

Tema 1: Cibo, Ambiente e Stili di vita

Solving Conventionalization in Alternative Food Networks: the case of EPGs in the Province of Pavia

Alberto Cannone

Department of Economics and Management
University of Pavia -Italy
e-mail: alberto.cannone@gmail.com

Maria Sassi (corresponding author)

Department of Economics and Management
University of Pavia -Italy
e-mail: msassi@eco.unipv.it
tel. +39-0382-986465 – fax +39-0382986228

Magdalena Rowicka

Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education
Warsaw – Poland

This analysis focuses on the alternative food networks in the Italian Province of Pavia in order to investigate the conventionalization processes within this phenomenon.

Several studies underline the relationship between conventional and alternative food networks and some of them address the conventionalization processes of these latter. However, this aspect has never found investigation within the Ethical Purchase Groups (EPGs).

This is the innovative element of this paper, which adds to the current literature a new element of understanding of the virtuous processes activated by EPGs. In this context, the conducted analysis reflects on limits and challenges of a real alternative to conventional systems as a mean to promote a sustainable process of innovation in agriculture.

This paper is structured as follows.

First, the literature on EPGs is reviewed in order to create a theoretical framework for the empirical investigation. Endogenous and systemic innovation is based on an enhanced social learning through efficient and transparent communication and close and continuous relations.

Sharing tacit and codified knowledge permits to develop cognitive frames applied in the process of understanding of how to put in practice decisions and behaviors coherent on values. This is what the literature suggests. From a theoretical point of view, this paper adds a new element to the connection between social learning and innovation: the resolution of the conventionalization processes. Progressively, it is possible to overcome the problem of coherence questioning case by case the real intention or motivation of solidarity and social economies. Improving the definition of their essential factors and fundamental meanings with practices and achievements represents the way to foster social innovation processes.

The second section of this paper is dedicated to the introduction of the empirical strategy. This is articulated into three parts: definition of the investigation methodology; selection of the sample; and explanation of the rules used to process results from interviews.

The field research refers to semi-structured qualitative interviews. This methodology finds justification in light of the dynamic, multifaceted and constantly evolving feature of the EPGs, as a consequence of social interactions. The questionnaire is designed in order to focus on practices, problems and possible solution. Within a flexible research design, the choice of the sample cannot be accurately defined in advanced. In fact, it depends on the quality of interviews. However, three

guiding principles are followed. They consist of the empirical relevance, heterogeneity – to enhance the case representativeness - and accessibility.

The selected actors are both EPGs and farmers linked with them as suppliers of food items. Their choice is justified by the fact that conventionalization is a possible result of a process of destructuring

of the relationships in terms of continuity and proximity.

Different typologies of EPGs are included in the analysis in order to consider two main aspects: the group size and therefore its organization, and the location, which affect their specific internal and external relationships. On the other hand, farmers are selected taking into consideration different unconventional methods of production and relationships with EPGs.

Results processing starts with a preliminary understanding of the recorded interviews combined with a reading of the notes taken during the interviews. In a second phase, the analytical categories common to the collected interviews are underlined and, afterwards, re-conducted to a speech coherent with the theoretical framework previously defined.

The third part of this paper concerns results. Among them there are:

- The effect of conventionalization within EPGs on the peculiar relational values; coherence to the basic principles and general objectives of solidarity and social economy.
- The understanding of the direction taken by this process has allowed clarifying the above mentioned effect and, in particular, the importance of the civic engagement;
- The risk of “trust dissipation” linked to the lack of transparent communication and inefficient public information;
- The importance to generate an immaterial infrastructure for information sharing to assist the process of definition and consolidation of social norms and rules of interaction;
- The need to generate reciprocity in order to manage the natural conflict of interests;
- The key function of the social innovation concept in a context of network and peer relationships for producers.

The achieved results confirm the importance of the hypothesized link between social learning, resolution of conventionalization and social innovation. Social norms, coherence, reciprocity and civic engagement have resulted as the most important features of the alternative food networks in the investigated area. Moreover, they represent efficient and effective instruments in the resolution of conventionalization.