

Qualitative study on social grocery stores

ABSTRACT

The *Direction Générale de la Cohésion Sociale* (the French Department for Health and Social Affairs) wished to conduct a qualitative study on social grocery stores, which are a form of food aid. While there is no official definition of social grocery stores, around 1000 structures in France claim this designation. Their common feature is to provide food aid to vulnerable populations but, contrary to other forms, in social grocery stores, beneficiaries pay a small part of their purchase. Since social grocery stores are not eligible to the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), they benefit from a governmental grant from the *Crédit National pour les Epiceries Sociales* (a national fund for social grocery stores). From a legal standpoint, social grocery stores are supported by charities or local authority social services. Most of them are members of national networks: *La Fédération des Banques Alimentaires, ANDES, Secours Populaire, Croix Rouge...*

In order to better understand the reality and diversity of social grocery stores, the *Direction Générale de la Cohésion Sociale* wished to proceed to a qualitative review. This study was conducted by ASDO Etudes, a consulting firm composed of sociologists, on a sample of 41 social grocery stores. Individual and collective interviews were conducted in each store with members of the teams.

The study shows the diversity of situations, resources and ways of functioning of social grocery stores:

- All social grocery stores welcome vulnerable populations, but the eligibility rules can differ: some only welcome people who are facing temporary difficulties, while others accept those who are in more structurally precarious situations.
- The structures' volume of activity can be more or less important: some receive a limited number of people while others have a very active user flow.
- Social grocery stores operate essentially thanks to volunteers, but most of them have at least one or more paid employees. Depending on the financial means available, they can cater to a variable number of people, and can implement collective actions or not.
- The way social grocery stores acquire supplies can be very different: some depend mostly on provisions from food banks while others are more autonomous and can organise their own food collections.
- Finally, their relationship to users can also vary depending on structures: some function as a traditional store where users can walk around and choose whatever they wish to buy. Others, because of more limited resources, can have less welcoming setups.

Beyond these differences, social grocery stores ideally wish to promote ways of functioning that are based on a warm welcome, a free choice of products, individual support... A working group representing governmental departments and networks of social grocery stores was tasked with the construction of a common definition. It started to establish common criteria for all structures claiming the designation Social and/or Solidary Grocery Store.