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### **Abstract**

Conscious of the nutritional failings of the current food systems, there has been a call in the last decade or so to move beyond sustainable consumption and towards sustainable diets defined as healthy diets that also optimize the environment, food quality, socio-cultural values, the economy and governance. Previous studies have shown how local food initiatives can lead to greater levels of sustainable consumption and healthier diets, and have focused on the key role played by the conscious-consumer. Analysing various types of local food initiatives – from community-oriented to more privately-run activities – they have described the processes that local food initiatives set in motion to empower conscious-consumers and to ultimately change habits and routines. Taking the specific case of a business-oriented box delivery scheme in Italy, the paper sheds further light on the mechanisms that enable clients to consume in more sustainable and healthier ways, with a central role played by learning, commitment and empowerment. Obstacles however exist in the form of the way people's everyday lives are structured, and the competing values that people draw upon in making their food choices. Support is therefore needed from public institutions to make it easier for people to choose healthier and more sustainable food provisioning systems.

**Key words:** sustainable diets; local food systems; conscious-consumers

## ***Introduction***

The state of the food system developed in the aftermath of WWII has come under intense scrutiny in the last decades. Issues that were once put forward primarily by social movements, such as the environmental damage of industrial modernization, have climbed up the international agenda and have garnered enough consensus to be able to suggest that business as usual is no longer possible (UN, 2015, GLOPAN, 2016; HLPE, 2017). Mounting scientific evidence shows that the current food system is failing humanity both in terms of the environment and climate change (MEA, 2005; IAASTD, 2008; UNEP, 2012; IPES, 2016), and in terms of health, as the global rise in malnutrition and non-communicable diseases testifies (WHO, 2009; IFPRI 2015; IFPRI, 2016). In this context, the term “Sustainable Diets” was coined to emphasize the need to confront these challenges holistically, recognizing the inextricable link (and trade-offs) between the different aspects that a food system should deliver: a healthy diet that is “culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable, safe, respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems while optimising natural and human resources” (Burlingame and Dernini, 2012). This definition of sustainable diets, agreed upon at an International Scientific Symposium held in 2010 and co-organized by FAO and Bioversity International, brings to the fore the multidimensional aspect of “sustainability”, and the need therefore to go beyond its “classic” definition - founded on the 3 pillars of the economic, the environmental and the social - so as to better reflect the full range of impacts of the food system. More recent sustainability frameworks have indeed also suggested the introduction of additional “pillars” such as “health”, “ethics” (or social values), which embraces areas such as animal welfare, identity and religion, and “food quality”, which include taste, seasonality and freshness (Garnett, 2014; Brunori et al, 2016; Mason and Lang, 2017).

Thanks to the recent publication of official, quasi- and non-official food based dietary guidelines that incorporate sustainability, there is today broad scientific consensus of what a sustainable diet would look like on a plate: a diverse diet, made up principally of minimally processed and whole foods, nuts and legumes, with moderate amounts of meat and dairy products, and very small quantities of foods high in fat, sugar or salt and low in micro-nutrients (Garnett, 2014; Gonzalez Fischer and Garnett, 2016). Disagreements however subsist, not so much on the need for a transition towards sustainable diets - only a few constituencies deny its urgency – but on *how* to get there. For some, getting to sustainable diets is a technical problem, and requires purely technical solutions: a focus on product reformulation, nanotechnology and functional foods. For others – and this is the focus of our paper - sustainable diets is a “code for better consumption” and, as such, questions the current consumption models and calls for a change in consumer behaviour, in how people eat (Mason and Lang, 2017). A panoply of structural measures exist to foster a shift in consumer behaviour – some “harder” as in the case of taxes and bans, and some “softer” as in the case of labelling or nutritional guidelines (Ranganathan et al, 2016). Some Governments, faced with worryingly high levels of overweight, have begun to take action to encourage people to consume healthier diets – ranging from the taxation of sugary beverages in Mexico, to health-promoting labelling in Chile, fast food zoning around schools in South Korea and the USA, and the regulation on food marketing and advertising to children in Norway (GLOPAN, 2016).

