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## Exploring connections between social innovation, grassroots processes and human development: an analysis of alternative food networks in the city of Valencia (Spain)

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### Abstract

This paper explores the contribution that the Capability Approach (CA) and Grassroots Innovation (GI) literature can make to the area of Social Innovation (SI). The paper takes four concurrent dimensions of the SI literature (agents, purposes, drivers and processes) and cross-fertilises them with the bottom-up, people-driven character of GI, and the concepts of agency, deliberative democracy and conversion factors from the CA. The result is the creation of a novel framework that we call *grassroots social innovation for human development*. The paper uses a case study, organic food buying groups in the city of Valencia, and examines them from an additional normative and evaluative perspective provided by the framework. The analysis shows the potentiality of the *grassroots social innovation for human development* framework to illustrate the elements that an SI process should include in order to contribute to human development.

**Key words:** capability approach, social innovation, grassroots innovations, collective agency, deliberative democracy

### 1. Introduction

Social innovation is becoming a popular concept in various environments, from academia to policy-making. It has been considered a solution to identify, understand and imagine solutions to current social, economic or environmental challenges. As a novel proposal, it has received attention from a diversity of disciplines, from sociology and organisational studies to environmental studies (Grimm et al. 2013). However, a number of academics consider that the idea continues to be ambiguous and vague (Borzaga and Bodini 2014; De Muro et al. 2007; Edwards-schachter, Matti and Alcántara 2012; Mulgan et al. 2007).

In general terms, the notion of social innovation refers to new ideas that work to meet social needs and goals. It is also broadly considered that social innovation is both the ends and the means for meeting these goals (Grimm et al. 2013; Mumford 2002; Phills, Deiglmeier and Miller 2008), and that it is linked with issues such as social justice, inclusion or participation

(Edwards-Schachter, Matti and Alcántara 2012; Moulaert et al 2007; Swyngedouw 2005). These are all key issues in the human development perspective. However, literature that links social innovation with human development is almost inexistent. This paper addresses this gap and departs from the idea that debates on human development can throw new light on the various dimensions of social innovation, thus contributing to a more specific and comprehensive clarification, conceptualisation and operationalisation of the idea.

In the debates on the meaning and dimensions of social innovation, some scholars have specifically highlighted the fact that mainstream literature chiefly focuses on innovation that occurs in the realms of the state or the market (Grimm et al. 2013; Mulgan et al. 2007; Seyfang and Smith 2007), and which is usually top-down. By doing so, a key space of social innovation—that is, innovation that takes place in the civil society arena, bottom-up and people-driven—has been neglected in both research and policy. This is a problematic gap, as this bottom-up process has been recognised as being extremely relevant in addressing current societal problems and promoting sustainable development (Frank Moulaert et al. 2007; 2010; Seyfang and Smith 2007; 2012). Scarcely any scholars have explored what have been called grassroots innovations, understood as “*networks of activists and organisations generating bottom-up solutions for sustainable development that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved*” (Seyfang and Smith 2007, 585).

In this paper, we commence from the idea of grassroots innovation and enrich it with elements of the human development and capability approach, specifically, the concepts of agency, deliberative democracy and conversion factors. We try to explore connections and propose a framework that merges ideas and concepts coming from grassroots innovation and human development perspectives to better approach bottom-up social innovation processes for human development. Specifically, these connections will help us to understand four key dimensions of social innovation identified in the literature: agents, purpose, drivers and processes.

The framework that we shall propose, called *grassroots social innovation for human development*, is used to explore a particular case of bottom-up social innovation: organic food buying groups in the city of Valencia (Spain) and its metropolitan area. These are cases of people self-organising in voluntary associations and assemblies, independent of market and state action, to provide themselves with local organic food. We have used the results of a participatory study with 8 organic buying groups to address the case.

The paper is organised as follows: in section 2, we identify key dimensions on the concept of social innovation; then, we discuss the contributions of the literature of grassroots innovations in order to better understand and specify these dimensions when approaching bottom-up innovation processes (section 3); subsequently, we explore the potential contributions of human development to further approach these processes (section 4); then, we connect these ideas and discussions to propose the original framework of *grassroots social innovation for human development* (section 5). The relevance and usefulness of this framework is explored in the analysis of our case study (section 6). This allows us to conclude with some reflections on

the relevance, potential, possibilities and limits of connecting the issues, concepts and academic strands mentioned (section 7).

