. For this reason, a children's entertainment area is provided during the meeting*”. As with any complex social interaction, it takes time and care to adapt to different needs. In this sense, A. emphasizes that they are improving the way they recognize the values of what members can offer, “*what could be the skills and knowledge of that person, because we've missed the part, let's say, of sociability and sharing to get to know each other better, and that's what we're recovering now*”. She specifies: “*among other things, as social media manager, I follow the communication part. V., who does some security stuff for work, is in charge of all the logistics. So **the combination of work and personal knowledge also makes it so that you can handle some projects or some parts better because you already have [the skills]**. For example, there is a project related to the world of cinema that is taking shape in these weeks, and the person most delegated to this project works at the Cinematheque. And so, of course, she already knows who to talk to, who to go to, and she's accompanied by an associate who deals with SIAE and rights and things like that for a living*”.

To conclude with the personal elements of transformation experienced by members, the testimony of F. is quite interesting. She had a previous associative experience, but of a different kind (“*I had*

²⁵⁵ In an informal email exchange, M. comments on this issue: ‘There is a formal level and a substantive level. As a cooperative and social enterprise, volunteering is strictly regulated. For obvious reasons: being in “competition” with companies and commercial entities, you cannot act voluntarily. Imagine a cooperative pizzeria: if only volunteers worked there, the costs would be much lower and the competition would be unfair. Therefore, volunteers cannot replace workers, they can only be in proportion to the number of worker members, they cannot be both voluntary and worker members, they must be registered and insured in certain registers... and so on. We do not have voluntary members. The substance is different: you saw the Bologna Summer, no one in the organization and management machine was paid. Only those who did the workshops. Were the others volunteers? No. It was a self-management activity. Hybrid, gray area’.

the associative experience that is a little different. I realized that it's a little different. I volunteered for a year, I'm a lawyer, and I volunteered for a year at Avvocato di Strada, which is an association here in Bologna"). F. joined at the end of 2022, a few months before I interviewed her. But she's already quite involved and has clear intentions.

*"We moved to this neighborhood about a year ago, it is a neighborhood like many in Bologna, peripheral and under redevelopment. And **we liked the idea**, also having a child, **to do something active, to be protagonists of what could be a change**, an improvement of the quality of life in the neighborhood, for us but also for everyone. My partner and I are members of the cooperative. **We are strong believers in the power of bottom-up action**, so we said, "Let's try to do our part". So we started this experience, which is very new for us, so we are taking our first steps".*

There is a level of small facts (Gibson-Graham, 2014) and connections that may seem insignificant but can improve the quality of everyday life. *"Apart from improving what is already our life", says A., "because then we meet members who are also friends in the growth of all this. So we get together, yes, to talk about how to do this thing, this project, but also to say: "My son, I don't know how to take him anymore for this thing here, you with yours, how did you do it?", to share. Or trivially, "I've never been to that Indian restaurant you have, but let's go together". These are very trivial things, but they also lead to an improvement in the life, let's say, of the individual or the family or the couple, whatever, because they know each other better".*

At a deeper level, increasing awareness and promoting cultural change requires effort and intention, which experiences like Il Passo della Barca can contribute to. F. tells me, *"I certainly say that the first thing is to improve the quality of community life at the neighborhood level, and that seems to me to be one of the main objectives. And then, on the other hand, it seems to me that there is also **a desire to spread a way of thinking**. In other words, **a cultural change: spreading the idea that "it can be done", starting from the citizens**. So I see an immediate change in the improvement of neighborhood life, also participation in community initiatives, and being an active part of the citizenry. And on the other hand, the promotion of a new concept, right? Because in Bologna there is already a little bit of this way of thinking in many areas, and Il Passo della Barca certainly*

contributes to being a protagonist of this world, of the cooperative world, of the world of active citizenship". And not only for adults, but also for younger and older generations: "So, for me, what can be done is to **involve the group of young people, the youth, who are the new generations, in certain types of initiatives and to accompany them also there towards a change, to open them to a certain way of thinking, of sharing.** And that could be a great first goal for me. And then, in general, to improve the life of everyone, because I think of **the elderly**, there are many of them **who, unfortunately, have few moments of aggregation here**".

Section Four: Consegne Etiche: ethical encounters through the platform

The path was born out of a very specific need: to try to provide an ethical alternative to a service, home delivery, that proved to be essential and unavoidable during the lockdowns. From a methodological point of view, it may seem easy to start by bringing together the actors of the service: deliverers, worker cooperatives, retailers, institutions and citizens; but it is not easy to work on the ground and to come to terms with the needs and expectations of those who see their business at risk and of those who want to carry out their work safely and with adequate protection.

(Flavia Tommasini, *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*, in d'Alena, 2021: 145)

Consegne Etiche, which stands for Ethical Deliveries, was launched in Bologna 2020 with the ambitious goal of being a game changer and triggering a paradigm challenge in the home delivery market (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2023: 4). It is a prototype of an ethical delivery platform that aims to address several issues related to the gig economy.²⁵⁶ Michele d'Alena (2021: 152), head of the Civic

²⁵⁶ Although they have specificities, they often overlap, have vague boundaries and are still being defined, for simplicity's sake in this paper I refer to the gig economy or sharing economy to identify a complex series of transformations that have occurred in the last decades with the platform as the main driver: 'Last step in this genealogy occurred after 2008 economic crisis when platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2016) burst into the scene: a tremendous set of platforms «have penetrated the heart of societies» (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2019, 2) quickly defining new ways of consumption as well as new figures of workers. Indeed, ICTs changed dramatically how labour confronts capital in the new millennium, and a kind of paradigmatic example is given precisely by "platform workers", namely those who work in the "gig" or "sharing" economy which – after a first fascinating period (Bauwens, 2006; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Wang & Zhang, 2012) – soon revealed its risks and challenges. Most platforms are prominently urban-based actors with a "logistics rationality" leading their conduct: all the food-delivery platforms as well as many others like those of ride hailing or domestic care operate just in time to the point. The "digital Taylorism" defined by Altenried seems to overstep the wall of warehouses spreading urban-wide where riders, drivers etc. have their time beaten by the algorithms that run their smartphones apps' (Cuppini, Frapporti, Pirone, 2022: 3).

Imagination Area, Digital Agenda and External Relation, within the *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*, sums up the situation by noting: ‘The landscape is very complex: large platforms exploit drivers without adequate social protection, retailers are burdened by high intermediation costs, there is no transparency, and competition is fueled among workers paid piecework’.

Furthermore, the pandemic has expedited the digitalization and platformization of labor, services, and lifestyles, especially in urban areas (Cuppini, Frapporti, Pirone, 2022). As a result, new needs have arisen and the already precarious conditions of gig economy workers have worsened. The importance of delivery riders in urban contexts has become more apparent during this period. Logistics and mobility have been greatly affected by the pandemic. Manifestation of what Flyvbjerg (2020: 615) calls the ‘law and age of regression to the tail’, where extreme and unpredictable events become the new normal. According to Arcidiacono & Pais (2023), the situation of food delivery platform drivers has become a paradigmatic example of the consequences of the digital transition in the era of so-called platform capitalism. However, it is important to note that the focus on commercial, for-profit sharing may overlook the diverse range of sharing economy interactions, including alternative market and non-market transactions, that are already taking place in different parts of the world. To address this, Sharp (2020: 263-266, in Gibson-Graham & Domboski, 2020) suggests building on the distinction made by Shareable founder Gorenflo between ‘transactional’ and ‘transformational sharing’. Transactional sharing is ‘primarily motivated by profit and resource efficiency’, while transformational sharing ‘involves a shift in power relations that builds social capital and community resilience through cooperation and strengthening of the urban commons’. As a concrete attempt to incorporate ethical negotiations in the platform economy, *Consegne Etiche* takes a collaborative and grassroots approach.

The genealogy of *Consegne Etiche* is notable. It was jointly planned by urban designers, local shopkeepers, academics, and representatives of the food delivery workers’ union at the beginning of the Covid-19 closures in Bologna. The municipality of Bologna served as an incubator for an ethical alternative to the gig economy and its digital infrastructure. This was accomplished through the Urban Innovation Foundation. On April 29, 2020, the foundation organized a public assembly

(online) to facilitate a dialogue among academics, activists, retailers, and local cooperatives. The process, which started with the assembly and was called *Cantiere Consegne Etiche* (meaning Ethical Deliveries “Construction Site”) due to its bottom-up laboratory character, lasted until September 2020 (Figure 34).²⁵⁷ The main objective was to promote a dialogue between interested urban stakeholders. The co-design phase was led by Fondazione Innovazione Urbana in collaboration with AlmaVicoo,²⁵⁸ a research organization on cooperativism (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2023).

Figure 34. Presentation image of the *Cantiere Consegne Etiche*



Source: *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*

The project builds on the struggles of workers in the food delivery sector, local activism and solidarity, and the city's cooperativist tradition. In 2017, the Riders Union Bologna (RUB), the first trade union of bike couriers, was established. Their activism resulted in the Municipality of Bologna committing to signing the Charter of Fundamental Rights of Digital Work in the Urban Context in

²⁵⁷ More information available at: <https://www.fondazioneinnovazionebologna.it/progetto/cantiereconsegneetiche>.

²⁵⁸ AlmaVicoo – University Center for the training and promotion of cooperative enterprises is a non-profit association promoted by the University of Bologna and Legacoop Bologna. Available at: <https://www.almavicoo.it/en/>.

