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Solidarity Purchase Groups and the new critical and ethical consumer trends: first results of a direct study in Sicily

GIORGIO SCHIFANI*, GIUSEPPINA MIGLIORE*

Jel classification: D63, D71

1. Introduction

In recent years researchers have turned their attention to understanding the mechanisms underlying consumers' choices. Currently, a large bibliography is available covering this subject which approaches the matter from economic, sociological and anthropological standpoints.

Agro-food consumption has greatly changed in the last 50 years: after initially satisfying basic nutritional requirements, food evolved along the same lines as the economic and social trends of the times and the relative changes in lifestyle.

Following the consolidation of mass consumption such as retail development and globalization of products, a new phase began in particular from the eighties onwards. This period has been characterized by a number of food scandals which, if on the one hand have drawn attention to the fragility and risks involved with certain production models, on the other hand have caused widespread concern among consumers.

Higher levels of income, increased awareness of environmental and health-related issues, and a more ethical approach to consumption have all influenced and continue to influence the choices that increasingly larger numbers of consumers make.

These consumers are now not only driven by an increased awareness of food safety or by the search for environmentally friendly food processes; they are also driven by the desire to show their agreement with ethical issues. They do this by pur-

Abstract

Recently in Italy food consumption has evolved in the sector of healthy foods and environmentally friendly foods. This trend is confirmed by the birth of numerous solidarity purchase groups (called Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale or GAS in Italy), made up of individuals or families who choose to purchase products that are ethically viable. In this paper we try to identify the socio-economic conditions and motivation behind this phenomenon, and for this purpose we have developed over 205 questionnaires.

Key words: Sustainability, New Models of Consumption, Solidarity Purchase Groups, Institutions and Economics.

Résumé

Récemment en Italie, l'évolution de la consommation alimentaire se base sur l'achat d'aliments sains et respectueux de l'environnement. Cette tendance est confirmée par la naissance, en Italie, des Groupes d'Achat Solidaire (appelés en Italie «Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale» ou GAS), d'individus ou de familles qui choisissent d'acheter des produits à haute valeur éthique. En ce document nous essayons d'identifier les conditions socio-économiques et les motivations des membres individuels des GAS; à cet effet plus de 205 questionnaires ont été développés.

Mots-clés: Durabilité, Nouveaux modes de consommation, Groupes d'Achat Solidaire, Institutions et économie.

chasing and consuming foods which give them a closer relationship with the producers themselves (short chain).

New consumption needs give rise to organizations which attract large numbers of participants interested in and willing to give birth to Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS). These groups are a rapidly evolving phenomenon and have also been attracting interest in Sicily over recent years.

This study is part of a broader research entitled "The Development of Solidarity Purchase Groups in Sicily and its relation to the world of production" funded by the department for agro-

food resources, and coordinated by the University of Palermo with the participation of the national institute of agrarian economy (INEA). In this study we present the results of a preliminary investigation on consumers who are part of GASs in Sicily, with reference to three groups in the cities of Palermo, Catania and Caltanissetta.

2. The "critical" consumer and solidarity purchase groups in Italy

2.1. Critical consumption and solidarity purchase groups

The economic crisis and the decreasing purchase power of salaries are leading most people to look for more advantageous purchase opportunities (local markets, discount shops etc.). Despite this and in opposition to the economic theory of the consumer (which is based on the utilitarian model of choices), in recent years a new kind of "critical" consumer¹ is asserting himself. He is more and more aware of his choices, and through socially responsible behavior he tries to play an active role in society.

Critical consumerism is at the center of numerous cam-

* Dipartimento Demetra, Facoltà di Agraria, Università degli Studi di Palermo.

Increased awareness and the diffusion of a new social consumer dimension is testified, even in Italy, by the positive trend of the fair trade products market and above all of the organic food market. These are now widely diffused in the large food distribution chains which, despite the period of crisis and lack of demand for food products, has obtained a +8% growth value in the last year.

paigns to boycott products sold by multinational companies that do not respect the environment or workers' rights. It has its roots in the environmental movement of the 70s, the bearers of a new social conscience that focuses on respect for nature and the development of new behavioral patterns, "*Nature – from being a product to be owned and enjoyed – transforms itself into a value ... As a value, environmental awareness is reflected in an orientation that influences action, and molds individual behavior in a wide variety of circumstances, influencing virtually all consumer choices*" (Fabris, 2003).

