



*Partecipazione e Conflitto*  
\* *The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*  
<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>  
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)  
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)  
**PACO, Issue 10(1) 2017: 246-274**  
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v10i1p246

Published in March 15, 2017

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# POLITICAL CONSUMERISM AND PRODUCERISM IN TIMES OF CRISIS

## A Social Movement Perspective?<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Local alternative consumerism practices supported by organized citizens seem to provide the only way to save small agro producers from economic failure. At the same time, organized small producers provide incentives to new forms of co-production. By relying on semi-structured and in depth interviews, a focus group, document analysis and participant observation, in this article, we show how Tuscan Solidarity Purchase Groups, together with producers, act in the context of the economic crisis, and how the crisis has influenced them. First, we show how organized political consumers and small producers are intensifying their relations to overcome the threats of the crisis. Secondly, we illustrate how these consumer-producer relations concretize in a co-production experience. Our case study shows that, in the adverse context of the economic crisis, local alternative consumerism practices can develop alternative processes through civic food networks and (re)discover radical forms of food democracy. That is they build a local Sustainable Community Movement.

**KEYWORDS:** Sustainable Community Movement, Solidarity Purchase Groups, Crisis, Resilience, Political

<sup>1</sup> The two authors designed and developed the study and contributed equally to this work. Massimiliano Andretta wrote section 1, 2 and Conclusions, while Riccardo Guidi wrote section 3.

## **1. Political Consumerism and Political Producerism in the Context of the Economic Crisis: a Social Movement Perspective**

Political consumerism is characterized by actions carried out by citizens who decide about products with the aim of changing market and institutional practices considered “wrong” in political and ethical terms, on the basis of their conception of what is “just” and what is “unjust” (Micheletti 2003, pp. 2-3). Even though it is generally considered a historical phenomenon shaped by the context (Leonini, Sassatelli 2008, p. 10), according to Beck (2000), political consumerism is today one of the most important political responses to the contradictions of the globalization process. Globalization has been interpreted in a variety of ways, but many scholars would agree that individualization and marketization of society are at the core of the process (Gill 1995, Beck 2000). There is no doubt that both individualization and marketization make consumerist practices all the more central (Micheletti, Follesdal & Stolle 2004).

The centrality of those processes, however, have influenced the way in which consumerist practices have been analyzed. With regard to the individualism of market and consumption practices, whether taken for granted, or problematized, most studies in political science and political sociology on the topic have privileged a micro-analysis perspective (Forno, Ceccarini 2006; Micheletti 2003; Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti 2005; Andretta 2006; Ferrer-Fons 2006; Ferrer-Fons, Fraile 2014), while the meso-level analysis has remained relatively marginal (Balsinger 2010; Sassatelli 2006; Forno, Graziano 2014, Grasseni 2013; Graziano, Forno 2012). Conversely, political consumerism has been prevalently studied by especially focusing on campaigns mobilizing against those productive practices seriously undermining basic human rights, or imperiling the environment (Micheletti 2003; Stolle, Hooghe, Micheletti 2005; della Porta et al. 2006). In this line, consumerism was framed, first as an aggregation of micro trends, although sometimes coordinated by groups and organizations, and secondly as a practice against the negative behaviors of some global producers.

Two aspects have been relatively underexplored in the sociological and political science literature on political consumerism. On the one hand, the specific meso-level dimension is reduced to a mere aggregation of individuals practicing new and alternative forms of consumption. To better grasp such a dimension, a social movement

perspective has recently called for by Forno and Graziano (2014), who argue that political consumerism is, actually, supported by groups sharing several traits with 'classic' social movement organizations, while presenting some novelties which have been overlooked until now; and we accept their suggestion to call them 'Sustainable Community Movement Organizations' (SCMOs). On the other hand, the practices of relations of trust and solidarity between politically motivated consumers and small producers have been relatively downplayed. Instead, we propose to look (also) at the role of politically motivated producers in sustaining political consumerism and promote alternative producer-consumer relations. In this perspective, we believe it is useful to introduce the concept of "political producerism" in providing the ground for new forms of political consumerism. Political producerism can be defined as the action of (often small) producers in setting up forms of production coherent with their political or ethical values, and promoting alternative production styles which imply and include the direct role of consumers.

It is not by chance that relevant exceptions to the under-exploration of political consumer-producer relations come from environmental studies, and sociologists focusing on agriculture (Hassanein 2003, Renting, Schermer, Rossi 2012), when they deal with practices of sustainable development (Battiste, Henderson 2000). Taking a close look at the interplay of consumers and producers, by emphasizing both the macro and the meso levels of analysis, those scholars have elaborated an analytical grammar through which it is possible to read alternative forms of consumption and production. This grammar is constituted by concepts ranging from 'food democracy' to 'food sovereignty', from 'food citizenship' to 'agrarian citizenship' to 'civic food networks', all pointing to the emerging role of citizens 'in the initiation and the operation of new forms of consumer-producer relations' (Renting, Schermer, Rossi 2012, p. 290), which has been conceptualized under the terms of 'co-production' (Grasseni 2014), 'co-sumption' or 'pro-sumption' (Renting, Schermer, Rossi 2012, pp. 302-303). In this perspective, against the logic of the globalizing forces pushing forward an agro-food system in which 'food production is considered merely an economic activity and food a tradable commodity' (Ibid., p. 295), civil society-based initiatives try to reconstruct spaces of 'economies of trust' (Grasseni 2014, p. 181), which 'reconvene "trust" between food producers and consumers ... and ... articulate new forms of political association and market governance' (Renting, Marsden, Banks 2003, p. 389).

It is worth noticing that the breakdown of citizen's support for the agro-food system, 'appears to be further aggravated and accelerated by the current financial and economic and political crises' (Renting, Schermer, Rossi 2012, p. 297).

The economic crisis, in fact, is pushing small agro producers, already at the periphery of the agro-food production system, out of the market especially in countries with a

strong agricultural tradition. Citizen-consumer grassroots initiatives seem to provide the only way to save them from economic failure, by setting ‘prices and logistics outside the laws of demand and offer’ (Grasseni 2014, p. 182).

In this article we aim at examining this relational dimension by looking at both organized alternative consumers and producers.

As already showed by other studies, in Italy, the Solidarity Purchase Groups are particularly relevant forms of SCMOs on the consumer side, since they appear among the most organized, spread and publicly known consumerist organizations in Italy (Forno, Graziano 2014; Guidi, Andretta 2015). Besides, due to the social profile of their membership—basically middle class families (Grasseni 2014)—and to their direct link with small and economically marginal producers, those groups are among the most exposed SCMOs to the effects of the economic crisis.

