Social and Solidarity Economy scale beyond contradictions:

The case of the actors of the Alternative Community Commercialization Network (Red Comal) in Honduras

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Disclaimer:

This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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Dedicado a la gran familia de Comal. A todas y todos los que llevan años haciendo posible que la economía social y solidaria no sea una promesa del futuro sino una realidad del presente.

Contents

List of Figures *vi*

List of Tables *vi*

List of Maps *vi*

List of Appendices *vi*

Acknowledgements *viii*

Abstract *ix*

Relevance to Development Studies *x*

1 Setting the stage **1**

1.1 Large scale challenges and contradictions in SSE 1

1.2 Research strategy 5

1.2.1 Data collection: what did I look at? 6

1.2.2 Research approach: where am I looking from? 7

2 Analytical lenses: Social and Solidarity Economy practices beyond 'market as usual' **9**

2.1 Working within the unseen part of the iceberg 9

2.2 Re-embedding economic (inter)actions 10

3 Achieving and maintaining large-scale in Social and Solidarity Economy: Comal's stories of being big **12**

3.1 Giving birth to Red Comal: the art of knitting networks (tejer redes) 13

3.1.1 Central America: from post-war to liberalization 13

3.1.2 Dialogues and exchanges for alternatives: de facto foundation of Comal 14

3.1.3 Making Red Comal real: from agreements to practice 15

3.2 Organizational and activity expansion and crisis 17

3.2.1 Mitch hurricane in 1998: a window of opportunity for activity and organizational expansion 17

3.2.2 Political instability and coup d'état in June 28th, 2009 18

4 How is large-scale related to experiences of contradictions? **20**

4.1 Analytical toolkit: dilemmas and up-scaling challenges 20

4.2 From *organicity building* to centralization 22

4.2.1 Knitting networks and organicity building: let's reach in 23

4.2.2 Comal is breathing: let's move on 24

4.3 Professionalization: new actors shaping principles and practices 24
4.4 Experiences of contradictions: Comal loses direction 28

5 SSE actors making sense of and shaping contradictions: *comalera/os* adjusting principles and practices 31

5.1 Analytical toolkit: the social life of contradictions 31
5.2 Reconnecting from practices: brown sugar re-localizing strategy 34
5.3 Reconnecting from principles: interweaving values 37

Conclusion *40*

Appendices *44*

References *47*

List of Figures

Figure 1. Façade of a Comal warehouse 2
Figure 2. Research problem 5
Figure 3. Shift in Comal's membership and organizational structure 16
Figure 4. Comal's stages and up-scale mechanisms 22
Figure 5. Comal's organization structure 25
Figure 6. Comal's shifting priorities 28
Figure 7. Social life of contradictions and (re)connecting efforts 33
Figure 8. Comal's organic granulated brown sugar (*panela granulada*) 35
Figure 9. Concepts used by Comal's discourse (in reports and workshops) 38

List of Tables

Table 1. *Comalera/os'* key words in group discussions 37

List of Maps

Map 1. Honduras map: regions of Comal's members 6

List of Appendices

Appendix 1. Participants in the discussion groups....44
Appendix 2. Comal's values and principles....44
Appendix 3. Drawings of Comal's history....45
Appendix 4. 'I am *comalera/o*' T-shirt....46

List of Acronyms

AFSC	American Friends' Service Committee
(Red) Comal	*Red de Commercialización Comunitaria Alternativa* (Alternative Community Commercialization Network)
CS	Community shop
ECOMAS	*Empresa de Comercialización Alternativa* (Alternative Commercialization Enterprise)
ECOSOL	*Escuela de Economía Solidaria* (Solidarity Economy School)
PECOSOL	*Plataforma Centro Americana de Economía Solidaria* (Central American Platform of SolidarityEconomy)
(CAUSA-) RELACC	*Centro América Unida y Solidaria- Red Latinoamericana de Comercialización Comunitaria* (Central America United-Latin American Network of Community Commercialization)
SSE	Social and Solidarity Economy
STRO	Social Trade Organization
TFSSE	United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy
UDIS	*Unidad de Intercambio Solidario* (Unit of Solidarity Exchange)

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'Writing is about perseverance. It is about working with bad ideas until good ones appear. Inspiration will find you working!'–Actors and director of the play 'La Cervantina'

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Abstract

This research paper looks at Comal, a large Honduran Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) network of peasants that supports the commercialization of its members' products since 1995. The paper sets out two interrelated objectives. Firstly, I aim to understand how Comal's members live and cope with the contradictions between their collective values and their practices. Secondly, I explore how these contradictions are related to Comal's large-scale, mirroring the challenges of growth in SSE.

Taking an ethnographic approach, the focus of analysis is Comal's actors' subjective narratives and practices. The research showed that Comal's members' experiences of contradictions can be explained by centralization and professionalization processes related to large-scale. Thus, Comal's actors also have a role in making sense of and shaping these contradictions by (re)adjusting their SSE principles and practices, as analyzed through two examples.

Drawing on literature about social organizations and diverse economic relations and practices, this research is brought into conversations about structure and agency in the Social and Solidarity Economy. In contrast to what is implied in some SSE debates, I will argue that SSE organizations are not bound to "degenerate" when they become big. Contradictions triggered by up-scaling can be interpreted not as "negative" outcomes of growth but rather as a dynamic process. By exploring what I call "the social life of contradictions", it became clear that SSE organizations are a nuanced mixture of co-existing principles and practices, and their members, as SSE agents, make sense and shape their perceived contradictions. It implies that (re)embedding the local economy in a SSE project is a messy process never completely achieved and not free from inconsistencies. This hints at a more nuanced interpretation of challenges and responses of how SSE projects are up-scaled and sustained while holding its core principles and objectives.

Relevance to Development Studies

'The international development community recognizes the need to rethink development. Business-as-usual has not prevented financial and food crises, climate change, persistent poverty and rising inequality.'

(United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Social and Solidarity Economy TFSSE, 2014b:1)

Development equals economic growth is no longer an axiom. Development Studies is also about *alternative* developments, and alternatives *to* Development. Research around Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), grounded on the diversity of economic interactions, enhances our understanding of community development and economies *otherwise*.

In the context of all-encompassing crisis at global and local levels, the economic, social and environmental potential of SSE is increasingly recognized, among scholars as well as civil society movements and local and global policy makers, as evidenced in the role of SSE in the discussions around the coming *Sustainable Development Goals* (TFSSE 2014a; 2014b)

The question of how to successfully scale-up 'alternatives' is very popular in Development Studies in very different fields from private enterprises to NGOs (Edwards and Hulme, 2002). In the case of SSE, this question is especially interesting because it can offer analytical insight to potentials and limits of SSE. It helps us read the already innovative nature of diverse SSE practices, directly speaking to processes on the ground. Following Gibson-Graham's approach (2005, 2008), research on diverse SSE practices has the potential to 'enlarge the field' of SSE experiences by creating new discourses that disclose and give credit to already existing community-based forms of solidarity and social wellbeing.

In contrast to other places such as Europe and North America, Central American is rarely present in SSE literature. Exceptional is also an ethnographic focus on SSE actors (i.e. Amin 2009). This research around Comal experience in Honduras aims to contribute to enlarge the field of SSE experiences in Central American region by exploring SSE in practice.

Keywords

Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), peasant cooperatives, diverse economies, Honduras, Central America, ethnography

1 Setting the stage

Será quela necedad parió conmigo,
la necedad de lo que hoy resulta necio:
la necedad de asumir al enemigo,
la necedad de vivir sin tener precio.

Yo no sé lo que es el destino,
caminando fui lo que fui.

May it be that stubbornness was born with me.
The stubbornness of what is now stubborn.
The stubbornness of assuming the foe.
The stubbornness of living without having a price.

I don't know what fate is,
walking, I became what I was.

El necio (The stubborn), Silvio Rodríguez

Honduras, 2009. First official coup d'état of the 21st century in the American continent. Zooming out: a scenario of growing civil society mobilizations contesting the direction of liberalization policies and struggling to build alternatives to national development policy.

A myriad of alternative development projects have been in growing dialogue since 1980s end of Central American conflicts. Then, two decades ago, many social organizations began to interconnect ideas of the role of state and market in society. That shaped the birth of a Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) network of networks of Honduran peasants: The alternative community commercialization network (Red de Comercialización Comunitaria Alternativa, Red Comal).

Comal has been a crucial part of these vibrant civil society dynamics in Honduras. It is a network of peasant community based organizations that nowadays has 122 local organization members, engaging 4421 people and 51 community shops across the country (Comal 2015b). Its story, despite the many obstacles, is one of a collective dream of how local socio-economic development can happen in Honduras.

1.1 Large scale challenges and contradictions in SSE

We finally arrived to the Comal Intibuca warehouse located in the west of Honduras. The warehouse is currently autonomously managed by local Comal members, though it has kept Comal's main symbols. In large lettering on the front: '*Red Comal. Supporting peasant economy*'. Paintings of Comal's symbol –actual 'comales', clay pans traditionally used to cook tortillas– fill the blank spaces of the façade.

From the outside one can glimpse that the warehouse is a big space full of packages of products piled up around a modest desk for the shop assistant. Inside, walking along corridors of packaged products ready to be distributed to the community shops I could see soap, rope, toothpaste next

to margarine, chips, Fanta, Coca Cola, etc. Only a shelf nearby the shop assistant's desk contains the collection of Comal members' products: coffee, artisanal wine, organic brown sugar, homemade biscuits, powdered fried beans, and a few more. Apart from this limited island, the rest of the products, that are the majority of the warehouse, are hardly coming from any cooperative of peasants. Indeed, many of them are not even produced in Honduras. (Intibucá, July 2015)

Figure 1. Façade of a Comal warehouse

Source: Intibuca, 2015

The starting point of this research is this contradiction: the gap between the slogan in the façade and the content of the warehouse. Such a contradiction is nothing new to Comal. As is not unusual in social organizations, Comal has historically been struggling with many internal inconsistencies and contradictions. Thus, this one –selling products as Coca-Cola in peasant commercialization shops– has been an outstanding contradiction for many years, central to many debates and collective reflections that Comal has had during the last two decades. Moreover, this contradiction connects with scholar conversations about SSE potential and limits. It is related with the idea that SSE organizations face fatal challenges once they grow, losing their potential.

The potential of SSE projects –as an umbrella term for economic initiatives not driven by profit but people-centered and striving for social justice (Utting 2015)– has been widely researched.

First, the emergence and expansion of SSE, in social life and Academia, is interpreted as a pathway enhancing coping and resiliency strategies. Extensive literature has researched the potential of SSE as an engine for community development (Gomez 2008, Muradian 2015, Seyfang 2002) by delinking from international markets, while widening networks within communities and revaluing social skills and excluded members.

Second, when emphasizing the role of ethics, self-management and agency in the diversity of economic activities SSE is argued to have a deeper "emancipatory" potential as well. It comprises an intentional re-localization and critical questioning of modern growth-based development (Bergeron and Healy 2013, Gibson-Graham 2008a, Santos 2011).

According to Amin (2009a: 33), in countries with weak welfare states, such as Honduras, SSE is being used to signal post-capitalist possibilities for local development:

> With markets and states linked to the destruction of indigenous lifestyles, local communities, the environment and social capacity, and to uncertainty, insecurity and inequality, the social economy is being seen as the way to a fairer and more sustainable society based on popular mobilization to meet local needs.

Despite these potentials, SSE seems to remain always on the fringe, locked in a marginal dimension in terms of scale (Gómez 2013). Apart from very few examples of 'successful' scaling-up (such as Mondragón cooperative in Spain) that could be the exceptions that confirm the rule, there are very few empirical cases of successful large-scale SSE projects (Reed 2015, Utting 2015).

When explaining this situation, researchers and activists suggest that scale entails a set of fatal challenges to SSE (ibid.). These challenges can be very technical (such as problems incorporating new users, making it economic sustainable, measuring success/failure, etc). They can be also very abstract entailing processes of *impersonalisation* and *dis-embeddedness* from the social setting and values, *mainstreamisation* loosing its alternative, politicized and emancipatory potential (Sánchez de la Blanca 2015).

These challenges imply a threat to the expressed ethics (*social* and *solidarity* principles) that explains SSE potentials. Therefore, there is an increasing scholarly interest in analyzing these up-scaling challenges. The question becomes whether SSE can be 'scaled up and sustained meanwhile retaining its core values and objectives', what Utting calls an *integrative upscaling* (2015: 3).

The case study of this research paper intends to contribute to this research gap in the analysis of up-scaling challenges within SSE. When designing the research, Comal presented an ideal case as a large and ambitious SSE network. In the past it has a membership of more than a hundred organized groups and today it continues to have a considerable one, though much more reduce and less active.

The starting argument met these "up-scaling conversations": Comal's quick boom and bust during the 2000s may have been an example of a fatal combination of up-scaling challenges, aggravated by the context of the socio-economic instability and de-mobilization of 2009 coup d'état.

However, fieldwork brought different ideas. The research problem shifted together with the realization that Comal's members are an endless source of narratives about SSE potential and challenges that do not necessarily fit the scholar conversations about SSE scaling-up. The notion of up-scaling challenges became only a starting point to dig on contradictions related to scale processes.

Feeling very puzzled by the contradiction of what Comal's community shops(CSs) were supposed to be and what they actually are, I asked repeatedly

to Comal's actors 'what is different about Comal warehouses and shops that sets them apart from any other shop?' In general four differences were explained to me. First, Comal CS is a collective property, where decision making, pricing and profits are equally decided among all CS members. Second, CSs are based on solidarity economy principles, such as 'fair weight and price for both producers and consumers' as expressed by the interviewees. Third, CSs as a type of collective action are 'an organizing effort', this being understood as an end in itself: as a way to help community empowering and politization. And fourth, in any case, commercialization of non-peasant products could be taken as a 'transitory process where to learn from'.

