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RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY.

The case of an Urban Consumption Co-operative in Greece

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ABSTRACT: The apparent ubiquity of alternative – to the dominant economic model – economies, after the 2008 multidimensional crisis across the world, fuelled claims about a new style of mobilisation emerging in Greece. It is the outcome of the evolution of the Greek anti-austerity movement and community-based experiences, consolidated to form new affiliations of collective initiatives and practices. Analysing original qualitative data derived from a case study of a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative, this article engages with the debate of Social and Solidarity Economy. The research highlights the capacity of a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative through sustainable consumption patterns to utilise local-traditional resources in order to empower local communities in times of crisis. Theoretically, this urban consumer co-operative generates new insights into the nature and meanings of a more sustainable and just economy, by changing the way it buys and sells food and other goods. From a policy and practice perspective, the paper raises the need for regional development strategies that capture the ‘alternativeness’ of these isolated initiatives, whose practices promote ethical, as well as environmental criteria and considerations in times of global economic crisis.

KEYWORDS: anti-austerity movements, Greece, social and solidarity economy, sustainable food consumption, urban consumer co-operative,

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1. Introduction

New movements have emerged in many European countries since 2010, with major differences in the experience of individual countries in terms of their strength, their style and their impact on agency and on a new provisioning infrastructure (Kousis 2017; Kousis and Paschou 2017). The rise of the opposition movement against austerity in Southern Europe, also coincided with major protests in other parts of the world, including the 'Arab Spring' and the Occupy movement in the United States. This apparent ubiquity of protests in the early 2010s has led some to perceive it as a new global movement phenomenon (Castells, Caraca, and Cardoso 2012), classified as 'sustainable community movement organisations' (Forno and Graziano 2014), or 'social and solidarity economy' movements (Dash 2014), etc. The goal of this paper is to explore the potential of those organisations who are concretely involved in the Social and Solidarity Economy movement in Greece, through a focus on their practices and values. Based on data collected on a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative, the analysis focuses on perceptions of sustainable consumption in relation to the 'alternativeness' of the Social and Solidarity Economy and its potential to create a shared vision that fosters ethical synergies between local, ecological, social and economic resources.

Traditional social movements have been studied by looking at their relations with political institutions and actors (della Porta and Diani 2006). In recent years, citizen responses to economic and political threats have varied. New collective responses in the public sphere (i.e., citizen initiatives and community-based groups) are manifested in alternative (to dominant) forms of economic and noneconomic activities and practices, by focusing on the interplay between market, politics and culture (Kousis and Paschou 2017). Greece, a country severely hit by the economic crisis and experiencing mass protests against unpopular austerity measures, offers an ideal setting to explore the appearance of new forms of movements. Alternative accounts embedded in anti-austerity movements have prominently been on the rise during the past decade in Southern European regions and specifically in Greece. A prototypical example of such an initiative emerged in Greece after the mass demonstrations of Syntagma Square in 2011, the so-called *Nontropo*, (pseudonym) an Urban Consumer Co-operative. Briefly, a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative consists of people who cooperate in purchasing food and other goods directly from traditional small-scale producers, on the basis of ethical and environmental criteria and considerations of solidarity. *Nontropo* presents itself as an alternative initiative with a shared critique of the dominant model of economy, expressed through the adoption of critical consumption patterns (*cf.* Fonte 2013). Members of the co-operative aim to build a more sustainable local economy by chang-

ing the way they buy their food and other goods, as they can no longer ignore ‘the blatant disregard of capitalism for the grounding of the economy and society in the natural world’ (cf. Hudson 2016, 205).

Policy makers, social scientists, activists and the wider public are more than ever advocating the need for alternative development models that reconnect communities with their resource-base and enhance their adaptability in times of crisis. Social and Solidarity Economy is gaining prominence in these debates (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Rakopoulos 2015; Utting 2015; North and Cato 2017), and is part of the wider theoretical framework of Social Economy. Social and Solidarity Economy is broadly defined as encompassing cooperation, reciprocity and justice issues, while much emphasis is placed on structural and cultural aspects that prioritise social and environmental goals over profit-maximisation (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy TFSSE 2014; Utting 2015).

As Nardi (2016) indicates, the Social and Solidarity Economy’s significance in overcoming inequalities throughout all sectors of the economy in favour of local communities and people, gives it a prominent transformative potential, both politically and socially. Similarly, Adam (2016) argues that the Social and Solidarity Economy has the capacity to nurture activities that protect the environment (i.e., recycling), develop synergies with other local economic activities (i.e., food processing of local produce), and generally contribute to the well-being of the wider community (i.e., community-supported agriculture). Calvo, Morales, and Zikidis (2017) go as far as defining the Social and Solidarity Economy as a promising location for eco-tourism, agro-tourism and community-led renewable energy projects, from which a reconstructive green political economy might be developed.

