

Sosterra





Constellation
of the Commons

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Colindres, Cantabria, Spain

Collective's name
**Asociación de Consumo
Crítico Sosterra**

Name of the interviewees
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Who are you and what is your relationship with Sosterra?

Javi: I'm Javi Vázquez, and I've been in Sosterra since its foundation. And now I'm in the group responsible for placing orders with the supplier's products and all that.

Eva: I'm Eva González. I'm also in the ordering group and I've only been here two months, more or less.

Fernando: I'm Fernando Lovato, and I've also been here since the beginning, and I do whatever is left over.

When, where and why was Sosterra born?

Fernando: When? Well physically, as an association in September 2017, but the idea started from way back. We spent a long time planning the organization before it was started in its current form, probably more than two years.

Eva: It was born here, in Colindres, Cantabria. We are in the eastern part of Cantabria and there wasn't a responsible critical consumer group, so we had to fill that niche in this area.

Javi: Why? Like Fernando said, we have been thinking about agroecology, food sovereignty, and all those issues for a long time. And while talking with producers, some producers outside called us and asked us how they could enter the market more in the area. While talking to them we realized that they needed a demand, more customers to consume their products and they were there, but they were all scattered. So we thought that the best way to help them was to create a physical space where all the potential customers could be gathered. That was our motivation to have a physical space, a place to start working on consumer issues, and this was the first project.

Why this name?

Fernando: It came up spontaneously. The first time we gathered, we invited all our contacts to a meeting, because we wanted to work on this, several ideas came out of that meeting.

Javi: It was clear that we had to have a name. In that meeting some names were brought up and others were eliminated and, Sosterra ended up staying because it was related with sustainability ("sostenibilidad" in Spanish), and with that call of help (SOS) from earth that so needs us and that we've so destroyed. And

it was the most well-liked idea, and the catchiest sounding one. It stayed, and that was it, because what's more, of course, it's our definition.

How many members are in Sosterra?

Fernando: Well, as of right now we haven't gotten to 40. The population of the valley is very geographically dispersed, so this town of Colindres, where we are, is kind of a central node. Colindres is a community that has around 10 thousand people. It has two other important communities nearby, Santoña and Laredo at the delta of the Asón river, and then as you go upriver, there are communities that can have one thousand people, two thousand, five thousand, three thousand. I mean the region is extensive, but it has a low population density. So in all the region we're talking about not more than 30.000 people. So there are people in all the towns.

What type of products do you have in this space?

Eva: Well to start, we have our fresh products, which is what Javier and Fernando were saying from local producers, orchard, etc. But then we have canned products. Also dairy products, eggs, natural cosmetic that we have incorporated recently. Pasta, flour, rice, vegetables. A wide range of products, a little bit of everything. The point is to increase according to the needs. If a product is demanded by different people collectively, well, we find providers for that product.

Are you providers for a school or a social center?

Fernando: It's complicated, legislatively you have to compete to get catering contracts. In fact, as of right now in Cantabria the contracting contest is being held by schools and it's complicated to access there. People around here in Cantabria have the idea that they'd like it. It's what we ask for in schools that we know, but it depends on each school's management team to have a contest with a series of conditions, and ecological sustainability can either be a part of those conditions or not when competitors are being judged. There's a lot of work to do. The counsel says that it's open to these things. We know of a school that has done it for years with the same laws and conditions in another part of Cantabria, but it depends on families that take their kids there to eat asking for that, and management teams being open to incorporating it.

For a lot of the collectives and efforts I've been speaking with, 15M has signified a moment of reorganization, of (re) inventing and strengthening. What has signified this moment for Sosterra?

Javi: Yes, I guess so. I'm not sure, but I believe that 15M affected a lot of people in a sense that gave a bit of hope and it communicated that that anger that you carry inside, maybe there's other people that have it. Maybe it makes more sense to organize even after you thought that all was already lost. In the end, 15M became an explosion of complaints, an explosion of anger strong enough to go out to the streets. Which is more necessary. But then, that right to protest also requires us to think about what to do, and what alternatives to propose, if what we have around us now isn't acceptable. Similar to 15M, there have been other micro, minor revolutions that have focused on that. And Sosterra comes up as one of those alternatives. It comes up to say, "Yes, let's organize ourselves, but for what? And how? And when? And in what form? and where?" To respond to these questions and shift toward action, going beyond 15M. Furthermore, we haven't really asked anyone

how much 15M meant to them. That is to say, in the end, we're individual people who believe in a collective project to better our environment and people's lives.

