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A resilient social economy? Insights from the community food sector in the UK

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At a time of global economic and environmental crisis, academic and policy debates are re-emphasizing the potential of the social economy in providing an alternative development model that reconnects communities with their resource-base and enhances their 'resilience'. The goal of this paper is to explore this potential through a focus on the practices and values of those who are concretely involved in the social economy. Based on data collected on five community food enterprises in Oxfordshire, UK, the analysis focuses on the perceptions of social entrepreneurs in relation to the 'alternativeness' of the social economy, its potential for expansion and its resilience. The research highlights the capacity of social entrepreneurs to empower local communities through a process of collective mobilization of local resources. Theoretically, this study generates new insights into the nature and meanings of resilience as a process of creation of more self-reliant communities of people, places, tools, skills and knowledge. From a policy and practice perspective, the paper raises the need for regional development strategies that capture the gains of these isolated initiatives, particularly in relation to their innovative capacity to create a shared vision that fosters synergies between local ecological, social and economic resources.

Keywords: social economy; community food sector; local food; resilience; local development

1. Introduction

The first decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed a new crisis of capitalism, in the form of financial collapse and the fast spread of global recession. Although this is not, by any means, the first time that the dominant economic system experiences a generalized crisis, the current scenario is made particularly complex and uncertain by the concomitant spread of a deep social and environmental crisis – linked to ever widening inequalities, climate change and peak oil.

In this context, it is becoming increasingly clear that 'capitalism's blatant disregard for the grounding of economy and society in the natural world can no longer be ignored' (Hudson 2010, 12). Policy-makers and academics alike are more than ever advocating the need for alternative development models that reconnect communities with their resource-base and enhance their 'resilience' – or, simply put, their ability to respond and adjust to interruptions, disruptions or even shocks that may affect their development process (Foster 2007; Hill, Wial, and Wolman 2008; Simmie and Martin 2010, 27).

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The social economy is regaining prominence in these debates. Broadly defined as encompassing people-centred organizations and enterprises that prioritize general interests over profit-maximization (Lukkarinen 2005; Levi and Davis 2008), the social economy seems to provide an ideal context to foster synergies between social, economic and environmental goals. As McMurtry (2004) argues, the social economy's emphasis on servicing 'life-needs' gives it a significant transformative potential, both politically and socially. Similarly, Gliedt and Parker (2007) argue that the social economy has the capacity to nurture the type of 'green community entrepreneurship' that is needed to address problems like climate change and to meet citizens' demand for environmental services. Smith (2005, 275) goes as far as defining the social economy as a 'promising location from which a reconstructive green political economy might be developed'.

So far, however, the transformative potential of the social economy has been discussed mostly in theoretical terms. Little or no empirical attention has been given to the values and views of those who are concretely involved in this alternative socio-economic model. How do key actors in the social economy perceive their role in relation to the dominant economic system? What is the scope for scaling-up their alternative development model and linking their practices with current efforts to enhance the 'resilience' of communities and localities?

This paper aims to begin to address these questions through a focus on the community food sector in the UK, where initiatives such as community gardens, co-ops, community supported agriculture, city farms, community growing groups and farmers' markets are explicitly associated with serving local communities – both by practitioners (see, for example, FARMA 2009) and within the academic discourse (Sonnino and Marsden 2006). In this sense, this expanding sector provides an excellent context to explore the 'alternativeness' of the social economy, its scaling-up potential and its capacity to contribute to the resilience of local communities.

The research focused on Oxfordshire, an area of the UK with a high concentration of community food enterprises. To reflect the internal variation of the community food sector, five different case studies were selected, including a local and artisanal bakery, a community garden, an enterprise that promotes organic food growing in city gardens, a farmers' market and a community farm that produces and sells local food. The analysis relies on documentary material as well as on data gathered through in-depth interviews with key actors involved with the selected initiatives.

The small research sample makes it impossible to draw generalizations from this study, which we see as exploratory in nature. As we will highlight in the conclusions, however, insights from this research provide an important starting point for re-orientating and expanding the debate on the social economy – particularly in relation to its association with local resources and the need for more targeted forms of political intervention that embed the social economy into a more coherent system and turn at least some of its transformative potential into practice.

2. The alternativeness of the social economy: A conceptual framework

Broadly speaking, the term 'social economy' refers to a wide range of organizations that engage in economic activities with social and ethical goals. Clearly, there is scope for significant internal diversity within this category, and much has been

written on the differentiated history and nature of the social economy and the various ways in which it has contributed to bring social justice values into the economy (see, for example, Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2002; Hudson 2009; Moulaert and Ailenei 2005).

Notwithstanding its many different forms and expressions, the literature makes clear that the social economy has one fundamental unifying feature: it emphasizes the synergy between economic and social goals (Golob, Podnar, and Lah 2009), rather than the pursuit of profit. Social enterprises, in other words, define themselves along a 'multiple' bottom line that includes, at the same time, social, environmental and financial considerations (Chell, Nicolopoulou, and Karataş-Özkan 2010, 488). As McMurtry (2004, 875) explains, the social economy addresses the life-needs of society by prioritizing products (from charities to alternative foods) that fall beyond or outside of the demands of the market. In its essence, then, it is understood as an alternative to capitalism, with its emphasis on quantifiable indicators, the generation of profit and the accumulation of resources.