Using a post-structuralist Actor Network Theory (ANT) approach, some practitioners and researchers have suggested that local food initiatives can play an important role in moving towards sustainability goals and, as we suggest in this paper, towards sustainable diets. Evidence has indeed been collected in the past decades and in various countries on the contribution of local food initiatives to a transition towards sustainable consumption (Lamine, 2005; Seyfang, 2006; Fonte, 2008; Kneafsey et al, 2008; Dowler et al, 2010; Brunori et al,

2012). A key role in these initiatives is played by “conscious-consumers”<sup>1</sup>, defined as those who infuse their consumer choices with ethical values and for whom pursuing, and maybe even privileging a private want, also benefits the collective good (Atkinson, 2012).

In disagreement with top-down structuralist approaches (Thøgersen and Crompton, 2009; Guthman, 2011; Sharzer, 2012), proponents of local food systems believe that a shift towards a food system grounded on sustainability can be brought about “from below”, through the political action of conscious-consumers. Local food initiatives were indeed set up at the beginning of the ‘70s as a “space” for conscious-consumers to express their agency vis-à-vis a dominant (conventional) food system that was contributing to environmental pollution, social injustice and contaminated food. Faced by an industrial food system that is perceived to be increasingly obfuscating and mystifying how food is grown, treated and distributed, people feel the need to “reconnect” with each other and with Nature (Belasco, 2008). In supporting local food systems, conscious-consumers thus redefine food “quality” by founding it firmly on new values and motivations that speak of limiting environmental pressure, re-establishing trust and relationships with others, maintaining “living rural communities”, protecting local economies (Seyfang, 2006; Fonte, 2008; Dowler et al, 2010), while at the same time taking care of one’s own health (Lamine, 2005; Kneafsey et al, 2008; Willis and Schor, 2012; Atkinson, 2012). In other words, they express three types of what Dowler et al call “interlocking cares”: a care for the environment and the local economy, a care about transparency and integrity in the food system, and a care for health and wholeness (Dowler et al, 2009) - three areas that cover all the dimensions of a sustainable diet as seen above.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we will make reference to conscious-consumers. In the literature reference is also made to ethical, critical consumers, citizen-consumers, ecological citizens and political-consumers (Seyfang, 2006; Willis *et al*, 2012; Atkinson, 2012). In all cases, their essence is understood to be that of “people who... inflect their choices as “consumers” with the values that underlie their responsibilities as “citizens” (Lockie, 2002: 194).

More importantly perhaps, local food initiatives can have a “transformative” effect on participants themselves: some studies describe processes of “discovery” whereby participants in an initiative may start off primarily driven by more personal reasons, related to health for example, and find their initial ethical values strengthened by their participation (Seyfang, 2006; Holloway et al, 2007).

In this process learning plays a key role. Indeed, local food initiatives are considered as incubators of important technical and social innovations, insofar as they provide new economic and cultural spaces to learn new ways of “knowing” food, new narratives and discourses around food (Fonte, 2008; Goodman et al, 2012). In forming part of local food networks, conscious-consumers change their social practices related to buying and consuming food and modify their purchasing and consumption routines (Brunori et al, 2012; Fonte, 2013). More than that, evidence shows that learning in one sphere can also lead to what Kneafsey *et al* call a “graduation effect”, whereby as consumers change their food consumption and decision patterns by being part of a local initiative, they may “bring” their new purchasing modes into other (more conventional) sites, thus creating the grounds for gradually expanding more and more the scope of sustainable diets in society (Kneafsey et al, 2008).

Processes of learning and reciprocal knowledge-sharing lead to a sense of commitment, trust and empowerment of conscious-consumers – local initiatives become “places” where consumers can express agency, they are channels of expression that facilitate and enable conscious-consumers’ civic and political engagement (Seyfang, 2006; Holloway et al, 2007; Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine, 2008, Atkinson, 2012). It is this sense of empowerment, achieved through reconnection and trust that gives a certain sustainability to the local initiatives themselves and, as Brunori argues, empowerment “is vital to understanding how socially

conscious consumption appeals to consumers and helps to sustain their practices” (Brunori in Atkinson, 2012: 200).