## 2. Conceptualising Social Innovation: issues and key dimensions.

*“When we talk about Social Innovation we refer to finding acceptable progressive solutions for a whole range of problems of exclusion, deprivation, alienations, lack of wellbeing, and also to those actions that contribute positively to significant human progress and development”.*(Frank Moulaert, MacCallum and Mehmood 2013).

In recent years, Social Innovation (SI) has become highly popular among policy-makers and academics discourses, at all levels: international, national, regional and local. There has been a proliferation of new government funding programs, leading to a wide range of projects, international networks and think tanks, which have led to a great diversity of approaches of the concept itself. Various authors defend that SI has become a “buzzword” or a “container concept” that has no agreed definition, or that the concept has been stretched in so many directions that it is at a breaking point (i.e. Borzaga and Bodini 2014; De Muro et al. 2007; Edwards-schachter, Matti and Alcántara 2012; Mulgan et al. 2007).

From these contributions and attempts to summarise the common elements in the multiple definitions of the term (Edwards-schachter, Matti and Alcántara 2012; Grimm et al. 2013), it is possible to identify 4 key dimensions of the concept that are relevant for the subsequent synergy that the paper establishes with grassroots innovation and with a human development framework. The first dimension refers to the *agents* of innovation (Echeverría 2010; Rodríguez and Ugarte 2008), and addresses the question of who participates in the SI and what their role is. The second, refers to both outcomes and *purposes*, and corresponds to the question of what the SI is for. The third core element concerns the *drivers*—what motivates and drives social innovation processes (Adams and Hess 2008; Moulaert and Mehmood 2010; Moulaert et al. 2007, 2013). The fourth core dimension refers to the *processes* of innovation, and addresses the question of how social innovation takes place (Moulaert and Mehmood 2010; Mumford 2002; Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan 2010).

The discussion about what is considered in each of the dimensions is not a closed one. For instance, in relation to agents, the literature concentrates on who can carry out SI and states that it can be promoted by authors belonging to three interrelated areas: civil society or the so-called non-profit sector; the government and, additionally, business agents (Echeverría 2010; Rodríguez and Ugarte 2008). In relation to the *purposes* of SI, some authors defend that SI is characterised by a type of innovation that is oriented to the social and public good (improving well-being and the living conditions of marginalised populations) and not to the competition in the market and in technologies (Grimm et al. 2013; Mumford 2002; Murray et al. 2010). Another group of scholars advocate for a wider definition, one in which the purpose of SI is *“the process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems”* (Phills, Deiglmeier, and Miller 2008). Regarding the *drivers* for SI, there are not many references and these are often entangled with the dimension of SI as a process. (Adams and Hess 2008; Moulaert and Mehmood 2010; Moulaert et al. 2007, 2013),

consider that what drives SI and makes it distinct from other type of innovations is its process. SI is understood as a *process* of collective action and social transformation that pursues the development of new forms of governance, community formation, participation, empowerment and capacity building.

From this transformative perspective of social innovation, an emphasis on SI as a driver to promote participation and social engagement is posed, especially amongst those who had previously been societally excluded in some way. Neumeier (2012) explains this by defining social innovation as "*new forms of civic involvement, participation and democratization... contributing to an empowerment of disadvantages groups and leading to better citizen involvement which may, in turn, lead to a satisfaction of hitherto unsatisfied human needs*". In other words, from that perspective, social innovation is very much about social inclusion as well as social justice (Kirwan et al., 2013).

In exploring the four dimensions further, by focusing on the requirements as well as on the impact of SI on these four aspects (agents, purposes, drivers and processes), we take, on the one hand, the discussions on grassroots innovation and, on the other hand, some core ideas of the human development approach in order to find elements to advance the evaluative as well as normative character of SI.

### 3. The contribution of grassroots innovation: approaching bottom-up processes of social innovation.

According to Seyfang and Smith (2007, 585) grassroots innovation (GI) describes:

*"(N)etworks of activists and organizations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved. In contrast to mainstream business greening, grassroots initiatives operate in civil society arenas and involve committed activists experimenting with social innovations as well as using greener technologies".*

The literature on GI is still an underdeveloped area (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Smith, Fressoli and Thomas 2013) but it is relevant to outline how it differs from SI. Similarly to SI, the *purposes* of GI are to seek innovative solutions for social needs and problems, in their own context. However, GI differs from SI in relation to agents, drivers and processes. Whilst the *agents* for SI could be individuals, third sector or private business, GI is promoted by groups of people from civil society, mainly activists or non-profit organisations, rather than government, business or industry. Regarding the *drivers*, GI take place as a bottom-up response to a local need. It aims to promote systemic changes that lead to a transition to more sustainable societies. Finally, Seyfang and Smith (2007) explain that these *processes* differ from market-oriented innovation on several issues, such as: they are based on social economy (not based on the principles of supply and demand); oriented to social needs and local problems; promoted by a non-profit organisation and with resources usually from voluntary donations or

voluntary work. Due to these characteristics, these social initiatives differ from the top-down initiatives promoted by the institutions.