Consumption becomes a conscious act of exercising choice and as a consequence the consumer actively participates in the creation of a fairer society. The inclination tends towards joint and unselfish development, giving great social value to each person's actions, "*that is, elements dependent on altruistic choices are introduced into the actions of consumption (or savings), which become significant in the defense of the interests of others or of society as a whole*" (Sali, 2005).

The solidarity that characterizes the behavior of this type of consumer develops from the "recognition that the interests of others can be reconciled, and could become the *"conditio sine qua non"* of the pursuit of self-interest" (L. Carrera, 2009): the importance that is attached to ethical values and solidarity can play a crucial role in a consumer's decision-making process, and profoundly distinguish the behavior of such consumers.

Therefore, the goal of the "critical" consumer is to interfere with typical consumer-company relationships in order to build a more cohesive response to new ethical values. The decision to buy becomes an effective tool to influence the market and encourage companies not to act selfishly, thereby stimulating greater social responsibility: "*Consumer choices are positive or negative signals for businesses. The act of consumption is considered a vote, and is considered on the same level as political choice and participation*" (Maietta, 2004).

The "critical" approach to food consumption issues is increasing, with a certain interest in agriculture being the consequence: the purchase of food, which is a daily commitment (and problem) for families, can easily be traced directly back to its origin. In this chain, the consumer's decision triggers an immediately perceptible feeling of gratification for him regarding either the business or the land in which he lives.

The search for a direct relationship between consumers and producers opens new market opportunities and heightens the interest of businesses, especially the smaller ones, in the development of direct selling (short chain).

The "critical" consumer does not only take into account the price of products, but several other factors such as the producer's reaction to workers' choices of production processes, which must be environmentally sustainable.

These requirements, when met, often create a relationship of solidarity between producer and consumer, which may give rise to forms of loyalty and support with differing le-

vels of structure and time frames. Such is the case with consumer groups that "adopt" farms, or in the case of agreements allowing for the collection and delivery of farm products directly to consumers; "pick-it-yourself" and "pick your own" are especially popular in the United States and England, etc.

In Italy the demand for critical consumption has given rise to a phenomenon of particular interest both economically and socially: the spontaneous creation of consumers' associations. These formal or informal associations share purchases (mainly agricultural products - organic food), are motivated by the desire to experiment with new forms of socialization and personal involvement, and are called Solidarity Purchase Groups (GAS): "*The solidarity purchase groups are thus a form of survival for the critical consumer, enabling him to exercise his power in a positive way, by buying products that have a history. It is a practice of re-appropriation and use of power on the part of the consumer*" (Saroldi, 2001).

GASs differ markedly from the normal Buying Groups (GA), whose main objective is the economic advantage of collective buying from a purely utilitarian point of view and concerned only with savings. "*The consumption model of GASs is one of awareness and respect for the recovery of a sense of belonging that goes beyond economic advantages*" (Carrera, 2009). This is due to the complexity of the reasons behind various choices; ethics and solidarity dominate. Furthermore, the relatively high degree of awareness guides members in purchasing decisions, favoring organic products and Fair Trade in particular.

Solidarity purchase groups are the key to activating local economies. GASs tend to promote stable business relationships with small and medium sized companies in the area. These relationships are built on a few basic principles that can be summarized as follows: a) the products must ensure food safety (health), which should be achieved through sustainable and compatible agricultural practices (in the case of food products, almost exclusively organic products are purchased); b) the farms must respect the rights of workers involved in production processes; c) products are preferably acquired from farms with difficulties in entering the usual channels of commerce (marginal holdings, non-profit cooperatives, social farming, etc.); d) where possible direct relationships with suppliers should be created to promote trust with the producers and the elimination of intermediaries and their costs; e) affirmation of the short chain as a model for developing the territory, in which everyone involved operates, and through which it is possible to reduce transport (energy) costs.

GASs are therefore active forms of political consumerism, in a position to seek a redefinition of the economic and social role of agriculture: "*the choice of local producers is regarded as an opportunity to promote employment and to strengthen environmental and social sustainability of agriculture*" (Carrera, 2009).

In addition GASs are characterized by the active partici-

pation of a relatively significant number of members who are usually enrolled on a voluntary basis and involved in the organization and management of purchases and deliveries. They may also be involved in other activities such as: cultural initiatives (dissemination of information on various issues concerning agriculture, environment, food, etc.); the establishment of “Time banks” or book banks, exchanges between members, farm visits and tastings, and the introduction of other services for members.

The informal model that characterizes the internal and external relationships of GASs promotes exchange processes and collective growth. Furthermore the groups become actual cultural laboratories and a seat for democratic processes: the collegiality of decisions and choices is important in terms of productive conflict.