Much of the theoretical debate on the social economy has focused on the nature and extent of this alternativeness. Hudson (2009) has recently identified three main positions in this debate, which somewhat mirror different perceptions of capitalist economies. First, there is the position of those who see the social economy as just an adjunct to the mainstream economy and as a 'safety net for those that are marginalized by or surplus to its requirements' (Hudson 2009, 507). This neo-liberal perspective, which, as we will see, dominates the policy discourse in the UK, accepts the primacy of the capitalist system and its economic logic, looking at the social economy as a way of helping those who have been excluded or even damaged by the operation of markets. Second, at the other end of the spectrum is the position of those who see the social economy as seeking to supplant the logic of capital. In this radical perspective, which McMurtry (2004) links to the 'utopian/social change' school of thought, the social economy has disruptive qualities and a transformative potential that can 'prise open the possibilities of a post-capitalist future' (Hudson 2009, 508).

The third, and somewhat intermediate, position is the most widely discussed in the literature. It sees the social economy neither as an adjunct to the mainstream economy, nor as a potential replacement of it, but as an alternative that emerges in parallel to, and at times in competition with, mainstream capitalism, 'demonstrating the viability of a socially needs-based, humane and human-centred economy within contemporary capitalism' (Hudson 2009, 507). At times of crisis of the dominant economic system, then, interest in the social economy tends to re-emerge as part of the search for an alternative social vision (Golob, Podnar, and Lah 2009) that can address collective needs no longer met by either the public or the private sector (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005) – or, as Hudson (2009, 509) puts it, for keeping on the agenda the theoretical, political and practical possibilities of alterity.

Surprisingly, however, not much empirical attention has been devoted to the identification of those needs (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005, 2046), especially in relation to the views and practices of social entrepreneurs (Evans and Syrett 2007). To progress the debate, we need to ask: how does the alternative logic of the social economy play out in practice? What (if anything) can the social economy really offer to the current search for development strategies that address the twin economic and environmental crisis?

The literature on these issues is still in its infancy. By and large, the practical potential of the social economy has been discussed through the provision of case studies that emphasize the availability of social capital (Laukkarinen 2005; Evans and Syrett 2007) as a key factor to understand why the social economy develops only in some localities.[1] However, the relationship between social capital and the spatial unevenness of the social economy has not yet been adequately analysed. To enhance our understanding of the reasons why clusters of social enterprises develop in certain localities and not in others and address key questions raised by researchers about the 'sustainable growth' of social enterprises (Chell, Nicolopoulou, and Karataş-Özkan 2010, 491), there is a need for research that concentrates on the manner in which the development of the social economy draws upon local social capital resources and generates further social capital within wider local development processes (Evans and Syrett 2007, 70). In other words, the link between the social economy and the nature and degree of its local embeddedness requires more critical scrutiny. From an empirical perspective, this raises the need for a research approach that focuses on interpretations, rather than measurements (Evans and Syrett 2007, 70), to generate insights into the context-dependent factors that bond and bridge stakeholders around a specific goal and, more generally, into the relationships between social capital and other forms of (financial, human, cultural and environmental) capital (Kay 2005, 168; Evans and Syrett 2007, 70).

In this context, a few social scientists have begun to open up a debate on the opportunities for green innovation offered by the social economy. Gliedt and Parker (2007), for instance, suggest that the social economy can be an ideal location for the development of 'green community entrepreneurship', given its emphasis on a fair and just distribution of resources, its progressive ideals and its broad interpretation of societal development. Similarly, Smith (2005, 280) argues that the ethos and structure of the social economy (and particularly its emphasis on communal interests and its focus on citizens' active participation) can foster the development of green citizenship – or, as he defines it, 'the recognition of duties in relation to the environment and taking responsibility to act in line with those duties'.

A new, broader vision of the role and potential of the social economy is perhaps beginning to emerge. The rest of the paper will explore the relationship between this normative view and the perceptions of 'altruistic individuals' (Hudson 2009) who animate and shape the social economy through their daily practices and activities. This kind of focus is crucial to distil the vision and values that inform the social economy and understand its concrete potentialities in offering socio-economic and environmental alternatives.

3. The political discourse on the social economy in the UK

In 2010, the UK Coalition Government launched the idea of a 'Big Society' that 'enables and encourages people to come together to solve their problems and make life better' (Cameron 2010). Behind this project is a quite distinctive view of the social economy in the UK, where during the last decade successive governments (Labour and Conservative alike) have all explicitly emphasized the role of 'social entrepreneurs' in delivering public services and regenerating communities (Cox and Schmuecker 2010, 9–10). As this term suggests, the political debate on the social economy in Britain is mostly framed by a neo-liberal discourse that gives prominence

to the ideals of free-market and entrepreneurship, relegating the social economy to the role of a 'safety net' for those who have been excluded or marginalized from the benefits of capitalism.[2]

Indeed, the first coherent strategy for social enterprises in the UK, which was set out in 2002 by the Department for Trade and Industry, focuses on the role of social enterprises in bringing excluded groups back into the labour market. Defined as 'a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community rather than being driven by the need to maximize profit for shareholders and owners' (Department of Trade and Industry 2002, 13), a social enterprise is seen, under this approach, as an integral part of the 'real' economy. In fact, the majority of case studies included in this report are assessed by the number of jobs they have created, with little mention of their social and environmental outcomes.

In 2003, the UK Government introduced Community Interest Companies, a new legal form of business that allowed social enterprises to have a greater degree of inclusivity and accountability in their governance arrangements. The initiative, which reflected a generalized change in legislation throughout Western Europe, where associations began to be seen as an important tool to increase social cohesion and citizen participation (Laville, Levesque, and Mendell 2008, 164), had a major influence on the sector, triggering a significant growth of social enterprises. For some, this is creating dangers of 'conventionalization' of the social economy and its original values. Dart (2004), for example, connects the overall emergence of social enterprises with the neo-liberal, pro-business and pro-market political and ideological values that have become central to OECD nations.[3] For him, social enterprises are increasingly being understood and practiced in more narrow commercial and revenue-generating terms. As he states, 'social enterprise is likely to continue its evolution away from forms that focus on broad frame-breaking and innovation to [a narrower focus] on market based solutions and businesslike models' (Dart 2004, 412).

