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# THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN CROSS-SECTOR SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS

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## **ABSTRACT**

A non-traditional and less examined partner type in the Cross-Sector Social Partnership (CSSP) literature is informal communities. The exploratory, single case study investigates how self-organized community groups open up or shut down engagement opportunities that have the potential to strengthen or weaken partnerships by conceptualizing key components and their positive and negative effects over time. The study offers an in-depth analysis of the ambivalent dynamics and dual role of community participation suggesting that the community size, member heterogeneity, level of direct interaction and bond-based attachment determine the direction of the effect. We argue that these key components either enable or dissolve the shared purpose of the partnership and offer three unique partner-specific opportunities: co-innovation, co-determination of prices and co-financing new product development. The study contributes to the CSSP literature a process understanding of the role of community participation as a significant partner in addressing complex social problems.

### **Keywords**

Cross-sector social partnerships, community participation, self-organized informal communities, SPG, GAS, CSSP.

## INTRODUCTION

Cross-Sector Social Partnerships (CSSPs) is defined as “*relative intensive, long-term interactions between organizations from at least two sectors [...] aiming at resolving a social or environmental issue aimed at addressing a social or environmental problem*” (Clarke & Crane, 2018, p. 303). CSSPs have spread over the years (Seitanidi & Crane, 2014, Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019) as a way to address complex social challenges (Barnett et al., 2018) leveraging the participation and skillsets of multiple (MacDonald et al., 2018) and diverse partners (Pedersen et al., 2021). Among CSSPs' partners, extant literature already investigated and established the importance of a wide array of organizations (Bowen et al., 2010; Seitanidi et al., 2010; Van Tulder et al., 2015) from firms to structured non-profit organizations (Hartman & Dhanda, 2018), but dedicates much less attention to the contribution of self-organized informal groups, such as a communities (Bowen et al., 2010). In fact, communities play a significant role in addressing complex social problems by allowing for broad and direct participation of their members in the ideation and implementation of solutions (Cohen, 2016), and also enabling the democratization of collaborative action (Pascucci et al., 2016). This study intends to explore this gap by investigating the following research question: under which conditions, and how, can self-organized informal communities contribute to CSSPs?

Using interviews and archival evidence, the study examines the development of a 13-year long CSSP comprising small-medium enterprises and a community of self-organized informal groups – known as Solidarity Purchasing Groups (Forno et al., 2015; Signori & Forno, 2019) – collectively addressing the problem of introducing Solidarity Economy principles, and specifically fair trade and organic production, within their supply chain. As such, the partnership's shared purpose (Adler & Heckscher, 2018) deals with a complex social and environmental issue that is

intractable for each single organization and calls for establishing an inclusive partnership (Waddock, 1989) to collectively address the socio-environmental issue across organizations, based on collaboration and collective participation, as typically done by CCSPs (Clarke & Crane, 2018).

This study contributes to the CSSPs literature (e.g., Quarshi & Leuschner, 2018) by providing insights on the role of self-organized informal communities in CSSPs. First, we identify the processes behind the participation of non-traditional, less-structured partners such as self-organized informal communities (the “*conditions*”). In particular, we shed light on the role of community members’ engagement (Bowen et al., 2010), and of its components: community size, members’ interaction, composition, and bond-based attachment among them. Second, our findings suggest specific opportunities made possible by the inclusion of self-organized informal communities as partners (the “*how*”), namely co-innovation, co-determination of prices, and co-financing. We also show how such inclusion may expand democracy within CSSSP. We conclude by discussing both positive and negative implications for CSSP of partnering with fluid entities such as self-organized informal communities.

## CROSS-SECTOR SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITIES

Cross-Sector Social Partnerships' ability to "*achieve jointly an outcome that could not be achieved by organizations in one sector separately*" (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 44) refers to the possibility for the participating partners to link and share their diverse resources, information, and capabilities.

A key element for the success of CSSPs is the wide involvement of various partners, especially those relevant to the social issue involving specific segments of the population, possibly identified as communities. Mintzberg and Azevedo (2012) commented on the importance of social initiatives promoted by communities that represent one of the most promising forms of the plural sector. Their involvement has the potential to drive the efforts to address societal needs, such as human rights, public health, education, poverty reduction, or environmental sustainability (Austin, 2000), *rapidly and directly* due to their proximity to the context, knowledge, and agility associated with their form. However, the circumstances of their participation in CCSPs, as well as the implied contribution, remain largely unexplored.

The literature suggests that the addition of new partners can substantially affect the development of a CSSP, especially at the early stage (Vurro et al., 2010) and that the larger the partnership and the higher the members' heterogeneity (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), the harder it is for the partnership to converge (Hardy, 1994) to a shared purpose (Waddock et al., 2015). Hence, involving self-organized informal communities may be very risky, due to their fluid, open, informal and dissipative organizational structure (e.g., David & Rullani, 2008).

Indeed, the relevance of investigating the interaction between such communities and more structured formal organizations was recognized already in 1976 by Simon: "*It would probably be fair to say that no formal organization will operate effectively without an accompanying informal*

*organization*" (pp. 148-49). The outcome of this interaction is not a given (Krackhardt, 1994): in the informal group, self-organization may continue and perhaps expand to the more formal organizations involved in the partnership; or it may be abandoned by the informal grouping in favor of a more functional hierarchy (e.g., O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2007). While a number of studies have investigated different characteristics of self-organized informal communities (e.g., Rullani & Haefliger, 2013) and their partnership with more formal organizations such as firms (Dahlander & Wallin, 2006), to the best of our knowledge this is the first empirical study explicitly looking at the interaction between self-organized informal communities and more structured organizations in the context of CSSP. Hence, investigating the conditions, processes, and contribution of self-organized informal communities is an important question for addressing complex social challenges.

## **SELF-ORGANIZED INFORMAL COMMUNITIES**

While NPOs are usually organized and structured entities, societal needs can also be represented directly by informal self-organized groups (Seelos et al., 2011) gathering around the aim of achieving a shared purpose. These communities generally work with open membership, allowing for substantial direct engagement of community members (Norris, 1999) and the creation of bonds among them (Ren et al., 2007; 2012). In general, however, communities generate different levels of members' identification with the collective (McKnight et al., 2017; Brewer & Kramer, 1986) and of engagement in the community activity (Giordani et al., 2019). In cases of strong-member identification, a CSSP can benefit from opening its collective to the community, as engaged members may transfer their sense of belonging to the whole CSSP, supporting and expanding its activities, sharing risks, costs, and providing ideas and solutions (e.g., Harhoff & Lakhani, 2016). Communities' very nature allows them to potentially infuse a broader democratic dimension to the governance and collaborative effort of the partnership (De Bakker et al., 2019), addressing what is known as the "democratic critique of partnerships", i.e., their "*weak representative and participatory foundations*" (Meadowcroft, 2007, p. 194). However, if the community fails to tighten its participants' bond-based attachment and endure their engagement, these difficulties may eventually impact members' identification (Ren et al., 2012) and collaboration (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011), to the point of discouraging them from active participation (Dorado et al., 2009), weakening and even dissolving the community itself and the benefits it may assure to the CSSP it belongs to.

Despite this uncertain effect of communities' involvement, there are several clearly positive effects derived from the self-organized and informal nature of such groups. Indeed, communities of engaged people have the potential to solve complex and resilient social problems (Mintzberg &



Azevedo, 2012) and research has shown that fostering direct and open participation can facilitate collaborative value creation (Austin & Seitanidi 2012a; 2012b; 2014), wider engagement (Bowen et al., 2010), and allow for a rich plurality of voices, from local farmers (Wilburn, 2009) to beneficiaries of service organizations (Benjamin, 2021), from customers of local businesses community centers (Garrett, 2007) to farming cooperatives, indigenous communities, women's federations, health workers networks (Murphy & Arenas, 2010) and even citizens mobilized within projects of public engagement launched by hospitals, chambers of commerce, authorities and universities (MacDonald et al., 2018). It is thus worth investigating under which conditions, and how, communities can fruitfully contribute to CSSPs.

