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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### A NETWORK OF RESISTANCES AGAINST A MULTIPLE CRISIS *SOS Rosarno* and the experimentation of socio-economic alternative models

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**ABSTRACT:** *SOS Rosarno* was launched in 2011 by a group of small farmers and activists based in the Gioia Tauro Plain, Calabria, Southern Italy. The idea was to sell organic citrus fruits through short self-organized supply chains, essentially based on Solidarity Purchase Groups, in order to allow producers to pay migrant workers according to the law, to receive a fair remuneration, to guarantee healthy and affordable food to consumers, to protect the integrity of the environment. This paper aims to reconstruct the ideological frame and the genealogy, the organization and the practices, the impact and the limits of *SOS Rosarno*, drawing mainly on the political documents produced by the association and in-depth interviews with its diverse members. It clarifies, on one side, the strategies of alternative economy and the new social alliances implemented in order to challenge those conditions which impoverish small producers and let migrant farmworkers be exploited and become the target of racism in many Italian countrysides. It explores, on the other side, the development of a new peasant civilization as alternative to the current economic and environmental crises, in terms of de-commodification of nature and labour, construction of a convivial democratic society, transition from monoculture to food sovereignty.

**KEYWORDS:** food sovereignty, migrant farmworkers, new peasant civilization, small farmers, solidarity purchase groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Before being formally constituted as an association in October 2012, *SOS Rosarno* was launched as a solidarity campaign in Winter 2011 by a group of small farmers, anti-racist and environmental activists based in the Gioia Tauro Plain, Calabria, Southern Italy. The project saw the light in the aftermath of the migrants' tumult exploded in Rosarno on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2010 after the latest racist aggression, which was followed by a violent reaction of the local population and a mass eviction of more than a thousand African workers decided by the national government (Mangano 2010; Pugliese 2012b).

The idea behind the campaign, which still inspires the association, was quite simple: to sell organic citrus fruits and other local products through short self-organized supply chains, essentially based on Solidarity Purchase Groups (SPG). This strategic choice would allow producers to hire and pay migrant and local farmworkers according to the law, to receive a fair remuneration, to employ a share of the earnings for solidarity initiatives, to guarantee healthy and affordable food to consumers, to protect the land and the territory. If one takes a closer look, this apparently simple idea entails a highly structured political project, which articulates a radical social critique with long-term strategies for change: the campaign re-framed the previously unrelated or artificially opposed needs of small farmers, migrant farmworkers and consumers in terms of converging needs, with the aim to promote new alliances among these weaker social groups against social mechanisms and actors hold responsible for the crisis.

The wide-ranging potential of this project became particularly evident, for instance, on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2014 when a coalition of "Italian and migrant workers, critical producers and consumers" launched a "National day of solidarity with the resistance of farmers and farmworkers" (Altracittà 2014). Not accidentally, the initiative took place a few days after the fourth anniversary of the tumult. In Rome, Livorno, Florence, Bologna, Milan and Padua exploitation- and speculation-free oranges and clementines produced by the organic farmers of *SOS Rosarno* were sold in front of Coop supermarkets. Activists of many supporting organizations, such as *Campagne in lotta* and *Brigate di solidarietà attiva*, social centres such as *EX SNIA* (Rome) and *Laboratorio Crash* (Bologna), members of SPG and grass-roots trade unions such as *SI Cobas* took part in this distribution, in order to denounce the role played by big retailers in the enduring crisis of small farmers, and in the severe exploitation affecting migrant workers in agriculture and in the logistics.

"Squeeze the oranges, not the farmworkers" was the key slogan of the National day of solidarity. On that occasion a very telling flyer was distributed. It compared the difference between the price of oranges paid to producers and the price asked to con-

sumers by Coop – labelled as “the price of exploitation” – with the difference between the price of oranges paid to producers and the price asked to consumers of SPG by *SOS Rosarno* – labelled as the “price of solidarity”. This last price was sensibly lower than the first – 1,25 euro/kg compared to 1,99 euro/kg – and it clearly specified all its components: labour cost of picking fruits, labour cost of preparing fruits for commercialization, remuneration of the producers, transportation costs, promotion costs, “solidarity quota” for projects supporting migrants or for other political initiatives. The message addressed to consumers was clear-cut. By asking how much really cost citrus fruits, activists wanted to “uncover the *untrue ethic* invoked by Coop in order to hide, to their members and consumers, the profits it makes as one of the largest retail company in Italy” and “reclaim a fair and sustainable price for producers, workers and consumers” (Altracittà 2014).

Surprisingly, four years after its launching, *SOS Rosarno* has received only limited attention from academic scholars. Nevertheless, it has been mentioned as an “alternative social model” emerged in relation to recent migrant struggles for the right to have rights in agriculture (Colloca and Corrado 2013, 19); it has been briefly described among the “best practices” against severe exploitation of migrant farmworkers in Southern Italy (Pugliese 2012a: 148-149); it has been evoked in connection with similar experiences made in Sicily with “fair organic oranges” sold through SPG (Grasseni 2013, 106-107) and through direct selling in squares of many cities in Northern and Central Italy (De Musso 2013). The present paper contributes to fill this gap in current researches, as it tries to reconstruct the ideological frame and the political project, the organization and the practices, the impact and the shortcomings of *SOS Rosarno*. I will stress, in particular, the multiple ways through which this project experiments new socio-economic models as viable solutions to the long-lasting crisis of agriculture in Southern Italy and to current global economic crises, addressing at the same time exploitation and racialization of migrant workers, impoverishment of small producers, destruction of social ties and the environment. Being fully aware of the limited dimension and the difficulties affecting *SOS Rosarno*, I suggest nevertheless to see it as a promising effort “to weave a network of resistances against the crisis” (BSA 2014) or, more precisely, against the unprecedented bundle of economic, social environmental crises we are experimenting nowadays (De Marzo 2009, 13).