In other words, GI has two main goals, related respectively with two types of benefits: intrinsic and diffusion benefits (Seyfang and Smith 2007). These are not mutually exclusive (in fact, in practice they overlap) but the distinction can be useful in order to better conceptualise GI.

Firstly, GI aims to satisfy the needs of those people or communities who may in some way be disadvantaged by or excluded from the mainstream market economy. This implies the achievement of benefits at the community level, the *“intrinsic”* benefits, related to job creation, training and skills development, self-esteem and confidence growth or a sense of community and civic engagement.

Secondly, GI also has a specific intention to challenge the dominant social and institutional arrangements by an ideological commitment to develop alternatives to the mainstream hegemonic regime, which includes re-ordering the values and generating new indicators of success for initiatives. These are the *diffusion* benefits. They have a more ideological nature that tends to mobilise communities to create transformation in production-consumption goods and services and, in short, to transform the dominant, market-based, technology-driven regime. (Kirwan et al. 2013).

The GI approach offers a deeper comprehension of the potentiality of narrowing the concept of social innovation in order to reveal the specificities of social innovation when it is bottom-up promoted. It highlights the active role of citizenship, and their direct participation in developing different forms of organisation and social relations. Although GI is not explicitly considered in the SI literature or in the Human Development literature, both approaches complement each other. The following section outlines some main elements of the Capability Approach that can be useful to rethink and complement Grassroots Social Innovation (GSI).

#### 4. The contribution of the Capability Approach

*“The terms initiative, autonomy, cooperation, democracy, and cultural diversity are used in discourses on SI, which, increasingly, is seen as a contextualized process and a strategy to foster human development and to transform the whole of society”.* (MacCallum et al. 2009).

Whilst the initial goal of SI (meeting a social need) does not necessarily include a transformational aspect for the individual, we have seen that the language of Human Development is usually present in the literature of GI, as it is in some SI literature.

From debates on Human Development, three core ideas can be taken: agency, deliberative democracy, and conversion factors.

*Agency* is taken to mean that each person is a dignified and responsible human being who shapes her or his own life in the light of goals that matter, rather than simply being shaped or instructed how to think (Walker and Unterhalter 2007). Whilst SI literature refers to the

dimension of agent (as stakeholders), the CA makes the novel contribution of centring the debate on the people. By considering every individual as an able being who is willing to participate in every sphere of life, SI moves from being a project for covering some social needs, to a process of ensuring one's capabilities (understood as genuine opportunities) to decide, to self-determine and to bring about change in the world (Crocker 2008). The concept of agents as individuals who decide and act but who also have the real freedom to bring change, defines individuals as social beings interested in goals beyond individual well-being. Concretely, the CA acknowledges that capabilities can be generated through individual efforts and collective processes and, similarly, agency can be individual as well as collective (Evans 2002; Kabeer 2003; Ibrahim 2006; Ballet, Dubois and Mahieu 2007). The capabilities and level of agency development achieved through the collectivity is, as argued by Ibrahim (2006), something that the individual alone would neither have, nor be able to achieve.

The concepts of agency and collectivity are crucial for *deliberative democracy*, which is conceived as public discussion and democratic decision-making (Crocker 2008). Under the CA, individuals are seen as socially embedded agents who interact with their societies and participate in political and social affairs (Sen 2002; Nussbaum 1997). Deliberative democracy is based on the principle that encouraging individuals to participate in local decision-making advocates citizens to decide together how to construct an idea of the good. The process has in itself the purpose of enhancing the agency of individuals and conceptualising them, not as empty vessels, but as doers (Sen 2002). The relationships between deliberative democracy, agency and capabilities are, hence, mutually reinforcing. Individuals usually seek to engage in collectivities in order to contribute not only to their personal well-being, but also to their wider conception of the good.

In an ideal market economy, every individual, regardless of personal, social or environmental conditions, would have the same space of freedoms to exercise (or not) their capabilities and agency. The *conversion factors*, as coined by (Robeyns 2005), are the personal traits (e.g. physical condition, gender, ethnicity or intelligence), social arrangements (e.g. public policies, norms, values, power relations) and environmental conditions (e.g. pollution, state of the roads, communication) which determine the ability of a person to convert a specific vector of commodities into capabilities or valuable outcomes. These "determinants of capabilities" (Volkert 2013) are relevant for the subsequent reflection on the genuine opportunities of individuals at a particular time and place. The three types of conversion factors enrich the analysis because they look at individuals as well as the circumstances in which he or she is living.