Then we illustrate how SPGs are coping with the economic crisis and how the pressure of the crisis is pushing them to reinforce their relations with small producers; and we will underline how a social movement perspective helps us understand specific dynamics, more collective and protest-oriented, of consumer-producer relationships, by investigating a case of radical co-production experience that shows how those relations build Sustainable Community Movements to preserve their politically oriented consumption and production from the threats of the economic crisis.

In our view, the economic crisis, particularly harsh in Italy, together with other factors facilitating consumerist organizing, and its relation with producers, such as the “reactive” and “adaptive” force of the organizations (Powell, DiMaggio 1991), reveals how resilience operates in creating collective identities in general, and food communities in particular.<sup>2</sup> Whereas community resilience has been mainly connected to an idea of adaptation after a stressful situation (Coles, Buckle 2004; Norris et al. 2008), local SCM resilience shows how the “threat” of the crisis can be transformed in “opportunities” for “collective action”.<sup>3</sup> Although social movements scholars have in general underlined more “opportunities” than “threats” (Tarrow 1994, Kriesi 1989), as Tilly (1978) has suggested long time ago, collective mobilization is often the result of a combination of opportunities and threats. In the case which we will analyze, the

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<sup>2</sup> Born in the fields of Ecology and Materials science, the concept of ‘resilience’ has been largely used by psychologists to describe how individuals cope with major life traumas and more recently it has been employed with regard to community-scale processes (Kalogeraki, Alexandridis, Papadaki 2014).

<sup>3</sup> On how “threats” can be transformed in opportunities for collective action see Reese et al. (2010) and McCammon, Van Dyke (2010)

context of the crisis shows how mechanisms of resilience shape the building of new collective identities.

The case study we propose to reconstruct in this article makes it clear that the transformation of specific organizations of political consumerism and producerism, stressed by the economic crisis, facilitated the building of new forms of Sustainable Community Movement.

Tuscany is a crucial region to understand the dynamics of alternative producer-consumer relationships for several reasons. Tuscany has the second-highest rate of SPGs in Italy after Valle d'Aosta. Here SPGs began to grow significantly after 2003, and continuously in the years of crisis (Guidi, Andretta 2015). Two factors,, which combine specific political and economic opportunities, can explain the diffusion of SPGs in Tuscany. On the one hand, Tuscany has a strong participative tradition, traditionally channelized by the "red sub-culture", which not only explains the high rate of associations and the strong social capital (Cappadozzi, Fonovic 2016) but also supports citizens involvement in social movements and non-conventional forms of participation (della Porta, Andretta 2002, Florida 2010, Andretta 2015). On the other hand, although declining as in the whole country, Tuscany has a strong agricultural sector and tradition, especially concerned with direct selling to consumers and associations: whereas the percentage of agro-food farms which practice direct selling is about 26% in Italy, this percentage is 41% in Tuscany (Bellini, Lipizzi 2013, pp. 118-120, table 4.8).

The article is organized as follows. A first section analyzes the impact of the crisis on Tuscan SPGs membership, motivations, practices and relations with other groups, especially producers, by analyzing the results of a survey, conducted in 2014, of 37 SPGs out of the 125 mapped. In-depth interviews with most of them plus other 5 SPGs coordinators, which refused to fill down the questionnaire, and a focus group involving both local producers and SPG activists are also used here.<sup>4</sup> Our analysis demonstrates that Tuscan SPGs are dealing with the crisis in a creative way, by adapting their main features and their relationships with civil society and market actors. Moreover, they seem more and more involved in forms of co-production, by sometimes building radical forms of 'food democracy' in response to the economic crisis. The second section is based on 4 in-depth interviews, documents and notes from participant

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<sup>4</sup>We mailed the questionnaire to about 125 SPGs, obtained from the retegas.org website, and we reiterated the mailing three times, for those who did not answer. We also made telephone calls when telephone numbers were available. See appendix for detailed information about respondents to questionnaires and interviews.

observation,<sup>5</sup> and reconstructs a campaign, called ‘Mondeggi Bene Comune’ and based in Tuscany, which will give a concrete picture of the transformation and the role of SPGs in their relations with producers in times of crisis.

The analysis shows how the crisis triggered out a radicalization process, which pushed some Tuscan SPGs to interact with more politically oriented groups and to redefine their role in the search for alternative co-production systems. In this process, as the Mondeggi campaign shows, a crucial role is fulfilled by small producers organizations that operate as brokers in the construction of the network supporting the co-production experience.

As we will see, the radicalization is evident in the forms of actions (land occupation), the framing (the crisis as the result of both capitalistic productions and the states’ failure to cope with it), and the conceptions and practices of democracy (based on direct involvement of citizens in the production management). Actually, the analysis of the campaign shows how anti-austerity policies contributed to rethink the role of citizens, consumers and producers in the “common good” management. If neither the market, nor the state seem in general well equipped to efficiently govern the commons (Ostrom 1990), this seems even more evident when both institutions are weakened by the economic crisis.

Finally, the conclusions summarize the main results and point out some theoretical implications.

## **2. The Tuscan SPGs in times of crisis: Resilience through transformation**

Although a reliable census of SPGs does not exist and the information on their own network websites are incomplete, the number of SPGs in Tuscany has clearly grown after 2008 (Table 1). Out of the 125 SPGs mapped at the end of 2013 through *retegas.org*, we could survey 37 (about 34%), with both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to coordinators. About half SPGs of our sample was founded between 2004 and 2008, and the other half in 2009 or after. This allows us to explore some differences that are related with SPGs activism in time of crisis.

The average number of members of the SPGs surveyed is about 32 (calculated considering both families and individuals). According to the coordinators, SPGs

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<sup>5</sup>See detailed information on the respondents and the participant observation sections in the Appendix.

membership mostly comes from a middle-class background: 21 SPGs (57%) have a prevailing middle-class membership (teachers, employees, specialized workers, small farm owners, etc.); 9 (24%) have upper middle-class subscribers, and only 6 (16%) include people coming also from a lower middle-class status (1 SPG did not provide information on this). Those data seem to confirm that social class strongly affects the likelihood of practicing political consumerism (Ferrer-Fons, Fraile 2014). Nevertheless, SPGs social composition varies according to their period of foundation: SPGs founded during the crisis period have more lower middle-class and mixed classes members than those founded during the pre-crisis period.