In the context of sustainable diets, an important aspect is the link between local food initiatives and health. As noted above, one of the reasons that motivate people to buy or consume their food within the local food system, as opposed to supermarkets, is the belief that the food is “wholesome and nutritious”, it is fresh, and therefore contains more of the food’s nutrients, and it is free from chemicals and preservatives (Defra WGLF, 2003; Chambers et al, 2007). A number of studies were carried out in the last decade on the link between local food initiatives and health, particularly in the USA. A systematic review published in 2010 gave insights into the positive link between shopping at Farmers Markets under the USA coupon programme for vulnerable beneficiaries, and an increased intake of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as a more positive attitude towards healthy eating (McCormack et al, 2010). Since then, other studies have been carried out on Farmers Markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and other local food initiatives, and their link to diets, pointing out similar results (Dannefer et al, 2012; Pitts et al, 2013; Pitts et al, 2015; Minaker et al, 2016). Of this however, only one was longitudinal, confirming this and other critiques raised by McCormack and colleagues on the need to improve the design and the accuracy of dietary assessment tools to be used in future studies (McCormack et al, 2010).

In describing the enabling role of local food initiatives in transitioning towards more sustainable diets, research carried out so far has analyzed different types of local initiatives, recognizing the wide array of local food initiatives that exist – from the more grassroots and community-based initiatives to more privately-owned, business-like activities (Lamine, 2005; Holloway et al, 2007; Grando et al, 2017). Much in the same vein, in their article on Food Justice, Werkheiser and Noll distinguish between three types of local food movements, depending on their focus:

individual, system or community, and the role that each play in helping to transform the global food system (Werkheiser and Noll, 2014). Given the predominance of research – particularly in Italy - on community-based initiatives with a strong activist/ideological slant, this paper wishes to contribute to further understanding the contribution of more business-oriented local food initiatives to a shift towards sustainable diets. How does the participation in local food initiatives contribute and aid choices of more sustainable diets? The aim of this paper is to further investigate the mechanisms that lead local food initiatives to enable the shift- and the limits thereof-, centering its analysis on the key role played by learning, its effects on strengthening motivation, empowerment and ultimately a certain degree of graduation.

## **2. Methodology**

### *Data collection and analysis*

To address the above question, a case study of a box delivery scheme in Rome, Italy, was undertaken. The scheme, called “Zolle” and set up in 2008, distributes food grown and processed by local small and medium organic producers to families living in Rome. In contrast to a number of local food initiatives that are more grassroots-based, Zolle can be described as a business-oriented short food supply chain, where the search for profit “rel[ies] on the valorization of elements of local sustainability, fairness, trust and personal relations” (Grando et al, 2017). Clients receive a box once a week containing fresh fruits and vegetables and, depending on the type of subscription, cheese, eggs and meat. There is also the possibility of ordering other organic/natural food products - such as bread, pasta, sweets, different types of cheese, etc. – and non-food products, such as washing liquids, soaps, etc. by filling in an Excel sheet called “Mercato Libero” (ML) which is sent to all clients once a week via email.

A review of Zolle’s website, complemented by a personal communication with the founder of Zolle, showed that in its quest to support certain types of producers and production methods,

Zolle explicitly uses a number of “educational tools” aimed at guaranteeing and shaping consumer demand so as to be in line with what “Nature” can provide. So, every week the box is accompanied by four-five recipes with suggestions on how to cook the seasonal products, and the same recipes can be found on a special page of Zolle’s website. Zolle also organizes day-trips two or three times a year to the farms that supply the products, where farmers show consumers around the farm and explain the production processes and generally how the farm works. Zolle’s website contains all the information on the producers: where they are and how they produce. Regular updates are sent to consumers on producers (when there are new arrivals, for example) and a blog is also posted on the website with news on recipes, new and old producers, events and news on why consumers may not be getting certain products that they expect to receive. Emails are sent for the latter purpose too.

Five household members who receive the box on a weekly basis were interviewed (see Table 1 in the “Results” section below). The interviews lasted about an hour, and took place face-to-face in venues where the respondent felt comfortable. When the interviews took place in people’s homes (3 times) observations were also possible. The interviewer had a set of guiding questions to guide the interview. The five families to which the respondents belonged to were selected by Zolle based on two inclusion criteria: the families will have been Zolle’s clients for more than two years, and two families will have young children and two will not (or will have older children). The choice of having two families with young children was aimed at understanding what are the constraints that young children place on food choices and habits.

The interviews were conducted in Italian, and only relevant quotes have been inserted in the text as an illustration of the identified categories were translated into English. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. Relevant portions of text were then grouped under the themes identified above: diets, learning, values/motivation, empowerment and graduation.