2018. This was the first metropolitan territorial agreement in Europe on gig economy issues.²⁵⁹ As other scholars have emphasized, one of the significant merits of *Consegne Etiche* is to create a dialogue among various stakeholders, including informal unions such as RUB.²⁶⁰

The first stage of the process involved researching the needs, expectations, and interests of local stakeholders. This resulted in the creation of a Manifesto that includes 13 shared principles among the network of project promoters. The principles aim to redefine the conditions of sharing through the platform. The principles are as follows:

1. respect workers' rights and protections
2. guarantee fair and adequate remuneration
3. guarantee the right to health and safety
4. dismantle reputation mechanisms that promote competition among workers
5. be logistically sustainable or have minimal environmental impact
6. guarantee the sustainability and transparency of the relationship between retailers and drivers
7. give value to the territorial service
8. promote synergy between actors at the expense of competition between them
9. prioritize open source principles for any technological support
10. guarantee customer information obligations
11. recognize the value of delivery and be able to communicate it
12. maintain the relationship between the retailer and the customer

²⁵⁹ Although representing an important antecedent in legal and symbolic terms, concrete advancements for bike courier conditions have unfortunately been modest. As explained by Arcidiacono & Pais (2023: 9), 'This collaboration culminated in May 2018 with the release of 'The charter of fundamental rights of digital work in the urban context', signed by the Municipality of Bologna, confederal unions, RUB and the Sgnam/MyMenù platform. The Charter constitutes a unique territorial agreement, recognizing the fundamental rights of platform-based home delivery workers in a universalistic sense. It does not take up a position with regard to the employment qualifications of riders. Rather, it aims to guarantee minimum and mandatory standards of protection for 'all workers and collaborators operating within the territory of the Metropolitan City of Bologna who use one or more digital platforms for the exercise of their work activities' (Lombardo, 2019) regardless of their employment status. The Charter acknowledges that riders are entitled to a decent level of compensation. Article 6 stipulates protection in terms of work security, committing home-delivery platforms to provide riders with accident and health insurance. Other articles acknowledge riders' freedom of trade union organization, ten hours a year of remunerated trade union assembly and the collective right to protest. Despite their intensive presence in the city, multinational platforms refused to subscribe to the Charter, dramatically limiting the efficacy of the agreement. The Italian Sgnam/MyMenù platform was the only one that signed the agreement'.

²⁶⁰ Arcidiacono & Pais (2023: 14) comment: 'Consegne Etiche constitutes a new stage of the virtuous synergy between informal unionism, like RUB, and the municipality, that with the example of 'The charter of fundamental rights of digital work in the urban context', has already obtained important results in terms of worker protection at a metropolitan level. The multistakeholder approach underlying this experience therefore enhances not only relations with formal institutions but also with those less institutionalized forms which play a significant role in the urban environment, such as social movements and new experiences of the collectivization of worker action that go beyond traditional unionism. However, this virtuous multistakeholder relationship needs to be regained and reinvigorated over time and not limited to the early stage of the service design phase'.

13. facilitate processes of civic solidarity.²⁶¹

The objective is to reintroduce the ethical dimension into the platform to create a fairer distribution of value that acknowledges the efforts of bike couriers and the products sold by local retailers, while also reducing the environmental impact and reestablishing the connection between consumers, retailers, and drivers. Indeed, the conditions negotiated by the parties involved are based on three key principles: 'I) sustainable mobility; II) the platform does not require shopkeepers to pay for the service; III) couriers are regularly hired and paid 9 euros net per hour' (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2023: 4).

The experimental phase commenced with the prototyping of home deliveries in collaboration with two local cooperatives, *Dynamo* and *Idee in Movimento*, who specialize in courier and social services. These cooperatives played a significant role in the development of *Consegne Etiche*. *Dynamo* is a cooperative that promotes bicycle mobility and has prior experience in small-scale delivery services during the first lockdown. *Idee in Movimento* is a social cooperative that promoted the mutualist initiative *Staffette Alimentari Partigiane* ('Partisan Food Couriers') during the pandemic. The initiative delivered food to vulnerable social categories, such as the homeless and lonely elderly.

The first experiment took advantage of the agreement between the Macron company and the city government to distribute antiviral masks to citizens.²⁶² *Consegne Etiche* distributed 1700 antiviral masks from May 22 to June 14, 2020 (d'Alena, 2021: 155).

In October 2020, the project partnered with local retailers to experiment with food delivery. The experiment lasted until June 2021 with a progressive decrease of deliveries²⁶³ In 2022, it provided

²⁶¹ Available at: https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/images/RINNOVARE_CANTIERI/2020_05_26_Cantiere_ConsegneEtiche_report.pdf.

²⁶² More information can be found at <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/45-uncategorised/2314-i-residenti-possono-acquistare-e-ricevere-a-casa-l-e-mascherine-prodotte-da-macron>. Citizens residing in Bologna could access the service (no longer active) at: <https://www.macron.com/stop-covid.html>.

²⁶³ The project involved two *NaturaSi* supermarkets, two *Coop* supermarkets, the *Mercato Ritrovato* farmers' market, the *Mercato Albani* food market, *Zazie*, *Erbavoglio*, *Porta Pазienza*, the *Orione 2000* cooperative, the *Anna Verde boutique* and the *Equi Libreria*.

food and medicine to economically and socially vulnerable areas of Bologna, specifically the Savena neighborhood and the Pescarola area, and received 15,000 euros for this purpose. Additionally, the project has received 15,000 euros in European funding each year to provide books for those who are unable to visit the library.²⁶⁴ Currently, the first two services are inactive due to the challenges faced by the project.

4.1: Discussing the social value of Consegne Etiche, or learning through failure

I saw a risk: the ethical delivery was in danger of becoming a positioning project without activating useful services for citizens and retailers. We would have had media attention, a few deliveries with two or three iconic merchants; but, as Simona from *Dynamo* said one day, “we are interested in changing our city, not in making headlines”.

(d’Alena, 2021: 152)

The proposal’s value has been publicly recognized. Consegne Etiche was awarded the prestigious Italian design award, *Compasso d’oro*, in 2022 for its innovative content.²⁶⁵

There are certainly positive aspects to highlight. Arcidiacono and Pais (2023: 13-14) identify four main elements of interest. This is the first attempt in Italy to provide an alternative to large extractive platforms such as Just Eat, Glovo, and Deliveroo, which dominate a market worth 1.8 billion euros in 2022 (The European House Ambrosetti, 2023: 108).²⁶⁶ Therefore, it represents an experimental approach to what scholars and activists refer to as platform cooperativism (Scholz, 2016). Secondly, *Consegne Etiche* represents a negotiation among various stakeholders interested in developing shared solutions to urban issues. As such, it strengthens relationships not only with formal institutions but also with less institutionalized forms that play a crucial role in the urban

²⁶⁴ The project involves the libraries of the University of Bologna and the municipal libraries, such as the *Biblioteca Casa di Khaoula*, *Biblioteca Scandellara*, *Biblioteca Ginzburg*, *Biblioteca Corticella*, *Biblioteca Spina*, *Biblioteca SalaBorsa*, *Biblioteca Lame*, *Biblioteca Borges*, *Biblioteca Tassinari Clò*, *Biblioteca Borgo Panigale*, and *Biblioteca Pezzoli*.

²⁶⁵ The *Compasso d’Oro*, established in 1954, is the highest award in the field of industrial design in Italy. The rationale for selecting *Consegne Etiche* in the XXVII (2022) edition is as follows: ‘Cooperative platform for urban home deliveries as an alternative to large platforms. The objectives are inclusion, participation, involvement of civil society in a public service’. Source: <https://www.adi-design.org/xxvii-compasso-d-oro-i-vincitori.html>. Translation is mine.

²⁶⁶ Available at: https://acadmin.ambrosetti.eu/dompdf/crea_wmark.php?doc=L2F0dGFjaG1lbnRzL3BkZi9yZXBvcnQtc29zdGVuaWJpbG10YS0yMDIzLTIwMjMwNjA5MTAucGRm&id=18199&muid=corporate.

environment, such as social movements and new forms of unionism. Thirdly, *Consegne Etiche* aims to unite driver cooperatives in a federal organization. Finally, the project design considers the socio-economic effects of the pandemic on consumption habits and work, which have unpredictable long-term results. Therefore, it is important to consider how the project will integrate into post-pandemic strategies and policies related to mobility and sustainability.

Moreover, the project has inspired others to experiment along the same lines. For instance, local administrations like Bergamo and Firenze, organized civil society (*Robin Food* was founded in Firenze in 2021, the first truly cooperative food delivery platform, with the support of the *CGIL* trade union and *Legacoop*), and social enterprises such as *So.DE Social Delivery* in Milan.

In addition, it is not easy to assess its social value due to a lack of data. A participatory approach was not feasible for this case study due to several unexpected challenges. One of the cooperatives responsible for managing the delivery service, *Dynamo*, was forced to cease operations in December 2021 due to issues unrelated to *Consegne Etiche*. The project was then continued by *Idee in Movimento*. The team from *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*, responsible for the project, had high expectations but also expressed frustration. Finding suitable terrain for action research proved to be difficult. To conduct the following analysis, I made use of the Public Assembly on Ethical Delivery, internal and official documents of the project, and a semi-structured interview with a member of the *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana* responsible for the project.

4.1.1 Emerging qualitative elements of transformational change from semi-structured interview and public discourse analysis

*“The last thing I want to say, still on this theme, is about neo-mutualism. So **these cooperatives are, in my opinion, an urgent, transformative infrastructure for the city.** But they are also a great opportunity to incorporate, to leaven, a series of other experiences that, as I said, this time of emergency is cultivating. I think **the emergency is an opportune moment to cultivate change,** and we are seeing extraordinary things. In particular, we are seeing things that **arise from the clash between the digital dimension, driven by the hyper-connectivity that isolation produces in all of***

us, and a growing territorial sensitivity. Today there are many prototypes of projects, solutions and platforms”.

(Stefano Venturi, economist and director of AICCON)

“Parallel to these platforms of profit, there are also platforms of solidarity, that society that has organized itself from individual buildings, where perhaps tenants have begun to do the shopping for their elderly neighbor, to more organized, branched forms in the city”.

(Alessandro Blasi, *Idee in Movimento*)

This section discusses the social value of Consegne Etiche, starting with an analysis of the public discourse that formally inaugurated the process, the aforementioned public assembly, in order to set the ground for the discussion. The section then continues with the analysis of the semi-structured interview that I managed to collect, together with data gathered from different sources, in order to read the evolution of the project in light of the premises given by the assembly.

Raffaele Laudani, then president of *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*,²⁶⁷ explains the genesis and purpose of the public meeting held on April 29, 2020.²⁶⁸ The meeting aimed to initiate a debate and establish a process for creating a local and urban alternative to extractive supply platforms. The alternative would be based on mutualism and ethical concerns and inspired by municipalist examples such as Barcelona's.