The first section of the paper discusses the theoretical and methodological background of my analysis. The second section provides a genealogy of *SOS Rosarno* taking the tumult of January 2010 as a turning point and describes its solidarity-based economic activities in relation to the crisis of citrus fruits plantation and the exploitation of migrant workers in the Gioia Tauro Plain. The third section offers an interpretation of

*SOS Rosarno* as going beyond simple solidarity economy, by promoting a sustainable, convivial and democratic society based on a “new peasant civilization” as a long-term alternative to the current crises. The conclusions briefly discuss current limits and further perspectives of the project.

## **2. Understanding the alternativeness of *SOS Rosarno*: a critical and interdisciplinary approach**

No effective alternatives to the *status quo* would be possible without political subjectivities and “critical communities” (Dussel 2013) developing an autonomous epistemic standing point and struggling against the given power structures. I argue that the alternativeness of *SOS Rosarno* in respect to the dominant socio-economic system, as well as its innovations in the solidarity economy, best emerges within the new perspective opened by those movements which have resisted, since the 1970s, to the worldwide affirmation of neoliberal capitalism, and which oppose today its multiple global and local crises.

During the last three decades anti- and alter-globalization resistances have also produced, firstly but not exclusively in the global South, alternative socio-economic practices. These practices aimed at satisfying human needs and managing resources without commodifying and monetizing them, at emancipating labour from exploitation, at respecting the life of local communities and the limits of the environment, and thus at promoting equality, diversities and participation (Shiva 2005). Successive waves of “political consumerism” in the global North, evolving from individual responsible shopping or ethical saving towards collective forms of economic citizenship within “sustainable community movement organisations” (Forno and Graziano 2014), are part of the same historical trend towards the re-politicization of market places and the re-embedding of the economic and financial system into social relations. Since 2008 economic crisis and austerity measures have produced mass unemployment and deeper precarization, growing social inequalities and losses in household buying power, cuts in public expenditures and privatization of public services, especially in Southern Europe. In reaction, alternative economies have started focussing anew on issues such as exploitation, dispossession, speculation, production and distribution of surplus value: class struggles have been reconnected with mobilizations for the commons and the environmental reconversion of the economy, as well as for the recognition of diversities and the enforcement of real democracy (Viale 2012).

I suggest conceptualizing *SOS Rosarno* from the perspective of movements for social and environmental justice (Martinez-Alier 2002; De Marzo 2009, 2012), especially those focused on food, agriculture and land, and to develop an interdisciplinary approach in order to systematically reconstruct and assess this specific experience. On one side, there is the need to describe the historical-political context and the socio-economic problems to which *SOS Rosarno* reacts. This demands two kinds of interacting studies: on contemporary agrarian question, *i.e.* the effects of transnational agribusiness on rural labour market and class relations, food circuits and the environment, within a largely liberalized trade regime and a financialized commodity market (Dicken 2011, 270-300); on contemporary migration and border regimes, *i.e.* the effects of immigration controls and racializing mechanisms on the “differential inclusion” of migrants and on their potential for social conflict (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), especially in critical rural contexts in Southern Italy (Corrado and Perrotta 2012). On the other side, there is the need to understand conceptual and organizational resources employed by *SOS Rosarno* in order to articulate its project. This demands two further kinds of interacting studies: on practices and values of “new peasantry” (van Ploeg 2008, 2010) and of alternative economy, especially fair trade (Gesualdi 1999) and SPG (Grasseni 2013); on key concepts of justice movements, such as re-localization and re-socialization of the economy, “food sovereignty” (Jansen 2014) and “Earth democracy” (Shiva 2005). I will draw on this literature in order to put discourses and activities of *SOS Rosarno* in a larger political-theoretical perspective, making some of the hidden assumptions of this project more explicit.

This theoretical approach is not arbitrary: it largely corresponds to the aims of *SOS Rosarno* as they have been formalized in its founding charter. The association intends to “promote and practice a culture of solidarity, mutual respect and nonviolence, in order to achieve equality and social justice”. This implies

to go beyond prejudices or boundaries, be they cultural, social, institutional, economic or physical, which produce disparities, discriminations, intolerance, xenophobia, racism, violence and obstacles for a real social and cultural inclusion of people, regardless of origin, social and economic condition, race, sex, religion and political ideas; to promote and practice the defence and the recovery of personal identities, territorial integrity and the right of local communities, by giving value to human, environmental, economic, cultural and anthropological resources; to promote and practice responsible consumption, sustainable development and solidarity economy, egalitarian cooperation among producers and between producers and consumers in a network perspective, enhancing small production of high quality goods, while respecting traditions, health of the consumers, natural resources, and the rights of workers (*SOS Rosarno* 2012a).

Co-production of knowledge with the people directly or indirectly involved within *SOS Rosarno* constitutes the key methodological strategy for articulating my research in a critical and interdisciplinary way. More precisely, I will draw on and compare two main sources of information: first, political documents and press releases produced by the association itself, videos reproducing public interventions of the members of the association, and press reportages on their activities; second, thirteen in-depth interviews with diversified members of the association, namely militants, producers, artisans and migrant farmworkers, and with other significant actors. Quantitative data provided by the Italian National Statistic Institute, rural trade unions and specialized research institutes will integrate previous qualitative data, by providing key information on Italian agriculture, food industry, etc. with a special focus on the Gioia Tauro Plain and on citrus fruits.

### **3. From the crisis of citrus fruits plantation towards an alternative agri-food regime**

#### *3.1. An alliance between small organic producers, migrant farmworkers and critical consumers*

The “facts of Rosarno”, *i.e.* the sequence of tumult, black man hunting and mass eviction of African farmworker, are still considered by the members of *SOS Rosarno* a turning point for the launching of the campaign. Many of them knew each other because of their involvement in environmental mobilizations, such as the *No Ponte* and the movement for the defence of the Gioia Tauro Plain from the doubling of the local waste incinerator (Interview No. 6, producer of *SOS Rosarno*). During those dramatic days of early January 2010, some of them were engaged as volunteers in the *Osservatorio Migranti - Africalabria*, trying to support and protect migrant workers from the assaults of armed local groups, and from the indiscriminate removal enforced by public authorities in the name of security and humanitarian reasons. In some cases, they even became “the target of resentment and menaces, labeled as *friends of the Africans*” (Interview No. 2, activist of *SOS Rosarno*).