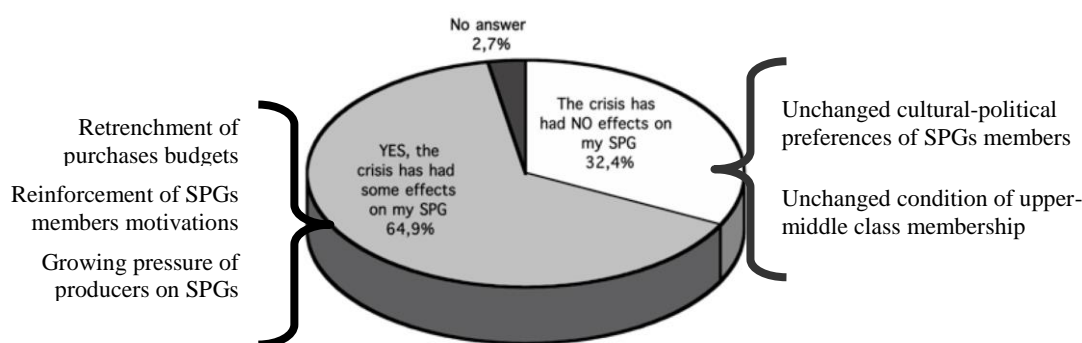
**Table 1. Tuscan SPGs per establishment year (source: retegas.org)**

<i>Establishment Year</i>	<i>Number of SPGs</i>
1994-1998	0
1999-2003	9
2004-2008	42
2009-2013	79
Not available	46
Total	125

About 60% of the interviewed SPGs declared that the number of their members has increased in the last years, about 27% that it has remained the same, while only in 5 cases the membership has decreased. Members have increased more in those SPGs founded after 2008. About 28% (10 out of 35) of SPGs report that the majority of their members actively participated in politics or associations before getting involved in SPGs activities; the same percentage declares that about half of its members did so, while in 14 SPGs (40%) only a minority had previous participative experiences, and nobody had it in just 1 group (in two cases we did not get the relative information). This seems to confirm that the diffusion of SPGs in Tuscany is connected to the strength of local associational life. However, SPGs founded during the crisis period attract less people with previous participative experience than pre-crisis groups do: only a minority has such experience in 55% of the former against 27% of the latter.

According to the people interviewed, the context of crisis (recession, austerity politics, narratives of decline) has largely influenced Tuscan SPGs. Less than 1 SPG out of 3 has not been affected by the context of crisis, whereas 65% SPGs have noticed some change (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Direct effects of crisis on SPGs (n=37)



Three different effects of the crisis seem to exist. *First*, in some SPGs, the crisis has affected consumption attitudes of SPGs members. As a SPG coordinator told us, ‘consumption through SPGs changed as families consumption changed in general’ (Focus-group). Families seem to have retrenched their own purchases budget, to have made their purchases more focused on what they really need, and to increase their own attention on purchase prices. *Secondly*, some SPGs have observed a different attitude in producers. They seem to have significantly developed a stronger interest in SPG as a favorable sales channel. It has meant that some SPGs have observed a growing pressure by producers who propose themselves as providers.

Now providers and producers have a strong desire to approach SPGs for economic reasons. We receive dozens of emails each month by providers and producers who propose themselves to our group. Sometimes it is positive: actually we have found some providers in this way. But sometimes it’s not... providers are too aggressive. (Interview 17)

*Thirdly*, in some SPGs the crisis seems to have strengthened the motivations of SPGs members. They seem to have further developed their own critical attitudes towards the economic system and to have counted more on SPG as a good way to react. As some of the coordinators interviewed said: ‘people are more aware of the importance of getting collectively organized, building territorial networks, reinforcing their food sovereignty...’ (Interview 6); ‘people are much more critical now, they observe more,



they are much more willing to learn about the entire production cycle...' (interview 14); 'the crisis has a positive effect on the SPGs movement, because it is now clear that capitalism is a bankrupt system, and people are much more in need of solidarity relationships, as the increase of families involved in our activities testifies' (Interview 27):

The crisis had a huge effect on our activities. We insist much more now in promoting cultural changes ... our sensibility to the producers needs increased, we are trying to guarantee continuity to make their firms more sustainable through pre-financing practices, pre-paid vouchers... The awareness that our consumerist practices are 'just', even if perfectible, that a solidarity economy embedded in human relations of trust and collaboration is a value on which is worth to invest, that our choices are important and affect the world in which we live are growing a lot... (Interview 10).

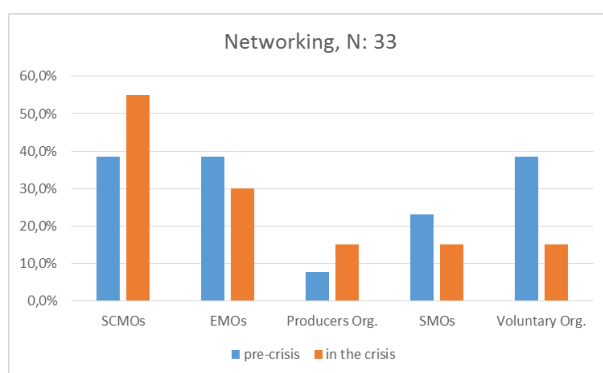
As the interviewed coordinators clarify, motivations based on local alter-consumerism coexist with self-oriented and pragmatic motivations and with an interest in community experience. A sharp economic motivation—that is paying less to purchase goods—is absent, but purchasing good-quality, local, organic products at reasonable prices is a typical motivation of SPGs members, especially in times of crisis. Thus, the pattern of SPGs members motivations seems to be generally *hybrid*.

The majority of interviewed SPGs (51,4%) has experienced some changes in the organization of collective purchase in the last 3-4 years. In this cluster the majority has gone towards a larger sharing of organizational responsibilities, whereas some SPGs has experienced the contrary. Although the debate among Italian SPGs about professionalization is vibrant, a very small minority of the Tuscan SPGs interviewed have shifted towards more structured and professionalized ways of collective purchase. Tuscan SPGs are almost 100% volunteer based. The growing use of ICT instruments help SPGs members to save time.