**This is an “association of critical consumption, a collective space where we can rethink what planet and society we are consuming and what types of social environmental alternatives we are capable of putting in practice to change the devastating capitalist dynamic of nature and humanity.”
What legal structure did you choose for this project and why?**

Fernando: Sometimes we give the matter of legality more importance than it really has, and sometimes the discussion is about what legal form to choose to develop an activity. We believe that what matters is to develop the activity, and later we'll find a legal structure to fit that activity into. We do know about other experiences, and in fact we ourselves have almost been proof, where they choose the legal form first and from there, you're already constrained. The association is the most versatile, the easiest, the most even option, it's very simple and it still includes all the instruments of a private company that we're used to. That is, an association can charge, can hire, can come to an agreement, can sign contracts, but it's horizontal and assemblyist, it has access to its own tools for working group control. Although we had started from the idea of a cooperative, setting up a cooperative is really impossible because the legal reality of a cooperative in Cantabria is absolute insanity. That is, it's organized legally in some offices where they've never created a cooperative in their life. Administratively they give people who've never participated in or created a cooperative in their life the responsibility of giving talks on the subject, and those of us who have created cooperatives know how complicated it is and how difficult the administration makes it. So basically from the start we'd given up on the idea of being a work cooperative, in spite of the fact that the idea of a cooperative is very effective in the area of work. So the most versatile legal form for us at the moment continues to be the association.

How are decisions made in this process?

Javi: The decisions inside Sosterra are always made as horizontally as we can or as we know how, although sometimes we don't know how to do it. I don't think we were ever taught to make decisions in an assemblyist way or to organize a group of people without hierarchies or leadership. So these decisions are made within the day-to-day operations that everyone can participate in, and then we have various commissions, various groups in charge of different tasks. Some are perennial positions and they're always there. Others are created for a specific activity, to organize a party or clean a place, they can be more of a one-off. The groups are totally autonomous, they make their own decisions and carry them out. And when they're bigger decisions, they can bring them to other groups. The group above all the other groups is assembly itself, and we celebrate it three times a year. In the assembly, we reveal our accounts with complete transparency, we account for everything, what needs we've had, all our expenses, all our income. The groups, the committees, discuss their challenges and what they've done and then, collectively, we decide what our objectives for the upcoming trimester will be, and what activities we'll do to complete them. And then we come back from the general things to the specifics and redistribute various tasks every assembly, to every little committee, and they carry them out. We actually have an ordering committee that's supervised by the treasury and accounting team, which is another kind of independent group that supervises things and tells us how the accounts are going. Then there's another group that's in charge of having the company store more or less outlined. There's been one or two committees in

charge of internal communications and knowing every member's perspective and what they're aware of. And another committee for external communications to help us figure out what vision of the association we want to present to the public. Then there are more occasional committees like, for example, preparing a one-year anniversary party. There are people in charge of all these activities, and once the party ends, the committee will disappear. That's more or less how we operate.

Are there people working in a salaried capacity in this process?

Eva: Not at the moment, the idea is that there could be a person hired. But well, they still haven't given us the numbers to hire someone for a partial job, even a starting salary. So all the work being done at Sosterra currently is volunteer. We, the members, are the ones who carry out the various tasks in the time we have available, the commitments we can make, etc. Participation is open to all the members, but at the moment it's all volunteer.

Fernando: In any case, I would emphasize that the project has to generate work. In fact, we think that is essential to generate jobs. The same way a bank, to manage people's money, gives jobs to certain people, that has to be exactly the same, or the project will have failed. This isn't born for our leisure to be implemented in a way that allows us to sleep at nights, from an ethical point of view. Transforming reality has to be remunerated work. Otherwise, we won't have accomplished it and we will have to do it in another way.

