AUTONOMOUS GEOGRAPHIES IN DUBLIN: SUSTAINABILITY INNOVATION, SOCIAL LEARNING AND SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLES IN RESISTANCE TRAJECTORIES

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Resumo

Nos últimos anos é crescente o interesse em ações comunitárias, com foco em inovações em sustentabilidade e na promoção de estilos de vida sustentáveis. No entanto, existem poucas pesquisas que se dedicam a analisar as relações entre geografias autônomas, inovações em sustentabilidade, aprendizagem social e estilos de vida sustentáveis. O presente artigo analisa dados sobre um Centro Social Autônomo, com sede em Dublin, denominado 'Seomra Spraoi'. Esta pesquisa procura identificar se o referido Centro é um espaço fértil para inovações em sustentabilidade, aprendizagem social e se estimula – ou não – estilos de vida sustentáveis. Um método misto de coleta de dados foi utilizado para a investigação: um questionário semi-estruturado para realizar entrevistas qualitativas com ativistas envolvidos na gestão do Centro e com voluntários que trabalham ali (9 participantes) a fim de estabelecer como as inovações em sustentabilidade e a aprendizagem social acontecem no local, e um questionário quantitativo enviado para os 'fãs da página do Facebook' (287 participantes), para verificar o nível de conhecimento dos participantes acerca de questões ambientais e verificar se eles se empenham em um estilo de vida sustentável. Os resultados revelam que o 'Seomra Spraoi' é um espaço onde a inovação, a sustentabilidade e a aprendizagem social, ocorrem *de fato* no projeto da 'Oficina de Bicicleta' e, *em certa medida*, no 'Seomra Café' e no Centro em si.

Os resultados também revelam que as atitudes dos fãs da página do Centro no Facebook são mais sustentáveis no que se refere aos alimentos que consomem e ao tipo de transporte que utilizam. Nesse sentido, os participantes indicam ter preocupação ambiental em grau mais elevado quando comparado com o resto da população irlandesa. Por fim, a pesquisa conclui que geografias autônomas podem propor e implementar ações inovadoras em técnicas participativas, sustentabilidade, aprendizagem social e promover estilos de vida sustentáveis em um contexto de desenvolvimento sustentável de base.

Palavras-chaves: geografias autônomas na Irlanda; inovações em sustentabilidade de base; aprendizagem social; estilos de vida sustentáveis; técnicas participativas.

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in grassroots and community-based actions focusing in sustainability innovation and in the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. However, there are few researches linking autonomous geographies with sustainability innovation, social learning and sustainable lifestyles. This research analyses one autonomous social centre based in Dublin, Seomra Spraoi, to find if the centre is a fruitful space for sustainability innovation, social learning and if it promotes sustainable lifestyles. A mixed method of data collection was used: semi-structured qualitative interviews with the activists involved in managing the Centre and long-term volunteers (9 participants) to find out how sustainability innovation and social learning take place in the space; and a quantitative survey with the Centre's Facebook page supporters (287 participants) to verify their level of environmental awareness and if they engage in a sustainable lifestyle. The findings reveal that Seomra Spraoi is a space where sustainability innovation and social learning de facto occurs in the project of 'The Bicycle Workshop' and to some extent in the 'Seomra Café' and in the Centre itself.

The findings also reveal that the attitudes of the Centre's Facebook page supporters towards food and transport use are more sustainable and the overall environmental concern is higher when compared to the rest of the Irish population. Finally, this research concludes with the contributions autonomous geographies can provide in terms of participatory techniques, sustainability innovations, social learning and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles in a grassroots sustainable development context.

Keywords: *Autonomous geographies in Ireland; grassroots sustainability innovation; social learning; sustainable lifestyles; participatory techniques.*

Introduction

The concept of autonomous geographies was cited during a literature review for a case study entitled 'From Grassroots action to Sustainable Enterprise: innovation at the bottom level'. The 'Grassroots Sustainable Enterprises' are considered highly democratic and fruitful spaces for the development of practices based in social learning and experimentation (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). Autonomous geographies share many similarities with the grassroots sustainable enterprise, such as: a) being part of the social economy; b) being ideologically conceived c) attending a social need. However, autonomous geographies are blatantly ideological about their principles (mainly libertarian) and promote radical questioning of political and social mainstream stands. Many autonomous geographies offer strategic space for other grassroots enterprises and activists' groups to meet up and organise their activities.

According to Chatterton and Pickerill (2008, p.12), these spaces, "where there

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is a questioning of laws and social norms, and a desire to create non-capitalist, collective forms of politics, identity and citizenship", are fertile ground for grassroots forms of autonomous action, participatory techniques, creation of useful social knowledge and technological experimentation completely outside of private or public spheres. In this sense, grassroots sustainable enterprises and autonomous geographies can be a space for the exercise of social learning, for the development of grassroots sustainability innovation, and for the promotion of sustainable lifestyles. Furthermore, autonomous geographies can also be found in both developing and developed countries and in varying degrees and forms, throughout human history. Autonomous geographies are attractive because they embody the spirits of autonomy and resilience which are timeless and universal (CASTORIADIS, 1991).

Whereas in the UK and in many other countries this type of space abound and one can find extensive academic literature on the subject (see HOLM and KUHN, 2011; HODKINSON and CHATTERTON, 2006; MONTAGNA, 2006; PICKERILL and CHATTERTON, 2006; WALL, 2005; CHATTERTON, 2004), in Ireland there are just few autonomous spaces and hitherto have little academic acknowledgement. However, Dublin's autonomous centre, Seomra Spraoi, is found in the academic literature on anti-capitalism and social movements in Ireland (COX and CURRY, 2010; COX, 2007).

