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Green social cooperatives in Italy: a practical way to cover the three pillars of sustainability?

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This article provides an introductory description of Italian green social cooperatives which are democratic nonprofit organizations specializing in the provision of environmental services. The background to this topic is the literature on the “third sector,” usually called social entrepreneurship, and the “sociology of environment,” mainly that part concerned with consumption and lifestyles. Green social cooperatives are a concrete attempt to unify the three pillars of sustainability. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part highlights the challenges that the environmental crisis raises for social enterprises and considers three dimensions in particular: work integration, generalized or linear exchange, and the theory of the commons. The discussion reveals mismatches between the urgency of moving toward a sustainable world and the competences of social enterprises. The second part examines this asymmetry and uses the social cooperative, the main empirical expression of social enterprise in Italy, as its point of departure. The article proposes a typology with which to frame green social cooperatives and employs a qualitative approach to outline a concrete case for each type. The result is the emergence of a social area, at present decidedly underdeveloped and undersized, but with considerable potential for job creation and environmental services. The analysis demonstrates that social enterprises are interesting hybrids of economic and social sustainability, but to promote the environmental pillar of sustainability they must combine work and habitation (or production and consumption) according to a logic of sufficiency.

KEYWORDS: nonprofit associations, employment, community involvement, social services, rights of future generations, resource management, human-environment relationship

Introduction: The Environment as a Stimulus for the Reconsideration of Work

Social enterprises are entrepreneurial activities with two primary objectives: “identify a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalization, or suffering of a segment of humanity”; organize a direct and efficient activity to change this equilibrium, reinvesting the surpluses in the community, rather than in shareholders and owners (Martin & Osberg, 2007). Besides social aims and the nonprofit constraint, social enterprises also often have the features of financial and managerial autonomy and the democratic representation of employees (one vote per person) (Borzaga & Defourny, 2001).

A central concern for social enterprises is the high value of “work” that is inherent in the concept of the “work integration social enterprise” (Spear & Bidet, 2005). The principle is that work is a constituent part of human dignity (Sennett, 1998). Social enterprises offer excellent opportunities for recovery and integration through work, removing people in serious difficulties from welfare dependency. This characterization applies not only to those suffering hardship, for even the most fortunate find that work is a source of freedom and personal expression.

Work comprises not only social recovery and employment, but also has an entrepreneurial dimension: the pleasure of doing new things and doing them well. If we relate the environmental question to work as a source of meaning, three aspects of particular interest to social enterprises emerge: 1) work is the manipulation of environmental goods; 2) work is knowledge of nature’s mechanisms; and 3) work is a way of living in a place.

The first meaning is the most common of the three: work is the constant manipulation of goods present in nature for the purpose of ensuring the survival of self and family. The value of work consists in transforming environmental goods into objects usable by humans. Environmental goods are therefore means with which to obtain sustenance, services, and sometimes a stock of resources from which further goods and services can be derived or accumulated.

In fact, social enterprises move with alacrity in the environment in search of work opportunities for their members, especially the disadvantaged ones. Because of its simplicity and immediacy, the manipulation of environmental goods is generally a useful source of employment: consider “green care” or the maintenance of public and private green spaces. Of course, we can distinguish between obtaining organic

food and carefully tending gardens or golf courses. In one case, we have products intended to satisfy basic needs; in the other, services for decidedly less urgent ones. Nevertheless, the emphasis on work as the manipulation of nature to extract goods and services does not entail many differences. What is important is guaranteeing work in itself because it gives people dignity and recognition.

Work in the second sense—knowledge about nature—closely concerns the environmental question. The environmental crisis is intimately bound up with science, even if in an ambivalent way. On one hand, the scientific revolution in a general sense is blamed as one of the main causes of the crisis (an objective and manipulative view of nature) (see, e.g., Pellizzoni, 2009) while, on the other hand, technical or experimental knowledge makes it possible to quantify human and environmental damage and to devise solutions. Science is, therefore, a mixed blessing for the environment. Whatever the case may be, it is evidently difficult to return to magical beliefs or to take refuge in agnosticism. Human societies incessantly produce technical innovations and environmental changes, the impact of which must first be monitored and then managed by means of refined knowledge and instruments.

This meaning of work as knowledge and as knowing how to manipulate the environment emerges to its fullest extent in the work of scholars such as Peter Dickens.¹ The expression that synthesizes the question is “environment professions.” Accordingly, there is a considerable body of literature on these professions, along with numerous expectations of their employment impact (Beato, 2000; Morriss et al. 2009). The constant creation of synthetic products, and the cumulative effects of human transformations, requires distinct specializations that subsequently give rise to new disciplinary branches, and they, in turn, foster the birth of new public agencies or authorities. The academic disciplines, for their part, have created an environmental subsector of their own, with a clear trend toward specialization.

Social enterprises, therefore, confront a further challenge if they want to concern themselves with the environment: they must acquire highly complex knowledge and skills. Social professionalism (i.e., interactions, relationships, ties) is useful insofar as it is still necessary to grasp interdependences among phenomena according to an ecological logic. However, the individual parts of ecosystems are so complex as to discourage any form of rough intervention.

