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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### BACK TO SOLIDARITY-BASED LIVING?

#### The Economic Crisis and the Development of Alternative Projects in Portugal

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**ABSTRACT:** The socio-economic crisis in 2011 caused a decrease in living standards for a large part of the Portuguese population, especially after the implementation of a new austerity programme. At the same time the country saw an increase in alternative projects such as: self-organised cultural centres; urban gardening groups; and solidarity-based exchange networks. The main aim of this contribution is to analyse how the crisis impacted these projects in Portugal in cities and also rural areas. The argument that the crisis had an adverse effect on resilience projects is strengthened by the results of case studies in other countries affected by the crisis and by empirical observations regarding the case of Portugal. After having reviewed the scarce literature on social resilience and alternative projects I present data from an analysis of internet pages and a questionnaire on the impact of the socio-economic crisis on the projects of Rede Convergir in 2015.

**KEYWORDS:** economic crisis, exchange networks, Portugal, Rede Convergir, resilience, urban gardening

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## **1. Introduction:**

The socio-economic crisis caused a decrease in living conditions for a large part of the Portuguese people. It hit Portugal especially badly in 2011 and the Portuguese government required external assistance in April of that year. The first large demonstration took place on 12 March 2011 (Baumgarten 2013b), at a time of political crisis, and contributed to the resignation of the government. The subsequent 2011 elections then brought a conservative government into power that was strongly committed to austerity politics. “The Troika, a group of experts from the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), negotiated with the Portuguese authorities an Economic Adjustment Program based on three major areas (European-Commission 2011c): a credible fiscal consolidation strategy; special measures to support the financial sector; and structural reforms to improve competitiveness and boost economic growth” (Viegas and Ribeiro 2014, 54). The wide-ranging sectoral reforms imposed on the country, have since been regularly evaluated by the Troika. (Gorjão 2012, 65). Besides large increases in taxes and the reduction of wages in public employment, there were also reductions in social expenditure – for example, cuts in the healthcare system, in education, and in unemployment benefits (Gutiérrez 2014). At the same time Portugal witnessed an increase in alternative projects, such as: self-organised cultural centres; urban gardening groups; and solidarity-based exchange networks. Thus, the main aim of this contribution is to analyse how the economic crisis affected these kind of projects in Portugal, both in the cities and in rural areas. The argument that the crisis has had an impact on resilience projects is strengthened by the results of case studies in other countries hit by the crisis (Forno and Graziano 2014; Kousis and Paschou in this Special Issue).

I address this question through a literature review and a case study. My case, Rede Convergir (Network Converge), is a hub website that lists sustainable projects and their events, with the aim to foster co-operation and attract people to take part in these kinds of projects. The website documents their aims, principal ideas, year of foundation, the number of people both involved and targeted, and contains contact dates that include links to websites of the projects. The site furthermore provides information on workshops and events taking place in Portugal announced by participants of the projects listed. This calendar is very active. For example, in January and February 2015 there were between one and four events or workshops every week - including learning to prune trees, introduction to permaculture, and teambuilding. “The vision of Rede Convergir is to have a platform that maps sustainable and inspiring projects so that the network members can co-operate, enhance synergies, and contribute to a balanced

society and a human life in harmony with the surroundings. The aim is to link projects in their activities and to promote reflection and awareness of the role of every human being in stimulating a critical, constructive, active and emancipated society”.<sup>2</sup> The idea for this project emerged at the conference “Ecovillage and Sustainable Living”.<sup>3</sup> The network is managed by individuals, not organizations. Some of these individuals work at CCIAM research group<sup>4</sup> and give the necessary technical support. There is also an attempt to find synergies with research projects like CATALISE, funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation (2014/2015)<sup>5</sup> which provided additional human resources. Currently, there are twenty people working voluntarily for the project. They are divided into moderators (*moderadores*) and guardians (*guardiões*). The moderators are responsible for new initiatives, improving the platform and keeping it in contact with the users, while the guardians promote the project and consider future developments. Initiatives must request inclusion onto the website, must be in line with the Rede Convergir vision and criteria, must contribute to the region’s sustainable development and allow the possibility of visiting the project (are they georeferenced?). Further, they must involve more than two people and be suitably inspiring.<sup>6</sup>

Rede Convergir itself does not use a common term for the projects it lists. They are described as “contributing to local sustainability, based on alternative models”. They are looking for alternatives to existing economic practices and therefore I call them alternative projects. To relate my study to the existing literature on ‘social resilience’, I borrow the term as an umbrella that characterizes the groups that are part of Rede Convergir. Social resilience is a specific concept related to the broader concept of resilience that “has become a popular concept within social sciences” (Scott 2013, 606). It is still marginalized in the Portuguese literature. Here the term is mainly restricted to phenomena of ecological systems (Fonseca and Pereira 2013; Mendes and Tavares 2009) or individual resilience strategies (Silva, Gonçalves and Sacramento 2014). Social resilience is used in manifold ways, to characterize societies, groups, practices or the results of processes. What such concepts of social resilience have in common are the characteristics attributed to actors, their actions, processes and outcomes. So, in rela-

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<sup>2</sup> Cited from <http://www.sustainable-communities.eu/makingrevolutionvisible/> [June 13, 2016].

<sup>3</sup> The conference report can be consulted at [http://gen-europe.org/fileadmin/\\_migrated/content\\_uploads/GEN\\_Strategies\\_for\\_Resilience\\_02.pdf](http://gen-europe.org/fileadmin/_migrated/content_uploads/GEN_Strategies_for_Resilience_02.pdf) [June 13, 2016].

<sup>4</sup> <http://ce3c.ciencias.ulisboa.pt/teams/profile/?id=2> [June 27, 2016].