According to Morrin, Simmonds, and Somerville (2004), the Labour Government's approach in the early 2000s set out the conditions for the emergence of social enterprises from the margins into the mainstream, especially after the start of the recession, when social enterprises came to be seen as more important in delivering public services as part of a mixed economy. For Morrin, Simmonds, and Somerville (2004, 70), seeing social enterprises 'as a new way of organizing and delivering services and goods to the community at large and not just in deprived areas' can be crucial to promote the growth of the movement.

More recently, however, Parkingson and Howorth (2008) have seriously questioned the UK policy focus on traditional business rhetoric to promote efficiency, discipline and financial independence amongst social enterprises. In one of the few studies so far conducted on the narratives of key actors, Parkingson and Howorth (2008, 285) highlight how social entrepreneurs tend to draw their legitimacy from a local or social morality that emphasizes geographical community, collective action and local power struggles. In this context, the suitability of using the discourse of entrepreneurship is questionable. In the long-run, they conclude, the move towards more business-driven social enterprises may undermine the ideological and political principles at the root of the social economy movement.

The policy discourse in the UK has been changing in very recent years. A second strategy document, launched by the national government in 2006, recognized that social enterprises 'tackle some of society's most entrenched social and environmental problems' and 'set new standards for ethical markets, raising the bar for corporate responsibility' (Office of the Third Sector 2006, 4). By committing itself to an investment of £10 million to improve business support and help social enterprises to enhance their contribution to the delivery of services, the British Government effectively re-cast itself as an enabler of the social economy, which currently includes approximately 62,000 social enterprises, contributing £24 billion of Gross Value Added to the national economy (Williams and Cowling 2009). In this sense, the UK approach is now beginning to resemble the traditional policy discourse of countries such as Italy, Spain and Portugal, where the cooperative status was introduced as a legal form in the 1970s with the overall aim of developing services that the public sector was unable to deliver (Laville, Levesque, and Mendell 2008, 161).

In this context, a broader vision of the role and potential of social enterprises has been taking shape. In a UK report on climate change, the environment and sustainable development, the Labour Government described social enterprises as having a 'pivotal role' in delivering a more sustainable economy, given their emphasis on a business model that 'combines economic efficiency with social and environmental justice' (Irranca-Davies et al. 2010, 15). Canada is one of the most pioneering examples of implementation of this new policy discourse through the adoption of a 'territorial' approach that encourages communities 'to initiate and implement their own solutions to economic problems to build long-term community capacity and foster the integration of economic, social and environmental objectives' (Chantier De L'Economie Sociale 2005, 16).[4] As some are beginning to point out, central to this new way of thinking is an emerging attention to the 'resilience' of localities and regions – or their capacity to cope with disruption and stress (especially those caused by serious economic crises) and retain functional capacity (Hudson 2010, 12). Originally used with reference to natural systems, the concept of resilience has progressively entered debates in social sciences as a tool to explain differences in regional economic adaptability and multilevel governance systems (Duit et al. 2010; Hassink 2010).

Recent literature highlights that resilience is more than just an economic attribute. It is a context-dependent process that embraces the economy, environment and society. As a report on community-level responses to recession suggests (Batty and Cole 2010, 3), the relative resilience of residents is shaped by both the structure of the local economy and their access to local social networks. There is also an ecological dimension, which relates to the ability of the local environment to cope with shocks or vulnerabilities. In one of the most comprehensive definitions thus far provided of this concept, resilience is 'the extent to which local places and local government are capable of riding the global economic punches, working with environmental limits, dealing with external changes, bouncing back quickly, and having high levels of social inclusion' (Ashby, Cox, and McInroy 2009, 10). Resilience, in short, has localized meanings and goals: the more contextualized (economically, environmentally and socially) the competitiveness of a region or locality, the greater its level of resilience (Bristow 2010; Simmie and Martin 2010).

The social economy seems to have a major role to play in enhancing resilience, in two fundamental ways. First, from a purely economic perspective, a contextual

resilience model calls for an appropriate balance between three core mutually-dependent elements: a commercial economy, which promotes stability and growth; a public economy, which invests in infrastructure; and a social economy that promotes voluntary and community activities (Ashby, Cox, and McInroy 2009). Second, more broadly, the social economy is almost by definition localized. As Amin, Cameron, and Hudson (2002) have convincingly demonstrated, the social economy is 'a creature of social context', an 'aggregate of local initiatives' shaped by specific institutional settings and cultures of place.

Can the social economy contribute to enhance the resilience of communities and localities? To say it with Hudson (2010, 19), should the practices and activities of social entrepreneurs be accorded greater recognition and significance within current efforts to create more resilient socio-economic systems? The rest of the paper will start searching for answers through a focus on the specific perceptions of key actors involved with one of the most rapidly expanding segments of the social economy in the UK, the community food sector, which, as Connelly, Markey, and Roseland (2011) have recently pointed out, can serve as an important catalyst for creating more socially just and environmentally friendly communities. By concentrating on actors' perceptions of their role in relation to the dominant economic system, the analysis will attempt to shed light into the scope for scaling-up this alternative development model and, more broadly, for enhancing its contribution to local resilience.

