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The No TAV Entrepreneurs' Transition towards a Sustainable Solidarity Economy: Pragmatic Analysis of a Social Innovation Process

ABSTRACT

Whilst a global transition towards sustainability appears to be a pressing challenge, several surveys have shown that sustainable principles and values seem to emerge on a global scale. Various social movements have laid claim to such a transition. An example of these movements is the No TAV movement in the lower part of the Susa Valley in Italy. Since the 1990s, this area has been the scene of a territorial conflict pitting the local inhabitants against the Italian state on a 54km long railway tunnel project under the Alps. By strongly rejecting this project and collective participation in numerous resistance movements, the Low-Valsusans have gradually become a territorialized community whose members seem to share a set of sustainable principles and values. In our research, we have questioned the impact of this very peculiar context on the local small and medium entrepreneurs, trying to find out if they are sharing the sustainable norms of their community, and whether it influences their activities. Are the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs currently in transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy? We have been able to portray an ongoing social innovation process in the lower part of the Susa Valley through which these entrepreneurs are gradually getting involved in the implementation of the sustainable principles and values of their community. After the introduction of our transdisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework, this paper will describe this peculiar social innovation process that seems to be currently transforming the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs' activities.

KEY-WORDS

NO TAV, SUSTAINABILITY, SOLIDARITY ECONOMY, ENTREPRENEURS, ECONOMICS OF CONVENTIONS, SOCIAL INNOVATION

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1. Introduction

A global transition towards sustainability is a pressing challenge in the current context of fast degradation of the biosphere (Steffen et al., 2004) and of rising socio-economic inequalities that generate multiple vulnerabilities (Carroué, 2015; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2013). Qualitative (Buclet, 2011) and quantitative (Bozonnet, 2014) surveys have shown that sustainable principles and values appears to be emerging on a global scale. Various social movements have laid claim to such a transition as the anti-airport movement of Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France, whose slogan was to fight against “the airport and its world”. Another example of social movement over a Locally Unwanted Land Uses (LULU) is the No TAV¹ movement in the lower part of the Susa Valley in Italy. Since the 1990s, this area has been the scene of a territorial conflict pitting the local inhabitants against the Italian state on a 54km long railway tunnel project under the Alps, linking the Susa Valley to the French Maurienne Valley. By strongly rejecting this project and collective participation in numerous resistance movements, the Low-Valsusans² have gradually become a territorialized community (Soubirou and Buclet, 2017) whose members are linked by strong bonds of co-obligation to each other and seem to share a set of sustainable principles and values. In our research, we have questioned the impact of this very peculiar context on the local small and medium entrepreneurs, trying to find out if they are sharing the sustainable norms of their community, and whether it influences their activities.

Are the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs currently in transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy? Our hypothesis was that the No TAV conflict has led to a major sustainable transformation in the local entrepreneurs' activities. Using the theoretical framework of social innovations (Klein and Harrison, 2007) developed by the “Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales” (CRISES) in Québec, we have been able to portray an ongoing social innovation process in the lower part of the Susa Valley through which these entrepreneurs are gradually getting involved in the implementation of the sustainable principles and values of their community. To explore this process, the first part of this paper will introduce our transdisciplinary theoretical framework, referring to the two categories of social innovation and solidarity economy. The second part will present the conditions of our empirical investigation in the Susa Valley and the qualitative methodology we have used to collect and process data. Finally, the third part will describe the steps, factors and limits of the social innovation process that seems to be currently transforming the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs' activities.

¹ No Treno ad Alta Velocità (no high-speed train).

² The inhabitants of the lower part of the Susa Valley.

2. Theoretical framework

Social innovations are peculiar processes of social dissemination and institutionalisation of inventions aiming to meet collective aspirations of human groups. This notion gained attention in the 1980s, in reaction to deleterious social and environmental collateral effects of economic development policies. Two approaches stood out. A “weak solidarity” approach (Laville, 2014: 64) states that innovations within the capitalist “dominant conventional regime” (Buclet, 2011: 66) can meet social and environmental challenges. From the economic point of view, the global market is there considered as “able to produce antidotes to the problems it creates” (Laville, 2014: 70), for example through the introduction of regulatory mechanisms such as tradeable pollution permits or by the expansion of “ecopreneurial” start-ups on the mass market (Hörisch, 2015).

On the other hand, a “strong solidarity” approach (Laville, 2014: 64), mainly developed by the CRISES in Québec, considers social innovations as locally embedded emancipatory and transformative processes (Klein et al., 2016) that challenge the dominant conventional regime. Economy is there conceived as “a mean to achieve social justice and ecological sustainability goals” (Laville, 2014: 65), in a solidarity perspective. This second approach, which focuses on local transformative processes, seems more appropriate to understand the dynamics at work in the lower Susa Valley. It has been developed in a variety of contexts such as “economically and socially disadvantaged areas” (Hillier, Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2004) or the Bolivian popular economy (Hillenkamp, 2007). However, LULU contexts remain understudied from a strong social innovation perspective (Laville et al., 2017). This is surprising, since these contexts are characterised by territorial conflicts that can affect local embeddedness, which is one of the basic characteristics of social innovation. Thus, by focusing on a LULU context, this article aims to contribute to fill a meaningful gap in the social innovation literature.

2.1 Solidarity economy

The solidarity economy approach allows a non-capitalist analysis of the entrepreneurs' behaviours. In this respect, they are considered as political actors, potentially aspiring to an alternative type of society. A solidarity economy can be defined as the whole set of “production, exchange, saving and consumption activities contributing to the democratization of the economy through civic involvements” (Fraisie, Guérin and Laville, 2007: 245). According to Hersent and Palma Torres, those initiatives' motto can be resumed as “Say what we do and do what we say” (Hersent and Palma Torres, 2014: 214). They claim the political dimension of the economic activities and participate to the real implementation of a way of life collectively desired. From this perspective, the economy is meant to serve societal aims as “social justice, environmental preservation, cultural diversity...” (Laville, 2014: 227).