2.2. The diffusion of solidarity purchase groups in Italy

Solidarity Purchase Groups, an all Italian phenomenon have a relatively recent history: some sources² report the establishment of a first group in 1994 in the town of Fidenza, a municipality in the province of Parma, but in the same year a group in Sicily was also formed and is still operating in the town of Palazzolo Acreide in the Syracuse area.

GAS diffusion was limited and largely concentrated in a few regions of Northern Italy until 2005. In the last few years the phenomenon has expanded significantly affecting all Italian regions – but to differing degrees – with growth rates averaging 52% over the period 2008-10 and 38% in 2009-10.

Despite the positive trend, the phenomenon continues to be popular in just a few areas of the nation. Of the 758 GAS³ enrolled in the National Network of GAS at the end of 2010, approximately 60% were concentrated in the northern regions of Italy, 26 % in those of the Centre, and only about 14% were located in the South and Islands (Graph 1).

The regions where there is a greater presence are Lombardy (190 GAS), Tuscany (105), Piedmont (84), Veneto (68), Emilia Romagna (62), Lazio (62) and Sicily (32) (Graph 2).

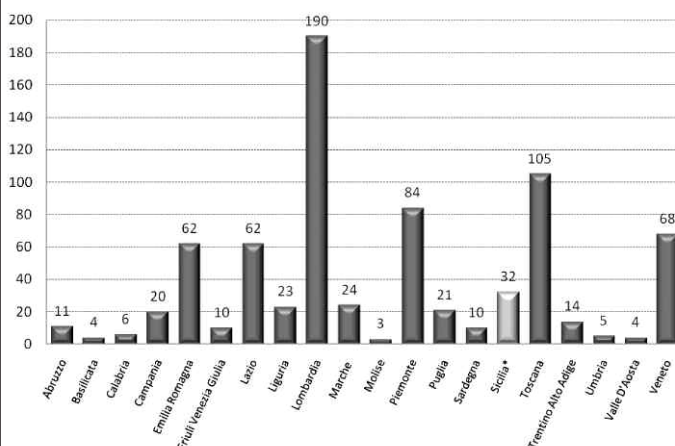
Institutional interest in the phenomenon was noted for the first time in November 2007 when the Budget Committee of the Italian government approved an amendment (Section 5) to the Finance Act, in which the tax aspects of GASs are also handled, including:

- In Section 47bis “joint buying groups” are defined as those non-profit associations set up to carry out collective purchase of goods and distribution thereof, without application of any charge to members, with ethical purposes, of social solidarity and environmental sustainability in direct implementation of the goals with institutional and ethical objectives to the exclusion of activities of administration and sales;

² (www.retegas.org) The national GAS network was established in 1997 in order to encourage relations and information among GASs, and to promote their diffusion.

³ This data is undoubtedly underestimated, since the GAS registration is done on a voluntary basis.

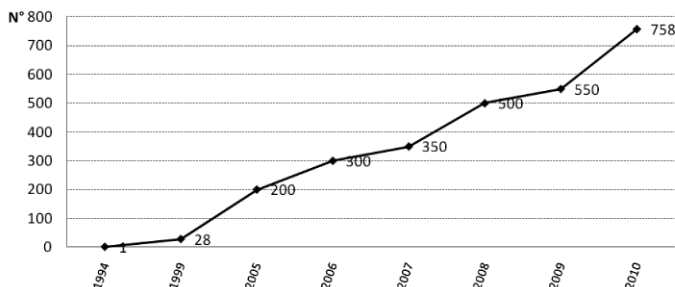
Graph 1 - Distribution of number of GAS subscribing to national GAS network (absolute values).



Source: www.retegas.org, December 2010.

*Elaborations based on our direct surveys, December 2010.

Graph 2 - GASs number trend in Italy from 1994 to 2010.



Source: our elaboration from data “National network linking GASs” available on web site www.retegas.org, December 2010.

- In the section 47ter: The activities of the persons referred to in paragraph 47bis, limited to those involving members are not considered for the commercial application of the tax provided for in Presidential Decree No. 633 of 26 October 1972. Notwithstanding the provisions of Article 4, the seventh period of the scheme, and for the purposes of the tax regime in the decree of the President December 22, 1986 n 917.

This regulatory action has thus formally recognized the merit of GASs and their purpose, which is to define the scope within which businesses can operate and to foster their growth through the tax benefit to which they are subjected.