4. Researching community food initiatives: Context and methodology

The community food sector provides an excellent context to capture the concrete meanings and development potential of an expanding social economy. Like the latter, the sector is extremely heterogeneous, comprising initiatives and organizations as diverse as farmers' markets, cooperatives, community supported agriculture and community farms. Their unifying feature is a strong focus on local food as a means to deliver social, economic and environmental benefits for local communities. For this reason, the sector has long been described and theorized as a more sustainable alternative to the conventional food system, given its capacity to re-spatialize and re-socialize food (Sonnino and Marsden 2006) or, in other words, to link it with local farming practices, rural natures, landscapes and resources (Renting, Marsden, Banks 2003; Allen and Hinrichs 2007).

Over time, the nature and extent of the alternativeness of the community food sector have been scrutinized and even criticized by agri-food researchers, who have identified dangers of parochialism and lack of social justice (Winter 2003; Campbell 2004), conventionalization tendencies (Guthman 2004) and dubious environmental outcomes (Born and Purcell 2006; Mariola 2008). This critique has recently led some to re-think the relationships between global and local food systems in relation to their contribution to sustainable development (Allen 2010; Morgan 2010).

However, in an era in which a 'new food equation' is placing enormous pressures on global food provisioning – from the effects of climate change to food price hikes, from the spread of urban food riots to the emergence of new forms of land colonialism in developing countries (Morgan and Sonnino 2010), researchers by and large agree that at least some degree of re-localization is necessary (although by no means sufficient) to build more resilient food systems (Allen 2010; Morgan and

Sonnino 2008). Given their emphasis on localness, in theory at least, community food enterprises provide a unique vantage point to explore the resilience of local food systems and, more generally, of the social economy – to which community food initiatives belong.

To progress research in this area, we focused on community food enterprises in Oxfordshire, a county in the South East region of England (with a population of 650,000) that is characterized by a strong and vibrant economy. Recent data show that its worklessness levels (6% in 2009) are significantly below the average for the region (8%) and England (11.5%), whereas the average household income (£16,700) is almost 4% above the South East average and 15% above the English average (Chadwick 2009, 15–18). A particular strength of the Oxfordshire's economy is its high-tech industry, which has been performing consistently above the regional and national averages on many measures of enterprise and innovation – including the introduction of novel processes and products (Lawton Smith, Glasson, and Chadwick 2007, 48–51).

Our selection of case studies in this area, which includes a very established and diversified social economy, was guided by the need to take into account the internal variation of its community food sector and, at the same time, to identify key actors who have been playing a leading role in the expansion of the sector. Based on preliminary interviews with two umbrella and support groups that are in charge of developing and monitoring the growth of food enterprises in the area, we identified five case studies:[5]

(1) *Bread Co-op*, a community food enterprise that grows and processes local wheat to make flour and breads using artisan methods. The enterprise has also set a buying co-op to help provide a market for its products. From an organizational perspective, this is an example of initiative that relies heavily on the commitment of a single individual (who we selected for our interviews). In this case, an entrepreneur took the initiative to establish a network that included farmers willing to grow and harvest an ancient local variety of wheat as well as bakers interested in forming a selling group. The community has some involvement in the operation of the initiative, especially in terms of providing access to their 'hub' premises for the collection of bread, but in this case the decision-making process and planning activities have remained under the control of the initiator of the enterprise.

(2) *Community Garden* is a community-run green space in the middle of a built-up area that hosts events and courses for community members who want to learn how to grow food. Unlike Bread Co-op, this initiative originated out of the collective action of a group of residents who wanted to make some use of a derelict piece of land located at the heart of their community. Once the project was up and running, the group employed a coordinator responsible for organizing the garden's day-to-day activities and formed a committee of trustees who make decisions about the direction of the project, whilst also making up the core of volunteers who ensure that the garden remains open daily. For this case study, we interviewed the coordinator of the initiative (who is also the only paid member of staff) and a member of the core group of volunteers who are responsible for opening, supervising, maintaining and closing the garden as well as for communicating with community members and helping with the organization of events.

(3) *Organic Urban Growing* is a community food enterprise that aims to coordinate neighbourhoods' efforts to grow organic food cooperatively in their gardens. Originally set up in Bristol and subsequently transferred to Birmingham, at the time of the research (the end of 2010) this model was in the process of being established in Oxford. In this case, we interviewed the person in charge of transferring the original scheme to our research area.
(4) *Farmers' and Community Market*, which runs once a week in a school hall, is a community-run initiative that aims to source products from within a 30 mile radius. The stalls are managed by both professional and amateur producers and include also organic and Fair Trade products. The organization of the market falls somewhere between the Bread Co-op and the Community Garden models. Indeed, the initiative originated out of the vision of an individual who did most of the leg work required to set up the market – e.g. finding a suitable venue, securing initial funding, contacting local producers and even arriving early to the market each week to help set up the stalls. Unlike the Bread Co-op, however, the market is currently run not by a single entrepreneur but by a Board of Trustees, a committee of local volunteers who are responsible for making all important decisions – such as those concerning the type of produce that can be sold at the stalls. In addition, there is a paid bookings-keeper who organizes and coordinates the stallholders. For this case study, we interviewed the Chair of the Board, who was involved in the initial setting up of the market, and a regular customer, who provided useful insights into consumer attitudes towards community food projects.
(5) *Community Farm* is owned and operated by a small number of community members who produce food for themselves and sell their surplus locally. In terms of organization, this initiative provides the most striking contrast with the Bread Co-op model. In fact, the project originated entirely from community action, rather than from the entrepreneurship of a single person. Originally set up by a group of 'like-minded' individuals interested in sustainable farming methods, the farm currently involves ten people of different ages and backgrounds and has no formal decision-making structure. Each individual is responsible for a specific activity, such as looking after chickens or lambs or tending to the beehives, and decisions are taken on the basis of advices provided by those who have most experience in a certain field. We selected for interviewing a core member of the founding group, who is considered one of the most knowledgeable people in the area about benefits and dis-benefits associated with involvement in a community food enterprise.

