

# Alternative Food Systems and Peri-Urban Agriculture in Milan, Italy

## *Sistemas alimentarios alternativos y agricultura periurbana en Milán, Italia*

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### Summary

The turn towards quality in consumption and lifestyles has in recent years been matched by a profound shift in farming models. New social, environmental, and landscape functions have been included in the sustainable farming strategies of organic and multifunctional agriculture, short chains, direct selling, and farmers' markets. In metropolitan regions and their peri-urban areas demand by local inhabitants and a reorganization of food production are driving a territorial transition towards sustainability. Consumers and producers are cooperating in food networks not only to regain control over the ways food is produced and to shape local alternative markets but also to establish true food sovereignty. This article presents the case of the Rural Solidarity Economy District of the South Milan Agricultural Park, where a reorganization of peri-urban agriculture and new forms of producer-consumer cooperation are promoting the transition towards alternative food systems. The analysis highlights the aspects of change related primarily to the reorganization of the model of a farming enterprise and to the subjectivities emerging as "new peasants", using a critical approach with respect to their social role, to agricultural practices, and to food, with new cognitive and relational skills developed in the practical and shared construction of territorial sustainability and food sovereignty.

### Key words

Peri-urban agriculture, local sustainable food systems, local food, alternative agro-food networks, rural solidarity economy districts.

### Resumen

El giro hacia la calidad en el consumo y en los estilos de vida en los últimos años ha ido acompañado de un profundo cambio en los modelos agrícolas. Las estrategias de agricultura orgánica y multifuncional sostenible, de cadenas cortas, de venta directa y de mercados de agricultores engloban nuevos objetivos paisajísticos, ambientales y sociales. En las regiones metropolitanas y sus áreas peri-urbanas la demanda local y la reorganización de la producción de alimentos están impulsando una transición territorial hacia la sostenibilidad. Los consumidores y los productores están cooperando en las redes de alimentos no sólo para recuperar el control sobre la forma en que estos se producen y para dar forma a los mercados locales alternativos, sino también para establecer una verdadera soberanía alimentaria. En este artículo se presenta el caso del Distrito Rural de Economía Solidaria en el Parque Agrícola del Sur de Milán, donde una reorganización de la agricultura peri-urbana y las nuevas formas de cooperación entre productores y consumidores están promoviendo una transición hacia sistemas alimentarios alternativos. El análisis pone de relieve los aspectos del cambio relacionado principalmente con la reorganización del modelo de empresa agrícola y de las subjetividades emergentes como "nuevos campesinos", utilizando un enfoque crítico con respecto a su función social, a las prácticas agrícolas, y a la alimentación, con nuevas habilidades cognitivas y relacionales desarrolladas en la construcción práctica y compartida de la sostenibilidad territorial y la soberanía alimentaria.

### Palabras clave

Agricultura periurbana, sistemas locales de alimentación sostenible, alimentación local, redes agroalimentarias alternativas, distritos rurales de economía solidaria.

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## 1. Introduction

This article analyzes the organization of sustainable agro-food systems by analyzing alternative agro-food networks and evaluating their capacity for innovation to meet shared and local needs and to promote food sovereignty. The transition process in agriculture involves a variety of different development trajectories (Ploeg, 2008). Among these the most interesting — from the point of view of the search for sustainability — is the trajectory that involves repeasantization and re-localization of food production and consumption processes. Changes in the organizational model of farms and the emergence of innovative strategies based on social cooperation contribute to the structuring of local (or regional) food systems that are orientated towards a sustainability that is multidimensional: economic, environmental, and social. This is the working thesis that guided a biennial case study in 2011-2012 on the Rural Solidarity Economy District of the South Milan Agricultural Park in Milan, Italy. Particular attention is given to the transformation dynamics that affect the farmers in the city belt who are involved in the District, both at the subjective level and taking into consideration changes in the style of farming and in the organizational structures in which they become involved to cope with recession processes.

We will begin by analyzing the elements and principles that characterize alternative agro-food networks and how these can contribute to a definition of sustainable local food systems. We then present the case of the Rural Solidarity Economy District of the South Milan Agricultural Park, examining in particular the characteristics of the area, the circumstances surrounding the foundation of this district, and the transformation processes generated by its operation. Some conclusions follow.

## 2. Paths of transition toward sustainable local food systems

### 2.1. *Alternative agro-food networks*

The reference literature for the analysis and conceptualization of territorial (or local) agro-food sustainability is for the most part of recent date and includes studies on new dynamics of rural development (Ploeg *et al.*, 2000, 2004a; Renting *et al.*, 2003) and on forms of organization that have been defined as *alternative agro-food networks*.

The definition of *alternative agro-food networks* (AAFNs) refers to the diversified models of production and consumption that characterize these organizations, and that are designed to be alternatives to the standard models of the industrial agro-food systems (Renting *et al.*, 2003). The innovativeness of these networks lies in their creation of different and unprecedented types of ties among actors, things, resources, and knowledge that up to now were unconnected. This innovativeness is the product of diverse practices adopted by social actors in relation to the given structural conditions — as defined by policies, by the market, or by technology — according to a unique model of development, that of modernization (Ploeg, 2006). The innovativeness, therefore, takes the form of *alternativeness*, yet this alternativeness can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Certainly the terms and conditions

of the alternativeness (or innovativeness) of the networks differ in relation to development and to policies, not just to those related to the movements' practices but also to those of institutional bodies. For example, Goodman (2003) highlights the difference in how AAFNs are regarded in North American literature versus European literature: while the former emphasizes these new organizational forms as bearers of political change and highlights in them "the ability to wrest control of agro-business from corporations and create a food system that is internal, sustainable, and egalitarian", the latter, based on considerations of food security, agricultural policy reform, and rural development, treats them as "examples of an institutional model of alternative rural development."