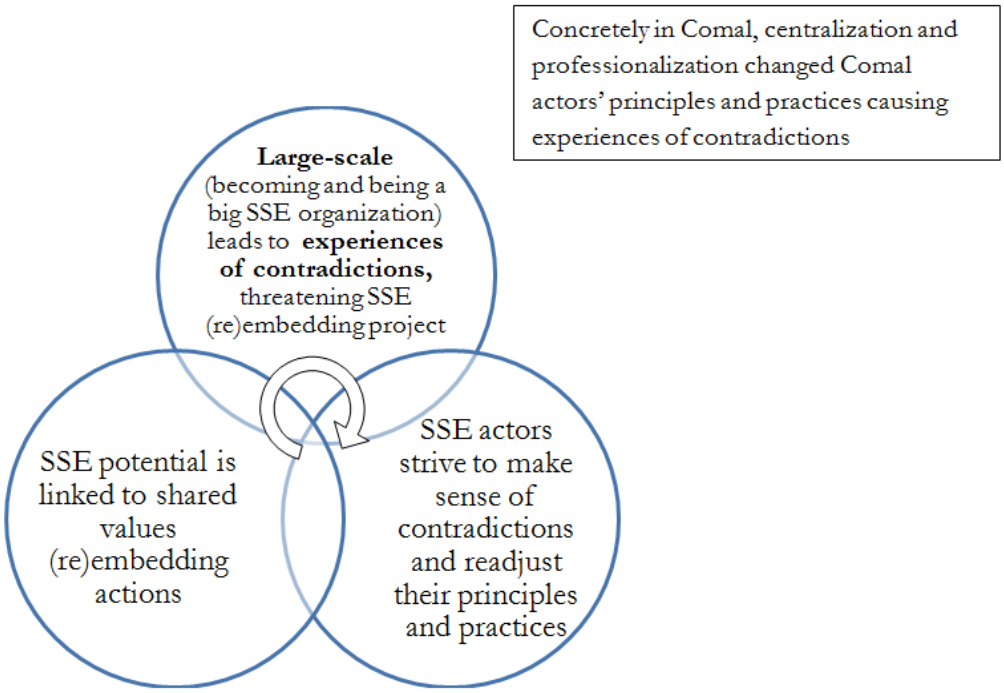
What I found most interesting in these answers is that they reflected that mine was not a surprising question to them. The contradiction mirrored in the gap between the lettering in the warehouse façade and the products inside was obvious also to them. Yet, this inconsistency did not paralyze them. They had learnt to live with it. But, how?

The research showed that, indeed, some of the experiences of contradictions can be related to scale processes. Part of the impossibility of Comal to commercialize peasant products, as its slogan states, is explained by centralization and professionalization processes related to 'being big'. But contradictions are more than negative outcomes of large-scale irremediably challenging SSE values. The second part of this research looks at "the social life of contradictions". In particular, at how Comal's members, as SSE actors, make sense of and shape contradictions in the context of a large-scale SSE network.

I arrived to Honduras assuming up-scaling had implied a set of fatal challenges to Comal that lead to insurmountable contradictions between what they express as their fundamental principles and what they actually do. During the research process, Comal's own narratives and practices made the research focus to shift. Instead of analyzing up-scaling process, I step back and dig into the assumption that "being big brings fatal contradictions". I became interested in the experiences of contradictions as the dialectical relationship between Comal members' principles and practices. That is, the tension between their expressed shared principles that are meant to guide action and the actual practices.

This research paper seeks to contribute to an ethnographic approach to SSE by exploring contradictions related to large-scale looking at members' practices and meanings. While this tension principles-practices is not exceptional for SSE actors, exploring it becomes especially interesting in the conversation about SSE potential as inherently linked to a shared morality that should (re)embed actions and relations. Moreover, large-scale seems to be a clear threat to the (re)embedding project and enlarge the distance between SSE principles guiding action and actual practices, as part of the experiences of contradictions.

Figure 2. Research problem



Source: elaborated by author

1.2 Research strategy

This research explores "challenges of large-scale" by looking at SSE actors' experiences of contradictions and the dialectical relationship between their SSE principles and practices. For that, I have focused on depth on a 'telling case' (Comal) where the 'ethnographic detail' (based on Comal actors' own narratives and practices) aims to speak to larger conversations.

This said, the overarching research question is: in what ways have Comal's large-scale processes affected Comal's members' tensions between their SSE principles and practices?

Being the research sub-questions:

- What has been Comal's path of "being big"?
- What organizational processes and structures supported Comal's large-scale? In what ways did these affect the tensions between SSE values and practices leading to experiences of contradictions?
- How have Comal's members, as SSE agents, experienced, made sense of and shaped their own contradictions linked to large-scale? In particular, how are they trying to (re)connect their principles and practices?

In order to answer these questions this paper is structured in 5 chapters. In this first one, having framed the research problem and questions, I will explain the research strategy in terms of data collection techniques and approaches to knowledge. In the second chapter, I will briefly explain how this research frames the understanding of SSE principles and practices.

Then, I will address the question: *how have Comal's large-scale processes lead to experiences of contradictions?* In order to do so, in the third chapter I will explore how large-scale has been achieved and maintained in Comal. In the next chapter, I will focus on the ways organizational dynamics related to large-scale have affected Comal's members' principles and practices driving to what they recognize as 'Comal losing its direction'.

After analyzing the influence of scale, the fifth chapter will deal with the question: *how do Comal's members, as SSE agents, experience, make sense of and adjust the relationship between their expressed common principles and practices?* I will then engage with the literature that explores the idea of contradictions as a nuanced process. This larger discussion will help me understand the ways Comal's members adjust the relationship between their expressed common principles and practices.

1.2.1 Data collection: what did I look at?

The fieldwork took place in July 2015. Based in Comal headquarters in Siguatepeque, Honduras. Together with the Comal team, I travelled throughout the whole network in order to know its scope and diverse membership. And when I was not travelling to visit Comal local members, I stayed at Comal headquarters in order to review their internal documents.

Framed from an ethnographic approach, the fieldwork consisted of participant observation, complemented by group discussions and individual and group interviews. Data collection techniques were qualitative and mainly based on unstructured interviews, though I often used semi-structure questionnaires to open and drive the discussion.

In a schedule designed with the Comal team, I visited 7 of the 8 regions where Comal is present nowadays. I met nine community-based groups, of which eight were members of Comal and one was not. Apart from constant reflections with the Comal technical team members, we had two "research meetings": at the beginning and at the end of the fieldwork. The total number of interviewees/participants in the focus group discussions was 102: 30 women and 72 men (see Appendix 1).

Map 1. Honduras map: regions of Comal's members

Source: Comal (2015a: 7)

The analysis was centered on Comal's members –*comalera/os* as they call themselves[1]. My focus was on the subjective narratives, experiences and practices of members of Comal, among which I differentiate[2]: (1) members of the Comal, so called, 'technical' team, (2) regular members of local organization part of Comal and (3) members of local organizations that are also representatives within Comal internal governance scheme (regional committees, general assembly, board of directors, etc.)

The overall research strategy intertwined three levels of analysis:

a) Organizational dynamics, comprising project making, mobilization of resources, interactions with other organized social actors, everyday organizational practices and identity.
b) Collective action dynamics, focusing on heterogeneity, blending processes and tensions between Comal's agents.
c) Context specificity of the units of analysis, that is, an emphasis on their *place-based* nature.

1.2.2 Research approach: where am I looking from?

I arrived in Honduras aiming to understand what people *do* (practice) and what they *say* (meanings) about it in everyday contexts. That is, what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 3) defined as an *ethnographic approach*. This attitude explains the research focus on *comalera/os'* practices, principles and meanings.

More importantly, I took an 'ethnographic approach' as a way of doing research anchored in certain ideas about knowledge. This research has understood knowledge as 'situated' –*place-based*– and therefore 'partial' (Haraway 1988). That is, an epistemological position where knowledge is embodied in social interactions (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). This explains the emphasis on Comal actors' own narratives and the research shift to "ground upscaling debates" on SSE actors' experiences.

In this process of looking at what Comal's actors do and say about it, I could have searched for what Emerson (1995: 140) calls 'naturally occurring situated interactions in which local meanings are created and sustained'. However, a complete immersion for any ideal participant observation was unrealistic for such a short time. Furthermore, the starting point of situated knowledges is hardly compatible with the metaphor of researcher as "participant *neutrally* observing *naturally* occurring situations".

So, during fieldwork I deliberately complement participant observation with interviews and group discussions. They came to be very useful research settings since, as indicated by Huijsmans (2010:61), disclosing my research role provided for the research interaction 'a grounded basis for interpreting data and for reflection on one's positionality and subjectivity'.

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[1] See Appendix 4 for a T-shirt designed by Ian Díaz, a member of the Comal team.
[2] These are only indicative "categories", since often one person can be in two of them. This is especially true nowadays since many members of the Comal team are also involved in local organized groups (it will be further elaborated in section 4.4.)

Therefore, thinking on *positionality* has implied thinking through *comalera/os*' experiences as well as on my own *positionality* as a researcher. During my encounter with Comal, I positioned myself as a young Spanish, female MA student inevitably foreign to many *comalera/os*' daily live struggles. As Abbot (2007), I was aware of my position as white European where power relations were repeatedly evident in the special treatments I received by local people. Nonetheless, despite these different positions, Comal's actors and I share something very relevant too: a common "activism" for Social and Solidarity Economy.

> I was in one of Comal's experience exchange events on agro-ecology between local producers in a cooperative in the region of Marcala. We had just arrived to the first visit to an integrated agro-ecologic farm and, as usual, we started with a round of introductions. To my surprise, after the introduction of the other participants, I ended up introducing myself by saying: 'I am Paula and I am not a producer. Well…hopefully I will one day produce a research paper about Comal'. (Marcala, July 2015)

In a period that is felt crucial to *comalera/os* to strengthen "Comal's collective dream" and think and learn about their contradictions, we wanted this research to be a learning process to eventually promote SSE in theory and practice. Indeed, this research fieldwork aimed to ultimately 'enlarge the field of experience' of SSE (Gibson-Graham 2008a) –Comal's experiences in this case. And taking Comal's actors seriously for this research has meant starting from their own narratives of Comal –comprising, obviously, my interaction with those narratives. Therefore, while I do not disappear from the picture, *comalera/os* are its frontline.

This research acknowledges the diversity of interpretations and the relevance of understanding the *position* of the lived experiences of the interviewees. Unfortunately, this type of ethnography in depth is outside of the scope of this paper. Instead, the emphasis has been on common trends in *comalera/os'* narratives about Comal's expansions; taking a closer look to their reflections on experiences of contradictions.

2 Analytical lenses: Social and Solidarity Economy practices beyond 'market as usual'

In an attempt to build theory from the 'tacking between the theoretical (whole) and the ethnographic detail (part)' (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007:19), multiple theoretical approaches and concepts have shaped the research process. For this reasons, each section of this paper begins with a sort of analytical.

Nonetheless, in an overarching manner, there is a particular way this research frames the understanding of SSE. A brief explanation of this research's analytical lenses will be provided in this chapter to understand how I approach the questions: what are Social and Solidarity Economy principles and practices? What does their dialectical relationship look like? And why the tension around values re-embedding actions is so crucial for SSE?

2.1 Working within the unseen part of the iceberg

'Solidarity economy means to produce, distribute and consume focusing more on human beings than on profit'

Member of a local organization part of Comal

Social and solidarity economy (SSE) is a big umbrella, a catching-all label under which a lot of hybrid practices and projects can fall. From fair trade to mutual aid schemes or community currencies, the actors involved are heavily differentiated by their understanding of the mission of SSE and its role within capitalism (Utting 2015). While exploring these normative views of SSE is important, this research understands SSE from the convergences among definitions rather than divergences.

The foundation of this conciliating analytical view is the theoretical conversation on the varieties of economic (inter)actions, seeking to shed light on daily economic relations and practices traditionally glossed over by classic sociological theories on market relations.

Polanyi's (1992) concept of *substantive meaning* of the economy is one of the referential ideas enlarging our understanding on economic practices. According to him, the *substantive meaning* is understood by human interdependence on environment and fellows, in contrasts to the *formal meaning* as 'the logical character of the means-ends relationship' (ibid.: 29).

This '*substantive economy* approach' has broadened the lenses. Empirical markets are the massive unseen part of the iceberg whose tip is the formal market economy. Similarly, Gibson-Graham (2005, 2008a, 2013) also dig into the iceberg deepness. Gibson-Graham conceptualize diverse, non-deterministic and non-linear economic dynamics. Their '*diverse economies* approach' emphasizes the need to render visible and credible the already wealthy community economies and their many types of economic agencies.

> It is a reframing that highlights diversity and multiplicity. People participate in many different activities across the diverse economy. They are economic actors in many fronts (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013: 13)

2.2 Re-embedding economic (inter)actions

The multiplicity of economic practices in daily life is this research's starting point to conceptualize SSE. Social and Solidarity Economy is a great evidence of these diverse practices that cannot fit in any strict market logic. So, SSE is about this unseen part of the iceberg. In particular about parts of it that deliberately want to be different from the tip of the iceberg (i.e. classic market practices).

Nonetheless, there is not such a thing as the natural market logic (as we know historically from the analysis of Marx, Polanyi, Schumpeter, etc). Instead, every economic relation should be understood as embedded in a unique set of specific social relations. And people, who –as Gibson-Graham emphasize– are economic actors in many different ways, can shape through their interactions the embeddedness of their economic actions.