In the solidarity economy approach, the economy is considered as plural as it mixes reciprocity, householding (Hillenkamp, 2013), market exchanges and redistribution principles. However, reciprocity understood as “a relationship between people conscious of having common interests which implies the moral obligation to not damage the others” (Castel, 2015: 178, quoting Polanyi, 1975), is the fundamental principle of such an economy. In other words, solidarity economy initiatives fundamentally require collective relationships of co-obligation between people, guided by the political principle of the common (Dardot and Laval, 2014).

In a solidarity economy the economic activities aim at implementing a way of life collectively considered as good by the members of the society or group where they take place. Thus, studying such activities requires first to circumscribe the concerned group and to identify the values of its members and the principles they believe as just and able to guarantee the respect of these values.

2.2 A transdisciplinary approach of social innovation processes

The CRISES was founded in Québec in 1986 “to understand and identify the success factors of innovative actions answering to new social aspirations and to the new social needs” generated by the crisis of the Fordist model in the 1980s (Klein and Fontan, 2014: 2). Inspired by Schumpeter’s conception of crisis as “creative destruction processes”, the CRISES original theoretical framework crosses institutionalist approaches, economics of conventions and social movement analysis with economic geography (Klein and Fontan, 2014: 2-6). According to this approach, social innovation processes aim “to answer to an aspiration, meet a need, provide a solution or take advantage of an opportunity for action to change social relations, transform a framework for action or propose new cultural orientations”, in order to contribute to “the better-being of individuals and communities” (Saucier et al., 2007: 390). Thus, the first characteristic of social innovations is to have social purposes, and not only market-oriented finalities.

A second key characteristic of social innovations is their historical dimension. Social innovation processes are relatively alike other innovation processes as they include three phases of invention, dissemination and institutionalisation. However, the peculiarity of social innovation processes is that these three steps take place at a societal scale, and not only into a company or a line of business. At first “emerges the idea of a novelty”: individuals create something that is locally new, individually, in parallel or collectively, but always in connection with the society in which they are embedded (Fontan, 2011: 20). In a second phase, the “creation” spreads and is gradually adapted and adopted by a group that attributes to it a “new social use”, helpful to meet his aspirations (Fontan, 2011: 20-21). Through this collective appropriation, the initial “creation” is refined, adjusted to the context in which it is mobilized, its mode of use is gradually codified. It is this

step that gives a “social dimension” to the innovation³. Finally, a last phase of institutionalisation of the social innovation can begin, through which it can potentially become a new conventional modality of action. During this last phase, a social innovation can transform normality by being added to other existing conventions, or by replacing one or more already established conventions. The emergence of a social innovation and its institutionalisation thus correspond to a process of “socialization” of an invention, through its increasingly extensive implementation. This process of progressive “interest sharing” can be detailed in four steps:

“The rise in interest primarily affects the innovators, that is to say the people directly interested in the novelty. Secondly, it joins the early followers, that is to say, this group of people who are very sensitive to the proposed novelty. Third, we find most of the population, [...]. Finally, is convinced a fourth group of people who were refractory to the idea but who, becoming marginal, must follow the general trend once it is well anchored in the population.” (Fontan, 2011: 23)

Once it becomes conventional, a modality of action emanating from a process of social innovation can thus be coercive if not oppressive (Larsson and Brandsen, 2016) for those who do not adopt it.

A last key characteristic of social innovation processes according to the CRISES approach is their local embeddedness. Territories are there understood as local systems of social relationships (Saucier et al., 2007) that can favour the social dissemination of innovations in a network logic.

3. Methodological framework

We lived in the lower part of the Susa Valley for five weeks in 2016 to conduct our investigation. We had spent several days in the valley during the previous year to establish contacts within the local population. Paying attention to the ordinary actors' self-reflexivity, we have chosen to conduct our empirical investigation in a “pragmatic style” (Barthe et al., 2013). In this approach, the ordinary people are considered as having a “critical competence” (Barthe and Lemieux, 2002). On the other hand, the researchers' duty is considered to be “less to seek to ‘free’ the actors challenging them to convert to the sociological point of view than to report the plurality of the forms of criticism in our societies” (Barthe and Lemieux, 2002: 37).

Our empirical investigation had two goals. Its first aim was to characterize the limits of the studied group and what its members considered to be a good life (that is to say the principles and values they eventually shared). Its second aim was to question whether the local entrepreneurs were transitioning towards a solidarity economy guided by the local principles and values. Even if this paper is focused on the second goal, we will first briefly present the results of the first step of our

³ It is to be distinguished from its “social purpose”, which is also crucial.

investigation in this methodological section, as they are crucial to the correct understanding of the results here introduced.

3.1 Preliminary results: the identification of the Low-Valsusan community

Studying social innovation and solidarity economy within a peculiar group or society requires first to define the limit of this group and the principles and values that constitute what its members consider to be a good life. We made such investigations at the beginning of our fieldwork, mainly using an historical approach and the economics of conventions⁴, an approach interested into social norms and representations. We have conducted several interviews with elder people of the valley to collect the local memory about the various conflicts since the 1970s and consulted the local newspapers archives. We made also a qualitative semantic analysis of local collective speeches, that is to say speeches expressed collectively (for example statements signed by all the mayors of the lower valley) or written through collective deliberative-participative processes. We observed in addition the local landscapes to detect the visible mark of anchorage of an eventual local community (graffiti, banners, flags...). Finally, we compared these results to the pre-existing literature about the studied territory (Caruso, 2008; Della Porta and Piazza, 2008; Chiroli, 2017).