But, the transformative potential of Social and Solidarity Economy has been mostly discussed in theoretical terms. Little empirical attention has been paid to the values and views of those who are concretely involved in this alternative socio-economic model. This paper aims to begin to address questions related to the production and supply of goods in Greece, where alternative organisations such as urban consumer co-operatives are explicitly associated with serving and informing local communities. *How do key actors of the Social and Solidarity Economy perceive their role in relation to the dominant economic system? Through what means do they try to expand and promote their alternative development model? How do they link their practices with current efforts to enhance sustainable production and consumption practices in communities and localities?* In this sense, this expanding sector in Greece provides an excellent context to explore the viability of Social and Solidarity Economy in times of crisis, its potential for expansion and its capacity to contribute to the sustainability of local communities.

The research draws information from the LIVEWHAT project¹. To reflect an internal tendency of local initiatives that promote organic or traditional food and other goods from small-scale producers, a representative case study of a Greek Urban Consumer Co-operative was selected. The analysis relies on data gathered through a face-to-face interview with a key representative of the selected initiative. The small research sample makes it impossible to draw generalisations from this study, which is exploratory in nature. However, insights from this research can provide an important starting point for orienting and expanding the debate on Social and Solidarity Economy in times of crisis; and, particularly, in relation to its association with critical consumerism, local resources, democratic production and supply processes. Finally, the need for more targeted forms of political intervention that embed the social solidarity economy into a more coherent system, can possibly turn at least some of its transformative potential into practice.

2. Conceptual framework

Social and Solidarity Economy consists of grassroots, bottom-up initiatives with a non-market and non-monetary orientation that engage in social, environmental, food crisis, unemployment, poverty and ethical goals (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Utting 2015). The double descriptor – social and solidarity – is used by Laville (2014), after theorists such as Polanyi, Defournay, Hulgard, and Pestoff in Europe, and Coraggio, Gaiger, and Razeto in Latin America. These authors emphasise the attributes pertaining to both factors. While the meaning of social economy refers to an alternative economic model to organise the production, distribution, circulation, and consumption and their respective processes, solidarity economy is linked to the processes of democratisation and the idea of equality with regard to the legality of people, not only as economic subjects. It emphasises the idea of redistribution, not limited or reduced to the market economy and the creation of reciprocity-based relations. However, there is room for significant internal diversity within this category, and much has been written on the differential history and nature of Social and Solidarity Economy and the various ways in which it has contributed to bringing social justice values into the current turbulent socio-economic and political domain (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Moulaert et al. 2013;

¹ Results presented in this paper have been obtained within the project “Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences” (LIVEWHAT). This project was funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme (Grant Agreement No. 613237). More information about the project can be found at: <http://www.livewhat.unige.ch/?p=1>

Utting 2015; Hudson 2016; Nardi 2016). These different emphases represent a wide range of characteristics and approaches; among these, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (Utting 2013) and the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy. Both advocate Social and Solidarity Economy as being a new model of alternative social development.

A wide range of organisations exists within the Social and Solidarity Economy framework such as (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2016, 16–17) cooperatives, social businesses, self-help groups, community organisations, informal worker associations, service NGOs, solidarity funding initiatives, etc., that have a market orientation but also encompasses new experiences of Solidarity Economy (Kalogeraki, Papadaki, and Pera Ros 2018). All of these organisations display the following characteristics that define their mission values while differentiating them from other economic systems: (a) defence and promotion of human dignity; (b) constant creation and production of goods and services without neglecting ecological sustainability; (c) decision-making powers not linked to capital, invested in the organisation; (d) social justice through the fair distribution of income; (e) limited distribution of profits; (f) transparent and democratic participation and management; and (g) a high level of self-management (Defourny et al. 2014). The aforementioned organisations are guided by principles and practices of cooperation, solidarity, ethics, and democratic self-management via the connection of production and practices to a specific geographical area. Given their emphasis on localness, these organisations create the conditions for improving quality of life and, at the same time, promote sustainable local development of people and communities (Aguilar and Eduardo 2016).

Despite the plurality of its forms and expressions, the literature makes it clear that Social and Solidarity Economy has one fundamental feature: it emphasises cooperation, reciprocity and justice issues by providing innovative and alternative solutions that challenge neoliberal perspectives of development (Moulaert et al. 2013; Utting 2015). As Sahakian (2017) explains, Social and Solidarity Economy addresses the recent economic crisis and the widening of inequalities. It also addresses the life-needs of citizens by prioritizing their access to products (from parallel/alternative currencies, solidarity-based credit organisations to alternative consumption and food sovereignty) and services as coping mechanisms, which fell beyond the demands of the market. Therefore, on the basis of the above, Social and Solidarity Economy can be understood as an alternative to capitalism, a social movement, which is not captured in official statistics but is accepted by a rich array of theoretical approaches and, at the same time, emerges in many European Union documents (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Nardi 2016).