<sup>5</sup> The project is available online <http://ce3c.ciencias.ulisboa.pt/research/projects/ver.php?id=25> [10.06.2016]. Publications from the project so far are a guide to practices of transformation. Santos et al. 2015 and recommendations from the project Rocha et al. 2015 (both in Portuguese).

<sup>6</sup> Thank you to David Avelar from Rede Convergir for his help and especially for this information on Rede Convergir.

tion to communities, Șerban and Tălăngă define social resilience as “the ability of communities to cope with external stress such as changes in the economic environment” (Șerban and Tălăngă 2015, 59). Other definitions go further and define it as “an essential characteristic of what we call successful societies – namely, societies that provide their members with the resources to live healthy, secure, and fulfilling lives” (Hall and Lamont 2013, 2). This definition very much reflects the aforementioned aims of Rede Convergir. Adger (2000) locates social resilience at the community rather than at the individual level and relates it to the social capital of societies and communities. A great majority of the projects included in my study are based on initiatives by civil society actors at the local level. According to data from Rede Convergir, more than half of the projects in their database have ten or fewer active participants and only fifteen projects reported more than fifty active ones. Thus, a few projects actually count as individual initiatives to alternative ways of living, but even the more individual projects are part of a social network.

Groups and their projects are central to this publication and also play an important role in the resilience literature. Using the concept ‘social resilience’ points to the characteristics of these groups. Also, other concepts that use ‘social resilience’ to describe the outcome of certain processes or practices employ similar characteristics, e.g. defining social resilience as “the result of active processes of response. [...] the product of much more creative processes in which people assemble a variety of tools, including collective resources and new images of themselves to sustain their well-being in the face of social change” (Hall and Lamont 2013, 14). A new focus is set on alternative forms of resilience and collective responses to economic and political threats - especially confronting hardship caused by the socio-economic crisis that hit many European countries after 2008 (Forno and Graziano 2014) - but also earlier forms of alternative resilience during economic crises in Latin American countries (Primavera 2010). These forms of resilience arose to meet urgent basic needs. They include for example solidarity-based exchange networks, time banks, alternative social currency, social enterprises, and others. Because of their specific structure of involving people in non-capitalist relations they are important also in terms of political participation (for an overview see Kousis and Paschou in this Special Issue). Some of the projects included in Rede Convergir that I analyze here, definitely belong to those alternative forms of resilience, though others cannot be counted under this label, as they were founded long before the socio-economic crisis and do not focus primarily on confronting hardship. From my empirical study and the publications of the project CATALISE (Rocha et al. 2015, Santos et al. 2015), I learned about a more general definition of crisis from some of these projects. The recent socio-economic crisis was considered as just one more proof of the

crisis of the capitalist system including the ecological damage inflicted. So in this respect the projects are part of the alternative forms of resilience. I characterize the projects as resilient because they – according to the above cited description of the aims of Rede Convergir – contribute “to a balanced society and a human life in harmony with the surroundings”.<sup>7</sup> To resume: the alternative projects fulfil the characteristics of social resilience and thus contribute to more resilience (if we use the term to describe communities or societies). Moreover, a great many of the projects fit into another definition of “resilience” used in rural studies, which is a “return to place-based, localized and regionalized ways of organizing food production, processing and supply, to transition towards a lighter ecological footprint and less carbon intensive economies” (Scott 2013: 602).

Many of the civil society groups analyzed here came into being at the same times as Portugal faced large protests and the creation of many activist groups related to the crisis (2011-2013). Furthermore, alternative forms of resilience often share similar organisational practices as activist groups, and have some personal overlaps and partly raise the same issues. So, questions may be raised about relations between community resilience projects and social movements. Forno and Graziano (2014) have recently combined social movement and consumerism theories. They created a label for groups that combine aspects of social activism and the issue of alternative production and consumption: “Sustainable Community Movement Organizations” (SCMOs). In detail these are characterized by: a strong critique of materialism and standard consumerism; the search for alternatives to mass production; interest in a worldwide equal distribution of wealth and life opportunities; and direct relationships between producers and consumers and mutual solidarity (see: Forno and Graziano 2014, 4-6). All these characteristics apply to the groups analyzed in this text, as we will see later. Although they are not all primarily motivated by ideas of political activism, their search for alternative ways of living is inspired by the above described critique of the current dominant ways of production and consumption. So changing the world by building up local initiatives - the “think global, act local” idea - promoted by the global justice movements is present, although the groups often do not engage in classical social movement activism, like demonstrations and political campaigns. In Forno and Graziano’s typology the Portuguese projects listed in Rede Convergir belong to a local scale of action and are in part alter-consumerist and in part anti-consumerist. Here we find groups practicing community-sustained agriculture, food networks, time banks, transition towns and ecovillages.

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<sup>7</sup> Cited from <http://www.sustainable-communities.eu/makingrevolutionvisible/> [June 13, 2016].

My focus on Portugal was chosen first, because of my privileged access to the field here, being a researcher based in Lisbon. Second, Portugal is an interesting case because it has been severely hit by the socio-economic crisis and there are large developments in the field of resilience, especially the foundation of projects for alternative living and production but also initiatives to make cities more resilient (Matos 2012; Selada 2013). Third, the paper is a first attempt to fill a research gap, as literature on resilience in Portugal is extremely scarce.

After a short introduction with some figures about the socio-economic crisis and a literature review on alternative practices in Portugal, I present data from a questionnaire distributed among Rede Convergir projects in 2015 on the impact of the socio-economic crisis on them. I have chosen to focus on Rede Convergir as my main case, because it is a recent and fast-growing initiative to build a network of projects related to resilience. Additionally, it provides good access, as all its projects are listed with an e-mail address.