¹ Dickens (2002) contends that capitalist forces are always able to control labor, keeping the workers unskilled. The environmental crisis—given its complexity and systemic character—is a further proof for testing the capacity of labor forces to overcome this situation, launching a great project of self-skilling.

If, for example, a social enterprise intends to furnish energy-saving services to households, it must possess highly refined knowledge about insulating materials and heat-diffusion processes. Otherwise, the organization will need to rely on externally appropriated sources of knowledge, which are generally expensive, difficult to evaluate, and dependence inducing.

The problem of technical-organizational professionalism is particularly severe in social enterprises (Fazzi & Stanzani, 2005) and is exacerbated in the case of environmental protection because it requires systematic knowledge. For example, this is what happened to small farmers forced to face the modernization of agricultural methods; they not only had to possess agronomic skills but also chemical, mechanical, and accounting ones. In short, this was a difficult learning process that in many cases led to removal of the business function from farmers and its transfer to external agencies (van der Ploeg, 2008). That social enterprises may suffer the same fate is evinced by the waste-management sector, where social enterprises have tended to assume those parts of the overall cycle with the smallest knowledge content, with serious risks that their workers will be occupationally marginalized.

The third meaning of work—a way of inhabiting—arises from criticism of the typical vocational or Weberian conception of work (*Beruf*). Various movements, among them environmentalism (Gorz, 2003) and what we may call the minimalist or pauperist ones (Etzioni, 2004; Cohen, 2005; Gesualdi, 2005), criticize the fact that work has become an end in itself. Such movements maintain that work is now primarily a dire necessity and only secondarily a source of pleasure. They denounce the fact that work has become a social duty, a moral obligation, an exorbitant sign of prestige and material wealth which clearly extends beyond its original purpose.

This view also comprises a critique against methods that measure work solely in terms of monetary remuneration. That work has become commodified is certainly not a new observation (see, e.g., Polanyi, 1944), but it regains vigor from the environmental perspective because of the monetary translation of the entire value (monetary and non-monetary) of numerous environmental goods. The commodification of work, relationships, art, and the environment has distorted their meaning, as well as our enjoyment of them. It is for these reasons that the value of voluntary or community work has been most appreciated in the environmental field (Linne, 2001). Such work involves the free delivery of services endowed with an imponderable social and existential value.

From an environmental-philosophical perspective, monetized work must be calibrated to people's

real needs. Such a requirement also entails revaluing self-production, neighborhood work, and work undertaken at the local scale. The environmental crisis highlights that work that is disconnected from its material basis and instrumental meaning becomes a mere commodity relocatable at will. Work has become a largely self-referential activity that prevents understanding that it is untenable to defend a job if it pollutes the place where one lives. The possibility of relocating work and the self-referential view of it create a nonsensical conflict between the professional sphere and the residential domain.

Insofar as social enterprises adopt an extremist position on work, they are liable to commit the same error of separating the worker from the resident. The appeal to the local community is a crucial aspect of the approach adopted by work cooperatives—the integration of a disadvantaged person depends on both work and extra-work relations. Without the support of the local community, a social enterprise—even if it provides regular work for its members—is flawed. The environmental perspective heightens the community dimension because it requires taking account of numerous integrating factors (e.g., health, consumption, lifestyle, infrastructure impact) that a social enterprise must use as criteria for evaluation of its service.

The all-encompassing perspective urged by the environmental crisis is crucial. This is evident in the case of immigrants, a social category vulnerable not so much in regard to work (which may instead be relatively abundant) as to housing and its conditions, which are generally seriously inadequate and stigmatizing. This third meaning of work as a function of living both corrects and includes the other two (work as a source of recognition and work as a profession). It also furnishes precise parameters with which to evaluate the concrete actions of social enterprises. The social enterprises most virtuous from this point of view are those that respond to the need for both occupational and residential integration into the community.

The Environment as a Stimulus for Generalized and Linear Reciprocity

The social dimension of green social enterprises (GSEs) can be construed on the basis of reciprocity, an archetypal principle regulating human exchanges (see, e.g., Becker, 1990). Based on symmetry between the exchangers and on a permanent obligation to give, to receive, and to return gifts (Mauss, 1923-24), reciprocity is widely considered the distinctive feature of the so-called “third sector” to which social enterprises belong (Donati, 1996; Boccacin, 2005). Even if reciprocity is present in various forms and to

different extents in all human domains (Thompson, 2003; Bruni, 2008; Sacchetti & Sugden, 2009), it is especially recognized as an ordering principle of social enterprises. However, typical forms of interpersonal reciprocity inherent in social enterprises are challenged when the issue of sustainability is raised. If they want to be “green,” they have to develop new forms of reciprocity, called linear ($A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \dots$) or generalized ($A \rightarrow BCD$), where the arrow indicates the act of giving (gift).

In social enterprises, relationships have value in themselves because they have therapeutic effects and give meaning and satisfaction to those who engage in them. Moreover, as transaction cost theory maintains, in some productive contexts and for certain goods, reciprocity is more efficient than the hierarchy or market (Ouchi, 1980). Strong bonds among principal and agent are the best conditions for the provision of high quality goods or of high relational content services.