What does it mean “work” for Sosterra? What labor philosophy do you want to practice?

Fernando: Surely Javi can say it much better than me, but the concept can't be transferred to the concept of salaried work that we have in capitalist circles that we move in. Here, the way we work has to be different. We will probably have to invent it; Javi is an ideologist in this aspect, and the way we engage with organizations and even the way people are paid, because we use community currency. I'm not sure if we already have an idea about all of this, but this is where we'll have to start exploring.

Javi: First, the concept of work would have to be separated from employment because all of us work inside Sosterra. That is, when it's done through activism, it's going to be work. And that work will always be essential. It would be impossible for there to be one person with contracted employment and income and the rest of the people just ignore it, because Sosterra would lose a large part of its essence. There will come a point, as Fernando said, where we need to hire someone for their contribution, but we need for there to be an economically sustainable alternative for the other participants too; that is to say, we need to generate enough income to provide a decent living for our members. So, there's going to be employment. In that sense, I think that we do have in mind the idea of a cooperative of member-workers, and all of that is easy enough in that everyone agrees and they'll decide on it in the assembly, once the numbers allow it. But in parallel, the work is going to continue, and the people will be able to keep working, participating, and collaborating as much as they can and want to.

From Sosterra, you work in the implementation of a “social economy.” Can you explain this concept (“social economy”) and how is it related to the model of sustainable life that you're exploring?

Javi: For five years, we've also worked in this territory in an exchange network, and, working on the same topics of sustainable life and so on, we believed that the economy was largely responsible for a lot of consequences that we didn't like and saw in our surroundings. Then a group of us gathered and decided to create an exchange network. That is to say, a group of people coordinated in a network to assign values to various goods, services, and knowledges that they had without using the euro to mediate, taking for granted that the euro was basically responsible for all of this. From there, looking at other experiences, always copying, trying to adapt them, improving, modifying, adding, subtracting, creating our own exchange network. An exchange network whose key tool is community currency, that is to say, currency created by the people who shaped it within the economic sovereignty that we wanted, giving it the value that we wanted. In this network, the people offer their goods, their services, and they make relationships and they pay for these goods or services, either 100% in community currency or combined with a euro cost according to the situation. All of this was cultivated, it blossomed, and it grew into a network of up to 140 people in the space where we lived, which is very spread out, very rural and with a low population as far as nuclei of population. And right now, what we've done is incorporate this tool into the various projects that have been born around the exchange network. This has a powerful potential and we see it as such, and it has other difficulties and other challenges that we also internalize. There are people who don't have economic income and they can pay for things directly in community currency, or there are people who sell their services and they don't have anywhere to spend those "robles," which is what we call our currency, and they spend them here. Then at the same time, we're trying to close the circle by looking for providers who accept community currency. We have providers of garden produce and other goods who sell their products to us partly for community currency. In that way, one of the community currency's functions is to fix the wealth in one area. So the circulation of money stays within our region.

What does critical consumerism mean to Sosterra?

Fernando: Good question. Let's see, maybe what best encapsulates the world we live in today is the act of consumption. We can't live without being a consumer; it's at the center of our existence. Expending and consuming is very easy to do. You can take part in the consumption process as young as one year old and as old as 99; you can consume in any way, because there are an infinite number of channels that reach you with the sole objective of selling you something, and your life is sometimes simpler and happier if you do consume, so it's about incorporating a critical lens in this form of life. Consumerism is a form of life, is it one we've chosen? Can we do it in a different way? What does merely living, which is to say consuming, imply for other people who aren't you yourself? Looking farther than your own navel, what happens what happens when you buy a certain product in a certain place? Do you know what happens? Do you know what's behind it? Do you know who produced it? Do you know what channels it went through to get here? Do you know whose hard work is letting you enjoy a sale? Behind all that, independent of the service or product that you buy, if you dedicate a little time to reflection and if you start to discuss this with other people and share your knowledge, maybe you'll have an easier time changing the way you consume than you would if you had to think it all through alone in your house. So, one of Sosterra's goals was the all of the paths to critical consumption that we have all taken in the solitude of our own homes, through our own reflections, can be shared as prototypes for others, like an informational highway. So that we don't have to reproduce that tedious path individually, over a long period of time, through many websites, books, conversations just to finally

reach the same conclusions. All these paths together, surely, will help us make the journey shorter for those who haven't yet dared to start it. We'll be able to teach it in a more efficient way, because it's easier for all of us to do this work together. And among all of us, we'll also learn things from each other, generate those moments of intersection that lead you to areas you hadn't thought of. More or less, that's the goal.