When the material emerging from the interviews could not be “fit”, it helped to identify “new” or unexpected themes that shed further light on the fields of analysis mentioned above, such as issues related to specific constraints, non-food related habits, and attitude towards food and conventional sources of food provisioning. The final themes that emerged from the analysis were four: healthier diets, values and motivations, learning and graduation, and willingness to overcome obstacles. The first theme can be considered as a direct finding on diet, while the others can be considered as “second-level” findings as they pertain to the mechanics that lead people to change diets and consumption patterns. With respect to diets, “healthier diets” has been operationalized to mean an increase in the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables (FFVs), an increase in the varieties consumed and a decrease in the quantities of highly processed foods. This was informed by WHO guidance and by a broad number of national Food Based Dietary Guidelines as mentioned above (WHO, 2015; Global Panel, 2016). Ethical clearance was obtained from the School Ethical committee at XXX [To be filled in if accepted - blinded for the moment].

Lastly, a note on the use of the case study approach. Given the exploratory nature of the study, and the limited number of interviews, a case study approach was chosen, implying the use of mixed methods and the integration of various forms of data: in this case, interviews and observations in people’s homes were combined with an analysis of documents from Zolle’s website, its educational tools and data on deliveries and geographical distribution (Yin, 2013; Cresswell, 2013). In line with the study’s intent to shed further light on the mechanisms that lead conscious-consumers to political empowerment, the authors considered that a case study approach also offers the possibility to generate an in-depth understanding of such mechanisms and to suggest pathways for further research and policy action (Thomas, 2015). Lastly, five interviews were sufficient to yield “rich” data that allowed to speak of generalities rather than in

terms of individual cases, thus suggesting data saturation (Morse, 2015; Baker and Edwards, 2012).

### **3. Results**

*Table 1 to be inserted here*

#### *3.1: Healthier diets*

In line with the findings from other studies, this study show that respondents have increased the amount and diversity of FFV consumed. In four cases respondents reported increasing the *diversity* of vegetables that they consume now with respect to before they joined Zolle. In addition to this, two of the above respondents also reported having increased the *quantity* of FFV that they now eat.

As for the amount and proportion of processed foods versus unprocessed foods, the picture is more mixed. None of the respondents ever bought ready-to-eat meals, and when asked about frozen and canned products and highly processed sweets, they do buy them, but in small quantities and therefore on the basis of this are perhaps not representative of the average Italian food consumer today, who has seen his/her proportion of convenience food increase in the last decades (Dickie, 2008). In this respect, not much has changed since joining Zolle, as they used to buy frozen and canned products in small quantities anyway. These range from peas and spinach, to tuna and legumes. The main reasons for buying them are linked to convenience (“for an emergency”, or “if I’m in a hurry...”), and children’s preferences (“my 7-year old son only likes frozen fish-fingers or supermarket biscuits”).

What they reported changing with respect to their buying processed foods is that they considered themselves as being much more selective, both in terms of where they buy their

products (specialized shops –often small - that they trust, or organic sections of large supermarkets), and what's in them:

*So, what about frozen foods?*

*Well yes, I do buy them, but only from BoFrost. I call them and I ask them: “can you tell me what the label says on the ingredients?”. For example I buy fish fingers, because that's what my son likes, but only those that are made with olive oil... At the supermarket [...] I read the labels now, for example I check to see that what I want to buy does not contain palm oil... [1]*

### *3.2: Motivation and values*

As previously discussed, there are a number of reasons – sometimes contradictory - that drive certain consumers to choose “alternative” food systems, or more generally, to consume in a more “sustainable” way (Dubuisson-Quellier et al, 2011; Willis and Schor, 2012; Cabuk et al, 2014; Carrero et al, 2016). Due to the specific business model of Zolle, based to a certain extent on convenience and the possibility of (limited) choice, it has attracted what Brunori *et al* call the “concerned consumer”, or what one could call the “lukewarm” conscious-consumers. In the case of the two respondents with young children, the fact of receiving the box “at your doorstep” was particularly important given the time constraints linked to child rearing. For them the choice of Zolle was triggered by the birth of their children and the desire to buy wholesome foods for them.