Much of the theoretical debate on Social and Solidarity Economy has also focused on the pursuit for structural and cultural alternatives and empowering lifestyles. There are a number of studies that focus on social strategies of building community bonds, local knowledge systems and new networks of social interaction. Barkin (2012), studies collective capacities, illustrating how inherited cultural knowledge promotes community wellbeing and the protection of ecosystems, thus delineating an alternative path of sustainable local development. Corrado (2010), focuses on the emergence of new relationships among producers, consumers and organisations, with the aim of re-qualifying food as a social need, instead of a commodity. Concurrent to the above, the Social and Solidarity Economy approach can be characterised as a transformative project that does not just aim to restore economic activity and create jobs in times of crisis, but to challenge the core function of production for profit instead of production for social needs (Kawano 2010). Furthermore, the underlying economic model integrates economic, social, and environmental aims, implying a kind of development, which shows not only social but also ecological concern, while still making room for economic concerns – hence its affinity with sustainable development. Social and Solidarity Economy's transformative project also entails a change in the relations of production, by placing the focus of attention on collective ownership of the means of production and democratic decision-making procedures. In this way, Social and Solidarity Economy revives old concepts and practices of solidarity and social economy through a 'Commons approach' (Ostrom 2001; Alix 2012).

Additionally, at times of crisis, interest in Social and Solidarity Economy tends to re-emerge as part of the search for an alternative social vision that can address social needs, no longer met by either the public or the private sector. In turn, addressing social needs via new productive relations presupposes the need to move beyond the binary state-market; in other words, to accomplish a mix of resources (Gardin 2006). For example, without ensuring alternative circuits for the purchase of inputs and distribution channels for their products, based on relations of solidarity, Social and Solidarity Economy initiatives are doomed to obey the dictum of the market and the logic of commodity, or depend exclusively on the resources made available by the state. On the other hand, contrary to what might be seen as conducive to their transformative potential, exclusive reliance on symmetrical exchanges among similar-minded initiatives may also pose threats, if these initiatives are restricted to dwarfish and marginal productive activities.

Moreover, the practical potential of Social and Solidarity Economy has been discussed through the provision of case studies that emphasise the availability of social and personal services in mental health, housing, health care and training (Defourny et

al. 2014) in specific localities. However, the relationship between social needs (articulated in social and personal services) and the spatial unevenness of Social and Solidarity Economy has not yet been adequately analysed. Recent literature on Social and Solidarity Economy centres on the availability of resources such as asset development, human capital building, and social capital enhancement in certain locations. Social and Solidarity Economy seeks to boost economic and social development that promotes shared ownership, sustainable production/consumption, and fair distribution or, in other words, seeks the availability of local social capital (van der Berk-Clark and Pyles 2012). Therefore, the link between Social and Solidarity Economy, as well as the degree and nature of its local embeddedness, require close empirical examination. According to Evans and Syrett (2007, 70), this raises the need for a research approach that focuses on interpretations and not on measurements. For example, what is needed is to generate insights into the context-dependent factors that bond and bridge stakeholders around a specific goal and, more generally, the relationships between social capital and other forms of capital (financial, human, cultural and environmental) (Evans and Syrett 2007, 70).

In this context, not much empirical attention has been devoted to the identification of social needs (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005). This is easily perceived, in relation to the views and practices of Social and Solidarity Economy. To further develop the debate, what is needed to be asked is: *how does the alternative logic of Social and Solidarity Economy perform in practice? What can Social and Solidarity Economy really offer to the current search for development strategies that address both the economic as well as the environmental crisis?*

Moreover, very few works have been dedicated to the debate on the opportunities for sustainable consumption, offered by Social and Solidarity Economy. Sahakian and Dunand (2015), for instance, suggest that upholding the values of Social and Solidarity Economy can be an ideal location for the development of a 'sustainable consumption community', given its emphasis on a fair and just distribution of resources, its progressive ideals and its broad interpretation of societal development. Similarly, Kawano (2013) argues that the ethos and structure of Social and Solidarity Economy (and particularly its emphasis on communal interests and its focus on citizen's active participation) can foster more localised production and consumption systems by shortening supply chains. Tied to this would be the goal of reducing negative impacts, such as local and global pollution (including carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases), the loss of biodiversity, as well as the depletion of non-renewable resources.

While the goal of a more sustainable society, based on strong environmental and social considerations, is acknowledged as necessary, how to actually get there is less clear

today. This means that an ‘individualized’-based approach, focused on critical consumer(s) awareness into the market arena and attempting to affect behaviour, has not borne fruit yet.

Lately, there has been a revival of interest in social practice theory (Fonte 2013) in ‘sustainable consumption’ studies. In deflecting attention away from the individual as central to change, researchers in this area have been increasingly attracted to the changing nature of practices over time, in relation to people, things and cultural contexts. Increasingly, empirical research is focusing on practices that relate to grassroots innovations, community-driven efforts, habits and routines (Fonte 2013; Warde and Southerton 2012). This is where the Social and Solidarity Economy could prove useful, as potential economic activities in this area could tangibly illustrate what ‘sustainable consumption’ actually looks like in practice. Therefore, a new, broader vision of the role and potential of Social and Solidarity Economy is perhaps beginning to emerge. The rest of the paper will explore the relationship between this normative view and the perceptions of ‘voluntarily independent individuals’, who try to give life and shape to Social and Solidarity Economy through their daily activities (Sahakian and Dunand 2015). This kind of focus is important in order to explore the values and practices that inform Social and Solidarity Economy and conceptualise its capabilities in offering socio-economic and environmental alternatives.