Is Sosterra's paper on "critical consumerism" linked to the idea of "prosumers"?

Fernando: Yes and no. The thing is that not everyone has to do everything. We're clear on the fact that we're consumers who want fresh products from the garden, but we don't have our own terrain, nor do many of us know how to farm, and maybe we don't have the resources to learn, but we do know how to do other things. That is to say, there's no reason for everyone to have to do everything themselves. It's not so much about aiming for autarky but rather working to share and look for connections in a network. There isn't really a separation of jobs in as specific a way as there is in the system, but collaborative work is the base that we can build much more equal relationships around. So, in that sense, yes. But we aren't going to be able to do everything, that is to say, being a consumer capable of producing their own material and fulfilling their own needs is kind of complicated in the twenty first century.

Javi: Especially since Sosterra moves in very small circles. The prosumers model makes more sense when we work together as a larger group, for example as a regional effort. That's where we can truly establish important networks with many people producing goods for the network and many others consuming from that network. We need a strong enough critical mass to really be able to go to each individual person and see what they can contribute to the rest and what they can get from their community in turn, so that these circuits function and flow. This is one of the reasons we put so much emphasis on working in a network and on sharing this collective intelligence with other similar collectives.

Can you explain what sustainability and living a sustainable life mean to Sosterra?

Eva: Of course, when we are talking about sustainability, for example, about environmental products, we mean that said product doesn't contain any insecticides or herbicides. But when we want to go a bit further, sustainability doesn't only mean not using pesticides that are harmful for the environment, but it also means knowing where these products are coming from. If it comes from Brazil is it sustainable? Is it sustainable for us to buy products in the grocery store that come from Brazil, which is thousands of kilometers away? Sustainability is also taking into account the CO2 emissions used in order to transport those products, and in the end that matters too. It's not just about how the products were produced but also where they come from. That's kind of the idea.

Javi: A sustainable life, or even sustainability of life, because in addition to all of the environmental variables there are many having to do with human relations and many of them have to do with relationships of trust. We as consumers try to consider the agriculturists, the farmers, and how their labor is managed. On another level, if we're talking about ethical finances, we have to think, what's behind this? What level of environmental or human exploitation is there? With our consumption, we should be able to sustain lives that are worth living, that are dignified. So, what is sustainability of life? Well, it has to do with that, that generation after generation we're not endangering our fields, our terrain, or our hopes and

dreams. We have to generate better conditions for our children on a global scale.

Do you bring up the concept of “social ecology” when talking about your labor?

Fernando: There's a lot of talk. I don't know if it makes us afraid or if we just reject that much talk, but one of our goals has always been to move forward and take action. There are times where we mask inaction with big powerful words. So, really, are we going to be able to do it? There's a lot of talk. For example, right now it's very 'in' to talk about resilience, but can we really live with a different paradigm than the one that's been implanted in us by capitalism and patriarchy? Are we capable, or not? Have we tried? How far have we gotten? Beyond just the talk and the words that get carried away with the wind, what's our reality? Reality is very different and it's really complicated to bring this talk and these concepts to life, because we and all of our neighbors are all different, and we don't all have the same baggage and we don't all have the same goals, and a sustainable form of relationships isn't that easy. Changing the paradigm means changing the game from start to finish, and it's not always understandable to everyone. They don't understand us or we don't make ourselves understood, or we don't fit in their lives, and that's a kind of important work going beyond all this. And you have to move a lot of ground to get there, you have to talk and eat with a lot of people so that you can start to form these fundamental networks of trust that Javi was talking about to be able to be sure that they hear you, or even to be able to listen to them. Because there are times when people come to this fairly rural environment from afar, people who are used to the urban sphere, who have read a lot of books, and they come and teach us what our futures are. And sometimes, it's not like that. So practice will bring us to theory. In spite of the fact that we do have references, we need to build this further than defining it in a paragraph.