A local law has been followed by numerous regional, provincial and municipal authorities to support the emergence and consolidation of GASs with small contributions (from 3000.00 to 7000.00 €/year). Some of the interventions included are: contributions made available annually by the Province of Rome, which in 2009 had provided a small fund for financing, and which was strengthened in subse-

quent years; the initiative of the Piedmont Region (2008); the initiative of the Veneto Region (2008); the Law of the Umbria Region, dating back to February 2011 on “Rules for the support of the buying groups united and popular (Gasp) and the promotion of proximity food products from short chain and quality”; the provisions of the provinces of Milan (2008) and Reggio Calabria (March 2010), etc.

2.3. The development of Solidarity Purchase Groups in Sicily

In 2010 the first results of the investigation in Sicily quantified the presence of 32 active groups in the region. These were spread throughout all provinces except Trapani and largely concentrated in or near the major urban areas.

However, not only the numbers, but also the dynamics of this phenomenon should be stressed due to both the ongoing activities that characterize this new phase of rapid growth, and the decommissioning (often temporary) of certain groups.

There are four provinces which are more affected than others and which home just under 80% of the total number of GASs in the region: that of Palermo, where there are 12 GASs largely in the main city; that of Syracuse, where 7 GASs were counted; the provinces of Caltanissetta, Catania and Ragusa, where there are respectively 3 GASs.

Special features of GASs and an element of fragility is their organization and management on a voluntary basis. In many cases this constitutes a considerable level of commitment particularly in the management of orders and deliveries because of their size. Sizes on the island range from about 10 nuclei in cases of smaller groups to 100 or 150 nuclei for larger GASs.

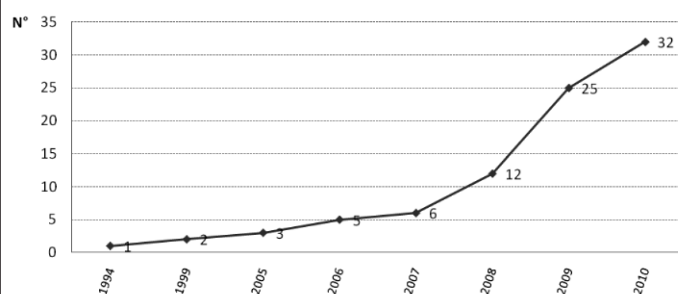
The level of active participation by members greatly influences the choices and the activities of the groups, which often promote visits to farms with their suppliers, product tastings, trade among the members, “time banks”, cultural events, etc. (Schifani *et al*, 2009).

Producers supplying the groups are carefully selected on the basis of discriminatory elements identified independently by each GAS. The choices usually concern products of organic farming (preferably typical and local), those of Fair Trade (not always certified organic), the possibility to establish direct relationships with producers, and the proximity of producers to the GAS (km0); products are always fresh and in season, and in some cases made in cold green-houses.

The 32 groups in Sicily currently deal with about 90 business relationships with local farms. They had a total turnover estimated at just under € 600,000.00 in 2010: in 44% of cases small fruit and vegetable farms, in just over 18% of farms milk and cheese producers, in 17% of cases olive farms, and in 7% of cases honey producers.

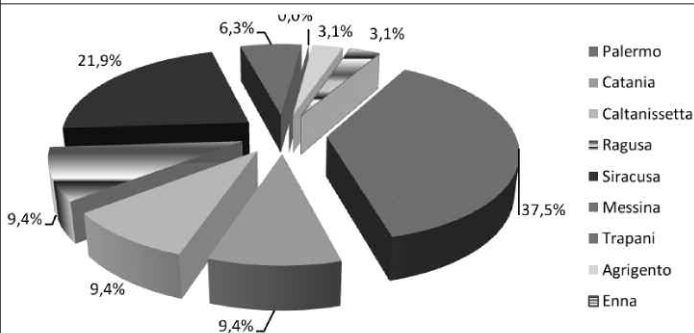
The products available are fruits, vegetables, honey, milk, butter, various cheeses from sheep, goat and cow milk, cow and pork meat and sausages, pasta and bread products, wines, jams and marmalades, tomato sauce, coffee, and so on.

Graph 3 - GASs number trend in Sicily from 1994 to 2010.



Source: Elaborations based on our direct surveys, December 2010.

Graph 4 - Distribution of GASs in Sicily by Province (% value).



Source: Elaborations based on our direct surveys (December 2010).

The price component in choosing a vendor or product does not represent a very significant factor. Prices are usually quite low thanks to direct purchases and the lack of intermediaries (short chain) and there is always a sense of solidarity with the producers which motivates the groups.