From a CA perspective, these three aforementioned core values can be used to address one of the criticisms of SI theory: that it does not explain how we can measure the real contribution of an SI to resolve a specific social problem or to produce changes in behaviour and social relationships (Echeverría 2010; Hubert 2010). The SI approach justifies innovation so as to promote empowerment, inclusion and social justice, but it does not mention how we can know whether this has been achieved. A framework that integrates the CA centred on the *agents* as autonomous and critical beings (agency), the expansion of capabilities as a *purpose* of the SI (individual and collective capabilities), an assessment on the *drivers* pushing for a SI

(conversion factors), and concern about the *processes* in which these are discussed and exercised (deliberative democracy), responds to this shortcoming. In regard to this, we consider that the CA also has practical relevance for the design and assessment of Social Innovation initiatives, even though it has not previously been explicitly connected with this area.

#### 5. Connections: proposing a framework to approach *Grassroots Social Innovation for Human Development*

The explanations posed above show that ideas coming both from GI literature and CA discussions can combine well and cross-fertilise in order to better characterise key notions and dimensions of social innovation, specifically bottom-up social innovation processes. We will now again discuss the dimensions identified in 2.1, in order to provide evidence on these connections and complementarities, and to build a particular framework that we shall call the *Grassroots Social Innovation for Human Development*, which will be used to explore a particular case study in the following section.

Regarding the *agents* of innovation, literature of social innovation broadly considers business agents (markets), institutions (public bodies) or civil society. Grassroots innovations focus on agents in this last space of innovation, on non-profit organisations, but more specifically mentions and emphasises the role of committed activists looking to meet their goals and make broader changes. The CA, for its part, emphasises the social and political character of the individuals and the importance of having the freedom to engage in collective action. Within the CA, individuals can act as agents of change not only individually, but also as a group (Crocker 2008). This can help to better understand and approach the characteristics, potential and possibilities of people's commitment and citizen's action.

On the *purposes* of social innovation, the literature on the topic is in agreement that they concern meeting social needs through new products, services, norms, governance arrangement, etc. oriented to the social and the public good, and to build new social relations. Ideas from grassroots innovation can deepen and clarify these notions, as we can differentiate between the intrinsic benefits of innovation: meeting the demands of people participating in innovation processes; and those of diffusion: building a broader alternative to current hegemonic social relations. CA debates enrich the meaning of these notions: meeting demands may be re-framed as improving the capabilities of people to live the kind of life they have reason to value and foster individual and collective agency (Sen 1999). From this perspective a major aspect of an SI would be to meet social needs that encourage processes that ensure that individuals as well as groups can be authors of their own lives.

On *drivers*, social innovation literature usually highlights that it aims to fulfil social demands not addressed by the market or institutions, and to societal challenges. Grassroots innovations literature indicates, more specifically, the centrality of demands that people have, which are always local and contextual. The contribution of CA is to assess, using the conversion factors— institutional, environmental, individual and social—the particularities of the individuals or

group studied as well as those of their location and how these determine their power to make an opportunity feasible. Drivers in this sense need to be understood not only as a scarcity of resources or the demands to increase these resources, but also as the relation of personal, social and environmental conditions that influence one's ability to transform some of the existent resources into valuable outcomes.

Finally, on *processes* of innovation, the literature broadly recognises the importance of participation and the key role of users in novel products, services, etc. It also indicates the relevance of the context and of the path-dependent nature of social innovations. Ideas coming from grassroots innovation debates qualify these ideas: participation of people and users means direct participation, the management and control of processes by the people interested. Moreover, this literature highlights the importance of building alternative comprehensive systems of production and distribution of goods and services, beyond the market and the state. Connecting these ideas with others coming from human development debates, the question of how things are decided (a process should also be based on recognition, inclusiveness, and the creation of active citizenship) is complemented by the question of who decides. In this second aspect, The CA contributes by presenting deliberative democracy as a concept linked to agency and capabilities. It is about *"the fairness or equity of the process involved, or about the freedom of citizens to invoke and utilize procedures that are equitable"* (Sen 2002, quoted in Crocker 2008, 229). The process can be conceived, under the *Grassroots Social Innovation for Human Development* framework, as people individually and collectively exercising their capabilities to actively participate in social and political life, if they so choose.