I argue that: what many SSE practices have in common is precisely the intention to re-embed economic (inter)actions into certain social justice values, beyond market principles.

In that sense, SSE is claimed to foster (re)humanization or (re)socialization of economic relations serving specific equity and environmental objectives and strengthening community ties (Amin 2009b, Orzi 2012). Furthermore, following Gómez's conceptualization, such a re-embedding allows us to explain SSE as an institutional innovation:

> [SSE] transform[s] the mechanisms for the satisfaction of needs by bringing back social justice to local communities and expressing solidarity and reciprocity. Shared moralities of solidarity and reciprocity embed economic relations at the local level and can constrain self-interest, allow actors to bypass the limits of pure rationality, and modify the interactions typical of anonymous markets (Gómez 2013: 5)

According to Utting (2015), two principles are crucial in this re-embedding of the economy: the *social* and *solidarity* principles. The *social* is linked to the primary purpose of benefiting people instead of generating profits. That is, an effort to re-embed market activities in progressive societal norms and creating or strengthening institutions that counter-act perverse effects of 'business as usual'. The *solidarity* part entails a sense of social justice as it pushes the envelope of social and systemic transformation.

Nevertheless, social and solidarity principles are differently understood, enacted and deployed by SSE groups and actors[3]. SSE general principles are highly difficult to be 'captured' because their meanings and uses are highly context, case and person specific, and they are constantly changing.

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[3] There are many scholars' attempts to identify the essential SSE principles, and explain how they are built, maintained and/or changed (Amin 2009b, Moulaert and Ailenei 2005)

Acknowledging the context specific nature of how SSE actors go about (re)embedding economic activities, this research looks at the broader question of *how* this re-embedding process takes place. In which ways are SSE principles (whatever they are for a concrete case, as Comal[4]) meant to guide quotidian economic practices and relations? Such a question implies the distinction between (1) SSE collective project crystallized in expressed common principles, and (2) the actual socio-economic practices and relations they aim to guide or re-embed.

The 'image' of *re-embedding* is the cornerstone of this research's understanding of SSE principles and practices. On the one hand SSE practices are meant to re-embed economic interactions into certain social justice values beyond market principles. On the other hand, these practices are themselves embedded in concrete social relation settings; and *social* and *solidarity* principles are very case and context specific as well.

This approach to SSE as a context specific re-embedding project relates to what some authors, as Seo and Creed (2002), have conceptualized as the paradox of *embedded agency,* echoing Giddens' (1984) emphasis on the mutually constitutive nature of social structure and agency. Meaning that SSE actors, as social agents, should be framed as navigating in the possibilities of their specific social context.

Such a stress on the complexity of context amounts on what social movements' scholars call *place-based politics* (Harcourt and Escobar 2005). Building on feminist ontologies, this framework brings to the front the importance of *locating* experiences that are striving for social change. They urge to take seriously the complexity of locations, *places*, which are not fixed or easily definable: 'being embedded in a particular location by no means suggests that the location is itself closed off to change' (ibid. 2002: 11)

Bearing these conversations in mind, I look at Comal as a SSE situated, *place-based*, re-embedding project of economic relations and practices. And *comalera/os* as embedded SSE agents who experience contradictions based on the changing relationship between their expressed common values and their practices. I use the conceptualization as a 'dialectical relationship' to emphasize the dynamism and bi-directionality of changes from both principles-guiding-practices and from practices-following-principles.

[4] See Comal's values in Appendix 2

3 Achieving and maintaining large-scale in Social and Solidarity Economy: Comal's stories of being big

Up-scaling semantically implies very different ideas of what SSE growth is about, frequently related to understandings of what SSE should be. To choose an illustrative contrast: while some fair trade actors advocated for up-scaling as a way to seek greater impact by reaching greater audience (Knorringa in Biekart et al. forthcoming: 17), for other feminist scholars up-scaling means a growing recognition of the diversity of alternative economic practices (Bergeron and Healy, 2013) or a 'scaling up from the academic location' (Gibson-Graham 2008a: 626).

The emphasis of this research paper is on the process of becoming and being big as entailing a set of problematic implications for SSE shared morality and practices. Many of these challenges are connected to the increasing number and diversity of SSE actors involved in the achievement and sustaining of large-scale.

Having this in mind, in this section I will look at Comal's members' narratives of being a big network of networks[5]. According to these narratives, I distinguish two analytical stages in Comal's history before the current phase.

First, Comal was born big. Nevertheless, the process of giving birth to a big network of networks was complex and dynamic. The consolidation of Comal 'as such' was a long effort of building an entity between already self-functioning networks. This was the first process of achieving and maintaining large-scale from 1995 to approximately 1998.

Second, once Comal was consolidated, almost ten years after it was first envisioned, Comal was already "another animal". Comal's actors had changed significantly and the collective dream of Comal was speeding into different directions. Then the extraordinary expansion of Comal's organization and activities, led by the commercialization branch, happened. This was the second stage of Comal's story of being big (around 1998 to 2007), quite different from the first one.

These two stages will give an insight into Comal's internal processes of expansion. Nonetheless, this collective enlargement project could be partly explained by contextual factors. Following Tarrow and Tollefson (1994:119), *political opportunities* are the windows that enhance engagement in contentious collective action. As it will be suggest in throughout this chapter, Comal's scale-up processes were also fostered by *political opportunities* to mobilize collective action resources. For example, Mitch hurricane was an occasion to start a coalition with international development agencies which was needed for logistic purposes. Regional trade agreements also fostered coordination and advocacy exper-

[5]Specifically, we held a focus group where the Comal team discussed and draw Comal's path. See some pictures of their drawings in Appendix 2

tise. In addition, the 2009 coup d'état facilitated Comal's ability to coordinate and shelter resistance movements.

3.1 Giving birth to Red Comal: the art of knitting networks (tejer redes)

No me digan que los médicos se fueron
no me digan que no tienen anestesia
no me digan que el alcohol se lo bebieron
y que el hilo de coser
fue bordado en un mantel

Don't tell me the doctors left
Don't tell me they don't have anaesthesia
Don't tell me they drank the rubbing alcohol
and that the thread for stitches
was embroidered into a tablecloth

El Niágara en bicicleta, (Niagara Falls on a bicycle) J.L. Guerra

On a visit where I accompanied Comal team to organize a workshop with local communities; this song of Juan Luis Guerra was played on the radio. One of the passengers declared 'any resemblance to reality is purely coincidental'. We all laughed.

Some weeks earlier there had been a horrible case of corruption in the Honduran Social Security, resulting on shortages of basic medical assistance. More dramatically, flour-based pills, instead of medicine, had been distributed by the public provider, causing the death of at least 12 women[6].

Later I learnt that Juan Luis Guerra wrote this song aiming to depict rampant neoliberal policies landing in Central America.

3.1.1 Central America: from post-war to liberalization

Comal has not a specific founder. Yet, most *comalera/os* agree on the referential role of Trinidad Sánchez –or Trino as they called him– who was Comal's executive director from its beginning until the difficult moments of the coup d'état when he stepped out and a new executive director was hired by Comal's assembly.

When I arrived to Comal, Trino has already moved out. However he remained very present in all Comal's actors' stories. Furthermore, his own narrative of Comal was present in the many reports he wrote about Comal. One of them *Comal's critical path* (Sánchez 2009) is the linchpin of this section. According to it, the building blocks of Comal were laid in the early 1990s in connection to emerging Central American social movements. Trino paints this time as the Central American transition from national demilitarization processes to-

[6] See for example La Prensa (4th June 2015, 22nd June 2015); Zúniga (16th 2015)

wards a quick adoption of national liberalization policies that hollowed out many social functions of the state.

According to him, from the late 1980s, the end of Central American wars and the conclusion of demilitarizing national negotiations were followed by the foundation of a 'new modern state', very interested in catch-up with globalization. Free trade agreements, enhancement of foreign investments, push of export oriented agro-industrialization and reduction of public deficit are main examples of the neoliberal liberalization of that time (Sánchez 2009).

Honduras was also part of this regional trend. From the early 1980s a modernization process of the state brought emphasis on industrialization and internationalization, setting an increasing 'hostile environment' for Honduran small-scale farmers (Sanchez 2011: 4).

Following Trino, at that moment Honduran social organizations and movements were inevitably wondering: *how could they create economic alternatives through which these marginalized majorities can also benefit from the economy?* (Sánchez 2009).This was the moment where organized collective action started to search for alternatives out of the state and self-organizing modest-scale initiatives flourished everywhere.

3.1.2 Dialogues and exchanges for alternatives: de facto foundation of Comal

At that time, 1991, the formation of Red de Comercialización Comunitaria Latinoamericana (RELACC) took place in Ecuador, inspired by Machita Cushunchic foundation: 'Commercializing as sisters/brothers' in quechua, an Ecuadorian communitarian commercialization network born in 1985.

Simultaneously and connected to RELACC foundational meetings, in Honduras the American Friends' Service Committee (AFSC) began organizing meetings in 1993 under the title 'dialogues and exchange' seeking for a collective diagnostic of ongoing problems and search for alternatives from civil collective action (Sánchez 2011: 5).

In October 1995, the third of these AFSC meetings exploring 'the alternative commercialization market against international economic dynamics' concluded in the foundation, *de facto,* of a Honduran national network for alternative commercialization, later baptized as Red Comal. A common practical concern brought together the 22 organizations present in that first assembly: commercial intermediation was increasingly exploiting both producers and consumers. The participants in the meeting agreed on the urgent need to substitute those brokers -'*coyotes*'- to increase the proportion of surplus available for the producers. This substitution entailed a collective building of an autonomous, empowering, alternative commercialization network. Echoing the Central American proverb 'for big problems, big solutions', Trino stated:

> We could not think of changing this problematic reality just with micro-enterprises, paternalistic donations or social and economically unsustainable systems, now it was time to play with creativity and a vision of a real social entrepreneurial network (Sanchez 2009:6)

The goal was to articulate ongoing initiatives and enhance new ones to better coordinate an effective answer to 'the *coyote* problem'. It involved practical coordination, but it was also profoundly related to a social transformation agenda centered on rural consumers-producers shared by all participant organizations. In Trino's words the challenge was to enhance articulation and complementarities in line with a sole imagination: 'a big social enterprise of the poor that works economically efficiently as well as it implements practices and principles of social transformation' (2009:7)

The centerpiece conceptual tool was the concept of *communitarian commercialization,* defined in the assembly as: 'a popular and participatory process within the social movement, which supports commercial exchange and interrelation between producers and consumers guided by principles of justice and morality' (CIPE, 1995:36-37). Across the building network, members agreed on some essential principles[7] such as human dignity, territory defense and justice and economic transparency.

3.1.3 Making Red Comal real: from agreements to practice

After the agreements of October 1995 –Comal's *de facto* foundation– one of Comal's early members recalls: 'the first steps then were to build cohesion and foster a common view and capacities between those engaged members'.

In this cohesion building process two first steps are especially highlighted in reports and interviews: the creation of a market information system and a unit of SSE training and education with 28 popular trainers (*animadores comunitarios*).

This team of trainers brought 'Comal's dream' –as they call it– and practical training (collective administration, fair pricing, collective self-management, etc.) directly to rural communities, part of the member organizations. The mission of this training team was to foster a common vision and participatory structures for the coming community commercialization. Simultaneously a members' collective fund was built up and the first micro-credits were granted to producers' groups and incipient community shops (CSs).

Donaldo, one of the most experienced members of the current Comal team, was part of this team of trainers. He remembers how they were feeling in this stage when two years had already passed since the first Comal agreements, yet none commercialization had yet taken place:

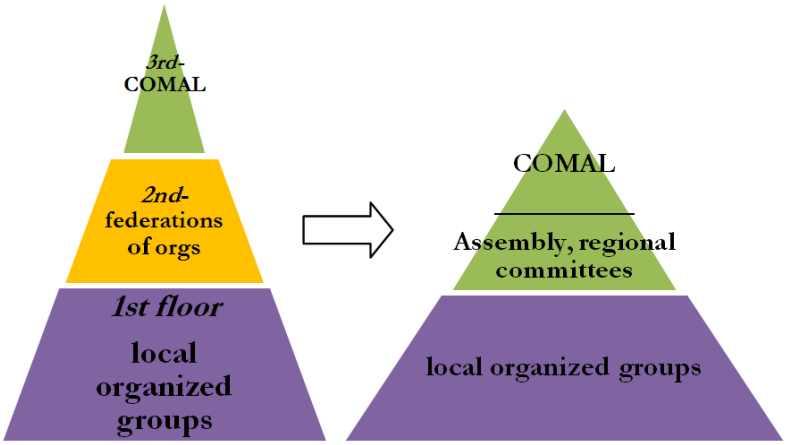
> 'Many *compañeros* (comrades) did not believe any real commercialization could ever take place, we did not have any money. For the meetings we had "to wear dresses". It means we had to carry our own lunch. And we often slept on the floor. We, devoted popular trainers, were mostly unpaid.' (Siguatepeque, July 2015)

Other interviewees also agreed that time and lack of trust caused many of Comal's early members to abandon the Comal project during these last years of 1990s. Interestingly, local members of those federations of organizations did not quit Comal. That is how Comal membership started to change from 'second floor' organizations to 'first floor' organizations, as they call it. Mean-

[7]See Appendix 2 about Comal's values

while Comal was launching its organizational system (based on regional committees, general assembly and board of directors), that 2nd floor disappeared of federations of organizations (see figure 3). As a consequence Comal's incipient governance institutions became the new organizing force for 1st floor local organizations that remained within Comal. Audulio, from the Comal team who at that time was an intern, argues: 'Comal Regional committees became then a *fake* 2nd floor'.