3. The Greek context of Social and Solidarity Economy

In recent years, the Greek government has started to make efforts to promote the development of ‘social economy’, as well as ‘social cooperative enterprise’ (Law 4019/2011), covering a broad range of social enterprise purposes and activities (Triantafyllopoulou 2012). To a large extent, this positive development has been prompted by top-down trends, thanks to encouragement from the European Commission, but also from bottom-up civil society initiatives that have emerged to address the exponentially increasing social needs as a result of the crisis. The first legislative action in Greece that launched the idea of Social and Solidarity Economy took place in 2016 (Berkidaki 2017). However, Social and Solidarity Economy as a term is not used in legislative or administrative documents (EC, Country Report: Greece 2014). Instead, the following institutionalised forms of social enterprise exist in Greece: a) Women agro-tourist cooperatives established soon after the country’s accession to the European Economic Community (EEC in 1981), b) Limited Liability Social Cooperatives (‘Kinonikos Sineterismos Periorismenis Efthinis’ or Koi.S.P.E.) in 1999, which provides a framework

and support to establish work integration via social enterprises for people with mental and health problems and c) Social Cooperative Enterprises ('Kinoniki Sineteristiki Epihirisi' or Koin.S.Ep.), in 2011 (Nasioulas 2012).

A further categorisation of Koin.S.Ep.s was promoted within the Social and Solidarity Economy framework, in bringing excluded groups back into the labour market, but not only. According to Kalogeraki et al. (2018), after the commence of the recession, Social and Solidarity Economy came to be seen as more important in delivering public services and being part of a mixed economy. For Adam (2016), Social and Solidarity Economy is seen as a new way of organising and delivering services and goods to the community at large and putting a crucial focus on their social and environmental outcomes. For example, after the legislative action of 2011 for Koin.S.Ep.s, three additional types were included in the Social and Solidarity Economy category: a) *Inclusion Koin.S.Ep.*, which has as its purpose the socio-economic inclusion of persons belonging to 'vulnerable groups of the population' mainly through work integration, b) *Social Care Koin.S.Ep.*, which has as its purpose the production and supply of goods and the provision of services in the field of social care (social assistance - health) to specific groups of the population (e.g., the elderly, infants, children, people with disabilities or chronic illness) and c) *Koin.S.Ep. of Collective and Productive Purpose*, which has as its purpose the production and supply of goods and the provision of services for the satisfaction of 'collective needs' (e.g., culture, environment, ecology, education, common interest services, maintenance of traditional trades, setting off local products, raising the bar for corporate responsibility while setting new standards for ethical markets, etc.) (EC, Country Report: Greece 2014).

However, the wider public still tends to think of Social and Solidarity Economy as belonging to the non-profit or voluntary sector, or being focused on work integration for disadvantaged people. The numerous grassroots civil society structures and citizens' informal initiatives (with numerous examples in the areas of social kitchens, health, education, media, democracy, etc.) that have emerged as a result of the Greek crisis, have come into focus in the debate, rather more often than the traditional cooperatives and the social economy enterprises established in 1999 (see above and Triantafyllopoulou 2012). Moreover, discussion on the ways to recover from the economic crisis has also generated some interest in the role of social and solidarity enterprises. The roles of social and solidarity enterprises or organisations start to become a publicly discussed and debated topic, among NGOs and social entrepreneurs, public administrations and, occasionally, the media during the recession years. Having said this, the exchange of ideas, practices and reflections on Social and Solidarity Economy in general, and on social and solidarity enterprises/organisations in particular, is limited by the

relative lack of active actors in these communities. There are only a small number of academics working on social solidarity enterprise and related concepts; as well as a few recently established social solidarity enterprise consultancies that are active in providing support services to social solidarity enterprises. The capacity on the side of the Greek government to design and manage support programmes for social and solidarity enterprise is also limited (EC Country Report: Greece, 2014).

Within the fragmented reality of Social and Solidarity Economy in Greece, recent legislation, adopted to support the development of social economy, has created a new legal form for social enterprises covering a broad range of purposes and activities, and has added a new actor and regulator, the Ministry of Employment (Bekridaki 2017). Following the adoption of the law on social economy and social entrepreneurship in 2011, public policy has tried to focus on creating an ecosystem for social and solidarity enterprises to operate and thrive in Greece. In November 2013, there were 274 Koin.S.Ep.s registered, most of which were of collective and productive purpose (e.g., solidarity actions associated with: culture, environment, ecology, education and local products). These Koin.S.Ep.s had 2,627 members (Nasioulas and Mavroeidis 2013). Therefore, in this context, a broader vision of the role and potential for social and solidarity enterprises has been taking shape in Greece.