During the last 50 years, the inhabitants of the lower part of the Susa Valley have been collectively involved into various local resistance mobilizations. This area, where today live around 60,000 inhabitants, has suffered a violent deindustrialization since the 1970s. Several labour struggles thus took place in the area during this decade, including a general strike that paralyzed the valley on the 9th of February 1971. The 1980s were the scene of two protests against huge cross-border infrastructures projects: a highway (failed struggle) and a high-voltage electrical line (victorious struggle). Those conflicts have been important premises that have facilitated the collective participation of the inhabitants into the No TAV conflict. They are still used today as a popular memory to justify the current struggle. The turning point of the crystallization of a community linked by co-obligation bonds in the lower Susa Valley is 2005. The violent police answer to the local popular mobilizations that took place this year to prevent the installation of several TAV building sites have been a deep shock for the Low-Valsusans and has reinforced the feeling of being a besieged territory. On the 8th of December 2005, a huge strike, locally known as the "Immaculate rebellion" gathered 10,000 people in the small village of Venaus to force the police and the companies involved in the TAV project to abandon their prospective building site in the village. Since 2005, the collective involvement of the Low-Valsusans has expanded beyond the TAV issue to a multidimensional movement concerned by the wider question of which societal model to choose.

⁴ The economics of conventions are described later in this paper, in Section 3.2.

Through the recent literature (Caruso, 2008; Della Porta and Piazza, 2008; Chirolì, 2017) and our analysis of collective speeches, Low-Valsusans appeared to share a set of common sustainable principles and values. In the collective speeches we have studied, humans and nature are both recognized as having worth. These speeches also converge around the eight following principles:

- opposition to the TAV and to the LULU
- measured action or sobriety, paying attention to the humans and the biosphere limits
- territoriality, local level being the just level for action
- autonomy, self-governance and opposition to any type of alienation
- friendliness, respect and mutual goodwill
- co-obligation between each other
- solidarity, care for the weaker ones
- continuity, belonging to a temporal continuum through past, present and future.

Thus, a Low-Valsusan solidarity economy is an economy guided by these sustainable values and principles.

Moreover, the Low-Valsusans share consciously a feeling of spatial anchorage in the lower part of the valley, between the villages of Exilles and Avigliana. It does not only appear in their speeches, the landscapes are also marked by this anchorage as there are hundreds of No TAV banners along the roads between these villages and a lot of No TAV graffiti on the bridges, roads, and even on the mountains. The inhabitants refer this space as the space they are responsible for, with sentences like “taking care of our territory” or “improve the territory”. To describe the peculiar Low-Valsusan community we have created the notion of territorialized community. It refers both to the French economic geography notion of territory (Moine, 2006), and to the socio-political notion of common defined as a political principle of co-obligation (Dardot and Laval, 2014). A territorialized community is a group of people spatially anchored in a close physical space, who consider to be linked to each other by bonds of co-obligation and that their territory is their collective practical responsibility arena (Soubirou and Buclet, 2017).

3.2 Capturing entrepreneurs' representations and capabilities: a composite semi-structured interview design

We conducted a qualitative investigation (semi-structured interviews) with 13 small and medium entrepreneurs (in 12 businesses) in the lower part of the Susa Valley. We used different entry points to select our panel: business directories, direct meeting in local places of sociability (cafés, markets) and associative directories. Table 1 details the composition of this panel.

Table 1. Entrepreneurs' panel

| | | |
|---|------------------------------|----|
| Associative membership of the businesses | Member of Etinomia | 7 |
| | Member of other associations | 3* |
| | Not member of an association | 4 |
| Gender of the entrepreneurs | Men | 9 |
| | Women | 4 |
| Age of the entrepreneurs | 30 years old and less | 0 |
| | 31-45 years old | 3 |
| | 46-60 years old | 5 |
| | Over than 60 years old | 5 |
| Date of creation of the businesses | After 2011 | 4 |
| | Before 2011 | 8 |
| Line of business | Agriculture | 3 |
| | Services | 1 |
| | Trade | 3 |
| | Craft | 2 |
| | Industry | 3 |
| Number of employees of the businesses | No employees | 8 |
| | Less than 10 employees | 1 |
| | 10-50 employees | 3 |

* Two of them are also members of Etinomia.

Source: Soubirou (2018)

3.2.1 Identify entrepreneurs' principles and values with the economics of conventions

Our first methodological challenge was to question the belonging of these entrepreneurs to the local territorialized community. More precisely, we wanted to know if they were sharing the local sustainable principles and values and if they believed that they had to implement them into their entrepreneurial activities. We thus needed a methodological approach interested into peoples' beliefs and social representations to answer these questions. We therefore chose to use the economics of conventions, an approach that has emerged in France in the 1990s (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991), between sociology and political economics. In the CRISES framework, the economics of conventions serves to understand the coordination among social actors involved in social innovation

(Callorda Fossati, Degavre and Lévesque, 2018). By rejecting the Homo economicus postulate, this approach allows the understanding of alternative coordination modes. A convention is a collective belief that leads our action. It is what is understood as the correct way to behave under this or that circumstance. Orléan defines it as follows:

“A behavioural regularity R in a population P as: (1) all the members of P act according to R; (2) everyone believes that all the members of P act according to R and (3) find in this belief a good and crucial reason to act according to R; (4) moreover, at least, one other regularity R' verifying the preceding conditions could have prevail.” (Orléan, 2004: 12)

Conventions derive their strength from the legitimacy that members of a group confer to them. By spreading, they are gradually instituted: they become what is perceived as a natural way of behaving. On the opposite, behaviours contrary to instituted conventions may be subject to social sanctions. With the conventions, “a common framework [...] of common principles which authorizes the actors to reprove those who do not respect the convention” (Orléan, 2004: 15) is instituted.