## **METHODS**

To tackle the research question, we adopted an exploratory, qualitative research design (Langley 1999; Pratt, 2009) by developing a single-case study (Yin, 2017) of a long-term CSSP with a self-organized informal community as a central partner. The aim of our research is to explore the process through which self-organized informal communities may either open up new opportunities or limit the activities of the CSSP they participate in. Following a central perspective adopted in CSSP studies in which the focus is on the process of partnership development (e.g., Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Seitanidi, 2010; Seitanidi et al., 2010; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; 2012b; 2014), and on how such process unfolds, we adopt a process study methodology (Van De Ven & Poole, 1995). We aim at developing a process-based theory (Cornelissen, 2017; Langley, 1999; 2020) able to “*provide explanations in terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome*” (Langley, 1999 p. 2). Given its focus on understanding activities, change over time, and flow (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) of certain dynamics, this approach is particularly apt to our case as it supports the creation of theory conceived as a “*conceptualization of events*” (Van De Ven & Poole 1995). Context and time can be embedded in the theoretical explanation because the final outcome is seen in the light of the sequence of events occurring over time (Cornelissen, 2017). We collected archival data and conducted interviews at different points in time over the course of the partnership's development, allowing us to capture how different events and activities in the partnership played out over time.

### **Solidarity Purchasing Groups as community participation: Case Selection**

We selected a CSSP offering a unique and rare opportunity to observe (Eisenhardt, 1989) the significant role of self-organized informal communities composed of consumers, in a partnership aimed at transforming the supply chain the partners belong to by introducing Solidarity Economy principles. Our research focuses on a partnership between for-profit and non-profit organizations that work to address environmental and social problems in the textile sector by adopting methods applied in other consumer-goods industries (e.g., food) and creating a new framework for inter-actor cooperation, in line with the definition of CSSP provided by Clarke and Crane (2018).

In particular, the Italian Solidarity Purchasing Groups<sup>1</sup> (SPGs) – (Forno et al., 2015; Signori & Forno, 2019) provided the context to answer our research question. SPGs are self-organized informal value- and place-based communities of citizens (Cembalo, et al. 2013) that coordinate their demand (Maestriperi, 2017) to purchase large quantities of goods (Seyfang, 2006) of different kinds (e.g., food, shoes, detergents, energy, and water) using the gained market power to ensure that producers abide by the values of the Solidarity Economy: Equity, Labor, Environmental Sustainability, Cooperation, Non-profit, Territorial Responsibility<sup>2</sup>. These values articulate an alternative economic system prioritizing people and the environment over profit (Cembalo et al. 2013; Fonte, 2013). The “critical consumers” composing SPGs are driven by the shared purpose (Adler & Heckscher, 2018) of supporting and spreading ethical production and consumption (Forno, et al., 2015; Orazi, 2011) but are not a small niche: it is estimated that in 2018 approximately 80 000 citizens participated in SPGs activities (Graziani & Forno, 2020). SPGs are

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<sup>1</sup> “*Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale*” in Italian.

<sup>2</sup> See the Table 3 in the Appendix for more information on SPGs principles

organized geographically (based on district or municipality) and function as self-organized informal groups: their decision-making structures and division of labor are flat and loose. They choose representatives internally to oversee the compliance of manufacturing procedures that must adhere to the guidelines of the Solidarity Economy principles. In other words, SPGs are communities of self-organized consumers partnering with producers to advance their shared purpose of generating a new supply chain system, designed and ruled not by the market principles, but by the principles of the Solidarity Economy.

In the case study, self-organized informal communities of consumers –i.e., SPGs – represent one of the main partners of the CSSP we focus on. Indeed, the partnership initially focused on the production of a new adult clothing line inspired by the Solidarity Economy principles, which was established in Northern Italy in 2006 among a network of SPGs, a small textile enterprise (SME\_design), and a non-profit organization (NPO). SPGs, the enterprise, and the nonprofit organization operated and governed the partnership together, sharing decision-making, and resources and coordinating their different activities in order to build on their specific capabilities. Such horizontal and broad governance took place via meetings between all partners (some more structured and regular in time, and others more informal and *ad hoc*) while, for specific projects, sub-groups were formed involving the enterprise, the NPO, and a subset of SPGs, typically those with the more relevant capabilities for the matter at hand. It is worth noticing that this governance structure is particularly in line with two of the partnership governance typologies described by Bryson et al. (2006): "*self-governing structures in which decision making occurs through regular meetings of members or through informal, frequent interactions*" and -when specific decisions require specific expertise- "*lead ... organizations ... [that] provide major decision-making and coordinating activities*" (Bryson et al., 2006, p. 49). Thus, the CSSP adopted a mixed governance

structure that was most capable of integrating the governing principles typical of communities such as SPGs.

### **Data collection**

Extensive archival data regarding the partnership and its context along with semi-structured interviews with representative members of partner organizations comprise the primary data of the case (see **Table 1** for additional information about data sources), which allowed for triangulation (Yin, 2017), increasing the reliability of the findings, and countering the risk of selective memory bias (Freeman et al., 1987) and retrospective rationalization (Eisenhardt, 1989). The interviews were conducted in two rounds, the first between April and June 2012 – when the partnership was thriving– and the second between December 2018 and July 2019 – when failure put an end to the project.

The two rounds of interviews were crucial to build the sequence of events pertaining to process theory (Langley, 1999). A total of 18 interviews with 11 partners were conducted, spread equally along the lifecycle of the partnership (See Table 2 for a description of the interviewed partners). The total duration of the interviews was 20 hours. All interviews were recorded in Italian, and then transcribed and translated into English. The archival database, comprising 51 archival sources, contained approximately a total of 200 pages of text. In all phases, we continued gathering new material until the point of data saturation.

+++**Insert Table 1 about here**+++

+++**Insert Table 2 about here**+++

### **Data analysis**

We started our analysis by aggregating data to reconstruct a “*thick description*” (Langley, 1999) of the partnership development over time. We started from its formation and by describing

how the SME got the initial SPGs involved. Then we moved forward with the development of the project. We started by using open coding to inductively identify the empirical themes emerging from our data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) followed by axial coding to iteratively distill our empirical themes into more second-order categories. Once a stable set of conceptual categories was crystallized, we developed aggregate codes representing our theoretical conceptual dimensions (the resulting data structure is reported in Appendix, Figure 3). We finally developed a grounded process model (Gioia et al., 2013) able to explain links among our aggregate dimensions to expose the processes strengthening or weakening the partnership (see Figure 2).

## FINDINGS

We present our findings in two sections: in the first, we provide an overview of the evolution of the case over its lifecycle, aimed at building the narrative approach of process theorizing (Cornelissen, 2017). This lays the ground for the second section, where we focus on the events and dynamics that directed the “*pathways over time*” (Cloutier & Langley, 2020, p. 5) of our case. In this way, we unfold the participation dynamics of the self-organized informal communities behind the SPGs' support – or absence thereof – to the partnership and link it to its capability to contribute to the partnership. All these elements are then integrated into our final process model (see Figure 2), while more empirical evidence supporting our analysis is provided in the Appendix, Table 4.

Northern Italy is home to several prominent textile industrial districts. Starting from the early 2000s, many of the small firms operating therein experienced a decline in demand, mainly due to the cost-based competition of Asian countries. To avert the same fate, the entrepreneur leading one of those small firms (Interview\_SME-design) decided to change completely his business: he reached out to an NPO active in the same SPG he was already part of as a consumer and decided to approach a group of SPGs in Northern Italy proposing to extend their engagement beyond food, toward clothing. This marked the partnership's formation in 2006, and the lively involvement of the SPGs in it (see **Figure 1** for a timeline of the partnership's development).