These spaces are self-funded and do not receive any type of financial support from public or private institutions. This research looked into how the networks of activists and volunteers involved in the management of one autonomous social centre in Dublin, Seomra Spraoi, generate solutions that respond to the activists' community needs and the knowledge, interests and values of the people involved. This research also looked into how the translation of these values into actions relies on specific skills and resources, and where small scale innovation, social learning and sustainable lifestyle are allowed to flourish – away from wider markets and from mainstream politics. Finally, this research discusses the implication of autonomous geographies' organisational setting for the development of grassroots sustainability innovation, social learning and the promotion of sustainable lifestyle, and concludes with a reflection on the contributions autonomous geographies can offer to the grassroots sustainable development field.

Autonomous Geographies: a historical and theoretical overview

Autonomous Social Centres, Autonomous Spaces or Occupied Social Centres are abundantly found in Italy, Germany, Spain, UK, Netherlands, Poland, Greece and France and have vast academic acknowledgement on their history, composition, actions and aims. Many of these spaces would have a connection with the squatting movements and working class movements (see HOLM and KUHN, 2011; COX, 2007; HODKINSON and CHATTERTON, 2006; MONTAGNA, 2006; PICKERILL and CHATTERTON, 2006; WALL, 2005; CHATTERTON, 2004). However, the historical, social and political context of each country shaped the outcome of the occupation of these spaces and its practice of autonomy.

Italy has a long and politicised history of occupation of abandoned buildings and the reclaiming of condemned spaces for communal, political and social use that

is intimately connected to the Socialist--Marxist tradition present in the country (KLEIN, 2001; MUDU, 2004; WRIGHT, 2002). In Spain, the actions of the Autonomous Movements (Autonomistas) and rural anarchist movements, such as the Anarchist Peasant Movement and the Urban Anarcho-syndicalism Movement, led to the consolidation of the C.N.T (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo) and to the widespread notion of the political and social use of abandoned or condemned spaces, which nowadays are found in the likes of squatted buildings for housing and social activities (MARTINEZ, 2011; WOODCOCK, 1962). The Urban Housing Movement in Germany, particularly in the city of Berlin, had a fundamental role in the development of urban housing policies during the transition to a cautious urban renewal in the 1980s (HOLM and KUHN, 2011). In Netherlands, squatting became a popular demand from the 1960s onwards due to lack of housing in urban areas combined with a high number of abandoned properties. This movement prompted the development of a law called 'domestic peace', which entailed that any person has the right to live in a house or building even if it was occupied illegally (POLDERVAART, 2001).

The common factor among all the countries mentioned above is that the Squatting Movement, Autonomous Social Centres, Autonomous Spaces or Occupied Social Centres are all connected to the left--wing political activism and socialist movements present in the European continent's history, particularly during the XIX century and the first half of the XX century. From a historical standpoint, the UK and Ireland did not really have a widespread left-wing, or a strong socialist political tradition that reached mainstream politics, or large social movements of socialist foundations (COX

and CURRY, 2010; COX, 2007; HODKINSON and CHATTERTON, 2006). However, in the UK, social centres and autonomous experiences in urban areas took form in the likes of the anarchist, punk and DIY[2] scene during the 1970s, which eventually evolved into social mobilization against taxation and many other forms of pro-people protests. Due to the action of these grassroots movements, squatting activities received legal status in the UK during the 1990s (HODKINSON and CHATTERTON, 2006). To summarize, regardless of the country and of the way it happened, all these movements and experiences claimed social and political autonomy.

The term 'autonomous' stems from the classical Greek concept of auto-nomos and it means self-government or self-management. On a contemporary scenario (from the 1990s onwards), the term 'autonomy' was claimed back by many anti--globalisation or alter-globalisation movements. These movements had a highly critical stand on the neoliberal globalised economy and called for solidarity amongst people and countries. The 1990s saw the advent and the trans-nationalisation of these movements, especially in the UK and in the USA, in the protests against the Bretton Woods institutions and large multinational corporations seeking profit at a high human and environmental cost (PELLOW, 2007; WALL, 2005). In Ireland, according to Cox and Curry (2010, p.89), during the 1970s and the 1980s, the Irish social movements were shaped by 'social partnerships', which implied that seeking legal office was the only way forward to have their needs met. The movements that were contested by the mainstream, such as "the peace movement opposed

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to Ireland's increasing support for US and European military strategy (...); trade unionists who reject the EU's neo-liberalism, ecologists opposed to the state's policy of 'development at any cost' and feminists and anti-racists who see the state as part of the problem rather than a tool for 'raising awareness'", were the movements that created the basis of the Irish alter-globalisation protests, alongside with "elements of the non-institutional left and poor communities which have been failed by the state".

From the 1990s onwards, the alter-globalisation struggle can be identified throughout its diversity, ideological tendencies and transnational values (HODKINSON and CHATTERTON, 2006; WALL, 2005). For instance, in Latin America, many indigenous environmental movements were already engaged in grassroots sustainability and conservation practices long before the 1992's Earth Summit launched the sustainable development goals (HERNANDEZ, 2010). During the 1990s, activists from African-American communities in the US organised an environmental justice movement in order to stop local authorities to install an incinerator in their areas (PELLOW, 2007). In the UK, groups of direct action like *Earth First!*, *Dissident!* and *People's Global Action* established networks that are still active in several countries (ROOTES, 1999).

These and many other alter-globalisation networks can be found all over the world, in multiple forms. These networks are mostly informal, operate at various scales, from local to global and are very diverse in their concerns. It is this nomadic and networked nature that composes an alter-globalization movement. They do not seek legal offices or official representation

and they normally have their basis in large grassroots organisations or movements (HERNANDEZ, 2010; HODKINSON and CHATTERTON, 2006; ROOTES, 1999).