There is little question that reciprocity has drawbacks as well: its stickiness and the personalization of relationships may induce pathological phenomena, such as moral and psychological blackmail and various forms of collusion (bribes represent an extreme example). Nevertheless, reciprocity is a way to regulate highly complex and risky relationships requiring a large degree of trust between parties. The social enterprise is one such case, in that it must reconcile the principles of efficiency and solidarity, it must work with people suffering from distress of diverse kinds, and it must constantly cope with highly uncertain circumstances. Trust among practitioners, and between these and the beneficiaries, is of crucial importance: social work is essentially team work.

Does the environmental perspective add to or subtract from the salient reciprocity of social enterprises? Reciprocity in activities that are difficult to evaluate—such as environmental monitoring—is important because the trustful relation conveys information not otherwise obtainable (Dodgson, 1993). Reciprocity thus yields a form of knowledge that cannot be transmitted through the normal codes of science, which instead work according to the subject-object schema (Honneth, 2005).² Thus intuited are connections whose understanding is improved by interpersonal accord. However, this situation raises the risk that knowledge may be confined within a very narrow domain and be restricted to the interactive capacities of the two parties concerned. Put in more direct terms, a reciprocal relationship between doctor and patient is not enough to diagnose a tumor;

² Jay (2008) explains that “Honneth stresses the priority of recognition to cognition, the intersubjective interaction that subtends any relationship between subject and object, self and world.”

also required is a body of knowledge and procedures external to that relationship. Nevertheless, long-lasting and affective patient-doctor relations may be—as Honneth argues—a prerequisite for encoded knowledge.

Concern for the environment can be a stimulus for concern for objects and things external to social relations (Smith, 2005). The environment rarely presents itself in the guise of a person with whom to establish a dialogue. There are certainly flesh-and-blood people who are victims of environmental injustices, and for whom reciprocity and dialogue may be the most appropriate medicines. But in the majority of cases, the environment presents itself as an impersonal good devoid of human features. In some cases, it is a forecast of damage to generations not yet born or living in remote areas. Here, reciprocity between A and B is not enough. In fact, reciprocity must be integrated with a type of relationship that we may call “generalized exchange” (Ekeh, 1974; see also Pearce & Conger, 2003), and that concern for the environment helps to develop. As Ricoeur (1990) puts it, this capability entails considering not only the face of the *other* but also the face of *everybody*; that is, the anonymous other whose specific features I shall never be able to grasp for practical reasons, and with whom I shall never establish an enduring relationship.

The “face of everyone”—which Ricoeur prefers to the “anonymous” face—recalls care for the other as the holder of rights without distinctions of a personal kind. One form of recognition is treatment of the other as a role, an abstract entity, a bundle of rights. This does not always give pleasure, nor is it understood, but in some circumstances it can be a highly refined form of respect: respect for the other as a person as such without considering any social capacity or individual attribute. The pedagogical force of the notion of “everybody” is strongly apparent in the case of environmental rights. These are living conditions for thousands of people, many of them not yet born, and to whom broad and impersonal respect must be given.

In the case of GSEs, movement in this direction entails enlargement of the number and the types of stakeholders to consider. The range will depend on what environmental services the GSE wishes to fur-

nish; in the case of waste management, for instance, it must deal anonymously with thousands of users of urban cleansing services.

Two challenges ensue with waste management: the first is that a good home-collection service or the management of an ecological platform requires the GSE to establish with the user both a personalized exchange, based on the particular needs of the individual user, and a generalized exchange based on the rights/duties of every citizen in regard to the provision of public hygiene services. The second challenge is that the waste-management cycle is very long; some parts of the waste collected often have distant and improper destinations. The social enterprise cannot gloss over this fact by claiming, as do many firms in the sector, that it is responsible for only one phase of the process, while it knows nothing about the waste’s final disposal location. In other words, the undertaking of environmental services by a responsible social enterprise greatly extends the chain of reciprocity relations. Dyadic or small group relationships are not enough. Necessary instead is linear reciprocity in which the paradigm is the intergenerational gift (Bearman, 1997). This is a path of sequential responsibility that could easily be adopted by social enterprises that want to be environmentally sustainable. If sustainability means the lasting use of an environmental good, linear reciprocity is an important source of commitment “over time” for every actor in the chain.

The Environment as a Stimulus to Enter Commons

It is possible to further grasp the potential of social enterprises acting on the environment by considering the well-known classification of goods first drawn up by Elinor Ostrom (1990) and then elaborated upon by several Italian authors (Borzaga, 2007; Marelli, 2009; Bravo, 2011). If we start from the typology resulting from the cross-referencing of subtractability and excludability,³ we have four kinds of goods (Figure 1). The current environmental crisis is attributable to a shift of many goods from public to commons (Pellizzoni, in press). The air, water, and forests have become scarcer and more polluted resources. Every new human action subtracts value from them, reduces their quantity, and diminishes their quality. These goods have scant excludability: in short, they become commons.

		Subtractability	
		High	Low
Excludability	High	private goods	club goods
	Low	commons	public goods

Figure 1 A typology of public goods.