After these challenging experiences, “we were moved by a *need*, more than by a simple idea. The need to provide an adequate answer to what appended, starting something which might open a new phase” (Interview No. 1, former activist of *SOS Rosarno*). Gradually, the founding members of the association developed a common un-

derstanding of the “facts of Rosarno”, which inspired their project: they decided to move from the denunciation of everyday and institutional racism towards the active critique of the socio-economic model, which needs and aliments racism. Moreover, according to other observers, the violent reaction of the resident population to the tumult was also alimented by the feeling that there was an “excess” in the presence of migrant farmworkers in relation to their employability: on one side, the reduction in European agricultural subsidies and the drop in farm prices induced many small farmers to leave fruits on the trees; on the other side, many migrant workers fired from companies in Northern Italy were coming to Rosarno to search for jobs, without any public planning of seasonal reception (Della Corte and Piperno 2010; Pugliese 2012b).

The systemic anti-racist approach developed by SOS Rosarno was the result of long discussions among themselves, and with those African migrants who constituted an Assembly in Rome at the *Ex SNIA* social centre, after having been evicted from Rosarno (Interviews No. 6 and 7, producers of *SOS Rosarno*).

We saw the so-called 'revolt' as a symptom. A symptom of the perverse mechanisms enacted by the big retail system and trade liberalization, which squeeze local small farmers and let them exploit migrant farmworkers. In order to end those perverse mechanisms, we had to move away from the contraposition between small farmers and migrant farmers and promote their coalition, based on the fair remuneration for work and food. We wanted to provide an example - a sign - that there are alternatives (Interview No. 7).

The only way to make this strategy work was “to address the world of solidarity economy, namely SPG, whose members pay higher – and decidedly fairer – prices than we would receive from traditional distribution networks. We knew, we had to intercept directly critical consumers, as they always want to know *what* and *who* is beyond the products” (Interview No. 6). The needed lands and competences in producing organic citrus fruits and in organizing efficient transportation, while fully respecting the rights of migrant workers, were found in the cooperative *I frutti del sole*, based in Limbadi near Rosarno (Interview No. 7). In Winter 2011 *SOS Rosarno* finally started as a campaign formally promoted by *EquoSud*, a consortium of local producers mainly based in the Reggio Calabria district, who have been selling organic food outside big retail chains since 2005. This experience, along with that of organic and independent Sicilian producers called *Le Galline Felici* (Forno 2011, 92-98) has been crucial in strengthen the relation of *SOS Rosarno* with SPG in Central and Northern Italy.

### *3.2. Reacting to the crisis of citrus fruits plantations*

The alternativeness of the agri-food regime put in place by *SOS Rosarno* on a small scale is best discernible in relation to the critical trends affecting Italian agriculture in the frame of industrialization and globalization processes: the shrinking access to land and the concentration of property; the divergent dynamic of falling farm prices and growing selling prices; the trade liberalization and the rising global competition and speculation on food as commodity; the dependency of local, small producers from multinational customers and, in the case of the European Union, from public subsidies; the concentration and the increasing buying and selling power of large food retailers.

Italy is still among the major producers of citrus fruits at global level, with around 3.7 million tonnes cultivated from approximately 170,000 hectares of land, amounting to 3% of the overall value of national agriculture. In the last five years, internal consumption has decreased around 4.4% per year. At the same time, there has been a passive balance of trade because of imported lemons and non-seasonal oranges (ISMEA 2011). Calabria is the second biggest orange growing area in the country after Sicily, producing more than 870,000 tons in 2009. During the last twenty years in the region 16,000 farms cultivating citrus fruits disappeared. In the same period, there has been a rise in productivity: in Rosarno, for example, in 1995 the production was of 300 quintals/hectare, while in 2010 it was of 400 (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 2013). There is also a growing presence of organic plantations, which in 2010 covered 544 hectares within the district of Vibo Valentia. The average dimension of plantations is around 1,6 hectares, slightly larger than national average of 1,45 hectares (ISTAT 2013). The majority of citrus fruits grown in the Plain are still cheap, industrial one, used for concentrates. In 2012 activities related to citrus fruits employed about 7,000 people: 5,000 in the harvest and 2,000 in the transformation industry (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 2013).

The crisis of peasantry related to citrus fruits plantations, in Italy and in the Gioia Tauro Plain, is not a recent phenomenon (Cavazzani and Sivini 1997). Causes and dimensions of this trend are particularly evident in the prices dynamic. This is a general phenomenon of agriculture, with the farm share of a food product's final price falling from about 41% in 1950 to 15.5% in 2011. This squeezing effect is particularly evident in the case of citrus fruits. In 1995 the farm price was about 500 lire/kg, that is about 0.26 euros/kg. In 2010 the price was about 0.15 euros/kg. At the same time, the selling price is about 1-1.45 euro/kg (not organic products), which is 19% more than in 2001. The gap is even bigger for fruits destined to transformation: the farm price is now about 0.04-0.08 euros/kg, while the selling price of juice is about 1.30 euros/litre (SOS Rosarno 2013, 3). This trend depends on the structure of the market and of the supply

chain. In the last twenty years, Italy's orange sector has faced an increasing competition from other producing countries including Brazil, China, the USA, Mexico, and Spain. In the future, it will be threatened also by Morocco, as a result of the new free trade agreement with the European Union entered into force on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012. At the same time, one of the main final customers of the juice from Rosarno is the Coca-Cola Company, which uses the juice for the controlled brand Fanta. Because of its size and monopoly in the area, the multinational can dictate the price it pays for orange juice, which is around 0.07 euro per litre. That price would not even cover the costs of production (Wasley 2012). Consumers too endure their share of this unfair agro-food regime, paying oranges five to six times more than the price paid to farmers.