*“Welcome to this assembly that inaugurates a new project of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana as part of the broader Observatory on the Coronavirus Emergency. The idea is to promote a series of projects through which, in the words of Joan Subirats [Barcelona's Culture Councillor], “the institutional public and the community public can try to experiment together with new solutions”, innovative solutions that are **capable of responding to the emergency**, but which can also act as **prototypes for longer-term solutions**. From this point of view, it seemed almost natural to us to*

²⁶⁷ Laudani is currently a member of the municipal council since 2021 and serves as Councilor Delegate for Urban Planning and Private Construction, Planning and Strategic Projects, Heritage, Digital Twin, Science, Research, and Knowledge.

²⁶⁸ The full video is available in Italian at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=779983492406837.

imagine, as a first “building site”, the theme of ethical alternatives to home delivery, that is, to try to imagine if it is possible to reconcile mutualist projects and projects linked to new platforms”.

Laudani, a key political supporter of the project (d’Alena, 2021: 152), highlights the urgency of pre-existing needs that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Specifically, *“The emergency has made it even more clear that the issue of home delivery and the relationship between the platform and home delivery is crucial today. Let it be something that goes beyond the already important issue of food delivery, but that makes it even more clear that home delivery is a fundamental infrastructure of cities today. A social infrastructure around which it is perhaps possible to imagine different mutualistic and cooperative solutions to the system of platform capitalism. The emergency, in our opinion, has made this need even more urgent”.*

The public assembly is an interesting attempt to carry out a municipalist process with the aspiration to be transformative, bringing into communication different and often distant worlds: university and research institutions, representatives of the city government, local associations and cooperatives, and more informal actors such as social movements.

As Professor Sandro Mezzadra points out, *“there is a very close relationship between the crisis and platforms, a relationship that we are facing again today. I think it is fair to say that platforms are candidates to emerge from this crisis as one of the winners. In recent weeks, we have seen a further entrenchment of platforms in our lives”.* He goes on to explain how they are politically relevant: *“Platforms are essentially infrastructures. At the same time, precisely as infrastructures, they are essential political devices, devices that we could define as governmental. In the very precise sense that they determine the governance of behaviors, practices, and social relations. I think this is a very important point, and affirming the political character of the platform as a form does not, of course, mean demonizing it. It means, for example, asking how the platform can be used within deeply democratic processes of governance. From this point of view, appropriation, the private ownership of platforms, is necessarily a terrain of conflict and negotiation”.*

Stefano Venturi, economist and director of *AICCON*, points out that it is necessary to overcome the prevailing approach that considers cooperatives, and mutualism in general, in a reparative way, mostly as an “antidote” to market or state failures. At a deeper level, ***“it is not just a solution that tries to solve the problems of contractual regulation, but it reaches into the mechanisms of value production. And I think that is the challenge, we have to be aware of that. At least personally, this is the real, the true characteristic of innovation, the transformative one. That is, mutualism, in these solutions, especially in this historical moment, acts as a coagulant with respect to a value that often evaporates. In this sense, cooperative platforms are an antidote to extractive platforms”***.

According to Venturi, promoting a new way of producing, allocating, and distributing value is challenging because ***“we have entered an era in which wealth is no longer concentrated in the hands of the working citizen, but in the hands of the consumer citizen. And this has been made possible primarily by business models, let's say corporations, that orchestrate rather than create value”***. In the context of delivery platforms, this means ***“that they are utilizing the last mile [...] as a mere appendage”***. In contrast, the recent proliferation of bottom-up cooperative initiatives, including those that emerged during the pandemic, can be defined as a form of *neo-mutualism*, ***“because they are created not so much to extract, much less to be scalable, but to promote a kind of mutuality and mutual benefit at the community level, obviously valorizing work, valorizing individual contributions and creating new generation goods and services”***. To support this transformation, or ‘transformed normality’ as the economist calls it, we need to ***“to invest in an authentic and massive way”***.

The role and perspective of public administrators then became crucial. In this context, former councilor Marco Lombardo²⁶⁹ made a statement that, at least on a discursive level, supports different forms of value production and reconsiders the role of the public sector. He claims that a

²⁶⁹ Marco Lombardo is a former municipal councilor in charge of European policies and international relations, international cooperation, NGOs, work, productive activities, the “Insieme per il Lavoro” project and policies for the third sector.

new space is open “to imagine that public intervention in the economy does not have to be seen as a form of return to unauthorized statism. **Public intervention in the economy is allowed.** If we consider the logistics sector, especially short-distance logistics, to be strategic, essential and a priority, **then forms of public intervention or organization that combine mutualism with platform issues are strategic elements that can be realized around a new concept: the value chain rather than the profit chain**”.

Tommaso Falchi, the spokesperson for the Riders Union of Bologna, highlights the crucial perspective of bike couriers who experience what he defines as a fundamental contradiction in their situation. “**We are considered indispensable workers, some even define us as heroes, but the conditions in which we work are the same or even worse**”.²⁷⁰ Falchi explains what this means in concrete terms: “we work with contracts, let's say, for occasional services. We are considered “false” self-employed. We have the blackmail of the piece rate, the majority of platforms pay on delivery, the ranking and the rating. And so we are controlled. There are rankings of who is more or less efficient, who has the right and priority to work over others. And in fact a whole series of other issues, especially related to trade union rights”.

Simona Larghetti, for her part, brings her experience as an activist for sustainable mobility and as the founder of *Dynamo*, one of the cooperatives that will become a strategic partner of the *Consegna Etiche* project. “As *Dynamo Velostation*, for those who don't know us, we are the bike park under the *Montagnola Park*. Our core business has always been that of guarded parking, bike repairs linked to events and culture to promote the use of bicycles. But already a year ago we took part in a call for *Legacoop* companies to imagine a branch of a new business related to bicycle logistics”. As a result, *Dynamo* partnered with local businesses, including *Forno Brisa* bakery and *Mercato Ritrovato* farmers' market, to organize an experimental home delivery service.

²⁷⁰ During the pandemic and lockdown, delivery drivers were classified as essential workers, despite their deteriorating working conditions. This is especially significant due to the inadequate provision of personal protective equipment by delivery platforms.

She addresses a crucial issue regarding value: the recognition of the social and economic value that delivery personnel provide. “*In our opinion, retailers must do this work of **recognizing the importance of paying for this value**, which must not be free delivery that disqualifies the work done, and also the service and time saved for the end user. Because let's not forget that the end user pays, but he saves because it is time that he does not spend and this thing must also be improved on a communicative level*”. The question of who bears the cost (retailers, platforms, or end users) is a crucial point of discussion that *Consegne Etiche* may find challenging to address concretely.

Emily Clancy, the promoter of *Don't Panic*, a network of grassroots initiatives that emerged during the pandemic to assist people in need, emphasizes the importance of workers' participation in the platform. “*If this is the case, **it will be truly mutualism**, in the sense that **only the workers can and must decide on the production process**, and there will be no recovery from this crisis if there is no economic democracy*”. Indeed, Piero Ingrosso, AlmaVico's vice president, emphasizes that cooperation is essentially a platform created to respond to specific needs. However, for-profit or extractive platforms, as they are called, are also created to respond to specific needs. Therefore, the goal of responding to needs is not enough. “*It is important to intervene immediately to avoid distortions in the models*”, he says, “*and this is the work we want to do. Regarding the centrality of this territory, **cooperation**, as opposed to extractive platforms, **has two elements: one is the centrality of labor**, understood as workers' rights, and the other is the **attention to the communities that inhabit the territory***”.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the point of view of the other cooperative at the heart of *Consegne Etiche*: *Idee in Movimento*. Alessandro Blasi, president of the social cooperative, adds important elements to the discussion. In particular, paying attention to the content of what is supplied, not only the context (“*the issue of ethical products, local ethical products and local trade*”) but also “*the integration of the most vulnerable into the workforce*”, considering the negative impact of the pandemic on the labor markets.

Blasi proposes another interesting element that is relevant for the direction the project will take in its evolution: a change of direction from food delivery to welfare services within the framework of

home delivery services, building on self-organized experiences already taking place in Bologna. “***We must also imagine solidarity at home as a form of ethical economy, as a form of cooperation, also as a form of experimentation, of social, educational and welfare intervention.*** Because I think that we should not only try to bring apples instead of pizzas, instead of packages, but perhaps we could also do some very interesting experiments where those who go home by bicycle are an educator, a nurse who goes to the elders living in the neighborhood”.

Despite the diversity of perspectives, interests, and vocabularies used, the panelists share a common discourse that recognizes the ‘negative externalities’ of the current food delivery model. They emphasize the relevance of local and community-based alternatives to it. Simultaneously, there is a widespread concern that this endeavor may remain a niche experiment. Blasi emphasizes the crucial role of regulatory frameworks in redistributing power among different actors, stating that “***if initiatives are not taken that oblige, that oblige the bad guys in delivery [referring to extractive platforms] to respect workers’ rights, if this Charter of Rights does not come into force in Bologna, in Emilia Romagna, in Italy, and if we do not lend a hand to make these things happen, then the risk is that we are thinking about an ethical option, but it remains a niche option***”.

After approximately two years of experimentation, I interviewed Chiara Sponza, a process and service designer at *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*. She was part of the team that co-planned the *Consegne Etiche* project.

Consegne Etiche is referred to as a prototype because, despite initial hopes and aspirations, it did not lead to the development of a new cooperative platform for bicycle couriers. The project's strength was that it reinforced existing experiences within the territory, rather than creating a cooperative of riders from scratch (Arcidiacono & Pais, 2023: 13). However, the breakthrough has not yet occurred. The main reasons for this will be discussed.