The rural studies literature has dealt with alternative agri-food networks using essentially three different approaches: 1) the *commodity chains analysis* approach; 2) the *actor-network theory* approach; and 3) the *theory of embeddedness* approach. The three approaches focus on different issues, but all contribute to the understanding of these networks.

The approach derived from *commodity chains analysis* was developed in connection with the conditions under which production is organized: the concept of *food supply chains* was applied to an analysis of alternative rural development networks with the particular intention of examining the ability of producers to capture new forms of added value by "short-circuiting" long and complex industrial chains (Marsden *et al.*, 2000).

In the European context, and beyond this as well, the reference to a process of repeasantization has served to describe a new dynamics of rural development and the dissemination of multifunctional, agroecological practices of small-scale farming. The distinctive elements of a peasant-style agricultural model have been identified as a struggle for autonomy (i. e. for economic sustainability), an origin from and an internalization of nature (co-production and co-evolution with nature), productive differentiation (multifunctionality), skill-oriented technologies, a continual intensification based on the quantity and quality of labour, and an increase in social wealth (Ploeg, 2010; Ploeg *et al.*, 2000). The strategies used to resist the squeeze of agricultural incomes that accompanied the dominant agro-industrial model and the contemporary technological and regulatory system all fit into this model.

The approach derived from the *actor-network theory* (ANT) is built around a post-structuralist and ecological perspective and overcomes the man-nature dichotomy present in modern ontology as well as the differences between micro and macro levels of analysis (Lockie & Kitto, 2000). The combination between actor and network refers to the dichotomy between agency and structure. It suggests a framework in which the interaction between nature and society is interpreted as heterogeneous collective associations (or networks) of both social and natural elements, human and non-human. The outcomes are actor-networks as hybrids of nature and culture (Goodman, 1999, p. 25). The actor-networks emphasize the metabolic unity between agricultural production and food consumption and the hybrid nature of agency shapes production processes as well as biopolitical practices by ecologist and peasant movements.

However, the references to ANT in rural studies are interpreted as ineffective in order to overcome the nature-society dichotomy, it is judged as "too uncritical, particularly in the agnosticism of ANT with regard to social network construction, and its inability to generate

middle-level concepts which can explore the variability and operation of power relations in and through food networks and supply chains” (Marsden, 2000, p. 21). It is criticized by whom put social actors at the centre of the analysis and try to solve the nature-society dichotomy by theorizing a process of socialization of nature by social action and farmers strategies: social action is thus expressed by and in nature itself (see e.g. Marsden, 2000; Ploeg, 2008). Studies on farming styles (Milone, 2009) show how the incorporation of nature results to be a key factor for the reproduction of small-scale and family farming. Co-production is a key word here: it describes the ongoing interaction of man and living nature (or more generally the social and the material worlds) that results in the ongoing transformation of both. New practices, new insights, new artefacts, reshaped resources, new networks or whatever are *novelties* resulting from co-production process that carry the promise of an improved performance (Ploeg *et al.*, 2004b).

Alternative food networks are closely associated with what has been defined as a “quality turn” in food production (Goodman, 2004), where the term “quality” can refer either to the food’s characteristics or to its degree of excellence (Watts *et al.* 2005). This is also interpreted as a “cultural shift” (Goodman & DuPuis, 2002), that has generated new consumption practices and carved out new market niches. According to Watts *et al.* (2005), however, the quality turn in food production and the “defensive localism” approach are characteristic of alternative supply systems that are *weak*, in as much as they place emphasis on the food itself rather than on the networks through which the food circulates. The vulnerability of such systems derives precisely from the possibility of being incorporated and subordinated within conventional supply chains of mass production and distribution (Allen *et al.*, 2003; Winter, 2003). They argue that the definition of “niche products” should instead be based on only a very limited involvement by conventional supply chains of multinational companies and on the creation of *alternative networks*.

In addition, the criteria used for quality certification or the enforcement of high standards of quality or hygiene can often constitute serious obstacles for producers who, due to the expenses that would be necessary or the traditional systems that they employ, cannot adapt to the newly imposed conditions for market access. As a result, *quality* too can fall captive to conventional long chains or to disproportionate governmental regulations regarding risk (Sage, 2006), regulations that have often made quality synonymous with safety (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 1999), thus putting at risk the existence of small-scale food producers and processors.

Finally, the approach based on the *theory of embeddedness* focuses on “rooting” that occurs at the regional or local level, but above all on the incorporation of a set of principles — ethics, quality, transparency, reciprocity, and solidarity — that form the foundation of relationships of production and exchange. As applied in rural studies, the term “embeddedness” can have two different meanings: incorporation within social relations and rooting within a given geographic area or region. Short food chains are distinguished by a high degree of personal interaction, mutual respect within the food system, traceability of products and prices, and the practice of self-certification, whereas the dominant industrial forms of production and marketing feature impersonality, standardization, and a lack of accountability. These non-industrial characteristics of short food chains are what encourage the formation

of alternative networks, and they likewise act to constantly reproduce confidence internally and to develop different ideas of quality that are linked to the intrinsic and social aspects of food.

