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Social economy and the Foodshed in Greece: local pathways and constraints through the lens of SDGs

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Abstract

Achieving sustainable living for the planet and the social ecosystem is one of the main goals of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). Rooted in the principles of reciprocity and the need for an equitable, and just economy SSE adopts alternative entrepreneurial models such as cooperatives, social businesses, community organizations self-help groups among others that use monetary and non-monetary resources towards a more sustainable future. The principal values of SSE question 'business-as-usual' and are consistent with the UN's 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Especially those initiatives and social entrepreneurial activities dealing with challenges within the foodshed are seen as a means to address the environmental pressures and social injustices and the democratic deficit in the agrifood chain. This paper tries to advocate this connection between SSE and the SDGs through the lens of alternative food networks emerging in a Mediterranean country the past years of crisis. Using a case study cooperative in Greece run by a grassroots solidarity group in the capital city of Athens we focus on the role of SSE in achieving at a local level some of the SDGs. According to our results different pathways may emerge and several challenges have to be discussed.

Keywords

Alternative Food Networks, crisis, farmers, poverty

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Introduction

Achieving a sustainable living for the planet and the social ecosystem by “taking back business”, to quote Gibson-Graham et al. (2013), is one of the main goals of Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). According to Quiroz-Niño and Murga-Menoyo (2017) the principal values of SSE question “business-as-usual” and are consistent with the UN’s 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Rooted in the principles of reciprocity and the need for an equitable, and just economy SSE adopts alternative entrepreneurial models such as cooperatives, social businesses, community organizations, self-help groups, among others, that use monetary and non-monetary resources towards a more sustainable future (TFSSE, 2014). Especially those initiatives and social entrepreneurial activities dealing with challenges within the foodshed through alternative short supply chains are seen as a means to address the environmental and economical pressures but also social injustices and the democratic deficit in the agrifood chain. In fact, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) -such as farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture, consumers’ cooperatives and solidarity markets in cities- shorten the physical and cultural distance between producers and consumers introducing new dynamic relationships and interactions between urban and rural settings (Anthopoulou et al., 2017; Renting et al., 2012).

As consumers are increasingly disconnected from food production places and rural environment to the extent that food supply chains are becoming longer and more complex, AFNs aspire to restore the link between people-places and food in a sustainable perspective (Belletti et al. 2012, Brunori et al. 2016). The literature stresses on several benefits of AFNs including the empowerment of small family farming, biodiversity conservation and High Nature Value (HNV) farming in mountainous and remote areas, food safety and locally assumed food sovereignty, transparency and fairness along the value food chains and so on, as a promising social innovation to re-localise agri-food systems and re-appropriate our food (Belletti et al., 2012). In this context, AFNs are addressing not only a “product” assessment but as Grasseni (2018) articulates community development, social equity and solidarity economy therefore are perceived as a valid frame of reference for the SDGs (Ilieva, 2017) and running through many of the 17th goals.

This paper tries to advocate this connection between SSE and the SDGs through the lens of alternative food networks emerging in Greece; a Mediterranean country currently amidst turbulent, both in economic and social terms, flows. The European South was indeed influenced by the global food and financial crisis after 2008 and despite all merits -referring to the biodiversity and to the sophisticated mixture of favourable climate, cultures and healthy cuisines- is trying now to find resilient strategies to cope. The latter global threats, among many other things, revealed the malfunctions of the conventional agrifood system, while price volatility for basic food commodities (closely linked to the financialization of the global agri-food system and agribusiness concentration) led vulnerable social groups to extreme poverty and even hunger; threatening the sustainability of the whole Mediterranean region. That being said, the response to the multiple dimensions of the crisis needs to be interconnected and systematic (Kalfagianni and Skordili, 2018). Towards this direction we will argue that there is a role for Social and Solidarity Economy, albeit some challenges and constraints, in responding to the aforementioned problems through the implementation of the SDGs.

Using a case study consumer’s cooperative in Greece, run by a grassroots solidarity civic group in the capital city of Athens, we focus on the actors, the activities, both at political and food provisioning level, and the impact of the initiative in relation to specific SDGs such as ending poverty (SDG1), achieving food security (SDG2), promoting sustainable agriculture (SDG2)

and sustainable livelihoods for small farmers (SDG2), as well as ensuring sustainable consumption (SDG12) and sustainable cities & communities (SDG11). We elaborate on the innovative solutions provided by the SSE amidst the crisis but also beyond that we advocate on the transformative instead of the ‘quick and all fix role’ of SSE within the sustainable needs of the economy, the society and the environment. In so doing our research (2017) is based on a survey to 253 people-members (urban dwellers) purchasing food from the alternative food market organized by the cooperative. At the same time focus group discussions with key-informants and participant observation on the food markets added to our arguments. Higher statistical analysis was employed to make the responses more comprehensive and elaborate on the pathways of social economy and constraints through the lens of SDGs in Greece.