The focus of this research is on the physical spaces termed autonomous geographies rather than the social or environmental movements. However, autonomous geographies and environmental movements are strongly interrelated. While a movement is a network of people united for a single or multiple causes and has in itself the potential to create the critical mass necessary for the formation of an autonomous space, the autonomous geographies are the actual physical space where these groups and networks articulate their activities (PELLOW, 2007; PICKERILL and CHATTERTON, 2006, WALL, 2005).

Autonomous geographies are composed by committed individuals, namely activists, that engage in social and political activities motivated by feelings of indignation, hope, passion, solidarity and many other emotions that relate to the activists' needs for solidary collective action and post-capitalist social relations (BROWN and PICKERILL, 2009; CHATTERTON and PICKERILL, 2010). In terms of its physical aspects, autonomous geographies "are places which can be squatted, rented or co-operatively owned, and they include elements such as book shops, affordable café and bars, food co-operatives, free shops, space for meetings, cultural/political events and educational activities. What sets them apart from established community centres is a desire to be autonomous and self-managed using direct forms of democracy" (PICKERILL and CHATTERTON, 2006, p. 3).

Autonomous Geographies in Dublin:

Seomra Spraoi

Cox and Curry (2010, p. 90) have identified in Ireland the alter-globalisation movements, during the late 1990s and beginning of 2000s, in the likes of the Irish Social Forum, People Before Profit, Another Europe is Possible, Anti-War Movement, the left-libertarian wing Grassroots Gathering network, "and more recently in the development of the Seomra Spraoi social centre in Dublin and allied projects elsewhere". The authors affirm (2010, p. 90) that the Grassroots Gathering "were based on the Grassroots Principles, demanding the abolition rather than reform of bodies such as the World Bank and World Trade Organisation as part of a broader challenge to power and inequality, stressing self-controlled workplaces and communities along with environmental and social sustainability. The principles emphasise bottom-up organising strategies and reject top-down and state-centred approaches. Gatherings have been typically twice-yearly meetings of activists involved in different movements and campaigns, focused not on decision-making but on plenary discussions and workshops aimed at sharing skills and reflecting on strategies".

Similar ethos is found in Seomra Spraoi's working values and organisational setting, which are manifested in the Aims and Principles of the space and in the Safer Space Policy. The Aims and Principles provide the working values for the activities that take place in the Centre and clarify what type of behaviour is not tolerated. Sen (2010, p. 1000) identified working values based on autonomy, self-management, openness, inclusion and horizontal organising as 'Open Politics', arguing that "it is a form of organisation and structure that allows a new form of politics based on the prin-

ciples of self-organisation, open-endness, indeterminacy and organic learning and reproduction". This research verified how this horizontality, inclusiveness, solidarity and cooperation of the autonomous social centre Seomra Spraoi, provides (or not) fertile ground for political, social and environmental ideas and practices that help beget sustainability innovation, social learning and sustainable lifestyles.

Methods

The methodology used for data collection is divided in three pillars: Seomra Spraoi website's content analysis; semi-structured qualitative interviews with the activists involved on the management of the Centre (n=4) and with long-term volunteers (n=5); and a quantitative Sustainable Lifestyle survey sent out through a Facebook account.

Four qualitative interviews were carried out in the facilities of the Centre from the 16th of May to the 31st of July with full consent of the participants. The other five qualitative interviews were answered by e-mail. I reassured the confidentiality of the interviewees' identity and of the content of what they said. Therefore, the names that identify the quotes of the interviewees in the results sections are pseudonyms. Of 15 possible candidates for the qualitative interviews, 9 of them agreed to participate in the research.

For the third pillar, I designed a Sustainable Lifestyle survey through *SurveyMonkey[3]* website. This survey was adapted from the *All-Island Lifestyle Survey[4]* that was carried out in 2011 and its use was authorised by Professor Anna Davies. By

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3   https://www.surveymonkey.com
4   http://www.consensus.ie/lifestyle-survey/

using the message contact feature of a Facebook account, 298 users that 'like' Seomra Bike Facebook page and 1,013 users that 'like' Seomra Spraoi Facebook page were contacted. In total, 1,311 people were contacted and 287 respondents completed the survey. The survey was sent out from the 28th of May to the 31st of July 2012.

During the months of June and July 2012, I went every Wednesday to the Seomra Cafe tasting (n=8), to the Bike Workshop (n=4); to volunteer (n=1); to attend their General Meeting (n=2); to a movie screening (n=1) and finally, to interview the activists (n=4). During my visits to the centre, especially during the Seomra Café tasting, I engaged in informal conversations with several visitors (n=17), users (n=9) and workers (n=10). These conversations provided fruitful and insightful ideas about their perception of the centre (visitors) and of the operability of the centre (activists and long-term volunteers). As soon as I started a conversation with someone, I explained that I was conducting research about the Centre, with the intention of being there as an overt researcher at all times.

Sustainability Innovation in Autonomous Geographies

In the international arena, efforts towards a sustainable future were set out by the milestone document The Bruntland Report (UN, 1987). This document stresses the risks of natural resources overuse without considering the carrying capacity of ecosystems. This report points out the incompatibility between the current model of economic development and sustainable patterns of production and consumption, stating that poverty in developing countries and extreme consumerism of the in-

dustrialized nations are the root causes of unsustainable development and environmental crises (UN, 2012). In an attempt to deepen the methods for achieving sustainable development, The United Nations launched Agenda 21 during the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Agenda 21 sought to establish a new paradigm that requires a reinterpretation of the concept of economic development and progress by contemplating greater holistic balance between the whole and the parts, thus promoting more quality in social and environmental relationships, coupled with economic growth.