As has been seen in other regions in Sicily, especially from the middle of 2009 onwards, GASs tend to form small groups of networks (networks of economic solidarity, RES). Their aim is to improve supply efficiency, search for new products, and organize events. In other regions this trend already seems to be evolving towards the creation of true “Districts of equitable economy” (called Distretti di Economia Solidale or DES), where relations with suppliers are intertwined in a more structured and functional way.

3. Gas consumption in Sicily: results of a direct survey

3.1 Methodological aspects

As mentioned, the present study is part of a more comprehensive research project that has, among its objectives, that of analyzing the consumers of solidarity purchase groups in Sicily and highlighting their typological characteristics and profile in relation to the reasons behind their actions. More specifically, we will show the first results for the cases examined.

The study is based on data collected directly from the administration of a self-completed questionnaire. The que-

stionnaire was organized into 32 closed questions which highlighted the socio-economic characteristics of the person responsible for purchases in family units. Using a Likert scale (1 – 5) it measured attitudes, opinions and reasons for the purchase of products in the GAS in the whole family unit.

A total of 218 questionnaires were distributed: 7 of them were discarded because they were incomplete and unsuitable for analysis, while in 6 cases it was not possible to retrieve the questionnaires. The analysis then focused on 205 people in charge of purchasing, representing a total of 628 consumers.

Data from the administration of the questionnaires was developed in two distinct phases: one phase highlighted the socio-economic characteristics of the person responsible for purchases in a household belonging to a GAS; using 'Factor Analysis and Cluster Analysis' the second phase highlighted the macroeconomic variables that affect consumption. Then, selected individuals were grouped on the basis of homogeneous socio-economic and "perceptive characteristics". All data reported refers to the period between spring 2009 and spring 2010.

For the evaluation of the factors determining purchase a factor analysis was conducted that transforms the original variables⁴ in a linear way into new "macro variables" (De Lillo *et al*, 2007), according to the following general equation:

$$Y_i = w_{i1} X_1 + w_{i2} X_2 + \dots + w_{ip} X_p^5.$$

In order to verify the validity of the data base for the application of the factor model statistical tests were performed. These were Test of the Kaiser-Maier-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett test of Sphericity⁶ and in both cases they were successful (Table 1).

To extract the number of factors, the criterion of 'eigen' value greater than 1 was used, which enabled the extraction of eight factors that together add up to 63% of the cumulative variance.

⁴ The variables considered in the model add up to 25 and they were chosen on the basis of the expressed variance.

⁵ Where Y_i is the i -th new variable, X_1, X_2, \dots, X_p are the standardized original P variables and $w_{i1}, w_{i2}, \dots, w_{ip}$ are the values of the loading weights associated with each of them.

⁶ The partial correlation result from the correlation between two variables when the effect of a third variable is annulled; the formula for calculating the KMO is the following:

$$KMO = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^p \sum_{j=1}^p r_{ij}^2}{\sum_{i=1}^p \sum_{j=1}^p r_{ij}^2 + \sum_{i=1}^p \sum_{j=1}^p r_{ij,12..q}^2}$$

Where $r_{ij,12..q}^2$ is the correlation coefficient between x_i and x_j excluding extracted factors and r_{ij}^2 is the simple coefficient between the variables.

- Bartlett's sphericity is based on Chi-squared:

$$\chi^2 = (n-1) \frac{2v+5}{6} \text{Log}_e |R_v|$$

where n is the number of cases, v is the number of elements present on the diagonal of the correlation matrix and $|R_v|$ is the determinant of the correlation matrix. The degrees of freedom are calculated in the following way :

$$df = v \frac{v-1}{2}$$

Table 1 - KMO and Bartlett's Test.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy. 0.7		
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1470,9
	df	300,0
	Sig.	0,000

3.2. Some socio-economic characteristics of the members of the GAS

The age of the respondents (the person responsible for purchases of the units) is shown to be between 40 and 49 years in 44% of cases, 23.4% between 50 and 59 years and 19.5% between 30 and 39, while only 1% was found to be aged over 70 years (Graph 5).