In these terms we can say that the construction of a “local food” — which comes about through practices that *reproduce sociality* and through the development of alternative agro-food networks — takes place in the face of two processes of atomization: a process that atomizes and abstracts the subjects, who come to be regarded as “consumers”, and a process that atomizes non-human organisms (i.e. nature and food) in order to reconstruct them and insert them into processes of industrial transformation (Watts *et al.*, 2005).

The concept of *territorialized* (or *localized*) *food systems* focuses instead on the means of marketing and distribution of agro-food products (Denechere, 2008; Maréchal, 2008), i.e. on their set of “devices” — institutional spaces that permit exchange — considered as interfaces between producers and consumers (local markets, outlets for collective selling, organized groups of supply and demand, solidarity purchase groups, direct selling at the farm, public procurement, etc.), based primarily on geographical proximity but also on organizational proximity. According to Maréchal (2008), “it is the locations (physical or logistical) where products change hands that need to be observed in order to better understand what goes on there” (*my translation*). The territorial dimension is therefore of fundamental importance.

## 2.2. Local Sustainable Food Systems

The development of alternative agro-food networks, which often is studied mainly in relation to rural areas and the transformation of traditional farming systems (Ilbery & Maye, 2005) as well as in relation to the process of re-territorialization of food production (Murdoch *et al.*, 2000; Winter, 2005; Watts *et al.*, 2005), is also closely linked to the transformation of urban and peri-urban areas and to the development of multifunctional agriculture, processes that play a strong role in the sustainable regeneration of social relations and of relations with the land itself.

Indeed, even in cities themselves increasingly efforts are observed towards a de-commodification of places or areas of land in favour of the emergence of “free spaces”. This is being carried out in opposition to the geographical materialization pushed by the neo-liberal economic model, which is largely based on the capitalistic speculation with space (Harvey, 2012) and on a strategy of “creative destruction” and expropriation of resources to ensure a recovery in accumulation, to the detriment of the quality of life and guarantees of social rights (Harvey, 2005). The new forms of urban and peri-urban agriculture that are emerging can therefore in some cases be interpreted as a manifestation of these resistance processes, but also as a manifestation of social innovation processes through collective practices. In addition, they are also a manifestation of the construction of new identities that, in a more or less conflicting manner, redefine spaces according to new needs, both subjective and collective.

The promotion of collective action around the issue of food confronts the question of the “metabolic rift” — between man and nature, between city and countryside — that has been produced over time by the dynamics of capitalist development. This rift is continually producing an ecological crisis through the exploitation of natural resources,

through processes of artificialization of nature by means of industrial-style agriculture, and through unlimited urban expansion (Foster, 1999; Moore, 2006).

In elucidating the elements most useful for a theorization of the transition to sustainability on the local and regional level, an important contribution is made by transition management theory, which focuses on ways to influence and direct socio-structural changes towards a more sustainable society (Dewulf *et al.*, 2009; Geels, 2005; Rip & Kemp, 1998; Rotmans *et al.*, 2001). The literature on the transition to sustainability developed the concept of “socio-technical niches”, understood as spaces in which new social practices and techniques can develop. In practice, the existence of such niches stands in opposition to the dominant socio-technical regime. The studies that have been carried out on socio-technical niches have sought to understand the dynamics by which these niches are able to grow, become stronger, and potentially bring into existence a new regime. The promotion and management of such niches, in order to facilitate the transition to sustainability, finds its synthesis in what is defined as *strategic niche management* (SNM) (Kemp *et al.*, 1998; Geels & Schot, 2008). The literature on the subject has dealt mostly with niches of technological innovation developed within markets. But the concept has been gradually extended even to sociology (Seyfang & Smith, 2007) through the model of “grassroots innovations”, in order to describe local initiatives for sustainability that respond to local problems and that develop solutions, innovative practices and devices, or new technologies, all of which constitute innovations that are an expression of alternative and progressive principles that are widespread or emerging at the social level. The main challenge to the perpetuation of a niche lies in making these innovations practical, i.e., in the possibility of institutionalizing them by consolidating knowledge, organizationally managing change, and spreading alternative ideas at the social level (Seyfang, 2009; Smith, 2006, 2007).

The transition theory's concept of niches is a useful tool for analyzing alternative agri-food networks: AAFNs come into being around paradigms of food production, distribution, and consumption that are entirely new, they are small enough to ensure that they have a protected space of action, and although their short-term quantitative impact is modest their multiplier effect can be important at the level of consciousness and action, to the point where they produce new innovation paths, new rules, and new standards.

Linked to the theory of transition to sustainability is the concept of “resilience”, particularly as used in the field of research into the resilience of socio-ecological systems (Folke, 2006; Gallopin, 2006). This research views human and ecological systems as being in interaction and tries to identify practical measures using adaptive management. The use of the term “resilience” originated in the 1960s and 1970s within a particular branch of ecology in which a better understanding of systemic dynamics inspired social and environmental scientists to challenge the then dominant concept of a stable balance between social and ecological systems, resulting in a more dynamic interpretation of the concept of resilience (Folke, 2006). Although early works focused on resilience in terms of the ability to absorb shocks and maintain functions, subsequently attention shifted to the capacity for renewal, reorganization, and development, as consideration of such a capacity is essential in discussions on sustainability and in examining practices and forms of co-production (man-nature), especially in a context of ecological crisis.

