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(Non)Environmental Alternative Action Organizations under the Impacts of the Global Financial Crisis: A Comparative European Perspective

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Abstract: Hard economic times have been considered obstacles for environmental activism by many environmental scholars, yet works, mostly based on case studies, on alternative action organizations (AAOs) during times of increasing livelihood vulnerability show considerable environmental activism. We explain this inconsistency by arguing that AAOs mobilizing at times of crisis opt for direct action, using strategies of citizens' solidarity initiatives centering on meeting basic needs and sustainability goals and thereby carry on the environmental claim-making in a new way. To this end, we compare environmental AAOs (EAAOs) with non-environmental ones using a cross-national dataset of 4157 hubs-retrieved AAOs active during the economic crisis (2007–2016), in France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. Given that EAAOs constitute more than one-third of all AAOs, it is clear that environmental protection or sustainable development are not neglected even at times of economic hardships. Instead, the crisis provides an opportunity to broaden the scope of action for existing organizations that can adopt sustainability activities focusing on alternative practices and lifestyles, improving societal resilience. We further show that EAAOs tend to be informal and, to an extent, more concentrated on contention and protests than non-environmental organizations.

Keywords: alternative action organizations; environmental activism; solidarity; Europe; crisis; sustainability; alternative consumerism; alternative lifestyles; action organization analysis



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1. Introduction

Times of economic crises have been considered as periods of decreasing environmental concern and initiatives by many scholars [1] but also as periods of humanitarian crises [2]. Political institutions have been delaying environmental compliance in Europe and the US, as reflected in delays in auctioning of CO₂ certificates in the EU-emissions trading system or the CO₂ limits on automobiles, as well as in “midnight regulations relaxing environmental legislation” [3–5]. Simultaneously, civil society and citizens' environmental concerns for the crisis period show a notable decrease [6,7]. Development issues absorb environmental NGO activities with the environment becoming a non-central issue at times of economic downturns. The environment has played a very marginal role in the national elections as the public is more concerned about austerity policies and cuts in government expenditures [8], or welfare retrenchment and the economic crisis [5]. Only recently, scholars have shown how even in times of crises citizens' pro-environmental attitudes can remain important [9]. Furthermore, the latest youth protests for climate justice [10,11] suggest that environmental activism might be increasing regardless of other crises.

Nevertheless, within this context, as well as subsequent crises that followed the economic crisis—the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 and the pan-syndemic of 2019 [12], recent work on the environmental movement points to their heterogeneity, their ability to

profoundly transform themselves and to their increasing institutionalization [13]. Furthermore, scholars studying alternative solidarity activism, have suggested that changes have been taking place and that there is significant environmental activism, especially when looking at mutual-help and bottom-up grassroots actions which offer alternatives to the mainstream capitalist economy [14–18]. There have been many examples of environment related direct action [19–21] and everyday activism [22–24], both before and during the past decade of crises (e.g., global financial, Eurozone, refugee, political, and climate crises). Although scholars note that environmental movements have moved beyond nature and conservation, to alternative consumption, extractivism, and climate justice [13], there are only few comparative empirical studies which actually demonstrate this change.

We address these different trends in the literature and argue that this period of ever-increasing inequalities [25] points to the need of refining analytical tools to bring to surface facets of alternative environmental activism that have received limited attention thus far [26]. We complement the existing studies related to climate justice, green backlash, and global environmental justice [14,27–29] by centering on a field of alternative action initiatives organized to confront hard economic times [17].

Neither the environmental nor the solidarity/social innovation strands of the literature offer a comparative systematic account of alternative environment-related solidarity organizations during hard times, across different national settings. This would be, however, important as solidarity actions developed during such times could also be useful for hard times such as during the health and climate crises, or in cases of natural or man-made disasters. We therefore aim to contribute by addressing this gap with empirical data from a comparative European Commission project, shedding light on a less visible field of environmental activism engaged in participatory solidarity initiatives reflecting economic, environmental as well as a socio-political transformative capacity, mostly at the local level.

More specifically, we analyze a cross national database built on Action Organization Analysis [30] and offer a descriptive, exploratory account comparing Environmental versus Non-environmental AAOs for nine European countries, during the period of the economic crisis (2007–2015). The systematic analysis offers a documented account of the major organizational characteristics, their aims as well as the strategies and actions they used to mitigate the risks and manage the vulnerabilities of the global economic crisis of 2007. It will also illustrate to what extent AAOs address environmental concerns and can thereby be considered part of the environmental movement. The discussion will also address the implications of the findings for AAOs' resilience when examining the impacts of the economic crisis.

2. Literature Review: Solidarity and Environmental Activism during Hard Times

Scholars of environmental activism in European settings adopt diverse theoretical and conceptual perspectives, as revealed in a multi-faceted literature. However, views appear to converge when defining the environmental movement [31–33] and approximate Charles Tilly's durable definition of social movements, as 'sustained challenges to power-holders in the name of interested populations, which appear in the form of professional movements, ad hoc community-based, or specialized movements, and communitarian, unspecialized movements, that give rise to a new community' [34] p. 18. Three basic forms of the environmental movement are acknowledged: formal environmental movement organizations; grassroots, community-linked groups; and radical, highly committed ecological groups. Alternative definitions of the environmental movement, adhering to European theoretical traditions have been proposed [35], following Mario Diani's definition of social movements (including environmental ones) as 'networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and organizations, engaged in a political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared identity' [13,34]. For others [36], collective identities, or narrative constructions which enable controlling the boundaries of a network of actors, are critical in the study of the environmental movement.