As Chiara Sponza points out, the project was developed within the framework of an observatory on the changes brought about by the pandemic at the city level, and therefore “*the theme was: “we don't have a proposal, let's say an answer, but let's think together about what the solution could be”*”. The Municipality of Bologna and the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana acted as facilitators of a bottom-up process, allowing participants to directly influence the direction of the project. As Sponza acknowledges, “*The sensitivity, so to speak, of the cooperatives that participated in the experiment was fundamental. In other words, the fact that it was Idee or Dynamo had a great influence on the type of path that was taken*”. In particular, the cooperative Idee in Movimento “*approached the issue from a different perspective. In the sense that they responded to the need for a domestic service by providing a free service. In this sense, they also participated in the co-planning, **promoting all the more the social aspects that, in fact, very much determined the direction of Consegne Etiche, as it is now becoming***”.

In terms of assets and skills, in addition to research, co-design and facilitation, the municipality and the foundation provided a showcase website as digital support, where people could find information about the project and a map of the services offered. The decision not to create a digital platform was initially motivated by Chiara Sponza, with the aim of maintaining a direct relationship between the customer, retailer, and bike courier, differentiating it from large delivery platforms. The website allows users to mark their home location and provides information on the nearest active retailers or services, such as the market, supermarket or library. Contact information is available on the site for direct communication. She explains: “*It was decided not to give the delivery person less freedom, so to speak, to organize himself in the time slots. And that's mainly to discriminate against, let's say, general generic platforms. But in favor of a contract that guarantees you working hours, and you know that on Tuesdays you have this shift, so you cover this area, and therefore you have a relationship with this library, this shopkeeper, this supermarket*”.

The experiment has the potential to be valuable for future research and experimentation, providing insights gained from a trial-and-error approach. Transformative elements emerged during the process, with actors negotiating different needs and interests and recognizing challenges. As Sponza explains, Consegne Etiche has been developed as “*an **iterative process where we started with***

*different types of models, including sustainability models. So that is why I said it is not a start-up. In the sense that **it was built empirically, even crashing ourselves from time to time.** In the sense that the first case we started from was that of the markets”.*

The food delivery service was gradually expanded to different types of retailers. However, the number of deliveries remained quite small throughout the experiment. For instance, in December 2020, 182 grocery deliveries were made, and this number decreased over time until the experiment was completely stopped in July 2021.²⁷¹ The main challenges were obtaining sufficient deliveries to warrant contracts for bike couriers, adjusting to the varying requirements of different retailers, identifying alternative methods to ensure economic sustainability while competing with exploitative platforms that fail to adequately acknowledge the worth of their workers.

*“We then extended it to Vittorio Veneto, Albani market, and even there we encountered a certain type of request. So we tested another type of service, the one that is linked to supermarkets. Supermarkets where you shop on site and ask for delivery at the checkout. So it's really just for transportation. Or we have activated it with some restaurateurs, for example with Zazie, with L'Erbavoglio, the home delivery of meals during lunch time. And in this case, the experiment was: we try to combine as many deliveries as possible in the shortest possible time, so that we can also optimize the cost of home delivery. In fact, **at the beginning, we decided to pass on the cost of the delivery to the customer, precisely in order to make it clear what the cost of a delivery man's work is for an hour's work”.***

As previously stated, the primary concern for an ethical delivery platform is acknowledging the worth of its workers and establishing a just and sustainable method of remuneration. In this regard, the communication campaign conducted by *Consegne Etiche* (refer to Figure 35) is undeniably valuable in terms of increasing awareness of a critical matter at the community level, although its

²⁷¹ The data are taken from an internal report of the *Fondazione Innovazione Urbana*.

practical effectiveness is challenging to evaluate. In 2021, Fondazione Innovazione Urbana produced a freely available online documentary on Consegne Etiche.²⁷²

Figure 35. Advertising flyer of Consegne Etiche

Mai come in questo periodo abbiamo potuto toccare con mano l'utilità degli acquisti online. **Ma come vengono pagati i fattorini? Quali costi devono sostenere i commercianti locali?**

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Consegne etiche nasce grazie a due cooperative, Dynamo e Idee in movimento, con il supporto del centro universitario per la formazione e la promozione dell'impresa cooperativa AlmaVico, che hanno aderito ad un progetto coordinato da Fondazione per l'Innovazione Urbana e Comune di Bologna.



fondazione
innovazione urbana




²⁷² The documentary titled *Le consegne etiche. Un video documentario sul servizio a domicilio etico e sostenibile nato a Bologna* (Ethical deliveries. A video documentary on the ethical and sustainable home delivery service launched in Bologna) is available at: <https://openddb.it/film/le-consegne-etiche/#>.

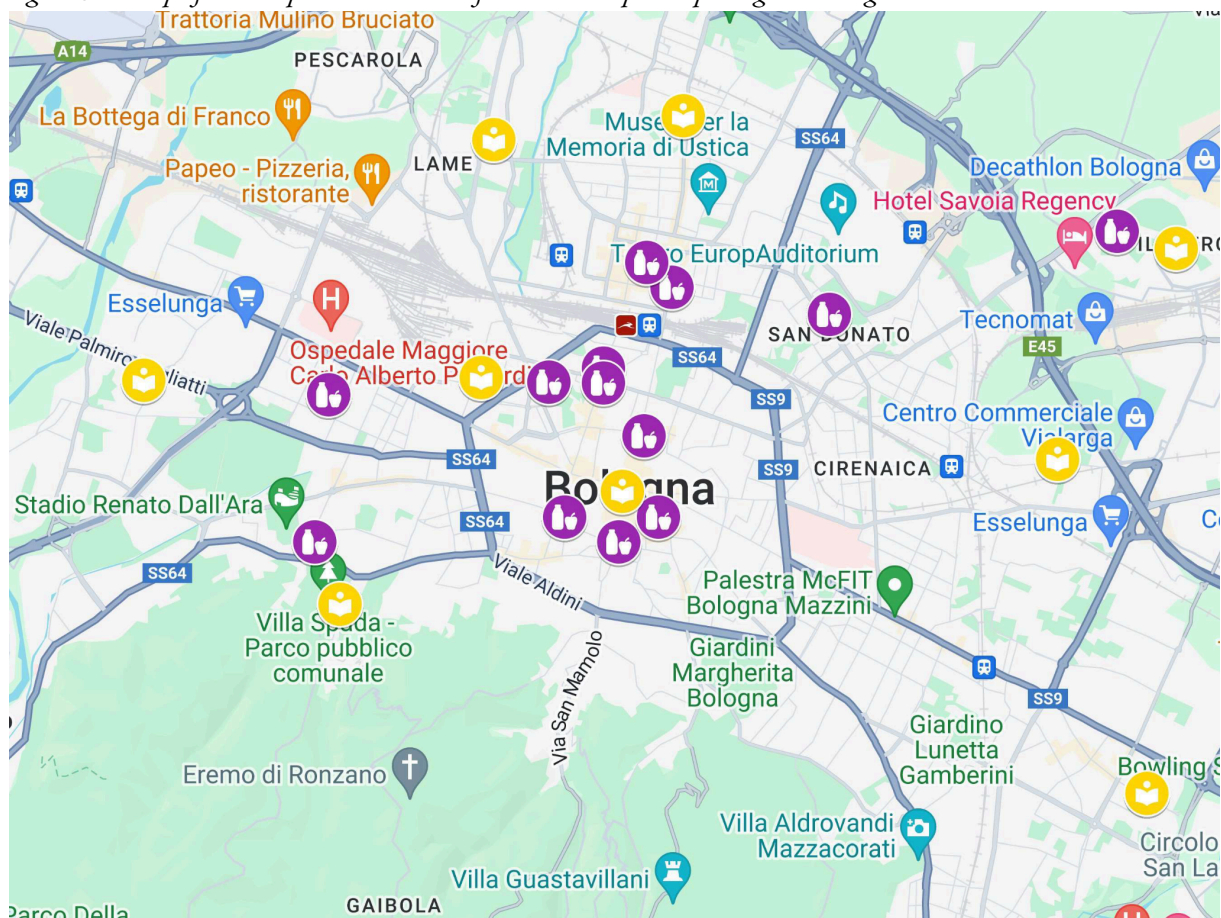
 <p>ORDINANDO IL PANE A DOMICILIO, PUOI SOSTENERE L'ECONOMIA LOCALE</p>	 <p>ORDINANDO LIBRI A DOMICILIO, PUOI RISPETTARE L'AMBIENTE</p>
<p>Circa il 30% del guadagno di un commerciante va alle piattaforme. Proviamo a garantire equità e trasparenza nelle transazioni, facendole gestire direttamente dalle attività commerciali del territorio coinvolte.</p>	<p>Per ogni consegna con mezzo a combustione si producono circa 100 gr/km di CO2. Utilizzando biciclette e cargo-bike stiamo cercando di portarle a zero.</p>
 <p>ORDINANDO LA SPESA A DOMICILIO, PUOI SOSTENERE PRATICHE ETICHE</p>	 <p>ORDINANDO LA FRUTTA A DOMICILIO, PUOI RISPETTARE I DIRITTI DEI LAVORATORI</p>
<p>Le nostre scelte possono contribuire a diffondere un nuovo modello di scambio solidale e sostenibile.</p> <p><small>I dati provengono da stime relative alle piattaforme che non hanno aderito alla Carta dei diritti fondamentali per il lavoro digitale nel contesto urbano di Bologna, promossa dal Comune di Bologna.</small></p>	<p>Un fattorino percepisce 5,5€ lordi l'ora. Proviamo a garantire salario minimo, sicurezza e dignità lavorativa, assicurando 9€ netti l'ora e tutte le tutele (infortuni, malattia, ecc.) che un lavoratore dovrebbe avere.</p>  <p>consegnetiche.it</p>

Source: Consegne Etiche website

According to Chiara Sponza, “at the peak of the service, there were six delivery boys active”. After delivering food, Consegne Etiche decided to explore new directions with books, taking into account the local resources and needs and how to effectively combine them. She recalls, “So we tried to experiment with this whole series of models until we arrived at home delivery of books, which has a **different kind of sustainability in the sense that it is free for the citizen** because it is provided by Biblioteche [the network of municipal libraries], but it **allowed us to develop a widespread model**. So by following the distribution of libraries in the area, which are one or two per neighborhood, then it depends on the neighborhoods, but they are distributed in areas, you can obviously also optimize the logistics of the delivery person”. This service proved to be the most successful and long-lasting. Additionally, as of September 2021, the University of Bologna's library system has been included in the book delivery project.²⁷³

²⁷³ More information is available at: <https://www.fondazioneinnovazioneurbana.it/45-uncategorised/2727-consegne-etiche-i-libri-delle-biblioteche-dell-ateneo-a-casa-di-studenti-e-docenti>.