In addition, social and solidarity enterprises in Greece received a boost in recent years, thanks to the growing pressure on civil society initiatives to increase self-financing, the lack of opportunities for many people to find a job and, last but not least, the legal framework, introduced by Law no. 4019/2011, to establish the legal form of a Social and Solidarity Economy in the form of co-operatives or enterprises. However, social and solidarity co-operatives/enterprises are not (yet) part of the economic agenda for long-term structural change and economic development in Greece. Thus, their potential for creating sustainable economic structures, strengthening social cohesion and driving (social) innovation is undervalued. The role of social and solidarity enterprises as agents of change for a sustainable Greek economy is therefore currently limited, but it is expected that their social, economic and environmental impact can be multiplied through organised action that will speed up and spread networking and learning processes, cooperating and clustering, financing and scaling up (Bekridaki 2017).

Finally, the Social and Solidarity Economy venture seems to have a major role to play in times of economic and social crisis in Greece. First, to promote stability and growth in the country's commercial economy, second, to invest in infrastructure, third, to promote voluntary and community activities and, fourth, to promote self-reliant localities. *Is it possible, therefore, for Greek Social and Solidarity Economy to contribute in*

enhancing the adaptability power of communities and localities? In other words, should the values and practices of Social and Solidarity Economy 'co-operatives/entrepreneurs' be accorded greater recognition and significance within current efforts to create a more sustainable socio-economic system? The rest of the paper will start searching for answers by focusing on the specific perceptions (e.g., economic, social, environmental, ethical, etc.) of the key representative involved in *Nontropo*, an Urban Consumer and Solidarity Cooperative (registered under the Koin.S.Ep. action) in Greece.

3. Case study and methodology

The primary production sector, along with the emerging trends of alternative sources of consumption (Fonte 2013; Guidi and Andretta 2015), provides an excellent example to capture the concrete meanings and development of a potentially expanding Social and Solidarity Economy in dire economic times. Social and Solidarity Economy is an extremely heterogeneous sector and, in terms of food production, comprises initiatives and organisations as diverse as farmers' markets, agricultural cooperatives, farm shops, community-supported agriculture, community farms and public sector food provision. In terms of new forms of consumer-producer relations, social and solidarity initiatives clearly go beyond food provisioning itself. Clear examples of such solidarity initiatives are found in Italy (known as *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidità*), *Solidarity Purchasing Groups* (GAS) (Guidi and Andretta 2015; Fonte 2013; Brunori et al. 2012), in France (known as *Associations pour le maintien d'une agriculture paysanne*), *Associations for the Maintenance of Peasant Agriculture* (AMAP) (Aubry and Kebir 2013) and in Spain (referred to as *Grupos Autogestionados de Consumo, agro-ecological consumption groups*, GAKs) (Ubasart et al. 2009). More precisely, the unifying feature of those initiatives and organisations is to potentially contribute to the axis of sustainable food systems, rural development and health communities (Brunori et al. 2016; Petropoulou 2016; Fonte 2013). In other words, their premise is to re-evaluate the relationships between global and local food systems in relation to their contribution to sustainable development and their degree of re-localisation (Renting et al. 2003).

The Greek Urban Solidarity and Consumer Co-operative, *Nontropo*, according to the Greek legislative action of 2011 for social enterprises and organisations, is a sustainable model of food consumption, which has as its purpose the production and supply of goods and the provision of services for the satisfaction of 'collective needs' (e.g., cultural, environmental, ecological, educational, etc.). The selection of this particular case study in the area of Social and Solidarity Economy was guided by the need to address

alternative social and economic initiatives and their future transition to a more sustainable model of food consumption in times of crisis. *Nonthropo* is an urban consumer solidarity co-operative that buys food and other products directly from producers, who are selected in accordance with ethical and solidarity principles, the most important being respect for people and the environment. The principles of such a co-operative can be summarised as reflexive consumption, solidarity within the group and with producers, socialisation, and the development of synergies, that is, the use of social links to generate alternative economies in critical times for food production and distribution (cf. Brunori et al. 2012).

Based on data from the LIVEWHAT research project, specifically from Work Package 6, in-depth interviews were carried out between June and September 2016 with representatives of Alternative Action Organizations (AAOs)². The data used in this paper, includes – among others – Social and Solidarity Economy Organisations (SSEOs). SSEOs are truly an informal and dynamic group of people but not always officially structured, with new entries being created and old ones ceasing to function. *Nonthropo* is a formal urban consumption and solidarity co-operative, following service provision criteria.

This Urban Consumption and Solidarity Co-operative is owned and operated by a small number of people who live at the same territory. Their café-shop consumption co-operative is managed by both professional and amateur producers and includes organic food from small-scale producers, as well as Fair Trade products. In fact, the co-operative originated entirely from community action, soon after the 2011 Greek anti-austerity movement. The members of *Nonthropo* have commenced this promising ‘venture’ in order to respond to both critical production and consumption needs that they saw emerging out of the Greek crisis. Their mission is to provide in-depth information on how society copes with the economic crisis and any other crises (e.g., environmental) and secondly, to shed light on how people cope, and embrace the creation of alternative forms of resistance.