Figure 3. Shift in Comal's membership and organizational structure



Source: elaborated by author

Comal's membership was changing in a domino effect. Once some 2nd floor organization started to leave, the remaining ones had to be seated side by side with local organizations in an equal position in the regional committees and general assembly. 'They gradually lost interest in Comal and left' –said a former member of the Comal team. Nevertheless, local organizations were clearly interested in remaining members due to the credit and training opportunities –as reflected in the interviews.

In 1997 Comal finally launched a commercialization program for 'a basic basket' (*canasta básica*). It was a system of storage of members' products and distribution to community shops of seven basic products. It was done thanks to the incremental creation of *sectorial*[8] warehouses and agreements with providers of industrialized basic products, such as vegetable butter elaborated by Hondupalma.

[8] I have kept the original adjective used by Comal. The term *sectorial warehouses* was not meant to refer to different activity sectors but geographic areas within Comal regions

3.2 Organizational and activity expansion and crisis

3.2.1 Mitch hurricane in 1998: a window of opportunity for activity and organizational expansion

The devastating effects of the 1998 hurricane negatively impacted Comal's activities and its members'. However, Trino (2011) pointed out that despite the damages, Comal could still play a major role in humanitarian assistance by providing the basic basket (*canasta básica*) and initiating an 'economic reactivation' scheme to support the recovery of rural production. As reflected in the reports (e.g. Sánchez 2011), the learning experience of this period resulted in increased expertise for large-scale coordination and logistics development, as well as increasing co-operation with international aid agencies.

The new decade opened up a golden period for Comal. Under the shelter of, mainly European, development funders, Comal had its biggest expansion.

In 2001-2003 Comal ran its first business plan aimed to consolidate the basic basket commercialization scheme. By 2003, Comal's education and training unit evolved into the Solidarity Economy School (ECOSOL) having funds to build its facilities in the center of Honduras (Siguatepeque) from where it could host training programmes for community self-organization and participatory alternative commercialization.

As recorded in Comal's reports, the growth of Comal during these years happened externally in terms of new civil society alliances, participation in multi-stakeholders funding projects, etc. But also Comal's internal organization and activities grew extraordinary, especially the commercialization network.

From 2004, *sectorial* warehouses were replaced by regional warehouses seeking a more efficient coordination. However, Donaldo has a different interpretation: 'regional warehouses implied an actual centralization of professionalized employees and information coming from Comal's headquarter in Siguatepeque, while *sectorial* warehouses were naturally born as self-managed and autonomous'. Finally, the 28 *sectorial* warehouses were replaced by 6 regional warehouses.

This year was also the birth of ECOMAS (Empresa de Comercialización Alternativa) as the social and solidarity enterprise in charge of yielding two channels for commercialization: one to buy products from producers and one to distribute and sell them throughout the network of community shops (CSs).

By 2005, Trino explains that the Comal team saw the need to create a new department to support 'product development' of its members, i.e. improve quality and image of its products and foster agro-transformation[9].

The credit department of Comal was financing all these new activities, as well as traditional micro-credits for production. Together with a Dutch NGO, STRO (Social Trade Organization), Comal developed their own 'alternative financing system': UDIS (Units of Solidarity Exchange).

[9]Comal supported the development of: brown sugar, coffee, aloe-vera products (shampoo, soaps and juices), organic fertilizers, artisanal wine and dehydrated fruits and vegetables.

> [The UDIS] are vouchers printed by Comal that, despite evoking the idea of an ordinary piece of money, actually represent and materialize trust of local communities to Red Comal, given that [locals] have given to these vouchers the same use, treatment and trust than they do to money. […] they do not doubt on these vouchers' liability; Comal physical inventory and transparent operations without any speculation are backing them up. (Sanchez 2009:39)

At that time Comal's political advocacy activities were rooted in a new department for 'institutional strengthening'. This organizational growth was materialized in the construction of new facilities thanks to increasing international funding. During 2006 and 2007, Comal's headquarters office, restaurant (*La Cocina de Comal*) and a Central American-RELACC shop (*La Tienda Centro Americana*) in Siguatepeque, and new regional warehouses were built all over Honduras.

Audulio, currently in charge of commercialization and credit, recalls that in 2008 Comal started its own sponsoring project of a small-scale industry of organic sugar transformation by organizing and training sugar producers in the Yoro region.

Close to Comal's 15th anniversary, Trino describes the organization as very successful:

> Nowadays the Network conglomerates, unites and represents traditional production and household consumption of 42 local organizations, in 13 of 18 departments of the country. More directly, this means supporting more than 16,000 households. Today in Honduras, there is no other organization similar to Comal in terms of reached people or households, even less in business flows. Overall, in a year, the Network has billed more than 25 million lempiras (1 million Euros approximately) (Sánchez 2009:39)

Paradoxically, only a few months before this anniversary some troubles had started clouding Comal. Donaldo explains that, excluding solidarity economy school –its educational and accommodation services always brought economic surplus–, many other activities never achieved solid economic sustainability. Especially on the commercialization side: some regional warehouses showed a huge accumulated deficit. They were progressively closed, compelling depending community shops to find other providers or just disappear; and compelling producers to expose to traditional brokers (*coyotes*) again. As a consequence UDIS circuit also collapsed, and they were collected and warehoused.

3.2.2 Political instability and coup d'état in June 28th, 2009

When looking back at 2009, most interviewees accept that Comal suffered several constraining problems after the coup d'état: general reduction of economic activities, international funders' abandonment of the country and the hit of the police search and occupation of Comal's headquarters on November 28th, one day before first general elections after the coup.

These tensions accelerated Comal's decision to close regional warehouses. There was a general trend to de-centralize responsibilities towards the local organizations that survived to the de-mobilization effect of the coup d'état. The two remaining regional warehouses, that maintained better economic sus-

tainability, have been now transferred to local member organizations (rural community shops and credit and producers groups) in a new autonomous legal status (*Empresa Social de Servicios Multiples*) where Comal is no more than a shareholder and/or a credit supplier.

Comal was still very big in terms of membership and community shops. However, commercialization activities gradually diluted. Meanwhile, Comal was deploying its more political face. It openly supported demonstrations against the political regime and hosted political meetings in ECOSOL's facilities. As I could see when I was living with the Comal team, ECOSOL has been gradually consolidated as a, literal, space for social movement organization and mobilization (such as indigenous movements, human rights activists, cross-cutting new social movements as '*Los indignados'*, etc.).

Auristela, a former Comal's president, points out that 'crisis helped to strengthen'. Struggle efforts renewed Comal's values and mission and by acting as a filter: 'only really engaged people remained'. She argues that the coup d'état context was a reminder of Comal's essential objective: a social movement to unify struggles. 'After all, we are axe wood' she states.

In that sense, as suggested by Boyer (2010), after the coup d'état context a growing window of opportunity might have been opened for Honduran counter-hegemonic organizations coordination. And this crisis might have also enhanced better resiliency strategies to cope with the unstable socio-political context.

Having collected these narratives of Comal's history of being big –marked by two clear stages (1995-1998 and 1998-2008) and a potential new one nowadays–, in the next section I will have an insight into the ways they are related to experiences of contradictions.

4 How is large-scale related to experiences of contradictions?

There are many experiences of contradictions among Comal's members. As mentioned, one major one is the experience that during the last decade non-peasant products have been a big majority in Comal's community shops (CSs).

The incapacity of CSs to commercialize its own members' products is connected to wider complex dynamics of Honduran peasant economy within the global economy. Unfortunately, a historical commodity chain analysis is out of the scope of this paper. The emphasis of this section is to analyze structures internal to Comal rather than external ones. It aims to explore the ways Comal's members' experiences of contradictions are related to their narratives of being a big network.

In interviews and informal chats about what Comal could learn from its history, stories of growth are much resorted when talking about contradictory situations. Many *comalera/os* frequently suggested that Comal's expansion yielded the field to develop practices that were contradictory to Comal's mission principles.

This section aims to explore this suggestion. In order to do that, I will first refer to some concepts about collective action dilemmas and contradictions related to up-scaling. This reference will allow me to better analyze the ways Comal's experiences of being big have affected Comal members' principles and practices, altering their relation and fostering what I refer as "experiences of contradictions". Two processes give a helpful insight in Comal's connection between large-scale and changing principles and practices: centralization and professionalization.

4.1 Analytical toolkit: dilemmas and up-scaling challenges

In 1896, Franz Oppenheimer formulated a general law about producer cooperatives' behaviour tendency to become less cooperative overtime. This *Law of Transformation* was later widely referred to cooperatives' inclination to *degenerate* as successful cooperatives tend to hire employees (Rosner, 1985; Russel et al, 2011)

Such an idea of degeneration law of cooperatives is implicitly present in the mentioned current debates about challenges of up-scaling the Social and Solidarity Economy. For this SSE literature, problems of becoming successful and big in SSE relate to the risk of 'degenerate' as the threat to the expressed ethics (*social* and *solidarity* principles) that define SSE. As McMurtry (2015) would put it, SSE might then become a 'Trojan Horse' or 'Frankenstein' rather than a 'Prometheus'. In this sense, SSE scholars pay special attention to the ways SSE shared morality can be extended and maintained for example via processes of institutionalization (Coraggio, 2015; Gómez, 2008; Medina, 2014).

Social movement scholars have also looked to the problem of becoming big and loosing coherence. Jasper (2004:7-9) identifies several examples of problematic 'strategic choices' –*dilemmas* as he calls them– made inside collective action networks. Two of them are especially interesting for Comal's experiences of large-scale.

The extension dilemma refers to the strategic choice of increasing the actors involved in the collective action. Sheer numbers are powerful. Yet, the further you expand your group or alliance the less coherent your activities and goals will be; the less people will be willing to share risks and the less sharp the collective identity will be. In that sense, the decision of whether (and how) to restrict membership, is related to whether the group prefers to 'reach up or reach down' (ibid).

Extension carries also coordination problems due to sheer size. These problems in SSE can be conceptualized as 'transaction costs', i.e.: 'costs others than price incurred in trading goods and services' (Swedberg in Gómez, 2008:108). This approach acknowledges that bounded rationality and opportunism might be present once the exchange takes place in a non-face-to-face context. The emphasis is on how SSE groups extend and maintain their expressed shared morality. Gomez's (2015) research on *Redes de Trueque* in Argentina, analyzes the limits to the extension of trust in impersonal settings.

> The expectation that there would be no shirking by participants was, to say the least, idealistic. […] as more participants joined in, the 'common principles' were increasingly being perceived as the principles of the initiators, who were basically the strangers who had started the system. Ironically, the initiators, who had shown extraordinary creativity and ingenuity in launching the Trueque, organising it as a network and designing a device to replicate it as fast as demand required, eventually failed to keep pace with the changes in their masterwork. (Ibid.: 232)

Coordination problems are not only a matter of sheer size but also of diversity of people that belittle coherence and add negotiations dynamics. As Gomez (ibid.: 233) observed: 'there were too many opinions or visions about what the *Trueque* should be'.

One way to overcome these problems is to coordinate collective action through the creation of new impersonal institutions. This links with another strategic choice: what Jasper (2004) calls the *organizational dilemma* thinking about whether formalization helps or hurts the movement. Indeed, bureaucratization brings well-organized structures but also 'can lead groups to give up important goals as well as their most powerful tactic, disruption' (ibid.: 7). Efficiency and better outcomes are also referred to centralization. Thus, the more hierarchical a group is the less it 'provides the pleasures of grassroots involvement' (ibid). Then good coordination may come at the expense of 'cutting grassroots members out of decision making'. This process also undermines the so called *subsidiarity* principle that 'presumes that decisions and actions should always be taken at the lowest possible level in society', being one of the essential principles of SSE (Pearce 2009: 25).

Professionalization and monetary incentive is also part of this organizational dilemma: '[s]taff may provide needed expertise, however, available only by paying them' (Jasper 2004:7)

I will now look at how Comal has answered its extension and organizational dilemmas. More specifically: how has Comal shared morality been extended and sustained?

4.2 From *organicity building* to centralization

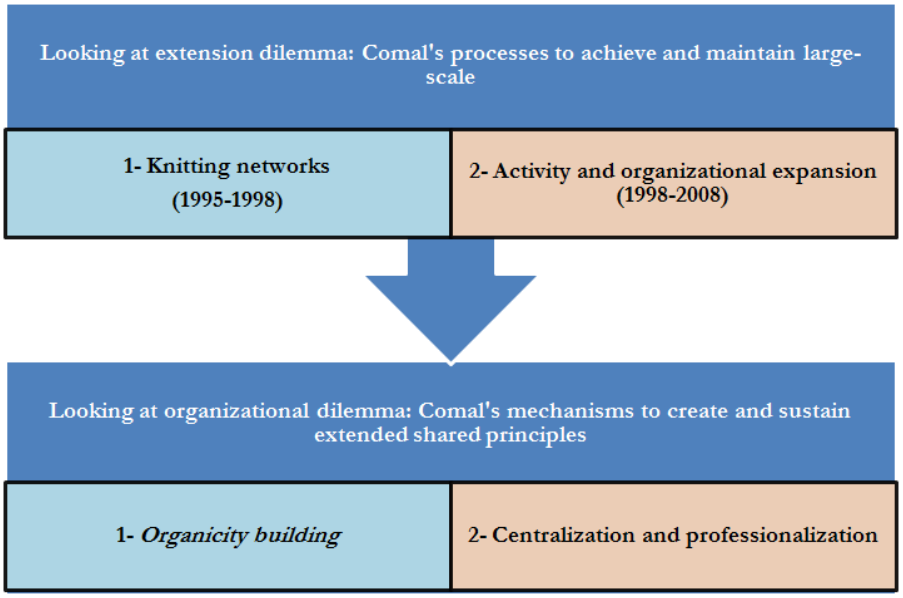
Comal has faced differentially the extension and organizational dilemmas throughout its 20 years of existence. Nonetheless, there are two major trends according to the two mentioned analytical stages.