To reach this objective, the document established the importance of the commitment of each country and its people to reflect globally and locally, about the way in which governments, businesses, nongovernmental organizations and all sectors of society could cooperate to find solutions for the socio-environmental problems that mankind faces.

However, Seyfang and Smith (2007) critically call our attention to the fact that international, national, regional and local spheres are committed to sustainable development at a certain degree and each of them with their own agendas. The authors state that there is a qualitative difference in the way governments, business and civil society organizations are moving towards sustainable development and how policies designed by governments help to hinder or nourish civil society's actions.

In the civil society realm, especially at the grassroots level, it is possible to find innovations carried out by a committed group of individuals or communities seeking to adopt environmentally focused

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practices by participating in social networks or developing new technologies in the social economy arena. In the grassroots realm there are neither corporate profit-driven interests nor social-technical hindrances of society's functioning institutions based on technical reproducibility, which potentially opens ground for creative and experiential approaches towards sustainability (SEYFANG and HAXELTINE, 2012; TANG et al., 2011; CHATTERTON AND PICKERILL, 2008; SEYFANG and SMITH, 2007).

The individuals thinking and carrying out the grassroots innovations are mainly "networks of activists and community groups generating novel, bottom-up solutions for sustainable development and that typically respond to local situation and the interest and values of the community involved" (SEYFANG and SMITH, 2010, p.1). This type of initiative can be identified in the likes of community-based or supported gardens, box schemes, recycling organisations, car-pooling; co-housing, renewable energy, etc. (TANG et al., 2011; LANG, 2010; DAVIES, 2009; SEYFANG and SMITH, 2007).

Autonomous geographies do not strictly fit in the concept of 'grassroots sustainable enterprise' due to their origins. These spaces are neither the effort of a Local Agenda 21, nor a sustainability or environmental focused initiative (SEYFANG and SMITH, 2007). As discussed in the previous chapter, autonomous geographies are the evolvement of left-wing traditions and alter-capitalist movements that condemn unsustainable aspects of capitalist such as excessive consumerism, fossil fuel dependence, ecological collapse, etc., providing workable alternatives to the toxic and corrosive effects of social and environmental

crises in human life and livelihoods (CHATTERTON, 2006). In this sense autonomous geographies are spaces that can potentially beget innovative sustainable practices due to the fact that they carry a high environmental concern.

In the academic literature on grassroots sustainability, one can find several examples in the autonomous geography context that reveal current practices and the potential for sustainability innovations in a radical grassroots and political activism realm. Few examples are listed below:

Lammas Low Impact Settlement Project in England – Chatterton and Pickerill (2008, p.4) identified a project of low impact development for sustainable and autonomous living, which is "a form of living where houses are built from recycled, local, and natural products, and livelihoods are made in sustainable ways from the land. (…) They are often small scale – creating a direct link between their occupants, their needs, and their waste. (…) They are autonomous in the sense that they often located at distance from mains supplies of water, electricity or sewage".

Zapatistas in Mexico - The Zapatistas Movement in Chiapas, Mexico, have improved the lives of many rural poor, marginalised and indigenous people in Mexico, giving them a space of positive resistance away from social exclusion. The efforts of such movement do not depend on the government, political parties or legal representation, but in a continuous desire to transform society (STAHLER-SHOLK, 2010). Paré et al. (2002, p.2) investigated how this type of organisational setting opens ground to innovations in sustainability: "This indigenous group has increasingly supported their livelihoods and their

struggle for survival by adopting new processes and technologies in their everyday life, as the result of making innovation a capability in their organisation. The adoption of technology has been one key factor for having improved the wellbeing, the environmental and economic performance of the community".

Unemployed Workers Movement in Argentina – It was a social movement organised by workers that were made redundant during the privatization of national companies in Argentina commanded by Carlos Menen. They were joined afterwards by the workers of the then privatized companies that collapsed due to the economic crisis caused by the economic policy of fixed exchange rates, sparking a major recession that would lead to the downfall of the government of Fernando de la Rua. The Unemployed Workers Movement managed to bring real change to many unemployed people through a network of solidary social economy and political empowerment through collective daily practices of cooperation. These practices included community farming and workshops for exchanging skills (CHETTERTON, 2004).

Rossport Solidarity Camp in Ireland – Gilmartin (2009) reconstructs the story of the Rossport Solidarity Camp organised in Erris, Co. Mayo by the 'Shell to Sea Campaign'. Originally the camp was set up to support the struggle of the local community against the construction of a gas pipeline that cuts through the local resident's land by the oil company Shell. The Shell to Sea campaign and the Rossport Solidarity camp attracted attention and support from national and international political and environmental activists; the academic community; local DPs and common people

with no political or ideological background at all. Nowadays the camp includes environmental sustainability to its aims.

Results of Sustainability Innovations in Seomra Spraoi

The first hypothesis this research verified is if autonomous geographies are spaces where sustainability innovation takes place. The results diverge according to projects. The project *Bicycle Workshop* is coordinated by few Seomra Spraoi's activists involved in managing the space and helped by several volunteers. The coordination of a project in an autonomous geography context does not mean they are in a hierarchically superior position, it means that they have been involved in the project for longer, are experts on bike mechanics or are professional of this field. Whoever decides to become a volunteer in the bike workshop does not necessarily need to have a working knowledge of bike mechanics, but just willingness to learn how to fix a bike.

The main findings of this section reveal that the bike workshop only reuses and recycles parts of collected or donated bicycles and they count on professional volunteers involved in other bicycle projects, as outlined below:

> "We (collect bicycles) that definitely don't belong to people or the ones that are pretty wrecked. We also get from places like office parks or business parks or college campus where they will cut locks after a certain amount of time if they are parked there. We get some bikes from those occasionally. We get bikes from house clearances." (Bart, activist).