³ Subtractability, or rivalness, refers to the degree to which one person’s use of a resource diminishes others’ use. Excludability refers to whether or not a user can be efficiently excluded from using a resource.

High subtractability and low excludability facilitate opportunism—in other words, one can enjoy a good without contributing to its protection. Common goods require close control to inhibit free riding lest they be rapidly depleted. The problem is how to exercise this managerial influence. Hardin's (1968) proposals that goods (or rights to their use) should be allocated to private agents, or that centralized public control should be created, stand in opposition to the bottom-up institutional arrangements that Ostrom (2000) theorized. Such interventions involve creating forms of self-governance that comprise an appropriate mix of firmness and flexibility, positive and negative sanctions, stable and revisable procedures. The relevant institutions are not always public, but in some cases can consist of undivided private property, such as certain forests in the Italian Alps.

Social enterprises are in some respects oriented to private goods and they often furnish discrete goods to individuals. Home help for a dependent elderly person is a very frequent case. The objection that this is the supply of a relational good that arises from the relationship between the provider and consumer is correct (Gui, 2000). In fact, according to the classification used here, a relational good tends to be a club good: it is not depleted by use (low subtractability), but at the same time it is very easy to exclude other potential users from the relationship. Various forms of community or group therapy are indivisible goods, but they are easily and rightfully excludable. If there were indiscriminate access to the service, the therapeutic value of the group work would collapse.

Social enterprises therefore can operate agilely in the domain of club goods. This applies all the more to environmental services. In fact, there are many cases of cooperatives that furnish natural and cultural guide services; these are club goods in that their use is collective, or at any rate it concerns an indivisible good like a landscape, an ecosystem, or a cultural asset. The service may be exclusive (in the form of an entry ticket to a park or a museum or payment of a guide), but its use—within certain limits—does not subtract value from the good. Club goods yield an economic return for the supplier, with the consequence that cooperatives have been set up by young people in areas of environmental or archaeological value.

But the dynamics of environmental goods open new prospects. Goods that were once public have become not only more subtractable, but also rather easily excludable, owing to increasingly technical requirements imposed by their provision. Drinking water provides an example: its distribution through underground mains and the controlled connections to each user make it a more easily excludable good and thus discourage free riding (although, of course, it does not disappear entirely).

Throughout history, enterprises arose that dealt specifically with the management of drinking water. This service was typically promoted by wealthy citizens who wanted the convenience of piped water in their homes. Municipal corporations then took over with the intention of distributing the precious liquid to everybody, even the least well off. The use of drinking water has been so strongly embodied in technical and accounting systems (the mains water supply) that it has become an outright subtractable and excludable good from which private enterprises could extract a profit. As is well known, water privatization is now strongly contested, because it is feared that drinking water will give rise to speculative use and less diligence in ensuring its distribution in low-density housing areas, which is notoriously less profitable. The political reaction to this tendency has been to propose the exclusive management of the good by an entirely public corporation.

This context of the (contested) privatization of common goods offers enormous scope for action by social enterprises (Fiorentini & Preite, 2004; Rieth, 2005; Pestoff, 2009). These organizations could manage goods of a public nature that have become commons because of the complexity of supply systems and the intensity of their use. These goods have attracted interest in their exploitation in the purely economic sense. This situation, though, poses conflict in two respects: equality in both the social and territorial senses and the need to moderate resource use. In this regard, social enterprises have ample terrain on which to assert their social (equity) and environmental (saving) commitment. Empirical cases, though, are rare; some cooperatives in the Alps have their own hydroelectric plants (Mendini et al. 2007) or irrigation systems (Bravo, 2002). Accordingly, the Po valley reclamation consortia tasked with regulating water drainage and the irrigation of fields can be considered social enterprises *sui generis* (private status, public function).

What makes the “social enterprise solution” difficult, besides ideological resistance, is the territorial scale of the delivery systems for environmental goods. Water, for example, typically accumulates over wide catchment areas that require integrated management on a large scale (Bobbio, 2005). This challenge necessitates the coordination of numerous private users and other institutions, as well as the availability of adequate investments. For the governance of a social enterprise, even if it is conducted on a multistakeholder basis, managing goods on such a scale may be very difficult (Fazzi, 2007). Hierarchical management mechanisms would have to be applied, and this would conflict with the principle of reciprocity that generally regulates nonprofit organizations.

Value Set on the Environment	Aim of the Social Enterprise	
	Produce	Produce and Inhabit
<i>Instrumental</i>	A—Simple environmental services (e.g., urban cleansing) SIMPLE GSE	B—Territorial promotion services (e.g., environmental education) TERRITORIAL GSE
<i>Final</i>	C—Services with high technical-innovative content (e.g., solar energy plants) INNOVATIVE GSE	D—Services incorporating lifestyles (e.g., residences with self-contained consumption) COMMUNITARIAN GSE

Figure 2 Types of green social enterprises (GSE).

Analytical Criteria and Types of Green Social Enterprises

The previous section discussed how social enterprises require certain operational mechanisms to be able to effectively address environmental sustainability. Under appropriate circumstances, conserving the environment can stimulate the creation of work opportunities with low-entry thresholds, provide training in systemic skills (e.g., analysis, planning, coordination), expand awareness of the needs of the local community, complement arrangements for dyadic or circular reciprocity with linear and generalized reciprocity, and increase attention to commons undergoing privatization.