We first asked the local entrepreneurs about what they believed to be the correct way to behave for the common good. We have chosen to sometimes “quarrel” with the respondents (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991) as a last resort. We thus argued opposite points of views to lead them to give more justifications about their declarations and thus to express in a clearer manner the principles and values they believed in. We made a semantic analysis of their speeches and compared their answers to the principles and values we had identified as shared in the local community. In addition, we asked them if they wanted and tried to implement such kind of behaviours in their enterprises, and if so, to detail this involvement in a concrete manner.

3.2.2 Entrepreneurs' solidarity involvements as capabilities

The capabilities approach links individuals' freedom, their activity, their aspirations and the context in which they act. In this approach, individuals are seen as evolving within an environment that provides them various resources. By mobilizing these resources, they can implement functionings, which are “the actual achievements, in terms of doing and being, of an agent (such as cycling, feeding, participating at a meeting, to be a teacher, etc.) [...]” (Bakshi and Dubois, 2008: 262). However, the implementation of these functionings requires more than just access to resources:

“It is important to consider not only the primary goods held by individuals, but also the personal characteristics that command the conversion of the primary goods into personal faculties to favour one's goals.” (Sen, 2003: 105)

There are thus conversion factors that determine the ability of individuals to mobilize their resources to achieve the functionings they aspire to.

In our investigation, we used the capabilities approach to understand how and why entrepreneurs succeed—or fail—to conduct their professional activity according to their principles and values. We therefore asked them about:

- the functionings necessary to their professional activity
- the constraints on these functionings (actors and resources mobilized)
- the adequacy between these functionings and their aspirations.

3.3 Identify the steps of a social innovation process: archives investigations

A transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy appeared quickly in the interviews we conducted with the local entrepreneurs. Thus, we finally made archives investigation to question more precisely these dynamics. We gathered videos, newspapers articles, press releases and web pages to identify the different steps of this transition. This allowed us to characterize a currently ongoing social innovation process and to check the truthfulness of events evoked by entrepreneurs during the interviews.

4. Results

4.1 Entrepreneurs sharing their community's principles and values

Whatever was their activity, all the entrepreneurs we interviewed respected both humans and the natural environment. The principles of the Low-Valsusan territorialized community, as previously highlighted, spontaneously cross the speeches of the interviewed entrepreneurs, who refer to them in their own words. The principles of opposition to the LULU and of territoriality are present in the speeches of all the respondents as shown in Table 2⁵. The principles of co-obligation, sobriety, continuity and solidarity are the ones most often mentioned. The other principles—autonomy and conviviality—were mentioned by more than half of the interviewed entrepreneurs.

Since they share their community's principles and values, it seems relevant to question the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs' ability to achieve a transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy with the capabilities approach. The coming sub-sections will show that this transition can be described as a currently ongoing social innovation process, since it spreads locally and aims at implementing the territorialized community collective aspirations.

⁵ Detailed verbatims can be consulted in Soubirou (2018).

Table 2. Shared principles in the interviewed entrepreneurs' speeches

| | Opposition to the LULU | Measured action | Territoriality | Autonomy | Conviviality | Co-obligation | Solidarity | Continuity |
|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------|--------------|---------------|------------|------------|
| Joséphine | x | x | x | x | | x | x | x |
| Evan | x | x | x | x | | x | x | x |
| Mathieu | x | x | x | x | | x | x | x |
| Philippe | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Valentin | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Théa | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |
| Hervé | x | x | x | x | | x | x | x |
| Liam | x | | x | | x | | x | x |
| Jules | x | x | x | | x | x | x | x |
| Liwa | x | x | x | x | | x | x | |
| Marcel | x | x | x | | x | x | | x |
| Charbel et Jeanne | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x |

Source: Soubirou (2018)

4.2 2011, a decisive impulse: “An entrepreneurs association is emerging... Entrepreneurs who wish to defend our valley: us, our entrepreneurs”⁶

On the 23rd of May 2011, a Free Republic was declared by the Low-Valsusans at the Maddalena di Chiomonte site, where building operations were supposed to start. This Free Republic lasted five weeks during which the area was transformed into a big fortified agora. Barricade buildings, concerts, spectacles, popular assemblies succeeded each other at the Maddalena. It was a crucial moment for the affirmation of alternative collective aspirations within the Low-Valsusan territorialized community. Through the daily assemblies' debates and collective activities, the dominant capitalist principles were questioned explicitly and implicitly. The Free Republic of the Maddalena was a space-time where an alternative way of life was collectively imagined and experienced:

“It is a month that every militant remembers with nostalgia and emotion, when, beyond the defence of the territory intended for the construction site, links are created, and practices are built that exceed the protest: The No TAV movement is making a great step forward in the shaping of a collective identity.” (Chiroli, 2017: 70)

⁶ Extract from a speech of Alberto Perino, a media figure of the No TAV movement, during a No TAV popular assembly in Bussoleno on the 26th of May 2011 (Infoaut Video, 22/05/2011).

The Free Republic of the Maddalena was a very intense moment for the Low-Valsusans. Amongst the initiatives proposed during those five weeks, a collective of entrepreneurs claiming their support to the No TAV movement and wishing to defend a sustainable and alternative economy emerged. Around 40 entrepreneurs called the other entrepreneurs of the valley to join them at the beginning of June 2011:

“We are entrepreneurs, farmers, tradesmen, artisans, self-employed workers. [...] We want to defend our work and to contribute to create new opportunities: we are convinced that this can only be done by preserving the local economy, valorising the sound businesses that operate in the territory, improving the agricultural and the alimentary line of business through the promotion of typical and organic products, investing in a conscious tourism able to appreciate the natural beauties and our cultural and artistic heritage.” (Presidio Europa, 2011)

In November 2011, the association Etinomia “Ethical entrepreneurs for the defence of the commons – Made in Val Susa” was launched, with 160 adherents. It claims to “promote the initiatives dedicated to the employment and the economical, commercial and social development through activities fundamentally dedicated to give back a central role to the territory, understood as a conscious relationship between a piece of land and the community who lives on it” (Etinomia, 2011). The association has seven working groups: agriculture, culture, economy, construction sector, energy and environment, information and communication technologies and tourism. These groups organize informational meetings, courses and various projects to implement Etinomia’s aims.