As pictured in figure 4, Comal's members have faced extension and organizational dilemmas –and implicitly answered the question of how to extent and sustain Comal's shared morality– in two different ways.

In the first stage of "knitting networks" the challenge was to agree on some common principles and bring them across the network to all local members. This was the creation of Comal as such through a process that will be conceptualized as "organicity building" following Coraggio's approach. In this first period (1995-1998), the concern about how to create and sustain Comal's common values was central throughout the process.

Once Comal already existed in shared values, organizational body and incipient activities (as the training workshops and first community shops), the priority was to spread these activities. Then, the process of *organicty building* as an effort to sustain an extended common morality faded out. And it was replaced by an emphasis on centralization and professionalization.

Figure 4. Comal's stages and up-scale mechanisms



Source: compiled by author

4.2.1 Knitting networks and organicity building: let's reach in

Comal's initial art of knitting networks was a fascinating case of up-scaling: the process was not to extend shared principles to new members, but to directly create an extended shared morality for all members. In other words, Comal was born big. Values were not extended from a small group to a bigger one, but Comal's values (see Appendix 2) were already the result of negotiations among an already large membership.

When conceptualizing Comal's up-scaling process of knitting networks, Coraggio's approach is especially helpful. Coraggio (2013) depicts SSE up-scaling as an institutionalization process looking at three levels:

1- Micro level among members of a local organization.

2- Meso level where 'organic articulations of organizations take place allowing higher and more complex forms of *ad-extra* solidarity' (ibid.: 11).

3- Systemic level where solidarity is embodied in institutionalized processes of redistribution and construction of commonalities.

According to him, the *meso* level of the *popular solidarity economy* is the key one to overcome its fragmentation, as it creates collective subjects with 'a reproductive rationale complementary to public policy and in counterbalance of capital enterprises' (Coraggio 2014: 13).

Comal as a network of local organizations can be analyzed as an example of up-scaling in the *meso* level. For the extension and maintenance of SSE shared principles throughout the network, the process of building *organicity* between SSE organizations has been crucial.

To clarify; the concept of *organicity* has its foundations in Durkheim's concept of *organic solidarity*, where, in contrast to the *mechanic* one, there is a practical interdependence of the components parts based on division of labour (Müller 1994). Coraggio's (2004: 39) *social organicity* conceptualization focuses on the process of components acquiring a structural unity to the point where not only "the whole is more than the sum of its parts", but also the lack of synchronization of the components may cause big troubles to the whole. These concepts refer to the interdependence between SSE local organizations, creating "something new" (Comal) that depends on the mutual adaptation of all components.

Hence, Comal's "first stage of being big" (1995-1998) was a context-specific type of up-scaling where (an already large) shared morality was created and consolidated through *organicity building* throughout years. It was a place and path dependent process, where "initiators" involved in the foundational meetings had a key role in the negotiations, as well as in the landing of the agreements on local members. Looking at mechanisms of *interpersonal transfer of trust* (Gómez 2008, 2013), I identify some decisive ones such as agreements between initiators, incremental institution building, and especially the training team (later ECOSOL) as keystone of common values and identity.

4.2.2 Comal is breathing: let's move on

By 1998 Comal was already perceived as an autonomous entity by its members and its first activities were already taking place. Then, the creation of a shared morality was not anymore a priority, and it seemed to be no worries about any need to consolidate it. Instead, the objective was to further materialize this common will: it is then when the expansion of Comal's activities and organization processes took place.

Comalera/os' extension and organizational dilemmas were being faced differently. The emphasis on *organicity building* seemed to be eclipsed by the concern on coordination problems and transaction costs. In this second chapter of Comal's experience of being big two interrelated dynamics explain the ways Comal's members faced the dilemma of having so many and diverse actors: centralization and professionalization.

Centralization has taken different shapes within Comal. In the early 1990s the coordination of independent self-functioning networks was implicitly homogenizing, building a common discourse and practices of what Comal is. Once Comal was felt as an actual 'common dream', this one was "deployed" through concrete "policies" of trainings, commercialization, credit, etc. Progressively, centralization meant a concrete governance and logistic structure, gravitating around Comal's organizational body. During 2000s, Comal centralizing programmes and scheme building were clearly connected with a process of professionalization promoted by development agencies funding.

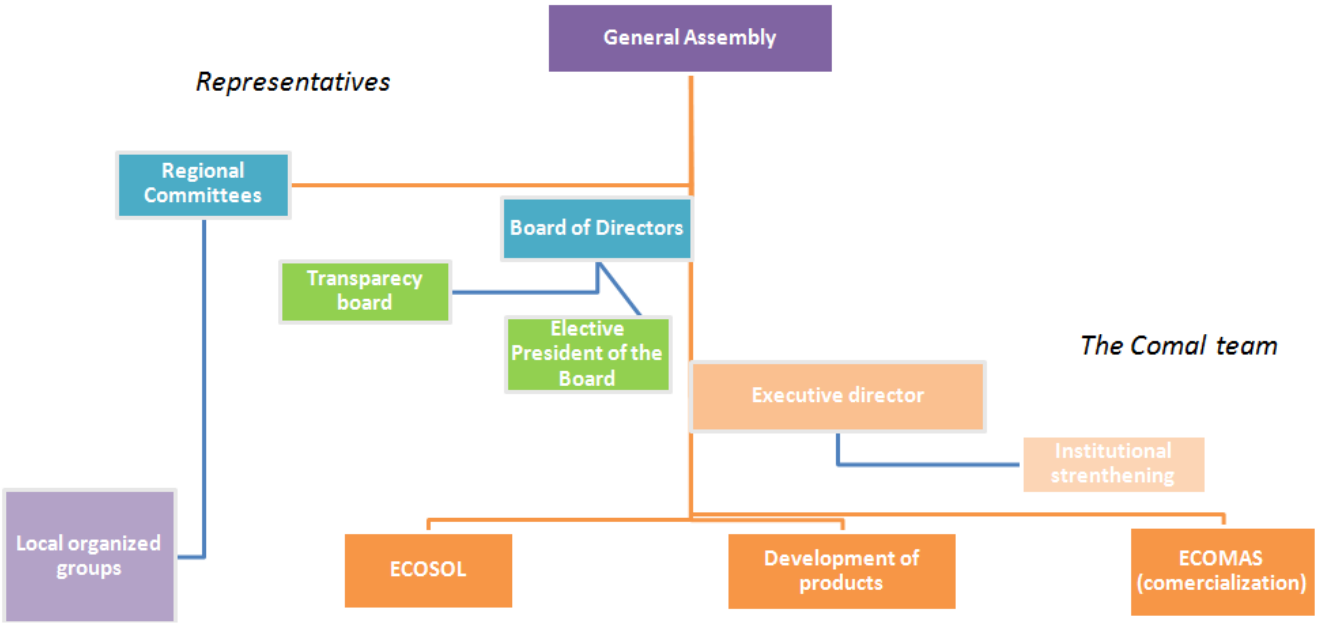
Comal always kept an internal governance system where local members were organized in regional committees, and gathered in a General Assembly every two years[10]. This governance system guaranteed formal decision making power for delegates from local organizations. However, as *comalera/os*' narratives revealed, during Comal's activity expansion from the early 2000s very relevant practical decisions (such as creating a central wholesale unit, substitute *sectorial* by regional warehouses, creating new departments or launching a policy) were taken mainly by a team of professional employees.

4.3 Professionalization: new actors shaping principles and practices

The professional Comal team was increasing throughout specialized new departments in charge of: training (ECOSOL), commercialization (ECOMAS), credit and development of products, management and administration, organization and advocacy strengthening, etc. The interviews gave the sense that the commercialization scheme –and therefore the departments in charge of it– gained special relevance at expense of other activities.

[10] From this Assembly, the members for the Board of Directors (including Comal president) and the Accounting Oversight Board are elected.

Figure 5. Comal's organization structure



Source: elaborated by author based on unpublished Comal's reports (2007-2010)

The building and consolidation of a centralizing commercialization scheme overlapped in time with the gradual dismantling of the training program. Attention to the commercialization system eclipsed the traditional emphasis on experience-based collective training.

The eclipse of solidarity economy school

ECOSOL, Comal's SSE school –as formalization of early Comal popular training programme from 1997– had more resources than ever before. In 2003, thanks to international funding, ECOSOL facilities were constructed in Siguatepeque: a big common room, a kitchen to hold trainings and meetings, and a set of wooden cottages were built, spreading around a pine forest on the outskirt of Siguatepeque.

Thus, trainings for local organizations members of Comal were diminishing. ECOSOL reoriented its activities towards selling training and facilities services to other social organizations. ECOSOL lost its key role as agent for exchange of experiences and training devoted to *comalera/os*. Gradually, it became only a social enterprise oriented to contribute to Comal (economic) sustainability. During Comal's economic crisis (2008-2009) it even finalized all its training services and nowadays it is only renting its facilities to other social organizations' meetings.

Since ECOSOL is only about facilities services, new Comal's members have not received any training on solidarity economy. I had the opportunity to

interview Comal's actors from old member organizations and from new ones[11]. The contrast was evident. Local Comal's members in Marcala were doubtless about how to define solidarity economy, how Comal contributes to it and how it relates to food sovereignty and agro-ecology. However, local Comal's group in Yoro (created in 2008 for the development of small-scale brown sugar production) did not even know what solidarity economy is about.

The impact of the experience-based training was manifest when it disappeared eclipsed by the expanding commercialization system and sustainability concerns. The solidarity economy school that had a major role as *organicity builder* proved to have a later role as "the guardian" of Comal's common principles as agreed in Comal's foundations. While ECOSOL was training *comalera/os* on SSE it guaranteed the continuity of extended trust based on common values. Once ECOSOL lost its prominence, Comal's SSE common values were not anymore "guarded".

Furthermore, centralization and professionalization fostered a growing process of bureaucratization and impersonalization of Comal's practices, that local members felt increasingly distant –as predicted by Jasper's concern about *subsidiarity* (2004). Professionalization also implied a "move away from ethics" in favor of supposedly neutral economic efficiency principles. Therefore, while Comal's formal mission has remained unchanged from the beginning, since the 2000s expansion its activities and discourse increasingly reflected a change in priorities and principles.

Economic sustainability as a major guiding principle

The driving discourse under which centralization, professionalization and primacy of the commercialization business took place had the concept of *sostenibilidad* (sustainability) as the centerpiece. As contextually used in workshops and other social interactions, *comalera/os* understand sustainability very practically as *economic* and *temporal* sustainability. This discourse can be framed within a general trend in social enterprises 'where the language of business model has usurped the language of activism and political engagement' (Pearce 2009: 30).

In addition, this discourse has context-specific meanings. Historically, in Honduras foreign development agencies have marked a "throwaway rhythm" of projects and organizations. Hence, Comal's commercialization expansion, centralization and professionalization are substantiated by the dream of building a self-sustained and autonomous commercialization system. Efficiency of large-scale, centralization and professionalism were supposed to sum up to such a dream.

Interestingly, this was in a perfect fit with the modern *modus operandis* of most of international development agencies funding Comal. International donors prefer to work with autonomous counterparts that can provide effective and measurable impacts. Nonetheless, a simple match should not be assumed between these dynamics linked to Comal's expansion and international development demands. Comal's growth, centralization and professionalization can-

[11] Some of the ideas arisen in the questionnaire and discussions are gathered later on in the section 5.3, see also Table 1 there.

not be explained just as a consequence of their interaction with international development agencies. As a matter of fact, Comal was born and grew very modestly, almost autonomously, until it could access any relevant international funding from the 2000s. Also important to note: donors were not perceived as determinant actors in the interviews about Comal's history.

Shifting priorities and needs

Comal's foundational mission –as stated in its founding reports and memorandums– was to commercialize basic grains surplus of Honduran small-scale organized peasants. At the beginning, this project drove to exchange practices between producers of different regions, such as bartering of rice and corn. Emphasis on commercializing peasant's surplus also informed Comal's microcredit programme. First credits for production had to be paid *in kind*, that is, in basic grains that were redistributed throughout the network.

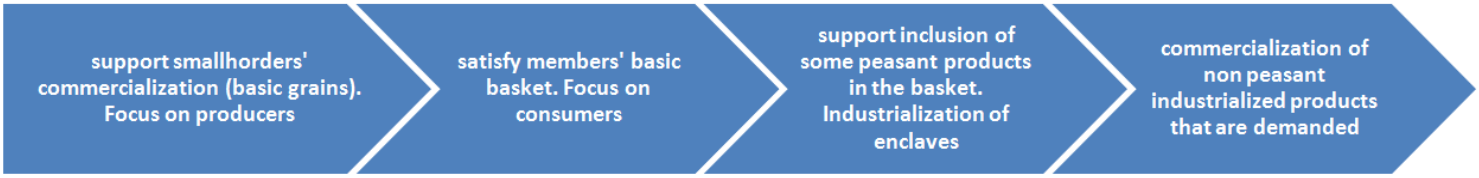
However, when Comal developed its incipient market information research and systematization the approach shifted. The Comal team "realized" that Honduran rural consumers were demanding many more products than what peasants were actually producing. 'Our study evidenced that the rural basic basket included more than 300 products. And a high majority [of them] was somehow industrialized' –a former Comal president states. 'We realized that we were much more consumers than producers' [referring to Honduran peasants].