Both the transition approach and the resilience approach deal with how to manage change but they focus on different aspects: the transition approach focuses on system-level innovation as a tool for dealing with certain problems, while the resilience approach focuses on the ability of a socio-ecological system to maintain or adjust its own structure or functions.

Sustainable food systems, in which as we will see organizations such as Solidarity Purchase Groups (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, GAS) and Solidarity Economy Districts (*Distretti di Economia Solidale*, DES) play a role, represent relational contexts in which innovations are co-produced by producers and consumers and are developed in niches that contribute to re-localizing food. This process serves as a space for the creation of new responses to the pressures exerted by the global economy (Morgan *et al.*, 2006; Ploeg, 2007), a creation that takes the form of direct, short-chain relationships between producers and consumers. The originality lies not simply in the commercial phenomenon — a reduction in the number of intermediaries — but more importantly in a reinterpretation of sustainability springing from a redefinition of consumption patterns from the point of view of quality and from empowerment strategies for agricultural producers following the perspective of food sovereignty.

The idea of “food sovereignty” was invented by movements of small producers and farmers but has gradually been adopted within alternative networks through processes of collective learning and practices of co-production. The expression “food sovereignty” was used for the first time in 1996 at the Second International Conference of the transnational movement Via Campesina held in Tlaxcala, Mexico, where it was given the following definition:

... the right of each nation to maintain and develop their own capacity to produce foods that are crucial to national and community food security, respecting cultural diversity and diversity of production methods...

Via Campesina identifies four priority areas or pillars for promoting political action and practices in favour of food sovereignty: 1) the right to food; 2) access to productive resources; 3) the agro-ecological model of production; and 4) local trade and markets (IPC, 2002).

The formulation of the concept of “food sovereignty” has continued to develop, and a more complete definition of the term can be found in the *Declaration of Nyéléni* adopted at the Forum for Food Sovereignty held in Mali in February 2007. At the Forum for Food Sovereignty in Nyéléni 600 delegations from five continents came together to reaffirm the right to food sovereignty and to launch an international movement to address the decline in food production in local communities. The *Declaration of Nyéléni* states the following:

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies (...). Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and bi-

odiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations (...).

In food sovereignty, producers, intermediaries, consumers, and the interests of the next generation — rather than market demand and corporations — are placed at the heart of food systems and policies. The Nyéléni Forum defined six “pillars” for food sovereignty: 1) it focuses on food for people; 2) it values food providers; 3) it puts natural resources under local control; 4) it builds knowledge and skills of food producers and their local organizations; and 5) it works in partnership with nature (ISC, 2007).

The concept of food sovereignty, developed in opposition to the concept of food security that was recognized and promoted by international organizations, was originally conceived as a platform for struggle against both neo-liberal policies and global governance of the agri-food system and as the basis for political action and negotiations with national and transnational institutions, yet it has gradually come to be used by food movements, associations, and communities as a principle for the reorganization of food systems on the local level as well.

In 2011 the Nyéléni Europe Forum was held in Krems, Austria, organized by several civil society and peasant organizations and movements calling for food sovereignty and for the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy to be changed in order to adopt the food sovereignty principles. The European Food Declaration that was issued at the Forum established the following commitments for food sovereignty: 1) changing how food is produced and consumed; 2) changing how food is distributed; 3) valuing and improving work and social conditions in food and agriculture systems; 4) reclaiming the right to the commons; and 5) changing public policies governing food and agricultural systems (NEM & ECVC, 2012).

### 3. The Case Study of the Rural Solidarity Economy District of South Milan Agricultural Park

#### 3.1. *The characteristics of the case study area*

The South Milan Agricultural Park (*Parco Agricolo Sud Milano*) is the largest agricultural park in Europe, encompassing 47.000 hectares and 1.400 farms located in 61 different municipalities. The farmland is spread out in a fragmented patchwork within the boundaries of the park, alternating with about 19.000 hectares of urbanized area. The agricultural park traces its origins to the idea of establishing a protected area, born in the 1960s as studies were being carried out on the control of urban growth in the Milan area. At first, the idea merely consisted of an attempt to arrest urban development and safeguard open spaces, agricultural land, and places of natural interest. Subsequently attention began to be paid to the destabilizing effects of urban sprawl on local agriculture, which was suffering from decay and neglect, especially in the fringe areas south of Milan. In the 1980s local citizens organized a petition for the establishment of a park in order to counteract these processes, to safeguard agricultural activity, and to encourage the use



of the area by the population for recreation and leisure. This grassroots initiative obtained the support of the Province of Milan and the municipalities concerned, which together formed a Proposal Committee, and in 1990 the Lombardy region passed Regional Law 24/1990 establishing the park, and entrusted its management to the Province of Milan.

In a survey of the park's farming enterprises carried out in 2010, of 1.400 farms surveyed only 576 turned out to be active. Among those active farming enterprises, the most numerous category consisted of those with 10-50 hectares of farmland in use. Such farms totalled 194, or 38% of all active agricultural enterprises in the park, yet the agricultural land being used by this group totalled only slightly more than 5.000 hectares or only 15% of the farmland in commercial use within the park. On the other hand, farms with more than 100 hectares of farmland in use numbered 84 or just 16% of all active agricultural enterprises, but made up 55% of the farmland in use within the park (Osservatorio Economico per l'Innovazione del Parco Agricolo Sud Milano, 2010).