+++insert **Figure 1** about here+++

The partnership was born with the explicit aim of realizing a new clothing line that could meet the principles of the Social Economy by “*changing the supply, production and distribution practices of firms*” (Archival\_data\_Strategic\_Document\_SPGs). The partnership identified in this way a shared

purpose (Adler and Heckscher, 2018), and rooted it into a set of shared meanings, visions and practices. During this first stage of the partnership formation (2006 – 2008) the formal decision to develop the first line of products was initially taken by the entrepreneur leading the SME Design, the President of the NPO, and the initial few SPGs, who collectively started to search for producers of the raw material and suppliers that could abide by their principles and be part of the project as well. Indeed, giving life to the principles of the Solidarity Economy (reported in Table 3 in the Appendix) meant to structure the decision-making process so as to include all the actors of the supply chain: “*Solidarity collaboration focuses on the inclusion of everyone in the production process and the integration of everyone in the consumption process*” (Archival\_data\_Principles\_Solidarity\_Economy).

The main meetings were always extended to all the actors involved in each stage, and democratic consensus across the whole supply chain started to build, becoming a visible outcome of the collective decision-making processes: being open and inclusive, providing opportunities for direct interaction. Interviewees confirmed that SPGs were always “*participating in quarterly meetings directly within the company to discuss the prototype and product development*” (Interview\_SPG#1). At the end of 2008, the partnership arrived at the successful commercialization of the first line of fair-trade organic clothes totally designed and commercialized with the support of the SPGs in all the phases from ideation to creation and distribution of the product. More specifically, the production process benefitted from three novel community-led opportunities: (1) *co-innovation*, which referred to the participation of all partners in the problem-solving and ideation process regarding the production of new clothes, i.e., making transparent technical dilemmas, jointly weighing the options and their implications, and asking for SPGs’ input as consumers but also as advisors and problem solvers; (2) *co-determination of prices* across the whole supply chain, that



allowed SPGs to internalize the impact of a certain final price on all actors of the supply chain, thus negotiating a price and a related quantity that could include also the valuation of those; (3) *co-financing*, with SPGs paying in advance part of the final price as a loan to the producers, thus sharing economic risk with them.

The opportunities unleashed due to the SPGs' participation stimulated quick project growth. In 2011, four years after its establishment, the partnership scaled in size and heterogeneity, extending its operations and ethical practices to almost all actors of the textile supply chain – from raw material producers, through intermediate actors, to final customers. In this period, the high quality of the product line attracted new SPGs, increasing the partnerships' size and diversity. Similarly, commercial success attracted additional business partners across the supply chain, and in particular SME-designKid, something that increased the potential scope of production.

After the initial growth phase, the partnership started to lose momentum, with increasing less capability to align principles and practices. *“There was a complete lack of feedback and interaction so that customers could not understand the true added value of our products”* (Interview\_SME-designKid). The launch of a new line of clothes – this time targeted at children – witnessed the inability of the SPGs to participate directly and contribute with their ideas and suggestions. *“Without the direct involvement and engagement of the SPGs, sales did not go well from the start”* (Interview\_SME-design). The inability to engage all the SPG communities weakened the alignment toward the shared purpose (Adler and Heckscher, 2018). The high level of engagement previously central to the partnership became discontinuous, resulting in a fragmented structure of the decision-making process, and the inability to sustain the community-led opportunities seen above. The substantial drop in sales and profit margins made the project less attractive also for business partners: *“No more enthusiasm exists, not like before. This is proven by*

*the inability to collaborate and discuss product development, as well as by the dramatic drop in purchase orders"* (Interview\_SPG#3)

Although in 2015 the partnership was still existent – operating as a simple market exchange among SME Design and only a few demotivated SPGs – it was just the blurred image of the impactful partnership observed in the 2008-2013 period.

### **Enacting the community's shared purpose and strengthening the partnership**

Our analysis highlighted the peculiar role of self-organized informal communities in substantially influencing the evolution of the partnership: community participation can function in two potentially distinctive ways, with opposite effects on a CSSP's success.

In the literature, the more community members have direct interaction (Giordani et al., 2017), the more their convergence to a homogenous common ground (Srikanth and Puranam, 2014). Direct interaction and homogenous common ground in turn increase members' bond-based attachment to the community (Ren et al., 2007; 2012). Such type of attachment supports members' engagement by leveraging the sense of belonging due to close direct relations. Familiarity among group members facilitated the development of common ground leading to convergence of ideas and practices as mentioned by an interviewee: *"We easily made a lot of decisions together because we all knew each other and had often worked on other projects [together], so we knew what to do."* (Interview\_SPG#2).

In our case study, SPGs' principles based on the Solidarity Economy functioned as a common ground and facilitated the development of shared purpose in the partnership, connecting the different stakeholders in a collaborative effort and encouraging shared decision-making. The homogeneity of the small size of SPGs further facilitated the operationalization of these principles. Moreover, according to the Solidarity Economy principles, participation in production-related

decisions was not simply considered a way for SPGs' to have a voice in the partnership: it was a form of community responsibility toward the environment, the producers themselves, and all the stakeholders in the supply chain. The importance given to participation was thus shared by all partners, who actively worked to extend direct participation in decision-making as much as possible within the SPGs and to the whole supply chain. Direct democracy was also facilitated by a sense of strong connection and closeness among all members of the SPGs (i.e., the bond-based attachment), which increased their engagement in terms of energy, time, and also financial participation as demand.

The high SPGs engagement made possible by their homogeneity, low numerosity, and bond-based attachments of their members created room for enabling a series of community-led opportunities, such as (a) buyer-producer co-innovation, (b) co-determination of prices, and (c) co-financing. First, the frequent meetings and discussions made possible by the low numerosity and the sharing of a common language and viewpoint (i.e., homogeneity) favored the setting up of co-innovation sessions. In such meetings, the SME Design and the SPGs -possibly also with the NPO and the producers of raw material- posed problems related to the product and tried to create solutions together. This allowed the users' "sticky knowledge" about the consumption of the product (von Hippel, 1994) to directly enter a dialog with the feasibility constraints of the producers, creating an effective process of problem-solving.

Furthermore, the direct sharing of the different viewpoints among all the participants in the supply chain, allowed the partnership to develop a system of price-allocation based on the collective discussion: *"All the prices of the products in the different steps of the supply chain were screened, shared, discussed and decided collectively among the SPGs, the producers, the suppliers, balancing possible revenues and costs"* (Interview\_SME-designKid). Repeated close interaction created a

bond making all participants internalize the point of view of the others, looking at prices not only with the eyes of economic convenience but also with those of fairness.

Finally, the high level of SPGs' attachment also resulted in their willingness to share risks with the producers through a form of pre-financing of the partnership's products, where the SPGs paid in advance 50% of the final jointly determined price. *"Each order is pre-financed by the SPGs to give us the possibility to start with the cotton procurement and production. When we deliver the product, the SPGs pay the remaining 50% of the agreed price."* (Interview\_SME-design). This agreement substantially stimulated the product development process, launch, and commercialization, fostering at the same time a new power balance in the supply chain (Dentoni et al., 2017).

These opportunities strengthen the partnership on the material side, providing a favorable business environment, but coupled with the collective decision-making and the participatory principles enacted into practice gave life to the shared purpose of the partnership, thus reinforcing engagement and the partnership as a whole, in a virtuous loop.