In terms of the succeeding waves of environmentalism [32] and types of environmental organizations involved, a simplified typology reveals a succession of conservationism, environmentalism and ecologism [37]. Other scholars have also included grassroots environmental movements [28,38–40]. Although useful, this categorization and periodization only rarely takes into account the significant changes in society, particularly the various critical moments, crises (e.g., global financial, climate crises), natural or manmade disasters or increasing inequalities [41,42]. This points to the need of refining analytical tools to bring to surface facets of environmental activism that have received limited attention [13,26]. Thus, we aim to offer a comparative account of environmental and nonenvironmental AAOs. The comparative findings will strengthen our knowledge on alternative forms of action and will thereby contribute towards our understanding of the ways in which ad hoc citizen initiatives surface as collective resilience organizing to cope with the crisis.

Diverse repertoires of citizens' direct solidarity actions and aims, with economic as well as a socio-political transformative capacity, appear usually during hard times as alternatives to the mainstream/dominant capitalist economy, or as initiatives aiming at building autonomous communities [17]. AAOs usually flourish during hard economic times marked by austerity policies, multiple, compound inequalities, governance problems, the weakening of social policies, as well as the depletion of labor and social welfare rights [19,20]. AAOs range from the more reformist third sector organizations, to social solidarity economy, critical geographies and post-capitalist ones [17].

Such initiatives have been studied as social innovation [43], social, human, and solidarity economy [44], political consumer oriented sustainable community movement organizations [15], communitarian forms of political consumerism [45], alternative economic practices [46], de-growth [47], alternative geographies [48], and post-capitalist and anarchist initiatives [48,49]. However, more recently these are bought under one umbrella term-AAO to embrace the variety of alternative forms of resilience [17,30]. The strategies of AAOs vary, but usually involve diverse repertoires of citizens' direct solidarity actions.

Even though such organizations are discussed in the recent literature of sustainability [50,51], there is a lack of systematic comparative analyses documenting the extent to which these organizations are environmentally active in European countries or how these may promote resilience in the context of the crisis. It has been shown that those South European countries harder hit by the crisis—Greece and Spain—witnessed higher peaks in newly created alternative organizations and groups, while at the same time, their initiatives tended to be organized more frequently by informal and protest groups compared to those in the other countries [19,52,53]. According to the theories and prior research relating the economic crisis to the declining support for environmentalism [7], one would also expect that in such countries AAOs would not be as concerned for the environment as those in the countries least affected by the economic crisis (e.g., Germany or Sweden). Similarly, one would expect that the AAOs established at times of crises are less, or differently focused on the environment.

In addition to the crisis, other contextual factors might also affect the development of environmental AAOs. In particular, historical conditions influence the organizational formations, resources and strength or effectiveness of the environmental organizations and movements in specific countries. On one hand, the presence of many strong environmental movements refers to the presence of open opportunity structures for such movements and might facilitate the mobilization or organizing of environment related AAOs. On the other hand, the existing organizations might also cover the “problem areas” the AAOs would work in and this might also lead to a smaller number of AAOs.

The nine countries in this study had a varying strength of (professionally oriented) environmental social movements in the late 70s and 80s. For example, Germany and Switzerland could be considered very strong, while Sweden, Spain, and France as medium strong; the UK, Italy, and Greece were seen as having relatively weaker overall strength of environmental social movement mobilization [54]. Prior studies rarely focus on East European countries such as Poland, which we have included in the analysis. It could be

assumed that during the 70s and 80s the environmental movement in Poland was also under formation [55].

More importantly, this literature centers its attention to formal, more professional environmental social movement organizations emerging under different opportunities and national historical conditions affecting their growth. However, other works point out the importance of community-based [34] more informal, grassroots, citizen-consumer environmental movements appearing under different historical context, usually with more limited resources, in less resourced regions, as seen in the environmental justice, or alternative action literature [14,16,28,39,56]. Considering that the constituencies of AAOs tend to be citizen-consumers, small enterprises, local communities, and vulnerable groups, i.e., groups close to the constituencies of social movement organizations [57], it is likely that environmental AAOs are also rather similar to environmental social movement organizations in respect to their constituencies.

Furthermore, we expect that environmental AAOs are more protest oriented compared to those not focused on the environment, and opt for bottom-up rather than top-down solidarity approaches. This is similar to what is suggested by Lorenzini [58], who refers to the importance of political consumerism, lifestyle politics, food activism, and alternative lifestyles in the environmental movement. She considers forms of action such as citizens buying goods and services following their ideological views, alternatives to the mainstream market (e.g., fair trade goods, organic food), but also engaging in community-supported agriculture to be more far-reaching and part of the environmental movement. Many of such activities are typical for AAOs [17]. There probably will be cross-national variations, but the variation of major constituency groups of AAOs is rather related to the solidarity orientation of the organization than to country characteristics [57].