Javi: Eventually I know that we will reach some conclusions about the foundations of social ecology, of the environmental anarchists, if all of that fits within the roads of Sosterra. But we're very clear that we were not born to be some academic's project or theory, but to make this a real practice to see if this all makes sense or not. It's true that in academic debates there are these same ideas or very similar ones, but we can't all agree in theory and move on to practice. We should begin with practice, and then from there extract one theory or another, or not at all.

Thinking of Sosterra's practices, you describe your work on your website as the following: “Constructing responsible and sustainable alternatives, reclaiming our rights, carrying out our obligations, without giving up on a combative consumerism that denounces and transforms the impacts of our way of life in towns and cities.” What rights and obligations are you referring to when you state this?

Javi: Yes, this has to do with critical consumerism. When we talk about the rights and obligations they've taken from us, the ones we need to demand or reform, we mean to say that all people are consumers, and as such, should have the right to know what they are consuming and to choose what they want to consume, and we need to fight for this right. We have the right to decide if our community plants a crop or not, even if we don't consume that crop; to decide if the stockbreeding currently in operation here is the kind we want. These rights have been taken away from us, people in other spheres decide these matters now, and it affects us directly. We have a right to decide if they're going to exploit our land through fracking or whatever it may be. These rights aren't respected, they've been taken away from us and we've given them up as lost. And of course, every right comes with an obligation.

So, it's really important to figure out what commitments we're willing to make in order to, from now on, demand those rights and those obligations. And that's what we were talking about before regarding critical consumerism, that is, we're all consumers and we know that consumption is a tool of capitalism to dominate us, and we should reclaim it for ourselves. Consumption is ours, we decide among ourselves what to consume and at the same time what commitments to make.

Fernando: To add on to that, between this village of Colindres and Laredo is a straight road. It's a road with all the grocery store and food chains that you can imagine. So you have the right to decide what grocery store you want to go in. I have all the right in the world to choose to either go left or go right or three streets down to find the same product and so on, but also in Sosterra we have always known that we don't just want to stick to nutrition. It's not just about eating; we have to consume in all aspects/scopes.

Can you tell us about the relationship Sosterra maintains with the institutions and under what conditions this “relationship” becomes important?

Fernando: We haven't looked into that relationship, but at the core of Sosterra there isn't an expectation of getting institutional support to survive. We have to endure without institutional support. As self-managed organization, we don't aim to be funded by institutional sources, but we are not antagonistic either. I mean, we have always been committed to complying with the law, we don't want our site to be shut down, so we've always followed the rules. We are a consumer association, and it took eight months for us to get accredited by the Administration, even though we had all the necessary paperwork. It's the same with our City Council, we're ready, so when the municipal officers get here (as a matter of fact, they've already been here), we can show them legal documentation to prove that our office complies with the rules, and that what we do is legal. Furthermore, administratively speaking, they just understand a consumer association from a legal point of view, as an association that defends basic consumer rights, for example when a consumer claims an incorrect invoice. They don't understand that we're different. At the beginning we had a lot of problems to get accreditation, because we are a consumer association, but we are not only that, and that's why they were confused when it came to identifying and accrediting us. Which is really not our problem. This being said, if we want to apply for a subsidy or grant for our activities, we have to abide by their rules, and we will decide in assembly if we want to do so or not. And regarding the collaboration with the City Council, we have tried not to offend each other; if they want to collaborate with us, great. For example, in regard to a big party that we're organizing, we'll try to let them know what we're going to do, and if they want to work with us, great, but without jeopardizing our future possibility of receiving funding. In other words, we don't want to develop the kind of relationship with the Administration where, due to money changing hands, we could be influenced when it's time to make decisions. I don't believe that the assembly is ever going to go down that road. I don't want to go ahead of myself, but I don't think it's in our DNA to be financially sustained by the Administration.

Javi: We understand that what is public belongs to all citizens, so it's ours as well, and therefore we don't consider the Administration our enemy. But up until now, we haven't received a single Euro from any Institution, and we're doing all right. We'll see what happens in the future, but I'm sure, anyhow, that we will still be doing okay.