The reflection over Comal's members consuming much more of what they were locally producing triggered an implicit shift in priorities where commercialization of grains was eclipsed by the perceived need to: (1) satisfy member consumers' basic basket and (2) support industrialization of some entrepreneurial members in order to induce a substitution of "capitalist" manufactures demanded by rural consumers. For instance, the substitution of industrial shampoo by aloe vera one made by women's cooperatives[12]. It was impossible to substitute all demanded industrialized products: the choice was to concentrate on the industrialization on a few successful "enclaves". Modest-scale industrialization emerged as the, unquestioned, new strategy to support peasants but from an emphasis on consumers.

Once some of these semi-industrialized Comal's products were developed, a new concern arose when many consumers still preferred well-known brands trusting their "marketing image". In other words, the contradiction had a new loop (see figure 6). Not only there were few peasant products in Comal's warehouses, but this limited collection of products was not even preferred by consumers.

[12] Nevertheless, members were always autonomous. They were rarely completely aligned with Comal's priority map. For instance, many of these "enclaves" have not prioritized local markets, but preferred to develop a fair trade product oriented to export to wealthy (urban or foreign) consumers. Similarly, community shops were supposed to respect the non-binding agreement of not commercializing Coca Cola or cigarettes, however many of them commercialized them.

Figure 6. Comal's shifting priorities



Source: compiled by author

Then, Comal's solidarity economy school (ECOSOL) started launching campaigns to promote local consumption. Thus, they were not very successful: 'we couldn't compete with big business marketing strategies' explains Jorge current president of Comal's Board.

At that point, the shift from producers to consumer evidenced that Comal was increasingly differentiating these two figures. When the peak of commercialization took place, the commercialization department was targeting "rural consumers" who seemed to be independent and disconnected from "rural producers" differently targeted by Comal's credit department. In one of the discussions with the Comal team, we realize that despite formally keeping the idea of *prosumers*, in reality Comal's practices increasingly disconnected producers and consumers. And this detachment of the two figures has been an enabling frame for the contradictory situation of peasant products becoming a minority in Comal's shops.

4.4 Experiences of contradictions: Comal loses direction

Thanks to the professionalized centralizing scheme Comal developed a large commercialization system. It brought new practices to Comal not necessarily in line with its agreed core principles. As mentioned, when expansion of commercialization happened, lots of non-local and industrialized products filled Comal's warehouses. Consequently, peasant products started to be a minority also in local community shops (CS) in contradiction to their mission and slogan '*Consuming our own, supporting the peasant economy*'. They were a minority amongst industrial products that not only were not from local peasants and not part of the basic basket, but whose brands represent Comal's antagonistic principles. Iconic examples of such products are Coca Cola or Facussé's[13] products.

At that point, many Comal's actors realized that the commercialization system had 'lost direction'[14]: it was not devoted to help smallholder peasants anymore. Even if rural consumers were demanding those industrialized products and Comal could not just ignore them if it wanted to be 'economically sus-

[13]Facusé, also nicknamed '*El Palmero de la muerte*', is one of main Honduran agrarian capitalist responsible for dramatic land grabbing for Palm Oil industrial production in the Atlantic coast of the country.

[14] Interestingly this expression was used literally the same for several interviewees.

tainable', such a mission drift from peasant economies was not 'justifiable', in their words.

In their narratives *comalera/os* link this losing of direction to the causes of Comal's structural crisis from 2007. Interviewees mentioned several examples of how expansion and consolidation of a professionalized and centralizing commercialization system brought problems to internal relations among Comal's members. For instance, Comal's local organizations perceived themselves as increasingly distant from important information and decisions driven by the growing group of professional employees. As focus groups revealed, many Comal's former delegates in the assembly found that this growing disconnection was the root of increasing leakages of information, corruption scandals of commercialization managers and, ultimately, the structural deficit that the commercialization scheme accumulated through decades.

During a focus group with the Comal team, other relevant issue arose from their collective diagnosis related to monetary incentives dilemmas. Two team members, Audulio and Héctor, discussed about problems of Comal's 'NGOization':

> [Audulio] 'Comal's work is weighed by NGOs. They have contaminated Comal's voluntary-based work. There are organizations, some friends of ours, who reimburse transport for workshops or even pay it as a labour day. They have so much money that they pollute workshops. Their dynamic is only to "implement money" (*ejecutar plata*) not to undergo any processes. What are NGOs' problems? They have not any local bases, unlike Comal.'
>
> [Héctor] 'But, Comal fell precisely into the same game. If Comal had maintained its initial position towards [not paying] transport or food, and each participant contributes voluntarily, maybe some people had left but others would have stayed more convinced.'(Siguatepeque, July 2015)

As predicted by Jasper's (2004) organizational and extension dilemmas, in this case expansion by centralization and professionalization, had left a sense of increasing distance of *comalera/os* from decision-making. Instead, a growing body of new expert actors was shaping Comal's new projects and organizational dynamics.

Problems of centralization and professionalization are so evident among *comalera/os*' narratives that they are directly informing major present decisions. For instance, in an attempt to avoid what is conceived as a negative over-centralization, responsibilities and management are being decentralized towards local members. It is happening in many areas issues, but notably in the commercialization system where former regional warehouses are being transferred to local actors under a new status. 'We realized that it had to be their [local organization's own] projects […] the new *Empresas Sociales de Servicios Multiples* are completely autonomous, though Comal tries to be strategically present to prevent any disassociation' –as explained by Jorge, Comal's current president.

Since the 2009 collapse of Comal's funding and activities, there was an enormous staff reduction. I could observe how nowadays engagement with

Comal is prioritized to strict professional capacities. In contrast with the former expert team, currently within the reduced "technician" team most of them are heavily engaged in Comal's mission (see Annex 4), as well as in other social activisms in the current Honduran context. Moreover, some of them are also members of a Comal's community shop in their village, or/and a Comal's group of local producers.

Concluding, Comal's "second stage of being big" (1998-2008) is marked by dynamics of centralization and professionalization. A centralized and professionalized commercialization scheme was placed as the center, and a new team of experts was the one leading new projects and organizational dynamics. They were new actors crucially shaping Comal's principles and practices, at expenses of local organizations' representatives. In addition, Comal's traditional training team, embodied in ECOSOL, was gradually put aside losing its role as *organicity builder* and "guardian" of Comal's principles.

These new professionals concentrated on the commercialization task and had a very specific answer to "large-scale dilemmas" such as how to combine economically sustainable activity with Comal's core values. While Comal's principles remained formally the same, new values and priorities were actually informing Comal's decisions. As result, Comal's expressed shared morality had not changed, but its concrete projects and activities were taking new directions. Consequently, there was a growing gap between Comal's agreed shared principles meant to guide actions and the actual practices, which explains why many *comalera/os* across the network express that Comal was 'losing its direction'.

5 SSE actors making sense of and shaping contradictions: *comalera/os* adjusting principles and practices

Throughout Comal's 20 years of existence, Comal's actors have tried to address and make sense of perceived contradictory situations and practices. On the one hand, their subjective experiences of Comal's expansion picture situations of losing of direction, contradiction and crisis. On the other hand, these same narratives also include reflections and experiences of collective muddling through contradictions. In other words, perceived contradictions have not kept members away from their collective project, but fuelled their debate around Comal's mission and vision of social change. They have deployed strategies striving to make sense of those contradictions; intending to deliberately adjust the relationship between their SSE principles and practices.

This section aims to explore the agency of *comalera/os* in response to perceived contradictions due to large-scale processes. It suggests that Comal's actors have mobilized their individual and collective agency to creatively "reconnect" their principles and practices based on trial and error learning experiences. I will use this section's analytical toolkit to bring some conceptual approaches from where to conceptualize contradictions "as a process", looking closer to "the social life of contradictions". I will argue that despite their experiences of contradictions linked to large-scale, *comalera/os,* as SSE agents, have undergone their collective dream and actually found ways to creatively adjust their practices to their principles and vice versa.

While it is difficult to determine what is first in the dialectical relationship between principles-guiding-practices and practices-following-principles, I have chosen two illustrative examples. The first is an example of an effort to adjust practices to common SSE principles. In particular: a strategy to re-localize and lock-in their economic activity to actually support peasant economy. The second example refers to the adjustment of common principles to practices. There, I address Comal's members' effort to amalgamate new and old values in order to be in line with ongoing practices.

5.1 Analytical toolkit: the social life of contradictions

When trying to understand how SSE principles and daily practices relate, one can refer to other type of scholarship that has already drawn attention to similar gaps between principles and real practices. For instance, in policy and project making there has been a wide debate over the relation between principles guiding plans and actual practices and results of the plan. As Lindbloom unfolded in his famous article *The Science of muddling through* (1959), policy making is not just a rational problem solving where values guiding plans, their implementation and outcomes match perfectly. Decisions are based on values, but they are also incremental to what has been done and much affected by the collective vision of what is 'a good decision'.

In other words, the distance between principles, plans and practices –as different phenomena– is part of the process of project making (policies as well as other collective projects such as SSE).

Going beyond rational models has also implied a critique of the implicit judgment informing the idea where contradictions are the evidence of the failure of the collective project. Gibson and Graham (2005) criticize such statement by placing SSE at the level of post-development thinking and practice. According to them, going beyond the binaries of rationality means also not applying the same level of totality and certainty –core to what they call the 'monoculture of *capitalocentrism*'– that have already rendered projects such as SSE non-existent and non-credible alternatives to what exists. Instead of trying to detect and solve contradictions as if only completely consistent projects could be successful and real alternatives, they urge scholars to create the conditions to 'enlarge the field of credible experiences'. That is, framing a SSE thinking and practice that is generative and experimental, as well as uncertain and open to contradictions (ibid).

Bearing in mind these conversations, this research has chosen an ethnographic approach. In Mosse's words (2004) this implies moving from the question *whether* a project has worked to *how* it has worked; not whether a project succeeds, but how success is produced. Taking Mosse's approach implies placing contradictions as the starting point of the social life of SSE projects, full of diversity, complexity and fragmentation.

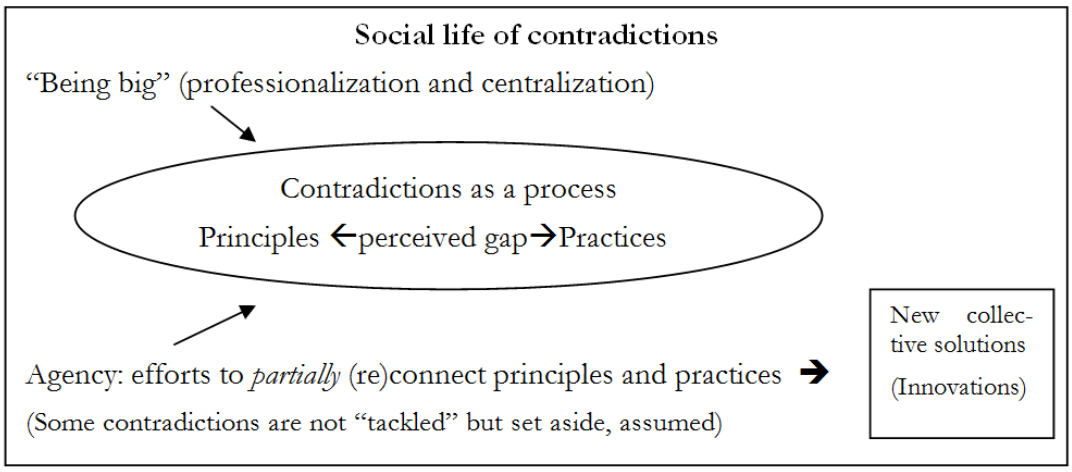
> The ethnographic task is also to show how, despite such fragmentation and dissent, actors in development are constantly engaged in creating order and unity through political acts of composition. (Ibid.: 647)

This approach tackles social negotiation, contestation and agreement of success and failure as interpretations that have to be shaped and sustained socially. The tension between SSE principles and practices illustrates Mosse's argument where the logic of political mobilization and the logic of operations are different. In his research about development projects, Mosse understands good policy as a 'mobilizing metaphor' rather than a guide to action, and he concludes: 'the gap between policy and practice is constantly negotiated away' (ibid.: 663-4)

Following Mosses' approach, I will analyze *comalera/os*' experiences of contradictions as a process rather than as a negative outcome of growth evidencing Comal's failure. Digging into "the social life of contradictions" sheds light on the ways *comalera/os* have "muddled through" their own contradictions. To choose illustrative examples of *comalera/os*' agency, I will focus on cases of creative efforts to reduce the perceived distance between principles and practices and mitigate contradictions.

This image of "adjusting efforts to better (re)connect" tries to grasp a partial process where *comalera/os* are deliberately trying to tackle some of their own contradictions, while they have progressively made sense of some others and just assumed or postponed many other ones to be solved later. In this chapter this image is used to stress agency in SSE in response to the new structures result of large-scale processes. At the same time, these (re)connection efforts are also a process that opens new collective systems to better deal with the so called 'up-scaling challenges' (figure 6).

Figure 7. Social life of contradictions and (re)connecting efforts



Source: elaborated by author

When doing research in two economic organizations in Massachusetts, Graham and Cornwell (2009: 37) stated:

> The liveliness and richness of these organizations make it difficult to treat them simply as case studies of the social economy. Precisely because [they] are difficult to narrate or categorize, they function as a spur to the theoretical imagination.