The distinction between pre- and post-crisis foundation periods allows us to assess in a preliminary way if the crisis is producing changes in the way SPGs network among them and with external collective actors. Figure 2 shows that SPGs founded in times of crisis are networking more with other SCMOs and producers organizations, whereas pre-crisis founded SPGs are more connected with Environmental Movement Organizations (EMOs), other Social Movement Organizations (SMOs) and Voluntary Organizations. However, this does not mean that SPGs founded in times of crisis are less publicly active, as 17 of them report involvement in public activities against 10 of pre-crisis SPGs. Rather it is the focus of the public activities that changes. The 'deepening' of SPGs relations with SCMOs and producers organizations, if confirmed on

a larger scale and with a more rigorous empirical analysis, may point to the formation of a community movement based on good, local, safe and (relatively) cheap food, where both the notions of 'co-production' (Grasseni 2014) and 'food democracy' (Hassanein 2003) may become even more central.

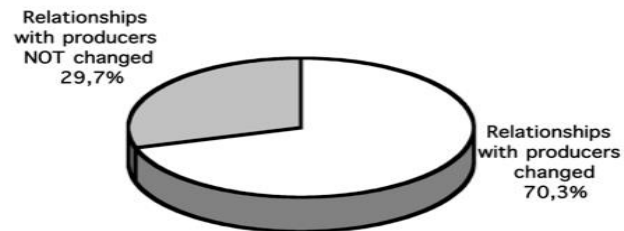
**Figure 2. SPGs networking by period of foundation.**



The pivot of this process seems to be centered in the relational dynamics between SPGs and small marginal individual producers. The latter are still the most important option for SPGs but more than 2 interviewed groups out of 3 have changed something in the last years. Changes are mainly about the number of producers involved by SPGs and the intensity of relationships. Some SPGs have increased the number of producers or have substituted some producers with new ones (turn-over) only. Other SPGs have strengthened or increased their own relationships with producers, or have left the numbers unchanged (Figure 3). This confirms a growing attention to good quality products and the increasing need for a sustainable and safe food community. As one coordinator told us

Producers have increased, but they are always small in size and often family owned. We always ask them precise quality standards... We ask producers to apply a small price charge to allow the biological access to as much people as possible (Interview 31).

At the same time another coordinator affirms: 'We ask producers to be present on the distribution day. This is very important, because we need to create a strong trust relationship between producers and our members' (Interview 15).



In the last years, Tuscan SPGs seem to have developed a stronger orientation to co-production. One of the most innovative practices, in this sense, is the so-called 'Participatory Guarantee' of producers. As reported by one participant, it consists of

a robust trust relationship between consumers/co-producers and producers about how local products are produced. It is concretely carried out through a calendar of 'farm meetings' where producers are available not only to consumers' visits but to the visits of other producers as well. The latter can better verify if production follows the right methods. (...) If you are in a Participatory Guarantee System you don't need an organic official certification: relationships are more important than a stamp! Some producers opt for Participatory Guarantee System because they cannot incur the costs' for an official organic certification. Someone else does it for political reasons (Interview 38).

Most of the evidences suggest that, under the stress of the economic crisis, Tuscan SPGs are transforming their practices, motivations and relations with their environment. Not only most of them are resilient, but this resiliency is achieved through denser food networks and more politically-oriented motivations and relations. The search of a new collective identity able to give sense to consumerist practices has meant the intensification of trust relations with small producers, and reveals the attempt at the building of a local Social Community Movement.

### 3. The 'Mondeggi Bene Comune' campaign: A radical 'food democracy' case?

The 'Mondeggi Bene Comune' ('Mondeggi Common Good' - MBC) campaign can be considered one of the best examples of how political producerism promotes and supports grassroots food networks, and, by relying on already existing consumer-producer networks, it involves politically motivated consumers, and other small producers in alternative practices of co-production. That is, the campaign illustrates how SCMOs, on both the consumption and the production sides, interact to build local Sustainable Community Movements.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.1 From 'Land Common Good' to 'Farm without owners'

Peasant social movements have a long history all over the world, and have been particularly active in resisting the neoliberal reforms from the 1980s onwards, and highly visible within the Global Justice Movement (e.g.: *Confederation Paysenne* in France, the global network *Via Campesina*). Recently, more and more after 2008 crisis, "the rural" has been interpreted as one of the most innovative (g)local laboratories of political mobilizations. Although different for specific contexts, issues and action strategies, contemporary (g)local peasant social movements have been extensively inspired by the principles of "agroecology" and "peasant agriculture".<sup>7</sup> The practices of political campaigning and protest against agri-business projects and agriculture policies have been mixed with more direct forms of social action that include community development projects, the establishment of producer cooperatives and communities of back-to-the-land and land rights activists (Sevilla-Guzman, Martinez-Allier 2006; Edelman 2012; Rosset, Martinez-Torres 2012; Woods 2008).

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<sup>6</sup> MBC Campaign has been studied through qualitative interviews to activists (conducted in February 2015) and participant observation (October 2014 - April 2015). Details are in the Appendix. As usual for this method (Balsinger, Lambelet 2014), observation has implied the elaboration of field notes of direct participation to meetings, activities and of discussions.

<sup>7</sup> Agro-ecology has been defined as "a collective practice of agriculture which explicitly considers not only economic and social aspects but also environmental and ecological aspects" (Sevilla-Guzman, Martinez-Allier, 2006: 472). Peasant agriculture is typically characterized by "a pattern based on short and decentralized circuits of production and consumption, with strong links between food production and local and regional ecosystems and societies" (Rosset, Martinez-Torres 2012, pp. 17-18)

In Italy, after the rise of the Global Justice Movement the visibility of peasant social movements has significantly grown within the local wave of political consumerism mobilizations in the 2000s (Forno, Graziano 2014), jointly with the increase of SPGs (Forno, Grasseni, Signori 2015), the wider and renewed attention paid to the typical and slow-food culture (Petrini 2003) and the diffusion of “new rural” subjects (van der Ploeg 2008) and “new territorial” projects (Magnaghi 2000). The “Peasant Agriculture Campaign” ([agricolturacontadina.org](http://agricolturacontadina.org)), launched in 2009, has made Italian peasants organizations structured as social movements well recognizable and has made clear the extent of social support it currently has in Italy. In this work all those issues are interpreted as forms of political agro-producerism, where production is based on and supports specific political and ethical values. When political producers act collectively and interact with other civil society organizations, especially consumerist organizations, they act as SCMOs, as SPGs do on the consumerist side.

In Italy, one of the most recent and visible forms of political producerism and SCMOs on the productive side is *Genuino Clandestino* (‘Genuine Clandestine’). Born in 2010 as communication campaign against the restrictive legislation on food transformation, *Genuino Clandestino* has evolved as a national, informal and bottom-up network. Although particularly fluid, it is mainly composed by peasants, eco-villages and communities, local antagonist groups and single citizens supporting local ecologist protests and promoting alternative food co-production practices such as local peasant markets and the participatory organic self-certification. The network calls for a fight for food self-determination, aspires to build a new alliance between urban and rural social movements, and operates through direct action practices ([genuinoclandestino.it/il-manifesto](http://genuinoclandestino.it/il-manifesto)).