Fernando: Yes, as a matter of fact, we have always been commended by the Administration (and by public Institutions).

They think there should be more associations like ours.

Would you say that Sosterra is in a way an informal educational project?

Javi: Informal education... Let's say that our society needs to participate in serious processes of unlearning, I mean, we are at a point where it's urgent to unlearn, to get rid of all those visions, all those methodologies that, historically, the capitalist system has imposed on us. Only then will we be able to start functioning, to start imagining, to start developing new alternatives. We believe that Sosterra has an important role to play in that process, because we're located in a town where there are no other options and alternatives like ours, and nobody really knows what this association is. People come in and ask who we are, what kind of organization we are, and when we explain who we are to them, we're already participating in informal education. Consequently, it's impossible not to be part of this unlearning process. Maybe we should take on the responsibility of being part of informal education, perhaps we should go to schools, universities, and groups of civic activism to speak about social economy. This goal seems too ambitious for us right now, but we've talked about this possibility frequently, we've noticed the need for it. A house needs a good foundation, and there's no doubt that education is the cornerstone of this project. And, even if we don't want to be, we are part of it.

Fernando: I think that's also going to depend on the number of people that are able to come together because it's demonstrating that in learning about Sosterra, every person who comes through gets new information to add to their academic 'backpack.' So right now we have a group that comes to do street theater to spread Sosterra's ideas and share them with neighbors, because right now we believe that one of the principal problems we have is that this town doesn't know what to make of what we do, and the surrounding population, the people who could walk over here, doesn't even know who we are or what we do or where we are. And spontaneously, some of our members have decided to put together a street theatre performance to communicate this. Well, as long as we're able to come together and generate a critical mass, surely this will keep going.

Javi: One of the greatest treasures we have within the community of Sosterra is precisely what Fernando says, that each person has a huge quantity of knowledge and experiences, and once you trust and value them for who they are, they are capable of doing wonders. The locale itself was made with the work of everyone's hands; there are ideas that wouldn't have occurred to those of us here at the beginning, and suddenly you see that all the people have developed their ideas and transformed them into something infinitely more precious or even more effective, and that's the potential that horizontality gives you, that facilitating easy participation gives you. Therefore, the process of unlearning and from informal education, it's not only something to be directed outward, it ends up also influencing those of us within the association. We are accustomed to hierarchical structures where one commands and the others obey, that's why when you're able to delegate and trust in the people around you, very cool things happen.

What are the challenges of Sosterra?

Fernando: First, just making it here. I don't think we're certain that what we do can be transferred in a simple way to normal people, to our neighbors. It's complicated.

Eva: That might be the most important on the side of the project's survival, which in the end is a project with a lot of hope and a lot of work behind it, but if we want to survive we're going to have to reach those people. Then, from there, projects like a party to make us more known in a festive environment, doing activities so that people come and see it, and making it all more simple, because another part of our work for the spirit of critical consumption is the riddle of how to not just get people to come and see what's going on, but get them to change their routines and their dynamics. Maybe someone goes to the supermarket on Saturdays, they buy the whole week's food, but what we're proposing is different. That is, we're not open, you can't come here on a Saturday. So you have to plan things out more to be a critical consumer. You have to want your entire consumption process to be different, responsible. So you have to make time every week to shop here, and just for that inconvenience, many people don't come here. It's not just getting people to come. It's getting them to come and convincing them that this is better because, in the end, it's better for our home, for the earth we all live in. What future do we want to give our children? How do we want to leave the earth in three generations, with all the problems of drought, climate change, etc? That's really the challenging point for me and from there, I think that for Sosterra, being able to survive means reaching more people and expanding our ranks.

Fernando: And that's tied to the economic sphere, which is to say we need to be able to pay for what we sell our members, we need to maintain the economic cycle and have the place full of products and constantly look for more ideal products, and that requires a cycle based on sales, on consumption. But a logical consumption based on what you need. It's not about a few people consuming a lot, it's about having a lot of people consuming just enough for each of their family units. We have units of just one person and of bigger families, but they only have to consume what they need. And the foundation of this economy is important to be able to generate the necessary jobs for this to work, to make it more logical. Those are important challenges. This has to be sustainable from an economic point of view as well because if not, the project doesn't make sense.