### **Dissolving the community's shared purpose and weakening the partnership**

With the partnership's success, more parties—including fair-trade stores, organic retail chains, and other groups of customers—showed interest in joining the project. In particular, the advent of SPGs from a wide range of backgrounds has caused the network to grow and become increasingly heterogeneous. For example, hospitals started to recognize the value of clothes free of synthetic materials for patients with allergies and skin-related diseases, something that impacted the SPG community in a variety of ways. Moreover, the larger number and the higher heterogeneity of partners multiplied the practices spurring from the diverse interpretations of the ethical principles supporting the partnership. Principles needed to be discussed at a more abstract level so that each

actor could adapt them to his specific needs, beliefs and identity. However, that made such principles less precise, less compelling, and less binding. Principles became increasingly uprooted from joint action, and the shared purpose based on them more blurred. Hence, achieving re-alignment of perceptions and practices became challenging: *“Since the product is already there and nobody wants to waste additional time on it, it didn't work out. There were too many issues to debate and coordinate. Honestly, at this point, you may purchase it if you like it! I'm done now!”* (Interview\_SPG#4).

The gradual loss of shared purpose was evident in the daily practices and actions of the partners. For example, the increased volume of production and new product lines launched by the more recent new SME partners moved the production toward more efficiency-led decisions, a departure from the Solidarity Economy principles and a reduction of emphasis on the shared purpose. Whilst the first SPGs strictly adhered to these principles, advocating a strong chemicals-free production, the new SPGs (and other clients) found the resulting selection of viable products less appealing. Therefore, *“the original principles were enacted less than they initially were, and at the same time, each partner found it more difficult to recognize its own principles in the partnership decision making processes”* (Interview\_ SPG#2). Consequently, the direct forms of participation that initially characterized the partnership were gradually abandoned. To manage the increased volume of production and the number of partners, the SPGs' inputs started being mediated through the creation of subgroups, fragmenting the decision-making processes. This created an additional layer of decision making among SPG members, segmenting decisions between SPGs and the other partners, hence decreasing the level of direct interaction and the opportunity for reciprocal understanding. It suddenly became more difficult to communicate, ask everybody's opinion, and take all of them into account. Such mediated participation in the partnership's decision-making

process and reduced direct interaction negatively affected the bond among SPG members and weakened their connection to the community. As direct interaction decreased and heterogeneity increased many SPG members seemed to lose their interest, eventually entering a state of bond detachment, and thus disengagement.

As the remaining collaborative activities receded, the CSSP shifted from a partnership based on engagement, i.e., a partnership “*characterized by joint learning and sensemaking [...], the joint management of projects with communities [...] and community leadership in decision-making*” (Bowen et al., 2010, pp. 305-306), to a transactional partnership between SMEs and SPGs, akin to traditional market-like interactions.

While initially seeking the realization of Solidarity Economy principles, the larger and more heterogeneous set of SPGs, with members’ bond-based attachment fading away, caused the shift to a different development path, pushing the whole partnership away from the original shared purpose and inhibiting community-led options, i.e., co-innovation, co-determination of prices, and co-financing. The lack of these opportunities, together with the decrease in the volume of clothes purchased by SPGs, made the collaboration less sustainable and interesting for the production partners, who abandoned the partnership. This decomposition greatly affected the sense of shared purpose (Adler and Heckscher, 2018) and seriously weakened the partnership. The dissolution of the shared purpose implied that the engagement dynamics that strengthened the partnership in the first place were not active anymore, leading the partnership to an inevitable termination. In fact, the downward spiral described above led to a drastic resizing of the partnership: by 2015 the partnership membership was reduced from more than thirty members in 2011/2012 (comprising two SMEs, twenty SPGs, and some suppliers, with different levels of involvement), to approximately only five SPGs and one SME on the production side in 2018.

The findings reported above clearly show that engagement of community members of the kind we observed for SPGs is the result of a complex web of relations among a series of variables: the size of the community (SPGs), the heterogeneity of its members' viewpoints, the level of their direct interaction and bond-based attachment. The engagement dynamics this web of relations determines governs two possible development paths. On the one hand, the partnership can be strengthened by favoring the embedding of guiding principles into practices, rendering more collective and inclusive decision-making processes, and enabling community-led opportunities. These processes, which allow the enactment of the shared purpose of founding the community, in turn, reinforce the engagement dynamics, in a positive loop that sustains the partnership's growth and expansion. On the other hand, however, the partnership can also be weakened by uprooting the same guiding principles from action, fragmenting the decision-making, and disabling community-led opportunities. This blurs the shared purpose of the community and finally dissolves it, likely for good (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). With no shared purpose, the community starts to decompose, ceasing to contribute to the CSSP and eventually sustain its own existence.

Figure 2 captures graphically these concepts and organizes them into a process model representing the argument above.

+++**insert Figure 2 about here**+++

## **DISCUSSION**

Extant CSSP literature mainly deals with formally organized (Salamon & Anheier, 1997) and structured entities (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Austin & Seitanidi, 2014), and pays less attention to more unstructured types of partners such as self-organized informal communities. Overall, our study contributes to extant CSSPs literature by showing under which conditions, and how, self-organized informal communities can contribute to CSSPs in the achievement of their shared purpose. We thus add an important and under-explored element to the CSSPs partners' spectrum (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; 2012b; 2014) able to effectively support the tackling of global challenges (Mintzberg & Azevedo, 2012).

In this respect, our analysis highlights the importance of community engagement, which we decompose in (a) community size, (b) community composition, (c) members' interaction, and (d) bond-based attachment. We also observed that the interaction among the elements of engagement can lead to opposite results: a small community, where homogeneous participants interact directly, is likely to generate bond-based attachment among its members, strengthening their engagement (Giordani et al., 2017; Bowen et al., 2010; Ren et al., 2007). With such a level of engagement, the shared purpose (Adler & Heckscher, 2018) is enacted, which means embedding the partnership's principles in specific practices and governance structures while generating collective forms of governance and further collaboration-based opportunities. Giving life to the shared purpose in this way reinforces the engagement of community members, strengthening the partnership even more. At the same time, as self-organized informal communities function as open organizations, with porous boundaries and informal membership (Wenger, 1998), if successful, they are likely to attract new members that are likely to be less homogenous than the initial group. As long as the community maintains a high level of direct connection, relative homogeneity in its communicated



purpose, and bond-based attachment, it is likely to continue supporting the required level of engagement to sustain and strengthen the partnership. But larger and heterogenous communities heavily tax members' direct relations and sense of kinship, weakening the formation of reciprocal bond-based attachment and, in the end, engagement. Indeed, "*for people seeking bond-based attachment to group [...] unconstrained growth can be overwhelming [...] it can make the community seem impersonal*" (Ren et al., 2007, p. 397). Community engagement may suffer when the community joining the partnership is large, as its members would be less aligned toward the shared purpose, seeing it from different angles, and thus unable to effectively embed the related principles into practice and governance structures. They would be unable to interact directly in a "flat" decision-making process and to create opportunities based on their collaboration and reciprocal trust. This finally undermines the capability of the shared purpose to reinforce the engagement dynamics of the community members, and the whole partnership is driven to an end.

As a second contribution, our findings show what important benefits CSSPs can gain from including self-organized informal communities in their partnerships, as this generates positive dynamics strengthening the partnership by opening new opportunities and reinforcing commitment to the shared purpose and engagement. In particular, our study provides evidence of the significant contribution that self-organized informal communities can offer by enabling three peculiar opportunities: (a) co-innovating, (b) co-determining prices, and (c) co-financing new product development, hence generally co-designing the supply chain and distributing value throughout it. Finding themselves at the end of the supply chain, consumers typically receive only a minimal part of the information regarding the whole process that led the product to the market, and about the people and organizations involved in its production. Our study highlights the possibility to increase the level of involvement of consumers, gathered in self-organized informal communities, with the

aim of producing the abovementioned three novel processes that may greatly increase the value produced by the partnership. Consumers such as those involved as in the case we analyzed acquire a holistic view of the supply chain, become aware of their role as key elements of it, and take action in innovation processes, risk-sharing, and price determination well beyond the perimeter established by the usual market dynamics. This point of view can be generalized beyond our case as many similar groupings are already active in several other sectors, such as food and energy (Cembalo, et al. 2013; Maestriperi, 2017; Signori and Forno, 2019). Furthermore, among self-organized informal communities, SPGs in particular, locate themselves in the borderlands between nonprofits, social movement organizations, and locally-based communities, thus representing potential partners for entities operating in the space between market and state (Young, Searing, and Brewer, 2016), where interesting examples of this could be collaborations taking the form of Collective Social Enterprises (Montgomery et al 2012).