In recent years the agricultural sector in the park has reorganized itself, resulting in a reduction in the number of hectares cultivated, a decrease in the number of animals raised, and a contraction in gross saleable production. New threats are apparent today, not only in the process of urban sprawl but also in the construction of new infrastructure (e. g. the construction of the West Milan Bypass), in projects planned for Expo 2015, in increasing demands for a redrawing of the boundaries of the park, in various types of biofuels speculation and investment (especially affecting other provinces such as Lodi), and in the upward trend of rents for farmland in an area where the Municipality of Milan is the owner of more than 50% of farming land and where 63% of agricultural producers are renters rather than owners. The increase in land rents represents a particular point of vulnerability for rental farmers in the park, since the owners of the land could potentially evict them and seek opportunities for higher income.

Peri-urban agriculture in general is influenced by specific pressure factors and opportunities that are different from those felt in rural areas (Heimlich & Barnard, 1997; Heimlich & Brooks, 1989). Agriculture in the peri-urban context is subject both to the effects of urbanization, which influence market conditions upstream and downstream, and to the existence of specific rules for the use of resources and for managing environmental issues. Yet it is also true that in recent years a variety of initiatives have come into being specifically in favour of (peri-) urban agriculture, e. g. the Slow Food project "Feeding Milano" (consisting of several initiatives: a Vegetable Project, a Bread Chain, and Earth Markets), farmers' markets, and experiences in urban gardening and guerrilla gardening.

### 3.2. Methodology

The empirical research for this paper was carried out as part of an interuniversity research program on the subject of "sustainable local food systems", implemented nationwide in Italy in 2011 and 2012.<sup>1</sup> The research was carried out using a qualitative methodology with the intention of unravelling the subjective processes and relational dynamics involved, starting from the hypothesis that these elements were the basis for the observed novel forms of organizational change in food

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1 The research program, co-financed by the grant program *Programmi di Ricerca di Interesse Nazionale 2008* (PRIN 2008) of the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research, involved the University of Calabria, the University of Naples Federico II, the University of Pisa, and the University of Trieste. The research team from the University of Calabria investigated new sustainable farming practices through case studies carried out in northern and southern Italy (Sivini and Corrado, 2013).

production and consumption at the local level and for the creation of sustainable food systems. Various techniques were used to collect data (in-depth interviews, focus groups, on-site observation) and to analyze grey literature. Interviews were conducted with 15 producers as well as with representatives of associations, local governments, and professional organizations. The producers interviewed were all located in the Province of Milan, either within the South Milan Agricultural Park or the Park of Ticino (*Parco del Ticino*). All of them are involved, in one way or another, in the Rural Solidarity Economy District, participating either in networks, initiatives, or other forms of highly original cooperation.

### 3.3. *The Rural Solidarity Economy District of South Milan Agricultural Park*

The expression *Solidarity Economy District* (*Distretto di Economia Solidale*, henceforth DES) is defined by representatives of the movement as “a political, cultural, and economic project which aims to establish a local network of subjects interested in spreading and practicing economic solidarity and critical consumption in its various meanings” (DES Milano, 2004). The DES concept derives its name from experiences of industrial districts in Italy in the 1980s, and the idea behind it is to create “alternative” economic circuits informed by the principles of solidarity, reciprocity, ethics, transparency, and sustainability. This system of relationships aims to contribute to the construction of a new form of local economy, one capable of using solidarity-based forms of trade in order to put the resources of an area to their best use, create jobs, and support those who are vulnerable or in difficulty (Biolghini, 2007).

In Italy roughly 150.000 people are estimated to be involved in solidarity-oriented collectives such as *Solidarity Purchase Groups* (*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*, GAS). GAS are grassroots networks that collectively organize direct purchasing, primarily of food, other items of everyday use, and services. GAS make their purchases directly from producers using a model of “solidarity” that places great importance on shared ethical principles (Brunori *et al.*, 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

Since the first GAS was established in 1994, about one thousand networks have spontaneously registered themselves as GAS with the national network *Retegas.org*. It can safely be assumed, however, that at least 50% more GAS groups exist than the 1.000 currently registered. The Italian region with the greatest number of GAS is Lombardy, where as of March 2013 no less than 451 GAS were registered with *Retegas.org*. Of these 451 GAS in Lombardy, 172 are located in the city and province of Milan. The same region of Lombardy also boasts 10 DES districts, and these second-order networks serve to connect GAS with agricultural cooperatives, ethical banks, time banks, and entrepreneurs. The fastest growth seen so far for these various kinds of experiments took place in the austerity years of 2010-2012 (Grasseni *et al.*, 2013).

One particular type of DES is the *Rural Solidarity Economy District* (*Distretto di Economia Solidale Rurale* — henceforth DESR). The first of such DESR was that of the South Milan Agricultural Park (*Parco Agricolo Sud Milano*, henceforth PASM). The DESR of the PASM (henceforth DESR-PASM) came into existence in December 2008. Its creation was promoted by a number of local players: by *Cascina Forestina*, a local farming company that was among the pioneers in the PASM in organic farming and direct sales and which became the headquarters of the

DESR; by the GAS of Biaggio, a western suburb of Milan; and by the national Solidarity Economy Network (*Rete di Economia Solidale*). Today the DESR hosts 20 organic farms (certified, self-certified, or in conversion), more than 40 GAS, an ethical finance network, 6 municipalities, and other entities and associations belonging to the solidarity economy movement.