In addition, based on work by de Moor and colleagues [21] using ethnographic case studies, the post-political context in which these organizations operate has been found to lead to depoliticization; yet, activists adopt strategies to maximize their political impact. For Moor et al., the political character or degree of (de)politicization of EAAOs could be evaluated by focusing on three dimensions of the “political”: (1) motivations or goals of the movement (challenge existing capitalist order), (2) activists’ views on agonism, and (3) movement strategies (the more contentious, the more political). Since our EAAOs almost by definition include organizations that aim to promote alternative economic and noneconomic practices, it is reasonable to evaluate only their third dimension of “political”—the degree of contentiousness or protest orientation. We propose therefore that EAAOs organize direct collective actions, at times combined with contentious actions, both leading to empowerment and common goals, which are important for collective resilience [59–61]. It was also proposed that the activities of AAOs reflect the wide repertoire of organizations forming Alternative Forms of Resilience [17].

3. Materials and Methods

Based on a new approach, Action Organization Analysis (AOA) [30], we have located a universe of the organizations via online directories (hub-websites) of AAO organizational websites for each of the nine countries in our study. AOA has been created in the context of the project “Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences” (LIVEWHAT). Aiming towards a comprehensive and systematic study of AAOs in the context of the economic crisis, the project has developed and applied the method to study alternative initiatives and solidarity practices during the years of the global financial crisis (2007–2015) in France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. Identifying adequate sources which would allow for the mapping and systematic study of AAOs at the national and cross-national level has previously generated challenges for the researchers since these are difficult to locate in sources allowing for systematic empirical research (as in protest event or organizational studies) at the national level.

Retrieving websites from hubs (online directories) allows AOA to avoid the prior limitations in identifying such initiatives which usually include informal grassroots groups in newspapers or conventional archives. It therefore allows for a more comprehensive coverage compared to national newspaper reports or local newspaper reports. AOA offers live updated directories, which are more inclusive of informal as well as formal organizations compared to conventional sources [62]. Hubs incorporate a considerable number of AAO websites, including rural or less resourced groups. In contrast to the more selective focus of other online-based approaches, the hubs-website approach provides large numbers of links on action organizations and an approximate ‘population’ from which randomized and cleaned samples can be drawn, not only for website and AO coding, but also for supplementary online-surveys and qualitative interviews [63,64]. The approximate population was used for drawing a random sample of 500 AAOs from each country; coding the characteristic of the AAOs followed, based on a common Codebook created for the specific study [30,65]. The home-pages of selected AAOs were coded by native speakers during 2016. It should be noted that the AAOs that had a Facebook group but not a webpage, were not included in the dataset.

The selected AAOs had to be active during the recent global economic crisis (2007–2016) and active in any of the following ten main types of alternative solidarity activities:

- basic and urgent needs (related to food, shelter, medical services, clothing, free legal advice and anti-eviction initiatives),
- economy (involving alternative coins, barter clubs, financial support, products and service provision on low prices, fundraising activities, second-hand shops and bazaars),
- energy and environment (protection of the environment or wild life, focus on renewable energy, climate change, anti-carbon, anti-nuclear power, waste management, recycling or animal rights),
- alternative consumption such as producer-consumer actions, community gardens, boycotts and buycotts
- interest group advocacy,
- self-organized spaces,
- culture and education,
- civic media,
- actions for preventing hate crime or
- to stop human trafficking [65].

We note that even though our limited time and resources had not allowed coding EAOs for a longer period (e.g., 2000–2016), unlike a survey, the AOA approach that codes information from the AAO’s organizational website, allows us to analyze EAOs based on their year of establishment and the year of creation of their organizational website. We can therefore trace and illustrate which EAOs were established each year, from 2007 to 2016. We expected fewer organizations in the first years of the crisis and an increasing number from 2009 onwards.

Defining Environmental AAOs

For the purposes of the analysis at hand we have only selected ‘environmentally active’ AAOs which included any of the following environment related solidarity activities: energy and the environment, alternative consumption, food sovereignty, or alternative lifestyles related solidarity activities (at the time of coding, in the past, or planned in the future). Their profile, is very similar to the environmental AAOs described by other scholars [21], that is, they focus on the promotion of “sustainable materialism” [33].

Subsequently, in our dataset of 4157 AAOs, more than one third (35%), that is, 1461 AAOs were labelled as environmental AAOs (EAOs thereafter). While half of these deal with alternative consumption, food sovereignty or alternative lifestyles’ related solidarity activities, 28% focus primarily on energy and environment and the rest (22%) are involved in both of these sustainable activities. More specifically, these energy and environment related solidarity actions involve: protection of environment or wild life

(31%); renewable energy or climate change (13%); anti-carbon or anti-nuclear energy (3%); waste management (14%); and protecting animal rights (7%). The alternative consumption actions primarily include activities such as community agriculture (44%), DIY and “slow food” actions (15%), community gardens (8%), alternative transportation (2%), alternative lifestyle and consumption (15%); building autonomous solutions and de-growth promotion (5%). As our coding procedure allowed coders to code the different types of solidarity activities that were mentioned on the organizational websites, we find that while non-environmental AAOs in general have 2.0 activities on average, EAAOs have 2.7 activities on average. This suggests that these EAAOs are more diverse in their actions. For example, while only 15% of energy and environment related EAAOs use such activities, 10% combine their energy or environment related activities with cultural or education related activities and another 10% use economic solidarity in combination to environmental, or energy related actions. Furthermore, our coders were also able to identify the main solidarity activity for more than 61% of the EAAOs (the respective number of AAOs is 57%). This allows us to report that a significant majority (64%) of EAAOs actually had their primary solidarity action related to energy or environment, alternative consumption or both.