This peculiar price dynamic depends also from the rising concentration of retailers, which has taken place in Italy during the last twenty years, making the food system similar to an hourglass, with thousands of farmers selling their products to millions of consumers via a small number of food processors and retailers. Retail industry is widespread in Italy, even if in minor extent than in other European countries such as France, Germany, the UK or Spain: currently, there are six major players in this sector – Coop Italia, Conad, Selex, Esselunga, Auchan and Carrefour – occupying 55,5% of the sector, with Coop Italia representing the first national retailer in 2012 with 14,7% (AGCM 2013, 35-39). As the number of retailer corporations has fallen, the market power of the survivors has increased, enabling them to extract ever larger profits from the agri-food supply chain. In particular, large retailers can exert upward pressure on their selling prices and downward pressure on their buying prices, and on the costs they pay for transportation and distribution of food. Concerning more specifically the situation of the Gioia Tauro Plain, according to the former mayor of Rosarno “during the 1970s, the *'ndrangheta* pushed away from our countryside those traders willing to pay adequately for our products, in order to remain the only buyer and impose low prices. In the following decades, it has occupied directly or indirectly most of the supply chain, including general markets and supermarkets” (G. Lavorato 2009).

In this context public subsidies to agriculture, such as those provided by the Common Agricultural Policies of the European Union, are the symptom of a hardly sustainable system, partially reinforcing the ongoing critical trends through further distortions and abuses. For years communitarian funds to citrus fruits, for instance, were based on the quantity of harvests. This stimulated overproduction, including through indiscriminate use of fertilisers and pesticides, but also illegal practices, such as the fraud occurred in Calabria and called “paper oranges” and “paper juices”, with declared production being 5-10 times bigger than in reality. These practices supported in the public opinion the decision, already taken in 2003 at European level with the so-called Fisch-

ler Reform, to start basing subsidies no more on the harvest but on the surface of production. As effect of the “decoupling” funds allocated to citrus fruits producers in Calabria are now in average 1,400-1,800 euros. Until 2008, the European Union paid an average 8,000-9,000 euros to each farm, on the basis of the quantity of fruits picked (European Parliament 2010). “One of the unintended effect of this reform has been to shrink the prices paid by large buyers to small producers, and thus to further squeeze the pay of migrant workers” (Interview No. 6).

### *3.3. Districts and supply chains of exploitation: vulnerable migrant workers in the Italian agri-food system*

A key role in the Italian agro-food regime, and in the management of its enduring crisis, has been played by the “neoliberal migration governance” (Oliveri 2014), which provides low cost and highly vulnerable labour force to be exploited in the whole supply chain: from seasonal harvests to food transportation and logistics.

Since the end of the 1980s, immigrants have progressively become a key element of the Italian agri-food system, as they started to substitute national workers in harsh, unsafe, low paid, low skilled activities, often in the underground economy (INEA 2010). More precisely, migrant workers became a precious countervailing factor against the ongoing critical trends in agriculture highlighted above. Lower cost and higher flexibility of migrant labour force, due to the conditions of extreme vulnerability produced by immigration laws strictly connecting residence permit and working contract, and thus systematically threatening migrants with irregularization and deportability, became a source of fictive competitiveness of the sector (Colloca and Corrado 2013). The economic crisis, and the definitive transition to the new criteria of communitarian subsidies, provoked in many rural areas the rupture of the previous equilibrium and led to tensions and protests (IRES-CGIL 2011).

Since the 1990s, between November and March, up to 2,000 migrants reached the Gioia Tauro Plain for the harvest of citrus fruits. They generally are from Maghreb or Sub-Saharan Africa. Workers from Romania and Bulgaria joined, and partially replaced them, during the 2000s (De Bonis 2005). After the harvest, many of them generally move on to work in other rural districts in Apulia, Campania, Sicily, Piemonte and Trentino, according to the season (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2014).

Like in other Italian rural districts, in Rosarno migrant farmworkers do not generally get regular contracts. Nevertheless, especially in the last five years, about two out of three of them has a regular residence permit, and most of the others enjoy some humanitarian protection status (Interview No. 10, volunteer of MEDU, Doctors for Human

Rights). They systematically experience multiple violations of their fundamental rights in terms of working and living conditions. “As a migrant farmworkers here you are typically paid 20-25 euros in a day. The length of the effective working day is about 12 hours. You are paid per crate, not per day, namely 1 euro for a crate of clementines, and 0.50 euro for a crate of oranges. In principle, the more you work, the more you get” (Interview No. 4, migrant farmworker of *SOS Rosarno*). Italian labour law prohibits this kind of remuneration, called *a cottimo* [piecework], as it systematically profits to the employers. “SOS Rosarno breaks with these abuses, which violate our dignity of workers: we are all regularly hired and receive the legal wage, which is here about 42 euro per day, for 7 hours of work” (Interview No. 5, migrant farmworker of *SOS Rosarno*). Moreover, social security contributions are also regularly paid, providing access to unemployment subsidies for farmworkers.

Since August 2012, Italian penal law also punishes unlawful gang-mastering aimed at exploitation, *i.e.* the so called *caporalato*. The enforcement of this provisions seems very limited so far. Gang-masters still are key actors in the local rural labour market, functioning as “brokers” (Perrotta 2014) which provide work, transportation and sometimes even housing to racially and spatially segregated seasonal migrant farmworkers. There are different types of gang-masters in contemporary Italian countrysides, which reflect local differences in the extension and the distribution of the fields, in the kind of cultivations, in the degree of mechanisation, and in the working and housing opportunities of migrants (Perrotta 2014). In Rosarno, gang-masters act rather as work-team heads, in a less marked and tense distance with workers than in other rural districts (Pugliese 2012a).