The main objective of DESR-PASM is none other than the preservation and improvement of the Park and its agriculture. It is due to this DES's close link with farming that it choose to define itself as the first "rural" DES, or DESR. The basic assumption that drives the work of the DESR is that it should be possible to preserve the vocation of the largest agricultural park in Europe using actions that defend the *Cascine*<sup>2</sup> farms and their income while at the same time resisting urban sprawl processes. This goal is pursued through 1) the upgrading and re-localization of agro-food supply and demand; and 2) the incentivization of direct selling and the processing of products directly at the farm, which encourages the multifunctionality of farms as well as the safeguarding and recovery of agrobiodiversity, and has the intention of altering the monocultural (whether rice or cereals) and intensive farming practices currently predominant within the Park.

These transformations are aimed at establishing food sovereignty in the Milan area, i.e. at satisfying the food needs and reproduction needs of the metropolitan area by rebuilding the relationship between city and countryside — a relationship that had gradually been compromised by agro-industrial development — by means of local production and local markets. The DESR-PASM project in other words asks for what Harvey defined as "the right to the city": "[...] far more than a right of individual or group access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts' desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right, since reinventing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization" (2012, p. 4).

The DESR, starting from informal relationships that gradually grew up between the GAS of Biaggio and two local farming enterprises, "began to take shape, [and] the experience of the DESR became codified," in the course of which it became clear "in what type of agriculture, [and] what type of production [to specialize], [and] what ethical value to assign to this work", "so there was a sort of sharing of intentions" (Dario, producer at *Cascina Isola Maria*). The DESR's relationship with GAS groups is of strategic importance in meeting the goals of conversion to organic methods and improvement of the food production of the Park because it provides not only a guaranteed commercial outlet but also enables forms of pre-financing of seasonal production as well as direct harvesting ("pick-your-own") by consumers at the farms.

... The producers began to seriously consider the fact that the demand [for organic products] by the purchase groups and some parts of the [social] cooperation sector was something that made sense not just environmentally, but also economically (...). And that's when we made both general and economic assessments that led us to consider ... the possibility of changing over to organic production (Dario, producer at *Cascina Isola Maria*).

At the same time, the enterprises' re-organization strategies helped to reorient the consumption choices of the GAS towards local agricul-

2 The *Cascina* (literally "farm house") is a type of farming organisation typical of the Po Valley, found primarily in Lombardy but also to some extent in Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna. The *Cascina* is a large farmstead cluster situated at the centre of a farm having tens of hectares of land under cultivation. Within the *Cascina* there is a single building containing stables, a barn, silos, a granary, a dairy facility, a well or spring, ovens, a warehouse, a mill, and the residences of the farm workers. These buildings are quite large, and in former times lodged multiple peasant families. The landowner would rarely run the *Cascina* himself, but instead would rent it out to a "tenant" (*fittavolo*), who would administer it for the duration of the contract as though he himself were the owner. The tenants, who constituted a genuine agrarian bourgeoisie, had rental contracts of 9-12 years. Today the lands of the *Cascine* are typically dedicated for the most part to the cultivation of cereals (wheat, maize, rice, and barley) interspersed with areas dedicated to cultivation of forage for cattle. Within the boundaries of the Municipality of Milan there are presently 144 *Cascine*, the vast majority of them situated in what was once the periphery of the city and the remainder lying in suburbs which previously were separate municipalities.

ture, causing them to question the thinking that treated quality as a commodity floating in the midst of urban consumerism.

From that was born a dual relationship that succeeded in driving an evolution in the thinking of the GAS, which at first was basically oriented just towards purchasing organic products, to consider the fact that promoting the protection of farmers in the park was equivalent to protecting the value of the Park (Renata, *Cascina Isola Maria*).

The post-organic evolution of the GAS groups that food producers have stimulated has responded specifically to the fact that the development of alternative consumption models is an essential condition of sustainability.

Food sovereignty is about the control of resources, of surplus production, and of use. Within the DESR a process of sharing and collective learning has emerged that encouraged other food producers to make the choice to convert, at least from conventional farming to joint struggle. This change has proven to be strategic for smaller enterprises, which focus on on-farm processing and on supplying quality products so as not to enter into competition with the products of the mass-distribution system but instead enhance the product by virtue of its symbolic and relational connotations. In fact, such smaller enterprises operate in conditions of self-exploitation and work intensification (i. e. with production costs that are not fully remunerated) in order to be able to keep their prices low in response to the reduced spending power of consumers in this time of recession.

Small and medium-sized enterprises are able to respond to the new recession conditions through a process of intensification of the use of the factors of production — primarily labour — by means of a transition to high-value-added production, the integration of income from outside the business (part-time work), or diversification. These enterprises are very dynamic commercially, and overcome the low productivity of land as a factor of production through a constant process of innovation. The most innovative among these firms position themselves so as to be able to provide a range of services — whether for leisure time, for environmental conservation, or for management of the countryside — even though such services may not receive economic remuneration.

In some cases farming enterprises have been accompanied by GAS groups during the internalization of these transformation processes, as for example in the case of the farm *Cascina Isola Maria*, which originally produced milk for the cheese-making industry but which today, following a reduction in livestock breeding, produces cheese on the farm which is sold directly to GAS groups.

Within these network systems there is a stimulus and reinforcement of processes of learning, of defining identity, of sharing, and of the development of motivations, processes which lead to a common definition of various aspects of food quality, the economic dimension of relationships, the construction of relationships, the production of knowledge, and of organizational aspects (Brunori *et al.*, 2011a).