Motivation, however, as Holloway notes, is “becoming” rather than being a “fixed part of stable identities”, and “consumers’ motivations and identities are as much produced through their participation as leading to participation to begin with” (Holloway *et al*, 2007: 12). So, while some respondents were clearly strongly driven by ethical concerns, others developed a more ethical stance by being part of the scheme itself for many years:

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*“Yes, well... now I have become almost an extremist! I started off at Level 0, and now I am careful of what type of flour I buy ... I make my own bread” [4]*

Zolle offered the opportunity for individuals to move from intention to action and to try out some of their principles in practice, within a safe framework. This shift in values is apparent from the changes reported with respect to the type of food they buy, where they buy it, and the frequency of shopping in certain shops. Their relationship with the “big” actors in the urban retailing scene, such as supermarkets, has changed: the increased awareness of what lies “behind” the food sold in these venues has led to a reduction in trust and consequent “measured” attitude towards supermarkets. All resort to supermarkets, but do so less frequently, they buy less, and they tend to prefer to buy organic or local foods:

*I go to the SM because I have to get some things there, but when I go I take my time: I have to read all the labels... Obviously I go less often than before.... And my shopping there has changed: while I used to buy many items before, now I just integrate. I don't come back home with 10 bags, but just 1 because I only need a few items... [1]*

This has occurred in parallel with an increased interest in organic supermarkets or in direct purchasing from producers online (organic whole flour, local and free-range meat).

A greater awareness of the value of food coupled with (and illustrated by) the “acceptance” of not being able to choose the content of the box has led to a decrease in waste and a renewed sense of “frugality”:

*Zolle has raised my awareness of what I eat... So I finish off everything that I have in the fridge, because now I don't want to throw anything away. I had that before too, but now even more... [5]*

The shift in values can “spill over” the realm of food and invest people’s non-food consumption habits, as illustrated by the switch from using conventional cleaning products to organic/natural liquids, or the new habit of buying products from shops that sells without packaging.

### 3.3: Learning and graduation

In the above strengthening and re-fashioning of consumer motivations and values, learning plays a key role. From their responses during the interviews, it was clear that all respondents had gone through a learning process through the scheme about how to buy, cook and eat food, even though the degrees and themes varied. The strongest learning experience, especially for those consumers who started off as “lukewarm”, is what Dowler *et al* (2009) refer to as the “biological reconnection”, that is a re-discovery of Nature:

*“I am an urban citizen, I grew up in the city, so through Zolle I learnt about the seasonality of products [...] Once I received a series of salads. It was rainy during that period of the year. I placed them in the fridge. The morning after I opened the fridge and it was full of snails. I was stunned! “Wow! It’s natural”. Just to give you an idea of how little I was used to this... So with Zolle I learnt... they really helped me” [3]*

Through Zolle, respondents learn about another way of conceiving the “quality” of food, beyond price and aesthetic appearance, typical of market and industrial quality conventions (Raikes *et al*, 2000): there is a requalification of aesthetic parameters, and a re-discovery of taste:

*“I was used to seeing things look nice, and when I used to see a product that looked a bit off, I wouldn’t buy it, to the extent that I would expect to see everything look shiny.... Sometimes I [now] get a product with dirt on it... it comes from the soil, it hasn’t been “treated”, it is ugly but it tastes great. And in this, Zolle has really helped me” [3]*

*My father in law, for example, was brought up in a family of farmers. When I invite him over for lunch on Sunday and I cook Zolle's chicken, he says that he can really tell the difference. We [young, urban dwellers] don't really have this sensitivity, but those who have been brought up in the countryside do, they can tell the difference in taste. Now, I'm slowly getting there too [4]*

Learning has also occurred in people's way of cooking. Recipes have played a role in this, but so has people's imagination. All respondents have shown an ability to innovate in their way of cooking, and to make cooking and eating a "fun" experience:

*It's also true that healthy eating can be a bit boring... unless one doesn't put effort and imagination in cooking... otherwise it just becomes a routine [2]*

This sense of empowerment and new identity as an "ethical consumer", has contributed strongly to what Kneafsey *et al* refer to as a "graduation effect": respondents have indeed brought this new way of "knowing food" into other more conventional market arenas, dominated by market or industrial quality conventions. As seen above, they have "transferred" their new food related social practices into their other food consumption sites such as supermarkets, and into non-food "sites" such as those related to washing up liquids or shops that sell without packaging.