Thinking about the crisis of trust in which we are living as a society and in the necessity of building relations of trust to set up communities that sustain themselves and sustain us and serve as references for others, how does Sosterra knit these bonds of trust?

Fernando: We're working on it, it's not achieved yet, precisely because of what you're saying, relationships aren't easy. Making the effort to put ourselves in the producer's shoes, knowing they have it really hard. All the weight falls on them. When things go badly, they have to invest, they have to work to secure a harvest and this harvest may or may not be what we want to buy. What's more, an ecological producer in this little area we have here has to be a marketer as well as a farmer. That is, they have to dedicate themselves to sales and to production. And furthermore, they have to generate their own channels, because there aren't formulas for how to sell eco-friendly garden produce. There's a market, but it's very minimally structured and lacks any kind of support. So they have it really hard. Their experiences have normally been bad. That is to say, when they've made contact or tried to cooperativize their processes, to collaborate, it's normally ended badly, not because of personal relationships, although that's another aspect, but because in the end the idea hasn't been economically viable, because there's not a real market, because there's not sufficient production throughout the year, because the consumers are very demanding since we come from a system where you have to be an activist to buy a product that's not the one we're

used to buying. You have to do that kind of reflection. So they're burned out and frustrated. Of course, when we come in with this discourse of critical consumerism, they don't believe it. We'd been working with them for a long time before coming up with that idea. In fact, the idea came partly from working with them. And the truth is, I'd say we're still taking the first steps. From our point of view, we have problems because we're living somewhere production is seasonal; you can't grow products in the winter, only in the summer. In the summer a lot of food is produced, in the winter nothing is, so we're just forced to hibernate and stick ourselves in a cave and eat only in the summer. So that also needs to change. But of course, that means changing their form of work, their crops, etc. But to work in this way, you have to guarantee that the demand in the winter will be the same, and will maintain itself as well as the demand in the summer. It's pretty complicated and for us, we're still just starting. And I'd say that we've made it there with some, we've managed to propose things and even plan what we're going to eat in the winter so that they plant it now. We're working on planning and even planting to be able to make preserves so that in the winter we can eat the surplus or the specially planted produce. That is, we're inventing ourselves a different formula than just consuming directly from the garden so that we can all maintain the sustainability of this relationship. We don't fit in quite so well with others' models of production, so for the ones who have worked more on their commercialization, we're not such an attractive option because we don't have sales as guaranteed, because we're just a small group. That's where we need to build the demand. So I think it's almost all pending work to do. We have many ideas.

Javi: Trust, for us, it's not just a key thing, it's everything. That is, when we choose providers, there are three criteria. One is proximity -- we understand that the closer the products are produced, the better. Another is environmental; everything we have is eco-friendly, and we prioritize reusable packaging over non-reusable. And then there's the social; we look for small entities, simple ones, who need us as much as we need them; other horizontal, self-managed initiatives. But over all that, what drives us to reject or accept a provider is trust. We look for initiatives without intermediaries. We need to know who's behind it all, know the stories behind the providers and the products so that they transmit to us the passion, the love that they have for their day to day work, so that we can in turn share this with our members. So, everything is based in trust. When an initiative doesn't offer us that trust, we disregard them immediately. We talk with them and many times, those who are able to, visit. It's all completely sustained through trust. We need to translate it to the people who come to buy things. When we come to buy, they ask us to put down some money and, of course, we're asking a lot already, that's why we have to offer that trust and make people feel that it's **their** market. It's important that people can contribute, that they can say what they like, that they can choose what producers to collaborate with, that economic needs aren't a motive for entering or not. We also need to establish a space here where people feel at ease. We can only work under that trust.

Does Sosterra work in networks with other collectives or social employers? What relation do you have with Ecologistas en Acción or with eco-social employers such as ARGOS?