## **2. The Socio-Economic Crisis in Portugal**

The crisis and the austerity politics described above have had various measurable consequences on the living conditions of the Portuguese people. The fall in the median wage between 2009 and 2013 is assessed as 14 per cent (Matsaganis and Leventi 2014, 400), while income inequality and poverty risk levels have increased (Gutiérrez 2014, 371). This means that the poorer people in particular have lost income. The decrease in income of Portuguese households is also identifiable in their levels of consumption. A study based on data from a major supermarket chain shows that between the first semester of 2010 and the first semester of 2011 people bought fewer expensive products (e.g. fish like sole (down 42 per cent) and dourada de mar (down 54 per cent), or beef (down 9,5 per cent) and substituted them with cheaper food, like horse mackerel (up 35 per cent) or chorizo sausage (up 15 per cent) (Taborda and Pimentel, 11). There are also more people depending on food assistance. Banco Alimentar, the largest institution in Portugal to collect and distribute food, helped 298,000 people in 2010. That is 37,000 more than in 2009 and 48,000 more than in 2008 (Taborda and Pimentel, 13).

As in other countries severely hit by the crisis, the poverty risk in Portugal increased (Gutiérrez 2014, 384). This is connected to the rise in unemployment: between 2007 and 2013 Portugal lost around 13 per cent of its paid jobs and especially young people (25-29-year-old) faced extreme difficulties in joining the labour market (Gutiérrez 2014). "Unemployment, in particular, reached an all-time high of 15.9 per cent in Au-

gust 2012 [...] More importantly, unemployment between ages 15 and 24 has increased steeply, reaching 35.9 per cent during 2012 (Gorjão 2012, 65).

There has been a shift in Portuguese society regarding the value of urban gardening, as Silva points out: "Until recently, the majority of the Portuguese urban population did not appreciate urban allotment gardens, since they have been associated with a past of poverty, malnutrition, and social inferiority. While there were 'vegetable gardens of spontaneous occupation' in Portuguese cities, they were always linked to the social condition of their occupants (migrants from rural areas, and ethnic minorities from the former Portuguese colonies in Africa). The recognition of the importance of vegetable gardens in a healthier lifestyle has been changing this attitude, and urban agriculture has gradually been attracting urban dwellers of all social classes. This paradigm change, associated with the recent economic crisis, caused a boom in the demand for a plot of land to cultivate" (Silva 2014, 48). But economic necessities did not dominate the motivations behind urban gardening. A questionnaire shows that 85 per cent of the respondents used it as a hobby and only 8.3 per cent used it as an additional source of income (Gonçalves 2014a, 68). Most gardeners gave the food they produced away rather than sell it (Gonçalves 2014a, 71). So, the crisis contributed to a mentality change in the value of urban gardening but urban gardening only rarely used as a survival strategy. The crisis further had an impact on gardening projects implemented by the state. Vila Nova de Gaia, for example, did not have an urban agricultural policy until 2012, while the municipality is now running the Municipal Network of Urban Allotment Gardens. The number of applications for a plot is growing fast and there is already a long-waiting list of people that have applied for a plot (Silva 2014, 43–45).

While the crisis hit Portugal from 2011 onwards, the effects of other earlier trends continued to be felt. Hespanha (1996) describes a crisis in the rural area beginning in 1989. Based on data by the national statistical agency INE, he notes that between 1989 and 1995 the agricultural population declined 31 per cent while the number of farms declined 25 per cent. It was mainly small farmers who gave up their businesses. This development relates to Portugal entering the European Union. Between 1989 and 1994 the average income of farmers in Portugal fell 50 per cent and the income of 55 per cent of them in 1997 was below the minimum wage. European regulations on quality forced many of the small enterprises - that for example produced cheese and sausages - to close down production because of a lack of sanitary conditions (Hespanha 1996).

So the recent crisis was not the first to hit rural areas where most of the alternative projects listed in Rede Convergir are based. In contrast to the former crises, the current one is characterized by very high unemployment among young people and declining

chances to find employment in Portugal. Also, the rising prices of food and other consumer goods have proved to be incentives to look for alternative ways of living in Portugal. Before analysing the recent impact of the current socio-economic crisis I will give an overview of the lines of development that impact today's alternative practices of living and producing in Portugal.

### **3. Alternative practices of living and producing – some lines of development in Portugal**

In this first part I will give an overview of the literature on alternative practices of living and producing in Portugal with a specific focus on new developments since 2008. I describe developments that affect the way Rede Convergir projects are conceptualized today. One line of development that has had great impact on today's projects related to resilience in Portugal has been the setting up of solidarity economy projects (Hespanha 2009; Laville 2009). Solidarity economy has a long history in Portugal, and includes associations which help each other (*Associações de Socorro Mútuo*) and other institutions with similar aims. Associations were suppressed during the dictatorship because they were regarded as contradicting national interests. Consequently, their number dropped. Another factor contributing to the decline of associations was the introduction of a social security system, and nowadays many of the solidarity economy groups and institutions are dependent on state funding (Gouveia 2009, 40-44). Since the beginning of the 1990s the number of state-run local development projects, and also the number of civil society-initiated projects, increased. Various programmes - sponsored by both the European Commission and by Portugal - promoted this kind of solidarity economy projects (Gouveia 2009, 78) resulting in a structure of such projects strongly connected to the Portuguese state and to programmes supported by the EU.