Our case also sheds light on the role of the diffused and democratic decision-making process implemented by self-organized informal communities inside CSSPs. In this sense, we contribute to CSSPs literature (Seitanidi and Crane, 2014; Bouchard and Raufflet, 2019) by exposing a different series of processes at work when governance is democratic, where power is distributed, and the practices of the partnership are defined together on the basis of the shared purpose that ground it. Differently from our case, previous works approached partnerships composed of diverse and many members applying a top-down approach to governance – typically where a ‘secretariat’ provides central governance and assures focus on the shared purpose – and where partners are not called upon to co-develop the outcome, but rather to contribute to a pre-defined outcome, as it is the case in certification processes. Instead, we highlight the conditions in which highly democratic

governance characteristics can lead to an effective partnership, potentially able to realize the shared purpose it aims at; and we specify also under which conditions this may not happen, and how.

As a third contribution, our findings show that – regardless of the potential positive impact on the partnership – the participation of self-organized informal communities in CSSPs requires careful management. When success creates pressure to expand community participation, this risks transforming the self-organizing governance and the open informal boundaries of the community into the drivers of its decomposition: by weakening personal bonds among members, turning the emerging plurality of views on the shared purpose into conflicts rather than reciprocal enrichment, and by establishing interaction modes that increase the perceived distance among members, implies blurring the shared purpose the partnership is based on, and likely losing it irreversibly (Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). Rather than showing that only small communities are reliable partners, our study shows that homogenous and bond-based communities centered on direct interaction can be great partners, but only up to a certain point. After that point, the community needs to evolve, to find other equilibria based on different mechanisms and levers to continue its growth while keeping strengthening the partnership. Promising solutions in this direction could come from rethinking the processes taking place in the community, acting on the causal links and web of relations between the variables we identified. For example, the CSSP could try to prevent altogether the tensions we have described, for example by implementing dedicated governing units acting as “*network administrative organizations*” (Sas-Carranza & Ospina, 2010) capable of supporting the evolution of the network and driving its growth. Other opportunities could lie in managing the loss of attachment once it manifests. For example, an extra effort in codification and sharing of the founding principles as a way to maintain a clear and widely shared purpose may foster convergence of viewpoints and values far beyond the limits of direct interaction and homogeneity. Another

example may be establishing a dual decision-making process, coupling small-group close-contact activities with larger assemblies, also using digital rich-communication tools, so that deep engagement can be achieved also in larger and more diverse communities. A third possibility is acting on the micro-practices of community members' involvement – those at the basis of the engagement evolution – avoiding easy and cheap but impersonal interfaces (such as spreadsheets for managing orders) and instead appointing contact persons able to channel not only information on purchases but also ideas, desires, and suggestions. The fourth piece of advice may relate to the type of attachment granting engagement: in our case, we have seen that high engagement is associated with a type of attachment mainly driven by the establishment of personal bonds and direct interaction among the SPGs members and between them and the other partners that participate in the same shared purpose. As Ren et al. (2007) argue, individuals may also feel engaged in a group thanks to identity-based attachment, which bases members' identification with the abstract identity of the group rather than on personal bonds and frequent interaction. This sentiment (which in our case could be geared toward the SPGs' Solidarity Economy, for example) is not unknown in community studies: peripheral members are less engaged but still attracted to the group by identity-based motives (Wenger, 1998). Thus, when the bond-based attachment is not possible anymore in the "core group" of members (i.e., the more active members, Rullani & Haefliger, 2013), the partnership could try to stimulate and strengthen identity-based attachment, increasing it for peripheral members while activating it in place of bond-based attachment for core members. Such an identity-based shift beyond bond-based attachment can be also useful for maintaining a clear and lively definition of the partnership's shared purpose across all its members.

## **CONTRIBUTION**

Overall, our results show that “taking action” is paramount: partnerships involving large communities, even as a consequence of growth due to exceptional success, run the serious risk of seeing their communities dry out’ of shared purpose (Adler & Heckscher, 2018) and harm themselves, and the partnership. While our findings are based on the observation emerging from our case, with certain actors playing more central roles and performing certain actions rather than others, the strategies we depicted above can be enacted at the level of the partnership and thus triggered by any other members of the CSSP. Not only the SPGs but also the for-profit actors as well as the other partners besides the community, such as the non-profit organization or the network of fair-trade organic-cotton suppliers it gave access to, could have acted differently. Had that happened, different courses of action would have potentially played a role in reinforcing the partnership, or avoiding the weakening of it. We hope this study may offer some ideas to CSSP partners for imagining broader more democratic partnerships involving communities, and also for understanding how to make them work.

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**TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF ACTORS IN THE PARTNERSHIP**

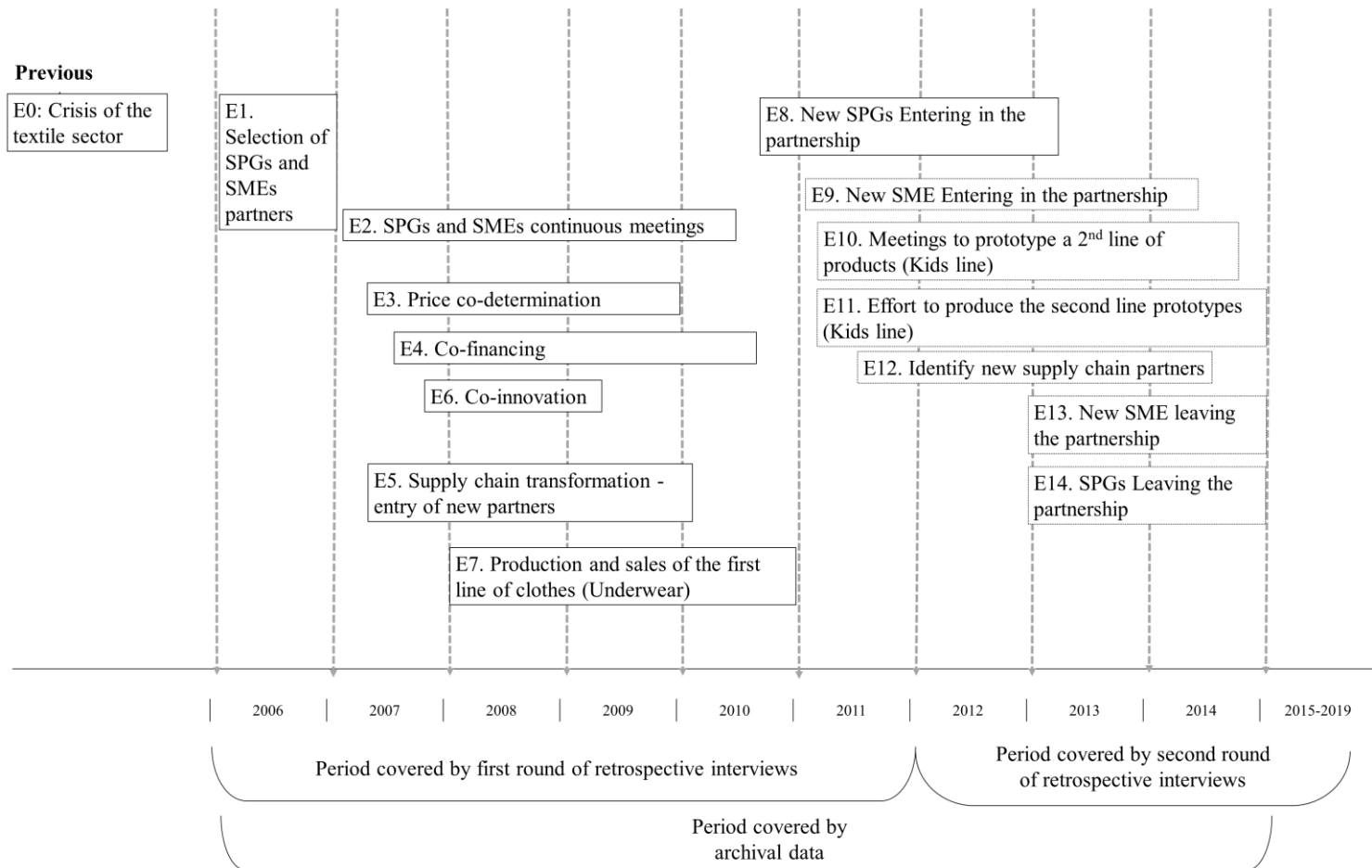
<b>Actors</b>	<b>Organization characteristics</b>	<b>organization in the collective</b>	<b>Objectives</b>
SPGs #1 to #4	Solidarity Purchasing Groups	Demand side partner	Initial members of the partnership contributing to the launch and development of it
SPGs #5 to #7	Solidarity Purchasing Groups	Demand side partner	Late entrant partners seeking to contribute to the development and scaling of the partnership
SME Design	A small firm specialized in the design and production of clothes for adults	Partnership co-founder	Develop and sell a new product with ethical and sustainable values
NPO Fairtrade	A non-profit organization specialized in fair trade initiatives	Partnership Co-founder	Advocate for a new structure of the textile value chain
SME Design Kid	A small firm specialized in the design and production of children's clothes	Late business entrant	Develop and sell a new product thanks to the partnership
IB Fairtrade	An international business broker for fair trade	Sourcing international suppliers for the	Support international commercial partnerships on fair trade principles