The Greek multifaceted crisis context and the role of SSE

According to the latest statistics, Greeks lost during the sovereign debt crisis and the imposition of fiscal adjustment measures one third of their purchasing power and a quarter of their income while unemployment increased up to 23.2% (Hellenic Republic, 2017). Food is not affordable for many urban consumers, while high food production costs and producer price volatility, closely associated with the crisis impacts and malfunctions of the conventional agri-food system, continually pose great risks to small farmers and their families (Anthopoulou et al, 2015). The cut-out the middlemen movement amidst the economic crisis (2012) embedded in the values of SSE, tried to close the gap between urban dwellers and small farmers triggering food activism movement as a reaction to the austerity and recession measures (Rakopoulos, 2017). Onwards, discussion put forth by academic and activist circles lies within the ability of the economy and the society to transform and gain resilience during turbulent period (Apostolopoulos et al, 2018; Partalidou, 2015). The legislation for Social Economy launched by the Greek Government in 2011 (by the L.4019/2011 Law) and reviewed in 2016 (by the L.4430/2016) was aiming to contribute towards a more sustainable development by providing a safe and equitable business environment through social and solidarity economy (British Council, 2017).

In Athens metropolitan area, a number of “no middlemen markets” within SSE initiatives are reported in the recent literature (Petrou, 2015). Inspired and organized by consumers’ communities in the city (neighbourhood collectives, non-profit associations, consumers’ cooperatives) they bring in direct contact rural producers and urban dwellers to promote local quality, fair, and affordable food. It is a self-organized movement, operating through equal participation and direct-democratic procedures for decision-making, and voluntary work of the collective members; all embedded in the principles of SSE and food activism. The “no-middlemen” markets aim according to their fundamental principles at: i) supporting vulnerable social groups, both producers and consumers, through cooperation and fairness; producers are also required to provide free products (2-4% of sales) to the social grocery of the district, ii) changing dietary patterns and consumers’ purchasing habits through the right to unmediated and free consumer choice, iii) supporting small family farming, iv) giving access to local productions of remote areas at risk of disappearing, v) building solidarity and community bonds in neighbourhoods supporting people in need. In practical terms, these AFNs operate once a month (usually the 1st Sunday), typically in the open air (parks, squares, municipal parking, and schoolyards), and are organized in a very systematic and thorough pattern (via blogs, e-mails, SMS, posters in the streets) (Petrou, 2015).

The “no-middlemen markets”, triggered after the so popular “potato movement” (2012), have been well embraced by both consumers and producers and spread all over Greece. For the

producers, especially for those of mountainous and remote areas, these markets represent a valuable place to give their production, as they suffer from multiple deadlocks brought by the crisis: increasing cost of agricultural supplies, delayed payments by wholesalers, lack of cash-flow, imports of cheap raw materials and food etc. For the consumers' community, this is a profitable social project with multiple benefits such as affordable high-quality food, support for the Greek producers, hit of profiteering and intermediaries in the food chain. It is also conceived as an act of resistance to external threats of any kind (large distribution networks, financial markets, memoranda, Troika) (Anthopoulou, 2019). The paper focuses on field research in one of the most dynamic and innovative food market in the wider area of the Municipality of Athens inspired by the values of SSE. We refer to the consumers' cooperative "Perno Ambariza" that is established under the umbrella of the initiative of the Resistance and Solidarity Movement of Galatsi Perno Ambariza.

The above solidarity market was launched in October 2012, at the very moment when the no-middlemen movement and "potato movement" were at their peak. It reflects a radical place in which members according to their proclamation: i) assert the right to intervene in the food marketing process, having in practice abolished intermediaries and speculators, parasitism and corruption, so that citizens can obtain cheap and quality food products directly from selected producers or producer collectives, ii) resist and try to concretely show that there is another way of doing so, that of dignity, solidarity, participation, self-organization, selflessness, social cohesion, and democracy. They operated in the margins of formal economy, due to the lack of an appropriate institutional framework to fit in, for at least 3 years and by October 2015 they established a non-profit consumer's cooperative under the Greek cooperative Law.