*Genuino Clandestino* has been one of the hardest opponents of some austerity policies which impacted on land property in Italy. In 2011-2012, under the pressure of the so-called ‘Troika,’ the Italian Government adopted some urgent laws in order to cut public spending. Some of these (L.183/2011 and L.201/2011 ‘Salva Italia’) made 320.000ha public agricultural lands saleable to private actors authorized to change the use of the plots after five years. Against these proposals, *Genuino Clandestino* launched the national protest campaign ‘Terra Bene Comune’ (TBC) (‘Land Common Good’). In opposition to the privatization of land, the campaign has counter-proposed to use abandoned public land for new rurality projects based on the principle of land access, peasant agriculture, and agro-ecology, and managed through the self-organization of local communities ([terrabenecomune.noblogs.org](http://terrabenecomune.noblogs.org)).

Coherently to *Genuino Clandestino*’s profile of bottom-up network, the campaign has been peculiarly shaped by local contexts and actors. In Florence the campaign has had a significant development with *Mondeggi Bene Comune* (MBC) (‘Mondeggi

Common Good'), that is currently one of the most advanced and known campaigns of social land re-appropriation in Italy.<sup>8</sup> TBC campaign in the Florentine area has facilitated the meeting between local marginal agricultural producers, university students belonging to a grassroots student union of the Faculty of Agriculture and citizens, some of whom are SPGs activists. A key-role in building the local network has been played by the local (marginal) organic producers involved into SPGs whose actions has been considerable in terms of example for the university students and in terms of political socialization for SPGs activists. As a SPGs member reconstructs through sharp words:

My wife and I haven't had almost any political experiences before. Our process was: first of all, the SPG. We have been among the founders of our SPG and we were enthusiastic about SPGs in the first years. Then, something new happened thanks to the small producers we knew through the SPG. They made us really know how peasant agriculture can oppose to agribusiness models, and they have involved us in the TBC campaign. Since that moment, I have been like in a wheel and I am an active member of the MBC Committee now. (Interview 38)

The first initiatives of the Florentine TBC campaign were some public stances against L.201/2011 'Salva Italia' (early 2012), then (early 2013) the TBC campaign assembly evolved "a will to go beyond the dissent emerged among TBC campaigners and we decided to inaugurate a purposeful phase" (Interview 39). A shared path towards "new rurality" projects and alternative food local networks in the Florentine area sounded realistic for three reasons. *First*, the TBC network shared a common interpretation about the problems of local and peasant agriculture in the contemporary globalized world. Previous experiences and mobilizations conducted by the actors involved into the TBC campaign on their own from half 2000s—namely the University students

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<sup>8</sup> The campaign has been supported and taken as point of reference by the Italian social movements for rural and common good and has progressively had a big echo on different national on-line information agencies and magazines (Italiachecambia.org, Greenreport, Comune-info.net, TerraNuova, ilCambiamento, Altreconomia...), whereas conventional local newspapers have mainly focused to the legal issues of the campaign. The campaign has received a significant and extended attention throughout Italy and abroad (autonomies.org; indymedia.org.uk) and has reached Pope Francis, who invited the group to participate to the peasant movements world meeting in November 2016. MBC Facebook page counts about 10,000 "Likes" (update: November 2016). An authoritative and explicit support to the campaign has come from university researchers and scientific societies such as the 'Società dei territorialisti' which have subscribed the appeal "A possible project for Mondeggi" in 2014.

through the grassroots student union, the citizens through the SPGs, the local organic producers through peasant movement organizations—have facilitated the process of frame alignment (Snow et al. 1986). *Secondly*, the TBC network showed a good connection between different and complementary immediate interests: the students and new graduates in agricultural studies were looking for a job out of the agribusiness model; SPGs activists were interested in buying local, organic and fair agricultural products; small agricultural producers could be center-staged and get recognition. *Thirdly*, the characters of the Florentine area—mainly the geographic proximity between city and countryside, the favorable local political culture, the existence of abandoned plots—gave the campaigners some real chances to build an alternative local SCM (Interview 39).

In 2013, the ‘Mondeggi Villa’<sup>9</sup> was identified by TBC network as a symbolically and concretely best fitting target for experimenting a grassroots food network. The ‘Mondeggi Villa’ was the location of a prestigious agricultural enterprise owned by the local administration in the Florentine Chianti. It was composed of over 200ha of land mainly cultivated with olives and grapes, 7 buildings (historical Villa, apartments, offices and stores), and about €200,000 agricultural machines. It has been progressively abandoned in the second half of the 2000s, it has accumulated over € 1 million debt and has finally gone into liquidation.

After some unsuccessful public appeals to make ‘Mondeggi Villa’ the location for new-rurality projects, TBC campaigners intensified their own mobilization when the local public institutions—according to the L.201/2011 ‘Salva Italia’—decided to sell it to private economic actors (Spring 2014). After a 3-day popular mobilization with over 1,000 people on the land, in June 2014, TBC campaigners occupied ‘Mondeggi Villa’ and launched the “Mondeggi Bene Comune - Fattoria senza padroni (MBC)” project.

The new and ongoing campaign has two intertwined aims: averting the ‘Mondeggi Villa’ sale to private actors and making it the center of an alternative food network in the Florentine area. As one of the MBC campaigner coming from an SPG reconstructs, “the idea is: finding a plot, put it into production and creating jobs, let the products be absorbed by SPGs. It’s an already available system. It’s simple but solid” (Interview 38).

Since June 2014, the ‘Farm without owners’ has started to exist and a new medium-long term agricultural co-production project has begun. Seventeen young people (11 of whom graduated in Agriculture at Florence University) live in one building of the Villa,

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<sup>9</sup> Mondeggi is the name of a small rural hamlet in the Municipality of Bagno a Ripoli (12km from Florence). The owners of ‘Mondeggi Villa’ public enterprise (Società agricola “Mondeggi SRL”) are the Metropolitan City of Florence (formerly Provincia di Firenze) and the Florentine Chamber of Commerce.

design, and implement the new agricultural project of Mondeggi in small and specialized working groups supported by the much larger 'Toward MBC' Committee. Without any institutional recognition, in 2014-2015 some olive trees and grapevines have been restored after the decay, a part of the land has been sown with vegetables, a 300-tree orchard has been planted, herbs production and transformation have been started up. The efforts to make the Villa a real common space have been multiple: many public working and training sessions have been organized in the Villa (the so-called MBC "Peasant school"), over 15 small plots have been equipped by the campaigners and entrusted to some residents in the municipalities around Mondeggi, as well as 1200 olive trees, for self-production through the "MO.T.A. project" (MOndeggi Terreni Autogestiti - Mondeggi Self-managed plots). The campaign has been publicly presented in a big number of local, regional and national initiatives (we observed over 20 initiatives in February 2015 only). According to the promoters, all this is also the best way to "make higher the political cost of a possible repression" (Interview 38).