Even if there were already several businesses involved and explicitly following alternative aims, those logics were quite confidential before 2011. The Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs involved into the No TAV movement used to do so as citizen and not as professionals. In this regard, the creation of Etinomia is a decisive “impulse” (Fontan, 2011: 20), in a social innovation process that gradually normalize such behaviours in the lower part of the Susa Valley.

4.3 An internal and collective dissemination

A sustainable solidarity involvement seems to gradually spread through internal and collective initiatives of the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs.

4.3.1 Dissemination and appropriation within the Low-Valsusan enterprises

All the entrepreneurs we interviewed have declared that they do try to implement their sustainable values and principles in their businesses. They do not seem to consider the civic and the professional spheres as distinct, but rather as linked through their existences. Some of them, like Evan or Mathieu⁷ have even closed former businesses to open new ones more consistent with their

⁷ We changed the names of the interviewed entrepreneurs.

aspirations. They have detailed the concrete implementation of this involvement as shown in Table 3. Mathieu, who now runs a little farm, explain his transition as follows:

“2005 [the No TAV events] made me question a lot of things. It made me think that there are big interests, not only what they show you on the television, moreover the news is not the truth, because they touched it... I saw things and then the things I saw on the television were completely opposite only because there was a certain image to show better than another... And this led me to close my business in a year, because I made a choice of degrowth. [...] I said: OK I close, and I do the house-man. [...] When I say the house-man what I want to say is that I was working at home, I started to plant cereals to make my own bread at home. Then I said: I have time and I want to spend less money too. So, I sold my car because I thought: if I stay here, one car is enough with a Vespa and a tractor. I started to enlarge the garden, and I carried on like that for three years, living only with what I had, and she [his wife] was working. [...] Then when I saw that I liked to plant, when I focused I thought: why not enlarging this”.

On his side, Evan explains that he has shut his previous business because the very vertical working relationships he was compelled to have with his employees (due to the competition in his line of business) *“caused him a lot of suffering”* and gave him the feeling *“to move away from humanity”*. He is now a self-employed worker with no employee and cooperates with other local businesses.

The implementation of a political action by the interviewed entrepreneurs within their businesses touches a lot of aspect of their activities:

Table 3. Various ways of involvement into a solidarity economy

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Joséphine (agriculture) | <i>“I favour food sovereignty”, “I seek to enrich the territory”</i> . She went through a professional retraining to become an organic farmer. |
| Evan (services) | <i>“I want to have conscious clients”</i> . He tries to disseminate the community’s principles and values through the relationships with his customers. He has chosen his activity because it helps people to save natural resources and to use local resources. He has transformed his activity in the last decade to improve his working relationships. |
| Mathieu (agriculture) | He changed his line of business and his way to work for sustainability and degrowth related motivations. He performs a natural agriculture using local seeds. He tries to create social ties, for example performing non-financial exchanges with the inhabitants and other local farmers too: <i>“Last week I brought pepperonis to [X] and he brought me tomatoes. I sold his pepperonis and he sold my tomatoes”</i> . |
| Philippe (industry) | He moderates workshops to favour several ecological behaviours and has made his business evolve so it can help such behaviours. He gives communication material in this direction to his supplier. |
| Valentin (agriculture) | He is a member of a cooperative that allows people to earn some extra-incomes by taking care of their plots. His cooperative’s activity helps taking care of the forests and creates social ties between the cooperators. |
| Théa (trade) | She has developed a special offering to meet the local inhabitants’ peculiar interests, values and principles. So, she thinks that she helps to <i>“improve the standard of living of her community”</i> . She tries to work as most as possible with local producers in her line of business. Her store has become a meeting point for the inhabitants of her village, and for the people coming into the valley (journalists, tourists, activists...). She thinks that she participates to the social life of her community that way. |

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Hervé (craft) | He tries not to produce too much new things and prefer to refurbish or “ <i>add value</i> ” to what already exists and is typical of his territory. He tries to carefully and “ <i>consciously</i> ” manage his business’ waste. |
| Liam (craft) | He thinks his working place is a “ <i>place of sociality</i> ”. He uses it to disseminate the No TAV struggle and to create political discussion, especially with people from the high valley. |
| Jules (industry) | He has tried to create an “ <i>ethical place of work</i> ”, that is to say respectful relationships with his employees, letting them be autonomous for example in the way they manage their working time. He describes this relationship as “ <i>a relationship of cooperation and honesty</i> ”. “ <i>We are not a social organization, we are not into charity, but for us several values are important</i> ”. |
| Liwa (trade) | “ <i>My life is not separate from my work</i> ”. She only buys products that has been manufactured without having a negative impact on the environment or disrespecting human dignity: “ <i>fair</i> ”, “ <i>products made with people sweat, but a fairly paid sweat</i> ”. She gives communication material talking about sustainability to her customers. Her business is not fully legal regarding to the Italian laws, but she chose it because it allows her to make her products more accessible to everyone and she believes that the rules she is breaking are unfair: “ <i>it is a way to protest [...] It is risky, but I carry on</i> ”. |
| Marcel (industry) | “ <i>All the people working here are against the TAV</i> ”. “ <i>In my business, we were doing night watches at the Maddalena. [...] We took part into the [No TAV] walks, always within the legal limits</i> ”. “ <i>When the police came on the 5th of December 2005 to take the presidio in Venaus*, hurting people... And when on the 6th and 7th of December people in the valley got angry and blocked the valley, all our offices were closed, all the businesses were together to demonstrate against this abuse, which was a violation of people’s rights</i> ”. He tells that he does his best to facilitate his employees’ involvement into the No TAV struggle, for example letting them be absent for such a reason. Moreover, he boycotts the “ <i>Si TAV</i> ” shops, for example for his business lunches or when he rents hotel rooms for his customers: “ <i>I called them and I told them: as you are accommodating the policemen who beat us at the Maddalena under the tear gas, I won’t send you anymore customers</i> ”. |
| Charbel et Jeanne (trade) | They organize expositions and cinema projections to favour political discussions. They want their business to be “ <i>a socio-political lab, something that improve people’s consciousness, that make them participate, that make them culturally grow</i> ”. They welcome various No TAV initiatives. They try to promote too the local culture, for example organizing traditional music events. They do not need this business to make a living. Charbel told us that they have it for political involvement reasons. |