### 3.4. Crisis, de-entrepreneurization, and the new peasants

The stimulus in favour of transition processes in agriculture cannot be attributed solely to critical consumption, i. e. to a demand for goods and services that is oriented not simply towards price or product quality

but also towards fairness, sustainability, and production and marketing methods. An essential part of the stimulus that is being felt lies in “critical production”, which is being generated by new subjectivities and by the restructuring of farming enterprises. On the basis of the interviews conducted, the “critical producers” are found to be men and women between the ages of 35 and 55 with a medium-to-high education level (high school diploma or university degree), and who are either “new peasants” — new comers without a background in agriculture — or “repented entrepreneurs”, who converted after a crisis of identity and/or a crisis of the enterprise.

The newcomers (six of the interviewees) have different characteristics, and almost none of them have any agricultural education or training. Instead they have acquired their new skills through on-the-job practice, independent study, or collaboration with others. Most of them own the land that they work, either through inheritance or purchase, though the youngest of them are renters. Every one of them had felt an immediate preference for organic or biodynamic agriculture. Their entry into agriculture was for them an existential choice, undertaken with strong conviction, and motivated either by love of nature and the outdoors or by discontent with hectic urban life and the unpleasant experience of working as a precarious worker or an employee.

On the other hand, for those who belong to families that have been rural for several generations, repeasantization is a response strategy to a crisis, not only the economic crisis but — for some — also an identity crisis. The interviewees in question are managers of family livestock farms (raising cattle and/or pigs) who in some cases had assumed control of the farm enterprise and, even in opposition to the “father-entrepreneur” figure of the farm, decided to convert the farm’s production model and restructure the enterprise. Agricultural production in Lombardy and Milan is characterized by an agro-food model that to a high degree is industrial and vertically integrated. Since the mid 1990s livestock and dairy farms have suffered due to a continuous series of difficulties: the bankruptcy of the Parmalat dairy processing company, the emergency of “mad cow disease” (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy or BSE), and the scandal of aflatoxin in milk.

The fall in beef consumption (which in 2001 amounted to about 70%, according to data from the Italian business trade group *Confesercenti*) and the resulting accumulation of debt via unpaid bills have weighed heavily on the destiny and the sustainability conditions of many enterprises. These are companies that — following the typical model of agricultural entrepreneurship — pursued continuous expansion and are heavily “addicted” to the system, both upstream and downstream, whether for the purchase of inputs, for the purchase of technologies, for product processing, or for access to sales and distribution channels (Ploeg, 2010). Some, in order to survive, opted to rethink their production model, and for this it was crucial for “entrepreneurs” to become “peasants”, reducing their dependence on the system through a downsizing of livestock farms (reducing the number of animals), a conversion or transition to an agro-ecological or organic model, a differentiation of crops, activities, and sales channels, and an internalization of transformation processes.

One of the most important innovations is the reactivation of biodiversity as a production strategy consistent with the decision to overcome the monocultural model of agriculture — standardized and dependent — and create food sovereignty (Corrado, 2008). An example

of this is the strategy of Sebastiano of *Cascina Resta*, who after the outbreak of the “mad cow” epidemic abandoned the intensive raising of cattle for meat and instead converted the enterprise’s activity to agritourism, horse riding, recreation, and education. But Sebastiano has since chosen to return to livestock raising in order to take part in a project to reintroduce a native cattle breed — the *varzese* — and sell this particular “local” meat to GAS groups and restaurants.

Another farm, *Cascina Selva* (35 hectares), also underwent a significant transformation. After the Parmalat bankruptcy the enterprise scaled down its breeding of dairy cows, reducing the herd from 90 milking cows with a production of 2,4 tons of milk per day to about 30 milking cows with a production of about 0,4 tons per day, but with the difference that “today we process it all on the farm.” *Cascina Selva* is also participating in the reintroduction of the *varzese* breed, but uses the *varzese* cows in its milk line to produce cheese. Whereas previously the farm produced its product for delivery, now the farm has started again through a “change of mentality”, to find a new “balance of the farm by de-industrializing it”, rediscovering the multifunctionality that had been abandoned in favour of monocultural and high-productivity specialization, turning backwards to preserve peasant culture, and organizing its production for self-reproduction and in co-production with nature.

The multifunctional and organic agriculture practiced by the “new peasants” is a lifestyle choice in favour of living and sharing a “healthy place”; it is a “creative” agriculture that retrieves traditional techniques (such as crop rotation) but which is also able to innovate. In this agriculture both action and design are guided by new principles: cost-effectiveness (or sustainability) rather than productivity, diversity rather than specialization, autonomy rather than efficiency, and cooperation rather than competitiveness. The emphasis laid on cooperation is an element of interest in a relational context, an element that is capable of producing innovation by “overcoming the individualism” that characterizes the regional entrepreneurial fabric and also is capable of producing the discovery of a “spirit of networking”, of “a new desire to design together, even in new situations”, a change that the producers themselves regard as “revolutionary”.

The multifunctional restructuring of the enterprises takes place through a new division of labour within the family group. The family enterprise assigns to its members various activities, taking into account even the new skills and experience they may have gained outside. Generational change often pulls these enterprises out of the recession, and, due to a greater sensitivity to environmental and social issues, stimulates changes and choices regarding involvement in associations and social centres, and regarding new awareness. Such transitions in farming can be supported by local development policies, but the truly essential factor is the producers’ participation in local networks.