Nonthropo was originally set up by a group of ‘like-minded’ individuals, interested in sustainable production and consumption. The co-operative currently involves seventeen people of different ages, genders, educational and vocational backgrounds and has no formal decision-making structure. Each individual is responsible for a specific activity, with roles such as ‘cashier’, ‘person responsible for the HACCP’, ‘member’, etc., while decisions are taken on the basis of advice provided by those who have the

² More information about the method applied could be found at: LIVEWHAT, 2016. Integrated report on alternative forms of resilience in times of crises (Deliverable: 6.4)- PART 3: Qualitative Interviews with AAO Representatives (Available from: http://www.unige.ch/livewhat/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/LIVEWHAT_D6.4.pdf)

most experience in a certain field. The co-operative is based on horizontal and non-hierarchical structures, including job rotation amongst its members.

A core representative of *Nontropo* was selected for being interviewed. The representative is a person who is considered to have a significant degree of involvement and a thorough knowledge of the particular Urban Consumption and Solidarity Co-operative, its mission, values and purposes. The questions of the in-depth interview were exploratory in nature, aiming at understanding the basic characteristics of the specific Urban Consumption and Solidarity Organisation, with respect to its mission and values, but most importantly its action towards covering the social needs of citizens for healthy and more sustainable food, in times of crisis. The ultimate aim is to unravel how the actors involved in *Nontropo*, both at the collective and individual levels, define, approach and create alternative paths of consumption to confront hard economic times.

4. Research findings

4.1 Political issues in times of crisis

Questions on values, ideals, political aims, but, most importantly, on actions towards the enhancement of citizens' resilience in times of crisis were instrumental in eliciting the views of *Nontropo* on the alternativeness of the Social and Solidarity Economy. Indeed, *Nontropo* initiated its activity during the Greek crisis, in order to respond to the special needs they saw emerging out of the crisis. *Nontropo* sees its mission as being very relevant to the economic, social, institutional and structural facets of the crisis. At the most immediate level, the representative of *Nontropo* uncovered a diversity of humanitarian values rooted in *Nontropo's* value system, such as the vision to transform the current society into a fair, caring and reciprocating one, through food consumption practices.

Our relationship with our food and the people who produce it is changing. We now stop seeing merely tags with numbers in the supermarket, but we see that behind these numbers, there are people with specific needs. We, as *Nontropo*, came to the realisation that the production of healthy, more sustainable food from local small-scale producers at affordable price is of value for both producers and consumers. Therefore, our primary aim is to slowly establish an attractive solidarity economy based on 'new' relations and on local places (Representative of *Nontropo*, 2016).

Central to the above concerns is solidarity. According to *Nontropo's* values, solidarity can come into being, only in the process of activities carried together with others. Members of *Nontropo* act as agents of solidarity, by making democratic choices about the provisioning of food to consumers and themselves, through direct relationships with producers. This solidarity action of *Nontropo* leads, consequently, to building a new, alternative system of food provisioning by acting politically in order to defend their values and beliefs. Solidarity, thus, encourages behaviours of cooperation, trust, unity and collectiveness as explained below:

I think that all of us [meaning citizens in general] should change our relationship with other people. Relationships should be based on trust and solidarity. The Greek crisis has helped us, here in *Nontropo*, to rely on each other in a trustful manner. *Nontropo* is the offspring of this trustfulness. We [the members of *Nontropo*], despite our problems, are united and very resilient to external influences. This is so, because we do not only give priority to the relationships among us, but also among consumers and the producers that we collaborate with (Representative of *Nontropo*, 2016).

The most politically aware approach of *Nontropo* and its members is typically associated with a non-material, cultural transformation as a necessary pre-requisite for changing the world, starting from solidarity relations from within (pointing to a radical left influence). In this context, the most influential part of the *Nontropo* initiative is expressed as a reflection of social needs through solidarity relations in dire economic times.

Beginning from sustainable consumption practices, we are also engaged in non-material realities, which can change society, slowly but steadily... because when change affects the social sphere, then, consequently, the political sphere follows accordingly [...] (Representative of *Nontropo*, 2016).

Nontropo is an instrument of political action at a local level that distinguishes itself from state institutions. It largely opposes capitalism and its values; utilitarianism, competitiveness, consumerism and commercialisation while, at the same time, it sympathizes with radical social movements, such as 'de-growth' movements. Therefore, *Nontropo* adopts the practices of an alternative socio-economic organisation, where food is not perceived as a mere commodity, but as a vehicle of change. From its own perspective, Social and Solidarity Economy can be viewed as a subversive condition and not as a supplement to the existing economic model.

Once you recognize that this society is an unfair one, by all means, characterised by inequality, severe poverty, racism and environmental degradation [...] yes, our ultimate target is to make small shifts towards a fairer and just society, where people live in peace, dignity and, at the same time, have access to safe and clean natural resources. This way, resource use and consumption patterns are more sustainable for the planet... thus, starting from food, we can change many things... (Representative of Nontropo, 2016).