* On the 5th of December 2005 the police violently cleared a group of people who were occupying an area designated to become a TAV building site in Venaus in the middle of the night. It is the same area that has been taken back by the people on the 8th of December 2005.

Source: Soubirou (2018)

The Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs’ political involvement is very multidimensional. It impacts different spheres of their activities as the choice of a line of business, the production methods, the working relationships with employees and collaborators, the choice of their suppliers, the information of their customers, the management of their waste or the creation of a special offering for their community.

This internal political involvement of the entrepreneurs—within their businesses—seem sometimes to have exist prior to the launching of Etinomia: some of the interviewed entrepreneurs have created their businesses before 2011. However, the dynamics initiated by Etinomia seem to have spurred the creation of new practices and to have given a new sense to those that already existed.

4.3.2 A collective dissemination and appropriation in the lower Susa Valley

Since its launch, Etinomia has been trying to spread the political involvement of the entrepreneurs within its community through various collective activities and projects such as local producers markets, slow tourism promotion or bank boycotts. Etinomia's mode of action can be generally described as follows: occasional exploratory activities, especially activities that do not need a lot of money but rely on the mobilization of various actors of the Low-Valsusan community and attempt to gather support from outside of the territory. To illustrate this, we propose to describe a peculiar action organized by Etinomia in 2013: the General States of Work.

From the 27th to the 29th of September 2012, Etinomia, which counted more than 300 members at that moment (that is, a growth rate of around 90% for its first year of existence), organized with the No TAV movement the first "General States of Work" in the village of Vaie. This festive and political event aimed at "claiming the will to re-appropriate [the] future, starting by re-appropriating the work topic", through "a practical approach", concrete and cooperative (Etinomia, 2013).

Citizens, entrepreneurs, national and local elected representatives, and Italian and European researchers participated in this event. Debates were organized in eight round tables with various topic such as health, local currencies, businesses' role or new technologies.

The three-day event gathered hundreds of participants. It was an occasion for Etinomia to focus on its past activities and to define a new schedule for the following years, involving collectively local businesses and other local actors. Several concrete orientations for action were purposed such as the creation of an independent audit body to evaluate businesses in relation to the aspirations of the community, or the implementation of participatory energy diagnoses involving the families living in the area.

These orientations called for a synergy between local businesses, elected representatives and inhabitants, in order to implement an alternative and sustainable way of life, particularly through a plural economy. In this context, according to the rapporteur of the round table dedicated to the businesses' role, the entrepreneurs must "*succeed to eliminate profit as a final objective, and instead put social equity, social well-being, respect for the environment and [...] respect for the territory in which the business operates*".

The various orientations proposed during this event reaffirmed Etinomia's initial objectives and enlarged them. It resulted in a multitude of actions within Etinomia's working groups, but also in the emergence of various specialized associations. Associations dedicated to the redeployment of an agricultural sector around hemp in the valley or to the development of a biodiversity trail between Avigliana and Sant'Ambrogio di Torino were created. Beyond this, joint initiatives between municipalities, local civil society and entrepreneurs were imagined and implemented by some elected representatives, for example for the reception and the integration of refugees. Little by little, the new conception of the role of local entrepreneurs as proposed by Etinomia seems to become customary in the lower Susa Valley.

4.4 Factors and constraints of the local transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy

Although the No TAV conflict and the resulting territorialized community seem to facilitate a transition of the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs towards a sustainable solidarity economy, constraints on this involvement were regularly raised by respondents.

4.4.1 A transition favoured by the No TAV conflict and the Low-Valsusan territorialized community

Almost all the entrepreneurs we interviewed told us that it was the protest against the TAV and its consequences at the level of their territory that incited them and allowed them to engage politically—individually or collectively—through their professional activities. The No TAV conflict is evoked by many of them as a shock that has led them to question their activities, but also as a moment of collective political creativity (Table 4).

Table 4. The No TAV movement: a questioning moment

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Joséphine | <i>“All has started with the now 25 years old No TAV struggle. It has created a network of community, who has first discovered to be a community having a common enemy. [...] During these 25 years, those persons have met each other during the strikes, the meetings, on the barricades, in the assemblies, and they have started to think. Not only about building barricades, [...] but also about a lot of things, also about what type of alternative society there could be”.</i> |
| Mathieu | <i>“A lot is born from the No TAV movement, because according to me it has created a questioning. [...] We said: where are we going? What do we want for our children, for our land? If we ask ourselves this question and we really seek for an answer, then it is inevitable that initiatives come from all parts”.</i> |
| Liam | <i>“People like me were at first not interested [by the No TAV struggle], we were numerous. [...] But when the police have started to be violent, we changed our mind”. He also says that the relationships he has with young people, including members of the local social centres, has led him to challenge himself: “I thought: you have been wrong during your entire life”.</i> |
| Marcel | <i>“I would not have imagined to be in this situation before this popular struggle [against the TAV]. Until 2005 I was living this struggle in a distant way. But when you are at the heart of the problem, when you live this violence, when the public authorities try to impose things by force, without respecting the rules, then it is not fine”.</i> |

Source: Soubirou (2018)

The alternative political action of the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs seems also to have been favoured by the support they get because of the co-obligation relationships between the members of the territorialized community they belong to (Table 5).