> "I still collect parts from my previous employer and I try to go around bike shops and ask for donations, some of them are quite ok with the idea, but others simply

prefer to put everything in the bin." (Matteo, long-term volunteer).

The other project analysed in this research, the *Seomra Café,* attracts the vegan community, animal rights activists and people willing to taste vegan food. The food used in the café is entirely bought by a group called 'Food Action' that also avails of the facilities of the Centre for their meetings. The group is a non-official cooperative that claims to offer means for people willing to buy ethical wholefoods at an affordable price by buying collectively at wholesale prices. Food Action is open to anyone willing to participate in their meetings. If a participant becomes interested in purchasing ethical food through the group, the person has to contribute with 120 euros on a monthly purchase of a range of food, cosmetic, cleaning, laundry and paper products, according to the needs of the group. The products are bought with the Independent Irish Health Foods Ltd., an independent wholesaler of healthy and vegan products (CALAIDO, 2008).

The findings of this section reveal the importance of the means of buying food for the Seomra Café through the Food Action Group – for the participants of the group as well as a collective effort of people's self-organisation. The findings also show the importance of buying food that does not have a detrimental impact on the environment; the importance of knowing the provenance of the food as well as the price and the ethics involved in the food production, as outlined below:

> "They definitely encourage animal-free diet and they buy food through Food Action, which is kind of a cooperative, they buy wholesale from them, ethical products" (Pablo, long-term volunteer).

However, one interviewee highlighted that not all products they purchase through Food Action are ethical:

> "(We buy) Through the Food Action Group, but there are some issues with them that some might not like to disclose. Some time ago at a kitchen meeting a proposal was made to stop purchasing soy made in the US. There are political, human rights and ethical reason for this, but it centred mostly on the fact that it's virtually impossible to find non GMO soy in North America since ten years ago. This was agreed. Yet the very brand that was problematic (GMO) was purchased the very next whole food order for the cafe" (Patrick, activist).

Veganism is openly promoted at the Centre. It is a philosophy of life motivated by ethical convictions based on animal rights, which seeks to avoid animal exploitation or abuse, through the boycott of products and activities derivate from animals and / or that use animals. Some braches of veganism also condemn the use of animal for its damaging environmental and unsustainable outcomes (ZAMIR, 2004; MCGRATH, 2000). The interviewees claimed the importance of vegan food for being less detrimental to the environment than the mainstream diet, as outlined below:

> "The food we serve is vegan, which by principle has less negative impact on the environment than an animal-based diet." (Paul, activist).

> "The café only buys vegan food. / Yes but I believe the food speaks for itself, another way is possible, vegan living is a viable and more earth friendly alternative" (Edriac, long-term volunteer).

Results also show levels of criticism regarding the outreach of the vegan lifestyle. One interviewee believes that the Centre tries to articulate a political message only though the offer of vegan food. He also thinks the Centre does not try to educate people directly about the food system through Seomra Café. Another interviewee made severe critics to the fact

that there are unresolved conflicts and tensions within the kitchen group because he claims that animal products are used to prepare the food.

Results of Social Learning in Seomra Spraoi

The second hypothesis this research verified is if autonomous geographies are spaces where social learning takes place. The results are positive and reveal that this education happens in an informal, organic and experimental setting rather than in a structured or pre-defined way. Results were obtained through the analysis of the social dynamics and people's interaction in the Bicycle Workshop; in the Seomra Café; in the consensus decision making process and in the Bottom-up participation model.

In an autonomous geography context, social learning definitions are conceived through the lens of social change, sustainability, personal transformation and critical/libertarian pedagogy. Autonomous geographies are not neutral spaces; they call empowered individuals with solidary aims, to critically re-read society, aiming to transform it (CHATTERTON and PICKERILL, 2008).

Pickerill and Chatterton (2006, p. 736) affirm that "autonomous geographies are part of a web of stories and lessons shared across the world and other periods of history, inspiring people to act for themselves in their locality. Participants are active in extra-local networks through solidarity with globally distributed groups through actions, fund-raising, awareness-raising, information-sharing and skill-sharing, or through virtual organizing networks, which facilitate extra-local communication". Seomra Spraoi's Aims and Principles follow the same lines: "Co-operation and mutual aid – In a world dominated by competition and conflict, we believe that working together, sharing knowledge, skills and resources, and helping each other out builds strong communities and networks of support and friendship."

The results for the Bicycle Workshop confirm the second hypothesis of this research, as it received only positive appraisals from 6 interviewees when asked if they believe the bike workshop is a place where people can co-create, collaborate, learn and share skills. The Bicycle Workshop team teach or transfer the skill of fixing a bike. They have a team of professional and non-professional bike mechanics to support the users in the process of learning how to fix a bike or in helping users to build a bike by themselves. This interaction might initially cause confusion because of the dynamic inherent to the process: it is a skill transfer, it is not a service one pay for, as outlined below:

> "You can see people going through that kind of confusion when they first come here. It's fascinating to watch, (...) You're talking to someone how the workshop functions and they're like, you know... "Well, how much is this?" Well, how much do you need it? If you need it a lot then you can have it"! It's basically focusing on needs. It changes the kind of dynamic between a customer and a service provider, where that exchange is just monetary really. But people sometimes come here and you can see that they are stuck in that mentality of being a customer and a service user. And you have sometimes to be really explicit with people and say: "I'm not here to do this for you, I'm here to help you do it for yourself or to show you how to do it" (Bart – activist).