### 3.5. Cooperation in Networks

The experimental nature of the participatory and organizational processes in which the different actors of the DESR are involved emerged in the course of the interviews as a problematic, yet also extremely interesting aspect. Farmers are implementing and intertwining multiple forms of cooperation and different circuits of networks with the aim of boosting direct sales of products and strengthening their

own autonomy. The networks and exchange nodes promoted by the DESR, or those in which the member farmers are involved in various ways, are helping “to develop marketing systems, but also production systems”, “to make production systems evolve in the direction of a demand ... for proximity in its various forms” (from small shops threatened by shopping centres to purchase groups, from canteens to selling cooperatives, from farm outlet shops to individuals or families who choose alternative consumption models), to promote participatory guarantee or certification systems, and to support forms of social and solidarity agriculture.

The nature of the relationships among producers within the networks is based on cooperation in terms of the exchange of factors of production (labour, technology, inputs) and of products themselves, the exchange of related services such as logistics, the exchange of knowledge and information, and exchange of the production know-how. In this way a “triangulation of values” such as eco-compatibility, multifunctionality, and solidarity is created (Niccolò, producer at *Cascina Forestina*). One example is *BuonMercato*, an experience of organized small-scale distribution. It consists of a local service centre set up in the municipality of Corsico with the aim of promoting new lifestyles and consumption styles by supporting short chains, local products, and responsible consumption that is affordable.

Another example is the *Terre d’Acqua Consortium*. It was created at the initiative of the farmers’ organization *Confederazione Italiana Agricoltori* (CIA) as a system of 19 agricultural and agritourism farms located in the Park of Ticino, the South Milan Agricultural Park, and the Rocolo Park. From a closed system the consortium has developed into an association that is autonomous and transversal, open to all farmers whether they are members or not. The consortium’s objectives are not limited to commercial promotion and agritourism, but extend also to the collective organization of work, the sharing of information on bureaucratic issues, the organization of events, and the exchange of products and knowledge.

Apart from these two experiences, an important innovation from the point of view of the development of sustainable local food systems arises from the dynamism of agricultural producers’ cooperation, a dynamism that is spatially organized within the South Milan Agricultural Park and associated with the Milan GAS groups in forms of co-production. In 2011-2012, 80% of the GAS groups interviewed in Milan stated that at least once they had paid for crops prior to planting. Such advance payments give farmers the cash they need for crop preparation and also guarantee them that, no matter how the growing season may turn out, the harvest will still be bought at the price agreed upon. Such working conditions are radically different from those imposed by buyers from mass-distribution (Grasseni *et al.*, 2013).

In a similar way, various forms of consortia have been formed in response to changes coming from both the demand side and the supply side, either on the western side of the Park (where the company *Orti Colti* operates, formed by the enterprises *Gambarina*, *Isola Maria*, *Caremma*, and *Corbari*), in the southeast (among *Cascina Santa Brera*, *Cascina Cappuccina*, *Cascina Lassi*, and *Tre Cascine*), or in the northwest (among *Cascina Resta* and the farms *Cassani*, *Strawberry*, and *Strada*). These consortia have the task of organizing a supply of food (fruit, processed foods, vegetables) that is of high quality — because it is local, coming from the Park — using short supply chains, and to handle the related

logistics for the GAS groups of the metropolitan area as well as for inhabitants of surrounding areas.

This evolution is similar the one seen in the model of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), which was born in Japan in the 1960s but in recent decades has spread to the United States and Europe. A CSA is characterized by its capacity to develop the local food supply and strengthen the local economy whilst maintaining a sense of community. It differs from direct selling in that its members commit to a full-season price in the spring, thus sharing the production risks with the farmer. In this way a partnership is created between farmers and community members, who work together to create a local food system.

The DESR has also transformed the awareness of both consumers and producers towards the countryside itself:

The landscape with its productive, ethical, and environmental values, as a common good, is acquiring value in the awareness, in the community. ... This attention is no longer the exclusive preserve of environmental groups or elite circles. There is a collective commitment to reproduce peri-urban agriculture and to keep it alive. It could have new political weight in institutional decisions. ... The land of the Park is identified as a common good, a collective value (Niccolò, producer at *Cascina Forestina*).

#### 4. Some conclusions

The case study of the Rural Solidarity Economy District (DESR) of South Milan Agricultural Park highlights important aspects of change, which primarily relate to the reorganization of the model of a farming enterprise and to the subjectivities emerging as “new peasants”. These were analyzed by using a critical approach with respect to their social role, to agricultural practices, and to food, with new cognitive and relational skills developed in the practical and shared construction of territorial sustainability and food sovereignty. Nevertheless, aspects that involve business relationships with consumers — especially those assembled in GAS groups — and with local institutions still remain to be explored, so as to better focus on the organization of local food systems, related problems, and the possibility of policies and interventions in support of these experiences and novelties.

The case of the DESR South Milan Agricultural Park permits us to analyze the conditions and processes involved in the emergence of food systems based on the localization of transactions in time and space, i. e. on a geographical or spatial proximity, but also on a proximity that is organized through the social practices and plural relational forms that support the establishment of innovative logistical infrastructures and co-production.

These local food systems can be said to be sustainable 1) in economic terms, due to the redistribution of locally produced added value; 2) in environmental terms, due to the impetus given to conversion to organic farming, to biodiversity protection, care for the countryside, and active land management; and 3) in social terms, due to the development of new “public spaces” or forms of reciprocity and cooperation, the provision of social services, and due to the contribution to the quality of life.



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