Figure 36. Map of municipal libraries and food retailers participating in Consegne Etiche



Source: Google maps

However, the promoters faced specific resistance and frictions in this context as well. According to Sponza, “There is a service called PAD, the Home Library Loan, which is done with Ethical Deliveries. We had also tried to do interlibrary loan, which is, let's say, a wholesale transfer of books between one library and another, which they do every two weeks, I think. The PIC, **the circulating interlibrary loan, and that was actually much better for the delivery people because I move a large number of books in a shorter period of time and therefore you can do many more steps and at a lower price. And still nothing happened. So they decided to stay with the PAD, also because they can use pickup trucks for that, they decided to continue using pickup trucks because it was convenient, and so it was like a failure. But even there, compared to what was convenient for the customer and in this case for the library**”.

Negotiating interdependencies is proving to be a significant challenge for this type of cooperative platform. However, the project has demonstrated remarkable adaptability to the local context by moving in different directions. Sponza explains the third form of experimentation as follows: “*In the last phase it became more and more social, with **Consegne Solidali**, let's say a spin-off, activated also thanks to the PON funding,²⁷⁴ which focused mainly on areas of Bologna in situations of particular fragility. Then Pescaraola and the Savena area to go and distribute expenses and hot meals to families reported by the services. So that's where it's going*”.²⁷⁵

According to available data, Consegne Etiche completed 3,877 deliveries across all mentioned services as of January 2022. However, recent quantitative data is unavailable, and no qualitative data has been produced thus far. The long-term goal of creating a cooperative platform with adequate investments in technology and human capital has not yet been achieved. In this sense, the transformative potential of this initiative appears limited at this time. Sponza highlights that Fondazione Innovazione Urbana is a research center and not an incubator. The other actors involved in the process have provided their expertise as consultants, but there has been no concrete investment to build a platform. Sponza concludes: “*It would have been nice to continue this experiment in that sense. However, other types of subjects were needed, which have not yet been found*”. As Sponza points out, it is not just a question of technology, “*it is also a question of **having the skills and human resources to manage it***”.

In any case, despite being a prototype, or perhaps because of it, Consegne Etiche offers an opportunity to build on knowledge: “*What was also needed was a greater facilitation from a technological point of view, but since it did not have the means to develop, it was put on hold. So the limit was recognized and we moved on to the more social part, which was the part that interested the subjects involved. So let's say that the **different models were tested, studied, the***

²⁷⁴ The funds for this service are public, as in the case of book delivery, and are specifically covered by PON, which stands for National Operational Programs. These funds manage European Structural and Investment Funds.

²⁷⁵ In the *Idee in Movimento* Social report 2022, it is stated that: ‘thanks to the “*Consegne Solidali*” [Solidarity Deliveries] project, which ended in December 2022 after a fruitful collaboration with the association Salvaciclisti A.P.S., it was possible to bring hot meals and shopping bags, provided by support organizations in the city, to the homes of elderly people and people in difficulty in the Savena or Navile districts’. Available at: <https://www.ideeinmovimento-coop.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/bilanciosociale2022.pdf>.

limits were defined and they were kept there. In the sense that they are all tools that we know a little bit about, also in terms of future planning for the city, in terms of how we can use them again. And that's a little bit of a challenge for us”.

Cooperative platform initiatives are often hindered by insufficient skills and investment.²⁷⁶ Additionally, capitalist extractive platforms hold a quasi-monopolistic position in a highly uneven playing field. This problem remains largely unaddressed in the absence of decisive regulatory policies. As d’Alena (2021: 154) poignantly summarizes, ‘The challenge became increasingly complex, in part because it was clear that the distance between Amazon and a small neighborhood hardware store could not be bridged by the Civic Imagination Office’.²⁷⁷

However, there is another significant challenge to overcome: the cultural barrier. As Martinelli notes, ‘even before cooperative platforms, the cooperative model is still little known’.²⁷⁸ Therefore, the value of this initiative lies in influencing public debate, opening discussions on the hidden conditions of precarious contemporary work, ethical alternatives to extractive platforms, and promoting awareness campaigns.

According to Sponza, the project garnered attention: *“in terms of impact on this issue, it was very positive to be able to establish a dialogue, even outside the city, with other cities like Bergamo, like Florence, which were moving, let's say, in the same direction, but with different results. For Florence, more led by CGIL, for Bergamo, more led by the municipality, to create solutions that also went against the extraction platforms. So on this point it was particularly interesting to be able to stimulate each other in the discussion of the issue”.*

The participatory dimension has played a crucial role in the process, although it appears to have been utilized primarily in the early stages. Consegne Etiche has successfully brought together a

²⁷⁶ Megan Carnegie, ‘Worker-Owned Apps Are Redefining the Sharing Economy’, *Wired*, June 30, 2022, available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/gig-economy-worker-owned-apps/>.

²⁷⁷ Translation is mine.

²⁷⁸ Interview with Francesca Martinelli on the evolution from sharing economy to cooperative platforms, published on *Pandora Rivista* on June 3, 2022. Available at: <https://www.pandorarivista.it/articoli/dalla-sharing-economy-alle-piattaforme-cooperative-intervista-a-francesca-martinelli/>.

diverse group of actors, and there's been an unusual and remarkable recognition on the part of the municipality of the value created by informal organizations such as grassroots unions and social movements. Sponza explains: *“During the summer, there was a series of interviews, I would say about fifteen interviews, and two joint planning tables that involved both the actors directly involved and Riders Union, that brought us their experience and together we understood, let's say, what were the critical points and the points that needed to be improved in the experience of the riders. So a collective decision was made to embrace the contract and the contractualization rather than, let's say, the piecework service. That was one of the choices that came out of the co-design tables”*.

Chapter 6: Conclusions (draft)

This thesis examined the concept of transformative Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) as an analytical tool through empirical observation. The research is motivated by the observation that much of the literature and public discourse focuses on SSE as a substitute welfare provider targeting specific population groups or presents a market-driven approach. However, there is also growing attention to SSE and its potential for positive social change. In this study, I analyzed SSE initiatives in an urban context in Southern Europe to determine if, how, and under what conditions they are transformative. The research question was developed based on a literature review and practitioners' experiences to address the barriers that SSE initiatives face in relation to the mainstream economy and discourse. It is argued that developing alternative readings of value can shift our economic perspectives and open up new economic possibilities. I suggested that diverse and community economies scholarship provides a valuable perspective for understanding transformative SSE that goes beyond the limitations of capitalocentrism.

I conducted participatory action research in Bologna, the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region in northern Italy. The research question was presented to the case study participants and preliminary answers were elaborated through a continuous exchange of information, feedback loops, data collection and restitution.

The question at hand is how to practice social and solidarity economy without promoting welfare cuts and a deepening of capitalism. The main hypothesis for transformative SSE is that no initiative in the social and solidarity economy can be associated with, justify, or promote budget cuts in welfare spending, austerity measures, or other similar conservative and regressive policies, either directly or indirectly. More importantly, SSE is neither a sector of the economy nor a policy tool (although it can be analyzed as such), but rather an open project of democratizing the economy and

an ongoing conversation about possible ways to meet our needs in a sustainable, democratic and equitable way.

Chapter One, *Exploring the Social and Solidarity Economy as a Post-Capitalist Practice*, laid the theoretical groundwork for the research. To productively study the Social and Solidarity Economy, three necessary theoretical moves are argued for: reframing the economy, reframing the SSE, and reframing value. These moves build on the critical thinking strategy of reframing employed by diverse economies.

Chapter Two, *On Collapsing the Distinction between Epistemology and Ontology: A Discussion on the Selection of Case Studies*, presented the case studies selection process as based on specific entry points and ethical concerns. The selection criteria include organizations that qualify as enterprises, do not provide welfare services, are pioneers in their field, and therefore do not have a clear legal status. Personal inclinations, commitment, and knowledge of the local context were also taken into account.

Chapter Three, *Research Methodology or How to Deal with Miscommunication, Contingency, and Particularity*, outlined participatory research, both in its theoretical implications and in the concreteness of empirical research. The methods were presented with a special focus on the participatory process using the Theory of Change. ToC was also discussed as a valuable discursive practice of evaluation, acknowledging both its limitations and advantages.

Chapter four, “The risk is aesthetics”: discourses and narratives on the Social and Solidarity Economy in 'Red Bologna', presented the contextual background for the fieldwork. The chapter focused on the salient features of the chosen urban context, its civic and cooperativist traditions, as well as current trends and challenges. Discourse analysis was then used to examine SSE narratives in the city of Bologna through interviews with selected support organizations.

Chapter Five, *Analyzing the Transformative Social and Solidarity Economy in the Urban Context: Researching an Italian Case Study*, provided an in-depth analysis of four case studies: *Camilla*,

Arvaia, Il Passo della Barca, and Consegne Etiche. The chapter offered a detailed account of the ToC participatory workshops with Camilla's members and their main results. The collected data was analyzed using 'thick description' to allow for the emergence of social value from the experiences and voices of practitioners. Critical elements or tension points were also identified and discussed.

Section One: Main findings

Chapter Four reveals that the urban context of Bologna plays a crucial role in the evolution of the local Social and Solidarity Economy. This explains the high concentration of organizations and its pioneering role in different fields. Bologna's social capital is widely acknowledged in the literature since Putnam's seminal work (1993), and its socialist municipalist tradition contributes to this. However, the city also exhibits signs of commodification and neoliberalization, including touristification, housing accessibility issues, increasing living costs, precarious labor, and declining purchasing power. To avoid oversimplifying opposing narratives, a diverse economies lens can help recognize the diversity of actors, practices, institutional arrangements, and policies that exist in this complex environment. This lens can also reveal the range of possibilities available for making the city a place of reciprocity, care, and sustainability.