If you look for a job, you have to go early in the morning in front of the railway station, for instance, where you can find both farmers and gang-masters who offer you some work. We call the gang-masters *capi neri*, as they mostly are Africans like us. Here, many are from Nigeria: they just bought a van and started bringing workers to the citrus fruits groves and back, for 3-4 euros. They work with you on the field, but they are paid directly from the farmers. Some of them force you also to rent a bed in a flat based in the town, which they lend for 3 euros. I decided to stop working with them after I had, like others, a serious problem with payments, as the gang-master did not want to pay us (Interview No. 4).

NGOs, such as Doctors without borders (Medici senza frontiere 2005) and Doctors for Human Rights (MEDU 2015), which operate with a mobile clinic, attest that migrants in the Gioia Tauro Plain experience muscle and skeletal conditions, and respiratory problems. Some cases, especially dermatitis or conjunctivitis, are directly linked to

the improper use of pesticides and fungicides in the fields. This depends from the dreadful housing conditions, and from the lack of safety equipments at work. Many of the seasonal migrants staying in Rosarno and the surrounding areas still live in abandoned rural or industrial buildings, between damp walls and leaky, half-destroyed roofs, without running water, electricity or heating or, more recently, in a tent city provided after the tumult by national authorities and managed by the *Caritas*. The tent city is away from the surrounding towns and from the fields and accommodates only 450 persons, becoming therefore dramatically overcrowded during the harvest time.

#### *3.4. Fair price within a self-organized supply chain: towards an alternative agri-food regime*

*SOS Rosarno* aims to reverse these structural conditions, which impoverish small farmers and let migrant farmworkers be exploited and becoming the target of everyday and institutional racism. The project aims to empower the weakest actors of the food supply chain – farmworkers, small farmers, consumers – while supporting awareness and trust among them. As I will briefly show, practices and values of solidarity economy are key in providing this project with the needed organizational infrastructures and capacities.

The price of the products is the first mechanism through which *SOS Rosarno* uncovers and reverses unfair power relationships within the current agro-food regime. Against the effects of low farm prices, imposed to small and medium farmers by big traders and retailers, the members of the association set prices for citrus fruits, olive oils, marmalades, cheese and other transformed products such as natural creams, which guarantee a fair remuneration of the producers, covering the cost of production and allowing a reasonable earning. Against the rise to the bottom of labour standards, they regularly hire and pay farmworkers according the agricultural national and district contracts. Moreover, they provide access to high quality, healthy and organic food for a larger share of consumers through a reasonable selling price, lower than the price in specialized shops and in supermarkets too. This price policy is particularly valuable in a time of structural crisis, when even the demand of food is shrinking, and consumers are pushed to be socially irresponsible by buying low cost products, which generally imply labour exploitation and environmental damages.

Prices are always clear and all the components are specified. They include also a so called “solidarity quota”, recently renamed “quota for the alternative” (*SOS Rosarno* 2015), destined to support specific projects in line with the aims of the association. Among the more significant destinations of this quota, there have been during these

years the struggles of migrants working in the logistic sector, projects aimed at improving living and working conditions of seasonal workers in the Gioia Tauro Plain, in Saluzzo (Piedmont), in Rignano (Apulia) and Boreano (Basilicata), the reconstruction of the social centre “Angelina Cartella” near Reggio Calabria burned down because of its activities, the support of the self-managed and ecologically reconverted factory *Ri-Maflo* in Trezzano sul Naviglio (Lombardy). In the near future, the quota will be partially destined to support a project of farmer resistance in Africa: “speculation and other perverse mechanisms related to capitalist agri-food industry and the big supply chain should be addressed in their transnational dimension” (SOS Rosarno 2015).

Producers of *SOS Rosarno* are able to ask fair prices, and thus pay farmworkers according to the law, because they have access to a short and self-organized supply chain, whose terminal points are SPG and militant realities, such as social centres. SPG – which formally amount to 900 in Italy, but might even be twice as much (Forno 2014) – can be described as informal groups of critical consumers who decide to buy collectively food and everyday use products by acceding directly the producers and establishing with them direct contacts based on mutual knowledge and trust. They are the selling-side of a *short* food supply chain, that is a chain with a small number of intermediaries, or with no intermediaries at all, between the producer and the consumer and/or a limited geographical distance between the two. This allows to drastically cut down the share of the final price generally appropriated by traders and retailers, responsible for the “squeeze” of medium-small farmers, farmworkers and consumers. Moreover, logistic and commercialization costs are sensibly reduced by the fact that SPG are based on voluntary work, and are inspired by values and motivations in line with those who inspire *SOS Rosarno*: guaranteeing labour rights of farmworkers and fair remuneration for the producers, reducing the overall environmental impact of production, transportation and consumption, supporting local and typical productions, creating new economic circuits producing relational and immaterial, not only consumable goods (Grasseni 2014, 180).

Members of SPG are not just consumers, looking for the lowest price and the highest quality of food: they are “co-producers” (Grasseni 2014), willing to support small and critical farmers in accessing markets from which they would be normally excluded, while sharing the risks of their economic enterprise. They are “reflexive consumers” (Guthman 2003), driven by a “broader sense of agency in the realm of consumption choices, reflected in knowledge seeking, evaluation, and discernment” (Guthman 2002, 299), inspired by a non-market ethics different from that of the cost-minimising, self-interested individual of neoclassical economic theory. SPG become therefore real spaces of participation going far beyond the decisions concerning consumption, also

thanks to the convergence and the interaction of people with different backgrounds, who share a critical attitude towards traditional politics. Being part of this alternative network means to refuse the main characteristics of traditional supply chains, such as extreme productivity, standardization and industrial organization, while paying greater attention to other aspects, such as social and environmental quality, origin and organic production of agro-food products. Within this frame, the “right price” for food products is not the minimum price but what farmers of *SOS Rosarno* calls “price of solidarity”: the price that is fair to producers, workers, consumers, and nature, as it includes also the higher cost of environmentally friendly practices. The “self-educational character of SPG” (Forno 2014) may be thus activated in order to make consumers fully aware of how big retail and agribusiness impact negatively on the economy, the environment and society as a whole.