The environmental movement in Portugal (Figueiredo, Fidélis and da Rosa Pires 2001) is another line of development that affects the structure of today's projects related to resilience. Projects that stand in this tradition are usually independent from the state and have a primary focus on sustainable ways of living and working together. The Portuguese Ecology Movement (*Movimento Ecológico Português* (MEP) was founded on 14 May 1974, only a few weeks after the Carnation Revolution. Since 1999 in particular the ecology movement has been inspired by international protests. The environmental activist group GAIA organised activities related to those protests. GAIA was a recently funded group consisting mainly of students which started to build up international contacts and linked environmental problems to political economy questions



(Baptista, 2009, 71). Together with another national association promoting environmental protection, the Confederação Portuguesa de Associações de Defesa do Ambiente (CPADA), GAIA tried to put ecology onto the list of issues to be debated in the Portuguese Social Forums (2005 and 2007).<sup>8</sup> They were confronted with a lack of interest by most other social forum activist groups dealing with ecological questions (Baptista 2009, 75). Thereafter environmental questions remained marginalized in Portugal. There is however a wide range of projects dedicated to environmentally friendly, sustainable living in Portugal., some of them existing already for a long time. They range from small farms to ecovillages, like what is probably the most famous community “Tamera” (Pires 2012). These projects are connected by various national and international networks and their foundation is often related to international movements. In the following section, I will highlight some of those networks that had a great impact on Portuguese projects during the last decade. There is little literature on these networks in Portugal (Matos 2012; Soares 2012; Pires 2012). This might change in the near future as various research projects have started only recently, like CATALISE.<sup>9</sup> Lisbon University is part of the international ECOLISE network that connects researchers and local communities trying to become more sustainable. Furthermore, the project SYMBIOS - on social movements for sustainable degrowth - of Gildas Renou (SAGE, CNRS/Université de Strasbourg) and Laura Centemeri (LAMES, CNRS / AMU) started in October 2014.<sup>10</sup>

The ideas surrounding permaculture have had a large impact on Portuguese alternative groups (Soares 2012). Various seminars on permaculture take place every year and, among the Rede Convergir projects, those dedicated to permaculture have the largest share (27 per cent). There is also a Portuguese website that brings together people with an interest in permaculture (<http://permaculturaportugal.ning.com>). Some Portuguese projects are inspired by and are part of the transition network (Matos 2012; Soares 2012; Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009; Smith 2011) that led to the creation of the Portuguese network ‘Transição e Permacultura em Portugal’ on 13 January 2009. At that time, it was mainly an online platform to connect activists and groups interest-

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<sup>8</sup> These two national forums were part of the social forum activism Nunes (2011); Baumgarten (2016b); Smith et al. (2011) that started in Porto Alegre in 2001.

<sup>9</sup> CATALISE stand for „Capacitação para a Transição Local e Inovação Social“ and ran for 15 months until December 2015 by CESNOVA (New University, Lisbon) and Lisbon university. More information (in Portuguese) at <http://transicaoportugal.net/759/> [accessed March 03, 2015]. See also: “Síntese sobre o Projecto CATALISE” <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7Ay23ikln3vZIRQOUZJbEJNRDg/view> [accessed June 10, 2016].

<sup>10</sup> See the project description (in French) <http://www.lames.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article427&lang=fr>

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ed in transition and permaculture. In 2010 the first local groups were created. The first workshops on transition took place, and in April 2010 a first national meeting was organised, followed by workshops and national meetings in 2011 and 2012. In May 2012, a national platform was created in order to co-operate more closely at the national level, to strengthen local groups and to connect them to the international Transition Network (Matos 2012, 94). Within this network there are, for example, projects which aim to reduce the distance between producers and consumers, and groups promoting bicycles as means of daily transport. Further groups related to solidarity economy and urban agriculture are now also part of the transition network. Some of them are run by state actors, some are more civil society group-based. As in many other countries, in Portugal the transition movement was supported by various anti-austerity groups, as for example the Indignados movements - which dedicated a few of their activities to the study and implementation of measures related to the concept of transition (Matos 2012, 86). Currently, there are no research projects about Portugal listed in the transition research network.<sup>11</sup>

Further, there is an international network of ecovillages (Dawson 2006) that includes Portuguese projects.<sup>12</sup> According to this network, ecovillages are defined as rural communities that aim to create a social environment where people help each other to live a lifestyle of low environmental impact. They usually contain projects related to permaculture, ecological construction, green production, alternative energy and community building etc. (Pires 2012, 14). The number of ecovillages is constantly rising. They are interconnected and to a growing extent use Local Exchange Trading Systems or other systems of local money among them. Many of them use systems of exchange that are not compatible with money and thus they have constructed a completely alternative system (Baptista 2009, 79). The ecovillages, as well as the transition movement, are part of what Forno and Graziano (2014) labelled "Sustainable Community Movement Organizations" (SCMOs). Although only few of the groups belonging to these networks engage in political campaigns or protest activities, they are all actively looking for alternatives to the political system and are organized in loose network structures to exchange ideas and do workshops together.

A further line of development of resilience practices in Portugal, that became prominent especially during the last decade, is urban agriculture. In contrast to the environmental movement and the ecological projects, it does not always have a focus on sustainability. Also, here the literature on Portugal is scarce (Gonçalves 2014a, 5–6).

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.transitionresearchnetwork.org> [accessed June 16, 2016].

<sup>12</sup> There is a Portuguese site to connect ecovillages (<http://portugal.ecovillage.org/>). But it does not show new activities since 2012.