To address our research questions on the perceived alternativeness of the social economy and its potential for scaling-up and enhancing local resilience, we adopted a methodology based on documentary analysis and on in-depth interviews with key community food entrepreneurs. Specifically, data from relevant marketing publications, secondary sources and websites used to promote the activities of the selected enterprises were integrated with data obtained through a total of eight in-depth interviews, which were semi-structured around two main themes: the aims and motivations that drove the initiatives under study (a theme that also included reference to organizational and funding arrangements as integral aspects of the alternativeness of this development model); and the opportunities for

(and barriers to) growth and expansion of the sector (a theme that included a strong focus on its capacity to deal with external shocks – i.e. the notion of resilience).

5. Research findings

5.1. *Community food enterprises as an alternative development model: Aims and values*

Questions on funding were instrumental in eliciting the views of community food entrepreneurs on the alternativeness of the social economy. At the most immediate level, their answers uncovered a diversity of funding arrangements within the sector. For example, the social entrepreneur who started the Bread Co-op initially invested his own funds but later developed a cooperative marketing model, requesting customers to order and pay for the bread 3 months in advance. This strategy allowed him to overcome potential difficulties related to the high costs of production of the bread and to the lack of economies of scale. Other entrepreneurs have managed to develop a self-sustaining financial model. The Community Garden project, for example, initially relied on grants to fund big events, set up large projects and cover the salary of the coordinator. Over time, the initiative garnered support from the County Council, the Co-op and other local businesses, who have helped out with funding and the provision of free services. Today, the garden is supported by donations as well as through the income generated by the events organized. The Farmers and Community Market also has developed a self-sustaining financial model. After receiving a small grant from the East Area Parliament of Oxford that covered the initial capital costs for setting up the market, the organizers decided to charge a small fee for each stall to cover the costs of hiring a venue and the salary of the booking administrator.

Notwithstanding this diversity, all people we interviewed agreed that acquiring external funding, usually in the form of grants, is crucial to starting off and sometimes even sustaining a community food enterprise, and this generates significant concerns for the social entrepreneurs. In explaining his reliance on grant funding for the large capital investment that his business requires, the entrepreneur who runs the Bread Co-op stated

> *We got a grant from the Leader Project that gave us £25,000 to buy equipment over the past 6 months, so they will buy equipment but you don't have the labour to actually do it. So somehow you got to make it work voluntarily and start bringing money in and it doesn't give you a premise. So I am struggling. Basically there is no money out there for local food.*

Central to these concerns is not profit, which (predictably) was never mentioned as one of the motivations behind these initiatives, but the fear that financial uncertainties may ultimately threaten the sustainability of these businesses, as a manager of the Community Garden Project conveyed

> *Because we hire the space out and people can book, [...] it's actually self-sustaining, which I think is a very important element because [...] if worst came to worst and we couldn't get funding for various things, we could actually still stay open.*

At stake, here, are the core values that our interviewees identified as the driving force behind their efforts: strengthening community cohesion and the generation of

social capital. In describing the motivations behind the Community Garden initiative, for example, the coordinator stated

> *It benefits the local community [. . .], whether they book it for themselves or they just come along and enjoy a picnic or something like that, and it also provides benefits from an educational point of view because people can come along and take part in things and gain knowledge about growing food or making bread or whatever it might be.*

A senior manager of an umbrella organization that provides support for community cafes in deprived areas emphasized the importance of community ownership as a means to strengthen local identity

> *If the café is actually being used by local people, then it becomes a locally-owned café, a place where local people know they can go and feel welcome.*

In her view, there are important social, educational and health benefits accruing from this

> *From that café, you then have opportunities for volunteering, for local training, for the whole social capital to grow. I think it seems a hub to invest into the community, so it's a reciprocated relationship. If people can come in and volunteer and get trained, the café can build on its reputation. [. . .] A community café can open up opportunities for people to try and give them an alternative to a greasy spoon.*

Several entrepreneurs also mentioned environmental issues as one of the key aims behind community food initiatives, especially in relation to climate change. The founder of the Bread Co-op stated

> *I want to demonstrate that you can make good bread from locally-grown grain. I want to reduce my carbon footprint, that is why I have now acquired my own mill and sieving system.*

The Farmers and Community Market has a similar focus on food re-localization. The chair of its trustee board explained that, by dictating that all food sold at the market comes from within a 30 miles radius, the organizers aim to provide support for local producers and to reduce the carbon footprint caused by food miles. As he simply put it

> *To us, being local is more important than being organic.*

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that community food entrepreneurs see their development model as radically different from the mainstream. The initiator of the Organic Urban Growing initiative stated

> *We have to produce our own food where we can and re-learn the skills. We need to do that and generally make ourselves less reliant on giant food corporations who fly food from all over the world.*

The coordinator of the Farmers and Community Market shares the same view

> *People should not be buying things from supermarkets who are shipping it from one end of the country to the other. Who knows what the actual production techniques are?*

However, community food actors do not consider their development model as a realistic alternative to conventional food production and retailing. As they pointed out, there are institutional barriers that keep community food enterprises at the fringes of the mainstream food sector. These include a policy context that continues to subsidize large farmers, a planning system that promotes the concentration of land

ownership, but also the lack of citizens' awareness of the social and environmental impacts of food. One of the owners of the Community Farm stated

> *I think there would have to be a massive shift in food distribution to make that a viable solution for the majority of the population. I don't think they would go down that route happily. If they were forced to go down that route, I think they may find it something that they would like.*

As we will describe in the next section, consumer attitudes and shopping habits are one of the main factors that affect the scaling-up or expansion potential of the community food sector, whilst, at the same time, influencing its resilience.