SPGs are pivotal in the campaign as they provide MBC three types of support and receive as much. *First*, SPGs bring activists and competences to the MBC campaign and *vice versa* the latter provides Florentine SPGs members the opportunity to go beyond their own "routinized way to live the SPG" (Interview 38) by participating in a real co-production initiative contrasting the mainstream agribusiness model. *Secondly*, both as properly purchase groups and as the main organizers of the bi-monthly peasant markets in five Florentine quarters ([gasfiorentini.it/2014/materiali/rete-dei-mercato-contadini](http://gasfiorentini.it/2014/materiali/rete-dei-mercato-contadini)), SPGs constitute an already available trust and socio-economic local infrastructure reducing the uncertainty of MBC productions by guaranteeing in advance a paying demand to MBC new peasants' productions. Conversely, thanks to MBC campaign, SPGs can count on a trusted producer to whom provision themselves. *Thirdly*, the stable connection between SPGs and MBC provide the latter a wide social and political support in the Florentine area.<sup>10</sup> Considered the lack of institutional recognition and the peculiar characters of agricultural productive processes, these points are crucial to give MBC new peasants a minimum safe base to plant medium-long term agricultural projects into an occupied land.

### *3.2 Alternatively coping with the economic crisis*

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<sup>10</sup> A wider active support to MBC campaign comes from further citizens, associations and the grassroots of Florence and national networks such as Genuino Clandestino, Communia, Attac etc.



The crisis has affected MBC campaign in several ways. *First*, the economic crisis and the austerity policies season have pressed the Italian Government toward the decision to dismiss the public lands in order to get more resources. Conversely, the economic crisis has also made difficult the dismissing, as not many farmers have had the resources to buy these lands and only a few have probably considered the conjuncture positive enough for a millionaire investment. This scenario has left 'Mondeggi Villa,' as well as many other public properties, completely abandoned, contributing to the rise of citizens' anger and frustration.

*Secondly*, the crisis and austerity policies have exacerbated some material conditions against which MBC campaign has been trying to act. Tuscan peasant agriculture developed by small farmers has been experiencing a crisis for many years, but it has been marginalized recently.<sup>11</sup> The rising interest in "km0" (local) and organic products by large retailers in the last years in Italy have not significantly improved the condition of small farmers. As a Tuscan delegate of the biggest agriculture union says, in times of economic crisis the intermediation processes in the agriculture market make small farmers more and more vulnerable. His words are particularly clear and provide an insider point of view:

When a small farmer goes to an intermediary, the latter has the upper hand. Large retailers inform her about how much product they need and the price. She has to transfer them a significant part of potential income and suffer for the more and more frequent delayed payment too. Moreover, large retailers always can tell her 'bye, I have found another provider'. In agriculture you can't even have a rapid reaction because times of conversion are slow... The only way is direct selling! (Interview 42)

Additionally, the crisis and austerity have made much more precarious the employment condition of Italian youth. In this context, so far unusual paths of self-employed micro-entrepreneurship have become frequent, especially among graduated politicized young people (Guidi, Bonetti, Popolla 2016). The interviews to MBC new peasants confirm that their unemployed condition was one of the reasons which convinced them to get involved in this "experiment," though it is not clear whether their unemployment has been determined by the crisis, or by their political awareness—probably both. One of the campaigners makes explicit a point of view shared by many MBC new peasants:

<sup>11</sup> From 2000 to 2010, in Tuscany the number of up to 1ha agricultural enterprises decreased by 63,8%, those of up to 2ha by 37,7%, those of up to 3ha by 27,9%, whereas bigger ones better resisted to crisis (Regione Toscana 2012).

You get a degree in Agriculture... What do you do at this point? Or you beg for a job, or you do what we did. When you graduate in Agriculture, a classic path is to find a job as a sales person of pesticides. There are a lot of corporations (Bayern, Monsanto...) that offer you a job like that. If you look for a safe job with a salary of €1,600 per month, this is the perfect opportunity. But when you join a student grassroots union this is exactly the world you want to contest. You look for an alternative model of agriculture, which is not only selling something. We have always said: 'not a job at any price'. The price would be to sell poisons which pollute the environment, do not make the farmers self-sufficient, do not allow them to increase their income... What kind of job is this? Then, as we were unemployed, we said 'let's invent our job!' and we met in Mondeggi... (Interview 40).

*Thirdly*, the crisis stimulated both critical producers and consumers to explore new and more radical forms of co-production by using the crisis as a 'legitimizing frame.' Such a virulent economic crisis provides the campaigners with the opportunity to denounce the effects of the contemporary (welfare) capitalism on society and agribusiness models on agriculture, to extend and reinforce the call for mobilizations, and to shape them into a renewed search for wide alliances and alternative projects. The use of the crisis as a legitimizing frame is clear in the TBC *manifesto* ([terrabenecomune.noblogs.org](http://terrabenecomune.noblogs.org)):

we stand shoulder to shoulder with those who are struggling against public resources waste, environment devastation, all useless and damaging major public works, the commodification of the territory, of the resources; those who stand for housing rights, and against the government decisions which take into account only the interest of powerful people, lobbies, banks and the mafias (...) we want to meet with social movements and committees that struggle for the protection of the territories and the common goods, to strengthen alliances ... to intertwine the paths between the struggles in the rural areas and those in the cities, to deconstruct the concept of crisis with proposals of alternative practices (ibidem).

### *3.3 Governing the Common through community (food) network*

The network involved in the MBC campaign works on the base of a 'Chart of the Principles and the Intents' collectively written by local farmers, recent graduates in Agriculture, SPGs activists, associations and members of local committees during a public meeting held in January 2014 in Pozzolatico (Impruneta - Florence), after many preparatory meetings (Poli 2014). The Chart states that the first aim of the campaign is

to 're-inhabit Mondeggi, by placing families and individuals in the rural houses of the Farm, in order to reconstitute the "people of Mondeggi"'. It also sets the guiding principles of the way the Mondeggi Villa should be used, among which there are 'solidarity instead of competition,' 'social justice,' 'a sustainable use of natural resources,' the 'safeguard and the increment of biodiversity,' the 'health of producers and consumers,' the 'use of forms of mutualistic and solidarity based finance,' and 'practices of forms of barter'.