There are some case studies like the Masters and Diploma theses on the cases of Telheiras and Linda-a-velha (Soares 2012) that concern the urban region of Oporto (Gonçalves 2014a), Lisbon (Gonçalves 2014b) and Oeiras (Saraiva 2011). There are also contributions in the Portuguese journal 'Urban Agriculture' (Henriques 2009) and a project report (Carvalho 2014). From these contributions, we learn that there are various types of urban agriculture in Portugal. Some of them are promoted by the state and some of them are organised by civil society groups or simply by people that start urban agriculture without any connection to groups. There are informal gardening projects on land owned by the municipality that is used without contract all over the cities and often along the motorways. This informal gardening is often tolerated by the state and sometimes even supported (Henriques 2009, 84). But sometimes groups lose their land when the state decides to turn it over to official projects, like in the case of "A Horta do Monte" in Lisbon. This was a project that existed for many years, was tolerated by the city of Lisbon but was destroyed in 2013, in order to create space for a formal community gardening project.<sup>13</sup> There are various types of financial support for community gardening from foundations (Gonçalves 2014a, 31), state agencies, like the municipality (câmara municipal), the parish (junta de freguesia) or the European Union (Silva 2013; Gonçalves 2014b, 29). Other projects are inspired by the Local Agenda 21, as for example the "Hortas Urbanas de Évora" (Gonçalves 2014b, 31). Moreover, there are urban gardening projects that work without financial support from institutions.

Some local assemblies connected to the Indignados movement that started in Portugal in 2011 (Baumgarten 2013b) include community gardening projects, like the Popular Assembly Barreiro (Carvalho 2014). A study about Barreiro, based on participant observation and interviews, gives us insight into the functioning of this kind of urban gardening project. It is a community garden on land provided by a local landowner and is used not only to grow vegetables but also as a place for social activities like concerts. According to Carvalho: "The allotment has several objectives: (1) occupation, self-management and emancipation (see above); (2) a social project; and (3) self-satisfaction and friendship. The first objective is connected with the anarchist experience that politicises this kind of activity as a daily activity of resistance. The second is linked with the idea of intervention and changing society, and the third could be thought as being inclusive of all the members, as a convivial space". (Carvalho 2014, 18–19). It is the most successful project of the Assembly of Barreiro as other projects slowly declined (Carvalho 2014, 11). Many activist groups that came into being after

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<sup>13</sup> See online article of the Portuguese journal „O Público“ 25 June 2013, <http://www.publico.pt/local/noticia/dois-detidos-e-tres-feridos-em-desocupacao-de-horta-comunitaria-em-lisboa-1598320> [accessed February 22, 2015].

2011 have experienced that concrete projects related to resilience are more sustainable than the organisation of political debates and protest events. Public assemblies that included concrete projects to improve the daily life of their participants tend to have a better chance of survival than groups without these concrete projects. Some of these groups rely on land provided by its owner, like the above-mentioned assembly of Barreiro or the assembly of Algés that uses an old factory building to host their workshops, cultural programmes and other events. A few projects included the occupation of public buildings. Those projects, namely the Es.col.a da Fontinha in Oporto and São Lazaro in Lisbon, ended with eviction (Baumgarten 2013a). Since December 2013 a small project started in the suburbs of Lisbon with the occupation of a privately-owned building, since tolerated by the owner under the condition that the occupiers help to improve the building. A few young people have lived there for over one year now and they organised social and political events.<sup>14</sup> These projects, however, are attempts to join people to organize activities together and are seldom directed primarily towards meeting urgent basic needs. Some projects try to politicize people and organize them around specific issues. So often within these projects we find events, like film evenings, related to issues of austerity or food security, political debates or workshops. So this type of project, in the field of Portuguese resilience groups, is probably closest to what we understand by activist groups belonging to the social movement sector.

Other projects related to resilience are the exchange networks and alternative markets based on solidarity instead of market prices (Andrade Gomes 2012; Azevedo 2010, 17–18; Montez 2010). Moreover, there are also networks for the exchange of used products, materials and equipment that are driven by the idea that someone might make use of what is waste for others. These networks are mainly organised via the internet, while there are also some gratis shops and spaces where people bring goods they do not need anymore. These spaces are often connected to social centers (Baptista 2009, 80).

If we aim to include all of the Portuguese projects described above, our definition of alternative projects becomes very broad. They are covered by the concept of social resilience described above, but only a small number can be labelled as “alternative forms of resilience” in the way conceptualized by Kousis and Paschou in this Special Issue. Only a few of them have a focus on political participation in a more classical sense – the response to urgent basic needs is not a primary goal of most of the groups in Portugal. This has to do with the projects’ history outlined above. The first line of development described above, for example, led to groups that are mostly apolitical and dependent

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<sup>14</sup> See: <https://laranjinhar.wordpress.com/about/> [accessed February 01, 2015].

on state or Church resources, while the groups related to the environmental movement focus more on aspects of sustainability than on urgent needs. Excluding all groups that do not fall into that category, however, would limit the analysis to a minority of groups and not include developments of the other groups focusing on “alternative forms of resilience”. So while the broader concept of social resilience has guided the choice of my sample, “alternative resilience” and social movement approaches help to analyse how far the socioeconomic crisis has affected the change in groups which have become more oriented towards urgent needs or becoming more political in the classical sense. In the next chapter I describe Rede Convergir and then present the results from a questionnaire distributed among these projects to find out about possible impacts of the socio-economic crisis on the foundation of new projects and on the daily work of the projects that already existed before 2011.

#### **4. Rede Convergir – a case study**

Here I give an overview of existing projects and their developments based on my own analysis of projects organised via the Rede Convergir website.<sup>15</sup> The analysis is based on two kinds of data. First, I constructed a database of all 101 projects listed on Rede Convergir on 16 January 2015. This database included the names of the initiatives, their main activities, the year of foundation of the projects, the number of people involved and e-mail contacts. Second, based on this work, I conducted an online questionnaire between 16 January and 30 March 2015 with the aim of capturing the main changes in the Rede Convergir projects. I contacted all 101 projects that were listed at Rede Convergir for the first time on 16 January via e-mail and sent them a link to a short online questionnaire. I have sent two follow-up e-mails to remind the participants to answer the questionnaire. 35 of the recipients answered my questionnaire<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> [www.redeconvergir.net](http://www.redeconvergir.net)