5.2. *Scaling-up community food enterprises: The scope for expansion and resilience*

Secondary data show that, although the majority of social enterprises have recently increased their turnover (by 56% in 2007/2008), 41% of those that are situated in the smallest turnover band, which represent the majority of community enterprises, are experiencing the opposite trend (Social Enterprise Coalition 2009a). Our interview data show that there are two main factors that significantly limit the potential for growth within the sector. First, the availability of land, which is especially a problem for the enterprises involved in growing or producing food. In most cases, land is donated by philanthropic individuals and organizations or is available on a short-term lease. In recalling the difficulties encountered in finding land owners who would let him grow his ancient wheat varieties, the founder of the Bread Co-op said

> *So why should someone invest their labour in someone else's land, develop a farm, get production and stability, if you have no security? And that's just where we are!*

The second factor that community food entrepreneurs consider crucial to determine their scope for growth is finding access to committed individuals who are willing to work on a 'non-profit' basis. In a context where, as described in the previous section, community food entrepreneurs face significant financial challenges, it is the commitment of unpaid volunteers that often ensures that these projects remain financially sustainable. As explained by a senior representative of an umbrella network for community food enterprises

> *When you get enough people involved, there is always someone who could have a meeting space, or meet somewhere free like a pub, for example. There are always people who have tools in their garden shed that they never use and can share.*

The resilience of these initiatives depends, in a sense, on their capacity to involve the local community – an involvement that translates into greater access to volunteers, more successful fundraising and access to the knowledge and skills of different people. As the manager of the Bread Co-op described it

> *The first thing you do is find a local farmer who is crazy enough to do it. You need an individual who is a bit nuts probably or a local group that is committed to growing their own cereals. They would have to find a local grower who is willing to do it. They need to find local bakers to bake for them, if they don't bake themselves. A local miller is one of the hardest things, but there are still mills up and down the country. You need to put those people together.*

The creation of this collective commitment is seen as the key factor in providing the only real opportunity for growth within the community food sector: the replicability of the model. When asked about potential for growth or expansion, one

of the managers of the Community Garden pointed out that 'making sure that the people involved, the trustees, are actually members of the local community' can allow these initiatives to expand even when there is a lack of access to space, funding and volunteers. The Organic Urban Growing initiative has adopted a model, previously used in two other cities, which, as a member of the network explained, works well because it helps those who lack the skills or the land to grow food by pooling the resources of the community. Whilst organizational issues place a limit on membership, she is confident that the model could spread to other areas

> *If there is lots more interest, then another group could be helped to start. We can share the model with the other group and they can run it for themselves, it is quite easy to replicate. [...] When I moved, I brought the idea here and it's such a simple model that anyone can do it, really.*

Secondary data confirm the importance of networking for social enterprises. In discussing the inadequacy of the support available for the sector, the Social Enterprise Coalition (2009a, 2) stated that 'business support is not sufficiently tailored to social enterprise needs. Social enterprises search for support from many sources, but a common theme is support from their peers within the movement'.

Community involvement featured prominently also in our interviews about the resilience of the sector. Secondary data suggest that 48% of social enterprises (compared to only 24% of small and medium enterprises) have responded positively during the recession in the UK (Social Enterprise Coalition 2009a), and our interviewees confirmed that this is indeed the case for their community food initiatives, which depend on local production costs, rather than the global market prices. Both the Bread Co-op and the Community Farm specifically identified this feature as key to the economic resilience of their model, which can also count on the commitment of the local community. The manager of the Bread Co-op explained

> *Recession or no recession, we have massive commitment [...]. I only want to produce bread really for people who are committed. To me this is your buying commitment; it's a loaf of commitment to change.*

Similarly, in explaining why the Farmers and Community Market has not experienced a fall in demand during the recession, one of the managers stated

> *People just like the market and like to get their stuff here. They are prepared to stick to their principles. [...] They don't come because we are the cheapest, [...] they come because they are committed to the principle of farmers' markets, which is local produce from local producers.*

Significantly, when asked to identify factors that contribute to the resilience of their initiatives, community food entrepreneurs widely referred to environmental issues, particularly the fight against climate change. A social entrepreneur involved with the Community Garden stated

> *The main reason I shop at the market is because it tastes great and I know where it comes from, because it's local and it reduces my carbon footprint.*

The manager of the Farmers and Community Market shares the same view

> *I think it's important to find alternative ways of producing food for the masses without shipping it in from all over the world. We need to reduce the carbon footprint of our food chains.*

The founder of the Bread Co-op also emphasized how the crop he has developed is more resilient to climate problems, being less dependent on fertilizers than modern wheat varieties

> *I have a lower yield, but I have a lower risk of crop failure. I have never had a proper crop failure yet. [. . .] So I have a more resilient system in terms of biological level of production.*

The theme of community involvement came back again in the discussion of resilience, which, in the views of the entrepreneurs we interviewed, clearly has also a social dimension. The entrepreneur who runs the Community Garden said

> *I think that most people basically want to get along and enjoy the world [. . .], and I think this garden allows people to do that and that is where its resilience comes from.*

The Organic Urban Growing project is also described as a resilient model due to its community-based approach

> *It is, by definition, about people coming together and doing things for themselves with no external resources. It's just about people sharing what they know, so it's very resilient from external influences.*

What emerges here is a holistic interpretation of resilience, a notion that community food entrepreneurs associate with economic, environmental and social autonomy – i.e. the capacity of the social economy to minimize dependence on non-local resources.