The emphasis on the 'common good,' explicit in the name of the campaign, in the Chart and in all the meetings of the network we participated in, indicates the intent to democratize the land use in a way that overcomes the State-Market dichotomy, and gives the citizens themselves the right to participate in the decisions and the management of the farm. This 'frame' resonates a lot with the concept of 'common pool resources' elaborated by Elinor Ostrom in her famous 'Governing the Commons,' where the author affirms that the commons management poses serious problem of collective action in both State and market models, and suggests that the direct participation of communities in the commons management represents a possible way out (Ostrom 1990).

In the words and practices of the campaigners both the 'tragedy of the commons' and a path to overcome it seem present. MBC campaigners propose to restore the public status of 'Mondeggi Villa'—beyond its "tragic" destiny—very differently from the privatization plan adopted by the local institutions. They contest the idea that a monetary equivalent obtained by local institutions for a private use of the Villa would actually be the best public option among the available ones, and counter-propose to renew its public use. According to them, the tragedy can be overcome thanks to the bottom-up alternative food network the MBC campaign has created. This matches some unsatisfied social needs (good food, agriculture employment, peasant agriculture defense, new city-countryside relationships), a community entrepreneur able to meet them (MBC Committee) and a citizen supporting infrastructure (SPGs, local peasant markets, local residents).

Generally speaking, abandoning the land is a complete waste. Well... if the land belongs to a private owner, one can say that she can do what she wants with her ownership. Here the land is public, a lot and productive, but was abandoned by the State. Now, there is somebody who wants to live there and work it... now keeping the land abandoned would be a dramatic waste (...) We are trying to transform this place in a real common good. We want to generate an income for some people, good food for Florence, a different model of relationships and economy, and a new way for farmers agriculture at the same time. (Interview 41).

The MBC practices we observed qualify the search for a shared and inclusive management of the common. Coherently to the Chart, the strategic initiatives of MBC campaign are discussed in the 'Toward MBC' Committee. This is convened once a week and each time it is composed of about 40 people who take the decisions through consensus method. The Committee represents the community-based decision body, but the Mondeggi Farm is also governed by other decision bodies, such as the 'agriculture assembly' (which decides on the productive activities to be carried out), smaller specific committees (which convene all those involved in a particular production, e.g.: olives, vineyards, fruits, legumes, goats, etc.), and the 'house assembly' (which decides on the house activities including cleaning, cooking and provisions). However, all the decisions impacting on the whole MBC Campaign are discussed in and need to be approved by the general Committee.

During our two-day stay on the Farm (February 18, March 11, 2015), we had the opportunity to observe two agriculture assemblies and two Committee assemblies, the first held in the late afternoon and the second in the evening. One of the most important decision to be made was about the possibility to buy a tractor. Everybody agreed that the tractor was necessary to work the land. Earlier discussions (observed on February 06) have excluded (after a controversy) the possibility to use the tractors locked in a building in the Farm, to avoid the risk that public authorities could consider this as an intolerable expropriation and proceed to evacuation. The agriculture assembly on February 18 decided that the Farm would ask for a loan to buy it and see if this was affordable. In the evening, this decision was reported to the Committee. After a long discussion, some suggested to ask for the loan to the cooperative of micro-credit created by a community in Florence (MAG), which explicitly expressed solidarity to the campaign, and which usually supports social initiatives without applying interest rates and through flexible debt repayment plans. The idea met the consent of everybody and two activists (SPGs members), on the basis of their personal connections with MAG, were asked to explore this financial channel. It is worth noticing that two principles formalized in the Chart of the intent have been directly referred to, during the discussion: the 'solidarity' with other communities, and the 'use of forms of mutualistic and solidarity-based finance'. Nevertheless, as emerged in the Committee assembly in March 11, the loan was not necessary thanks to the support of the community. Some fund-raising events in Florence and Rome allowed to collect enough money to buy the tractor that has been sold to the campaigners at a moderate price by a local seller in order to support to the campaign. An analogous support came from a

local wholesale nursery that sold the seeds to the campaigners at half the price (Participant observation notes).

The search for a Mondeggi farm self-management as a common good regards the economy of agricultural activities too. During our observational period the new peasants who live and work on the farm discussed about their work in and outside the farm, and about the methods through which to measure and divide the income opportunities among the individuals and the collectivity. The discussion appeared lively, aware about the limits and constraints but fed by “dreams.” The new peasants reject a strict self-entrepreneurship perspective and a principle of economic order based on the different remuneration of working skills. They consider themselves as a working collective but this does not imply to exclude the possibility to express subjective preferences. The right balance between the collective and the individual seems one of the most delicate questions and, in the group view, has to be coherent with the whole MBC Campaign.

The idea here is to work together on the grapes, olives and arable products and get an equally distributed income (or an economic help at least). Besides this kind of work, that we want to do all together, there are smaller agricultural groups. ... If somebody wants to do something more than the work we do together, she can join or set one of these groups. We are all in some agricultural groups, such as the honey's, the bread's, the fruit's group... The groups are made up according to affinity, friendship, interests, shared values. Within each group, we work together and we decide how and how much we want to work. One part of what we earn goes to the farm common fund (we think about 20%) and the rest is equally distributed within the group (Interview 40)

My dream would be that the Farm was legitimized and we can continue without the eviction anxiety, and that our project took shape: 2-3 inhabited houses, well coordinated but with specific features, carrying on agricultural activities, with the connected activities (transformation, markets, direct selling...), plus all the crafts activities... The dream is that many people can work together in this productive context and they can have a sufficient income to do something outside. (...) We can also imagine that we can work partially outside and partially here, and we bring here part of what we earn outside. It can work! (Interview 41)

#### **4. Conclusions. Sustainable Community Movement networks in times of crisis: evidence and suggestions from Tuscany**

Due to the link first established with the globalization process, political consumerism has been prevalently studied in the global context by looking at the micro-level trends and the individual reactions to perceived unjust practices of production. This perspective has for long time impeded a strong analytical effort toward the meso-level, that is the role of organizations and collective identities in shaping the consumers' behaviour. Moreover, networks of political consumers have been prevalently studied without taking into account the role of (small) producers. In this article, we introduce the concept of political producerism, to underline how consumer-producer relations may concretize in co-production experiences.