<sup>16</sup> 34 of these respondents gave answers to all questions, one left out the question on whether the project participated in the street demonstrations. Of those projects that did not answer the questionnaire I have little information: one did not answer because the project does not exist anymore and 12 answered that their projects are still active but did not want to answer the questionnaire. Three of them explained this, saying they were in the process of restructuring. I could not find out what has happened to the other 52 projects. Neither the administrators of Rede Convergir nor the project CATALISE – *Capacitação para a Transição Local e Inovação Social*, a project dedicated to the study of local projects dedicated to transition and training at this point of time had information about the number of projects still running. So it might be that some of these projects also do not exist anymore. For the case of the city of Lisbon I received some hints that some of the projects were at least inactive at the moment.

and one answered only the first question. Not all projects received the same questionnaire. As I was interested mainly in changes since the economic crisis hit Portugal, I divided the projects into two groups: 42 projects<sup>17</sup> contacted (of which 12 responded = 28,6 per cent) were founded before 2011; and 59 projects<sup>18</sup> (of which 23 responded = 38,9 per cent) were founded thereafter.<sup>19</sup> According to data from Rede Convergir, more than half of the projects on their database have ten or fewer active participants and only around 15 projects reported more than 50 active participants.

The projects in Portugal are quite young. Only seven of them have existed for longer than ten years, while 58 were founded in 2011 or later. This might have to do with the relatively young patrons of Rede Convergir rather than the new projects. But as I will show later, there are other developments that explain this phenomenon.

The number of projects founded per year slowly started to rise after 2000 with a clear peak in 2011 and 2012. It was in these two years that unemployment increased sharply from 11 per cent to 15.9 per cent (see: [http://www.oecd.org/std/labour-stats/HUR\\_03e13.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/std/labour-stats/HUR_03e13.pdf)). 2011 is the year when anti-austerity protests started in Portugal. But the rise of new projects during recent years does not necessarily relate to the

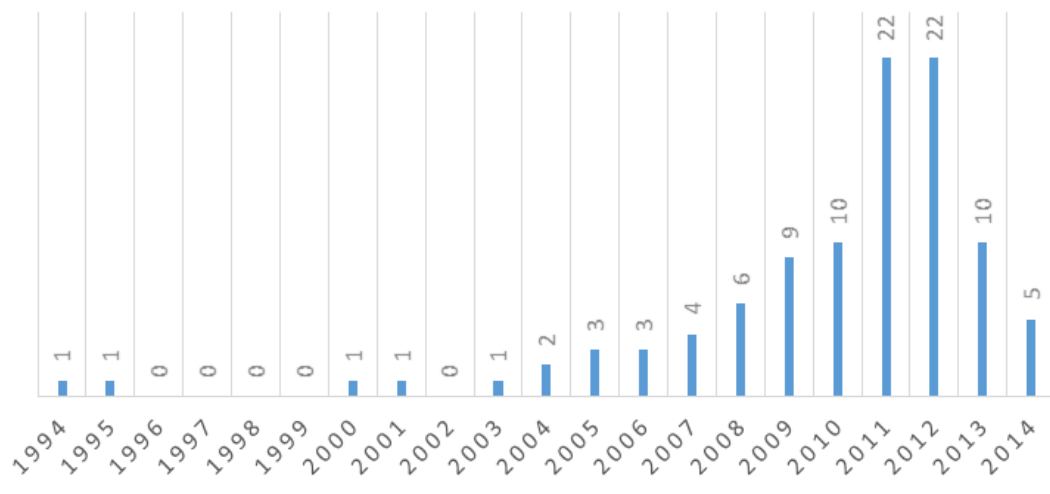
<sup>17</sup> This questionnaire started with the open questions “Do you feel differences in the work of your group compared to the time before 2011? And if yes, then what are the important differences compared to the time before 2011?” These open questions were followed by three closed questions about more specific differences (number of people involved, demand of products and type of people who are interested in the project). An open question about the aims of the project was followed by a question on changes in these aims. Then I ask about participation in anti-austerity protests. The always offered option to comment on close questions to explain the answers in more details was often used by the respondents, while the option to comment on the project was only used by five respondents to congratulate on the project, to ask for keeping informed, to say sorry for late responses and to promote own projects.

<sup>18</sup> This questionnaire started with four open questions on the aims of the project, the relation of the foundation of the project with the socio-economic crisis, other factors that influence the creation of the project, and whether the respondents feel an impact of the crisis in their day-to-day work. The last question about involvement of the projects in anti-austerity protests was similar to the other groups and also here I gave respondents space for general comments on the questionnaire and the research project. Comments were similar to the other group except one respondent who suggested an improvement of the questionnaire.

<sup>19</sup> The low response rate is a problem for my analysis. I tried to find out what happened to the groups that did not answer, but neither colleagues nor contacts in the field could help me in this respect. Colleagues from research projects in the same field reported even lower response rates. Cautious interpretation of the data gathered is necessary until further studies based on alternative, more time-consuming methods, like fieldwork with participant observation and face-to-face-interviews, provide us with more reliable data.

economic crisis. International trends and the rise of international networks seem to have some impact on the Portuguese developments, too.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 1 – Number of projects listed on Rede Convergir founded per year



Source: Own data collected from Rede Convergir website 16 January 2015

The answers to my questionnaire support the argument that we need to be cautious connecting the increased number of project foundations to the socio-economic crisis. Only one of the 23 projects founded in 2011 reported a direct relation to the crisis and one further project mentioned that the crisis accelerated the process of its foundation. Another wrote in a comment that the project was not directly connected to the crisis because it was more related to a belief, a mode of living and a lifestyle that the partici-