Another idea involved in the process of skill transfer is that you learn it so you can pass it on, so that the skill and the learning keep circulating. Therefore, it benefits the

whole community involved in the process. Two activists corroborate this idea, as outlined below:

"(...) the whole spirit of the bike workshop is that you learn how to fix your bike so you can show somebody else. And it all brings a benefit to the centre where all bicycles of the community are rescued and are fixed up and they are community bicycles. We have a community bike service that people can borrow bikes or bikes can be fixed and sold and the money comes back to the centre. It is rewarding for everybody to participate in it. People give value to the person that is showing them how to fix it because you're passing on a skill and there is the social contact and the enjoyment that comes from sharing something with somebody." (Ailbhe, activist).

"I think our whole model of how we would go about doing things is about skill sharing, and it's about making... it's kind of a deco-modifying skills. (...) Like, I know how to fix a bicycle and you need to fix a bicycle so... I'm going to tell you or help you to fix that bicycle, and you learn in that process. Now, to me that seems natural and obvious, but in doing that I think we are directly confronting how people in general in society just get things done" (Bart, activist).

Two interviewees believe the Centre directly encourages a bicycle lifestyle and the learning and sharing of skills:

"Definitely. The place is full of bikes! We encourage people to cycle, teach the fixing skill and if they want to teach it to someone else, great!" (Matteo, long-term volunteer).

"For sure the place encourages the use of bikes, both explicitly and implicitly. In addition to running a bike workshop, and supporting campaigns against oil companies, the majority of the attending Seomra naturally use bikes as the mode of transport... it is a bike culture.. (...) No one ever talks about cars or other modes of transport, it's not like you are excluded if you have a car or drive. I've never heard people

ask such things. But what does happen is a common appreciation and support for bikes is shared." (Sinead, long-term volunteer).

The results of the Seomra Café and the Food Action show that there are mixed opinions regarding the learning and sharing of skills. One interviewee said the Food Action does awareness raising campaigns and workshops about the food system:

"The Food Action, they do raising awareness campaign and from time to time you see workshops with related topics. A group that organises the film screening did a film screening about the industry behind fruits and vegetables sold in supermarkets and the use of pesticides." (Mabel, long-term volunteer).

"So through materials and documentaries, presentations and discussions articles we are offering that and through the use of space by groups like raising awareness about people's food supply." (Paul, activist).

Two interviewees believe that the fact that Seomra Café serves only vegan food is a way of encouraging people to think critically about the food they eat:

"The café is an education itself because a lot of people have never tasted vegan food and they might have assumptions when they hear about vegan; what does it mean to be a vegan; why to be a vegan and (then come to Seomra Spraoi) taste and experience the food." (Paul, activist).

"Yes it demonstrates that vegetarian/ vegan food can be tasty and enjoyable. You don't need to eat animal products to be happy, healthy and well nourished. / Sharing, cooperation and collaboration were evident in my experience. / When I volunteered in the kitchen, it had a good social system in place, non-hierarchical, cooperative and supportive. I felt they were receptive and supportive." (Edrian, long-term volunteer).

However, the skill sharing does not ha-

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ppen at its full potential and does not incite visitors or users to engage in the kitchen due to lack of organisation and unsolved internal conflicts. Following this line, the results also revealed an imbalance of power within the group that organises the kitchen, which hinders collaborative processes.

In several informal conversations I had with regular users (n=5) of the Seomra Café, they said that the reason they come for the café is to socialize rather than for the food itself. In this sense, the food also works as means of bringing people together, but not necessarily because they are vegan. In other conversations with vegan users of the café (n=3), they said they come to support the Centre, to eat dishes that are in consonance with their beliefs and to meet other vegan people.

Consensus-decision making process

Consensus-decision making process is a key element to understand the method of managing an autonomous space. Horizontality, direct democracy and equal participation might sound as noble aims, especially when mainstream and corporate politics operates in a hierarchical setting. However, in practice, consensus decision--making is an on-going process of overcoming challenges and individual differences to work towards a solution that benefits the collective, even if personally, one does not completely agree with the final decisions.

The results show the need of refreshing consensus decision-making process skills and the need to improve mechanisms to deal with individual differences, as outlined below:

"It's all based on direct democracy, and we would try to get consensus on every decision that we make. If we can't get that then we vote. (...) Because it is organised non-hierarchically there's no board of directors, there's no chairperson, there's no manager, there's no one with a veto or say that overrides anyone else's. Because everyone has their own say and we try to make decisions collectively. By large it works pretty well. / (...) I don't think that organising the way that we do it is a luxury... I think it is a necessity." (Bart, activist).

"We meet in a circle and we try to use consensus decision making processes to reach consensus on issues and implement those decisions. (...) There is a need to refresh your skills and maybe retrain in the process of consensus decision making, we haven't had one of those re-skilling in a while and yeah, the meetings can be clear, concise or messy." (Paul, activist).

I participated twice in the General Meeting of Seomra Spraoi as an overt researcher. At the first time, I explained my objectives. Nobody expressed refusal, then I left the meeting. On a second occasion, I invited more people to participate in the research and handed in a paper with the questions. The objective of participating in the General Meeting was to understand how the consensus decision-making process works in Seomra Spraoi. The process is as follows: one person acts as a neutral facilitator of the group, then he or she writes the agenda on a white board, takes the minutes of the meeting and organises the sequence of speakers. When a topic is discussed, the participants use hand signs to impart agreement or disagreement with a point made, so no one interferes verbally when someone is speaking. The hand signs used are: a) raise hands if one wants to talk b) shake hands in the air if one agrees with a point made c) make the hand sign of the horns if one thinks a great point was made d) make a sign of block with the arm if one does not agree with what was said.

In the first part, the meeting was concise. They discussed issues such as finances, rent, project proposals, etc. Then one of the participants raised a topic that clearly brought up tension to the group. At that moment, the facilitator asked me to be the facilitator of the meeting so she could actively voice her opinions. I noticed then how they discuss quarrelsome topics, and how clearly divided opinions co-exist. At all times, they discussed the topic in a non-personal way, clearly exposing their arguments forward or against the issue. At the end of the meeting, consensus was reached.