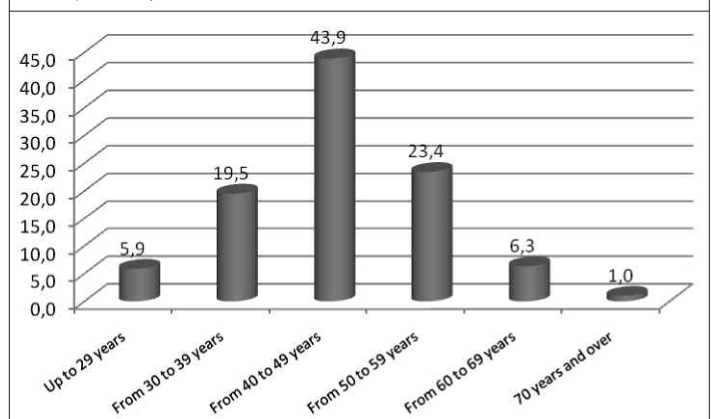
The education level of the respondents is above average. When comparing data from ISTAT on the 14th Census of Population and Housing (Sicily, 2001) with data collected directly, members of GASs that possess a degree represent about 47% of the total, compared to 7.5% of the regional average of college graduates; those holding a high school diploma account for about 47%, compared to a regional average of 29.7% (Graph 6).

With regards to employment status, 61% of respondents are employed and in a quarter of cases self-employed. The average monthly income for 26.8% lies in the range between 2,501€ and 3,500 €, and 25.9% between 1,751€ and 2,500 € (Graph 7).

3.3. Factor analysis and the determinants of purchase

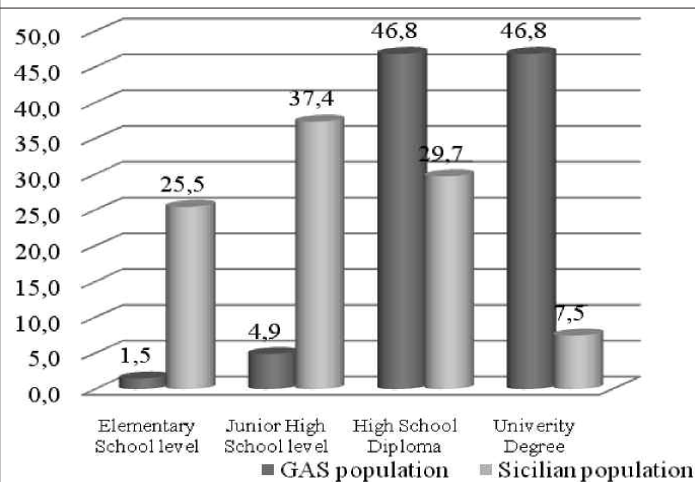
The first factor extracted, which alone reproduces 13.2% of the variance, was defined "Ethical Motivation", since it represents the main reasons which led individuals to join a GAS. These reasons are: Solidarity with the producers, Responsible Consumption, Low prices of the products, Trusting relationship with the producer, Food safety, Environmental aspects (with their factor loading of + 0.758, + 0.538, + 0.582, + 0.713, +0.727, + 0.813) (table 2).

Graph 5 - Age distribution of persons responsible for purchases in the units (%value).



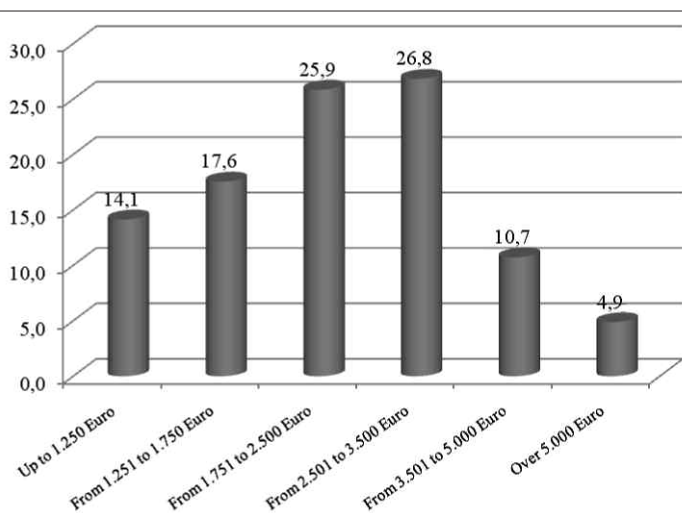
Source: Elaborations based on our direct surveys (December 2010).

Graph 6 - Distribution of the qualification of individuals within the members of the GAS compared to the regional average population (% value).



Source: Elaborations based on our direct surveys (2010) and ISTAT statistics (2001).

Graph 7 - Average monthly income of families belonging to the GAS.



Source: Elaborations based on our direct surveys (December 2010).