This chapter identifies with this reflection. Comal's "SSE in practice" does not simply fit as an example of an already existing scholar argument. This said, the analysis of *comalera/os*' agency vis-à-vis their contradictions can link out to broader conversations about agency-structure in collective action and institutionalist scholarship. Especially since the image of agency in response to challenges and implicitly triggering new collective solutions resonates with the concept of *institutional innovation*.

The concept of innovation has already been mentioned in chapter 2 when conceptualizing SSE as an *institutional innovation* by which systems of rules (institutions) for economic relations are changed bottom-up via collective action, negotiation and contestation at the local level (Gómez 2009, 2015).

Under this light, this chapter emphasizes *comalera/os*'s agency within their created SSE institutions; promoting endogenous change from within. According to Schmidt (2010), in her analysis of the fourth new institutionalism, institutions are not just macro-patterns of action without agents, but they are 'internal to sentient agents, serving both as structures (of thinking and acting) that constrain action and as constructs (of thinking and acting) created and changed by those actors' (ibid: 14). This evokes Giddens' (1984) *structuration* concept according to which social change happens thanks to the interweaving of social agency and structure; in a way that agents' actions within and upon their social structures generate new structures. Therefore, SSE agents reproduce and produce institutions (systems of rules and ideas) as a type of structure (Gómez, 2013). Thinking on agency for institutional change and especially interesting for this research's topic, Schmidt (2010: 14) argues that 'people generally act without thinking and only become conscious of the rules that might apply if they are in contradiction'.

In the case of SSE, solidarity and reciprocity re-embedding mechanisms of economic relations are examples of collective agency and the essential *institutional innovation* of SSE. However, large-scale can jeopardize this innovation. As analyzed, the processes of being a big network open challenges of how to coordinate action, extend and guarantee shared values among many actors. This chapter explores how from a "trial and error" approach *comalera/os'* have undertaken innovations to strengthen coordination mechanisms, interpersonal trust and consistency with their common values.

Bearing these conversations in mind, I will look at concrete examples of how Comal's members have performed agency in response to challenges of large-scale shaping the relationship between their principles and practices. Through the coming examples I ask:

a) How have they strived to cope with their own contradictions by (partially) (re)connecting practices and principles?
b) What is new, innovative in this process and responses?

5.2 Reconnecting from practices: brown sugar re-localizing strategy

The Comal team, together with the Comal assembly, has deployed several strategies to re-localize commercialization as a way to mitigate the contradiction of having too few local products in Comal CSs and Comal producers' products struggling to be bought somewhere else. In practice, it means both increasing the presence of Comal's products in CSs and increasing the consumption of Comal's products by *comalera/os*. I argue that these re-localizing strategies are examples of *comalera/os*' agency in response to the perceived gap between their principles and practices.

One referent re-localization strategy was the community currency Unidades de Intercambio Solidario (UDIS) –units of solidarity exchange in English– that took place from 2003 until the closure of regional warehouses by 2007. When I arrived to Comal, they did not circulate anymore. Thus, conversation with Comal's members show that they all have fantastic memories and hope they can circulate again in the future. Edith, one of the older local members explained: 'UDIS were such a nice experience. If they had continued, there would be progress in Comal'.

This willingness to lock-in has fairly remained in Comal. When I was in Honduras a new strategy was launched to guarantee local consumption of Comal's products and to reconnect consumers and producers' identities.

Audulio, currently in charge of credit and commercialization, came up with an interesting campaign to try to connect supply and demand of organic granulated brown sugar (*panela granulada*) produced by a Comal's group of producers in Yoro. Comal will supply an agreed amount of brown sugar to community shops every year, assuming a fixed basic consumption per member of the 51 community shops (CSs). To facilitate the payment, Comal will supply panela for a whole year all at once and CS members can pay gradually during the year. From this brown sugar supplied to each local CS, the shop could keep

a little percentage of the price as collective profit for its members, and they can even decide to buy more and sell it more expensive to non-members.

Figure 8. Comal's organic granulated brown sugar (*panela granulada*)

Source: Comal's website

The idea, as explained by Audulio, is to create an eating habit in CS members who currently prefer white industrialized sugar rather than brown organic sugar. Complementary, such a fixed consumption would help Yoro producers to guarantee the demand of their product, and potentially increase it when Comal's rural consumers get used to it.

Interestingly, the main strategy to trigger such agreements with community shops is to visit each community: Audulio personally presents Comal's brown sugar to its members. An interesting piece of this situation can be brought from the fieldwork:

> It was late afternoon. A heavy heat filled the courtyard of the church where the meeting was taking place. The Comal team has gathered members of all organized groups in the region of Santa Barbara. Around a dozen of people were sitting on a circle to listen Donaldo explaining how they could organize a seed bank to preserve indigenous seeds.
>
> After it, Audulio steps in to explain the many benefits of Comal brown sugar compared to white sugar. Actually with Comal plan, brown sugar is going to be cheaper than white one that everybody consumes. 'And Comal affiliates are going to pay that price for a product that is actually nutritive and not a chemical poison' Audulio states.
>
> 'I would love that this message reaches every corner of Comal' –one of the local members says. He argues that it should not be only about selling a product. 'The idea is that we know what we consume. And that it is a product from peasants like us. […] The market of the poor is not a poor market. Remember: who are you buying to when you buy white sugar?'
>
> The conversation flourishes. The participants are wondering what is the best way to convince their peers about the benefits of consuming Comal's

> brown sugar. 'The only way to convince others is convince ourselves' Donaldo says. He explains he started at home, introducing brown sugar near to white one. 'Food culture changes progressively.'
>
> He reminds all that they have grown up with white sugar. However, white sugar is not so old. 'Our food culture has been alienated'. He reminds that all their grandparents used pure brown sugar. I see everybody nodding. One of them remembers how his grandfather used to just chew sugarcane before going to work. 'That was enough for a whole day of work' he explains, echoing Audulio's message of brown sugar being highly nutritive. (Santa Bárbara, July 2015)

As captured in this conversation, Audulio is promoting brown sugar consumption by personally explaining the strategy emphasizing the health benefits of the product (organic natural brown sugar *vs* industrial poisoned white sugar) as well as announcing the credit facilities that will be given to consumers. It triggers very interesting discussions and collective brainstorming about how to promote its consumption among Comal's members. This is a very different strategy of the marketing from others Comal used to have during its golden expansion. Specifically, it contrasts with the organic certification that Comal used to pay years ago when brown sugar demand was targeted to urban or even foreign consumers. 'We realized we were paying an expensive certification company that did not even come to Honduras to see our producers' explain one of Comal's assembly members.

Current Comal's team's strategy targets again local rural consumers. Consequently, trust on the benefits of the product does not need an impersonal and professional certification. Instead, it is a face-to-face marketing among "Comal family", supported by a low cost campaign and credit for consumption aiming to enhance member consumers' loyalty. When Audulio explains that the brown sugar will be held cheaper for them thanks to blank packages without any labeling at all, Comal's members seemed very understandable. 'I do not care about labels, because I do not eat them' explained a local participant in a workshop.

So, what is interestingly new? First, referring back to the issue of how to maintain an extended shared trust in a large network, attention can be drawn to the ways trust is transferred through interpersonal bonds. This brown sugar "face-to-face community marketing" is an interesting combination of personal and impersonal transfer of trust; as well as a smart combination of SSE values, health and economic sustainability discourse.

Second, despite brown sugar strategy is less complicated than the UDIS scheme, it is also embedded in a more complex organizational structure. One highly decentralized after Comal crumbling in 2009. As a consequence it is a highly *ad hoc* and adapted-to-context strategy, re-thinking ways of durably enhancing peasant products and *prosumerism*.

Nowadays the reflection continues as other solutions are suggested such as: a plan to include at least 10 peasant basic products in all Comal shops, launch again UDIS, etc.

Brown sugar re-localization practices are interestingly reconnecting *comalera/os*' practices with their common principles around supporting peasant econ-

omy. Through this strategy –shared from the Comal team–, *comalera/os* are agents tackling, shaping and making sense of their own contradictions in innovative ways.

5.3 Reconnecting from principles: interweaving values

Comal's members have also tried to adjust their principles to their practices to mitigate contradictions. An important way of going so has been a deliberate effort to amalgamate old and new common values in a way that they are better connected with their practices while respecting plurality. These efforts seem especially explicit nowadays.

In group discussions with local groups during agro-ecology and seed bank workshops we discussed their understandings of Comal and of Social and Solidarity Economy. Some key (literal) words of their narratives are gathered in the table below.

Table 1. *Comalera/os'* key words in group discussions

I.	**Questions about Comal**
a.	*Definition of Comal*: a school (for training and organizing collective action), a mother, a mutual help organization, a combative social movement
b.	*Motivation to join*: general support on their activities
c.	*Best of being a member*: trainings and credit
d.	*How could Comal improve?* more training and better commercialization
II.	**Questions about solidarity economy**
a.	*Understanding of SSE*: consuming own our, (Comal's slogan), solidarity, exchange. *Groups that had none or few ECOSOL trainings had none or confused ideas about SSE (e.g. associate with 'bolsa solidaria' of Honduran government)
b.	*Does Comal contribute to SSE?*: Yes (thus, not many can explain why or how)
c.	*Relation SSE with food sovereignty and agro-ecology*: Complementary, interrelated, most times interchangeable
d.	*Expansion of SSE: why? how?* Need to expansion for achieving SSE social goals, to reach every peasant community, to change people's mindset. Need to network with other social organizations.
e.	*Challenges?* Difficulties to social change. Bottle necks: poverty, corruption, government (as an enemy), big enterprises, individual's habits

Source: compiled and translated by author

Among the many interesting analysis of these words, some conclusions can be drawn in relation to *comalera/os*' efforts to stress complementarity. First, Comal is not perceived as a mere commercialization organization. It is understood as having a highly social nature. Moreover, the identity of Comal as "a school" and as "a social movement" has been deliberately adopted by the Comal team. I argue that both of these images have yielded the ground for a quite flexible and open definition of what Comal is and who is part of them. Second, Comal's school identity can be connected to Comal members' understandings of Social and Solidarity Economy. The fact that most of them interchange SSE with Comal's slogan, food sovereignty and agro-ecology shows an effort by Comal's actors –notably the Comal team– to build links between these ideas as striving for a same objective.

Indeed, Comal's discourse –as embodied in its reports and concepts used by the Comal team– has clearly evolved from the very incipient peasant claims. During its 20 years of history, Comal's box of conceptual tools has be filled in and tidied up (see figure 9). From an early peasant discourse, Comal incorporated concepts of communitarian commercialization, solidarity economy, social movements, agro-ecology, food sovereignty… this creative combining project worked for the consolidation of Comal's practices, incorporating new concepts (including sustainability) to old ones and connecting them in a way they could be easily understood by local peasants.

Figure 9. Concepts used by Comal's discourse (in reports and workshops)

Source: elaborated by author

Such a creative interweaving of discourse evokes Lévi-Strauss' metaphor of *bricolage* (1966). This picture emphasizes the exercise of continuous reconstruction of the knowledge discourse from the materials that are 'at hand', being the choices between the limited possibilities already an account of the message (ibid: 21).

Similarly, Comal's actors' efforts to (re)connect their principles to their practices can be understood as an exercise of *bricolage*. That is especially true in Comal's current phase. At this point I find useful to "flesh out" these concepts by introducing Alba, the executive director during my encounter with Comal– the second director after Trino left. My numerous conversations with her have been the clearest examples of Comal's 'refunding period', in her own words –a clear "*bricolage* moment", in my words. Her reflective attitude has channeled many *comalera/os'* concerns of 'Comal losing direction'. In frequent communication with Trino and Comal's regional representatives, she has decided to bring again to the Comal team some of the oldest popular trainers (*animadores comunitarios*) as a way to enhance learning processes. Coming from an activist background, she has personally pushed for the identity of Comal as a social movement bonding it with local members' mobilizations. During my days in Comal, Alba demonstrated every Friday her indignation for the Honduran government after the corruption scandal[15]. She, together with Jorge –the president of the board of directors–, took part of a hunger strike in support of some Comal's members on hunger strike in front of the Presidential House.

Looking at what has been interestingly new; in the context of how to address perceived contradictions the "extra" challenge has been how to do so in

[15] The Social Security corruption scandal –already mentioned at the beginning of section 3.1 –was the reason of weekly civil society demonstrations under the name '*los indignados*' (the indignants). Some of them decided to start a hunger strike in front of the Presidential House in Tegucigalpa. See La Prensa (22 June 2015), Rodriguez (11 June 2015)

a way that still emphasizes plurality. Comal's actors have always been very diverse, and so have been their practices and principles. Today lessons learnt from the problems of centralization and professionalization have fostered that efforts of *comalera/os* to amalgamate their heterogeneous visions value especially diversity and look for complementarities.

Comalera/os' bricolage of ideas and flexible identifications are interesting examples of institutions as both structures and constructs of meanings (Schmidt 2010). Also, Comal's actors's interweaving of different concepts and visions and identities of school and social movement evidence their agency addressing internal consistency. And they do it in a creative way: avoiding hierarchical solutions and triggering complementarities and interdependence.

Concluding, this chapter argues that agency is evidenced in *comalera/os'* capacity to respond to challenges of a "big Comal". That is their capacity to make sense and strive to tackle perceived contradictions by (re)connecting their principles and practices. At the same time these responses have the ability to generate new collective action practices and ideas that can crystallized in new SSE institutions as case-specific mechanisms working for internal consistency, trust and coordination within a big SSE organization.