Table 5. The Low-Valsusan territorialized community: a supportive context

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Joséphine | <i>“I work alone, but in fact I am not alone. I have a people behind me. It somehow supports me”.</i> |
| Evan | He evokes the support he gets because of the mutual “ <i>confidence</i> ” that the Low-Valsusans have developed through the No TAV struggle. He says that they recognize each other’s inside the community and that this helps a lot to work in synergy: <i>“We became close during the hardest moments of defence of the territory. [...] This tends to improve the confidence, also in the professional sphere. Relationships are easier”.</i> |
| Valentin | He talks about the support he gets because of the “ <i>altruist spirit</i> ” of his community. |
| Théa | According to her, her involvement and the collective involvement of her community’s entrepreneurs has been possible because the No TAV movement made the lower Susa Valley inhabitants “ <i>struggle together</i> ”. |
| Jules | He says that the entrepreneurs get support because of the mutual “ <i>responsibility</i> ” of the Low-Valsusans towards each other’s. |

Source: Soubirou (2018)

The transition of Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs towards a sustainable solidarity economy seems moreover to have been facilitated because of their consciousness that, acting like they are, their behaviours are not transgressive of any social convention at a local level (even if they are transgressive at a global scale). They are conscious that their action is locally fair and coherent with the values and principles locally shared (Table 6).

Table 6. Less-risky transgressions

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Philippe | He says that his individual and collective involvement has been facilitated because “ <i>here [in his community] there is a different sensibility respecting to the one that prevails in the Piedmont region</i> ”. |
| Liwa | She considers that her involvement has been facilitated by the No TAV movement. She evokes “ <i>a helping hand from the No TAV movement</i> ”, saying that her business “ <i>is born into the movement</i> ”: “ <i>I have found a supportive context</i> ”. |
| Charbel et Jeanne | <i>“All of this [their business] has started with the No TAV struggle. [...] We were born with the movement”.</i> |

Source: Soubirou (2018)

Furthermore, Théa has highlighted that the collectives born through the No TAV struggle, “*the associations created in the movement, [...] the groups of friends who get together*” favoured her involvement. Hervé, who does not seem to be aware of the existence of associative actions in his line of business, indicates for his part that he could participate in collective sustainable activities as an entrepreneur if other entrepreneurs in his line of business joined him and if municipalities were interested in non-profit collaborations, for example to safeguard the historical heritage. Finally,

the existence of a stable income independent of the activity of their businesses seems to facilitate the involvement of these entrepreneurs. This is the case of Valentin, Charbel and Jeanne, who are retired, but also Mathieu, whose wife has a regular income.

The participation to an alternative and sustainable territorialized community, that collectively and voluntarily transgresses the dominant capitalist conventions, thus appears to be a strong incentive to adopt new sustainable practices. This collective transgression seems to reduce for individuals the risks associated with the adoption of practices that are part of a sustainable social innovation process (or at least their perception of these risks), but also to give them the feeling that these practices, although transgressive at the global level, are legitimate. This latter feeling is reinforced by the support they consider getting from their community. The speech of Georges, a craftsman in the nearby French Maurienne Valley whom we met during an exploratory interview, is in this respect an enlightening counterpoint. While attempting—like the entrepreneurs interviewed in the lower Susa Valley—to conduct his professional activity in coherence with sustainable principles and values, he shared with us the difficulties related to his feeling of marginality:

“In my village, I am the weirdo. I am the guy who makes things, who welds, who makes solar panels [...]. It makes you question yourself too often when you are really the only one in your thing... After a while, you ask yourself ‘Did I took a path [he mimics a chaotic path with his hand] ...?’ [...] When you are alone you can also run out of steam”.

4.4.2 Common constraints

Several regularities have appeared regarding the constraints of the Low-Valsusan entrepreneurs' solidarity involvement. First, it seems harder to transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy for the entrepreneurs whose professional activities are depending on actors outside of their community. Valentin told us that the wholesaler who buys most of his cooperative production diminishes every year the price he pays, preventing him and his cooperators to have a fair retribution. As this wholesaler's location is far from the Susa Valley, Valentin considers their dependence on this actor nefarious also because it creates pollution due to transport. However, they have no other choice because this wholesaler is the only one who allows them to sell all their production, as they do not have freezing facilities to conserve it. On his side, Jules told us that he is constrained to work with banks, even if it is completely opposite to his values and principles:

“If I could I would eliminate all the banks. [...] The bank has been created to... I have money and I give it to you, and you give me an active interest rate and you lend it to [business X] because it needs it, it has interest in it. And the [business X] pay you interests. Today banks are not assuming this role. [...] They give you the red carpet and make you the reverence when you do not need it. When you need them, they shut the tap. Because it is like that. They only care about your guarantees, and then they manage to... And then they do the other disgusting things among them... But you, little business, if you need them, you must give in exchange... Or your personal belongings, or something else so they are 100 per cent guaranteed. [...] If we could less depend on them, it would be a great advantage”.

Jules also told us that he cannot act according to his own principles and values with his customers, as they are huge companies who act according to the dominant capitalist principles. Therefore, he has to do so in his relationships with them:

“[The customers] do not have this state of mind [his community's state of mind], consequently you risk being expelled from an industrial system that only looks at the figures. [...] If you do not respect that, it is the wall and you get shot, you disappear. So, it is difficult to think like that [according to his community's rules] with the customers or the external world. [...] I am part of a gear... Or I shut my business... But I can't change the world in one shot. [...] When I am outside, I suffer. [...] They stress you, they make you die. If I could... I love this job, this activity... But what comes after, it is really shocking me... But I must sell to them, or I do not sell at all.”