<sup>20</sup> Most prominently the transition network that only started in 2006 in Great Britain and became visible in Portugal since 2009. Groups that call themselves transition groups listed in Rede Convergir came into being after 2010, with a peak in 2011 (11). So half of the groups founded in 2011 describe themselves as dedicated primarily to transition. As already mentioned above, 2010 was the first year of a first national meeting of transition projects followed by many workshops in 2011 and 2012. So the high number of new projects after 2010 is related to the transition movement. A diagram provided on the website of Rede Convergir about the distribution of the types of groups shows a great many projects practicing primarily permaculture (27 per cent), followed by transition (17.5 per cent), work with land and nature (10.9 per cent) and use of land and community (10.9 per cent) (<http://www.redeconvergir.net/v2/>). So we have a great number of groups that are related to environment protection and sustainable production.

pants of the projects already had a long time before. Yet another wrote: “We would do the same things without the economic crisis, but the economic crisis also had an impact. On the one hand, because it is more difficult to find an employment adequate to one’s experiences and qualifications. On the other hand, because the necessity generated by this crisis is an opportunity to rethink our way of living in more consonance with our values and principles”. 20 of the 23 respondents answered with a clear “no”. Ecological motives dominated those who answered in more detail. Besides looking for alternatives to the existing system of production, personal experiences - like having a child or their first farm animal - affected their answers. Moreover, local problems like desertification played a role in the foundation of projects.

Another question aimed at the projects founded since 2011, was about the impact of the crisis on the projects’ daily work. 17 of the 23 projects reported effects; four reported no impact; while one project reported, it could not estimate any impact because the project was founded after the onset of the economic crisis. Seven of the twelve projects founded before 2011 that answered the questionnaire said there was an impact, while three of them saw no such impact. Of course, this self-evaluation is not a strong indicator. However, it gives us an idea about those projects that answered the questionnaire and how they perceived the impact of the crisis. The exploratory character of my project did not allow more reliable data. Based on these first results, further research in this direction is necessary. The option to leave a comment, in addition to the questions asked, was used by a majority of the people who answered the questionnaire. This provided us with further interesting information. One of the projects which stated that the crisis had had no impact added that it was comprised of people who were also employed outside the group. Another group mentioned that other factors were much more important than the economic crisis. Among those projects which gave more information about the impact of the crisis, I have singled out some positive impacts that were reported<sup>21</sup>:

1) More time became available: some participants said they now could dedicate more time to the projects because they were unemployed and there were potentially more people with time for projects due to the increasing number of unemployed.

2) Positive change in attitudes: people became more concerned with notions of solidarity and were more open to new ideas. At an ideological level the crisis revealed structural problems inherent in the projects’ debates and interventions. The following response from the questionnaire illustrates some of the developments cited above:

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<sup>21</sup> I distinguish positive from negative impacts by the criterion that: was the impact helpful for the daily work of the project or an obstacle for the daily work.



“there is less money, so our ideas, especially the system of exchange, start to make sense to more ‘normal citizens’. A greater number of people participate in the markets and fairs that sell and exchange their products. Unemployed people develop alternative activities to feed their families - there is a greater solidarity between people”.

Some negative impacts were:

1) A lack of financial resources: people were less able to spend money and there was a greater necessity to earn money through participation in projects. One project stated it had set up a gift economy and other forms of solidarity to deal with these necessities. These changes were a response to increased unemployment. For some of those projects reliant on external resources, budget cuts related to the crisis were reported. Another project reported that an important partner had reduced its financial support, so there was less money available for food.

2) Fewer personal resources and visitors: another problem connected to unemployment was immigration - many previous participants had left Portugal to seek employment. The crisis saw a significant reduction in the number of visitors at one project since 2012. Because of its remote location, one project suffered from the new motorway tolls, which led to fewer visitors. One project reported that less money for food resulted in fewer people participating.

3) Negative change in attitudes: one project mentioned that “mainly in the year 2013 there was a lot of fear and a lack of confidence in our project”.

Thus, factors related to the crisis, like unemployment and resources (or lack thereof) had both positive and negative impacts on the projects. The low number of respondents and the diversity of answers do not allow analysis of any major trends. It is difficult to say why a factor related to the crisis had a positive impact in one case and a negative in another. Nor can we build a typology of group-specific impacts from the crisis though there has been restructuring of some projects and in some cases even closure. Further research is necessary to find out more about concrete numbers and the relationship to the socio-economic crisis.

There are some connections between the anti-austerity movements and groups of Rede Convergir. At the events “Activar” and “Primaveira Global” organized by anti-austerity groups, we saw groups dedicated to alternative ways of living, e.g. permaculture and transition (Baumgarten 2013b). There were films about transition shown at these events and some of the movements for alternative democracy organized debates on transition and permaculture. The project 270 (<http://projecto270.com/>), related to the issue of permaculture and food sovereignty, sold food at the large demonstrations

that took place in front of the parliament in 2012. Furthermore, there are the projects founded by people belonging to the Indignados movement. During the protests against austerity and for alternative ways of living a lot of new activist groups came into being amongst them the format “public assemblies”. These public assemblies, like for example the “Assembleia de Benfica” and the “Indignados de Lisboa”, organised films and debates and tried to bring people together to talk about politics and become active citizens. These assemblies, created after the occupation of Rossio, a central place in Lisbon, in May 2011, flourished especially in the year 2012. They were a catalyst in the organisation of a second occupation. To join the worldwide celebrations of the first anniversary of the Spanish 15M, a park in Lisbon was occupied for three days. This occupation included a variety of workshops – a great part of them organised by groups dedicated to the search for alternative ways of living. While some assemblies from the beginning started to organise projects - including community gardening, cultural events or courses connected to alternative forms of living - other assemblies started with the main aim of fostering political debate amongst their participants (Baumgarten 2016a). So I was interested in whether the Rede Convergir groups took part in public protests against austerity programmes. Some of the groups analysed are political in the sense of searching for and practicing alternative ways of living. So it is surprising that the great majority of the projects that responded to my questionnaire were not involved in protests against austerity. Only four of all 35 projects that answered said they had participated in anti-austerity protests.<sup>22</sup> As many of the protests, especially in 2013, took place across Portugal (including smaller cities), this lack of participation cannot be explained only by the fact of being located outside the capital. Some of the projects have a self-understanding as “not political projects”, like the one that answered in more detail: “This project is not of a political character. The macro-economic decisions overrun us and we have so much to do to change our backyard before we go demonstrating, spending fuel and saliva on Lisbon”. One project wrote that it introduced policies of austerity on itself, to be more efficient and to work with fewer resources. So, there are a few projects that participated in protests, but a great majority did not protest against austerity in this way. The type of resistance practiced by many of these projects and their self-awareness helps to explain this low level of participation in protest activities. The projects are in great part looking for alternative ways of living outside existing structures of the state and the economy. Their claims are not directed against the government and thus mostly do not resonate with the main claims of the anti-austerity

