



Mapping agro-food consumption groups in the city of Barcelona

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Abstract – “Consumption groups” (or “consumption cooperatives”) is one of the types of short circuits of food consumption. They are organized to create an alternative to the dominant model, the agro-food big chain. Breaking the barriers between consumers and producers, this model of organization strengthens the possibility of stimulating social and economic local development.

In this article, we show how consumption groups take advantage of the traditional cooperative movement rooted in the XIXth century, and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the context of Barcelona.

We analyse how the Social and Solidary Economy (SSE) measurement indicators are achieved by agro-food consumption groups, the nature of the networks made up by consumers and producers and the relevance of ICTs to maintain the business activity. Using geolocalized data and social network analysis we highlight the significance of local economical connections among the actors involved.

Even though consumption groups stimulate local business and correlate with SSE indicators, they are not represented in the design of public policies. This article wants to draw a different point of view in the promotion of alternative food futures as emerging social and economic actors, and the public policies to promote them.

SHORT CIRCUIT BUSINESS MODELS & LOCAL NETWORKS

Consumption cooperatives, originated in Rochdale, in 1844, arrived in Catalonia in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the 1930s, Barcelona had around fifty consumption cooperatives distributed all over the city (Miró, I. and García, J., 2012). During the Civil War and Franco dictatorship, the unification of cooperatives took them to an insignificant place. By the 1990s, consumption groups emerged again in two waves: at the beginning of the new century and around the 15M *Indignados* movement, in 2011 (Vivas, 2014).

This new growth of agro-food consumption cooperatives coincides with the emergence of the use of ICTs, which affects the way organizations communicate in the Network Society (Castells, 1997).

Consumption cooperatives are included in the short circuits of commercialization business models. Its definition is controversial because according to the European Leader Observatory, the short circuits of commercialization focus on the number of intermediaries between consumer and producer, but some authors focus on the agroecological approach involving local networks. We will be using Binimelis & Descombes (2010) definition of short circuits of commercialization, which focus on the proximity between producer and consumer, understood in terms of relocation and resocialization strategies, classifying them in specialized shops, consumer cooperatives, consumer cooperatives with a shop, producers and consumers cooperatives, producer cooperatives / collective place sellers, community orchards, catering, sponsorship systems, supermarkets, direct seller at home or consumption groups, direct farm sales and direct market sales. As we mentioned, in this article, we have analysed the consumer cooperatives and consumer cooperatives with shop.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH

This investigation has three main objectives: 1) evaluate the weight of SSE in the performance of each consumption group project, with the hypothesis of a high grade of SSE indicators accomplishment, 2) analyse the network between producers and consumers, with the assumption of a strong local short circuit network, 3) determinate the role of ICT in the development of this type of business model, with the hypothesis that ICTs contribute in a better network organization among the group consumer members and between consumers and producers.

The results, visualized throughout geolocalized and network graph representation, will provided the grounds of the influence of the cooperative movement in the social and economic development and the relevance of ICT so as to reinforce this economic model.

METHODOLOGY

For this article, we have chosen the entire agro-food consumption groups' population in the city of Barcelona (54) which is distributed along the different city

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districts. Each consumption group has been classified according to their different characteristics (Vivas, 2014):

- Related to their structure and group organization, e.g. non-professionalized groups, organizations with a professionalized staff, etc.
- Related to their supply chain: some groups offer an open basket, while others agro-food shopping basket is closed.

In order to achieve significant results, our study uses a quantitative methodology, such as statistics analysis and geographic information systems; and a qualitative methodology, around semi-structured interviews. We are using Vera et al. (2003) as a basis for our work, since it has outstanding similarities with our research, has allowed us to design a similar methodology.

Throughout a survey, answered by all the consumers groups, we have gotten the type and organization group information, the list of agro-food producers or suppliers, the criteria of their election and the way of ICTs are used by its organization and communication tasks. What is more, taking advantage of the indicators proposed by «Xarxa de l'Economia Solidaria y Solidaria» (Social and Solidary Network), the organization which is working on amplify SSE economy model in Catalonia, we have evaluated each consumption cooperative. The fifteen items to evaluate the accomplishment grade of each initiative are divided in three groups: 1) social impact (proximity, fair trade, transparency, social integration, cooperation, participation, and ethical finance), 2) environmental impact (ecological criteria, waste management and energy efficiency) and 3) organization and activity (wage levels, personal and professional development, genre equity, internal democracy and free software).

To sum up, we performed three data analyses: 1) the Social and Solidary Economy items grade of accomplishment of each cooperative, 2) networks of producers and consumers: their connections and the geographical distance between product origin and the place where it is commercialized, and 3) the impact of ICTs in the organization of demand and supply.

RESULTS

Our analyses demonstrate that there exists an actual local network around the agro-food product, with strong nodes made up by producers and consumers with lots of transactional connections.

Agro-food cooperatives have a high performance levels as measured by SEE indicators, like proximity, fair trade, transparency, democratic processes of decision-making, etc. Proximity is one of the key issues of the initiatives analysed. Most of them show special interest in being served by local producers, thus avoiding long freight distances.

On the other hand, ICTs proves to add much value when it comes to the organization of agro-food

commercialization, in two directions: providing an instrument to unify the whole demand group and connecting it with the supply of the producers.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURES

Our research provides a new set of tools for the organization and amplification of a model to measure the performance of the short agricultural food consumption circuits based on the relational network and the intensive use of ICTs.

Social network analysis in producers and groups of consumers made visible a wide range of producers. This results suggest that consumer groups goals could be improved by shortening the freight distances or improving social compromise, for instance, and also by improving competitiveness, reducing the cost or getting better a service, to name a few.

The new cooperative law in Spain² (2013) aims at promoting a Cooperative Movement based on big organizations with capacity to export agro-food products. This strategy collides with the model of short circuits of commercialization, which, as we showed in this study, are at the basis of emerging – but quickly growing – consumption groups. Future investigations could complete our approach by evaluating the social and economic impact of cooperatives, and by comparing their impact with that of the main current model, namely, the agro-food big chain. Based on this, it is likely that the policy maker would face the necessity to approach public policies and reinforce this model based on short circuits of agro-food consumption.

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² New Catalan Cooperatives Law is still debating but, it has been receiving the same critic of the recent approved Spanish law: both laws promote a cooperative model based on agro-food big chain.