The second factor, defined “Satisfaction with purchase”, alone reproduces 10.1% of the cumulative variance and is characterized by the variables: Satisfaction with the quality of products (+0.849), Satisfaction with the range of choice compared to the basket of products offered (+0.844) and Satisfaction with the level of general organization of the GAS (+0.844).

The third factor extracted reproduces 8.4% of the variance and is characterized by the variables, Family unit size of the individual partners (+0.730), Number of incomes in family (+0.764), the Average monthly income of the family (+0.797) and the Education level of the person responsible for purchase (+0.445). On the basis of the considerations just described the third factor was defined as “Socio-economic characteristics”.

The fourth factor extracted, defined “Interest in the activities organized by the GAS”, is characterized by the variables: Expenditure percentage, Interest in food tastings and Interest in cultural activities organized by the GAS, which are respectively Loading Factor +0.466, and +0.736, +0.711.

The fifth factor defines the Satisfaction with the quality of products (+0.736) and the Satisfaction with the prices of products (+0.711), so the fifth factor was called “Satisfaction in products”.

In the sixth factor extracted, defined “Difficulties influencing purchases”, one can identify two opposing sets of variables: under the correlation with a negative sign we find the variable that expresses the “Difficulty in finding certain products” (-0.741), while a positive correlation sign identifies the variable “Expenditure percentage” (+0.439) and “Frequency of expenditure on the GAS products” (+0.427).

The seventh factor is correlated with variables: “Attention to local origin of products” (+0.760) and “Attention to certified organic products” (+0.363). For these reasons it was called “Attention to the characteristics of the product”.

The eighth and final factor was defined “Characteristics of the person responsible for purchases”, since it is characterized by the variables Age and Activity status of the individual, whose factor loadings are, respectively, equal to +0.814 and +0.512.

3.4. The profile of members

In order to group respondents on the basis of homogeneous characteristics, depending on the determinants of purchase arising from the factor analysis, a cluster analysis was performed using the method of non-hierarchical K-means (Table 3).

Through cluster analysis the following three groups of consumers were identified:

Cluster 1: consumers are very satisfied and active. In this group comprising 43.9% of respondents, we find the units particularly active and participatory in the initiatives of the GAS, very satisfied with the purchases, allocating 20% to 50% of overall food expenditure to GAS products. This cluster shows a high level of satisfaction with the quality/price ratio and particular attention to the organic product certification and its local origin.

Cluster 3: satisfied and supportive consumers. 28.3% of respondents (as part of a total of 3 GASs) belong to this group. They are usually bi-income family units (on average between 1,751 and 3,500 €/ month), mostly made up of four individuals. The person responsible for purchases is usually a dependent worker with a high level of education and aged between 40 and 49.

In this cluster we find individuals who are more motivated and sensitive to the aspects that characterize the GAS such as environmental sustainability, ethical and responsible consumption, confidence and solidarity with the producers, etc. These consumers are very satisfied with the purchases made through the GAS, but show no particular interest in the cultural initiatives promoted by the “group”, in

Table 2 - Components matrix. Extraction method: (PCA); Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

	Component							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Age	0.040	0.035	0.036	0.004	0.024	0.188	0.050	0.814
Sex	0.185	-0.016	0.029	0.010	-0.570	0.206	-0.114	0.131
Family unit size	0.069	-0.014	0.730	0.063	-0.094	-0.229	0.020	0.034
Activity status of the responsible	0.045	0.060	-0.082	0.173	-0.008	-0.397	-0.298	0.512
Number of income in family	0.004	-0.113	0.764	0.079	0.061	0.023	-0.072	0.033
Income	0.080	0.027	0.797	-0.037	0.073	0.237	0.016	-0.046
Education	0.071	-0.154	0.445	-0.002	0.132	0.253	0.005	-0.393
Expenditure percentage	0.207	0.166	-0.101	0.466	0.083	0.439	0.071	-0.228
Frequency of expenditure	-0.141	0.237	0.155	0.330	0.083	0.427	-0.026	-0.037
Satisfaction with the quality of products	0.263	0.237	0.140	0.094	0.736	0.050	-0.113	-0.077
Satisfaction with the prices of products	0.224	0.168	0.031	0.015	0.711	0.122	0.119	0.234
Attention towards local origin of products	0.097	0.005	-0.014	0.091	0.154	0.058	0.760	-0.021
Attention toward certified organic	0.317	0.090	-0.084	-0.071	0.279	0.329	0.363	-0.045
Solidarity with the producers	0.758	-0.208	0.114	0.153	0.153	0.034	0.059	0.076
Responsible Consumption	0.538	0.007	-0.022	0.109	-0.179	-0.081	0.488	-0.039
Low prices of the products	0.582	-0.026	0.026	-0.085	0.255	0.193	-0.437	-0.063
Trusting relationship with producer	0.713	-0.085	-0.121	0.110	0.196	-0.003	-0.065	0.008
Food safety	0.727	0.157	0.167	0.003	-0.067	-0.052	0.149	0.130
Environmental aspects	0.812	-0.014	0.086	0.070	-0.036	-0.074	0.127	-0.090
Interest in food tastings	0.122	-0.173	0.096	0.859	0.071	0.027	0.053	0.016
Interest in cultural activities	0.105	0.015	0.024	0.870	-0.049	0.055	0.060	0.123
Difficulty in finding certain products	0.079	0.226	-0.045	-0.088	0.148	-0.741	0.004	-0.169
Satisfaction with the quality of products	-0.114	0.849	-0.064	-0.048	0.110	0.014	0.016	0.068
Satisfaction with the choice possibility	0.027	0.844	-0.091	0.032	0.131	-0.065	-0.032	-0.023
Satisfaction level of general organization	-0.017	0.844	-0.014	-0.049	0.065	-0.016	0.051	0.065