6. Alternativeness, expansion and resilience: An analysis of local perceptions in the community food sector

Our findings confirm that, as many academics have pointed out, the social economy is not really seen as an adjunct to the mainstream economy, in the sense of providing a safety net for those who are marginalized or excluded from capitalist markets. Nor is it viewed as truly capable of challenging or replacing the capitalist system. Community food entrepreneurs carve out a niche for themselves in the dominant economic system, an alternative space where they attempt to turn their commitment to the values of the local into daily practice. Indeed, the stories we have collected invariably involve one person or a small group of individuals willing to invest time and resources to set up economic activities that are meant to have qualitative, rather than quantitative, outcomes. Simply put, rather than pursuing the generation or maximization of profit, as private entrepreneurs commonly do, social entrepreneurs work to enhance the quality of life of their communities – through the provision of quality food, the regeneration of derelict or unused urban areas or the creation of spaces where people can interact and participate in educational activities.

In this respect, our case studies also confirm that the generation or enhancement of social capital is the most fundamental motivation behind community food and other social economy initiatives, as many researchers have pointed out (see, amongst others, Johnstone and Lionais 2004; Somerville and McElwee 2011). However, what emerges from our study is a very dynamic notion of social capital. In our examples, social capital is, first and foremost, a *process* of pooling of skills, knowledge, tools and resources. As such, it involves an active and continuous effort to bond and bridge people and to enhance their quality of life. In our case studies, this process is

not just what allows community food initiatives to emerge; it is also what allows them to remain sustainable over time. As our data show, without the involvement of local volunteers and without a committed customer-base of citizens who reject the conventional wisdom of the mainstream food sector, none of the initiatives included in this research would be able to survive. Resilience, for our interviewees, has a strong social connotation; by establishing relationships that motivate the community to use the resources at their disposal, the entrepreneurs work to ensure that their projects remain successful. In simple terms, there is a virtuous cycle of giving to, and receiving from, the local community that social entrepreneurs have to orchestrate, as secondary data on the social economy are also beginning to show. In a recent survey conducted in the UK, the most common response provided by social entrepreneurs to the question 'Who is helping you the most?' was: 'The community we benefit' (Social Enterprise Coalition 2009b). This study confirms the role of the community as 'the gardener of entrepreneurship' (Hindle 2010, 639) – that is, 'an intermediate, mediating and moderating environment' that influences both the kinds of entrepreneurial initiatives that are undertaken and how they are performed (Hindle 2010, 639).

This central research finding has two main corollary implications for our analysis. First, if, as we have argued, the sustainability of the social economy is closely dependent on its level of local embeddedness, then there are clear limits to the extent to which this development model can expand. Simply stated, these clusters of social enterprises cannot grow to be bigger than the community of volunteers and of 'committed customers' on which they depend for their daily operations as well as for their financial survival. The limited size of the local demand for community food products, which most of the actors we interviewed connect with lack of education amongst consumers, is especially an issue here. In fact, reaching out to customers in other regions is not really an option for these social entrepreneurs, since it would entail loosing one of the core values of the sector: its community or local focus. Several of our interviewees made this point when they described their environmental agenda, which, as we mentioned above, often involves a focus on local food production (or the adoption of non-intensive productive methods) in the name of fighting climate change. In this context, the only real scope for expanding the social economy is about knowledge-transfer and the replicability of the model – that is, creating opportunities for alternative ideas to travel to other areas that can rely on the availability of a similar social, human and natural capital, as the example of Organic Urban Growing in particular demonstrates. Community involvement, in short, is the defining factor that allows for the emergence of these initiatives; ensures their sustainability; and constrains their opportunities for expansion.

Second, the analysis also emphasizes the importance of local embeddedness on the perceived resilience of the social economy. Indeed, all our interviewees stated that their enterprises have remained almost completely unaffected by the recession. When asked to identify the factors that have contributed to this economic resilience, social entrepreneurs referred to the environmental friendliness of their practices, which promote ecological sustainability, but also, most importantly, to the localized nature of their productive activities, which protects their operations from the economic cycles of the global capitalist system. Again, the connection with the local community emerged as a central theme in the narratives of the social entrepreneurs. By providing assets, resources, markets and committed volunteers, local

communities have made community food enterprises financially and socially self-sustaining – hence, 'resilient from external influences', as one of the interviewees stated. In this context, there is clearly a gap between the weaknesses that have been identified in the use of resilience as a theoretical framework to make sense of different regional development trajectories and the usefulness of this notion in empirical research. At the theoretical level, some economic geographers have recently identified a few major shortcomings implicit in the concept of resilience that limits its capacity to identify differences in the regional economic trajectories. These include an excessive emphasis on 'equilibrium', which downplays the dynamism of all regional economies, as well as the neglect of state and policy and of cultural norms and habits, which are seen as key factors to understand and explain differences between the economic adaptability of different regions (Hassink 2010; Pike, Dawley, and Tomaney 2010). In practice, however, this research has highlighted the potential of the notion of 'resilience' as an empirical tool to capture the views of local actors on the nature of their socio-economic system. Indeed, in our interviews the use of the term 'resilience' was instrumental for eliciting discussions about the socio-economic and the environmental attributes of the community food sector – especially, but not exclusively, in relation to its scaling-up potential.