These considerations can be illustrated by conceiving the social enterprise as a system that interacts with its environment. In this case, “environment” has the twofold meaning of “everything that is distinct from the organization” and “the domain comprising vital resources (ecosystems).” Notably, these definitions overlap, producing new exigencies for the social enterprise, which is a system that receives constant stimuli from the environment and on which it, in turn, reacts.

Having codified the essential features of the relationship between the social enterprise and the environment, it is now possible to consider whether a combination of these features exists that enables construction of a typology to guide empirical investigations. This typology—which must be a good compromise between variety and parsimony—can be constructed on the basis of two key dimensions. The first ranges from whether the social enterprise is, on one hand, exclusively concerned with work or whether it, on the other hand, reconciles work and living (attention to acting professionally and with consideration of the local community). The second dimension specifically concerns the environment in terms of whether it is viewed as an instrument or as an end in itself.⁴ The intersection of these two dimen-

⁴ The second dimension can be translated in terms of sustainability (see Robinson, 2004). An instrumental approach to the environment means using an environmental label for other purposes, while

sions produces a Cartesian space with four quadrants in which four ideal types of social enterprise can be arranged (Figure 2).

Quadrant A comprises the vast majority of social cooperatives⁵ that are involved generically with the environment.⁶ Organizations that furnish services for the maintenance of public green spaces, for urban waste collection, and for urban sanitation probably account for one quarter of the Type B social cooperatives in Italy (Mattioni & Tranquilli, 1998). The census of social cooperatives conducted by the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT) in 2003 reported approximately 400 such cooperatives operating in the “green” sector, which also includes agriculture and forestry. They represent approximately 20% of the Type B social cooperatives in the country.⁷ Little

an end-directed approach aims at the conservation (or the reproduction) of an ecosystem over a long period of time.

⁵ In Italy, “social enterprises” almost always take the form of “social cooperatives,” a unique institutional form created in 1991 by a national law. Social cooperatives can be of Type A (community services to nonmembers) or Type B (one third of the cooperative’s members must be disadvantaged people) (see Thomas, 2004). The rationale of this national law was to institutionalize the solidarity toward nonmembers rather than the typical mutuality among members of cooperatives.

⁶ The case-selection method is based on an “ideal types” mode of organization (Zijderveld, 2004). It captures and interprets the distance between models and real cases. The former are constructed with the analytical dimensions of social enterprises envisaged in the initial paragraphs of this article and summarized in Figure 2. The latter are the result of “purposive sampling” or selection of a few exemplary cases, usually one or two for each ideal type. It is a nonrandom sample of real cases used as examples of the theoretical types. The article is not based on a statistical survey of social cooperatives, but only the exemplification of their theoretical traits through singular aspects of case studies. The method is then qualitative and is justified by the explorative nature of the analysis and the hybrid nature of social cooperatives. The main source of empirical cases is a special issue of the Italian journal *Impresa Sociale* from 2007 that highlights several green social cooperatives in different regions of the country. It merits noting that inside the same legal framework, social cooperatives are “used” for many different aims, such as waste management and fighting crime syndicates.

⁷ According to the European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises (2011), in 2008 the Italian social cooperatives numbered 13,938, of which 814 were working in the industrial sector, and 230 were active in the waste and water management and sanitation sectors. The report does not specify how many

information is available at the European level, but it is almost certain that activities to do with waste recycling, especially in its recovery and transaction segment, are most common among GSEs (Bicciato et al. 1999; Ferraresi & Sidaway, 1999; Aiken & Spear, 2005; Williams et al. 2005; Heike & Koring, 2008).

After beginning on a small scale in the late 1990s with the start-up of integrated waste management, these services began to develop quite rapidly in Italy. In particular, municipal administrations contracted the collection of certain types of waste and waste-recycling facilities to social cooperatives (Osti, 2002). Furthermore, the maintenance of public green spaces was outsourced to social cooperatives. Cooperatives also work on private gardens and sanitize industrial areas, creating a macroscale area of activity that can be designated as “hygiene services.”

These services were initially hailed as highly innovative because they introduced more refined methods of waste sorting and recycling and because the institutions assigned a multifunctional role to the social cooperatives (Osti, 1998). This enthusiasm subsided over time because it became apparent that these were low-grade activities and the institutional partners were unwilling (or unable) to foster the growth of social enterprises. Nevertheless, the sector has created numerous opportunities for work integration and substantial revenues for the cooperatives and a chance to diversify their activities.