**TABLE 2. DATA SOURCES**

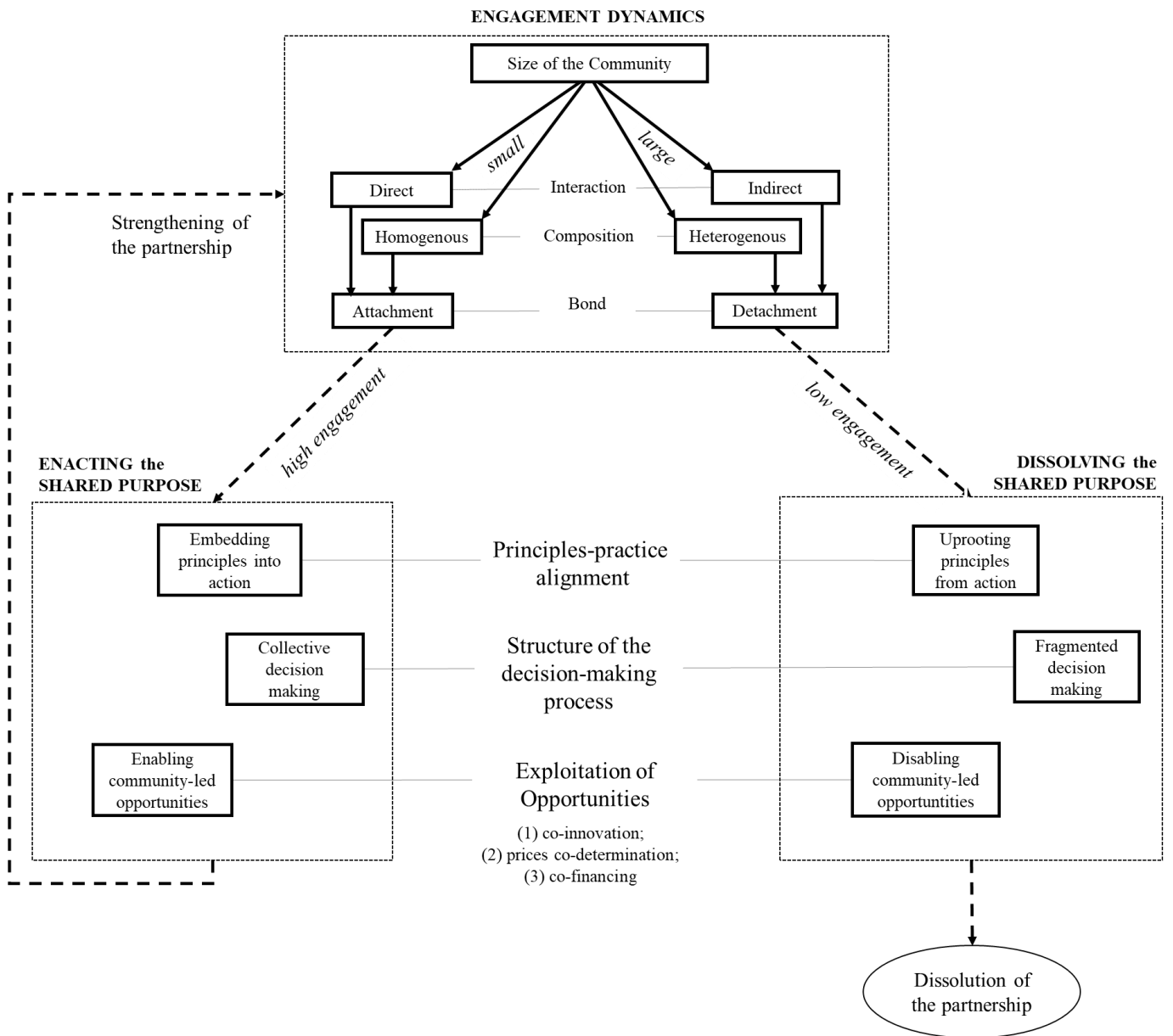
<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Typology of data</b>
<b>Semi-structured Interviews</b> <b>(Total 18 interviews)</b>	<b>First Round (2012-13)</b> 2 interviews with the entrepreneur (initial promoter of the Partnership); 1 interview with the President of the Nonprofit organization specialized in fair trade (initial promoter of the Partnership); 1 interview with the Vice-President of the Nonprofit organization specialized in fair trade (initial promoter of the Partnership) 1 interview with the entrepreneur specialized in production of clothes for children – Late entrant in the partnership; 1 interview with a private consultant, expert of international fair trade - International Broker for Fair-trade of the Partnership; 3 interviews with the responsibility of the textile industry of SPGs – (one interview with 3 different SPGs involved in the Partnership)
	<b>Second round (2019)</b> 3 interviews with the entrepreneur – (initial promoter of the Partnership); 4 interviews with the textile responsible of SPGs – (one interview with 4 different SPGs involved in the Partnership) 2 interviews with the textile responsible of SPGs – (one interview with 2 SPGs late entrant involved in the Partnership)
<b>Archival Data</b> <b>(Total 51: 48 documents, for a total of 200+ pages, and 3 videos)</b>	5 blog articles (About SPGs and Textile Industry); 15 newspaper articles (containing interviews with the entrepreneur and the President of the NGO as promoters of the partnership); 3 magazines (industry-based magazines about the Italian textile industry) 15 newsletters (SPGs Newsletters with information and updates about the specific partnership) 10 reports (SPGs Internal Reports) 3 video interviews (online interviews to the entrepreneur and the President of the NGO as promoters of the partnership)