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<sup>22</sup> One did not answer the question, which is remarkable given the project responsible answered all other questions.

movements (Baumgarten 2013b). Baptista states that there are various lines of ecologist thinking and in some cases it is not clear up to which point these include an opposition the capitalist system (2009, 51). This also corresponds to Forno and Graziano's (2014) typology including alter-consumerist groups that are not primarily anti-capitalist.

## **5. Was there a larger impact of the crisis**

According to the questionnaire and the statistical data from Rede Convergir, there is no doubt that alternative projects have become more important in Portugal during the last decade. My empirical analysis shows that many new projects were founded at the same time as the onset of the economic crisis (2008), while a peak of newly founded organizations emerged in the year when the Troika entered Portugal (2011). This phase was also accompanied by a wave of protests and by the creation of new activist groups related to the anti-austerity movement. Furthermore, there were personal contacts between activists, members of resilience projects and groups related to alternative forms of living, producing and consuming in the events organized by anti-austerity groups. Not only did the number of projects listed in Rede Convergir increase during this time, there was also a peak in the number of projects in 2011 and 2012. The number of projects related to resilience is definitely growing in Portugal and networking at the local, national and international level continues with a focus on pragmatic issues, like the exchange of ideas and workshops. I have found no trend towards more alternative forms of resilience or more political engagement. The more politically-oriented groups enjoyed a phase of high activity and growing support in 2012 and 2013, when the anti-austerity movement flourished and Portugal experienced some occupations and an increased number of assemblies (Baumgarten 2013). After 2013 there is no continuation of this trend. Meanwhile, there is a trend towards solidarity-based living in Portugal, but this does not necessarily mean a trend towards alternative resilience or classical political engagement of resilience projects. Furthermore, my literature review demonstrated a growing interest in practices of resilience, like urban gardening, projects related to alternative economy and alternative ways of living and producing - especially permaculture and transition (Gonçalves 2014a; Matos 2012; Pires 2012).

The responses from my interviews give a hint that the crisis - although having a tremendous impact on many people's lives - is not the main reason for creating these kind of projects. There are, however, some factors related to the socio-economic crisis that impacted on the day-to-day work of the groups – positively, but also negatively. Finan-

cial, personal, and time resources as well as people's attitudes are reported to have changed since the beginning of the crisis. The need to respond to urgent basic needs is not an important factor – neither in the description of the aims of the groups and their projects nor in the respondents' description of change since the beginning of the crisis. The ideals of sustainability - of alternative forms of production, quality of food, and the search for more personal systems of distribution and consumption of goods - steer developments in this field. The necessity to create alternatives to meet basic needs was mentioned by only a few projects and was never the main reason for creating and sustaining a project. This corresponds to Gonçalves' (2014b) observations on the practices of urban gardening in Portugal.

All projects of the case study are located at a community level and are connected by networks. This network structure of *Rede Convergir*, like some other networks, are recent phenomena in Portugal. They allow a better exchange of ideas and practices among formerly unconnected projects. But the networks do not yet show classical social movement activities, like campaigns or social policy orientations. They are pragmatic in their desire to improve the functioning of the single projects by workshops and other forms of exchange of ideas and are not primarily dedicated to political organization. A few projects and groups, nonetheless, are strongly related to the social movement sector. Some of them are related to the environmental movement, while others emerged from activities related to the anti-austerity organizations, like the *Indignados* groups. Permaculture and transition have been promoted during the occupations of public space and there are relationships between anarchist groups and projects searching for alternative ways of living and producing. But most of the Portuguese social resilience projects do not belong to this sector and show no ambition to promote political participation, to try to affect policy-making or become part of a social movement.

Thus, we should not only relate the development of these kind of projects to the socio-economic crisis. In particular, the foundation of the projects' international networks and ideas played a greater role. The short time lag between the foundation of the first transition projects abroad and those in Portugal, as well as the high number of foreigners that are involved in permaculture, ecovillages and transition, speak to the large impact of transnational diffusion in the creation of new projects in Portugal. They show similarities with what many consider the main problems of society and these ideas are not necessarily related to the socio-economic crisis and austerity policies (Dawson 2006; Matos 2012; Soares 2012; Haxeltine and Seyfang 2009; Smith 2011).

Given that social resilience is a relatively new field of research, this article can only provide a first exploratory study. It has contributed an initial overview of the main lines of development of these kind of projects within the existing literature concerning social resilience in Portugal. It has also offered some ideas about the possible impacts of the crisis on projects. In comparison with the other contributions in this Special Issue, some Portuguese peculiarities become apparent, like the low degree of alternative forms of resilience while classical social resilience continues to dominate the field. More research is necessary in order to gain profound insights into the groups and projects dedicated to alternative forms of production and living.

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