The problem remains of the level of professionalism associated with public hygiene services. Only rarely are social cooperatives able to design such services themselves and propose them to public authorities. While Lombardy, the first region of the country to introduce a large-scale waste-sorting system, offers some encouraging, contravening evidence (Panna, 1999), most social cooperatives in Italy have failed in their attempts to assume a more industrial and professional profile. However, technical factors are to some degree responsible for these developments—once an advanced waste-sorting system is introduced, further recycling phases become highly mechanized and require specific expertise and large investments. Few social cooperatives have entered the more industrial phases of the waste cycle, which instead has been taken over by nonsocial cooperatives belonging to large consortia.⁸

The most innovative social cooperatives in Italy are shifting toward waste prevention and reuse. In other words, these organizations have developed initiatives with low technological, but high cultural content that enables them to promote more moderate consumption and to conduct workshops to repair discarded—but otherwise functional—goods for resale (Zanetti, 2007). In terms of the typology in Figure 2, this means that such cooperatives move from Quadrant A to Quadrant B (educational services) and Quadrant D (lifestyles). This shift, though, has implications for revenue because users are unlikely to pay for educational and cultural services, so that ongoing provision is dependent on public subsidies. Contributing further to the challenge is the fact that demand for these services is often sporadic, a situation that differs dramatically from public hygiene services that have a daily or weekly periodicity. Given this distinction, some social cooperatives have tended to shift from the enterprise model to voluntarism or “way of life” models.

The most emblematic case is the network of the Emmaus communities. But the “Riciclaggio e Solidarietà” cooperative, based in Florence and run by the “Mani Tese” (Open Hands) nongovernmental organization, resembles the model as well.⁹ Revenues are very low because the repair of used objects is time consuming, and customers for such objects—with the exception of some collectors—are not prepared to pay very much money for them.

Quadrant B—territorial services—comprises social enterprises furnishing home-care services, tourist entertainment and recreation, environmental education, and cultural promotion. This category effectively captures the social cooperatives that have been established in rural areas of Italy that are well endowed with environmental amenities but lack adequate commercial and social services. In fact, these organizations plan and manage care services for the resident population and recreational services for outsiders (Carrosio, 2007). It is no coincidence that tourism-oriented cooperatives and social cooperatives tend to merge together. This is the case also for forestry cooperatives that now increasingly engage in biomass recovery for energy purposes in addition to the provision of civil and tourism services. Their action is centered on promoting noninvasive use of territory. A census of Italian ecotourism cooperatives

of the 10,538 social cooperatives working in the service sector provided environmental services occasionally or secondarily.

⁸ There are two kinds of Italian cooperatives: nonsocial (or quasi-profit) and social. This article discusses the latter type, which represents a smaller part of the Italian cooperative movement. According to the European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises (2011), in 2008 there were 57,640 Italian nonsocial cooperatives; see also footnote 7.

⁹ Emmaus Italy is a network of communities, created in France by Abbé Pierre, and involved in the accommodation of marginal people, who specifically work in the sector of recycling and reuse as a form of personal redemption. Mani Tese is an Italian secular nongovernmental organization (NGO) working mainly in the sector of international cooperation. It has a “green” identity as well, very similar to the American voluntary simplicity movement (Grigsby, 2004).

conducted during the late 1990s counted almost 250 cases (Eco&Eco, 1999); more recent numbers are not available. These organizations were often for-profit cooperatives created or inspired by environmental associations, particularly ones interested in the protection of natural sites (Osti, 2007).

The second type of social enterprise in Quadrant B is most prevalent in urban and suburban contexts affected by poor community life. The most frequent activity is the management of social centers that host after-school and consumer clubs, as well as recreational and sports activities. Obviously, the management of public premises does not compete with the supply of work opportunities. On the contrary, the integration between work and habitation is the distinctive feature of this type of social cooperative (Battaglini, 2007). The most commercial part of such organizations may be the management of a bar or sports facility, the facilitation of weekend breaks and holidays, and the maintenance of green areas. The attribution of “instrumental” to the use of the environment by social cooperatives of this kind signifies that their main concern is socially focused; environmental issues are addressed only on a reactive basis, for instance, in response to the threatened closure of a public park or the presence of a polluting factory.

Various kinds of practitioners are involved in these social cooperatives, with a predominance of cultural educators. Great importance is given to communication and training. The already-mentioned problem of low remuneration persists because the organization depends on public revenues or donations by local residents. Services that can be sold at full price—a day with a nature guide or entertainment by an educator—can survive only on the basis of high volume. Nevertheless, the problem of remuneration can be attenuated by the establishment of appropriate mutual-help arrangements. When a territorial cooperative is well-integrated into a network of public bodies and associations, an exchange of services and operators takes place that enables some members to be fully compensated. Cooperatives that are better off because they operate in more lucrative sectors (e.g., homes for the elderly or with children) acquire training and recreational services from cooperatives of the Quadrant B type. In addition, local authorities, aware of the social and cultural value of these initiatives, often seek to ensure that funding is provided on a regular schedule.

It is furthermore instructive to consider the capacity of social cooperatives to assemble themselves into larger associations to participate in European Union (EU) calls for proposals. For example, some Italian social cooperatives have been able to prepare and win bids on environment-related projects financed by the Communitarian Initiative EQUAL, a

funding scheme focused on supporting innovative, transnational projects aimed at tackling discrimination and disadvantage in the labor market (European Communities, 2004).

Quadrant C comprises social cooperatives for which the introduction of environment-friendly technologies in recent years has created useful opportunities to acquire work for their members and to develop customary industrial skills. These activities specifically concern the installation of energy-production devices and, more rarely, the construction of low-energy buildings; these mainly involve “nonsocial” cooperatives that have sufficient technical and practical knowledge to consider construction of an entire building.