Table 1 summarises the cross-fertilisation potential of the combination of debates and ideas from grassroots innovations and human development, within the questions of social innovation. We will now explore the potential of this analytical framework to understand a particular bottom-up innovation process: food co-operatives in the city of Valencia (Spain).

<b>Dimension</b>	Broad ideas from social innovation	Grassroots innovation	Human development
<b>Agents</b>	-Civil society, public bodies and business agents (market)	-Committed activists involved, non-profit organisations	-People have agency, which intrinsically entails that they participate.
<b>Purposes / objectives</b>	-To meet social needs. -Oriented to the social and public good. Non-profit. -Collective action and social transformation	-Individual: Intrinsic benefits: Reach people's demands, which are contextual and local, in the communities. -Collective: diffusion benefits, alternatives to the hegemonic regime, to social relations.	Expansion of capabilities to reach the things people have reason to value, at an individual or a collective level.

<b>Drivers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Social demands that are traditionally not addressed by the market or existing institutions</li> <li>-Local and global social, economic and environmental challenges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Demands and processes, which are local and contextual.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Not just demands, but personal, social and environmental conversion factors.</li> </ul>
<b>Process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Role of users/people</li> <li>-Participation</li> <li>-Contextual and path dependent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Bottom-up initiatives and processes, ruled and managed by citizens, active role of citizenship, direct participation (control of processes).</li> <li>-Through the production of alternative means of production and distribution of goods and services (social economy).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Through Deliberative democracy</li> </ul>

## 6. Case study

### 6.1 Organic food buying groups

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the phenomenon of “alternative agro-food networks”. Specifically the local provision of organic food has been observed as one of the most prominent spaces for an alternative economy based on a fairer, responsible, socially controlled, community empowering options of consumption (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012). These kinds of initiatives may be prefiguring a new model of development, building democratic societies and more engaged and responsible citizens (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine and Le Velly 2011).

Various initiatives and schemes have grown and spread as part of this movement for an alternative means of food consumption, which try to establish direct connections between producers and consumers: farmers markets, farm shops, veggie box subscription schemes, organic buying groups, food cooperatives, etc. (Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012).

This movement was born as an alternative to an unsustainable food system, characterised by the concentration of power in a few corporations, exploitative trade relations, enormous environmental impact, and the prominence of unhealthy industrially processed food. Even though corporations are trying to capture new ideas, the movement struggles to resist assimilation and dilution in the corporate mainstream (Goodman, DuPuis, and Goodman 2012).

The movement is very active in the Spanish context (Díaz Escobar 2014; Cabanes Morote and Gómez López 2014; López 2011). Specifically, there has been a sizable growth of the so-called *grupos de consumo ecológico*, organic buying groups (Vivas 2010; FCCUC 2010). These have been defined as groups of people who self-organise, with the aim of “*re-localising food systems and establishing direct relationships between consumers and producers [...] Its formats are usually cooperatives or associations [...] Its day-to-day practices respond to the principles of agroecology, even if they also have social and political dimensions*” (Vivas 2010, 159-160).

## **6.2 Food cooperatives in the city of Valencia**

### **6.2.1 Methodology**

The analysis in this section is based on the results of a study organised by *Utópika*, a group from the *Universitat Politècnica de València* interested in participatory research; ISF-Valencia, a local NGO working for the transformation of the agro-food model; and the *Plataforma per la Sobirania Alimentària del País Valencià* (Valencian Community Platform for Food Sovereignty), a local alliance of associations with the same aim. Between January and June 2012, a group of researchers and members of 8 organic buying groups undertook a process of participatory research on the functioning, relationships and principles of the 8 groups involved. These groups were all from the city of Valencia or its metropolitan area.

During the research, primary information was gathered in: 5 meetings that were held to discuss the process and results of the research, with a group composed of researchers and members of the groups; 8 interviews, made with key members of the buying groups; and 8 group discussions on the preliminary results, held with members of each of the 8 buying groups. This primary information was complemented by secondary sources, essentially websites and internal documents of the groups, with information on the internal organisation and procedures, criteria for selecting products, or pedagogic and diffusion material.

The analysis of the products of this research was undertaken by drawing on the concepts and dimensions predefined in our theoretical and conceptual framework (Miles and Huberman 1994). However, these concepts and dimensions were refined and critically revised in the process.