Direct negotiations between producers and consumers within SPG, for example through collective orders with a minimum quantity for each delivery, offer the technical opportunity to gain secure income for farmers, allowing them to sell their products for more than the price they would have received from a wholesaler, and to rationalize and reduce the costs of transportation. Moreover, thanks to SPG, in theory farmers can better program the speed and quantity of the harvests; they receive payment at the delivery avoiding the waiting times imposed by big retailers; they can sell their products during periods of the year when offer exceeds demand; they enjoy the flexibility to sell what they produce in line with seasonality; they can cut costs for conservation and storage; they get direct feedback from consumers that serve as a reference for continual improvement (Rossi and Brunori 2011). The five-years long experience of *SOS Rosarno* has shown that all these organizational competences need time and mutual adjustments in order to be conveniently and efficiently put into practice (Interview No. 3, employee of the cooperative *Frutti del Sole*).

#### **4. From an alternative agri-food regime towards a sustainable, convivial and democratic society**

Promoters of *SOS Rosarno* are aware of the complex nature and the global scale of the crises we are living through. They also know that the agri-food regime they aim to establish, through the building of solidarity-based networks of emancipated farmworkers, critical farmers and consumers, should be considered only the first step of a long-term path towards an alternative society. They really feel engaged in expanding the field of activity of the association potentially to all fields of everyday social life. To this

aim, they try to continuously deepen and clarify “the fundamental element of [their] efforts, the vision [they] share and which puts [them] together, namely *solidarity*” (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 3). Moreover, they are all but self-indulgent and they regularly submit their project to a severe scrutiny of coherence and practicability, which also explains their growingly critical relations to the Italian networks of solidarity economy.

I will explore this side of the project by reconstructing how discourses and practices of *SOS Rosarno* contribute to develop an alternative social model, in terms of de-commodification of nature and labour, construction of a convivial and real democratic society, transition from monoculture to food sovereignty, within the coming of a “new peasant civilization”.

#### 4.1. *From alternative food networks to de-commodification of nature, territories and labour*

*SOS Rosarno* developed since the beginning a systemic approach to production and consumption: the interest in organic food alone appeared meaningless if disconnected from struggles against pollution and destruction of the environment. “We would not understand the logic behind the promotion of organic food if those who support it do not feel the need to engage in avoiding the diffusion of pollutant activities compromising the environmental balance in the same territory where the organic food is produced” (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 3). This is why the promoters of *SOS Rosarno* themselves got involved in local movements against waste incineration, re-gasification terminals and water privatization (Interviews No. 2 and 6).

In particular, promoters of *SOS Rosarno* argue that it is not possible to “support short supply chains without supporting those who resist against environmental destruction produced by high-speed rails” (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 4). From their point of view, “principles of sustainability, which inspire practices such as short supply chains, have their political parallel in the issue of big infrastructure projects such as [the] high-speed rail [under construction between Lyon and Turin]. These projects constitute the logistical support for long, industrial, concentrated, irrational and speculative supply chains, and are expression of speculative interests and lobbies which are coincident or are natural allies of big retail companies” (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 4). In order to implement this view, *SOS Rosarno* repeatedly donated their exploitation-free oranges to NO TAV activists in the Susa Valley (Piedmont). “One of the main point of disagreement within the national network of Solidarity Economy was our strong support to NO TAV movement. This is part of our identity, we cannot renounce to it” (Interview No. 6).

Within this frame, solidarity becomes a far-reaching notion than just direct and trustful relations between farmers and consumers: it includes de-commoditised relations to the environment, to rural and urban territories, and to labour. It means to support popular movements which demand local democracy and defend the territory against big infrastructures, or privatization of public goods. It demands to promote projects of social and sustainable tourism, aimed at the recuperation of abandoned historical towns, such as the *Borgo* of Nicotera, which is an integral part of the project of *SOS Rosarno* (Interviews No. 1 and 2). It implies also to support experiments in the self-management of enterprises (*Rimaflow*), of abandoned land and rural houses (*Mondeggi*, Bagno a Ripoli, Florence) and of abandoned industrial sites (*Municipio dei Beni Comuni*, Pisa). What all these struggles and *SOS Rosarno* have in common is the vision of the nature as a living entity, of territories as sites for diverse social relations and of labour as free cooperation, rather than commodities within the capitalist circuit of profit-making. This alternative paradigm is crucial in finding solutions to the ongoing multiple crisis, structurally integrating socio-economic and environmental concerns.

#### 4.2. *From solidarity economy to convivial society*

*SOS Rosarno* is not just about a solidarity-based way of producing, transporting and consuming food and non-food exploitation-free products. It is a path towards an alternative idea of society. “We are becoming a small community of farmers and farmworkers, who have the same dream, during the day, while cultivating together the land, and who spread the bacillus of *convivial solidarity* in other towns, telling everyone the secret of how beautiful is to live in the world that way” (*SOS Rosarno* 2013, 5).

Conviviality expresses, first of all, the practice of valuing and cultivating diversity as a key feature of human relationships based on equal respect and peace, understood not as the absence of conflicts but as their recognition and management. Encouraging a convivial society involves negotiating between different visions of good life, and competing social interests. This happens in every moment of life of *SOS Rosarno*, especially in collective deliberations which follow the rule of direct democracy and of consensus: “Everyone decides on everything. And everyone has the same say. Disagreements are managed through long and reiterated discussions. Sometimes we just have to accept our divergences, and move on working on them” (Interview No. 7).

Within *SOS Rosarno* there are two main differences distinguishing farmers and farmworkers criss-crossing one-another: the difference of class position, and the difference of cultural backgrounds. The difference of class position, reflected in different social interests and perspectives between farmers and farmworkers, is openly recog-

nized and explicitly addressed. Together with a certain “lack of determination in campaigning for an alternative economic model” (Interview No. 6), this has been one of the points of disagreement with the established Italian networks of solidarity economy:

The identification between farmers and farmworkers, in terms of representation within the Solidarity Economy Networks is a huge mistake. Sustainability and equity of a labour contract do not change its *asymmetric* nature: this is why it is highly unjust and incoherent with the principles of Solidarity Economy Network that farmworkers and their associations, when they exist, are not autonomously represented in the assemblies at all levels (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 4).