Table 3 - Final Cluster Centers.

	1° Factor	2° Factor	3° Factor	4° Factor	5° Factor	6° Factor	7° Factor	8° Factor	Numerosity	%
1° Cluster	0.374	0.690	0.150	1.117	0.417	0.244	0.554	0.298	90	43,9
2° Cluster	0.236	-1.134	-0.292	0.081	-0.236	-0.396	-0.356	0.122	58	28,3
3° Cluster	0.647	0.548	0.892	-0.908	-0.157	-0.077	-0.925	-0.315	57	27,8

which they rarely participate. Their attitude towards organic certification of products is “tolerant”, meaning that they are willing to buy products just based on a *self-certification* of producers, largely based solely on the trust that is established with the farmers.

Cluster 2: Consumer dissatisfaction. The second cluster comprises 27.8% of the individuals interviewed. These households spend a small proportion of total expenditure on food through the GAS (less than 20%). They are characterized by a low level of satisfaction with the products especially because of the limited range of products and by the low frequency of purchases.

These are consumers who pay little attention to the origin and certification of organic products. Compared to the other units they are less ethically motivated.

5. Conclusions

In Sicily the development of solidarity purchase groups has accelerated suddenly in the last two years. This is due

to various factors, ascribable to consumer demand, and critical and active participation by increasingly larger groups of citizens. The strong ethical grounds that characterize the behavior of these groups tend to meet newly emerging needs, in a spirit of social solidarity and great attention to sustainability issues.

GASs are characterized by how they are formed, related to voluntary initiatives of small groups of consumers, often destined to grow over time, and by self-management mechanisms that allow voluntary activity. They play an important role as activators of local economies, and they represent the grounds for collective growth and comparison.

The analysis carried out on members of the three GASs has sought to highlight the main factors that lead consumers to purchase food and agricultural products through these forms of association. This has been done by measuring opinions, attitudes and motivations. The processing of data has allowed us to trace an initial profile, although brief, of this particular type of “critical consumer”: to the relatively low age (almost

44% of individuals surveyed in the age range between 40 and 49 years) is associated a high average level of education evidenced by the widespread dissemination of graduates, representing 46.8% of the sample. The income is predominantly middle and upper-middle, but a third of households declare an income not exceeding a monthly income of € 1,750.00.

With regard to motivational aspects, in the examined sample, solidarity with the farmers and the environment and matters relating to responsible consumption are significant.

The satisfaction with products purchased and with the experience as a whole is generally high, affecting about three quarters of respondents.

The three plotted profiles show a large area of consumers interested in organic certification, and in part, in the absence of this, they will be satisfied with guarantees offered by farmers. Undoubtedly, this position is strongly influenced by the relationship of trust that is established with the pro-

ducers as a result of direct contact and the careful selection process which usually takes place when selecting suppliers. In any case, given the high availability of organic produce, about 90% of purchases are certified products.

Despite the fact that the element of participation and solidarity still seems prevalent, there is a significant number of GAS consumers who are less motivated (27.8%) and less satisfied overall. They do not participate, or occasionally participate in the activities of internal GAS organization and initiatives that are promoted within the group. These consumers are less ethically motivated, they use the GAS for convenience, and they sometimes remain on the margins because of the inability to devote time to the GAS.

This first study on the phenomenon confirms the advisability of continuing the research in greater depth on a regional scale.

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