4.2 Related socio-economic issues and innovative practices-initiatives in times of crisis

The Greek economic crisis has given impetus to Social and Solidarity Economy, by making people more responsive to economic hardships and consequently promoting the search for alternative paths to the dominant food regime. From this perspective, the crisis framework provided opportunities for Social and Solidarity Economy enterprises to flourish. Specifically, groups and organisations that emerged during the Greek economic crisis perceive it as being the catalyst of their existence.

Nevertheless, the representative of *Nontropo* agreed that acquiring external funding, even in the form of research grants, is crucial, not only for starting off the co-operative, but, most of the times, even for sustaining it. Central to *Nontropo's* concern is not profit, but the fear that financial uncertainties may ultimately threaten the sustainability of the co-operative. The hurdles of bureaucracy and Greek institutional fragmentation can put an additional strain to the future viability of alternative local initiatives. In the case of *Nontropo*, it took two years to redact the co-operatives' statutes and start up.

But what is at stake here, are the core values that *Nontropo* identified as the driving force behind the efforts of its members: to strengthen community cohesion.

Because of the fact that Law 4019/2011 almost fitted our view for an alternative path of economy, which I think is a very important element to combat the current unjust political and economic system, we started approaching friends or people who might be interested in this venture, to actually build a self-sustaining community (Representative of Nontropo, 2016).

To ensure their ability to obtain local or organic food at affordable prices, while giving farmers a fair return on their investment and labour, *Nontropo* has eliminated the intermediaries in the food system and has shortened the food supply chain through the establishment of a direct link with producers. Priority is given to small, traditional pro-

ducers, since they are more likely to practice less intensive forms of production and because they are prone to extinction by big agro-industrial farms. Small traditional farmers are further supported to continue to exist because they are valued as stewards of local natural resources and biodiversity. Last but not least, *Nontropo* is a small, but rather important market for local small farmers, with whom a more direct, personal relationship may be established. Only on the basis of a personal relationship with the farmer, can relations of solidarity and trust be built and reproduced in times of crisis. To summarise, it emerges that environmental sustainability and solidarity translate into practical and economic criteria for buying food from small, local and organic farmers.

I think that is a result of the crisis... to learn how to eat... to not only support local production and consumption, but to try to satisfy the social needs of those hit the most by the crisis... (Representative of *Nontropo*, 2016).

The provision of goods and services by *Nontropo*, not only to ethical consumers but also to those most in need, includes a broad spectrum of humanitarian and solidarity practices and initiatives that support local capital. The Urban Consumption and Solidarity Co-operative of *Nontropo* has established an electronic platform of direct communication between themselves, consumers and producers, thus benefiting local production. This innovative electronic platform also describes the motivations behind *Nontropo*, for example the organisation of public events by its members, such as public talks, workshops, in-farm events and participation in eco-festivals. According to the representative of *Nontropo*, there are important social and educational benefits accruing from this initiative.

This is not only a consumer co-operative it is also a café, where you have opportunities for socialisation, for volunteering, for educational seminars, for people to come along and take part in things and gain knowledge about growing food, the ethics of food, etc. (Representative of *Nontropo*, 2016).

However, as mentioned earlier, *Nontropo's* viability depends on institutional barriers that keep local food initiatives at the fringe of the mainstream food sector. These include a policy context that continues to support specific rural geographies, the agro-industrial food system, but also the lack of citizen awareness with regards to the social and environmental impacts of food.

4.3 Governance and network issues

Findings from *Nonthropo* suggest that, in general, its relation with governmental institutions and the Greek government is ill-disposed. *Nonthropo* avoids being related to governmental institutions, given its critical stance towards state policies, which have been intensified with the introduction of the austerity measures. Their criticism even goes beyond national boundaries, since they target the undemocratic profile of European Union governance and policies.

We do not want to have any relationship with the state or with any state bodies, nor with the European Union to get 'any type of help' [...] we do not accept money from those who we believe are responsible for today's living conditions [...] (Representative of *Nonthropo*, 2016).

It seems that, for *Nonthropo*, cooperation and networking is a basic element in providing a good opportunity for growth, knowledge exchange and public exposure. *Nonthropo* has economic and social ties with other solidarity economy enterprises and organisations. For example, it chooses to buy consumables etc. from enterprises or organisations of a similar ideology and organisational type. When asked for potential support within the community of the food sector, the representative of *Nonthropo* stated: 'We search for support from many different sources, but a common one is support from peers and volunteers from the area'. In addition, networking is usually attained through participation in festivals (e.g., eco-festivals, alternative economy festivals), which accommodate workshops, public talks and artistic events, where Social and Solidarity Cooperatives are connected with each other through the provision of information, knowledge and shared experiences. Finally, what emerges here is the capacity of the specific Urban Consumption and Solidarity Co-operative to minimise socio-economic and political dependence on non-local resources.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

The results of the case study analysis of an alternative anti-austerity Social and Solidarity Economy initiative in Greece, namely *Nonthropo*, reveal many distinct elements of continuity and change. The findings of this research support the view that such initiatives or alternative organisations are not capable of replacing the current capitalist system. However, they can carve out a niche for themselves in austerity-ridden Greece; an

alternative field, where they attempt to diffuse their beliefs, values and practices at the local level. Specifically, *Nontropo* is interested in enhancing the quality of life of its members and community through the provision of sustainable food and other consumption goods, as well as in building new material infrastructure of solidarity and knowledge provision (i.e., café), where people can interact and participate in educational activities.