As our dataset also includes the year of foundation of the organization for about 70% of the AAOs and 76% of EAAOs, we find that half of the AAOs in the study were founded since 2005, before the crisis, while the respective year for EAAOs was 2007, when the crisis had just begun. It is also noteworthy, that out of 247 AAOs founded in 2011, when the impacts of the crisis were deeply experienced at the community level, 47% were EAAOs.

An alternative option to the categorization based on solidarity activities would be the use of the AAO's aims stated in its website. About 22% of the AAOs in our total sample and 53% of the EAAOs stated (in the website) that their goal was to promote sustainable development, and the respective percentages were 42% and 74% for alternative economic and non-economic practices or lifestyles. We focus on activities rather than aims because the activities are a stronger indicator of the environmental profile of an organization, as they refer to the concrete direct activities aimed at achieving pro-environmental social change.

4. Results and Discussion

Our findings below provide a comparative account of environmental and non-environmental AAOs, their organizational profile, their aims, as well as the strategies and actions they have used to mitigate the risks and manage the vulnerabilities of the global economic crisis of 2007. They also illustrate the extent to which AAOs address environmental concerns and can thereby be considered part of the environmental movement.

4.1. Who Are the AAOs and to What Extent Are They Environment Oriented?

In order to get a better view of the character of our EAAOs, we have examined their type (Table 1) and solidarity approach (Table 2). As one would expect, these are more frequently organizations of social economy (e.g., The Ants in Sweden or Club “Brotherhood and Peace” in Italy), informal and/or protest groups (e.g., transition Matlock in the UK or vegan Solidarity Kitchen in Germany). The large proportion of NGOs suggests that we deal with rather typical environmental organizations, or environmental social movement organizations. In the context of crisis, the solidarity approaches which the organizations adopt are crucial and therefore one would expect that EAAOs focus on mutual help rather distribution of goods and services (Table 2).

Indeed, EAAOs are focusing primarily on bottom up and mutual help, especially in comparison with non-environmental AAOs, which tend to adopt a solidarity approach that is more top-down oriented, offering services and goods to beneficiaries/participants (Table 3). Similarly to the literature on environmental sustainability, our investigation shows that AAOs focusing on environmental sustainability actions are also the ones which work for and with consumers, small enterprises and local community. Thus, similarly to the findings by Uba and Kousis [57], showing that the constituencies of AAOs in general are close to the ones of social movement organizations, the beneficiaries of the environmental

AAOs during times of crisis in Europe are rather similar to those of environmental activists and movements. Both focus considerably on consumers as participants of AAOs.

Table 1. Organization Type of EAAOs and non-EAAOs (percentages).

Type	Env. AAOs (%)	Non-EAAOs (%)
NGOs	41	31
Informal and/or protest gr.	28	14
Informal platform	2	3
Social economy	21	16
Charities, church	5	20
Trade unions	0.4	0.45
Other	11	5
All	100% (1461)	100% (2696)

Table 2. Solidarity approach of EAAOs and non-EAAOs (percentages).

Type of Solidarity	Env. AAOs (%)	Non-EAAOs (%)
Mobilizing for mutual help	69	39
Support between groups	29	17
Offer support to others	26	49
Distribution goods/services	33	55
Total N (percentages go over 100%, as multiple selection was allowed in the pre-defined list)	1461	2696

Table 3. Constituency groups of EAAOs and non-EAAOs (percentages).

Constituency Groups (Not Mutually Exclusive)	Env. AAOs (%)	Non-EAAOs (%)
Animals	3	0.01
Children/teens/young/students	19	25
Consumers	23	3
Disabled/elderly	2	9
General population	13	13
Local community	9	4
Poor	6	9
Small enterprise	16	4
Refugees/migrants	3	6
Total number of AAOs (does not add to 100% given dichotomous variables, multiple answers allowed)	1461	2696

Looking at the year of foundation of the organization (Figure 1), we find that the average age for the AAOs is 18.3 years, while for EAAOs it is 14.8 years. Even though information is missing for about 30% of AAOs, and 24% of EAAOs, the available data reveal that the large proportion of EAAOs were founded in relation to the crisis, after 2007.

Figure 2 illustrates the number and proportion of the types of EAAOs and non-EAAOs founded since 1991. Based on our AOA approach, the figure documents that organizations which were founded almost two decades before the global financial crisis, were organizing solidarity activities during the crisis period—coded in 2016.