Bottom-Up Participation

Seomra Spraoi provides space for any group that would like to carry out their activities, workshops or events at the Centre, once they agree and respect the aims and principles of the space. The 'Events Group' is responsible for deciding which groups can use the space. According to results, it is very unlikely that groups or individuals' projects will have their requests denied. All activities happening at the Centre are bottom-up conceived, as outlined below:

> "It's not something that they come up with, is something that people come up with and tell them that they'd like to implement that activity in the space. The Spanish classes for example, they didn't asked me to do it, I offered to do it. It's more about individuals who put their names forward rather than the group deciding which activities will take place. It comes from below really. You are not being told what to do." (Mabel, long-term volunteer).

One activist highlighted that groups or individuals can contact the Centre directly. The Centre also contacts groups or individuals to use their facilities:

> "It happens in both ways. Some people

hear about us and they contact us, sometimes we'll know somebody and we'll suggest something. A lot of people, who contact us, haven't heard about the space." (Ailbhe – activist).

Results show that the setting in which the Centre operates allows groups, individuals and anyone who wishes to participate in the Centre to expose their ideas. This organisational form creates channels for the development of social technology and innovation to flourish from the people and for the people.

Results of Sustainable Lifestyle Survey

The third hypothesis this research verified is if Seomra Spraoi's Facebook page supporters engage in a more sustainable lifestyle in terms of transport use, food purchase and environmental awareness than the rest of the Irish population. The results of this survey are compared to the results of the *All-Island Lifestyle Survey* carried out in 2011 in the Republic of Ireland.

This survey was carried out in an autonomous geography context, where many participants would consider themselves anti-capitalists and affirm that the main cause of environmental and human crisis is capitalism itself. This positioning is confirmed in this survey, particularly on the question regarding the most important problem facing the world today. The most frequently mentioned word was 'Capitalism' (n=40), followed by 'Overpopulation' (n=18) and 'Climate Change' (n=17). This anti-capitalism positioning is translated into several anti-consumerist practices such as bin-diving for food, deliberately reducing or not consuming any type of product derivative from animals, the use of bicycles instead of cars for transport, and many other practices that constitute a

lifestyle that, directly or indirectly, has less impact on the environment (AUTIO et al., 2009; BLACK and CHERRIER, 2010). One can find elements of this attitude throughout the results of this survey. It is fundamental to highlight, though, that some of the respondents are not necessarily volunteers, activists or have never been involved or visited the Centre (n=42), but in general, they show interest in autonomous social centres.

Results show that 52.8% of the respondents are male and 47.2% are female. The participants are aged between 25 and 34 years old (48%). They are people with third level education (78%), with 52% displaying Master or PhD titles who live in rented spaces (64%), with housemates or family (46% and 36%). They have high level of concern for environmental issues (65%) and their top choices for transport are bicycle (35%) and walking (23%).

When compared with the results of the Irish Lifestyle survey, which displays 63% of respondents feeling *somewhat* concerned and only 23% feeling *very* concerned about the environment (LAVELLE & FAHY, 2012), 65% of Seomra Spraoi's supporters feel *very* concerned and 33% feel *somewhat* concerned about the environment. Results show that the level of environmental concern of the respondents is 42% higher than the Irish population. In total, 73% believe that Seomra Spraoi encourages, directly or indirectly, a sustainable lifestyle. 94% of the respondents recycle their rubbish and 52% do composting. In the Irish Lifestyle survey, the "levels of environmental concern were slightly higher among respondents who had attained third level education (89%)" (LAVELLE & FAHY, 2012). The level of education of Seomra Spraoi's supporters is considerably high, with up

to 78% of them having achieved third level education, which could be a factor of influence on their level of environmental awareness.

A stark contrast emerged on the topic of transport use. In the Irish survey, 73% of respondents are dependent on car to travel to work, college or school (LAVELLE, RAU, HEISSERER & HYNES, 2012), whereas 58% of Seomra Spraoi's supporters use mostly bicycle or walk as means of transport to the same destinations. Similar results were found on the means of transport for shopping (31%) and recreation/leisure (33%). When respondents were asked about the benefits of cycling, the top choices were 'protecting the environment' (31%) and 'physical exercise' (19%). When asked about the obstacles against cycling, the top choices were 'distance to travel' (27%) and 'lack of bicycle lane' (22%).

On the topic of food, despite considerable amount of respondents highlighting their main method of acquiring food as 'growing their own' (n=8) and other methods (n=12), the main place for purchasing food among Seomra Spraoi's supporters is the supermarket (46%). They were asked to rank their top three considerations when making food purchase decisions. The top words of choice were 'price' (53%), 'quality' (28%) and 'where and how the food is produced' (26%). The fact that 'where and how the food is produced' emerged as the third most chosen option could be associated to the activities and awareness campaigns of the Food Action group. The same option emerged in fourth place in the Irish survey (LAVELLE, CARROLL & FAHY, 2012). In a question about the meaning of local food, 57% of Seomra Sproaoi's supporters consider local food what is produced locally or regionally, whe-

reas 44% of respondents of the Irish survey consider local food what is produced nationally (LAVELLE, CARROLL & FAHY, 2012). The discrepancy between surveys' results can also be associated to the food awareness promoted in the Centre.

When asked about self-awareness and behavioural change for environmental reasons, 44% of Seomra Spraoi's supporters agree that their own personal consumption behaviour can bring about positive environmental change; 45% agree that they can change their consumption behaviour quite easily if they wanted to, and 44% would be willing to accept cuts in their standards of living to help protect the environment. When asked which actions they had taken that benefited the environment, 66% of the participants said they signed a petition about an environmental issue in the past 5 years. The results for the same topics on the Irish survey showed 20 to 25% less agreement with the sentences posed above. These results corroborate the hypothesis that the level of environmental concern amongst Seomra Spraoi's supporters is higher than that of the Irish population.