Food deliveries took place first at an open-air space (the Veikou Park) with a core group of 15 founding members and 50 volunteers. Now they sum up to more than 140 members and have transformed this informal open-market. Onwards, the market has been operating in a closed rental facility, always based on the voluntary work of the cooperative members and equal participatory decision-making processes, while at the same time succeeded in creating two part-time jobs. Some informal data show that they have started by distributing food to 650 households, while now they distribute food worth about 50,000 euros responding to the needs of 1.250 households, which account for about 650 households per month market.

The farmers and products are selected through general assemblies and in a more democratic way in comparison to the reverse logic from the dominant market (Petrou, 2015). The cooperative operates a webpage that informs about the food list but also works as a platform for interaction around healthy lifestyle, sustainable diets, environmental local and global issues, food issues as well as political manifestations. It is indicative a recent post "*Young people need to find new qualities. Qualities and objectives embedded in participation, co-responsibility and control by many, ordinary everyday people, so let's change ... first of all, at the level of our consciousness, mind, thought and action*".

Assessing impacts in relation to SDGs and targets

According the results of our field research the majority (80%) of the members participating in the cooperative food market have more than 6 months experience in this activity. Almost half (47%) of them are purchasing food in the monthly market spending a Mean of 52.22 euro (StDev 29.12). They are in their late 40ies (Mean 49,84, StDev 11.42) of higher education (64.4%). They are employees (56.9%), retired (22.5%) and a significant number unemployed (13.8%). The latter comes to advocated on the different pathways of such initiatives in Greece, in comparison to what we've seen in the literature of Western and Northern European Societies

in which the affluent consumer is at the forefront of such AFNs (Kalfagianni and Skordili, 2018). They purchase food for a family with a Mean of 2.73 members. Only a 27% of them come from a rural area, meaning that they are less connected to a network of family and kins providing a basket form the rural. People are mostly using the web platform developed by the cooperative to pre-order their food (at least this is the case for a 70% of them) but also, they send emails (12%) and call directly at the cooperative (12%) and the rest buy -in situ- during the day of the open market.

In regard to their motives for participating in the solidarity movement of the cooperative the driver factors were rooted in SDGs 1, 2, 11, 12 & 17. This means that by their participation they mainly hope to achieve food sovereignty, access to affordable and quality-nutritional food, (often organic), minimize poverty by achieve a decent living for small farmers, that has been threatened by the crisis, reconnect the urban dwellers with rural values and make the city more sustainable, support local seeds and domestic consumption (minimize food miles) and finally participate in a new form of governance through claiming the commons and developing voluntary and bottom up- multi-stakeholder approaches (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Driving factors for participating in the SSE network through the lens of SDGs



This innovative form of reorganizing and re-localizing the food system through an initiative within the SEE framework manifests a quality turn from global to local markets and a shift from a rather obscure and anonymous conditions of food production (by a conventional agri-food

system) to a more visible and democratic one (Kalfagianni and Skordili, 2018). Quoting a member of the cooperative: “...*these past years thanks to the cooperative and the food market we all learned to eat healthier. We can now find a variety of vegetables, even some that I have never heard before! In the past we used to buy all unhealthy stuff that were shinning in the selves of the supermarket just because they were in a nice packaging and all the same size and spotless. At the end of the week most of them were wasted. Now we only buy from the market what we really need and what is really healthy and we never throw anything*”.

Another major driver is the fact that all products in the market are Greek and have a high quality (28% identified origin as important driver). As quoted by a member “... *all products are Greek, some we cannot find elsewhere ... they have good prices and they are delicious... that is why we will continue and buy them. It is also a difficult time- with all that is being done with the cuts and the taxes and the crisis-and we want to support quality Greek production*”. The meanings inscribed to the latter concept of ‘quality’ are multiple and refer to trust, reliable products, not industrialized, traditional and pure, as was further elaborated during the in-depth interviews. Such a hybrid quality definition and convention was also highlighted in the case of different European food networks by Renting et al. (2002). The discourse on the drawbacks of the productivist model of agriculture (Woods, 2005), the numerous food scandals and the consequences in people’s health is at the forefront even since the late 80ies in some places of the global North (Schifan and Migliore, 2011).

It goes without saying that the economic crisis in Greece has driven a number of households to alternative food markets in order to rationalizing the family basket and optimize the cost-benefit ratio through quality. At the same time, however, it has moved consumers to think from the individual to collective good; through the involvement and awareness of wider social and political goals and the building of solidarity relations between producers and consumers. As a woman farmer described during the field research “*lentils had almost disappeared from our region, because the wholesalers brought from cheaper countries...now with the crisis, Greek lentils became popular again as the world is looking for local products and quality. The cultivation was extended, we rent fields in my mother's next village ... When they tell me in the bazaars' say-say! what 's delicious, what 's hotter lentil ', I think' well what have they been eating for so many years? It was always like this. This gives me good hope for our future in the farm*”. In this sense the initiative of the Resistance and Solidarity Movement of Galatsi Perno Ambariza seems to have reciprocal transformative impacts, both for the small farmers (contributing to the revitalization of local agriculture and rural resilience) and consumers (contributing to food sovereignty and urban resilience).

