



## **The role of grassroots social innovations in enhancing responsible (green) production and consumption practices in the local context**

The case study of Galician network for conscious and responsible consumption<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

Sustainable consumption has become a central focus for national and international policies. The actions that people take and decisions they make to consume certain products and services or to live in certain way have direct impact on the environment as well as on personal and collective well-being (Jackson, 2005). Besides, individual behaviours are deeply embedded in social and organizational contexts that condition or influence their consumption choices. A wider responsible consumption movement -associated with ethical and green consumption- have arisen worldwide as community-based initiatives grounded on the active engagement of citizens in promoting sustainable lifestyles in the local and global context. Consumers are seen as active agents that assume ethical responsibilities in their consumption decisions, which also requires extent knowledge and education regarding environmental issues. In this context, public participation and social engagement are conceived as real educational process for social transformation, gaining social empowerment and collective learning (Uzzel, 1999; Lema-Blanco & Garcia Mira, 2015, Lema Blanco et al, 2016).

Transitions literature (Seyfang, 2007) as well as recent theoretical approaches on transformative social innovation (Haxeltine et al, 2016) have provided empirical analysis on how social innovation -developed in different contexts and scenarios (Wittmayer et al, 2016)- permit people take part in solving problems processes, introducing alternative ways of knowing, doing and relating to alter current economic systems, throughout

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horizontal structures where normal people share responsibility in making decisions on collective issues and deepening a well-functioning democracy.

According to scientific literature on social learning (Walker, 2007; Heras, 2005, Palh-Wostl, 2007; García-Mira et al, 2013) robust participatory methods improve capacity-building, establish social identities and place attachment, help people to understand governance issues, to create social networks, and receive feedback to their effort. Secondly, these participatory processes could be authentic processes of environmental participation, in which people create- in a collaborative way- new knowledge through personal reflection and the interchange of knowledge and experiences in community. Participants will develop (through active involvement), new skills (attitudes, abilities) that will reflect on greater individual and group competences for action and social mobilization (Dumitru, Lema-Blanco et al, 2015; 2016). However, social participation and collaborative learning processes are influenced by personal factors (motivations, expectations, trust) as also structural conditions (information available, communication tools, decision-making spaces, capacity of incidence in reality). Contextual factors (social-economic system) should be taken into account, likewise democratic culture or social norms (Gifford, 2014; García-Mira & Dumitru, 2015).

This paper will present the first phase of qualitative research that aims to analyze the role of grassroots social innovations in enhancing responsible (green) production and consumption practices within the local and regional context. We aim to determine the motivations, processes and objective and subjective factors that influence in the constitution and operationalization of grassroots sustainable consumption initiatives in Galicia (Spain).

The selected case-study is the "Galician network of conscious and responsible consumption", which gathers twenty (non-profit) associations, cooperatives and responsible consumption groups distributed in the Galician region. Empirical data have been collected through qualitative research methods: a semi-structured questionnaire has been designed to guide the interviews with practitioners and key-actors. Participant observation and document review completed the data analysis.

Preliminary analysis of the results permitted to identify common characteristics, constitution processes, internal structures and internal processes that enable the participation of people and communities in their structures. The results demonstrate that responsible consumption is linked to personal values and worldviews shared by the practitioners. In terms of sustainable production, social initiative enable the consolidation of local organic production, establishing face-to-face relations with local food producers, based on certain criteria (proximity, production systems, social structure of the company, etc). Regarding consumption choices, together with organic production, initiatives support fair trade movement and endow "slow food philosophy"



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to their daily practices. Besides, the participation within the network promotes pro-environmental behaviours that go beyond “green consumption”: implementing strategies of low-carbon emissions, waste management and enhancing sustainable local development and collective entrepreneurship.

The Galician Network of Conscious and Responsible Consumption is an example of grassroots initiatives that enable open spaces for social participation, enhancing community empowering dynamics, capacity building and self-efficacy perception. Despite being minority networks of consumers and producers, community-based initiatives may become “agents of change”, playing a notable role as creators of new cultural frames that turn into social referents for the rest of the society.