Javi: Yes, for us working in networks is key. In fact, in our relationships with institutions, we've sometimes been intermediaries between providers. For example, here we offer the services of the La Vorágine bookstore, and we've also helped other institutions who have asked for them to get these services. This kind of adding together our combined forces to multiply our strength and impact -- "adding to multiply" -- has

been a mantra at Sosterra. Being a central node of various alternative initiatives is a kind of capital. Practically every week, we talk with similar initiatives who want to combine forces with us, whether it's to sell their products, or to see where we can collaborate on our common needs to look for a collective way to address them.

Fernando: We're part of Solabria (<http://www.solabria.es/>), which is the cooperative marketing green energy en Cantabria; we're part of La Voragine (<https://lavoragine.net>); we're part of Fiare (<https://www.fiarebancaetica.coop>) as well, this ethical bank project that still doesn't have a headquarters in Cantabria and we're pushing to see if we can get a headquarters in Cantabria.

Javi: We are part of telecommunications ethics.

Fernando: Yes, telecommunications ethics, there's one with headquarters in Catalonia. We are part of Somos Conexión <https://somosconexion.coop/>. We only consume what we pay for, and we have to be a node not just of what works in territories close to us, but initiatives doing different things, too.

Javi: And then there's social inclusion companies, like Brumas (<http://www.brumas.org>), the Cantabrian Association for the Fight against Unemployment, like Dínamo (<http://s46114779.mialojamineto.es/?v=04c19fale772>), a social and laboural inclusion project belonging to the Asociación Ciudadana Cántabra Anti-Sida (Cantabrian Citizen's Anti-AIDS Association, ACCAS in its Spanish initials). Here we have their products and we offer their services and try to support them. For example, if one entity organizes a market, the others go too. Here in Cantabria we do feel that there's a lot to do, and at the same time, that gives us a great opportunity to do things differently, and that's what we're working on within the framework of the social economy.

Fernando: A challenge.

Taking into account the climate of political discontent and insecurity in which we live, can you tell us how you sustain hope as a motivating 'motor' in Sosterra?

Eva: I think it's about talking about utopias, but in the sense of believing that things can be done another way, regardless of what the majority of people are doing or what's happening in the majority of the world. The majority is the majority, but you can start out being a minority and then these projects start to develop and reproduce themselves; we're not the only project that's arisen. I, in fact, I didn't come up with this but it was part of my philosophy, I think it's essential for projects like these to emerge in order to bring together people who maybe wouldn't dare to take the first step, to start something like this. So you stand up, thinking about how you're a part of something beautiful. You find yourself with people who more or less think like you, which is also important because in the end, if you're not surrounded by people suggesting things you agree with, or you're talking about something that seems so vital to you and it's all Greek to the people around you, you lose hope. So that's a motivator. I'd say that it's really motivating to form part of a collective like this.

Fernando: Yes, because giving something a "like" on Facebook isn't enough for some people. Talking heatedly in the bar about the solution of the world's problems isn't enough for some people either. So in spite of the fact that we could go wrong and that we'll probably fail, at least we'll have tried. We've done something. It's about the praxis, and maybe if we're intelligent enough, we'll learn something from it.

What does growth mean for Sosterra?

Javi: To resist. In the end, our side of the fight will always have the most to lose. Therefore, staying alive is growth. Really we've spent eight months like this and it's been a tremendous growth, much more than we'd hoped for. There are moments when the fight is more in the trenches, others when it's been more exposed in close quarters. But just to stay here and keep up hope; to see our community, as Eva was saying; to realize that this feeling of solitude that sometimes invades you is shared, and that the search for your goals is something in common, and to find yourself with people and discover that this is as important for the others as it is for you, and that the movement is growing. It's not so much a question of numbers as, above all, hope and drive. As long as you have that, all of this is maintained and time passes and you see that it's viable and possible and it's not absurd to believe that it's worth trying.

Eva: And I also believe it's a question of conscience. To grow also means growing in conscientiousness. It's not about preaching but rather talking about the things you can do in another way and also being true to your own conscience, which is also very important because depending on how you are, you can't do things as you see others doing them because it doesn't fit with your philosophy. So, saying that things aren't okay is a form of growth, spreading the idea that you can do things another way.

Fernando: We've even grown ourselves, maybe, I don't know.