#### *3.4 Willingness to overcome obstacles*

Zolle's respondents' motivation and sense of empowerment is clear from the efforts they have made to overcome some of the obstacles that being part of an alternative food network entails, such as time, family eating tastes, or paying more for their food:

*My family loves meat, but Zolle's meat is tougher than the conventional one... so what did I do? I didn't give up. I cut it up in tiny pieces, and cooked it in exactly the same way, and the situation was resolved... [1]*

*Yes, Zolle is a bit more expensive, especially for the meat... but I assure you, it is better to eat less, but better quality food. We know how unhealthy conventionally raised chicken can be, that's where part of our illnesses come from. So, as things stand, I prefer to eat chicken [only] once a week, but eat well! [4]*

Respondents' willingness to overcome what Meyer *et al* describe as "time capabilities" is manifest in their use and development of human, social and "organizational" capabilities (Meyer *et al*, 2014). Organization meant keeping weekly cooking tables, as in the case of one respondent, but it also meant that respondents displayed a certain level of creativity in the use of artifacts to help them in the kitchen, ranging from simple blenders to quickly prepare a soup, pressure cookers, special plastic bags to keep the vegetables fresh for a longer time in the fridge, to sophisticated machines such as blast chillers.

The willingness to accept limitations and make compromises however should not be necessarily seen as dreary "sacrifices". In her study of political consumption, Atkinson notes how citizen-consumers reframed their efforts as "a source of potential pleasure" (Atkinson, 2012: 201). In the case of our study here, the way that respondents reacted to the limitations set by seasonality and by not being able to choose what is in the box is a clear illustration of this:

*[The fact of not knowing what is in the box] fascinates me. I remember the first box we opened, it arrived at 10 pm. I was happy to open it and see what was inside. My children were also curious at the beginning [5]*

There was an implicit understanding that respondents also drew a certain pleasure in having to learn new ways of cooking, and in having at times to "improvise". It was clear that the process of discovery and of learning unexpected aspects about food was a source of pleasure and fun, as well as a source of gratification and empowerment, as respondents were able to live up to their values.

#### **4. Discussion**

The above illustrates how a business-oriented local food initiative can set in motion very similar mechanisms and processes as those examined in previous studies, thus aiding choices of more sustainable diets. The material support, as well as that given in terms of confidence and learning, have contributed to help clients modify their food and (to a lesser extent) non-food habits. All respondents surely had a leaning towards certain values that led them to choose Zolle in the first place, but Zolle's role in communicating a different way of "knowing food" has enabled a strengthening of their original values or the forging of new ones.

The continuous learning process described above, the shift of respondents' social practices, habits and routines, the new relationship with supermarkets, have contributed to a new way of "doing and knowing food" and to "dis-embed[ding] consumption from dependence of big players in the agri-food system" (Brunori *et al*, 2012: 4). By reframing consumption costs into benefits, Zolle has provided consumers an opportunity to resolve the conflicts and the trade-offs between identity, responsibility and convenience thus promoting greater levels of commitment and empowerment (Belasco, 2008; Dubuisson-Quellier and Lamine, 2008), and lending a certain sustainability to the scheme itself (Atkinson, 2012).

The capacity of the conscious-consumers however to consume in a healthy and sustainable way is limited in several ways, and this questions the almost exclusive reliance on the consumer to bring about a more healthy and sustainable food system (Johnston, 2008; Evans, 2011; Dixon and Isaacs, 2013). Although being part of Zolle has enabled respondents to change their social practices and to increase their "capacity to control their environment" (Brunori in Atkinson, 2012: 200), respondents still resort to conventional food outlets and their degree of graduation has been limited. What are the reasons for this apparent incoherence?

Evidence from the work of social anthropologists shows that the complex reality of the respondents' lives does not always allow them to always live up to their intentions and values (Jackson, 2005; Evans, 2011; Dixon and Isaacs, 2013; Dyen and Sirieix, 2016). Respondents are still, in spite of their disaffection with supermarkets, embedded in a consumerist culture made up of loyalty to brands, the desire for choice and the orthodox notion of being a "good, or savvy, consumer" (Evans, 2011: 113; Dubuisson-Quellier et al, 2011). A number of respondents during the course of the interview, while not explicitly making reference to the issue of brands, did mention in passing some brands when describing certain food items they ate. One respondent explicitly mentioned not resorting to a particular supermarket (to compensate for what she did not buy with Zolle) because "it does not have branded products... otherwise I get lost".