The discourse analysis conducted on interviews with public and private support agencies related to SSE has highlighted the presence of different narratives of SSE in the urban fabric. These narratives sometimes overlap and sometimes conflict. The terms social enterprise, social economy, and third sector are widely used, while solidarity economy is a less recognized conceptual category. Despite the increasing global recognition of the social and solidarity economy label, its cultural acceptance is heavily influenced by local specificities. In Bologna, both approaches have a long-standing tradition. However, a dialogue between the two cannot be assumed, as demonstrated by the divergent views of the regional Forum of the Solidarity Economy and the Forum of the Third Sector. The social economy is commonly associated with the occupational capacity of its cooperatives and the third sector's role as a provider of social services. Additionally, the solidarity economy is often characterized by informal grassroots groups. This separation of the social economy from the

solidarity economy is relevant, because discourses are always intertwined with social relations. It is therefore crucial to reduce the perceived distance and lack of knowledge among public administrators and the general public to increase the possibilities for SSE. This is particularly applicable to experiences within the solidarity economy, which are frequently less institutionalized and more radical, yet generate significant social value. The narratives already reveal multiple elements of convergence to build upon.

On the one hand, discourse analysis reveals a widespread awareness that marketing strategies by interested actors can obscure and dilute the transformative potential of SSE. Including elements of social and environmental sustainability in narratives without practical change is a common practice that risks prioritizing aesthetics over real change, as Viviani has pointed out. On the other hand, investing in measuring and communicating the social value produced by SSE organizations has emerged as a crucial element in resisting cooptation and disseminating knowledge. The public sector has been identified as having an important role to play in supporting this.

At the discursive level, two interviews suggested that some solidarity economy initiatives may become self-referential and have limited impact outside their own circle due to their ideological positioning. The term “Indian reservation” was used to describe this phenomenon. Despite its colonial derivation, the term highlights an important tension point that is often at play when ‘alternative’ practices confront the mainstream.

1.1: “Creating and defending the Indian reservation?”. Addressing the limitations and challenges of the case studies

Chapter five identified tension points for the Camilla case study that emerged from participatory workshops. These points are specific to this organization but can be valuable considerations for other grassroots and self-managed organizations working towards social and environmental sustainability. Four tension points were discussed in particular:

1. *Balancing Social and Environmental Sustainability with Affordability*
2. *Economic Sustainability versus Environmental Sustainability*

3. *The increase in available products should not come at the expense of sober and sustainable consumption.*
4. *It is important to ensure a sustainable distribution of responsibilities among members, rather than an unequal one.*

Identifying tension points is crucial for SSE organizations to track progress. Ongoing negotiations must be mediated to maintain dialogical and learning aspects. It can be challenging to resist the instinct to avoid discussing failure, as it involves acknowledging mistakes and the often negative emotions they evoke. However, it is essential to overcome the habit of judgmental self-censorship and learn from the inevitable mistakes made on the journey towards transformative SSE.

These tensions relate to both internal and external aspects of the organization. The concept of value in its multiple dimensions is the narrative thread. The contradictions in SSE initiatives stem from the power to determine the appropriation and distribution of value. These initiatives can be perceived as “Indian reservations” due to their presumed elitism, ideological nature, or lack of replicability, depending on the critique. This is because commonly accepted capitalist practices and metrics make it difficult to recognize other forms of value. SSE organizations often struggle to involve individuals with limited resources, time, and commitment, which can lead to burnout and defection.

The fieldwork revealed that the majority of participants in the case studies belong to the X generation. This indicates reduced participation from younger and older generations. The participants have a high level of cultural and intellectual capital and a background in civic participation. The level of ethnic heterogeneity is low, and the income is medium. On one hand, material and immaterial resources are crucial for enabling citizens' active participation. As d'Alena (2021: 119) bluntly puts it: ‘From the point of view of the passive citizen, who is often excluded from traditional forms of participation and from the activities of associations and informal groups, the priority is to improve living conditions, not to participate. Being there, sharing, self-organizing have no value in themselves, much less transparency and participation. What counts is the impact of

the processes, which takes the form of solving problems: the power to make things happen'.²⁷⁹ On the other hand, I describe how these organizations are containers of a wealth of diverse interests, cultural backgrounds, and skills that can be exchanged.

Economic sustainability, which refers to the ability of SSE organizations to generate income, is often a crucial challenge. In fact, three out of four case studies (Arvaia, Camilla, and Consegne Etiche) show a negative trend in economic sustainability. This thesis recognizes the impact of competition from large for-profit actors, such as extractive platforms or large retailers, which makes it difficult for SSE organizations to access and maintain parts of the market. However, I emphasized how diverse economies mobilize various resources and exchange value through non-monetary or alternative market exchanges.

The existing legal framework was observed as a potential obstacle to transformative social innovation. Indeed, the status of the case studies discussed is not clearly regulated, as they are borderline and innovative experiences. However, the legal framework is also constantly evolving. In fact, the Emilia-Romagna region has already recognized the solidarity economy and community cooperatives, as they have recently become more relevant. However, there are no specific laws on food cooperatives, CSAs, community cooperatives or cooperative platforms at the national level. As a result, they operate within and beyond the boundaries of existing legal frameworks. For example, the issue of voluntary vs. paid work is a point of tension in these initiatives. Voluntary work is not expected in a cooperative enterprise, while it is strictly regulated in social cooperatives. At the moment, self-management is the category used to frame voluntary work. But this is an experimental field and a possible object of conflict with umbrella organizations. In fact, cooperative federations do not seem very open to these new models of cooperation, or at least they seem suspicious.

Finally, two case studies, Arvaia and Camilla, demonstrate the problematic relationship between institutions and SSE organizations. The local government's lack of understanding of their value is evident, as they have different languages, temporalities, and needs. The case studies reveal varying

²⁷⁹ Translation is mine.

levels of cooperation between the local government and SSE organizations, with different narratives and practical implications at play. To properly examine them, it is necessary to take the context into account. In the case of Bologna, this involves considering the concept of 'guided development', which relies on extensive social consultation and strong civic traditions as indispensable mechanisms to mitigate the effects of urban characterizations that are often labeled as neoliberal. Giovanardi and Silvagni (2021: 22) suggest that it is more important to determine the approach's concrete capacity to reduce inequalities, facilitate sustainable tourism development, and foster an inclusive urban society.

Table 35. Main obstacles identified in the case studies

	<i>Camilla</i>	<i>Arvaia</i>	<i>Il Passo della Barca</i>	<i>Consegne Etiche</i>
Main obstacles	Economic sustainability - no interest from the local government - unbalanced competition from large retailers - high commitment required - difficulty to grow beyond its circle - difficult access for vulnerable groups - rigid legal framework	Economic sustainability - difficulty in communicating with the public administration - unbalanced competition from large retailers - high commitment required - difficulty growing beyond its circle - difficult access for vulnerable people - rigid legal framework	Newsstand economic sustainability - creation of job opportunities for members - inclusion of single individuals, the elderly, young people, and those with lower incomes - rigid legal framework	Financing (high start-up costs and lack of investment) - unbalanced competition from extractive platforms - high technological and managerial skills required

1.2: Overcoming Discouragement: Opening Spaces of Possibility through a Community and Diverse Economies Approach

In an era characterized by generational *shock*, in which children have gained the certainty of the greatest possible inequality - that is, that their future will be poorer

than that of their fathers - it is crucial to get out of the shallows of the dichotomies on which many have prospered (state/market, production/redistribution) in order to rewrite development paths in which not only "how much" is produced, but "how" and "where" this value is sedimented and distributed becomes central.

(Farina, Teneggi, Venturi, Zandonai, 2017: 25)²⁸⁰

The phrase 'there is no alternative' is often present in contemporary economic conversations, reflecting a tacit Thatcherite ideology. It suggests a relationship of subordination. In this context, the authors suggest that the logic of subordinate complementarity could be applied in reverse, arguing that the success of capitalist firms depends on a solid and vital community economy (Healy & Graham, 2008: 29). Additionally, they acknowledge the importance of reproductive labor for the reproduction of society. In particular, three main categories can be identified under which the critical issues of both proponents and critics of SSE fall: exclusion, co-optation, and marginality (Healy et al, 2018).²⁸¹ However, Healy (2009) suggests that instead of looking for alternatives that are performatively rendered marginal and powerless, we should recognize, respect and build upon the vast biodiversity that already exists in the world. This includes not only human as well as more-than-humans communities.

Chapter Five describes how elements of care and reciprocity are allied for the production and circulation of social value in the forms of social relations, knowledge exchange, and mutual support. The availability of time and resources are identified as fundamental elements. As we read in *The Care Manifesto* (2020: 28-29), 'Both more time and adequate material resources are essential to ground and facilitate mutually fulfilling and imaginative practices of care, from the domestic to the planetary level - and to foster the overall well-being of all creatures, human and non-human'.

Care and community economies require intentional cultivation over time. This qualitative research reveals conflicting temporalities at play, with urgency and speed demanded by recurring

²⁸⁰ Translation is mine.

²⁸¹ For an excellent discussion see Healy & Graham (2008), Healy, Borowiak, Pavlovskaya, Safri (2018).

emergencies, technological innovation, and capital accumulation contrasting with slow processes of negotiating interdependencies, as demonstrated by the case studies. This can also take place when grassroots and self-managed experiences deal with institutional politics.²⁸² As Schmid & Taylor Aiken (2023: 5) point out, ‘Many values community initiatives pursue – such as democracy, inclusion, respect, care, and joy – cannot be instantly inaugurated. They require time. Therefore a note of caution is in order against a sense of urgency that potentially reduces or suspends spaces for democracy, controversy, reflection, and care (Newell et al., 2022)’.

Finally, the ‘imperative to scale’ discussed in the theoretical chapter is not present in any of the case studies, indicating a different interpretation. In contrast, the CSA views excessive growth as potentially negative, while the other case studies emphasize the critical role of establishing networks and connections rather than solely increasing numbers. According to Johanisova (2013: 123-124), scaling can indeed pose various problems for SSE organizations: ‘with member-based organisations, there is a risk of diluting member loyalty and decision-making power, with possible gradual taking over of governance by management and/or umbrella bodies. (Stampfer 2001). [...] The second risk involves the danger of a weakening of localised provisioning patterns [...] and their environmental benefit. [...] Thirdly, as an eco-social enterprise grows, it may lose its more stable and less competitive community market (Douthwaite 1996) and be drawn into the vortex of what Terry Clay, founder of a small British credit union, has called “the supermarket model of finance”, where business objectives tend to override environmental aims (Johanisova 2005, p. 82-83).