Cultural differences between African farmworkers and local farmers are also recognized and managed as a source of mutual enrichment, in the perspective of an egalitarian society of “*africalabresi*” – a new word used within *SOS Rosarno* which condenses the two identities of origin of farmworkers and farmers. More than to Ivan Illich, who first developed this notion in terms of “individual freedom realized in personal interdependence” within a post-productivist society (Illich 1973), conviviality as intended by *SOS Rosarno* seems closer to Paul Gilroy's concept. He described indeed conviviality as “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multi-culture an ordinary feature of urban life” (Gilroy 2004, xi): *SOS Rosarno* might be seen as one of the first efforts in Europe to transfer this kind of experiences from urban to rural contexts. Conviviality overcomes “closed, fixed and reified” notions of race and identity, especially those that derive from colonial discourses, promoting instead the “creative, intuitive capacity among ordinary people who manage tensions”: problems of racism are not over, but through conviviality “we have to start taking note of the fact that there were spontaneous ways in which many of these problems (problems we are now told are features of a clash of civilisations) melted away in the face of human sameness” (Gilroy 2006). It is therefore more resilient than just multiculturalism, as it expresses a practice of equal respect, mutual recognition and sharing of social responsibility for the community one is part, based on a shared “sense of place”. These dimensions of *SOS Rosarno* are plastically evident in the artistic clays produced and the spectacles performed by two Italian members of the project, with the collaboration of the migrants (Interviews No. 8 and No. 9, artisans of *SOS Rosarno*).

#### 4.3. *From monoculture to food sovereignty*

Members of *SOS Rosarno* recognize that solidarity-based supply chains alone do not radically challenge the dominant model of citrus fruits plantations, oriented to distant and global markets rather than to local ones (SOS Rosarno 2013). If this is partially un-

voidable, as this kind of fruits could be produced nowhere but in Southern Italy, a truly sustainable food system demands to break as much as possible with medium and long-distance trade, and to encourage only local productions for local consumption. Indeed, re-localization allows for reducing the environmental impact of food transportation, but also to avoid dependence of local producers from external, far less manageable price and supply dynamics.

This is particularly true in the case of citrus fruits harvests in the Gioia Tauro Plain, for decades destined to transformation under the monopoly of the Coca-Cola Company. In order to achieve the independence of local production, the promoters of *SOS Rosarno* deploys a consequent critique of orange monoculture in the name of food sovereignty: “Going beyond organic food, social justice and sustainability, our commitment to the perspective of *food sovereignty* demands that we include in our agenda the overcoming of monoculture as a historical unsustainable legacy, which puts ourselves as citrus fruits producers in a blatant *contradiction*” (SOS Rosarno 2012b, 4).

According to the *Declaration of Nyéléni*, adopted at the *Forum for Food Sovereignty* in Sélingué, Mali, on 27 February 2007, by about 500 delegates from more than 80 countries, “food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems”. This approach “prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture [...] and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability”. It clearly centres the food system on those who produce, work and consume rather than on the demands of markets and corporations. This is perfectly in line with the strategy enacted by *SOS Rosarno* in order to attain the autonomy of farmers and farmworkers from big traders and retailers. Moreover, reclaiming control over production and distribution via food sovereignty is seen as the solution to those crises precipitated by liberalization, unrestricted competition, corporate global agriculture.

The transition from monoculture of citrus fruits to policulture in the name of food sovereignty offers the opportunity to reintroduce new varieties of traditional local products and to become more autonomous from seasonal constraints. Together with a strong re-orientation to local markets, and the creation of solidarity-based activities of transformation producing, for instance, exploitation-free tomato sauce, this approach should guarantee farmers with more stable earnings. It should also encourage a small number of migrant farmworkers to stop moving from one harvest to another in different Italian rural areas. Transforming seasonal workers in stable ones may help overcome, with the due support of public authorities, the periodical emergencies related to

migrants' precarious accommodations (SOS Rosarno 2013). In connection with the possible extension of the alternative agri-food circuit, the diversification of productions may also counter the abandonment of lands, and support the implementation of a multifunctional agriculture, oriented not only to food production but also to the defence of the territory from speculation and erosion.

#### 4.4. *Towards a new peasant civilization*

These dimensions of the new model of society promoted by *SOS Rosarno* are part of a coherent political project, aimed at transforming power relations not only in the agri-food system but in the community as a whole, while producing new kinds of people and new relations among them, and with nature. This perspective seems very close to that developed by Vandana Shiva (2005) when she talks about "Earth democracy" as the convergence of living economies, living cultures, and living democracies. If we assume that the current multiple crisis is the historical product of capitalist commodification and exploitation of labour and nature, nurturing fundamentalisms and racisms "where culture is reduced to a negative shell, where one identity is in competition with 'the other' over scarce resources", this perspective appears to be extremely promising in developing a viable alternative to the *status quo*.

The promoters of the campaign conceptualize this alternative social model as based on a "peasant mode of agriculture" and on a "new peasant civilization" (SOS Rosarno 2013, 2-3). They implicitly understand their efforts as being part of a larger processes of "re-peasantization", based on re-grounding of agriculture upon nature and decent work, delinking agriculture from dependency on market dynamics and on financial and industrial capital, re-introducing rural "artisanality", implementing a new generation of skill-oriented technologies, experimenting "pluri-activity" and new forms of local cooperation, etc. (van Ploeg 2008). These notions are fundamental in conceptualizing a viable alternative to "entrepreneurial" and "corporate agriculture", while carefully distinguishing the "new peasant way of life" from the old peasant condition, often marked by patriarchal, invisible, miserable, and self-exploitative forms of subsistence economy. Moreover, these concepts help to understand in political terms the importance of a re-localized, organic, sustainable, and democratic food production and consumption in solving global issues, such as famine, climate change and environmental crisis, privatization and destruction of the commons.