In this respect, the case study of *Nontropo* acknowledges the enhancement of solidarity as one of the most fundamental motivations behind sustainable food consumption and other Social and Solidarity Economy initiatives (Anderson et al. 2014). In other words, what emerges from the case study of *Nontropo* is a positive notion of social capital. Social capital is a source of collaborative efforts of knowledge, skills and resources and, in the case of *Nontropo*, it involves a process of bonding people (i.e., producers-consumers, etc.) in order to enhance their quality of life and allow local food initiatives to emerge in critical times. Therefore, *Nontropo's* survival is ensured by committed producers and consumers who reject the dominant tendency of the conventional food sector.

The sustainability of *Nontropo* and, consequently, that of additional Social and Solidarity Economy initiatives is dependent on their level of localness. However, exclusive reliance on symmetrical exchanges among similar-minded initiatives may pose future threats if these are restricted to dwarfish and marginal production activities. Simply stated, *Nontropo* cannot grow much bigger than the available personnel and committed customers on which they depend for their financial survival. Reaching out to customers in other regions could be an additional option for future survival, but demand for local and fair trade food is limited. On the other hand, an expansive tendency, which most probably includes intensive productive methods, would hinder the positive ecological footprint of *Nontropo's* value system. Moreover, the objective of *Nontropo* is to 'transform the café-shop, not only to a place of exchange, but also to a place of relationships, information and social interactions' (Representative of *Nontropo*, 2016). Therefore, knowledge diffusion and creating opportunities for alternative ideas to circulate inside and outside the local community can enhance *Nontropo's* social, human and natural capital and, consequently, resilience in times of crisis.

Another finding from the *Nontropo* analysis is that its alternative character can withstand the economic recession that is taking place in Greece. The localised practices of *Nontropo*, in addition to the fair, eco-friendly and small-scale provision of food and other services may be perceived as a limiting factor to financial security but, at the same time, act as a safety net towards the current recession. The productive and consumption ideology of *Nontropo* protects its operations from the economic cycles of the

global capitalist system. By providing, even on a small-scale basis, local assets and resources in the name of an ethical market by committed personnel, *Nonthropo* acts as an original example of sustainable consumption patterns in crisis-ridden Greece. In practice, the case of *Nonthropo* has highlighted the potential of the notion of solidarity in times of crisis, as an empirical tool to capture the view of alternative consumption initiatives in the nature of the local socio-economic system. Indeed, the use of the term 'solidarity' was instrumental in extracting discussions on the values, beliefs, motivations, as well as the socio-economic and environmental attributes of *Nonthropo*.

By integrating its values, beliefs and practices into the local context *Nonthropo* attempts to promote an alternative and sustainable model of development at the local level. Localness in this view signifies an emphasis on the social-solidarity dimension of development, in contrast to the territorial one. The social-solidarity notion of development is constructed by principles of co-operation, trust and networking as opposed to the dominant economic system, which engenders the threat of externally induced economic changes. Of course, further research needs to be done to understand the 'genuine' nature and potential of this alternative development model of sustainable consumption in times of crisis. Actually, *Nonthropo's* 'denial' to receive help in the form of European Union or state grants and over-reliance on its committed members might raise questions regarding future survival. However, one cannot deny the interrelatedness of economy, society-solidarity and nature, emphasised by alternative initiatives as a form of reaction to the current unjust capitalist system.

Social and Solidarity Economy promotes processes of democratization and equality (Sahakian 2017; Utting 2015). In the case of *Nonthropo*, an Urban Consumption Solidarity Co-operative in Greece, this translates into a vivid engagement with the values of local and traditional resources, signifying a cultural characteristic and an identity-shaper in times of crisis. What emerges from this exploratory research is the capacity of alternative sustainable consumption movements to withstand their voices through a collective mobilisation of local and traditional resources in dire economic times. It is a process and a movement that reconnects people with common political beliefs, tools, skills and knowledge to combat the recession through endogenous development models and activities. As mentioned earlier, much more research is needed in order to further understand the governance implications of these alternative initiatives and practices that would, in the long-run, be incorporated into national and regional policies as forms of resilience to external influences.

To conclude, the establishment of Social and Solidarity Economy at a national and regional level must delineate itself from the existing political discourse of extraction and competitiveness that impose on the current natural environment and socioeconom-

ic structure. New terms of funding and networking mechanisms should incorporate the values and practices of Social and Solidarity Economy for the establishment and expansion of alternative initiatives that promise a new transformative potential, as well as a method of local food governance and institutionalisation that can strengthen and stabilise this new practice.

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