The outside actors to whom Valentin and Jules are depending on play the role of negative conversion factors of their capability (Sen, 2003)^{3/4}of their ability to act as they wish to^{3/4}as they prevent them to lead their professional activity coherently with the way of life they aspire to. These actors are even more to be considered as limits because they cannot be substituted, nor the functionings (i.e. the concrete activities) to which they participate: Valentin and Jules cannot cease to sell or produce and they cannot cooperate with other partners (in Jules' case, changing for another bank does not seem to be able to improve his situation).

Several interviewed entrepreneurs consider their line of business as unable to become fully sustainable. According to Jules, the industrial activities (including his) cannot be sustainable: *“the factories, if I could I would destroy all of them, I would build garden instead”*. On his hand, Hervé deplores that sometimes the products of his line of business serve more *“speculation”* than *“needs”*.

Finally, Mathieu, Charbel and Jeanne told us that, even if they wanted to do so, they have not been able to create cooperative businesses due to the current costs—especially taxes—of such activities in Italy.

4.5 A currently ongoing institutionalisation of a sustainable solidarity economy in the lower Susa Valley?

We have identified three clues of a potentially ongoing local institutionalisation of the entrepreneurs' solidarity involvement.

The speeches and activities of the entrepreneurs we interviewed are a first clue. All of them are trying, within the limits of their capabilities, to direct their professional activities towards their alternative principles and values, which are also those of their community. Moreover, such a way of acting seems legitimate to them. Most of them have the feeling that their behaviour is the one that dominates in their community, which could suggest that such an action is already locally instituted. This last observation must however be counterbalanced. First, it is important to notice that the solidarity involvement remains a conscious (and not natural) choice for the interviewed entrepreneurs between at least two possibilities, the other possibility being the pursuit of the profit only in their professional activity. A second limitation is what Mannarini and Roccato (2016) call *“cognitive biases”* in the context of LULU conflicts. In such situations, individuals tend to overestimate the cohesion of the group they belong to.

A second clue is the occurrence of incidents in recent years that appear to be sanctions against entrepreneurs considered by the Low-Valsusans as putting the quest for profit before the interest of the community. These, considered as “Sì TAV”, that is to say for the TAV, seem to be the object of a real social boycott, sometimes violent. For example, in 2011, construction equipment owned by a local business working on the TAV worksite was set on fire. At the same time, occupations were held in front of the grids of other local contractors also involved in the construction site. In 2013, it was a hotel housing the police in the valley the subject of a collective boycott, occupations and saucapans concerts in front of its doors (La Stampa, 2013). Finally, in 2015, a café where the workers of the Chiomonte construction site took their breakfast had its terrace and windows vandalized, the inscription “Judas, you sell the valley for thirty coffees” painted on the front of the business (La Repubblica, 2015). No matter how one may judge these events, they are also a clue that in the lower Susa Valley, it is an entrepreneurship guided primarily by the quest for profit that is now considered deviant.

Finally, we need to point out that it was not possible to interview entrepreneurs considered as “Sì TAV”. It turned out to be very difficult to identify them at first. The answers of the Low-Valsusans questioned about them ranged from “*There are no Sì TAV*” to “*they are all mafia, we do not know them*”, with many other unkind comments. Nevertheless, by insistence, four businesses have been designated as “Sì TAV”. They were all businesses that provided accommodation or meals to the police officers and workers working on the TAV construction site. We contacted them, telling that we conducted a survey on “local entrepreneurs and the development of the valley”. We have systematically undergone avoidance strategies. The person we were “supposed to talk to” was never available, despite repeated calls, or we were asked to send the list of questions before the interview, which would have biased our results. This is a last clue of a potential local social stigmatization of entrepreneurs perceived as putting profits above all other goals in their businesses.

5. Conclusion

Over the last 30 years of the No TAV conflict, the lower part of the Susa Valley has become a territorialized community aspiring to a sustainable life. This paper has questioned the transformation of the local entrepreneurial activities favoured by this peculiar context. In order to do so, we have mobilized a cross-disciplinary theoretical and methodological framework inspired by the CRISES framework about social innovation, crossing economics of convention, economic geography and capabilities approach. The Low-Valsusan small and medium entrepreneurs seem to be currently transitioning towards a sustainable solidarity economy. This ongoing transition happens through a social innovation process that has been impelled in 2011 by the launch of the association Etnomia. Gradually, the implementation by the entrepreneurs of the principles and values of their community has spread. Nowadays, several clues suggest that this sustainable solidarity entrepreneurial behaviour might have started an institutionalisation phase.

This empirical case study shows how a LULU context can favour the emergence of important transformative social innovation processes such as a local transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy. In the lower part of the Susa Valley, the No TAV conflict seems to have created a shock that led the local entrepreneurs to question the meaning of their professional activities. It has also crystallised a territorialized community that local entrepreneurs consider as supportive of their transition towards a sustainable solidarity economy. However, various constraints to such a transition remain as the inability of several activities to become sustainable or the relation of dependence of several local entrepreneurs towards external entrepreneurs who do not act according to their principles and values. A second takeaway is that in a context where entrepreneurs share the aspiration of the society they belong to, it seems relevant to study their solidarity involvement with the capability approach.

However, we consider our inability to interview “Si TAV” entrepreneurs as a limitation of this work even if it has been a relevant clue of their stigmatization. To overcome this invisibilization of certain actors at the margins, the mobilization of analysis grids developed to study social exclusion seems a potential option. Another limitation is that we did not verify the efficiency of the entrepreneurial initiatives we have identified. In that view, territorial metabolism (Buclet, 2015) case studies could be an interesting complement to such investigations about sustainable solidarity economy. Finally, a quantitative survey could be an interesting addition to this work in order to characterize better the extent of the highlighted transition process and to understand the relative importance of the constraints that were identified.

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