The discussion was based on a purely qualitative research strategy, aimed at reconstructing processes and building and capturing meanings and interpretations (Corbetta 2007). The research had an exploratory nature. It did not aim to obtain generalisations or explanations of phenomena. On the contrary, it aimed at a better understanding the process of the particular buying groups under study and the experiences of the people engaged, while revising and deepening the theoretical and conceptual perspective proposed.

### **6.2.2 Discussion**

*Agency of the agents: people organising from the bottom-up*

The groups under analysis were all formed by persons living in the same neighbourhood in Valencia (5 instances), in the same town close to Valencia (2 instances) or working or studying in the same place (1 instance, in the *Universitat Politècnica de València*). The groups were all composed of “consumption units” or “families”. The average size of these units or families was of 2-5 persons. The number of units in the groups varied between 7 and 50.

All tasks are carried out voluntarily by members of the buying group, who self-organise into smaller working groups. All buying groups establish direct relations with local food producers and, in some specific cases, with organic and/or fair-trade food distributors. All groups offer fresh food to their members, and most of them have some other products available (from oil and bread to personal care products).

Typically, members communicate their weekly order of products to some person or to a working group, who convey these needs to the producers—using various online tools, either already available or developed by the groups themselves. In most cases, the food is delivered by the producer to the group’s premises and distributed to the consumption units once a week, with the coordination of another working group. The premises are usually social or community centres managed by neighbourhood associations. That is to say, beyond consuming, most groups organise a range of activities of awareness raising or lobbying, and work with a range of stakeholders, from schools and NGOs to other buying groups.

There are differences between the groups regarding their formal entity: some are informal associations of people, while others are legal entities (usually formal associations, and never for-profit organisations or companies).

These working groups have autonomy to carry out their tasks. However, in all cases, key decisions and discussions must be made in the periodic assembly—there are no real boards or representatives, and where these do exist for legal reasons, they are purely formal. However, a great concern for most of the groups, frequently mentioned in interviews and discussions, relates to the issue of participation: in some groups, almost everyone is very active and contributes to performing the tasks, whereas in others a small number of people do most of the jobs, while the majority are just passive consumers.

Using the notions from the proposed framework, these initiatives are: bottom-up processes, led by people making their own voluntary contribution, taking place in the civil society arena, with no agents from the for-profit private sector involved, nor public bodies (in fact, there is no public support for the groups). Moreover, from the aforementioned ideas arising from human development discussions, the exercise of individual but also collective agency through the meetings is in this sense intrinsically important for individual freedom (to exercise one’s voice and transform one’s values into possible actions), but also instrumental for collective action and democratic participation (through the discussions). It is also true that this may not be happening for all the people involved, some of whom may be meeting their individual needs (getting local, ecologic and accessible food), but do not get as far as developing capabilities (real freedoms in terms of voice, inclusion, participation, critical-thinking), nor do they take part in collective process for building collective agency. As Alkire (2002) and (Walker and Unterhalter 2007) mention when referring to the process of education, agency is a process of

both being and becoming. It can further expand and advance our well-being, but it is a process and needs to be embraced over several areas of action. The food cooperatives and their participatory practices may not be a sufficient trigger for everyone to exercise their agency.

*The purposes: from providing food to expanding producers and consumers capabilities*

All groups coincide in their stated objectives, both in the individual benefits for their members and their broader social and transformative aims:

On the one hand, the groups declare—publicly, on their websites and other documents, but also in the interviews and discussions—that they want to address the material needs of their members; that is, access to local, organic, seasonal, high-quality and healthy food. Moreover, the groups mention other individual gains for the members: to learn more about the agro-food system, to meet neighbours and local producers, to take part in a place of reflection and sharing, etc.

On the other hand, the groups state broader social aims, in a number of ways. All the groups mention that they contribute to the transformation of the agro-food system, working towards making it more sustainable and just through a collective, responsible and critical form of consumption. Moreover, they sometimes refer to the importance of the transformation of the food system for the broader overall transformation of the current social, economic and political system from below. Both group documents and members state that buying groups are key instruments in this transformative process, as long as they: support the local, family and rural economy; build just and close relations between food producers and consumers; create civic awareness; build community links, etc.

If we analyse these issues by using the ideas of grassroots innovation, we find that the groups refer to both intrinsic and diffusion aims. In the terms used in human development discussions, these intrinsic aims refer to the fact that food cooperatives will increase the capabilities of people to enjoy good food, to be healthy, to be part of a community and enhance agency on an individual, as well as a collective, level. As diffusion benefits, the groups will be contributing by building a model of social relations from the bottom-up, a model that: is more environmentally sustainable (as it re-localises food systems, etc.), promotes sustainable livelihoods (as it makes the life of local farmers and family farming possible); is more just; creates solidarity (within the groups, between consumers and producers, etc.); promotes natural and cultural diversity, etc.