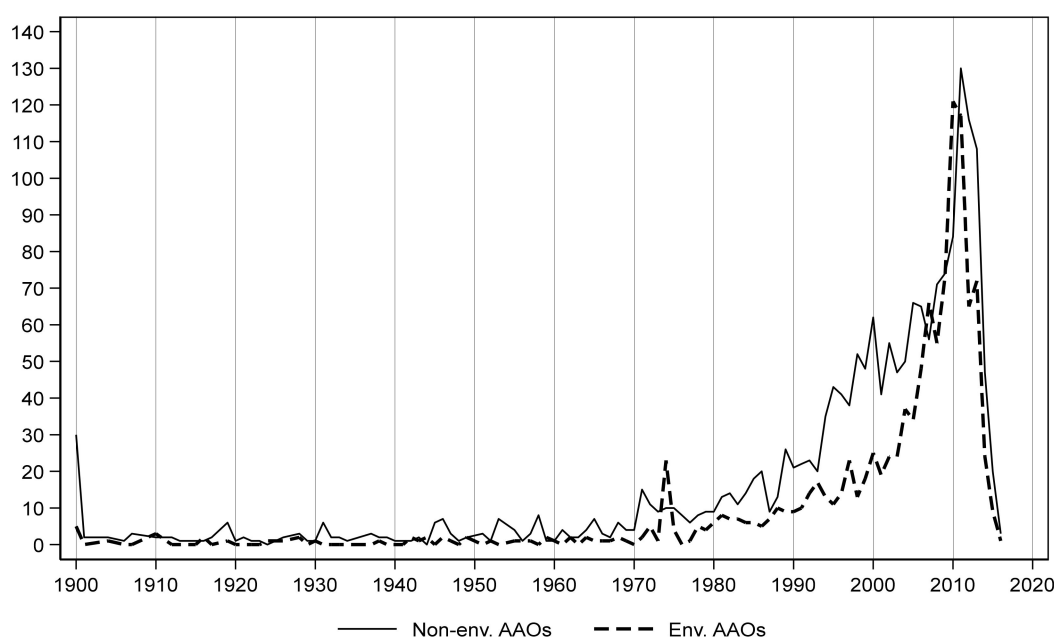


Figure 1. Year of Foundation of EAOs and non-EAOs, as a proportion of all AAOs (N = 2963).

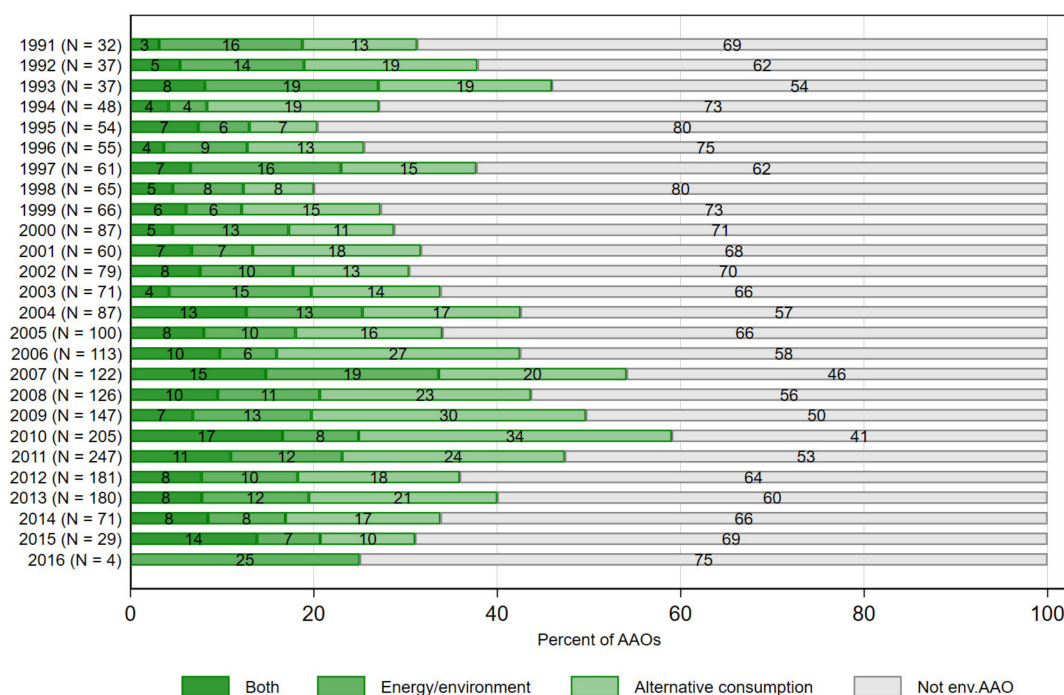


Figure 2. Number and Proportion of types of EAOs and non-EAOs founded since 1991.

The data above therefore show that a large proportion of AAOs, which were founded since the economic crisis, organized activities related to energy, environment, alternative consumption, or both. We do not argue that the existing organizations changed their strategies towards more participatory solidarity, as we do not investigate all kinds of organizations over time. Our argument that the studied AAOs (as well as EAOs) mobilize during times of crisis is based on, (a) our sampling strategy of selecting organizations active during the global financial crisis (2007–2016), (b) the evidence that the number of AAOs in general increased during the years following the economic crisis, and (c) that the large proportion of the AAOs founded since the beginning of the crisis (2007) were environment oriented (EAOs).