In short, social entrepreneurs emerge from this study as community leaders that have the capacity to mobilize local natural, economic, cultural and social resources. By embedding their values, practices and activities into their local context, these entrepreneurs feel that they are devising an autonomous, sustainable and resilient (in a word, alternative) development model. Significantly, 'local' here is a social (rather than territorial) notion. Informed and shaped by ideals of 'involvement', 'networking' and 'commitment', the local is constructed as a generic alternative to the 'global', which engenders the threat of externally-induced change – especially economic change.[6] Much more research needs to be done to understand the real nature and potential of this development model, especially in more deprived areas and communities. Indeed, the over-reliance of the model on the work and efforts of 'wilful individuals' and on grant funding raises questions about its ability to continue to nurture community entrepreneurship and to maintain the collective capacity to withstand shocks. However, the analysis highlights the emergence of an alternative vision within the community food sector that emphasizes the interrelatedness of economy, society and nature. As we will argue in the conclusions, there are important lessons that can be drawn here to progress the theoretical and practical agenda on sustainable development.

7. Some conclusions

The social economy, it has been written, promotes 'civic participation' (Lukkarinen 2005, 420) and 'active citizenship' (Smith 2005, 280). In the case of the community food sector, this translates into a strong engagement with the values of the 'local', cementing communities around their shared resources – be them land, traditional crops or healthy foods. In this sense, it is clear how the social economy contributes to the 'culture of a place' (Amin, Cameron, and Hudson 2002, 122), rather than to the development of a 'space'. Whereas the latter is an economic evaluation of location based on its perceived capacity for profit, place is a social evaluation of location, based

on meanings (Hudson 2001), which creates an attachment to a community as both the location of socialization and a shaper of identity (Johnstone and Lionais 2004, 219).

There are questions, however, which need to be addressed to avoid normative interpretations of this notion of 'local'. One striking theme in the narratives of key community food actors, for example, is their emphasis on cutting carbon emissions through food re-localization. The literature has widely criticized the tendency to assume that local food is the best solution to the problem of climate change, pointing out that there are other environmental aspects that can significantly affect the sustainability of a food system and that the search for environmental integrity should not come at the expenses of economic equity and social justice – the other two fundamental dimensions of sustainable development (Born and Purcell 2006; Gareth-Jones et al. 2008; Sonnino 2010).

Despite these potential shortcomings, however, it is clear from this study that the perceptions and practices of food entrepreneurs empower local communities by reconnecting them with their resource-base. Indeed, the most fundamental lesson that emerges from this exploratory research concerns the capacity of the community food sector to foster resilience through a collective mobilization of local resources. Resilience, in the context of our case studies, is about local ownership and management. It is a process of creation of self-reliant communities of people, places, tools, skills and knowledge. By establishing links and connections between the available social, natural and economic resources, key actors in the community food sector attempt to empower people by sheltering them (and their eco-systems) from the uncontrollable and potentially disruptive consequences of externally-induced change. Our respondents' description of the lack of effects that the recession has had on their activities is a case in point.

In essence, then, this study highlights the role of social entrepreneurs in devising endogenous development models that foster resilience through collective action. More research needs to be done to understand the governance implications of these models and embed their spatially-isolated gains into national and regional development strategies. In fact, this study clearly highlights the fragility of these socio-environmental innovations, which all too often depend on the efforts of small groups of individuals. The issue of funding is an especially crucial one that needs to be addressed, given the heavy reliance of social enterprises on grants for the setting up or the expansion of their activities and the effects that this, in the long-run, may have on the resilience of the sector.

In short, for the social economy to take hold, regional development strategies must move away from a narrow political discourse of de-contextualized competitiveness that 'reifies a particular set of globally-oriented business activities to the neglect of broader environmental and social objectives' (Bristow 2010, 163–4). New funding and networking mechanisms are needed to incorporate social enterprises into a coherent system that consolidates these clusters of innovation and facilitates the dissemination of a collective vision, based on the integration of social, economic and environmental goals, which constitutes the real transformative potential of the social economy.

Notes

1. Amin, Cameron, and Hudson (2002, 120–2), in particular, identify six aspects of local social capital that favour the development of the social economy. These include: the

presence of minority cultures that express alternative needs and values; the availability of intermediaries between the state and the private sector; a local state that encourages civic activism and institutional heterogeneity; an agonistic political sphere that aims to establish a democracy based on the presence of diverse interests; a high degree of local connectivity; and a low level of socio-economic deprivation.

2. In this respect, the UK provides a striking contrast with Scandinavian countries, especially Sweden, where cooperatives and other types of associations have been contributing not just to the redeployment of existing services, but also to the creation of new ones (Laville, Levesque, and Mendell 2008, 161).
3. France is a good example of this trend. As Chaves (2008, 46) argues, in the early 1990s, the introduction of legislation that opened the French cooperatives' social capital to private investors 'encouraged their privatization or absorption by capitalist groups and thus their loss for the social economy'.
4. In other countries, especially Italy and the USA, this broader vision of the development potential of the social economy has led to the implementation of sustainable public procurement policies as a means to support small businesses and social cooperatives (Chantier De L'Economie Sociale 2005, 16; Morgan and Sonnino 2008; Sonnino 2009).
5. For reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, we are not using real names.
6. As one reviewer pointed out, there are important implications emerging here for wider debates about 'space' and 'place'. The paper will touch upon this in the conclusions, but this aspect would deserve more focused scholarly attention, given its relevance for theories on global/local relations and for regional development policies that aim to promote entrepreneurship in localities with high social meaning but low economic value (Johnstone and Lionais 2004).

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