Trying to contribute to the discussion of the relevance of the SDGs to the SSE at a local level we also elaborated on higher statistical analysis and specifically Categorical Principal Component analysis (CPCA) (Hair et al., 2010). The latter tries to reduce a primary set of variables into a smaller set of uncorrelated components and is most useful when a large number of variables prohibit interpretation. According to the results of the CPCA, to a number of 12 variables closely related to the SDGs, three-dimensional solution was found useful to the model maximizing the variance (89.46%) explained (table 1). What we see from the results is that the goal of “Achieving better prices” stands alone (with higher component loadings) in dimension 3 whereas “Ideological and political aims against the crisis” dominates in dimension 2; in close with another goal that of “Sending a message to the Institutions and policy makers”. It goes without saying that the message is to give power to people and small farmers as it was clearly supported during the field research. All other variables that describe motives and connections to SDGs of this SSE initiative “Perno Ampariza” are gathered together at the 1st dimension revealing that there is a constellation of goals- closely related and difficult to separate: empower

Greek products (with relevance to locality), support of small farmers, access to quality food, active consumerism, active citizenship, fair prices, fair food system, control over the food chain. This dimension clearly advocated the interconnection between economic, environmental and social challenges and the need for new forms of governance and new forms of thinking; forms that take consideration the system and sustainability goals as a whole and not in a vacuum.

Table 1: Results of CPCA – Component Loadings – different goals

Variable /Target	Dimension		
	1	2	3
Greek products/place of origin	0.940	-0.292	0.124
Affordable Food	0.392	0.098	0.703
Quality is better	0.941	-0.288	0.139
Send a political message to policy makers & Institutions	0.333	0.629	0.448
Active consumer/ set own terms in the food market	0.892	0.257	-0.313
Participate -active citizen	0.761	0.296	-0.345
Direct relationship/social control	0.892	0.258	-0.312
Support small producers	0.941	-0.291	0.126
Fair trade, limiting profiteering on the market	0.943	-0.280	0.137
Ideological and political motives	0.214	0.825	0.221
Fighting against the middlemen/ fair prices	0.893	0.279	-0.294
Support small rural family agriculture	0.940	-0.292	0.124

In other words, if we were to identify pathways of this SEE initiative through the lens of SDGs we are understanding that achieving the goal of ending poverty (dimension 3 -SDG1) created by the crisis is one pathway, another pathway might be through SDG 16 or 17th (dimension 2) in terms of developing Institutions that are effective and accountable and develop mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development by a multi-stakeholder involvement. Another pathway (dimension 1) seems to embrace SDGs1, 2, 11 and 12 as one (complex) goal.

Despite the fact that it is too early to assess the full potential of these new types of businesses in the framework of SSE in achieving at a local level several sustainable goals, we have seen in this research that there is a potential to be transformative and change the way “business is done” by fostering social, economic and environmental welfare and changing the mainstream paradigm. This SSE initiative is seen as a means to achieve several SDG goals but amidst the backslapping there are several aspects to consider and assess, their durability for instance, is under consideration. Many of these AFNs still operate in the informal sphere of the foodshed, heavily supported by networks of friends and quite often with the tolerance of local city councils and other institutions (Rakopoulous, 2015). They are heavily under researched and left alone in their struggles. Our case study might be an example of a transition from informal to formal types of AFNs and legally established business (under national legislation) but still shows a very low degree of institutionalisation and embeddedness to other policies at a local, regional or national level. Despite the fact that the Hellenic Government makes reference to the Social and Solidarity Economy when describing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development it has only focused (in the reports and factsheets) in companies of the mainstream economy; when giving the business perspective in the adoption in of the SDGs (awareness, willingness and next steps) in Greece (SEVBCSD, 2017). From our research and according to our key-informants it is evident that the lack of a national implementation plan for the SDGs, from the social economy lens, might be proven also useful at a local level. As we

have seen a number of goals are already there, in the discourse that these AFNs are raising, maybe in an informal way but still there, and are embedded in the practises of SSE.