Table 36. Basic characteristics of case studies

²⁸² What Marco Ottolenghi told me about the Solidarity Economy Forum is revealing in this sense: “In the moment, in the phase of confrontation with the regional referents, **you have to be able to understand what are the ways, the tools, the languages with which to go to this confrontation.** Because, on the other hand, they will send you on your way. I mean, the third time... I mean, this world here, which is different from social cooperation, is very much based on volunteerism, and so there is this expectation that: “I do this in a voluntary way, so you still have to recognize and respect all the time that I dedicate”. Conversely, you compare yourself to people who are there to do their job. And so you can find the official who is more sensitive, who is more like-minded, who may also have had experience in his private life in volunteer work, in social cooperation, in civic aspects. And so he or she will have more patience in following you, in creating empowerment also through methods and tools. If, on the other hand, you meet someone who is used to dialoguing with category associations, with more structured forms of representation, **you have to be effective in the way and the time in which you make requests. Otherwise it becomes ineffective**”.

	<i>Camilla</i>	<i>Arvaia</i>	<i>Il Passo della Barca</i>	<i>Consegne Etiche</i>
Foundation year	2018	2013	2021	2020
Legal form	Consumer cooperative	Agricultural cooperative	Type A social cooperative enterprise	N/A
Organization type	Food coop	Community-supported agriculture	Urban Community Cooperative	Cooperative platform prototype
Members in 2022	627	548	100	N/A
Membership fee	125€	115€	150€	N/A

1.3: “Changing habits is a terrible thing”. Towards an understanding of the Transformative Social and Solidarity Economy

The awakening of a communal subjectivity did not emerge from common histories or qualities but from practices and feelings—of appreciation, generosity, desire to do and be with others, connecting with strangers (no matter who), encountering and transforming oneself through that experience

(Gibson-Graham, 2003: 68-69)

*“Then you have **digitalization** and the arrival of digital technologies. Look, this is, this alone is a revolution and it has elements of great concern because you are **acting a separation between mind and body. The social and the supportive are such when the body and the mind are there, let's say, simultaneously.** That is, if I were talking to you through the computer, I would not be talking to you the way I am talking to you now that you and I are here. Why is that? Because it is normal. We are not - **the human being is not only mind, he is not only body. He is both**”.*

“So, the question of digital technologies and therefore this separation of mind and body, to what extent are they an asset or a problem in the social and solidarity economy?”.

(Fausto Viviani, *Forum Terzo Settore Emilia-Romagna*)

In Chapter Five I tested the tentative hypothesis about the conditions and effects for SSE to be transformative. These hypotheses were the following.

Conditions of transformative SSE:

- *It is supported by an enabling regulatory and policy environment.*
- *Fosters the development of proper competencies, assets, and skills.*
- *Is linked to other groups and social movements that share its interests and values.*
- *Allows for democratic governance and processes.*
- *Is not utilized as a justification for budget cuts and public service outsourcing (Avelino et al., 2019: 203).*

Effects of transformative SSE:

- *It specifically addresses social needs, fosters solidarity relationships that go beyond market mechanisms.*
- *Addresses roots and symptoms of inequalities.*
- *Uses 'tactical scaling'.*
- *And promotes counter-hegemonic narratives and practices.*

Table 37 presents the synthesis of the results of the four case studies, indicating that most of the conditions and effects are present, although to varying degrees. This thesis provides a comprehensive examination of the various resources, both tangible and intangible, that these types of organizations can mobilize. Notably, none of the case studies are related to a retrenchment of the welfare state or reduction in services. Only one case study, Consegne Etiche, developed a new public service in response to an emerging need during the pandemic. This fact deserves a separate reflection.

I studied SSE organizations that do not provide social services and operate in various sectors, including food, agriculture, delivery, and urban regeneration. This highlights the existence of diverse SSE and its relevance to the wider economy, challenging the mainstream narrative. Transformative SSE involves more than providing social services to specific groups, such as people with disabilities, the unemployed, or poor migrants. The task at hand involves a renegotiation of

how social, economic, and cultural needs are met in our societies. It is not simply a matter of introducing social elements into a market-oriented society. Consegne Etiche was established to challenge extractive delivery platforms. However, due to uneven competition, it is now shifting towards the delivery of social services. This shift sends an important signal for public policy and politics in two ways. First, co-producing public policies with SSE organizations can lead to interesting experimentation in service delivery. On the other hand, creating an enabling environment for the development of SSE cannot be reduced to cultural promotion. It requires a decisive shift of resources and power from an extractive, consumerist, and unjust economy to an equitable and sustainable one. In this sense, this thesis contends that changing our perspective on economic possibilities is crucial.

As previously stated, the most critical aspects of SSE are related to assets, particularly funding and access to public assets on favorable terms, as well as regulatory frameworks that only partially recognize the most innovative SSE initiatives, making it more challenging for them to operate. Improvements in these areas could significantly enhance SSE's transformative potential.

Table 37. Comparison of transformative elements in case studies

	<i>Camilla</i>	<i>Arvaia</i>	<i>Il Passo della Barca</i>	<i>Consegne Etiche</i>
Necessary skills	Self-education - external consulting	Self-education - external consulting	Self-education - external consulting	Partly - high technological and managerial skills required
Assets	Emporium	47 hectares of land	Newsstand	Showcase website
Funding	Self-financed	Self-financed - public funds	Self-financed - public funds - crowdfunding	Public funds
External funding	<i>Banca Etica</i> free interest loan (FEMS)	<i>Banca Etica</i> free interest loan (FEMS) - EU and regional funds	Participatory budgeting	EU and regional funds

Membership in a cooperative federation	No	Confcooperative	Legacoop	N/A
Connections to social movements/ organizations/ networks	Association Campi Aperti - Network Rete Sovranità alimentare Emilia-Romagna - Network R.I.C.C.A. - Forum Economia Solidale ER - multiple organizations	URGENCI - Forum Economia Solidale Emilia-Romagna - Rete italiana CSA - Campi Aperti - multiple organizations	Local associations and cooperatives	Riders Union Bologna, grassroots organizations, research centers
Democratic participation	Self-management	Self-management	Self-management	Co-planning
Response to a decrease in public services	No	No	No	No
Social needs addressed	Access to fair, sustainable, fair-mile food, cosmetics, detergents - solidarity - sociability	Access to local, organic, fair food, - solidarity, - sociality, - income for local farmers	Proximity - solidarity - urban regeneration - parent-child spaces and services	Response to the pandemic emergency, rights of delivery workers, home delivery for special categories
Solidarity beyond the market	Redistribution - reciprocity	Redistribution - reciprocity	Redistribution - reciprocity	Redistribution - reciprocity
Addresses inequality	Yes	Yes	Not directly	Yes
Tactical Scaling	Horizontal vertical	Horizontal vertical	Horizontal vertical	Horizontal
Counter-	Solidarity	Solidarity	Community	Cooperative vs

hegemonic practices/narratives	economy, sustainable consumption	economy, sustainable consumption	economy	extractive platforms
Areas of impact	Consumption habits - solidarity relationships - knowledge exchange - environmental impact reduction - local and far economy	Consumption and production habits - solidarity relationships - knowledge exchange - environmental impact reduction - local and fair economy	Solidarity relationships - knowledge exchange - attention to environmental impact	Workers' rights - access to goods and services for vulnerable groups - environmental impact reduction - local and fair economy

The research found that different forms of social, economic, and environmental value are produced, circulated, and distributed through the case studies. In particular, the Camilla case study demonstrated how the Theory of Change can be used as a participatory tool for evaluating SSE organizations, enabling critical self-reflection and collective learning, free from pressure to conform to a prescribed model or demonstrate social return to external funders. Evaluation is an open-ended and iterative practice. I have suggested that there is no single method of evaluation and that not everything can be measured. However, the most important thing is to maintain a deliberative form of evaluation.

The studied organizations produced social values such as care, proximity,²⁸³ and solidarity. Self-management is a complex and cumbersome process, but it can also be extremely rewarding. It is not a given and is counter-cultural, so it needs to be carefully cultivated through negotiations to avoid burnout or disaffection. However, it can certainly revitalize democracy.

²⁸³ On proximity d'Alena (2021: 165) writes, 'The survey suggests that the proximity of institutions, even at the national level, must become a priority to respond not only to the current emergency, but to all future social challenges'. Translation is mine.

This thesis proposes that rethinking value can have many benefits, including addressing the multiple crises we face and promoting transformative elements of SSE. Redefining the concept of work can also be facilitated through this approach. Since city and local governments often fail to recognize the value of these initiatives and dialogue can be difficult, demonstrating their value could increase public recognition.

Transformation can occur at the individual, organizational, and societal levels through SSE practices that serve as spaces for social learning. SSE organizations are by definition collective, and their individual and organizational elements are deeply intertwined. This thesis focused specifically on the individual and partly on organizational levels. SSE practices are locally rooted but can be reproduced in other contexts because they are flexible. When considering reproducibility, lessons learned from one context can be productively applied to another, as long as they are adapted to the social, political, and cultural context (Stame, 2016: 165). It is worth noting that six years after Camilla was founded, other communities in different urban contexts followed its example and are now connected through an informal network of community emporiums.²⁸⁴ The statement holds true for CSAs as well. In Italy, five new experiences were initiated during the pandemic in 2020,²⁸⁵ along with community cooperatives.²⁸⁶

During the fieldwork, it became apparent that economic resources, such as disposable income, are essential for active participation in SSE. However, social consciousness is equally important for activating transformation. The concept of 'awareness' emerged multiple times during the action research as a crucial factor for social change.

During the reflexive phase of the action research, I was led by this 'emergence' to explore and clarify how awareness works in practice. By interacting with and observing case study participants, as well

²⁸⁴ Currently, there are six other active food cooperatives. *Alveare* (Conegliano), *Mesa Noa* (Cagliari), *Stadera* (Ravenna), *OltreFood* (Parma), *Le Vie dell'Orto* (Grosseto), and *Edera* (Trento). Furthermore, *Eufemia* (Milano) is in the process of being established.