*Drivers: from demands to a holistic view*

Most interviewees state that there are at least two kinds of motivations for people to form part of the groups.

The first kinds of motivations are shared by all members in all the groups. Among these motivations we find the more individualistic ones: easy access to good quality, local, organic food; being healthy, etc. However, most people seem to also share other, less individualistic, motivations, such as supporting small local farmers or protecting the environment through responsible consumption.

A second group of motivations refer to more transformative issues. For some members, the key motivation is to contribute to the construction of democratic arenas and of alternative provision systems beyond the market and the State, to make a bottom-up transformation of the social system. These motivations are considered to be the most relevant and powerful drivers for the most committed members of the groups.

It is interesting to mention how this second group of motivations led to the creation and development of most of the buying groups under study. At least five of them were born or were significantly bolstered during the period of intense social mobilisations of the *15-M* or *indignants movement*—the Spanish antecedent of the *Occupy* movement, which exploded after the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011, and involved the occupation of public spaces and huge mobilisations of people and the emergence or growth and connection of a number of political and social initiatives. A great number of people engaged in these mobilisations found that they needed to develop practical alternatives to the current economic, social and political system—considered to be unfair, corrupt and controlled by elites—in order to be free to live the way one would like to live. This led them to join buying groups and other initiatives of the self-managed social economy. A shared feature among those new initiatives was the role of individual and collective agency and the process of public discussion. In summary, it can be said that the non-favourable Spanish political context, in terms of capabilities, was the driver to find innovative solutions where the public as much as the individual was seen to be an active participant in change; being citizens whose voices count. Finally, other drivers for the groups to grow and consolidate were mentioned that concern more emotional issues, such as the formation of friendships and the creation of a sense of belonging.

As the discussions on grassroots innovations posed earlier indicate, it seems that food cooperatives mobilise for particular needs (from the access to healthy food to the need to go beyond mobilisation in the streets, to build alternatives to the existing system), linked to the specific context. Moreover, it seems that the most powerful drivers are values and political ideals, the need for new means of participation and citizen engagement, as highlighted by key discussions on human development. However, once again, this may not be true for every group participant. All the of them seem to be driven by certain basic motivations, but the more active individuals are also driven by more openly political and transformatory perspectives and values. The results of the research also highlight the importance of emotional issues as key drivers in the processes under study, or in Sen's words "*for people to be able to take part in these social decisions if they so choose*" (1999, p. 242).

*Processes: from consumers to organisers*

All the groups under study show horizontal decision-making and democratic procedures as key features. As has been indicated, all relevant decisions are made in open periodic assemblies, which are celebrated in periods varying between 1 week and a few months (depending on the group), but usually each month or two months. There is no delegation of power for decision-making, as working groups only make decisions on pragmatic, non-relevant issues. This centrality of participation and democratic procedures is also considered to be fundamental in the relations with other people and associations.

Beyond participation and democracy, the interviews, discussions and documents frequently mention the importance of certain values and attitudes. References to trust, friendship, engagement, responsibility, or cooperation are frequent, especially when interviewees refer to the relations with farmers; people frequently mention the importance of visiting the farmers, sharing opinions, exchanging problems, giving mutual support, etc. As an example, groups do not consider that farmers' products necessarily have to include the official label for organic agriculture. On the contrary, they trust that the farmer is using agroecological techniques in production. The farmers are seen to be an active participant in change, as citizens whose voices count. However, people from the groups frequently mention that there is no time or availability to foster the close relationship with farmers that may be desirable.

Relations with other groups (further organic buying groups, neighbourhood associations, etc.) are also frequent, and commonly based on shared perspectives and values. There are no relations with big companies or public bodies.

A prevalent feeling among the groups is that each buying group has to find its own ways to respond to its particular context and situation, and that each group is always in a permanent process of experimentation. This is frequently mentioned in the discussions: there is no formula or "good practice", only experiences to share.

Connecting these ideas with the theoretical notions posed earlier, groups can be seen to recognise the central role people play. However, beyond this, the processes are entirely controlled by "users" who operate as active citizens experiencing means of self-management through the creation of an alternative economy. Participation is not just a tool, but also a principle and a political position; an end in itself, as discussions from a human development perspective indicate, and it prefigures the kind of society pursued. Relations are based on political affinity and solidarity. The process of public discussion in each of the groups is crucial; so all members of the collective are "*able to be active in the decisions regarding what to preserve and what to let go*" (Sen 1999, 242). Values, political affinity and trust seem to mould these innovation processes. Moreover, it seems that emotional and political aspects are both important and are connected, as in the recognition, admiration and support of local organic farmers shown by the groups.