4.2. Which Aims Drive (Non)Environmental AAOs to Mitigate the Risks of the Economic Crisis?

In addition to the expected sustainable development aims, EAAOs are also more likely to promote alternative lifestyles than non-environmental AAOs (Table 4). Even though these are AAOs active in times of economic crisis, a significantly smaller proportion of EAAOs, compared to other AAOs, aim primarily to reduce the negative effects of economic crisis or reduce poverty and exclusion. Although they might promote such goals indirectly via their activities, it is noteworthy that the explicit focus on crisis mitigation is not visible in their organizational websites. On the one hand, this partly reflects the criticism towards traditional environmental organizations, that they are not addressing grassroots concerns. It could also imply that EAAO claims about “crisis” are related to the emergent discourse of “climate crisis” rather than the explicit “struggle” for grassroots concerns on meeting basic needs at the community level. On the other hand, the aims of promoting alternative economic and non-economic practices and lifestyles are implicitly thought to address the concerns of people with lower socioeconomic status.

Table 4. The Aims of EAAOs and non-EAAOs (percentages).

Aims (Not Mutually Exclusive)	Env. AAOs (%)	Non-EAAOs (%)
To reduce the negative impacts of the economic crisis/austerity	9	12
To reduce poverty and exclusion	16	35
To combat discrimination/promote equality of participation	12	29
To increase tolerance & mutual understanding	7	18
To promote alternative economic practices, lifestyles	63	15
To promote and achieve social change	31	31
To promote and achieve individual change	17	37
To promote sustainable development	53	5
To promote health, education, welfare	15	34
To promote alternative noneconomic practices, lifestyles and values	22	12
To promote democratic practices	18	21
To promote social movement actions and collective identities	10	9
Total N (percentages go over 100%, as multiple selection was allowed in the pre-defined list of aims)	1461	2696

Under the impact of the economic crisis, the majority of AAOs—clearly focus on alternative economic practices; nevertheless, significant cross-national variations do exist (see Figures 3 and 4). The EAAOs are clearly more focused on alternative lifestyles and sustainable development than other AAOs across the nine countries; however, the proportions are the lowest for alternative lifestyle in the former communist country, Poland. The aim to promote sustainable development among Greek and Spanish EAAOs is relatively low, but expected since these countries were the most affected by the economic crisis. This can be seen even in the focus of EAAOs on the economic dimension (18% and 22% of the EAAOs in the respective countries), which aimed to reduce the negative effects of the economic crisis, while in other countries this varied from 0–15%.

The cross-national variation of EAAOs (as a proportion of all AAOs) in Figure 5, shows the divisions by solidarity activity (energy or environment, alternative consumption, or both). Examples of EAAOs focusing mainly of energy and environment, are the German Animal Welfare Federation, the Rural Youth Union from Poland, or the IPF New Energies from France. EAAOs focusing on solidarity and alternative consumption are, for example, organizations that promote second-hand shops, such as several religious organizations in Sweden or Switzerland, as well as the ones supporting organic farming and food (e.g., Gardens of Cocagne in France, or Greencity Wholefoods in the UK). Among EAAOs with solidarity activities related both to environment & energy, as well as alternative

consumption are organizations such as Global Justice Now in the UK, Cultural Association of Ano Ambelokipi in Greece, The City Quarter Inverigo from Italy, or a vegan solidarity kitchen in Germany.



Figure 3. Aim to promote alternative lifestyles of EAAOs and non-EAAOs, by country.



Figure 4. Aim to promote alternative lifestyles of EAAOs and non-EAAOs, by country.

There are very clear differences between Germany, with a relatively few environmental AAOs and Switzerland, where almost half of the AAOs have energy, environmental or alternative consumption related activities. The same applies for Sweden and France, suggesting that the historical strength of the environmental movement is not directly related to the activism of environmental AAOs during times of crisis. When we look at the age of the EAAOs in the examined countries, that is the time between coding (2016) and the year of foundation as reported in the EAAOs' website, then there are some cross-national variations as well. In France, Greece, and the UK, the EAAOs are significantly younger than non-EAAOs, while in other countries there is no such difference. Still, none of these

differences demonstrate any clear patterns which follow the strength of environmental movements or exposure to the economic crisis.