²⁸⁵ <https://altreconomia.it/le-nuove-csa-nate-nella-pandemia-per-unagricoltura-di-relazione/>.

²⁸⁶ According to the Emilia-Romagna region, 'In 2021, there were 33 community cooperatives associated: 26 in the rural area, 5 in the urban area, and 2 in surrounding municipalities'. Available at: <https://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/notizie/2022/luglio/territorio-emiliaromagna-sostiene-le-cooperative-di-comunita>.

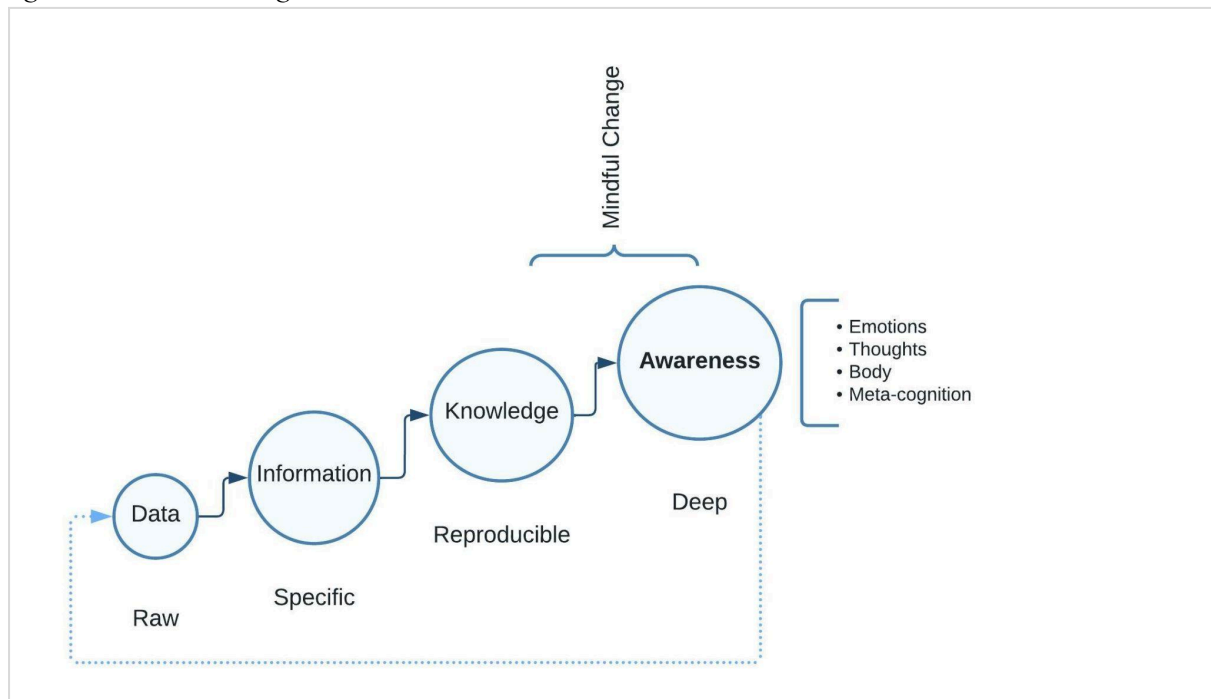
as drawing on my personal experience as a practitioner, I realized the significance of distinguishing between data, information, knowledge, and awareness. This distinction can help us understand why desired changes are often not achieved.

This distinction is not new. Neuroscience (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), along with emerging research fields that link mindfulness to social and environmental sustainability (Sajjad & Shahbaz, 2020), can aid in the development of tools to promote conscious social change.

In any case, one issue is the interchangeable treatment of different categories, where awareness is sometimes mistaken for knowledge and information when it is not. It is important to distinguish between these concepts as they relate to different elements of our understanding of the world. Data is the raw material used to start the process, information is specific and knowledge is reproducible.²⁸⁷ Awareness, as shown in Figure 37, is profound. The root of the problem lies in Western culture's persistent mind-body dichotomy, which has led to the repression, ignorance, and mystification of the unconscious, emotional, sensory, and physical dimensions of human life. As neuroscientist Aberkane (2017: 84) explains, 'While introspection is an irreplaceable step in advancing the knowledge of the mind, mental activity itself is not conscious, in fact it is mostly unconscious, because consciousness consumes a lot of energy. Most actions and decisions must be unconscious, automatic, and cost very little neural activity'. Therefore, a conscious effort must be made to observe, accept, and possibly change our habits in new and more positive directions.

²⁸⁷ 'Information and knowledge are not the same. Information is temporal, knowledge is reproducible. If a man has the information that there is a city after a certain number of kilometers of forest, this information cannot be verified in another epoch. On the other hand, if a man knows how to light a fire, he will know how to do it in any epoch. But the line between information and knowledge is not always clear. [The fundamental difference between knowledge and information is that knowledge is reproducible'. (Aberkane, 2017: 125-126)

Figure 37. Awareness diagram



Source: own elaboration

The most effective way to bring about conscious change is through experiencing emotions and bodily dispositions that come into play when making important decisions. This includes the senses, emotions, and the whole body, along with meta-cognition and the rational mind. Achieving this in social and political practice could be an intriguing as well as compelling challenge of our time.

Currently, we are not facing a shortage of information, but rather an excess of it. While obtaining knowledge may be more challenging, it has never been more accessible. The missing component appears to be awareness. As stated by one of Camilla's founders, *'For me it is very important to help people to change their habits. That is, awareness is something that comes with a lot. You need a lot of time because you have to metabolize information'*.

In conclusion, this research demonstrated that SSE organizations serve as 'self-educating' spaces that promote awareness of crucial aspects related to sustainability. I argue that what Rossi et al. (2021: 16-17) write in relation to food systems holds true for any field that SSE is experimenting with.

'The social learning that develops through the interaction between actors involved in these experiences as well as within their broader networks is fundamental. It supports the development of

sensitivity, awareness, shared knowledge and new social norms that lead to the development of new social practices and consolidation of collective identity and agency. These processes allow producers to deal more easily with the transition to alternative models of production and marketing, in terms of attitudes and skills, and more in general to redefine their social positioning. On the other hand, consumers are supported in the growth of their capacities and role, in their “reconnection” to food going beyond the dimension of critical consumption and rather adhering to a more significant collective project of transformation. Both producers and consumers are accompanied towards a socialized dimension of food citizenship, in which political awareness around food issues is also developed. In this sense, belonging to SE networks at any scale provides a meaningful social environment, which enables processes of emancipation and empowerment, both at the individual and collective level, paving the way for more durable and significant changes and nurturing a broader transformative potential’.

Section Two: Limitations

One issue with the participatory approach is the significant investment required from organization members. Time and resources are often a challenge, particularly for projects based on volunteerism, activism, or ethical commitment. Due to these constraints, the participatory workshops could not be conducted for *Arvaia* and *Il Passo della Barca*, despite multiple attempts and expressed interest. In the case of *Camilla*, member involvement was difficult to achieve and participation was low despite the large number of members. Interestingly, some members of the *Camilla* food cooperative personally told me that they did not respond to the call because they wanted to leave room for others, perhaps newer members. According to other members, they were unable to participate, although they found it interesting. Participant observation was not possible in the case of *Consegne Etiche*. The scarcity of resources and conducting the research alone led to other limitations, such as the inability to provide support to facilitate workshops, offer a suitable venue, or provide incentives to attend workshops. However, the research process was enhanced and its practical validity increased through my commitment to SSE, the active involvement of practitioners, and the

integration of practical and theoretical findings. This approach would not have been possible using traditional research methods.

Regarding the use of Atlas.ti's AI software for analysis, I have not yet had sufficient time to become familiar with the tool. However, based on my limited experience, I did not find it particularly useful for qualitative analysis.

Section Three: Recommendations and avenues for future work

Social and Solidarity Economy is a potent analytical category that recognizes the diverse forms that create a post-capitalist society here and now. It is a metrological project in the making, and therefore, the direction it takes in the next few years is crucial in determining its interaction with actual practices. Will it be a dialogue that multiplies its imaginative capacity, or will it become another buzzword captured by capitalocentric discourses? To anticipate the answer I suggest that integrating the diverse and community economies approach into the study of SSE can help recognize its transformative potential.

The empirical research revealed promising insights on the social values produced, circulated and multiplied by the SSE organizations analyzed. The research aimed to explore ways to implement SSE principles without endorsing austerity measures or further market-driven practices. SSE is not considered a sector of the economy or a policy tool, but rather an open project aimed at democratizing the economy and fostering ongoing conversations about sustainable, democratic, and equitable ways to meet our needs.

Some possible future research directions in this perspective are:

- Examine the institutional dimension of SSE: *How do existing legal forms affect social processes and how do social processes affect legal forms? How do new experiences of SSE change and/or challenge legal forms?* Specifically, focus on legal frameworks and how they are being

adapted to accommodate emerging needs and innovations that organizations are promoting. Additionally, suggest possible improvements to existing legal frameworks.

- Conduct a comparative analysis of each model presented in this thesis (Food Coop, CSA, Urban Community Cooperative, Cooperative Platform) in different urban contexts to see how they adapt to different contexts.
- Refine the non-linear theory of change models for SSE organizations and incorporate more of their political aspects.
- Given the recognition of time and resources (or their lack) as critical elements for SSE, I suggest it would be productive to explore in depth the connections with liminal approaches such as foundational economy, municipalism, and universal basic income.

To conclude, I would like to borrow Fausto Viviani's suggestion:

“I think today, if you want to deal with these issues, you have to have the patience, the awareness, and also the persistence to keep sowing. I think that is what we can do today. For my generation, even more so because of age. For you, it's different. It's about describing the seed, what kind of cultivation I'm doing. If I use pesticides, if I don't. What kind of distribution I have. If there is a market that exploits or a market that distributes equally between the different phases from production to consumption. And therefore the infrastructure of a more just system”.

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