Conclusion

When thinking about the process of building a large community-based organization the image that usually comes to mind is that of building of a tower; where more height implies more distance from the foundation and original principles, less solidity, less consistency. Comal's path, however, could better be compared to a process of knitting a big net. What has been central to the expansion and maintenance of SSE shared principles throughout the network is the process of building *organicity* between local organizations and members. This process helped maintain consistency between practices and common values, and gravitated around a team of popular SSE trainers (*organicity builders*) who also act as major *guardians* of SSE shared values.

The shift from deliberate *organicity building* towards organizational processes of centralization and professionalization was a turning point in the ways the experience of being big affected expressed common principles and practices. Through *comalera/os*' narratives it became evident that the new body of experts that came out of this period had a very specific answer to large-scale dilemmas. More importantly the concern of how to sustain an extended morality was not anymore a priority. Instead, while Comal's principles remained formally the same, new values and priorities were actually informing Comal's decisions. As a result, Comal's expressed shared principles had not changed, but its concrete projects and activities were taking very different directions. Therefore, it is only in this "second stage of being big" that some organizational processes and structures (implicitly centralizing and professionalizing) triggered a growing gap between Comal principles and its actual practices, explaining why some *comalera/os* thought Comal was 'losing direction'.

Yet, these same narratives also point out to ways through which *comalera/os* show agency by making sense of and shaping these identified internal inconsistencies. Their deliberate efforts to (re)connect practices with principles, and vice versa, have been responses to Comal's perceived challenges of being big. Current adjusting efforts by Comal's agents illustrate how their collective concern over how to uphold extended common values is brought to the fore front again. Comal's actors today are interestingly reflective and innovative in the way they deal with this concern over extended trust and internal consistency. In their creative exercise of interweaving (or *bricolage*) of concepts and visions to correspond with practices, *comalera/os* have found ways to emphasize plurality and complementarity. The same can be found in the brown sugar plan: it takes place in a decentralized structured and tries to (re)connect heterogeneous interests by using a new type of face-to-face community marketing. In that sense these *comalera/os'* efforts evoke again the image of *organicity building* characterized by high interdependence and mutual adaptation, in a such way that Comal's collective dream is continuously being (re)knitted emphasizing diversity.

There are, no doubt, many more questions to be explored when it comes to Comal. For instance: investigating the implications of Comal's large-scale processes on community wellbeing. The question whether *comalera/os'* case-specific solutions in response to contradictions are examples of *civic innovation*

(Biekart et al., forthcoming), directly contributing to SSE resiliency could also be deeper explored.

Going through this journey and inspired by an approach of theorizing from the ethnographic material, some conceptual images have been deployed. *Organicity building*, collective concern over extended trust, intentional (re)connection principles-practices and knitting complementarity have been especially relevant. While they are not concrete recipes to guarantee a successful up-scaling, I believe they are useful tools to understand collective coping with challenges related to the growth of alternative economic projects.

As to this research's focus, it shifted along with the recognition that *comalera/os* are an endless source of narratives about SSE potential and challenges that do not necessarily fit the scholarly conversations about SSE scaling-up. Progressively, I became interested in the tension between principles and practices in SSE as a way that enables me understand concrete contradictions such as the one between the slogan painted on the front of Comal warehouse and the products inside. I wanted to understand how this contradiction was related to Comal's large-scale; mirroring the challenges of growth in SSE and placing barriers to SSE potential as an ethical community-based project. Yet, I also wanted to understand how *comalera/os* have lived and dealt with the mentioned contradiction, beyond the image of being "victims" of their own contradictions. The research focus has shown how lived experiences and narratives can have an analytical purpose. Moving away from a single story of what SSE should be, the emphasis on *place-based* narratives and experiences has looked at contradiction not as a negative outcome of growth but as a complex process where agency was also exercise, what I call "the social life of contradictions". This approach has fostered a nuanced interpretation of *comalera/os'* challenges, case-specific solutions and learning process of being a big SSE network.

Zooming out, this research suggests some broader findings for SSE collective and individual actors. First, it points out some specific ways organizational dynamics supporting growth can problematically affect members' trust. Large-scale in SSE is sustained by specific organizational structures that allow for the achievement and maintenance of a big network. This may come at the expense of some distancing from original collective values, leading to members' experiences of contradictions. Thus, these do not need to destroy the SSE organization since members can make sense of and offset them by specific actions to hold on to these values or update them. Indeed, SSE goes beyond monolithic rationality by which organizations in the SSE are only one coherent project and push only for certain absolute and static values. Instead, this research suggests that SSE organizations are a more nuanced mixture of co-existing principles and practices, which can sustain their growth while protecting heterogeneous values.

Therefore, this research emphasizes the ways in which SSE members are agents responding to and making decisions to continuously (re)shape their own collective structures. As Gibson-Graham (2005: 19) point out, these kinds of decisions constitute the economy as a political and ethical space. Nonetheless, SSE agents are not bonded to static values and practices. Their personal and collective envisioning, doing and re-thinking of their SSE project is ever-changing. Key questions such as *what is SSE? How can it bring social change?* are constantly "re-visited". Agency in SSE is not only about one agreed answer to these questions and rational ends-means practices. Agency in SSE is also about

living with contradictions, partial answers and uncertainty. Moreover, internal inconsistencies can enhance actors' concern over their common principles and trust and push them to engage in collective learning processes and case-by-case responses. That is a mosaic of all-encompassing initiatives that mirrors how members of a big network seize their own challenges and hint at their collective reflexivity about how to achieve and maintain shared values guiding economic relations.

Hence, this paper has critically engaged with the debate amongst SSE scholars about whether SSE organizations are bound to "degenerate" and fall into contradictions when they become big. Following Utting's phrasing, this research is speaking to 'the question of whether SSE can be scaled up and sustained meanwhile retaining its core values and objectives', what Utting calls an *integrative upscaling* (2015: 3). Taking an ethnographic approach and looking closer at the dialectical relationship between SSE actors' principles and practices has provided new insights into how contradictions of large scale are experienced by SSE agents, as well as into agency in *structuring* processes.

From the analysis emerging in this research, it was clear that (re)embedding a local economy is a messy process not free from inconsistencies and never completely achieved. It is rather a continuous effort, on the part of SSE actors, of striving to navigate their changing contexts and own puzzles.

These findings have implications for SSE in practice, in particular to current dynamics of SSE given that SSE expansion is acquiring considerable momentum (Utting 2015). This research speaks directly to other networking projects amongst similar peasant cooperatives, especially in Central-America, that are also striving to achieve considerable coordination and mobilization to sustain SSE relations and practices. In that journey, they struggle as well with both squeezing political economy structures and their own collective action dynamics to build autonomous and sustainable civic organizations. This research suggests a malleable image of what becoming and being big can mean, and how different visions and interests among many actors can be blended. SSE actors are an endless source of innovative ways of finding intersections between different struggles and alternatives, such as solidarity economy and food sovereignty.

Regarding broader scholar conversations, these research's reflections substantiate Gibson-Graham's critique of the assumption that only absolutely consistent projects are credible alternatives to capitalism. Instead of trying to detect and solve contradictions of SSE projects as if only completely consistent projects could be successful and real alternatives, scholars can contribute 'creat[ing] the conditions to enlarge the field of credible experiences'. SSE thinking and practice can be framed as is generative and experimental, as well as uncertain and contradictory (ibid, 2005; 2008a). When disclosing and giving credit to diversity of principles and practices in SSE, this research not only has de-essentialized hegemonic economic logics but it has also "de-centered" conceptions of Social and Solidarity economy. It has loosened what Gibson-Graham name the 'discursive grip on unilinear trajectories on narratives of change' (2004: 5).

Learning from SSE in practice stretches out our unhinging notions of growth and scale. It enlarges our understanding of the interrelated elements behind "the up-scaling question" such as the need of coordination and mobili-

zation of many actors, as well as of flexibility, mutual adaptation and resiliency. It questions our binary of large *versus* small scale. And it hints at a more complex continuum with unpredictable intersections where dynamics of large and small scale are combined. These are case and context specific combinations with particular understandings of the role that scale(s) has for SSE as an emancipatory community-based alternative. Finally, SSE practices push us to (re)think the role of uncertainty, contradictions and partiality in relation to collective reflexivity and social experimentation in *place*.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Participants in the discussion groups*

	Member of Comal	Nº of groups	Use of questionnaire	Women	Men	Total participants
Local organized groups	Yes	4	Yes	6	32	38
	No	1	Yes	6	9	15
	Yes	4	No	15	24	39
The Comal (technical) team		1	No	3	7	10
Total		10		30	72	102

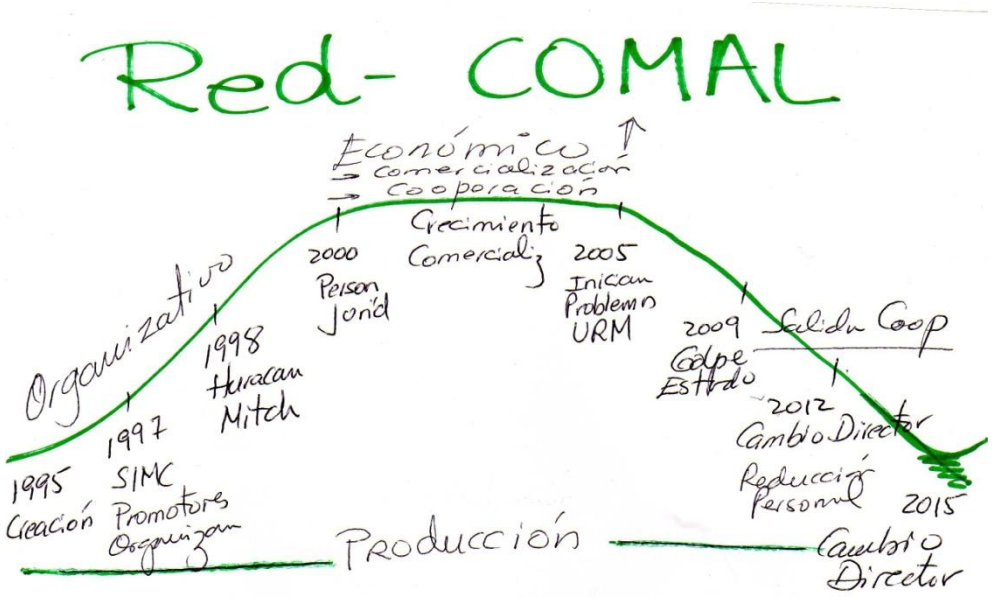
*Group discussions took place when they already had planned group meetings or workshops. Therefore the composition of the groups was not decided in the research design but it was simply the members that were attending the meetings.

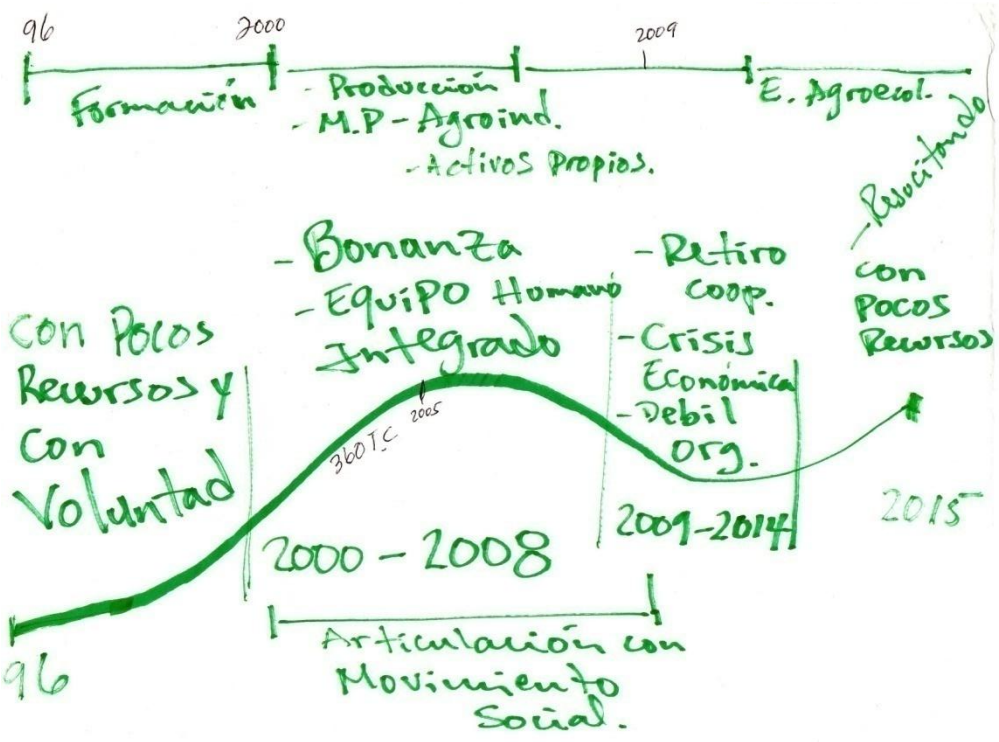
Appendix 2. Comal's values and principles

Comal's values and principles
• Together, we strenghthen our transformative faith (fe transformadora). • We value work and participation of people more than capital. • We respect life and nature. • We produce and commercialize with quality and warmth? (con calidad y calidez), in fair price and weight. • We practice solidarity and justice • We practice equitable relations between men and women • We respect every person, recognizing equal rights, no genderdiscrimination, especial challenges, sexual preferences, age, ethnical origin, religion or ideology. • We practice integrity and honesty and we are committed to keep transparence and accountability. • We recognize and respect diversity of the social and popular movement.

Source: Comal (2015a:6)

Appendix 3. Drawings of Comal's history





Source: members of the Comal team during a group discussion for the research (10th July, 2015)

Appendix 4. 'I am *comalera/o*' T-shirt

Source: Design by Ian Díaz, member of the Comal team

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