As earlier studies show (Chambers *et al*, 2007; Dixon and Isaacs, 2013), barriers linked to time and children's food preferences are also important and reflect conflicting values with respect to those of being a conscious-consumer. In this study too, lifestyle and the never ending quest for time ("I'm always running"; "time is no longer available...") featured strongly, and were the major reason that pushed respondents to resort to supermarkets, even if reluctantly.

In spite of making efforts to educate their children to eat FFVs, sometimes by hiding the vegetables in their "normal" dishes, the two respondents with young children did point out that there were some types of food where they did "give in", such as supermarket cornflakes. In this case the respondents' desire to be a "good mother" and to provide children with food that they like, over-rode considerations linked to healthy eating.

It is also important to note that, on the whole, conscious-consumers who purchase from alternative food networks belong to the affluent middle class (Goodman et al, 2012), and Zolle is no exception, as most of its clients live in well off neighbourhoods of Rome. For low-income

socio-economic groups however, the cost of a healthy and sustainable diet can be a barrier (Barosh et al, 2014).

The reality of the lives and the social context that people are embedded in thus places a limit to the capacity of conscious-consumers to consume in a more sustainable and healthier way. Knowing these limits and understanding the complexity of people's lives is important to devise ways to make it easier for people to choose sustainable diets.

### ***5. Conclusions and (some) policy implications***

Overall the above analysis seems to suggest that local food systems, through their involvement of conscious-consumers, may help to shift our current food system towards healthier and more sustainable pathways. This particular study has focused on what Werkheiser and Noll (2014) refer to as an "individual focused" local food sub-movement, pointing out the contributions that such initiatives can make towards a shift to sustainable diets: creating an awareness in society at large of the problems linked to industrial agriculture, and influencing people to make better food choices and (indirectly) influencing corporations to change their supply practices along more sustainable lines to respond to consumer demand.

The authors are aware of some limitations of the study. First of all, the study relies on a small number of interviews. However, given the exploratory nature of the study, conceived as a "springboard" for a future larger study, the researchers considered that a small number of interviews would be adequate. Additionally their strong link to the works of other researchers on the mechanisms that link political consumerism to sustainability were considered to be worth exploring in depth. For these reasons, as mentioned above, a case study approach was

chosen. The researchers were fully aware of issues of accuracy with self-reported behaviours and conforming to the perceived norm. These were contained in several ways. Firstly, the interviews are framed within the broader context of a case study and are not the only source of evidence. Secondly, the provision of the box allowed for the interviews to focus around what was received, prepared and eaten, and lastly, as with all self-reported behaviours, errors are internally consistent thus allowing internal validity. Additionally, it is important to note that this research focused on what people felt and believed, and reports on how they believed they behaved, in line with interviewees' construction of their reality. The next stage of the research should be informed by the findings here and should engage with a larger sample and gather empirical data (Seale, 2016; Silverman, 2017).

Notwithstanding the above, the strength of this work has been that of highlighting the role played by different local initiatives through their "recruitment" mechanisms in contributing to sustainable diets. As previously pointed out, different types of movements or initiatives appeal to different types of conscious-consumers (Grando *et al*, 2017), thus increasing the net level of engagement and participation within society as a whole to initiatives that aim at a healthier and more sustainable food system. In the case of Zolle's clients, given their level of initial engagement as "lukewarm", there would probably have been a certain resistance to an involvement in any "activist" project, while being part of an initiative such as Zolle is considered as more acceptable and has helped "rally" their support for the long term goal of sustainable diets.

For this reason, it seems important to support the policy recommendations made by localists to encourage alternative forms of food provisioning to co-exist with the current mainstream ones.

Some examples exist of legislation that make local public procurement (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008) and direct sale to consumers easier. More however would be needed to strengthen the “soft” and “hard” infrastructure required for local food systems to work, for example by supporting small independent retailers, easing bureaucracy for the sale of local products, improving logistics, and others (DEFRA, 2003; Dixon and Isaacs, 2013; FAO, 2016). In the context of today’s complex life systems, this would be a step forward in making it easier for a greater number of people to choose food systems that are more sustainable and encourage healthier diets and by doing so, to further support these provisioning systems themselves.

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