If Forno and Graziano (2014) have correctly argued that a social movement perspective is needed to better understand the phenomenon of political consumerism, and have proposed to do this by using the concept of Sustainable Community Movement Organizations, the focus was restricted to the role of consumerist organizations. Although we adopted such a perspective too in a previous article (Guidi, Andretta 2015), the focus on organizations does not allow *per se* for a better understanding of the relational dimension that is at the centre of a social movement dynamic; while the role of producers in building Sustainable Community Movement remains a bit neglected. In our view, not only a Sustainable Community Movement is built through relations between consumers and producers, but to be considered a "movement" it needs to act on, and through, conflicts (della Porta, Diani 1996). Those relations have been much more explored in socio-agriculture studies that have developed the conceptual tools through which investigating how groups of consumers and producers interactions build new food communities, working in small co-production systems, based on shared ethical and political values, and horizontal and democratic relations.

By looking at both the role of (consumerist) organizations and producers, we can grasp better the relational dimension that shapes political consumerism, and by looking at the way in which the economic crisis (the threat) has triggered out mechanisms of social movement building—that is, how the threat has been transformed into opportunities—it is possible to better appreciate what a social movement perspective may potentially add to the study on this topic.

Actually, our analysis of the Tuscan SPGs' transformation in time of crisis shows that the relations between members within their group and between groups of consumers and groups of producers are at the centre of a process of politicization of consumption

practices. Members of SPGs seem first motivated by getting good food at a relatively low price, and then understand that getting good food implies a political redefinition of practices, and a struggle for the building of concrete alternative ways to consume and produce. Although explorative, our investigation on Tuscany shows that SPGs can allow people to buy good quality, safe and healthy products at sustainable prices, and can give people a chance to feel 'less' powerless and try to affect, if not the 'capitalist system,' at least their local economy. Moreover, the Tuscan case seems to demonstrate how SPGs can offer the members a soft but meaningful communitarian experience through both the group dimension and the practical commitment with local producers. This hybrid motivations pattern seems to be appealing and appropriate to shape an alternative resilience process.

Although our limited sample reveals significant differences among Tuscan SPGs, they generally appear to have increased their membership, have intensified their own connection and the relationships with producers, and have involved more people from the impoverished middle class in the last 4 years. At the same time, our data indicate that SPGs organizational strategies may aim at deepening the 'food community' at the expense of broader networking.

The experience of the Florentine MBC campaign shows that such deepened food community network may take the shape of a radical food democracy network. The campaign radicalized the connection between consumerism, production and political engagement, in a way hardly imaginable out of the economic crisis context. The latter has made pressure on institutions to sell out public lands, marginalized and impoverished small producers and widened unemployment, especially among young people. The MBC campaign explicitly refers to all three processes and seems to show that the 'crisis' has also been used as a 'legitimizing frame' to explore innovative and radical co-production processes. Besides, our exploratory investigation shed some light on how important is the role of politicized small producers in providing the ground on which to build a radical local SCM. Moreover, the emphasis on the Mondeggi Villa as "common good," seems to give to such experience a prefigurative meaning, as the activists try to create 'within the ongoing political practice of a movement ... those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal' (Boggs 1977, p. 100). According to the MBC campaigners, the management of a common good is based on the direct participation of the community, the producers and the consumers, and this, in their understanding, represents the most efficient way to preserve and reproduce it, after the failure of the State and against the deprivations of the Market.

We think that future research on political consumerism needs to focus more on the processes and mechanisms through which individuals get collectively organized,

organizations shape the meaning of their behavior, and relations both within and between organizations become politicized. A relational approach needs to be further elaborated to understand whether and when alternative consumerist practices and groups take the form of a social movement, that is intensify the density of their networks, build a collective identity, and promote the citizens mobilization on a conflict for social change (Diani, McAdam, 2003).

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## Appendix

*Interviews/Questionnaires (conducted and/or received between June 16<sup>th</sup> and November 5<sup>th</sup> 2014)*

1) Anonymous	22) SPG Etica o Etichetta – Arezzo
2) SPG Station - S.Miniato - Pisa	23) SPG Calenzano – Firenze
3) SPG Pietrasanta - Lucca	24) SPG Casale Marittimo – Pisa
4) SPG Chicco di grano (Pistoia)	25) SPG Collesalvetti – Livorno
5) SPG GASancat - Firenze	26) SPG Ecomondo – Livorno
6) SPG Barga (Lucca)	27) SPG GASello – Reggello (Firenze)
7) Anonimo	28) SPG GASalpasiense – Siena
8) SPG Amici della terra Versilia (Lucca)	29) SPG GrrAS – Grosseto
9) SPG Massa	30) SPG SangerGAS – Firenze
10) SPG GASedotti Firenze	31) SPG Fresco in Città – Livorno
11) SPG Carrara	32) SPG Equipe GAS – Firenze
12) SPG Seravezza (Lucca)	33) SPG Ortica – Empoli
13) SPG Viareggio	34) SPG Londa (Firenze)
14) SPG Mezzaluna - Pisa	35) SPG Ponsacco (Pisa)
15) SPG Felice - Pistoia	36) SPG Millepiedi Cerreto Guidi - Firenze
16) SPG Casciana Terme - Pisa	37) SPG Carmignano - Carmignano (Prato)
17) SPG Bio c'è - Firenze	38) SPG GaSpaccio (Firenze), activist in MBC Committee
18) SPG Reggello - Firenze	39) Farmer, 'Genuino Clandestino' activist, MBC Committee
19) SPG Allegri – Firenze	40) Activist in MBC (A.)
20) SPG La Montagna GASata - Firenze	41) Activist in MBC (E.)
21) SPG Valdichiana Senese - Siena	42) Coldiretti Tuscan delegate

*Focus Group (Pisa, September 16, 2014)*

Participants: Massimiliano Andretta (UNIFI); Riccardo Guidi (UNIFI); SPG Aulla (Massa-Carrara); SPG Vicopisano (Pisa); Legambiente activist and Eco-Producer in Val di Cornia (Livorno).

*Participant observation sessions of 'Mondeggi Bene Comune' campaign*

Participation to MBC Newsletter: from February to April 2015 (143 messages)

Committee Assemblies: January 29; February 6, 18; March 11, 2015

Agricultural Assemblies: February 18; March 11, 2015

Fund raising event: March 10, 2015

Street demonstration: October 14, 2014

#### **AUTHORS' INFORMATION**

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