Some Italian social cooperatives have found it relatively easy to enter the market for the installation of solar panels. The ability of these organizations to move in this direction is, however, grounded in prior expertise that derives from earlier experience in the assembly of complex devices, primarily switchboards (Battaglini, 2007). Still, the installation of panels is simple enough to be done by that part of cooperative membership represented by disabled workers. Of course, the social cooperatives provide the installation phase, while the assembly of the panels themselves is out of their sphere of activity. Nevertheless, they are satisfied that they are contributing to a clean energy transition.

Initiatives by social cooperatives in the energy-technology field exist at different levels. The first activity centers on the aforementioned installation of panels. Notable is the concentration of these organizations in Lombardy, with promising forms of integration in “districts of social economy,” i.e., local agreements of small firms and consumers clubs (Biolghini, 2007). Consortia and larger cooperatives promote a number of technician-training schemes, and in some rare cases cooperatives undertake their own research and development in the energy-technology sector. Programs to enable collective purchasing of energy-saving devices exist; these initiatives are spearheaded by cooperative banks and other financial associations, although such efforts are typically coordinated with social cooperatives.

In the case of energy cooperatives, it merits considering not only their capacity to learn techniques but also their commercial practices. Unlike some other goods, both energy-production and energy-conservation devices are discrete products for which it is relatively easy to identify a price and to market. Why and how have some social cooperatives entered the energy-technology sector? There is reason to think that what happened first in the organic sector, and then in the waste sector, has been repeated. More specifically, some social enterprises have managed to

effectively anticipate the market, to create the institutions needed to realize the value of certain energy technologies and to develop a comparative advantage position for themselves (Bravo & Villa, 2007). In other words, they were organizations able to innovate before private for-profit enterprises. The social purpose of these organizations has provided greater freedom to transcend considerations of short-term profitability that dissuade “rational” entrepreneurs. There is, in fact, evidence to suggest that the latter can get bogged down in excessively detailed calculations and thus become risk averse at the expense of creativity (Beveridge & Guy, 2005).

The social orientation of an enterprise may therefore enhance its capacity for risk-taking and innovation. Nevertheless, it warrants keeping in mind that only a very small minority of social cooperatives are involved with energy technologies. The entry threshold to the sector is often high, and it is certainly more limiting than is the case for urban hygiene. Another difference (especially with respect to waste disposal) is that the energy sector entails closer engagement with private agents more than with public bodies. Moreover, competition in energy technology is intense and firms are frequently forced out of business.

The social enterprises in Quadrant C also have more chances of overlapping with nonsocial cooperatives, especially those operating in the housing sector. Such circumstances also mean greater competition within the cooperative domain, with potential for internecine competition. This situation previously emerged in the waste sector when ordinary cooperatives delivering routine services resented the entrance of social cooperatives with new practices such as sorted collection and help from public authorities.

An Italian province with a strong cooperative tradition, such as Brescia, exhibits rather marked polarization between a consortium of ordinary cooperatives (that comprise noncooperative enterprises as well) and a consortium of social cooperatives (Bravo & Villa, 2007). Working to protect the environment therefore creates many social and economic interactions, but paradoxically it does so to a lesser extent inside the cooperative movement.

Finally, we come to the social enterprises located in Quadrant D that interpret environmental action as a lifestyle. In analytical terms, these entities are formed by the intersection between, on one hand, the dimension of producing and inhabiting and, on the other hand, treating the environment as an end in itself. These kinds of organizations were discussed above in terms of the shift of certain social cooperatives in the waste-management sector to waste prevention and reuse. In addition, some social cooperatives in Quadrant D have begun to engage in experiments in communal living. These cases are particu-

larly prevalent in rural areas where religious and identity movements use the cooperative formula as the best way to economically express their ideals (Carrosio, 2004-5).

There are also cases in which care for marginalized people, community life, and a search for solidarity-enhancing modes of work have merged into a single large organization or are closely connected in networks. A rare but paradigmatic example is provided by the movement “Comunità e Famiglia” that refers to itself as a “solidarist condominium” (Volpi & Volpi, 2002). The participants in this scheme reside together, take care of disadvantaged young people, and observe quite stringent ecoconsumption rules. They live in a radical style, sharing their homes and ecofriendly practices with disadvantaged people. The sustainability dimension is not secondary in such a composite and all-encompassing organization. It is prominent in the awareness of the crucial importance of consumption and the urgency of the ecological crisis. There is a growing conviction among the members of this movement that merely reassembling activities on more efficient bases cannot reverse the crisis without a parallel and substantial “reduction” of consumption volumes at both the residential and industrial levels (Osti, 2006).

Quadrant D harbors a further type of social cooperative concerned with consumption. Old consumption cooperatives, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, persist in Italy, the largest of which manifest environmental awareness through marketing initiatives. Besides these historical cases, however, consideration should be given to a new category of social cooperatives that manage “fair trade purchase groups” (FTPs) and give priority to environmental objectives. The aim of these organizations is to reduce consumption, shorten supply chains, and develop relationships with producers that use environmentally preferable practices (Brunori et al. 2012).