**FIGURE 1. TIMELINE (adapted from Seitanidi, 2010)**



**FIGURE 2. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION**



## APPENDIX

### TABLE 3. SOLIDARITY ECONOMY PRINCIPLES

List of principles	Description
<b>Principle of Fairness</b>	<p>Fairness introduces a principle of ethics or justice to equality. As a value, it acknowledges the equal dignity of all people and protects their right not to be subject to relations based on domination, regardless of people's social condition, gender, age, ethnicity, origin, capacity, etc.</p> <p>Equality is an essential social objective given that its absence invariably leads to a loss of dignity. When joined by acknowledgement and respect toward differences, equality becomes "fairness".</p>
<b>Principle of Work</b>	<p>Work as a key element in the quality of life for individuals and communities, as well as the economic relations between citizens, people and states.</p> <p>The principle advocates for the importance of restoring the human, social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of work which develops people's capacities and produces goods and services to satisfy our real needs as individuals and those of our immediate environments and communities.</p>
<b>Principle of Environmental Sustainability</b>	<p>All our productive and economic activities happen within nature. The point of departure is to work with nature, not against it, while also recognizing its rights. We believe that a good relationship with nature is a source of economic wealth and good health for all. Therefore, environmental sustainability must be an integral part of all actions, as we assess our environmental impact and ecological footprint for the long run.</p> <p>The aim is to significantly reduce human ecological footprint of all our activities, advancing towards sustainable and fair ways of producing and consuming while promoting an ethics of sufficiency and austerity.</p>
<b>Principle of Cooperation</b>	<p>Cooperation is to be favored over competition. The aim is to build together a model of society grounded on local, harmonious development, fair commercial relations, equality, trust, co-responsibility, transparency and respect.</p> <p>The Solidarity Economy should be founded on participative and democratic ideals and it should promote cooperative learning and work among people and organizations by fostering collaborative processes, joint decision making and fair distribution of tasks and responsibilities.</p>

**Principle of Non-profit**

The Solidarity Economy pursues and practices an economic model geared toward the full, collective and individual development of all people and, as a medium, the efficient management of economically viable, sustainable and wholly gainful projects, where surpluses are reinvested and redistributed. This non-profit orientation is closely tied to our way of measuring overall results. Beyond economic aspects, we also consider human, social, environmental, cultural and participative processes in ways that are beneficial to all. This means that all the activities direct any and all profits toward the improvement or development of the social objectives of our projects, as well as toward supporting other solidarity and general-interest initiatives.

**Principle of Territorial  
Responsibility**

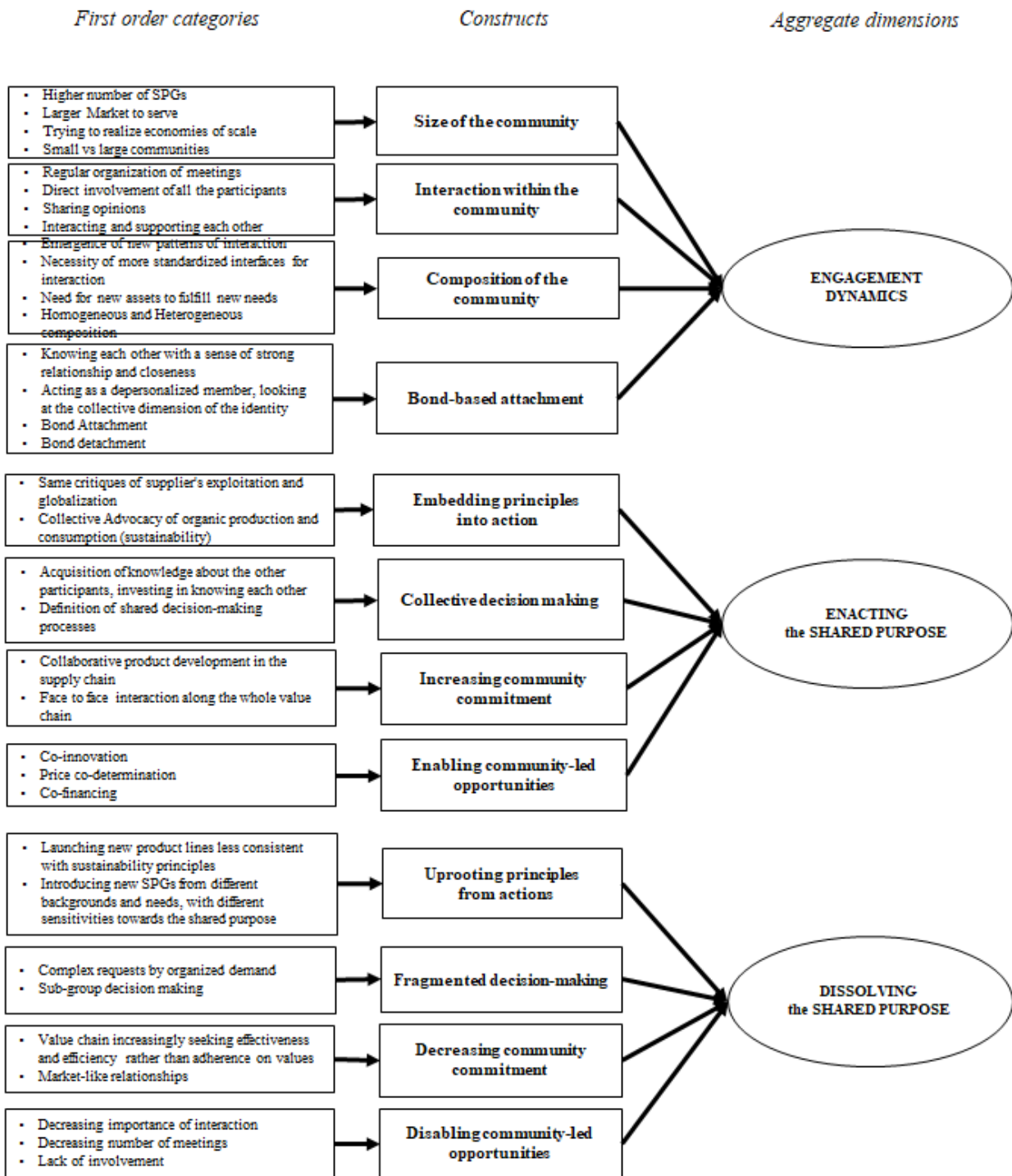
The general commitment to the environment takes shape through participation in local, communitarian and sustainable development contexts. The organizations involved are fully integrated in the territory and social context where they develop their activities. This demands active participation in and cooperation with other organizations involved in the local economic and social fabric.

This collaboration is seen as a journey where positive experiences of solidarity can generate a transformative process to overcome structures of inequality, domination and exclusion. The general commitment to the local dimension propels us in the search for more globally oriented solutions, continually moving back and forth between the micro and macro, local and global.