In conclusion, *SOS Rosarno* supports the development of a "new peasant civilization" not only as a possible solution to the failures of the dominant agri-food system. More radically, their promoters understand it "as the basis for a non-dominated society",

that is, a society built by people emancipated from domination. “A society founded on land, both economically and symbolically, influences all sectors of activity. All is oriented to the respect of the Earth and the peaceful co-existence of those who dwell in it” (SOS Rosarno 2013, 2).

## 5. Conclusions

Five years after its launch, it is time to assess the impact of *SOS Rosarno*, and measure the gap between the objectives and the effective results of the project as a viable alternative to the current crises.

From a quantitative point of view, we register a dynamic and growing reality. The 17 original members of the association, including 4 immigrants, have increased now to 23, 10 of which are immigrants. Farmers have also increased in these years, from 7 to 10, and this has brought to a slightly larger surface to be used. The production has also generally increased, with the exception of some difficult years for olives, such as 2014: concerning oranges, for instance, there were 100 tonnes of oranges sold in 2012, while in 2015 there were 155.4. In connection with the growing of the harvest, since 2014 the number of migrant farmworkers employed has almost doubled, with the construction of two working-teams of 6 members each. Previous problems in terms of logistics and transportation of goods from the production site to the SPGs have been largely solved, with a reduction of costs and environmental impact (Interview No. 3).

From a qualitative point of view, we should consider the multiple relations and networks in which *SOS Rosarno* has entered and played a role, from *Genuino Clandestino* to *Associazione Rurale Italiana*, from *Campagne in lotta* to *Brigate di Solidarietà attiva*, from social centres in Reggio Calabria, Rome, Bologna and other towns to more than 400 SPGs (Interview No. 3), which implies not only relations of commercialization but also mutual exchanges and visits, participation to public events, diffusion of the political project of the association through the products (Interview No. 7).

At the same time, if confronted with the dimension of the problems which originated the project, such as the working and living conditions of seasonal migrants, and the impoverishment and exclusion from the market of small farmers, the impact of *SOS Rosarno* should be seen as “a drop in the ocean, *i.e.* as an example rather than something decisive” (Interview No. 7). In particular, the gap between the potential and the effective beneficiaries of the project is still relevant, and not easy to be overcome in the short term.

As regarding small organic farmers, the current possibility to introduce new producers into the association is limited because the capacity of the SPG, to which *SOS Rosarno* is connected, to absorb the production is reaching its limits. As a result, some producers have to sell their products to other channels, albeit always outside the traditional and big trade, for which the prices asked were too high. The members of the cooperative *I Frutti del Sole*, for instance, participate only for 10% of their production to the campaign on the base of a “fair rotation principle” (*SOS Rosarno* 2015), and sell through other national channels of commercialization of organic products, recently within the *Agrintesa* Cooperative based in Ravenna (Interview No. 3). The diversification of the production going beyond monoculture, which started in 2014 with the use of abandoned lands for introducing new species of pomegranates and produce different vegetables, seems far more promising than just extending the network of commercialization inside the solidarity economy.

As regarding migrant farmworkers, they are aware that *SOS Rosarno* may be not attractive to many seasonal migrants, despite the legal price paid for labour, the shorter working-day and the regular contract.

Being part of *SOS Rosarno* is not only about working in the fields, with our dignity of workers fully respected. It is also about participating to all the activities of the association, starting with our long and intense assemblies, and to make some free time available for the promotion of our activities throughout Italy. Moreover, you have to remain here all the year long, even when the harvest is over and you do not find work easily. For many African brothers, and sometimes also for us, this is a sacrifice. We made it because we believe in this project, and hope this will really change things (Interview No. 5).

Also for migrant workers, the more sustainable perspective of consolidation and enlargement of the project consists in the diversification of their activities, for instance through the building of a cooperative for food production and transformation (Interviews No. 4, 5, 6 and 7), which is still under discussion among them and the other members of *SOS Rosarno* at the time of writing.

Besides the obstacles in confronting, as a small reality, with the mainstream economic system based on market competition, speculation and exploitation, the difficulties of *SOS Rosarno* in enforcing its political project is also related to the specific historical moment. With the exception of the logistics (Curcio 2015), struggles started in Italy after 2010 in order to claim equal rights as migrant workers, which had a highlight during the first self-organized strike of farmworkers in Nardò, in Summer 2011 (BSA et al. 2012), are now almost silent. When *SOS Rosarno* started, some of their promoters were convinced that it would be politically successful only on the basis of two interconnected elements: alternative solidarity-based economic circuits and social conflict,

*i.e.* migrant-led mobilizations connected with other movements of the crisis and with a revival of class politics (A. Lavorato 2011). Now that the scenario seems to have changed in Italy, with a reduced level of struggles and growing difficulties in their organization, the whole political strategy of the association should be re-thought in order to avoid self-enclosure in a niche of alternative economy, renouncing really changing the present state of things.

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### **List of interviews**

1. Interview with a former activist of *SOS Rosarno* (Nicotera, 22 march 2015).
2. Interview with an activist of *SOS Rosarno* (Nicotera, 23 march 2015).
3. Interview with an employee of the cooperative *I Frutti del Sole* (Limbadi, 23 march 2015).
4. Interview with a migrant farmworker of *SOS Rosarno* (Rosarno, 24 arch 2015).
5. Interview with a migrant farmworker of *SOS Rosarno* (Rosarno, 24 march 2015).
6. Interview with a producer of *SOS Rosarno* (Serrata, 25 march 2015).
7. Interview with a producer of *SOS Rosarno* (Limbadi, 25 march 2015).
8. Interview with an artisan of *SOS Rosarno* (Serrata, 26 march 2015).
9. Interview with an artisan of *SOS Rosarno* (Serrata, 26 march 2015).
10. Interview with a volunteer of MEDU (Nicotera Marina, 26 march 2015).

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