Social entrepreneurship intersects with the FTPs when these groups decide to give a broader and more commercial organization to their service. This requires a legal structure more appropriate than a simple association and able to engage in complex economic relationships. There are no statistics on how many FTPs have a cooperative form and many of them continue as informal organizations because they are averse to bureaucratization. In contrast, other groups find it convenient to rely on an existing social cooperative to avoid the costs of initial organization and to enhance their multifunctional capacity.

A final aspect regards the food producers that FTPs use. They are not social enterprises, but small individual farms, the backbone of Italian agriculture. Nevertheless, some agricultural cooperatives are in-

volved and have a “lifestyle” component: almost all of them use organic farming methods (Carrosio, 2004-5) and others practice the green-care approach that often entails residential services for disadvantaged people (Di Iacovo, 2009). The economic solidity of these socioagriculture cooperatives mainly derives from the close commercial and personal relationships that they maintain with a wide network of consumers and institutions. Of particular relevance are certain southern Italian cooperatives located in areas of the country dominated by organized crime (Angelini & Pizzuto, 2007). In these regions, young people, church groups, and free associations have created agricultural and crafts cooperatives, often with the legal form “social” enterprise, not only because they deliver services of this type, but also because they express a determination to free local communities from the grip of criminal syndicates. These efforts are evidence of a further means to promote the merging of work and habitation through social-political re-establishment of the community.

Prospects: Beyond the Instrumental Approach

The preceding analysis of GSEs in Italy has highlighted a number of crucial dimensions of these organizations. Although specific data are not available, it is likely that the majority of these entities in the country are concentrated in the upper part of Figure 2, and divided between the so-called simple and territorial GSEs for which environmental objectives are either instrumental (provide a simple source of work) or highly diluted into broad cultural services. From a social point of view, this orientation is justified on the basis that jobs are created, attention is paid to the local community, and production and habitation are pursued as valuable goals.

The challenge of environmental sustainability supplements this line of development: social cooperatives centered on work and reciprocity are not sufficient to cope with goods exhaustion that profoundly undermines the possibility of working and living together. To understand the limits of GSEs in this field, the environmental problem origins have to be mentioned, along with a related crisis of knowledge about the secondary effects of human actions and a reduction in the quality and quantity of common resources.

It is precisely in these two spheres—knowledge and commons—that social enterprises are notably weak. Very few social cooperatives are able to operate in the area of applied knowledge (“innovative” GSEs) because these activities require expertise in ecosystems or complex systems to enable the integrated management of, say, waste recycling or energy supplies. We have seen that the majority of Italian

social cooperatives instead are engaged in labor-intensive services. Their success in these endeavors depends heavily on other organizations that may be present in the relevant sectors. For instance, if large public or private utilities are operating as quasimonopolies, it will be difficult for social cooperatives to enter or to acquire roles of responsibility.

Yet social enterprises also have room to maneuver, provided they possess practical knowledge and insights deriving from their capacity to create strong and durable relationships with ordinary people. Communal transport provides an example: shared travel should be encouraged by arrangements such as carpooling and car sharing, in which social enterprises have a specific competence based on reciprocity. The picture is even more promising with regard to the durable management of common goods (“communitarian” GSEs). There are few social enterprises dedicated to reducing the consumption of resources, but they exhibit a certain dynamism as evinced by the creation of fair-trade districts. The difficulty in this case is typical of every enterprise that conceives itself as a “producer” that presumably must grow indefinitely. But the ecological ideal does not require production to stop; it instead requires production of what is necessary and can be consumed with sobriety—in other words, it pursues “a logic of sufficiency” (de Geus, 2003; Princen, 2005; Sachs & Santarius, 2005). Accordingly, some social cooperatives have sought to bring together green production, rehabilitation of insulated dwellings, and education campaigns emphasizing the prudent use of goods. The success of these enterprises has to date been attributable to their ability to combine these aspects of producing, living, and communicating. From this combination, they have derived strong legitimation for their existence and operations. The social enterprises in the “communitarian” quadrant express a coherence that elicits the approval and support of other organizations.

These organizational relationships prompt a final consideration. It is pointless to deny that GSEs do not enjoy high social power—they do not have bargaining power with utilities and municipalities, the cooperative movement considers them its “poor relations,” the trade unions fear their competition since it infringes upon general labor rules, environmental organizations regard them as excessively rigid in their employment relationships, and for-profit enterprises usually try to exploit them. Public opinion is largely indifferent to GSEs, and at best considers that delegating them disagreeable functions, such as waste disposal, is already a major concession.

This description may seem ungenerous, but it is necessary to avoid the risk of idealizing initiatives undertaken in highly precarious conditions. The prestige and legitimacy of GSEs, from which derive

material resources as well, probably resides in a demonstrated commitment to environmental sustainability and the creation of jobs. The instrumental approach can only be left behind by shifting between the lower quadrants in the analytical scheme, with more applied knowledge of how ecosystems work and application of a rigorous logic of sufficiency to producing and consuming. From this commitment we may derive greater appreciation of GSEs and initial reconciliation among the three pillars of sustainability.

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