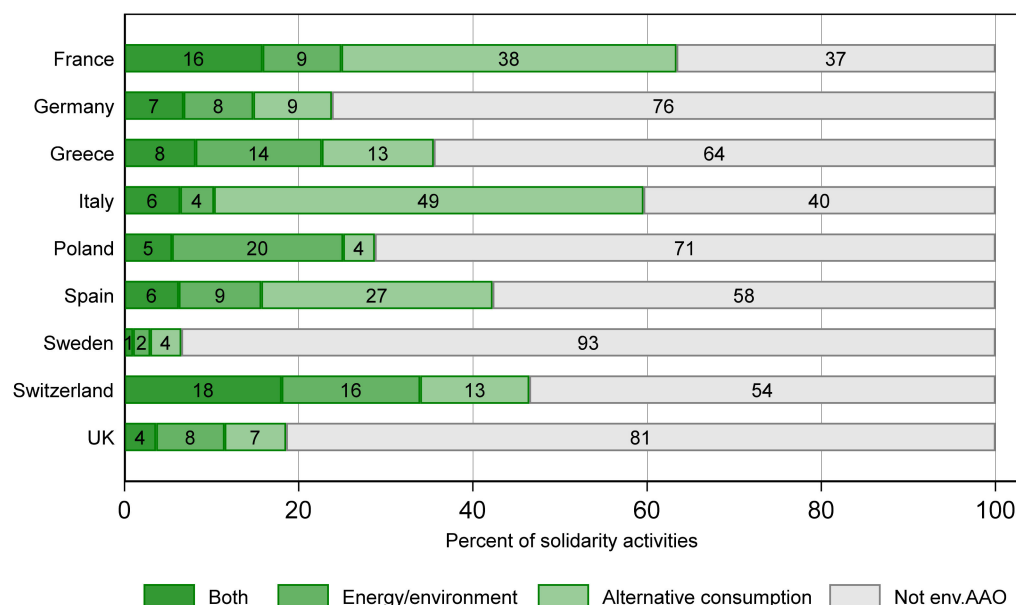


Figure 5. AAOs' Environment and non-Environment solidarity actions, by country.

4.3. Through Which Strategies and Actions Do (Non)Environmental AAOs Manage Vulnerabilities during the Economic Crisis?

Aiming to categorize the EAAOs on the basis of the degree of (de)politization, we have followed the discussion in de Moor et al. [21] on the three dimensions of their political character (motivations or goals of the movement; perceptions of activists regarding agonism; strategies of the movement—the more contentious the more political. This would suggest that an EAAO could be political to different degrees—some are “political” in their motivations only, where others are “political” in all three aspects. As our EAAOs almost by definition include organizations that aim to promote alternative economic and alternative noneconomic practice, we rather evaluate the third dimension of the “political”. Hence, we look at the strategies or preferred routes to reach the organization’s aims, and the degree of contentiousness of these strategies. We label as “contentious” all EAAOs which report (in their website) that their preferred route for achieving their goals are protests or change of establishment, while we categorize non-EAAOs as those preferring “direct action”, raising awareness, or reforms.

The results of this categorization are presented in Table 5 and Figure 4. These show that a relatively small proportion (16%) of EAAOs could be labelled as “political” on the basis of the de Moor et al. [21] third dimension, but this also reflects the general character of the AAOs in our sample. Still, the difference is significant and suggests that the EAAOs that are active in times of economic crisis, are more political than other AAOs. In contrast, the majority of the AAOs aim to reach their goals via direct action.

Table 5. Type of strategies by EAAOs and non-EAAOs (percentages).

Type of Strategies	Env. AAOs (%)	Non-EAAOs (%)
Contentious (protests)	16	12
Direct Action	72	80
Raise awareness	5	5
Reform	7	3
Total	100% (1461)	100% (2696)

The cross-national variations are also noteworthy (see Figure 6). On one hand, in Greece, Poland, Switzerland and the UK, the EAAOs are significantly more contentious than other AAOs. On the other hand, particularly low degree of contentiousness could be found among the EAAOs in France, Germany, Sweden, and the UK. The relatively high degree of contentiousness probably reflects the effect of the economic crisis, as the most affected countries were Greece, Spain, and Italy. The finding that EAAOs in some countries are more political than other AAOs should be examined further, as these might also be more revealing about the policies such organizations promote. Although the direct actions—i.e., the dominant strategy for EAAOs and other AAOs –, often aim for social transformations outside the parliamentary sphere [20], using contentious strategies is more typical for traditional social movements, and might lead to requested public opinion or policy changes faster than using only direct action.