Another constraint finally, that has to do with governance, also refers to transparency and the need for a framework of certification of the locality and quality of the products distributed. Currently is based in these informal networks of trust between farmers and urban dwellers. As a volunteer of the Cooperative articulates: *“the first thing that people say when they come to purchase food from the market is that they trust the products and they come without any doubts. Whereas when purchasing food from a supermarket for instance they are not so sure about who and how produces the product. Everything that we sell has been assessed by us, we know the farmers and how they practise agriculture. Relationship is based on trust and this is very crucial for the sustainability of the initiative”*. There is however an open discussion on how this new type of social businesses can benefit from a more formal and participatory quality guarantee system (Anthopoulou and Goussios, 2018) and actually turn this informal type of assurance to a more formal quality assurance system, albeit local and bottom-up. Such a system will legitimize the transactions and guarantee the quality of the products in a different way (than the mainstream agrifood chain has done) mainly giving emphasis on social control. In this way more farmers, especially the small ones can be included and connected to the market with higher added value in their products.

Discussion

Political consumerism, critical consumption and fair-trade purchasing are highlighting the current trends in the foodshed in Greece driven by social and environmental goals, respecting human and workers', nature's rhythms, solidarity and the work of small local producers. In addition, several civic initiatives offer an alternative to small-family farms that are currently excluded from the global – dominant commercial chains (Petrou, 2015). This is indicative of the transformative role that they might play. These AFNs that are flourishing within a local civic governance model, and most of the times against global markets, seek to regain a democratic control of production processes and distribution of the food within the framework of sustainable and solidarity-based economy. The concept of social and solidarity economy, whilst less developed than in other European countries, is currently widely accepted in Greece. It is offering a fertile ground for addressing some of the most important challenges amidst the crisis (British council report, 2018). Cooperatives, the first business agents of social economy, are seen nowadays as having a major impact at a local level, in which they operate, due to a number of fundamental principles such as democratic governance, meeting people's needs instead of market needs, participatory decision making, freedom of membership etc.

With a first glance to the public discourse on SSE in Greece it seems that the initiatives emerged (especially in the foodshed) are trying to cope with the neopoverty and the urgent need for food and sustainable living conditions of several social groups (urban poor and small farmers). However, in a more in-depth research, it is evident that initiatives embrace principles and values of a constellation of goals such as fair trade, moral consumption, sustainable agriculture and advocate on a political act in the process of changing the dominant agrifood system (Anthopoulou, 2019). They are local-collective actions, but they reflect an overall societal demand and a political position for a model change that is consistent with the sustainable UN goals.

The advantage of these initiatives compared to other forms of the economy it is the fact that (as we've seen through our case study) they highlight different pathways of development while at the same time promote an integrated approach to many goals without excluding people and

social groups. However, these initiatives often come up against institutional weaknesses. In Greece, while the new Law on SSE was widely accepted by the parliamentary parties, there is still a long way to adapt the regulatory framework that will allow social enterprises to develop and withstand the harsh arena of the real-capitalist economy. At a local-municipal level, politics need to be reconfigured –according to the actors involved in the initiative-in order to collaborate with the local collectives through transparent processes in the perspective to reach the aims SDGs and not reproduce older goals of just keeping the constituency happy. In addition, a lot has to be said on the actual reality of the SSE as according to latest reports from the Greek Ministry of Labour (2017) from almost a thousand of SSE businesses less than one third are active due to lack of financial resources and microfinance tools for social enterprises and start-up projects, bureaucratic obstacles, and so on.

The key actors in implementing the SDGs through the SSE are not only within the entrepreneurial body but also the administrative and policymaking as well as the educational community. The dissemination and enhancement of SSE culture through education at all levels is expected to enhance the ecosystem of social economy and provide a fertile ground for the implementation of the SDGs as well. Currently a discussion is open in regard to the establishment of a great number of educational support centres all over Greece as well as the empowerment of SSE enterprises towards their actions.

Finally, this research is a pilot one in terms of understanding the connections between the SDGs and SSE in Greece. A systematic data collection from further initiatives all over Greece is needed to identify and scale up their sustainability and monitor targets in relation to the SDGs. SSE in Greece is diverse and changing dynamically in trying to address some of the most pressing issues the country is facing (poverty, unemployment). There is a great need for ‘macro’ policies that will support its growth and impact in close relation to other policy frameworks such as the Agenda 2030. These initiatives of the foodshed embedded in the principles of SSE are aiming towards a more sustainable future but they need to not only pop-on and left ‘bowling alone’ to quote Putnam but multiply in an efficient way and in collaboration with each other and with the support of all-local and global- stakeholders (Leontidou, in Anthopoulou, 2019). A first National Policy report in 2013 highlighted the need for structural changes, that will enable independency from the public and private sector and the need for an overall support; but still that remains only at a theoretical ground.

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