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Source: REAS 2019

**FIGURE 3. DATA STRUCTURE**



**TABLE 4 EXCERPTS FROM DATA**

**ENGAGEMENT DYNAMICS**

2 <sup>nd</sup> - order code	Selected quotes
<p><b>Size of the community</b> (small / large)</p>	<p><i>Let's say that for those times, the SPGs were still a pretty small reality, they had small numbers and an SPG alone did not have the possibility to influence a project ... in the textile industry because even a small craft-based firm alone has a productivity that is greater than what a single SPG consumes. So, it was absolutely necessary that SPGs got together and coordinate. (Interview SPG #1)</i></p> <p><i>There was an initial period of growth, in which we started from zero garments, and [then] we produced about 15,000 of them annually. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>Today the participation from a big part of the network has disappeared ... basically – with the exception of a small number of SPGs - it's all over. (Interview – SME Design)</i></p>
<p><b>Interaction</b> (direct / indirect)</p>	<p><i>Currently, we are doing this work of renewing the product and the project [and] we see each other pretty often: twice a month. Then normally in any case, we are in touch often via skype and by telephone. Normally we see each other in person once every month or two. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>Every time a decision had to be taken, we had a meeting straight in the firm and tried to discuss the issues we had to confront as a group, with all of the project's partners. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>We couldn't interact directly anymore, so we needed to find a way to handle too many requests. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p>
<p><b>Composition</b> (homogenous / heterogeneous)</p>	<p><i>It was really a phase in which the product's requirements had increased, the requests had increased, and even the different requests for differing products from the SPGs had increased, and obviously in this phase, we, as a company, were not able to respond to such an important heterogeneity of the product, as you said before. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>We sell to many (different) customers in Italy, there must be at least about 50 SPGs and about 30 shops. Then you have to consider that some of the active clients are always present; others, instead, are tiny, they order 20 pairs of underwear, and we see them 10 years later. (Interview - NPO Fair Trade President)</i></p> <p><i>[With SME- Design Kid] there was an attempt to open a line of children's clothes, the field in which they were specialized. (Interview - NPO Fair Trade President)</i></p>

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*We discussed a lot about how to build the whole model of partnership; it was a long process in which we all involved people we knew with whom we were sure to share values and ideals. This sense of belonging allowed us to build a beautiful project. (Director - NPO)*

**Bond**  
*(attachment / detachment)*

*We are part of a group of volunteers who have been following the project since its origins when the product line did not exist yet. Thanks to this, we have been able to be part of the value chain transformation process in all its aspects (Interview – SPG#2)*

*We suffered a lot: as we arrived later, we did not take part in a whole series of actions and interactions on the initial decisions and therefore we could not feel 100% involved. (Interview – SPG#5)*

*Somehow the many relationships and interactions that we had to manage with SPGs were an element that certainly made the enthusiasm diminish. [...] The problem was not the product but more the fact that we could not maintain the relationships. (Interview - SME-Design)*

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## ENACTING the SHARED PURPOSE

2 <sup>nd</sup> - order code	Selected quotes
<p><b>Embedding principles into action</b></p>	<p><i>During the morning a German documentary was screened: "100% Cotton". It painfully plunged us into the reality of cotton production in countries where no rules are applied, neither for safeguarding health nor for paying workers fairly, nor for safeguarding the environment. (...) The movie raised many questions about the mechanisms of production and globalization, that strangle small producers, and not only economically. We had the opportunity to talk about it with the representative of the "Clean Clothes Campaign" [to promote fair treatment of labor in the fashion industry], followed by a report [from one of the SPGs involved] on the origins of the ... project. (Archival data - Newspaper interview NPO - Fair Trade)</i></p> <p><i>SME-Design] communicated clearly how he had in mind to rebuild the supply chain, from the cotton field to the final product in the shop, drawing all the intermediary phases. This in the textile industry means a lot, as it's a very complex supply chain. (Interview - SPG #5)</i></p> <p><i>This transformation [towards solidarity economy] was thought of obviously around a product that is completely planned with all the other subjects that are part of the same sector, from the suppliers to the consumers, who in our case are represented by the SPGs. (Interview SME-Design)</i></p>
<p><b>Collective decision making</b></p>	<p><i>In total, I believe we had 56 meetings, in which we met, us as firms and them as consumers. [...] We met in subgroups according to product types. We also discussed in the whole assembly, because the work done by each subgroup was then brought to the assembly. [...] And so we brought the results of our project and submitted to the assembly also our choices for future development. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>We are one of the very few projects that know by name all the steps in the supply chain, from Brazil to Italy. (Interview – NPO Fair Trade President)</i></p> <p><i>He [the entrepreneur] has always been very transparent from this point of view; he always made it clear which were the strong points of the project, and which were its weaknesses. (Interview - SPG #5)</i></p>
<p><b>Increasing community commitment</b></p>	<p><i>The problems of the seams and the imperfect size range, and these little holes... we had to learn (...) also, [SME-Design] had to learn, [as] mastering this cotton without any elastam [i.e., a chemical compound that makes cotton flexible], without any chemicals, it's not trivial... thus we learned also about that, I feel we are a bit more competent than before. (Interview - SPG #1)</i></p> <p><i>Each SPG actively participated in all meetings and gave its perspective on all phases of the project (Interview - NPO Fair Trade President)</i></p>



*We really put a collective effort in [the project]- for instance when there were the first designs of the clothes, our SPG gave a lot of availability and we really acted as “guinea pigs” for the product: that first experimentation lasted a lot of time and there really was a lot of participation and effort on our side – we were in contact all the time! (Interview - SPG #5)*

**Enabling community-led opportunities**

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*The first things we said was that the seams were tight and there were these famous holes in the seams. The first thing I did was take the photos and send the photos by email, communicating it to the rest of the textile group. [SME-Design] ‘activated the brain’, and after a while, he reached the conclusion and explained to us the reason for the problem. We forwarded [SME-Design’s conclusion] to our SPG network, ... [SME-Design] replied to [all we asked] and modified everything at the end. The holes disappeared, he changed the needle and the way the cotton was treated, and the seams were done differently. [ ...] I mean I believe he listened to us. (Interview - SPG #1)*

*We formed the price together with the various actors trying to re-construct every step in the supply chain to understand everyone’s contribution in the project. [...] We also involved SPGs in determining the final price of the product. (Interview - SME-Design)*

*Thanks to the 50% pre-financing, the agreement with consumers organized by SPGs was fundamental to guarantee the startup of production and the first investments in organic and fair raw materials. (Archival data - Newspaper - Interview NPO - Fair trade – La Repubblica, 2010)*

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**DISSOLVING the SHARED PURPOSE**

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**2<sup>nd</sup>- order code**

**Selected quotes**

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*We had problems because there were two producers who had been backed very strongly by the SPG and there is not always that critical ability, that spirit that is needed, really beyond the rules, with your mind somehow trained to understand where the danger lies... (Interview - SPG #6)*

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<b>Uprooting principles from actions</b>	<p><i>[The line of children's clothes] did not have the impact we'd hoped for with the SPGs ... because the color was missing, ... We tried first with natural colors, but they impacted too much on the price. (Interview - NPO Fair Trade)</i></p> <p><i>At some point it was our need as a company to take a step forward towards greater efficiency, trying to abandon what was the 'sartorial' concept of the product [...] to move towards a more standardized model. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p>
<b>Fragmented decision-making</b>	<p><i>I am responsible for the sub-group for clothes and I'm (responsible) to maintain contact with SME-Design. (Interview - SPG #4)</i></p> <p><i>Some people found themselves in front of a finished product, already prepared and already packaged (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>[Today, the dynamic of shared decision-making with SPGs] is not relevant anymore. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p>
<b>Decreasing community commitment</b>	<p><i>Honestly, it didn't fly, it's not flying. [...] In the months when no order was possible, I expected people to call me: "What happens? Can't we order?". Nothing, nothing. No one asked such questions (Interview SPG #4)</i></p> <p><i>In my opinion, what happens when SPGs can't be part of the decision-making process from the beginning is that if they like the product maybe they buy it once to try it, but if you don't involve them in some way, it's difficult that they will buy it again (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>One important component of this project was the participation of the SPG. [...] more in general ... there was a moment of stall .... a slowdown from the point of view of the orders. [...] So the combination of these two things worked together to make the project fail (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p>
<b>Disabling community-led opportunities</b>	<p><i>Today the relationship between all the companies participating in the project and the SPGs themselves has changed completely. Currently, there is no relationship but on a purely commercial stand between some SPGs and my company: [...] sometimes, when they need them, SPGs buy some of my products. (Interview - SME-Design)</i></p> <p><i>Today no SPG adopts the pre-financing method. [...] The response from the consumers has slowly diminished and therefore we thought of dissolving this project because, in fact, the minimum conditions did not exist to be able to carry on. (Archival data – Newspaper article)</i></p>