Discussion: a call for autonomous geographies in Ireland.

Autonomous geographies or autonomous social centres are not usually found in Irish urban landscapes nor are widely known by the Irish public. However, this research found a growing number of autonomous social centres in Dublin (2 - Seomra Spraoi and The Exchange, in Temple Bar); a project for an autonomous social centre in Galway (1), Cork (1) and an autonomous camp (Rossport Solidarity Camp) in Erris, Co. Mayo (1). Although the motivations of these initiatives are diverse, they indicate a growing effort, in civil society, towards political autonomy and reveal a disposition for grassroots space development. In other words, these autonomous projects show a desire for consolidation of spaces where people can work together without the interference of mainstream politics or market constrains. In Ireland, autonomous geographies initially aimed to provide support and space for class-based struggle and resource centre for activism. However, these spaces have incorporated environmental sustainability to its practices. In Seomra Spraoi this is explicitly found in its Aims and Principles and the same 'greening' process can also be found in the Rossport Solidarity Camp and many others.

The setting in which autonomous geographies operates – horizontality, inclusiveness and cooperation – does open ground for social learning and sustainability innovation, proving to be a fruitful space for innovative ideas for local sustainable development that resonates with national and global sustainable development challenges such as transport and food use. The high environmental awareness coupled with horizontal organising provides fertile configuration for innovation in participatory techniques, sustainability, organic learning and promotion of sustainable lifestyles.

Autonomous geographies' organisational setting is in itself an on-going process and source of experiential knowledge in horizontal politics and inclusive participation. Having said this, in global spheres of discussion about the challenges facing sustainable development, there is a growing recognition of the political need of inclusiveness alongside environmental sustainability if any sustainable future is to be achieved.

The contributions in innovation autonomous geographies can offer are numerous and of course cannot be entirely captured in this research. However, it makes suggestions for further empirical research questions. The current challenges autonomous geographies face relates to how to network outside their space to attract a larger number of participants and how to communicate these experiences to a larger audience. These challenges are acknowledged by Seomra Spraoi activists who recognise the need of involvement of a larger or a local community that might not be necessarily connected to activism, as outlined below:

> "So we see ourselves as a community of activists, people who want to change the world and linking with our aims and principles, but we would really like also to be involved with the local community We are trying to become more outgoing in terms of finding people that we agree with what they are doing and contact them. (...) We are just after making a leaflet explaining to people what we are, so we can go and find them. We have an outreach going on, we're only starting and we are trying to bring more people in and groups in." (Ailbhe – Seomra Spraoi's worker).

This research also found that the one of the hindrances for the development of autonomous sites is the lack of official acknowledgement of autonomous geographies as legitimate spaces aiming at social transformation and environmental sustainability. This current configuration stems from historical factors surrounding land use and property ownership in Ireland that hindered the development of spaces operated by people and consequently the development of more flexible property use policies in the country. The progressive demands of community-based initiatives and local social movements in Ireland during the 1980s and 1990s were never widespread enough to form a social movement

with large appeal (outside the circles of activism), let alone having its demands reaching mainstream politics.

Another challenge that arose in Seomra Spraoi is the need of more training on consensus decision-making process and facilitation skills to overcome challenges such as internal tensions and conflicts. Sen (2010) indicates that the openness and looseness of the inclusive participation might lead, in some cases, to procrastination and inefficient conflict resolution. Seomra Spraoi does have some level of tensions, especially in the Seomra Café, but it is nothing that up to now has eroded the aims and principles in which they operate. However, that does not exclude the need to have these conflicts adequately addressed.

Conclusion

Autonomous Geographies denounce many social-environmental unsustainable aspects of capitalism and therefore carry an intrinsic environmental concern. This high environmental concern coupled with horizontal setting configures a framework for grassroots innovation in participatory politics, sustainability and social learning. These topics resonate with national and global challenges for achieving a sustainable development, such as the use of transport and food, in which Seomra Spraoi approaches by encouraging the use of bicycles and the consumption of vegan food. Autonomous geographies can also provide a multitude of participatory techniques for space management and project development.

Seomra Spraoi's projects that aim to reduce environmental impact and foster social learning are *de facto* the Bicycle Workshop and *to some extent* the Seomra Café. Therefore, the centre does foster a

culture of skill sharing and environmental awareness. In addition, autonomous geographies contribute to grassroots innovation and inclusive participation because it operates within a structure that allows innovation to flourish through the people involved and for the people involved. However, as inclusive participation is a method of decision making that enables all participants to express their views an opinions, differences are prone to arise.

As these spaces operate outside mainstream channels of innovation (universities and technology institutes), the challenge they face now is to create mechanisms of communication with a wider community and other spheres of civil society to increase the number of participants. However, as found in this research, the profile of the people that the centre attracts is that of activists; highly educated and environmentally aware people, which can inhibit the participation of wider groups who do not wish to be identified as an activist.

By developing a theoretical framework that ascertains the contributions autonomous geographies can offer for a sustainable development, we can better understand how civil society articulates environmentally-focused initiatives and how the communities of activists and autonomous spaces are organising activities with sustainability aims. Finally, this research explored the potential and the current working projects for sustainability innovation; the scope of social learning processes; the wealth of participatory techniques and the promotion of sustainable lifestyles present in one autonomous social centre in Dublin, Seomra Spraoi. This research also found the challenges Seomra Spraoi faces, such as solving internal conflicts and attracting a larger number of stakeholders.

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