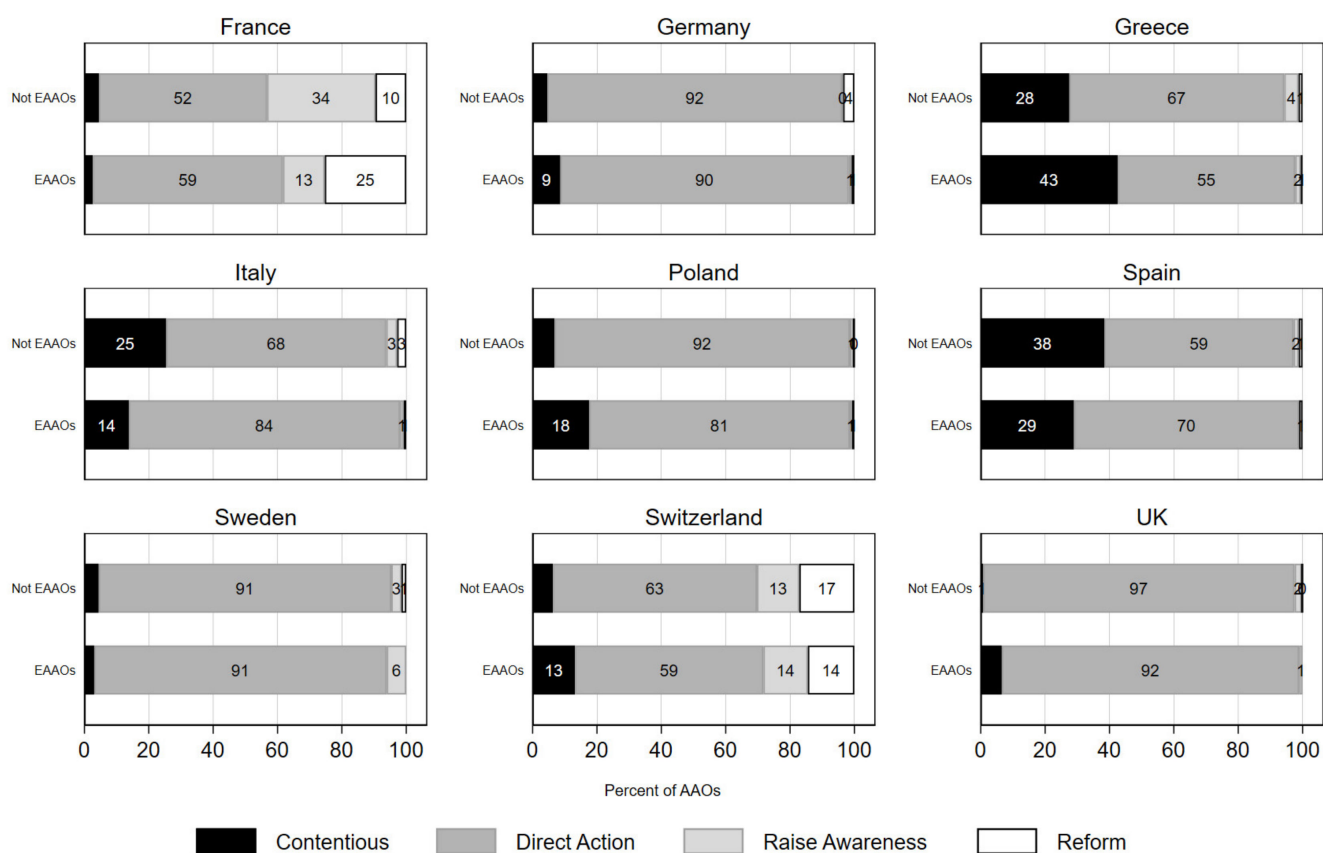


Figure 6. AAOs' Environment and non-Environment solidarity actions, by country.

5. Conclusions

Using primary comparative data on AAOs from nine European countries, the paper points out the importance of environmentally active communities which are confronting hard times through a more participatory solidarity approach. Their direct-action initiatives reflect economic, environmental as well as socio-political transformative capacity at the local level, alternative to the mainstream/dominant capitalist economy; less often they adopt a critical collective resilience stand, and a social movement perspective.

Our AOA findings support the sparse recent works on the impact of crisis on environmental activism, but also document its relation to non-environmentally oriented AAOs. They offer systematic evidence on the durability of bottom-up environmental solidarity action of mutual-support oriented initiatives at the community level, even at times of economic crisis. The fact that slightly more than one third of AAOs that have been active at times of economic crisis in nine examined countries could be labelled as environmental AAOs, suggests that environmental protection or sustainable development is not neglected

even at times of economic hardships. Instead, they provide an opportunity to broaden the scope of action for existing organizations that can adopt sustainability activities focusing on alternative practices and lifestyles. In the long-term these will benefit collective resilience during other crisis periods, not only economic ones. The fact that cross-national variations of EAAO activism did not follow any known patterns, such as being hit hardest by the economic crisis nor opportunities for mobilization of environmental movements, suggests that the trend of developing AAOs in general and EAAOs in particular might be something more universal. Our data does not allow to test the argument, but future studies could examine how much the present EAAOs have been active towards mitigating the consequences of the emerging climate crisis and the health crisis related to the outbreak of COVID-19.

Supporting works attesting the important contribution of community based and alternative solidarity environmental activism, our findings illustrate that EAAOs tend to be informal, but also, to an extent, focused on contention and protests, more than non-environmental ones. By combining their bottom-up solidarity, direct actions focusing on constituency groups, such as environmentally aware citizen-consumers, youth, local communities, small enterprises, with protest activism, EAAOs could create a stronger basis for future environmental activism. The fact that many young people involved in the recent climate strikes did not have the background in traditional environmental organizations but at the same time experienced life-style activism [11] also demonstrates the political potential of the EAAOs examined in our study.

Based on AOA, a new method using online-hub websites, and supplementing them with independent AO websites, we were able to select random samples from extended pools of organizational websites in nine countries, based on a common set of criteria. Our representative findings therefore provide evidence for the significance of direct solidarity actions and its importance for collective resilience and subsequently offer support to related works. More importantly, our findings also bring to surface a different set of environmental concerns and actions, mostly at the community level, across a variety of European settings, unveiling new paths through which citizen initiatives address the multiple challenges faced by 21st century communities.

More in-depth, supplementary analysis could assist in the future through in-depth interviews with purposive samples of (non) EAAO representatives. Such studies could further examine the reasons and the ways in which decisions were made on choosing these paths and the challenges they have been facing.

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