## 7. Final remarks

This paper aims to make a contribution to the broader debate on the conceptualisation of social innovation, by combining and cross-fertilising ideas from social innovation and grassroots innovations with the capability approach, and applying four key dimensions in a specific case study.

The four dimensions taken from the SI literature (agents, purposes, drivers and process) offered us a broader description and comprehension of the case study, and helped us to organise the analysis of the bottom-up emergence of an organic food buying group initiative. Through the analysis of these four dimensions, the framework allowed us to illustrate some complexities, ambiguities and tensions—for example, the differences in people’s purposes—of bottom-up social innovations and the need to complement the SI literature with another kind of framework; one that is able to grasp the individual but also collective reasons that motivated the emergence of this initiative.

The combination of the three theoretical approaches (SI, GI and GSI) has allowed us to fill that conceptual gap, examine the complexities involved and carry out an analysis of the organic food buying groups that explore intrinsic elements (the demands of people participating in innovation processes) and also those of diffusion (reasons for broadening the alternatives to current hegemonic social relations). We called the new framework that emerged out of this exercise *grassroots social innovation for human development*, and it makes a fourfold contribution.

- A transformative character, through the concept of agency: Whilst the literature on social innovation addressed the aspect of agents as participants or solely as promoters of the initiative, GI recognised the relevancy of people-driven processes, and the CA enlarged it to include one’s ability to configure, plan and carry out valuable agendas. Under the *Grassroots Social Innovation for Human Development* framework, an agent is an active “doer” having, hence, a transformative character, as the experience of the organic buying groups have promoted in some—but not all—of their members.
- A normative vision: Conceptualising social innovation as expanded opportunities for development (individual as well as collective) requires providing a detailed conceptualisation of individual and collective goals on how grassroots social innovation actions enhance (or not) the set of freedoms. Through deliberative democracy, the operationalisation of the CA in a grassroots social innovation action requires an assessment to be made of which capabilities are in need of expansion, for whom, and how to do so. In the case studied, the idea of deliberative democracy has allowed us to recognise the process of public discussion as crucial in all groups, and participation as both a core issue and a political position.
- A prospective and an evaluative perspective: A prospective analysis focuses on *how* and *why* capabilities are expanded, whereas an evaluative analysis focuses on *which* capabilities are expanded, to *what extent* and for *whom* they have been expanded (Alkire 2008). This is a valuable contribution since it addresses one of the shortcomings of SI theory, which is the difficulty of measuring the real contribution of a SI to resolve

a specific social problem or to produce changes in behaviour and social relationships. In this sense, we have seen how organic buying groups promote individual and collective capabilities, and establish new social relations (between consumers and producers), based on values such as trust, solidarity and political affinity.

- A locally-placed and people-centred perspective: Under the *grassroots social innovation for human development* framework, dimensions are focused on local and contextual spheres but also take into account the personal, social and environmental conversion factors, as we have been able to identify in the case studied, where main drivers were contextual (a non-favourable political context) or individual and social (friendship and sense of belonging).

It is also important to note some identified limitations in the framework proposed. On one hand, in relation to the 4 dimensions selected, these are so interdependent that they may easily be confused or mixed up (as can frequently happen in the distinction between purposes and drivers). Therefore, these four dimensions should be defined more extensively, detailing and determining what we understand by each one. On the other hand, the case studied shows us the importance of some elements that are not central to our framework, such as: the non-rational choices related with feelings or emotions, such as indignation (main drivers), and the explanation of the reasons of structural context that lead people to act. The framework proposed does not allow us to analyse the reasons for the present, unfair agro-food model (which has proven, however, to be a very relevant issue for the people in the case study), nor has it focused on capturing non-rational choices (choices based on feelings and emotions). In order to fill this gap, the framework should be supported by literature (from the CA, and from other approaches, such as political ecology) that considers these issues.

This is an exploratory work that aims to broaden the debate on the limitations of SI, the ambiguity of the term, and the potentialities of merging this literature with ideas and concepts coming from grassroots innovation and human development perspectives. Through an exploratory framework, this paper hopes to stimulate the debate about the necessity and means of providing SI with a normative and also evaluative basis. At the same time, it hopes to offer some essential elements that should be present in a grassroots social innovation process that seeks to contribute to human development.

## 8. References

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